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Lessons Learned From a New Elder Cohousing Community

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As an alternative to traditional housing options, the first elder cohousing communities in the United States have recently emerged. This study reports findings from a mixed methods longitudinal evaluation of one such self-managed intentional community. Respondents were asked about the process of community building and the benefits/challenges of living in elder cohousing, using both surveys and in-depth interviews. Despite challenges, respondents indicated feelings of safety and comfort through being part of an interdependent community. Life improved after the first two years, when much foundational work was completed. Their experience reinforces the thought that elders can create and manage their own communities and provide mutual support.

KEYWORDS mutual support, living arrangements, sense of community, neighbors

INTRODUCTION

Some older adults and Baby Boomers are rebelling against the current array of choices for their living arrangements as they age. Traditional housing options may not meet their needs. Most older individuals, if they have children, do not wish to live with them (Harper & Bayer, 2000; Krout, Holmes, Erickson, & Wolle, 2003); the percentage of older individuals who co-reside with their children has been decreasing since the 1950s (Gilleard & Higgs,

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2005). Baby Boomers are less likely to have children (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005) and more likely to be single; recent data show that one-third of Baby Boomers are unmarried, with most of them being either never married or divorced and living alone (Lin & Brown, 2012). Among those aged 65 years and older who are non-institutionalized, more than 11 million (29.3%) currently live alone (Administration on Aging, 2011). Neighborhoods are increasingly comprised of superficial and changing networks (Stafford, 2009). Loneliness has been clearly identified as a problem, especially for older adults, that places individuals at risk of worsened health outcomes (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007) and even of functional decline and mortality (Perissinotto, Cenzer, & Covinsky, 2012). There is increasing evidence that isolation itself puts individuals at health risk (Tamaka, Thompson, & Palacios, 2006), especially elders. Thus, a wide variety of housing alternatives is needed for our diverse aging population (Folts & Muir, 2002; Glass, 2012; Kahana, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Kahana, 2003; Krout et al., 2003). One less traditional approach is to provide mutual support through an intentional self-directed community. With this goal, a small group of proactive pioneers created one of the first elder cohousing communities in the United States in 2006, referred to here as Parkside. As part of a mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation of Parkside, this article presents the residents' views on the process of community building and the benefits and challenges identified by the respondents, as well as the lessons learned.

Several environmental gerontology researchers have studied the relationships between the person, environment, and behavior (Carp & Carp, 1982; Gitlin, 2003; Kahana, 1982; Kahana et al., 2003; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973; Oswald & Wahl, 2005; Parmelee & Lawton, 1990). Wahl and Lang (2003) stated that the mission of environmental gerontology is to provide "contributions to the understanding of prototypical environment-related tasks of the aging individual" (p. 7), including relocation and how elders adapt to new settings. This study adds to the field in several ways. It allows for consideration of the temporal context as advocated by Golant (2003) because there is a lack of and need for longitudinal qualitative studies for assessing processes and outcomes in the context of environmental gerontology (Krout & Wethington, 2003; Parmelee & Lawton, 1990; Wahl, Iwarsson, & Oswald, 2012). There is also a dearth of research on expectations and attractions related to various housing options (Krout et al., 2003). Further, Parkside can be characterized as a neighborhood, and few studies consider the role of the neighborhood (Krause, 2004; Smith, 2009). Even fewer exist in which the residents have created a new neighborhood together. Chavis and Pretty (1999) cite one such study by Garcia, Giuliani, and Weisenfeld (1999), observing that "The participants describe experiences that would be rare to most of us of this generation, the construction of a community planned and executed by residents themselves" (p. 638). However, this phenomenon is exactly what Parkside residents experienced, and thus is an excellent living example of how a dynamic community can be realized.

As previously documented (Glass, 2009; 2012), Parkside is unique in many ways. Parkside was created by a group of elders who came together, developed a vision, and saw it through to the reality. They adopted the cohousing model, a concept borrowed from the Dutch "living group" (Brenton, 2008) in which the physical design fosters social interaction and a sense of community (Fromm, 1991; McCamant & Durrett, 1994). Such intent makes it an ideal setting in which to study the dynamic relationship between the "social and physical place over time (SPOT)" discussed by Wahl and Lang (2003). Other prior American cohousing has been intergenerational, although elder cohousing is well established in Northern Europe (Andresen & Runge, 2002; Brenton, 1998; Choi, 2004; Choi & Paulsson, 2011). Furthermore, Parkside encompasses both owners and government-subsidized low-income renters in the same community, and the fact that it is designed for moderate- to low-income residents is unusual because most cohousing targets middle- to higher-income individuals. It is self-managed by the residents, and they make their own decisions using consensus. In addition, Parkside aspires to be a community of mutual support where neighbors help each other; an example of a "community of identity" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005, p. 118) as Grant (2006) describes, "where the residents are primarily responsible for, and have to work at, preserving a spirit of harmony and cooperation to ensure their [community] provides the quality of life they desire" (p. 108). Although new in the United States, the option is beginning to get more widespread attention (Brenton, 2008; Durrett, 2009; Glass, 2012; Glass & Skinner, 2013; Wardrip, 2010).

