



# All Together Now

For many women, a new kind of communal living offers a radical solution to the most basic problems of work/life balance. But could “cohousing” be right for you?

**By Jennifer Chen**  
**Photographed by Ye Rin Mok**



*This page, clockwise from top: Members of LAEV on a bike ride; a chicken hangs out in the chicken coop; a sign outside of LAEV*

*Opposite page, clockwise from top: A sign in the garden; clothes drying on the laundry lines; a poster with ground rules for conflict resolution; Joaquin Sol Lizama and Eyla Lark Waters playing*



**I**N THE CAR-CONGESTED metropolis of Los Angeles, where drive-throughs and gas stations are ubiquitous, there is a unique community in the Koreatown section where residents grow their own crops and eschew automobiles in favor of bicycles. It's housed in a three-building complex (once low-income housing), which is typical for the area, but it stands out from the rest of the neighborhood in many ways. Pedestrian paths are designated with green and yellow lines. A hand-painted "Please slow down" sign greets visitors at the main gate; it refers to traffic, but the moment you enter, you experience a radical change of pace from the hustle and bustle outside. The large, light-filled lobby houses a piano, a dry-erase board with the community's weekly schedule, and several couches. A bookshelf holds free clothes, household items, and reading material for the taking. Apple and banana trees line the perimeter of the grounds, and a chicken coop is home to a few egg-laying hens. Public art, including a light sculpture, decorates the exteriors of garages that have been converted into shops and studios, where residents can borrow a drill or handsaw from the tool-lending library, take an art class, or learn to sew.

This urban Shangri-la is the Los Angeles Eco-Village (LAEV), and it is what's known as a cohousing community. Every cohousing setup has different policies, but at LAEV, residents maintain small, private apartments and have access to lots of shared spaces. There are outdoor gardens lush with dinosaur kale, ripe red tomatoes, and hot peppers, and there's a large community room with all sorts of amenities, including a children's play area. At weekly Sunday-evening potluck dinners, neighbors work together to devise menus and cook, with special attention paid to birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries. Communal washers, dryers, and clotheslines are available to all residents, and informal childcare sharing is worked out among the parents. Members are expected to attend two out of the three "work parties" that occur each month to improve the complex, and everyone is expected to clean up after themselves within 24 hours of using a shared area. Several residents help with painting, plumbing, and carpentry, while the crops are tended by a gardening group. This cooperative lifestyle offers a vibrant, sustainable, and affordable way of life—the rents at LAEV are one-third to one-half the market rates in the surrounding areas. A typical single unit costs \$475 a month, and a two-bedroom is \$900—even in a distinctly urban setting.

The concept of cohousing originated in Denmark—dubbed *bofællesskaber*, or "living communities"—in the early 1970s. An American couple, Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, encountered this way of life in 1980 while studying architecture at the University of Copenhagen. They both grew up in tight-knit neighborhoods, and the notion of sharing resources combined with a strong sense of community made a lot of sense; they wanted to bring the idea back to the States. Upon returning to the U.S. in the mid-'80s, the couple penned *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, which spawned the beginning of intentional neighborhoods like LAEV in America. And lest you think that cohousing is akin to living on a commune *Wanderlust*-style, the objective is vastly different. As McCamant and Durrett explain, "Communes are often organized around strong ideologi-

cal beliefs and may depend on a charismatic leader to establish the direction of the community and hold the group together. Cohousing, on the other hand, offers a new approach to housing rather than a new way of life."

In Josephine Sarria's LAEV apartment, her family's to-do list is written in bright colors on a chalkboard wall. While the 33-year-old bespectacled Latina relaxes in her red living room, her three-year-old son, Joaquin Sol, wanders through into the lemon-yellow kitchen and opens the smaller-than-average refrigerator to grab a glass bottle of water. Sarria lives with Joaquin, her partner, Jimmy, and her 12-year-old son, Jean-Michel, in an apartment with French doors that faces the courtyard and a banana tree outside.

