

Beyond the White Picket Fence:  
Communal Living Models and the Reimagining of American Political Life

## **Introduction**

We're told that growing up means moving out, getting your own home, your own job, your own life. But young people today can't afford to live alone. Housing costs have skyrocketed while wages have stagnated (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2023), and rates of loneliness and social isolation have reached epidemic levels (Cigna, 2020). In response to this crisis, there has been a renewed interest in older, more collective models of communal living. These alternative housing models offer more than practical solutions to economic pressures. They contest dominant neoliberal narratives that treat housing as a commodity and individualism as the natural state of adult life (Brown, 2018). By creating spaces for shared decision-making, collective resource management, and intentional community, they become sites where residents can practice different ways of relating to each other and to the built environment.

This paper explores how alternative housing models both challenge and remain constrained by neoliberal governance, and what this tension can teach us about possibilities for democratic engagement in everyday life. Rather than presenting these communities as utopian solutions, I argue that their political significance lies precisely in their status as imperfect experiments, and as spaces where residents rehearse mutual aid and participatory democracy within, rather than outside of, existing economic and regulatory systems.

Drawing on observational visits to cooperative housing communities and informal conversations with residents, combined with analysis of literature on neoliberalism, housing policy, and intentional communities, this paper examines how built environments and governance structures can both reflect and contest broader political ideologies. Through case

studies of cohousing developments, cooperative houses, and pocket neighborhoods, I explore how alternative housing arrangements can re-politicize daily life while remaining embedded in the very systems they seek to transform.

### **Neoliberalism, Housing, and Social Fragmentation**

To analyze alternative housing models' place in a society governed by neoliberalism, we must first understand how neoliberalism reorders our very ideas of freedom and community. Political theorist Wendy Brown, known for her work on neoliberalism, democracy, and power, conceptualizes neoliberalism not simply as an economic policy package but as a "governing rationality" (Brown, 2018). Under this logic, what used to be shared social goods become private tokens of competition, and the very notion of collective care is recast as interference. Housing ceases to be a right grounded in mutual obligation and becomes instead a financial asset whose value must appreciate (Brown, 2018).

Successive waves of urban development have also functioned as mechanisms for absorbing surplus capital. Geographer David Harvey, a leading scholar in urban political economy, charts how each wave of urban expansion has played a deliberate role in soaking up excess capital (Harvey, 2008). Far from accidental side effects, suburban tract housing booms, downtown condo gluts, and megaprojects like gated communities exist as planned outlets for investment. As land values surge, long-time residents are priced out; housing becomes a speculative bet rather than a stable home. Access to shelter now hinges on one's ability to pay.

One of the most visible instruments of this transformation is exclusionary zoning. Many suburban municipalities enforce single-family zoning with minimum lot sizes (often half an acre or more), effectively banning duplexes, triplexes, or accessory dwelling units and ensuring that smaller, more affordable homes cannot be built (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2008). In Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, a one-acre minimum lot requirement has long restricted development to sprawling estates, reserving suburban property ownership for higher-income

households. California's Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act further skews the balance by exempting newer units from rent control (California Legislative Analyst's Office, 2015), encouraging developers to focus on luxury apartments while leaving lower-income renters with few protections.

Beyond zoning, deeper policy shifts have hollowed out the public housing safety net. Since the 1980s, federal funding for new public housing projects has been all but eliminated, and Section 8 voucher allocations have failed to keep pace with escalating rents—leaving many voucher holders unable to find landlords who will accept them (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022). At the same time, state and local tax incentives such as New York's 421-a program grant developers generous breaks for luxury condo construction, with only a small fraction of units set aside as "affordable" at income thresholds that many families cannot meet (Furman Center, 2022).

Those who defend these policies often point to increased market flexibility or expanded opportunities for personal homeownership. In reality, though, the social costs are severe. Fragmented and privatized housing patterns reduce intergroup contact, weaken social trust, and magnify isolation (Brown, 2018). Constant housing precarity sparks chronic stress, erodes neighborhood ties, and diminishes civic participation. Displacement through gentrification and the proliferation of gated or privatized neighborhoods fracture social networks and undermine the informal support systems that sustain democratic life. Experiences of loneliness, housing insecurity, and social fragmentation are not isolated cultural phenomena, but rather outcomes of structural policies that have prioritized privatization, withdrawn public investment, and reoriented housing toward individualized market logic (Brown, 2018). In this context, neoliberal governance reframes freedom as consumer choice, responsibility as an individual burden, and collective space, both physical and political, as constrained by zoning and property regimes.

