

Cohousing is an inclusive approach to smart, sustainable cities

16 November 2018, by Cheryl Gladu



Vancouver Cohousing Courtyard. Credit: Cheryl Gladu, [CC BY-NC](#)

The idea that technology will fix complex and systemic problems like climate change, poverty, the housing crisis or health care is simplistic to say the least. [We need a radical shift in how we live](#), and designing for environmental and social sustainability [cannot simply be about applying new technologies to our existing models of living](#).

We need to support models of living that can both improve our actual well-being *and* reduce material demands on the planet.

Existing models of urban development that can achieve these goals are taking hold across North America. One example is collaborative housing or [cohousing](#).

As municipalities consider the development of [smart cities](#), they have to consider how citizens contribute to the relative "intelligence" of a city. Cohousing is just one such model as it both a [form and a process of design for co-operation](#) that helps create vibrant and resilient communities.

[Alphabet's Sidewalk Labs](#) [is mapping out a new kind of neighbourhood](#) that would redevelop a

12-acre waterfront district in Toronto called Quayside from "the internet up."

This is just the beginning of the relationship, as all eyes are on the future development of the [750 acres neighbouring the site along the eastern waterfront](#).

It has been a year of scandals at Silicon Valley, from [Google sharing emails with app developers](#) to a joint investigation between the Justice Department, the FBI, the Federal Trade Commission and the Securities and Exchange Commission into [data leaks by Facebook](#). A networked neighbourhood built "from the internet up," may not be the selling feature Sidewalk Labs had hoped it would be. It should come as no surprise that many people are suspicious of this proposal.

Several paths to the Smart City

There are [different paths that lead to smart cities](#). For example, we have [techno-utopias](#) that focus on the digital optimization of the city, with a particular focus on infrastructure. Or we might consider how social innovations can lead to a better quality of life for more people.

Of course, there are times when these approaches intersect, but I can't help but notice the particular focus on the technological aspects of just about every critique of the Quayside project.

These critiques, by academics, [technology writers](#) and [concerned citizens](#) are warranted because so far, ["smart city" approaches the world over have generally been related to top-down processes with a focus on new technologies](#). People who live in these cities are often excluded from meaningful participation in the planning process that later impacts their lives. Given the levels of engagement on [this issue](#), it's quite clear that the citizens of Toronto are hungry for the opportunity to truly

participate in making their city better.

With this in mind, I want to draw attention to one element of the plan presented by the [Quayside proposal: Cohousing](#).

A model of meaningful collaboration

There is an assumption that people understand what is meant by cohousing, but [as a researcher](#) in this field, I can assure you, most people don't.

Some think it's some kind of approach to [affordable housing](#), which has yet to be the case in North America. There is little understanding of how the nature of this kind of intentional community represents a fairly radical, and positive, shift in modern living, where people learn through regular practice to build consensus with their neighbours on issues of sharing, co-caring and meaningful collaboration.

This is a model of design, development and management that when done properly, can contribute to a "bottom-up" approach to building the city. Yet in both [the proposal itself and media coverage](#), cohousing isn't clearly defined.

What is cohousing?

Cohousing includes participation in the project's design, development and management by a self-organizing group or collective. It is one of a [number of collective housing models](#) that emerged in northern Europe in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Decisions are made by consensus and talking through differences is central to the creation of these communities. Residents own or rent complete private dwellings within the larger project (typically between 15 to 33 households), while also sharing common property, such as a common house, a large kitchen and dining area, guest suites and gardens.

The legal structure of these communities may vary: Some are co-operatives, while others are condominium associations.

Materially simple, relationally rich

One reason that this model is interesting is that it shows us that when members of an intentional community get together to design their own neighbourhood, they opt for [less personal space and more shared resources](#); they opt for materially simple, yet rich relational lives.

These projects can also help "[seed community](#)" into a larger area. Despite the fact that most of these communities are not certified green buildings, [research shows us](#) that cohousing communities can outperform green buildings on environmental measures, and this is likely related to the governance structure rather than technological innovation. Smart, no?

[A case study in Barcelona](#) suggests there is much to gain from the pairing of top-down with bottom-up approaches in terms of smart city development, as partnerships between different stakeholders can reinforce collaboration.

Cohousing [communities across Canada](#) and [the United States](#) could benefit from the capacity of companies like Sidewalk Labs to mobilize people, politicians and resources.

However, in order for this to work for cohousing communities, there has to be a real opportunity to partner with the eventual occupants so that they have ownership of the process because cohousers themselves must be the [driving force behind the process](#).

The sense of community that emerges from cohousing developments is not merely due to its physical design, nor is it a happy accident—it is the central aim of the development and management process, which starts *prior* to the design and development of these communities.

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