

# PRACTICE WHAT YOU PLAN

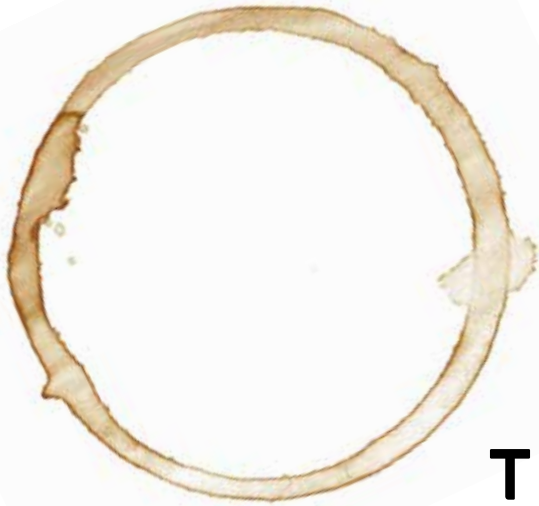
A group of land-use alums decide  
to age in place in a cohousing community of their own design.

By MARY HAMMON



Ankeny Row residents gather to share a potluck meal in the complex's shared courtyard following a monthly partner meeting. The courtyard (opposite) is also home to the group's common garden and serves as an impromptu meeting place.





T

**THERE'S NOTHING BETTER** than chatting over a cup of coffee with friends. ¶ That's exactly where I found myself on a rainy morning last October, as I sat in the cozy common room of Ankeny Row talking with Dick Benner, Lavinia Gordon, Michael Royce, Lanie Smith, and Dave Siegel, FAICP. ¶ These friends gather for more than just the occasional coffee klatch. They see each other nearly every day, as residents of a three-year old, sustainably built "intentional community" of their own devising in Buckman, a popular neighborhood in southeast Portland, Oregon. ¶ They have a lot more in common than sharing a cohousing space. Most of them are planners or allied professionals, and the thoughtful design of their living arrangement and the homes themselves reflect many of the values they practiced over the course of their careers.

The owners of Ankeny Row celebrate its groundbreaking in 2013. Wolfgang Feist (fourth from left, in a black cap), the co-originator of the Passive House concept and founder of the Passivhaus Institut in Germany, joined them. Built to Passive House standards, Ankeny Row's units are so efficient that they can be run by the energy produced by 3,500 square feet of solar panels on the roof.

Four years later, Dave Siegel, Lanie Smith, and Kayla the Wonder Dog are right at home in their town house (opposite page).

Four years ago, facing retirement and empty nests, these five baby boomer couples and one single, ages 50 to 70, sold their homes and came together, looking to downsize, be a part of a close-knit community, go green, and age in place.

That October day, we shared plenty of banter and laughter as we sat sipping coffee and looking out onto the inviting, albeit damp, shared center courtyard and garden surrounded by a handful of attractive two-story craftsman-style town houses. I was having such an enjoyable time that nearly an hour passed before I realized I had yet to ask them to tell me about their unique community.

Siegel asked, "How far into geekdom do you want to go?"

**Quit dreaming, start doing**

The project was the brainchild of longtime friends and Portland residents Dick Benner and his wife Lavinia Gordon and Michael and Francie Royce, who had tossed around the idea of cohousing for years but didn't get really serious until 2005, when they began hunting for properties.

"A lot of people our age have been thinking about cohousing—maybe because we like to be in communes like we were in our 20s," Michael Royce jokes. "At least in Portland, we hear of new groups pretty frequently. So I think [Ankeny Row] was just a question of four friends who convinced each other to quit dreaming and start doing."

Gordon and Francie Royce (now retired) had



2013



worked together for 20 years at the Portland Bureau of Transportation. Benner was a growth management lawyer for Metro, the regional government for the Oregon portion of the Portland metropolitan area, and is a former director for the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development, the state's planning agency. Michael Royce is a former environmental attorney and founder of Green Empowerment, a nonprofit that works to strengthen communities around the world by delivering renewable energy and potable water.

Their backgrounds were well suited to the rigors of the project, which involved locating and purchasing a property (which happened in 2010), creating an LLC and acting as their own developer, vetting and hiring a design firm, and marketing and recruiting additional like-minded partners to fill the rest of the units.

"It's not for the faint of heart," says Gordon, who acted as the project manager during construction.

All 11 cohousing partners knew at least one other person in the group when they signed on. Siegel, a senior project manager at Leland Consulting Group (and APA's president from 2005 to 2007), had worked with Francie Royce and Gordon at PBOT. Smith, also a planner (and married to Dave Siegel), had worked under Benner at the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development.