Sarria marvels at the opportunities she's found at LAEV for herself and her kids. "My sons are exposed to people with college degrees who are lawyers, doctors, teachers, and scientists. Jean-Michel currently gets music lessons from Thiago, a musician here. How convenient is that?" she says. Born and raised in L.A.—specifically, "Hollywood up to no good"—Sarria says she saw a very different side of the city than her sons do. "Growing up, I was used to a lot of parties, kids running in the hallways, gangs, and violence. Here, people talk things out through conflict mediation and nonviolent communication." Now she's able to develop her skills as a seamstress and designer by turning one of the common-space garages into a sewing studio while she studies fashion design at LA Trade Tech. She also loves growing her own food, including cucumbers, tomatoes, and watermelon.

Later, Sarria and fellow LAEV member Aurisha Smolarski Walters, 40, meet up in the sunny community room with their children. In no time, Walters' 19-month-old daughter, Eylar Lark, is rolling around on the floor with Joaquin. Basic ground rules of conflict resolution are posted on the wall in this common area, where mediation meetings and Sunday group dinners take place. An assortment of chairs and sofas fill the room, along with a kid-sized red table and blue chairs that are stationed in front of a bookshelf filled with children's books.

Walters and her husband got married at LAEV. They decided to raise a kid in cohousing because they saw the value of what trusted neighbors could bring to their family life. "During a naming ceremony, we named the community as [our daughter's] godparents," says Walters. "It's not like they are taking her in if something happens to us, but they are people who can teach her and set boundaries."

In most typical American households, parenting is a dual or singular endeavor. In cohousing, however, raising a child becomes a shared community effort. Back in her personal living space, Walters reads a French children's book to Eylar and talks about how her daughter has already benefited from growing up in cohousing: "She's very social and outgoing. Right now she's an only child, but she gets the benefits of interacting with other kids and sharing her toys every day. The friendships she's developing are more than just playmates—it's like she has two older brothers and a younger one." Walters' husband chimes in to say that last-minute babysitting has also been very helpful to the new parents. "For example," Walters says, "if I have a business call, I can knock on my neighbors' door, and most times we've been able to find



From top: Aurisha Smolarski Walters and her daughter Eylar Lark in the garden; tomatoes growing; Josephine Sarria, Joaquin Sol Lizama, and Melba Thorn biking



Clockwise, from top: Joaquin Sol Lizama in his family's kitchen; a poster detailing cohousing expenses; Lois Arkin, one of the founders of LAEV

	2012 Budget	2013 Budget
INCOME	292,269	298,877
EXPENSES		
Events	2000	2000
education	-	2000
LAHD	3408	1705
OFFICE	3775	2475
ANGLA	100	500
ACCOUNTING	1200	1200
UTILITIES	34,200	34,200
JANITORIAL	10,800	10,800
REPAIRS & MAINT	56,500	70,900
Landscaping	7,700	7,700
GROUND LEASE	14,400	14,400
DEPRECIATION	5000	5000
WAGES	59600	47,000
INSURANCE	21,813	25,000
Prof Taxes	28,900	21,340
Interest	19,440	19,133
TOTAL EXPENSE	260,836	265,353
NET INCOME	31,433	38,524
Income + deprec.	36,433	38,024
PRINCIPAL PMT	-	-16,812
total for Reserves	36,433	21,712
		58,524
		33,623+
		4,901



someone to step in for 20 or 30 minutes.” In addition, they enjoy support and guidance from fellow parents in the community. “You hear a lot of times that the first couple of months of motherhood is lonely—you’re not seeing your friends anymore; the stress of having a kid, you deal with on your own. I never felt that. It was very helpful to have people pop by. Instead of roughing it on your own from ground zero, you have support,” says Walters. “Everyone here has different parenting styles, and I’ve learned from their shared knowledge.”