Within such a landscape, community becomes a deviation from the norm rather than a default condition. It's something that must be actively constructed in the absence of systemic

support. Popular explanations that attribute social isolation to technological or cultural shifts risk overlooking the structural conditions that have made proximity, stability, and long-term connection more difficult to achieve. Addressing this context requires a reconceptualization of housing not solely as a commodity but as a political right and a site of collective life. While most individuals cannot fully exit capitalist housing systems, some pursue alternative arrangements that emphasize cooperation, mutual care, and democratic self-governance within our current systems. Communal living represents one such approach.

### **Cohousing as Democratic Governance in Practice**

Communal living has always been a part of human life, but collective housing as a defined concept started with Swedish kollektivhus (collective houses) in the 1930s. These early projects emerged during a time of social democratic reform and were explicitly designed to redistribute domestic labor, especially the unpaid labor traditionally assigned to women (Vestbro, 1982). Many kollektivhus included centralized services such as communal kitchens, childcare, and cleaning staff, enabling women to work outside the home while still maintaining family life. These projects aimed to modernize domestic life by collectivizing care work and reducing the burdens of isolated homemaking. The transformation also signaled a move away from treating collective housing as a welfare service and toward a new kind of political and cultural project, one rooted in mutual aid, everyday democracy, and care. While still shaped by the broader institutions around them, these new cohousing communities began to blur the line between the private and the communal, making the home a site of shared responsibility and alternative social life. This stands in stark contrast to suburban housing models, which are often deliberately designed to maximize privacy and minimize neighborly interaction, seen in features like garage-to-kitchen layouts, large lawns, and high fences.

Initially, this model emphasized rationality over communion, with hired staff performing services for passive tenants. But by the late 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of feminist

organizers in Sweden began advocating for collective housing based not on services from above, but on shared work by residents themselves. They valued domestic labor not as something to eliminate, but as something to be made communal, pleasurable, and politically meaningful. Projects like Stacken and Prästgårdshagen marked a shift from professionalized care to self-organized participation, reflecting a broader turn toward grassroots governance and tenant control (Vestbro, 1982). This mirrors a larger pattern identified by Swedish architect and researcher Dick Urban Vestbro: state-supported collectivism giving way to user-driven cooperation, often in response to bureaucratic failure or institutional withdrawal.

As welfare services were rolled back and state-supported labor diminished, kollektivhus evolved from service-oriented institutions into co-managed, resident-run communities. Residents began to take on the labor of shared meals, cleaning, and governance themselves, not as a return to unpaid domesticity, but as an intentional practice of mutual aid and collective responsibility. This shift reflects the broader transformation of collective housing from a state-supported gender equity intervention to a grassroots experiment in participatory democracy. It also points to a tension that remains relevant today: when institutions stop providing support, the work of maintaining community doesn't disappear, it falls on the people living there.

Today, there are many different systems for cooperative living, but the most common is the condo cohousing model, which is generally defined as housing that combines private dwelling units with extensive shared spaces and facilities, collectively managed by the residents. This model, pioneered in Denmark and later adopted globally, is not only about architecture, but also social infrastructure. Even within this model, there are many different forms of decision-making, sharing of resources, and planning of events that vary from group to group. To give a more concrete example, I visited a group called Linden Cohousing based in Madison, Wisconsin. Linden Cohousing occupies a single condominium building housing approximately 80-100 residents across 45 units. Each household has private living quarters

while sharing extensive common areas: a central kitchen, multiple lounges, guest bedrooms, and community gardens. The building's layout is deliberately arranged to foster chance encounters, with corridors and communal spaces positioned to encourage informal interactions.

Like most communal living models, Linden is entirely self-managed. Residents collectively handle budgeting, utilities, maintenance, repairs, and cleaning through a system of committees. Participation is expected but flexible, with members contributing according to their interests and availability, whether that means cooking team shifts, garden work, committee service, or facility upkeep, all without any formal tracking of individual hours contributed. Community meals occur every other day and function as both social rituals and practical mechanisms for sharing resources. Some are potluck style, others prepared by rotating cooking teams, yet all emphasize shared experience and social connection, particularly benefiting those living alone. Beyond meals, residents pool resources for shared purchases such as patio furniture, kitchen appliances, washers and dryers, and maintain guest rooms for visiting friends and family, extending hospitality beyond individual units.