Siegel and Smith had also considered pursuing a cohousing relationship years before, but to no result. Then Benner and Gordon reached out to them with

#### CORE VALUES

Ankeny Row's founding partners wanted their new home to embody multiple tenants of good planning:

#### SUSTAINABILITY

##### INFILL

##### WALKABILITY

##### HIGH ENERGY EFFICIENCY

##### LOW CARBON FOOTPRINT

#### AGING IN PLACE

##### A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

##### GOOD FIT WITH THE SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOOD

##### CLOSE PROXIMITY TO DOWNTOWN

an introductory email. Siegel's reaction? "Hell, yeah." They were the first to sign on.

There was no small amount of risk involved, particularly because relative strangers were committing to the project after only seeing a proposal on paper. They would also be financing the project themselves, which most of them did by selling their homes.

According to Siegel, the overall concept, underlying values, and thoughtful planning process undertaken by the founding partners (as the other residents call Benner, Gordon, and the Royces) won them over. "We drank the Kool-Aid," he says.

#### Value-based design

At the project's outset, Ankeny Row's founding partners had a list of characteristics that they wanted their new home to embody: sustainability, infill, walkability, high energy efficiency, low carbon footprint, aging in place, a sense of community, contributing to the betterment of the surrounding neighborhood, and close proximity to downtown.

They used this list of values to pinpoint a neighborhood and ultimately select a site. And in true planner fashion, they undertook a series of charrettes with three design firms and ultimately hired Portland design-build firm Green Hammer to bring those ideals to life.

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.** Ankeny Row is a medium-density infill project in Portland's Buckman neighborhood, just six miles east of downtown. With a walk score of 92 and a bike score of 98, the property ticks off everything the founding partners were looking for: a bike boulevard out front, easy access to transit, and a grocery store, restaurants, and other services within walking distance.

The 12,000-square-foot parcel combines two lots, one of which was home to a derelict commercial warehouse, which they demolished and redeveloped into five town house units and a common room structure with an additional apartment above it.

They chose to forgo space for off-street parking to make room for their shared center courtyard and garden.

Given the property's zoning, they say they could have built a four- to five-story, 40-unit stacked flat building, but it was important to them that Ankeny Row fit in with and contribute to the mix of building types in the neighborhood.

Benner admits to feeling a little guilty at first, having spent most of his career encouraging high



2017

Ankeny Row is more efficient than most homes. It saves

**94.2 metric tons of energy and carbon each year,** which is equivalent to:

Greenhouse gas emissions from **20 passenger vehicles**

CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from **10 homes' energy use**

Carbon sequestered by **89 acres of U.S. forests**

SOURCE: EPA.GOV/ENERGY/GREENHOUSE-GAS-EQUIVALENCIES-CALCULATOR

density within Portland's urban growth boundary. "[But] I reconciled myself to it on a completely different thought: What makes a great neighborhood? And what helps people accept density?" The answer, he says, is good design and diversity of building type. He thinks they've achieved both.

**AGING IN PLACE.** With residents ranging in age from their 50s to their 70s, accessibility and the ability to age in place were a top priority.

Though the five 1,400-square-foot town houses each has two stories, they also have a bedroom and full bath on the main floor to allow for one-level living, with the idea that the second floor could then serve as private living quarters for guests or a full-time caregiver if needed.

Universal design principles were incorporated inside and out. All doorways and bathrooms are wheelchair accessible, as is the courtyard. The path into the complex is built on a gentle grade, with no raised steps along the walkways or entryways to any of the buildings.

Ankeny Row's location in a walkable neighbor-

hood also makes the place age friendly. "My haircut place is three blocks there, my movie place is two blocks there, my grocery store is three blocks there," Royce says, pointing out their general directions.

"There are more restaurants than I can count within walking distance. I can go days without using my car, which is just great. Just walk to everything or take a bus [or train]," he adds.

**COHOUSING.** Just as important as the physical characteristics of the development was the owners' desire to be part of a community of like-minded people. They wanted to live where they could look out for one another as they got older—not in an anonymous condo building or neighborhood.

The cohousing arrangement—and the physical one—helps foster that sense of togetherness. The town houses' doors and windows face onto the courtyard, which is shared, though each unit has its own private patio. This creates opportunities for chance hellos and impromptu conversations. As for privacy, the partners think they got the balance between private space and common space just right.

## COHOUSING THROUGH THE YEARS *By ELLEN RYAN*

**1967.** A Danish newspaper publishes Bodil Graee's "Children Should Have One Hundred Parents," inspiring 50 Danish families to begin organizing a housing collective. They are soon joined by another group, led by architect and cohousing creator Jan Gudman Hoyer.

**1972.** Sættedammen, the first known cohousing development, opens in New Hammersholt, Denmark. Designed by architects Theo Bjerg and Palle Dyreborg, Sættedammen still operates today, with 70 people in 27 houses.

**1979.** During this decade of cultural turbulence, groups have begun communal living experiments that last—including the little-known Sunlight Holding Co. in Portland, Oregon, which opened in 1979. Today, Sunlight's site contains a common

house, decentralized parking, and 15 homes.