Helpful neighbors are a given in cohousing communities. A sense of collaboration and trust builds when you set out to know more about your neighbors than just their names. Jill Summer, 29, an African-American filmmaker living at LAEV, likes the community support. “When Aurisha had to leave to get something done for her job, I stepped in to help with her daughter,” says Summer, who is using a pseudonym for privacy purposes. “Yes, you could get that kind of help in a ‘normal’ living space, but that’s more the exception nowadays.” Ana Paula Noguez Mercado, 35, agrees, saying cohousing brings together people with similar values and goals. “We all want to live our lives in a sustainable, socially responsible fashion in an urban space,” she says. “It’s so great to have a group of neighbors who become friends that you can share important moments in life with.” Mercado, like Walters, got married at the eco-village. “People were super-supportive in our wedding planning,” she says. “I will never forget that.” Still, residents are able to maintain the necessary boundaries. As a single woman, Summer highly values her privacy, especially when it comes to her dating life. She considers the members at LAEV to be her family and brings partners into the community space only if she’s serious about them. So far, she has found that partners of residents are always welcome.

Mercado, Summer, Walters, and Sarria acknowledge that with shared living comes challenges that aren’t for everybody. Juggling community responsibilities while managing a full-time job or school and parenting can be overwhelming. Each LAEV member is required to work, since the neighborhood is maintained by the residents, and gardening, managing the food co-op, and being on the welcoming committee are just a few of the ways residents are expected to help out. Plus, since all decisions are made by consensus, individuals may not always agree with the final outcome after a vote. “It can be dramatic at times, especially when making decisions that not everybody agrees with,” says Sarria. “I will say that there are policies and ideas here that I really don’t agree with.”

Certainly, anytime you bring 40 people together under one roof, conflict is bound to arise. “There is the beauty of relying on your neighbors, but there also comes drama. It’s not always easy,” says Walters. “It comes with the territory,” adds Summer. “It’s like family. Sometimes your family rubs you the wrong way,

and you get upset. But here, you learn to mend fences.” That’s because unlike in traditional neighborhoods, where a dispute can lead to next-door neighbors not speaking to each other for years, the goal of community living is to deal with conflicts head-on. Members are reflexively shuttled into mediation by the group to resolve any issues that come up so that harmony can be preserved. Walters, who works as a therapist, uses her conflict-resolution skills to help with group mediation. “When you have open dialogues with people,” she says, “it creates understanding, empathy, and flexibility.”

While cohousing may not be the right lifestyle for everyone, McCamant points out that American neighborhoods have radically changed in the past 50 years—and not always for the better. “It’s only been very recently that we’ve had this idea that a family is supposed to be alone in its isolated single-family house and should take care of all of its needs by itself,” she says. “In much of the world, that idea doesn’t exist.” In fact, the American demand for space for single-family homes has only grown in the past 30 years. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average square footage of a single-family home in 1973 was 1,660, compared with 2,392 in 2010. Cohousing, on the other hand, opts for smaller private units with the common shared space taking up the most real estate. For instance, at the Swan’s Market Cohousing community in Oakland, CA, a 1,152-square-foot home was on the market for \$465,000, but it came with shared common spaces that included a full-sized kitchen, dining room, guest room, exercise room, laundry, children’s playroom, and more. While the asking price is slightly above the average price for a similarly sized home in Oakland, no conventional homes listed offer as many amenities as the cohousing space does.

Today, there are 125 cohousing communities in the U.S., and the national nonprofit Cohousing Association ([cohousing.org](http://cohousing.org)) offers an online directory listing them all. Interested folks can inquire about openings or request a tour. But just like with traditional co-op boards, prospective residents must be approved by their chosen community before gaining membership. Summer likens this application experience to finding the right relationship. “People use the analogy of marriage. It’s definitely a serious commitment,” she says. “If you rush into it and commit to something like this and don’t take the time to get to really know what a cooperative is all about, you might be disappointed.”

All aspects of cohousing taken into account, Walters, Mercado, Summer, and Sarria still sing the praises of this lifestyle. “Seeing what the community can offer me in terms of how I see myself developing in my life is a big part of why I stay here,” says Walters. “I think it is a great option for women who are interested in having their own space,” says Mercado, “but who also want to feel the support and company of a community.” **B**

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