Decision making at Linden follows a modified consensus model. Committees develop proposals, which are then discussed at business meetings. Members register support, assent, or block; a single block returns the proposal to committee for revision, while a double block invokes a supermajority vote (though this is rare). This process seeks broad agreement rather than simple majority rule, reinforcing collective responsibility for outcomes. This consensus-based approach directly contests Brown's analysis of neoliberal governance, which reduces political participation to individual consumer choices (Brown, 2018). Instead of selecting from pre-determined options, Linden residents collectively shape the decisions that affect their daily lives.

This more traditional cohousing model both benefits residents financially and helps to reduce isolation. Substantial resources are saved from communal cooking and shared facilities, which both saves money and benefits the environment. There are also economic advantages to

sharing labor, which reduces the cost of hiring help for tasks an individual can't do. For example, an older resident who can't clean might contribute through committee work, while a younger resident might handle cleaning but not have time for meetings. This type of living reduces the need for individual self-sufficiency and promotes communal being. The physical layout of a community such as Linden does much to reduce isolation, with common spaces designed to encourage residents to run into each other and work or play alongside one another. This includes shared kitchens, centralized areas that are frequented for small tasks such as laundry rooms and mailboxes, and community areas to work, read, play games, etc. This architecture fosters community, which in turn cultivates political habits of shared support, listening, and compromise both inside and outside of the community.

Linden's decision-making processes foster localized autonomy by placing responsibility for community governance squarely on residents' shoulders. In the absence of a landlord or formal hierarchy, individuals must articulate and negotiate their needs directly with one another. While this can be challenging, residents consistently described feeling both "seen" and supported by the process (particularly those living alone, such as aging widows or young professionals). In this way, Linden not only cultivates political trust and civic habits but also demonstrates how cooperative housing can create spaces for practicing democracy within market-driven housing systems, showing both the promise and constraints of embedding collective governance within neoliberal structures (Brown, 2018).

### **Informal and Hybrid Models**

Linden shows what can happen when people reclaim housing as a site of democratic life rather than private consumption. It provides a concrete example of how design and governance shape political possibility at the level of the everyday. However, not everyone can join a cohousing community such as Linden. The high cost of purchasing a condo (let alone creating a community if there is not one in your area) is a real barrier, as is the large time commitment and

the requirement for emotional labor. In response, alternative models for collective living have been developed over time. These communities are often built around serving a demographic that is typically underserved by traditional co-living models, while still addressing the same societal issues and holding similar values as a more traditional cohousing community. Below, I will discuss three of these communities built around alternative models, and how they can achieve the same goals as more traditional communities while serving different audiences.

### *Sage House (Coop Model)*

Sage House is a duplex in Los Angeles reimagined as a co-living space. It houses 9 people, including one household in a studio building at the back. It operates as "co-op lite," intentionally designed so that anyone walking in off the street can immediately understand how the system works. Anticipating turnover, the model accommodates LA's transient population while preserving community continuity. Over an 18-month period, the house maintained 98% occupancy while offering below-market rents, demonstrating both the economic sustainability and social appeal of the model (Kronovet et al., 2024). Tenants rent individual rooms but share communal goals and routines. Rent contributions are pooled into a collective fund for groceries, household improvements, and shared events, including everything from bulk food orders to a chest freezer, solar panels, or even occasional social gatherings and parties. Data from the same 18-month study showed 551 group purchases made through this collective fund, showing how the pooling system reduces waste and cost, since bulk purchases of groceries minimize packaging and food spoilage typical of single-household buying. The physical and social design fosters mutual support and shared values. Shared meals, a small garden, a music studio, and communal storage mirror the benefits of larger-scale cohousing in a more accessible, rental-based setting. Residents report that living among passionate, engaged neighbors enhances daily life and reinforces the importance of intentional community.

To streamline day-to-day management, Sage House employs a Slack app called Chore Wheel. This tool distributes tasks equitably without rigid schedules or conflict-prone spreadsheets. Residents completed 567 chore claims during the study period, demonstrating consistent engagement with the task allocation system. It features sections for chores, conflict resolution (Hearts), group purchasing (Things), and a rotating calendar. The Hearts system, which manages behavioral norms and community conduct, recorded 255 events over 18 months, showing that residents actively used the platform to address interpersonal dynamics and maintain community standards (Kronovet et al., 2024). By integrating technology, Sage House maintains accountability and connection while minimizing administrative overhead and the need for a more formal committee structure that would be difficult to maintain for young, busy, working professionals.

