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Wheat Ridge housing project to take communal approach: shared spaces, meals and even snow removal

Blue Columbine Cohousing near Prospect Park to follow Scandinavian model, allowing for residents to better connect with neighbors





Bryan Bowen, an architect at Caddis Collaborative, stands in front of a farmhouse in Wheat Ridge. The parcel is being purchased by Blue Columbine Cohousing, which plans to building 39 housing units. Future residents are developing the community, and they have hired Bowen to design it. (Aldo Svaldi/The Denver Post)

By **ALDO SVALDI** | asvaldi@denverpost.com | The
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When it comes to cohousing, a development model pioneered in Scandinavia, Colorado is a national leader. And Wheat Ridge is on track to become the latest city in the state to join the club.

“The more you share, the more your life is successful,” said Bryan Bowen, a principal architect with Caddis Collaborative, expressing the sentiment behind cohousing and a new community he is designing called [Blue Columbine Cohousing](#).

Bowen has designed more than 20 cohousing communities in Colorado and other states, drawing on more than 15 years of experience living in one. And if the concept can be summed up in a few words, it is that life is better lived in a close-knit community.

Blue Columbine Cohousing plans to [offer 39 for-sale homes on three-plus acres](#) once occupied by two former farmsteads on the north side of 44th Avenue, just across the street from Prospect Park. The homes will range from 770 square feet to 2,000 square feet and range in price from around \$476,000 to \$1.2 million.

“For three years we would find sites and then they would get taken,” said Eliza Prall, one of the organizers behind Blue Columbine Cohousing, which has 200 people on its interest list, including nine who have put down deposits.

Those who have expressed interest range from young parents with twins in kindergarten to retirees in their 70s looking at their next steps in life. Doctors, writers, artists, and renewable energy experts, are all in the mix, she said.

Cohousing is different than [co-operative housing](#), which tends to pack people more closely together, often under one roof, in a way to boost affordability. In cohousing, units are individually owned, but there are more common areas than found in a typical apartment or condo development.

The balancing act with cohousing is having enough people in a community so everyone can find people they can connect with, but not so large that neighbors remain strangers, Prall said.

Cohousing, in its modern iteration, traces its roots back to Denmark in the 1960s when people were unhappy with what the market was offering. They banded together to build their own communities — secure land, hire designers and bring in builders — essentially flipping the script on the development model.

The people who will live in the community drive what it becomes, not a developer or the builder selling homes. And when given the choice, they are designing for interaction, not isolation.

The U.S. Surgeon General has labeled loneliness and social isolation as a public health crisis. Cohousing offers an antidote to modern neighborhoods where people can slip in and out of their garages without ever greeting their neighbors, much less firing up a grill and sharing a meal.

And while some cohousing focuses on seniors, most projects try to bust through generational silos that current development models promote, bringing a mix of generations together.



Cohousing tends to appeal to people who feel out of kilter with the current culture, who feel a need to connect with other people on a very local level, said Jim Leach, founder of Boulder-based Wonderland Hill Development Co. and a thought leader in the movement.

“Loneliness is a big deal and community is one of the better solutions,” he said. “With cohousing, you get to know your neighbors.”

The parcel that backers of Blue Columbine, after a long search and some false starts, have secured rights to is in a formerly agricultural part of Wheat Ridge that is redeveloping. Closing on that land should happen within the next two months.

What comes next can also be difficult — bringing together enough serious buyers, not just those expressing interest, to allow the project to go forward. Bowen said about 80% to 85% of the units need to be claimed before construction can move forward.

Given that Blue Columbine won't be completed until August 2025 under its current schedule, patience is also needed.

“You are doing a custom community for 30 people rather than a custom house,” Leach said. Most production builders aren't willing to tackle them, making the niche a specialized one.

After California and Washington state, Colorado has the third highest concentration of cohousing communities in the nation at 28, both established and forming, according to a [directory maintained by CohoUS](#).

Colorado's first community was Nyland Cohousing, established in Lafayette in 1992 and the two most recently completed are the Aria in Denver in 2017 and Silver Leaf in Paonia in 2018. Two are in the building stage, and seven more are forming, including Blue Columbine, according to CohoUS.

Blue Columbine will have a heavy emphasis on gathering spaces, Bowen said. He notes that an apartment developer might try to fit 70 to 80 units on the land where Blue Columbine is looking to build 39.

Common areas take up a larger share of the land than typically seen with multi-family developments, but that also frees up more space within individual units and allows them to be smaller.

The Common House at Blue Columbine will run along 44th Avenue and cover 5,400 square feet of space, including a library, common living room, exercise studio kid's playroom, chef's kitchen and a shared dining hall where members of the neighborhood will gather a few times a week for shared meals.

The Common House will also have guest rooms where visitors can stay, cutting down on the number of extra bedrooms needed in each unit.

Elsewhere on the property, there will be a wood, metal and maker space, a community garden, a bike barn, a dog wash, a potting shed, a swimming pool and a common green.



The Common House at Blue Columbine Cohousing, pictured in a rendering, will cover 5,400 square feet and includes features like a community dining hall and living room, a library and guest rooms for visitors. It will be the centerpiece of a community of 39 residential units built on three acres. (Rendering provided by Caddis Collaborative)

Blue Columbine has a goal of getting as close to net zero energy as it feasibly can and plans include a ground-mount photovoltaic array. Electric vehicle charging stations, which can be costly to set up in multi-family developments after the fact, are included in the plans.

Cohousing isn't for everyone. For starters, it requires a commitment of time and focus in helping the community come to life, and the commitment intensifies once people move in.

Participation in the homeownership association tends to be much broader with tasks like clearing sidewalks of snow and mowing the common lawns handled by residents rather than outsourced.

Bowman said people contribute to a cohousing community based on their different skills and talents — it could be running the woodshop or cooking meals or planning activities and programs. Given that people tend to self-select into communities, those added obligations don't tend to be the biggest hurdle. Most people find their niche.

Rather, in today's expensive real estate market, cost has become a barrier.

"It is not an easy slam dunk from a sales standpoint, especially today when housing is so expensive. The units can be smaller, but the common space adds to the cost of the project," Leach said.

Each person buying a unit also is buying a share of the common house, the swimming pool, the wood shop, the community gardens. The more features, the more added costs. Cohousing developments also tend to put a greater emphasis on architecture and design.

"I have never had a client group come to me and say let's make use a cookie-cutter, mass production design," Bowen said.

That said, because future residents are essentially the developers, there isn't an outside party taking a 15% or 25% cut as their profit margin. And construction defects tend to be less of an issue with cohousing.

"We don't have any other cohousing communities in Wheat Ridge. This will be the first," said Stephanie Stevens, a senior planner with the City of Wheat Ridge.

She said cohousing developments tend to offer a more diverse mix of housing types, reflecting the different types of households living there, and Blue Columbine is following that pattern.

The [subarea plan for the 44th Avenue corridor](#) emphasizes residential development in areas west of Kipling Boulevard and commercial uses to the east. The plan includes road improvements to make it easier for residents living north of 44th Avenue to access the Clear Creek Trail and Prospect Park.

The 39-acre park, complete with pickleball courts, picnic shelters, a football field and two ponds, is expected to be a major draw for residents of Blue Columbine, Prall said. For those looking for a fast link to downtown, the G Line light rail stop is under a half mile away.

“It is not as much about your home as it is about your community,” Bowen said.

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