The Community Design

Consistent with European elder cohousing (Andresen & Runge, 2002), Parkside was purposefully built, with almost all private living units facing the common green space (see site plan in Figure 1). The 29 units are comparable with earlier Dutch elder cohousing studies, which found an average of 20 to 30 units, with 24 units suggested to be ideal (Brenton, 1998, 2001). The 13 owned houses are one-story and are grouped in duplexes and triplexes on one side of the common space. Rental units, which are subsidized for low income residents, comprise two two-story buildings on the other side of the common space. The two-story design was necessitated by the steepness of the site, and the opposing on-grade entry permits all units to be entered from ground level. Second-floor units face away from the common space and have parking at the front door, with back decks overlooking the common area. Other residents park in lots at either end of the community. Four small rental apartments in the Common House were completed after the other units. The approximately 2,000 square foot Common House, which includes a large kitchen and gathering space for meetings and the twice-weekly common meals, is at one end. In addition, two of the original planners had lived in a house adjacent to the property for years

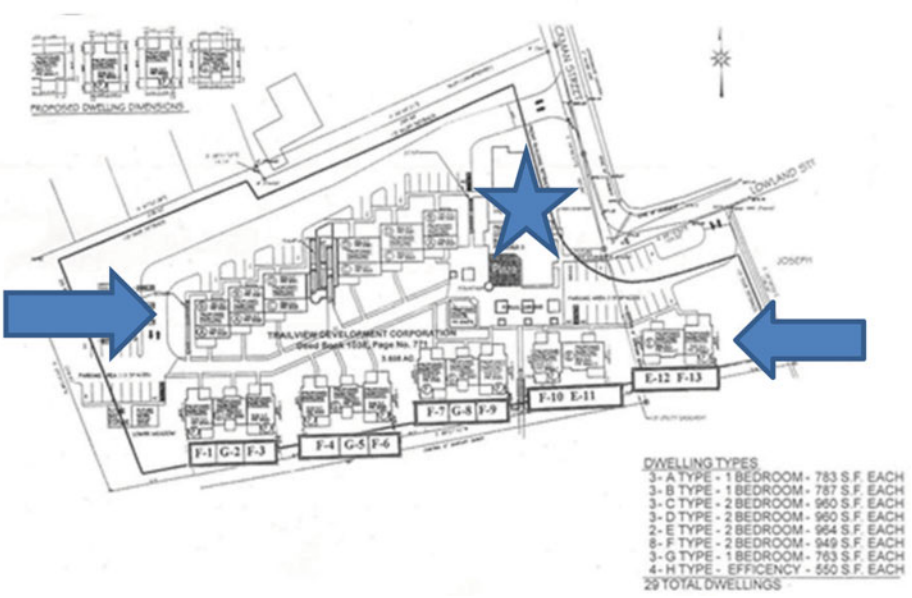

FIGURE 1 Parkside Site Plan. The arrow on the left points to the rental units and the arrow on the right points to a row of owned units. Common space and walkway can be seen between. The star indicates the location of the Common House. Diagram used with permission in earlier article by author in this journal (2009). Arrows and star have been added. (Color figure available online).

before Parkside was physically constructed. Two other women have moved into an apartment in this house, drawn by the Parkside model. Although physically located slightly "up the hill," these four individuals are very involved with Parkside; in effect, adding two more units to make 31 the total number of units on campus. The development corporation still owns the 3.7 acres on which Parkside was built.

DESIGN AND METHODS

A phenomenological qualitative approach was appropriate to learn how the implementation of the community was experienced and interpreted by the respondents. The social constructivist world view innate in phenomenological research is reflected in the effort to gain an understanding of the phenomenon directly from those who are experiencing it (Creswell, 2007, Moustakas, 1994). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. . . . This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Approval was obtained from the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board to conduct this research, which included in-depth interviews and survey data collection. The original interview guide was developed with input from a team of Parkside residents prior to beginning the study. The researcher had full cooperation from Parkside residents, including being able to stay on site while conducting the research. Residents received notice from the Parkside Residents' Association. Their participation was voluntary and their responses were confidential.

The researcher first gathered data at Parkside in 2006. A three year grant allowed data collection in four additional waves. Baseline data were collected from all respondents. In 2008, the survey instrument was substantially revised to focus more closely on measures of sense of community, mutual support, and resident satisfaction. Interviews were also conducted each year from 2006 to 2009, incorporating questions about these topics as well as communal coping and community evolution.