Sage House shows that a community need not require long-term ownership or custom construction. Even short-term, rental-based models can cultivate shared purpose, mutual aid, and resource efficiency when guided by clear systems and shared commitment. By making cooperative living accessible to young professionals and transient populations, Sage House extends the practice of collective decision-making beyond the traditional cohousing model.

#### *Townpeople (Integrated Shared Housing Model)*

The San Diego Shared Housing Collaborative, operated by the nonprofit Townpeople, offers a model of shared living for people experiencing housing insecurity. In a county with the nation's highest housing costs, Townpeople emphasizes participant choice and autonomy: individuals select compatible housemates, preferred neighborhoods, and suitable housing arrangements rather than being placed. Program staff facilitate matchmaking, navigate lease logistics, and provide ongoing support for communication and conflict resolution. Importantly, they refrain from direct intervention in household disputes when possible, fostering residents' capacity to manage conflicts independently.

This approach reframes shared housing as a dignified, empowering process rather than a last-resort shelter. By centering autonomy (choice of roommates, location, and timing), Townspeople addresses multiple needs simultaneously: affordability, security, and social support. The Townspeople model underscores that community itself can be an essential component of housing stability, reflecting the foundational belief that connection and shared responsibility are basic human needs, especially during life transitions. This approach directly challenges Harvey's analysis of housing as surplus capital absorption by prioritizing human need and social support over profit maximization (Harvey, 2008).

### *Third Street Cottages (Pocket Neighborhood Model)*

Third Street Cottages in Langley, Washington, is a small-scale pocket neighborhood composed of eight energy-efficient tiny homes arranged around a central courtyard and shared garden. Each homeowner owns an individual cottage, while communal amenities include seating areas, raised garden beds, and a multi-use pavilion for gatherings and workshops. Rather than formal consensus governance, Third Street Cottages utilizes a simple homeowners council that meets quarterly to coordinate shared maintenance tasks (lawn care, garden stewardship, and upkeep of common structures) and to organize community events such as seasonal potlucks, skill-sharing workshops, and movie nights under the pavilion. Decisions are made through informal consensus, with proposals discussed in person or via a private online forum and finalized when broad agreement is reached. The neighborhood's design emphasizes walkability and neighborly connection. Front doors open directly onto the shared courtyard, and narrow pathways encourage spontaneous encounters. Residents report that proximity to shared green space and regular communal events foster strong social bonds, mutual support, and a heightened sense of environmental stewardship through collective gardening and composting efforts. Third Street Cottages was developed under standard residential zoning and financed through conventional mortgages, demonstrating that pocket neighborhoods can be realized

without custom regulatory or funding mechanisms. Its success illustrates how a modest, replicable model can integrate social infrastructure into everyday living, reducing isolation and building resilience through small-scale communal design that is not vastly different from a typical suburban neighborhood in America.

Third Street Cottages shows how even minimal shared infrastructure can foster democratic engagement and shared support. By working within conventional zoning and financing, this model demonstrates that the political practice of cooperative living can emerge even within highly regulated suburban contexts.

### **Comparing Models of Democratic Practice**

These four communities represent different approaches to the same fundamental challenge: how to practice mutual aid and democratic participation within systems organized around individual competition and market logic. Linden demonstrates the possibilities of formal consensus governance and extensive resource sharing, but requires significant financial investment and time commitment. Sage House shows how technology and flexible structures can make cooperative living accessible to transient populations while maintaining shared values. Townspeople illustrates how even temporary housing arrangements can center human dignity and mutual support over market efficiency. Third Street Cottages proves that meaningful community can emerge from minimal shared infrastructure when residents commit to regular interaction and collective stewardship. Each model negotiates the tension between structure and accessibility differently, but all create spaces where residents practice interdependence rather than isolation, collective decision-making rather than consumer choice, and shared responsibility rather than individual accumulation. Together, they demonstrate that cooperative living can take many forms while preserving the core political practice of learning to live with and for each other. Even without full consensus processes or custom-built facilities, these hybrid models foster interdependence, voluntary cooperation, and shared meaning through intentional

spatial and social design. These hybrid spaces demonstrate scalable, accessible alternatives to high-barrier cohousing, navigating the tension between structure and flexibility. They show that collective living can take many forms while preserving the core values of cooperation, care, and democratic engagement.