**1988.** American architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett publish their book *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, introducing the term "cohousing" to North America and helping communities coalesce what they've already started.

**1991.** Muir Commons opens in Davis, California, and is widely credited as the first U.S. community designed and built (by McCamant and Durrett) specifically for cohousing. It has a common house, laundry, auto shop, tot lot, gardens, and orchards.

**1996.** Cohousing debuts in Canada with the Windsong development in Langley, British Columbia. Amenities include a

glass-roofed pedestrian street with passive solar heating and a 5,000-square-foot common house.

**2005.** Cohousing surges in urban areas, including in Boston with transit-focused Jamaica Plain Cohousing. Durrett publishes a handbook for senior cohousing; per the Cohousing Association of the United States, the U.S. has at least 12 senior cohousing communities.

**2017.** Roughly 164 cohousing communities are operating in the U.S., with around 132 currently in the works. "We've been experiencing an exponential increase in cohousing development and interest in the last couple of years," says Coho/US executive director Alice Alexander.

Ellen Ryan is a freelance writer who has written on livable communities for AARP.

Respecting one another's privacy helps. And, after three years, the landscaping has grown enough so that when they are sitting on their patios, they can't see across the courtyard. It's enough for privacy when they want it, but doesn't stop them from spontaneous get-togethers on someone's patio.

"Cohousing turns a lot of people off [because of the privacy aspect], but if you design it well, just like any other building, you can make it great," Benner says.

**ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY.** Green Hammer built the complex to Passive House standards, which use superinsulated walls, an insulated concrete slab, and other features like triple-pane windows and doors to create a building envelope that minimizes the loss of air and the overall amount of energy needed to heat, cool, and operate the units. Indeed, as I toured one of the street-facing homes, I was struck by how comfortable and quiet it was.

Because of Passive House design, the units are so efficient that they can be run by the energy produced by 3,500 square feet of solar panels on the roof, which keeps utility bills low and earns them "net-zero energy" status.

In addition to energy efficiency, Ankeny Row also has a lower carbon footprint than conventional developments. It used sustainable materials, including Forest Stewardship Council certified wood, and the development achieved the Earth Advantage platinum certification for green buildings standards.

Building to those standards was more expensive, and the units certainly aren't short on amenities and style, but the Ankeny Row partners say the extra expense was worth it for something they know will provide lasting value (the homes and metal roofs are projected to last up to 100 years).

"We're very fortunate that we could afford to do a very high-quality development that was value based," says Siegel, adding that much of the approach is "replicable to different degrees, depending on what the values are and the objectives you're trying to achieve."

### **So far, so good**

Fast-forward to today, and things are going pretty much as planned.

Beyond the day they all moved in three years ago, they say one of the best moments so far came at the end of the first year. That's when they learned that they had surpassed their net-zero energy goal, producing 18 percent more energy than they con-

sumed. (That surplus goes back into the grid in return for credits, which they donate to a low-income energy assistance program.)

And they couldn't be happier with the sense of community they've fostered. A typical week might bring casual encounters in the courtyard that lead to extended conversations and socializing over coffee, wine, or a meal. On Friday mornings, they do yoga in the common room, and they're considering hiring a Spanish tutor.

Their monthly partner meetings typically turn into socializing over dinner in the common room, and other times the shared space plays host to get-togethers for watching political debates, as well as other celebrations. One of their favorite moments so far was an official celebration they called "Big Night," where they recreated the menu from a favorite movie of the same name.

"Everybody got completely into it and dressed up," Dave Siegel says. "We had the big table out, we had all the dishes, a lot of wine, and that basically screamed community to me and it just made me feel like we were in the right place."

Outside the common spaces, they share a house cleaner, and watch each other's homes and Ankeny Row's three resident dogs (Lily, Winston, and Kayla the Wonder Dog) when someone goes out of town. They take turns giving rides to the airport, and pitch in with the gardening (led by the "esteemed garden committee"), cleaning out the compost bins, and other shared tasks.

More recently, a minor medical situation prompted a larger discussion about how they should handle such emergencies in the community. "Typically you're not sharing that kind of stuff with your neighbors. It's become a very close, interesting bond," says Lanie Smith. "That community, as we grow older, is going to be really important to us."

As for the future of their intentional community, Dave Siegel says he anticipates that there will be some watershed moments over the next five to 20 years. "Somebody may be incapacitated. Somebody may need a caregiver. Somebody will die. Somebody will sell their unit." They also foresee a day when younger people and children will come into their community.

"And good for us for getting that to happen," Dave says. "I've been a planner for 40 years [and] I think this is a great example of [us] walking the talk. I feel really fortunate, blessed, to be a part of that." ■

Mary Hammon is *Planning's* associate editor.