### **Challenges and Structural Limits of Cooperative Living**

While the previous section highlighted the diversity and promise of cooperative living, it's important to recognize that these are not frictionless alternatives. Every experiment in collective housing exists within broader systems of constraint. Architecture and community culture can support new ways of living, but they cannot fully shield residents from the structural pressures of capitalism, inequality, and bureaucratic inertia. Indeed, the very fact that these models must operate within rather than outside of dominant housing systems means they inherit some of their core challenges: unequal access, burnout from unpaid labor, regulatory barriers, and vulnerability to market capture. As these communities seek to build alternatives, they also run into the limits of what small-scale design and governance alone can accomplish.

This section outlines four key tensions that cooperative housing must navigate, not to dismiss their value, but to both acknowledge their imperfections and clarify the stakes of building counter-systems within dominant paradigms. Each challenge shows how deeply embedded our current housing crisis is in the broader political economy, and how efforts to resist it, even when successful at the local level, remain constrained by the systemic.

#### *Labor and Emotional Burnout in Self-Governance*

Participatory governance is one of the defining features of cooperative living, but it comes with real costs. Organizing shared meals, managing building maintenance, and attending regular meetings takes time, energy, and emotional labor. While these tasks can be rewarding and build strong community ties, they can also become sources of burnout (Franck &

Ahrentzen, 1989). Not every resident has the time, temperament, or capacity to participate fully in collective decision-making, especially when the work is ongoing and unpaid. At Linden Cohousing, for example, much of the day-to-day management is divided among committees, and residents are encouraged to contribute according to their skills and availability. This helps distribute responsibility, but it doesn't eliminate the labor required. Even with flexible structures, informal hierarchies can emerge (those with more time or emotional bandwidth often take on more, while others disengage). Over time, this dynamic can undermine the sense of equity that cooperative housing aspires to uphold (McCamant & Durrett, 1994). Communities have developed partial strategies to address this tension: rotating leadership roles, setting clear norms for consensus processes, using facilitators for difficult conversations, or simply allowing residents to contribute in different ways based on their capacities. Informal systems of mutual aid (where one person's labor is offset by another's resources) can also help. Still, these workarounds don't resolve the deeper issue: this is still unpaid labor. It remains largely invisible in market terms, and echoes broader patterns around who is expected to perform community-sustaining work (often women, queer folks, or people already engaged in caregiving roles). The result is a tension between the ideals of democratic governance and the unequal capacities of people to sustain it over time.

### *Accessibility, Inclusion, and Who Can Participate*

Despite their progressive values, most communal living groups remain predominantly white, middle- or upper-middle-class, and well-educated (Sanguinetti, 2014). Entry into these spaces often requires both financial resources (typically the ability to purchase a unit and pay a monthly fee) and cultural fluency with the norms of collaboration, consensus, and community responsibility. This creates a paradox: the very models intended to reimagine housing as more just and inclusive often replicate the same exclusions found in traditional markets.

Linden Cohousing, for instance, has struggled with both affordability and recruitment of more diverse residents. Even rental-based models like Sage House or Townspeople, which aim to lower barriers, face challenges when it comes to long-term sustainability, outreach, or deep structural inclusion. Without broader redistributions of land, capital, or decision-making power, these projects can only go so far. To address this, some communities have experimented with limited-equity cooperatives, rent-based or mixed-income models, and community land trusts (CLTs) that remove land from the speculative market entirely. Others have created “scholarship” units or used sliding-scale contributions to expand participation. Yet even with these interventions, deep structural inequalities remain. Under capitalism, housing is distributed according to wealth and access, not need or interest. Inclusive intentions are not enough to counteract the broader political economy of exclusion. If cooperative housing is to fulfill its democratic promise, it must contend not only with its internal structures, but also with the external forces that shape who gets to live where and why.

### *Zoning, Legal, and Bureaucratic Barriers*

Even when communities have the desire and resources to form, they often run up against legal systems that make cooperative living difficult or outright impossible. Zoning codes across much of the United States privilege single-family housing and explicitly prohibit shared kitchens, multiple households on a single deed, or accessory dwelling units (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2008). These laws were not designed to accommodate collective living, and in many cases, they were written to prevent it. This legal rigidity imposes enormous costs. Projects are delayed by red tape, stalled by permitting issues, or forced to compromise on their design. In some cases, potential communities never form at all because the regulatory environment is too hostile. In response, some cities have begun experimenting with cohousing-friendly reforms, such as legalizing ADUs, loosening density restrictions, or recognizing new ownership models. Toolkits for legal workarounds, such as co-op corporations or CLT frameworks, are also

growing. But these changes remain marginal, and highly dependent on local political will. Without sustained advocacy and grassroots pressure, bureaucratic inertia tends to win out. Zoning may seem like a technical hurdle, but it's deeply political. It defines what kinds of living arrangements are considered legitimate, and by extension, whose ways of life are sanctioned. Cooperative housing is often treated as the exception, not the norm, and that status severely limits its ability to scale or influence mainstream development.

### *Market Pressures, Financial Sustainability, and the Risk of Co-optation*

Even when a cooperative community succeeds in forming, it remains vulnerable to market forces. Rising land values, inflation, and insurance costs can push even the most idealistic co-ops to operate more like landlords or homeowner associations, charging higher dues, enforcing rules, or prioritizing aesthetic upgrades over affordability. Over time, the radical promise of these communities can erode, giving way to what some call “lifestyle cohousing,” which is exclusive, expensive, and socially homogenous. This risk is especially pronounced in gentrifying areas, where intentional communities can inadvertently drive up local property values and contribute to displacement. Communal housing, when not carefully structured, can become a boutique commodity marketed to affluent buyers rather than a tool of grassroots resistance. To resist this co-optation, some communities have grounded their projects in CLTs, capped resale values, or banned individual profit from property sales. Others have embraced democratic budgeting processes and prioritized affordability over expansion. Some begin with explicit racial or economic justice goals, aiming to bake equity into their founding values, rather than treating it as an afterthought. Yet even these strategies have limits. They mitigate harm, but they do not transform the underlying system. The financialization of housing remains dominant. In that context, even the most thoughtful communities are swimming upstream. Each of these challenges is a reminder that cooperative housing is not a utopia. It is an ongoing negotiation with the world as it is. The labor of participation, the struggle for inclusion, the obstacles of

zoning law, and the pull of market logic all shape what is possible. Still, these tensions do not negate the value of the experiment. They clarify its stakes. To build and sustain alternative models of living is to confront the very structures we hope to move beyond. And in doing so, cooperative housing becomes not just shelter, but a site of resistance, imagination, and mutual aid.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began by asking what happens when we take housing seriously not just as shelter, but as a political site. A space where values are lived, contested, and reproduced. Through examining cooperative housing models from cohousing communities like Linden to flexible arrangements like Sage House and Townspeople, I have argued that while these communities cannot escape the structural logics of neoliberalism, they nonetheless offer something vital: a rehearsal of different ways of living. The young people who cannot afford to live alone face a housing crisis that is simultaneously economic, social, and political. The market-driven individualism that promises freedom through private ownership has instead delivered isolation, precarity, and exclusion (Brown, 2018). Communal living models respond to this crisis not by offering perfect solutions, but by creating spaces to practice alternative values: mutual aid over self-sufficiency, collective decision-making over consumer choice, shared resources over private accumulation. These are modest, fragile experiments. They struggle with burnout, accessibility, regulatory barriers, and the constant pull of market forces. They remain predominantly white and middle-class. They cannot house everyone who needs affordable, connected living arrangements. But their political significance lies precisely in their imperfection, in their daily work of negotiating shared support, responsibility, and democratic participation within systems that make such values difficult to sustain.

The clearest lesson across these case studies is that design matters, but context matters more. Shared kitchens and common courtyards can enable community, but they cannot

guarantee it. Physical forms can create conditions for collectivity, but they cannot insulate communities from zoning laws, financial speculation, or structural inequality. What these projects demonstrate instead is that to live differently requires not just different houses, but sustained commitment to different social relations, even when, especially when, the broader systems remain unchanged. The crisis of housing in the United States reflects a deeper erosion of the conditions that make communal life possible. Communal living does not resolve that crisis, but it points toward a politics that might: one rooted in shared life, collective infrastructure, and the recognition that individual security depends on mutual aid. In a society organized around competition and accumulation, the simple act of sharing resources and making decisions together becomes a form of resistance. This does not mean everyone must join a co-op or move to cohousing. It means recognizing that the promise of these experiments extends beyond their walls. In practicing interdependence rather than isolation, democratic participation rather than consumer choice, and shared support rather than individual security, these communities offer glimpses of social forms we might build more broadly. They remind us that even within systems of constraint, spaces for imagination and different ways of relating remain possible. And in a time when young people are told they must choose between unaffordable independence and prolonged dependence on family, these models suggest a third path: chosen interdependence, built through the slow work of learning to live with and for each other.

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