When visiting, the researcher participated in Parkside activities, such as common meals, and collected Parkside newsletters, committee rosters, and other documents during the entire study period. Thus, the evaluation used a triangulation of mixed methods, including interviews, survey data, participant observation, and content analysis. This mix of techniques was optimal for evaluating a new program.

At the same time, it was also important to collect baseline and follow-up data on demographics and other quantifiable aspects. Residents' subjective perceptions have been demonstrated as useful measures (Carp & Carp, 1982; Kahana et al., 2003). Member checking was accomplished by sharing the final evaluation report with any community residents who were interested, and their responses were solicited and reviewed. This manuscript was also reviewed by the Parkside Research Committee. In both cases, perspectives of community members varied occasionally between themselves, depending on each individual's personal degree of knowledge about Parkside, but their reviews confirmed general agreement with the findings.

Interviews, which lasted an average of 50 minutes, were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were analyzed using NVivo software to code and identify themes by both the author and a research assistant, who then compared their findings to determine consensus. The survey data were entered into SPSS software (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) and analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. This article reports responses to questions about the process of how the community was developing, as well as open-ended opportunities to say what respondents liked most and least about the community and what suggestions they had for others who were considering a similar community.

Participation of Sample

Interviews and surveys were conducted at least once with 34 of the original 39 residents and 3 additional residents. In 2010, 32 surveys were completed,

these included six second-phase residents who had moved into units vacated by original members, resulting in a total of 43 residents represented over the time period. Fourteen participants were interviewed each of the four years. It should be noted that years before the community was built, the researcher had a prior consulting relationship with three of the original community planners. Thus, the possibility of consequent bias on the part of the researcher is recognized. However, only one of those three original planners ultimately became a resident during this period, and other residents moved in from 14 different states and were previously unknown to the researcher. Having this prior knowledge of the early history of this community might even have provided some advantages in more fully understanding how this community came into being.

Demographics

Average age at admission for the initial founders' sample was 70.4 years (range = 63 to 84 years). All respondents were White and the majority (79%) was women. The percentages that were divorced (21%) or never married (18%) were higher than comparable national averages of 12% and 4%, respectively (Greenberg, 2011). By 2010, average age had increased to 74.03 years (range = 65 to 88 years), and 24 respondents (75%) were never married, divorced/separated, or widowed. Five (16%) of the 32 respondents were men. Two-thirds of the founders reported annual incomes of less than $35,000, but they had higher levels of education than would commonly be found in low- to moderate-income housing, with half of them having graduate degrees. A wide variety of former occupations was represented, including a cook, teacher, therapist, office worker, and community organizer. All respondents continued to generally be independent in their activities of daily living, except for temporary problems due to surgeries or illness. Measures of self-reported health in 2010 indicated that the majority of respondents reported their health was good to excellent, with 28 (90%) of 31 and 30 (94%) of 32 responding in these categories for physical and mental health, respectively. The number of residents who had common health conditions, such as arthritis, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease, was similar to the national prevalence (Glass, 2009). A question about memory problems was added to the survey because this concern emerged in interviews. By 2010, seven residents reported having some memory problems and one resident had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

RESULTS

The qualitative data are the primary focus of the findings presented here. To provide a richer description for the reader, the gender of the speaker is included for direct quotes from respondents, along with the year the quote

was recorded. For women, whether they are renters or owners is noted, as well as their age group, with 60-64 years labeled "early 60s," 65-69 years labeled "late 60s," and so on. Due to the small number of male respondents, such descriptors are not included for them because of confidentiality concerns. In a few cases, specifically related to group activities, turnover, and whether respondents would recommend cohousing to others, quantitative data are used to enrich the report. This first section addresses the process of evolution that the community has undergone since it was founded.

Process

Many Parkside residents saw themselves as pioneers who were doing something groundbreaking. There was recognition that "the process … that all of us are forming now is really important; it will lay the foundation for how this community evolves" (female, late 60s, owner, 2007). Other early representative comments expressing expectations about the process included:

> We have all chosen to be here with each other, and we have some responsibilities toward each other. When we get together, it's like we are all friends, like almost family … kind of like extended family. We feel free to call on people if we need a companion to do something. (female, 80-plus, owner, 2007)
>
> I think … we act as neighbors and recognize that we're responsible not just for ourselves, but for the rest of the people in this community. I guess that's different from the sense of community that I've had at any other place that I've ever been because … there wasn't any presumed mutual responsibility. (male, 2007)
>
> Here, we are to some degree interdependent. That's the way it should be. That's the difference to me what a community is as opposed to just a bunch of neighbors. (male, 2007)

Conversely, some expressed concern over the lack of a shared vision. One respondent stated that Parkside was not yet what she expected: "I thought we'd have more of a common purpose, that we would all be working somehow on a goal together" (female, late 60s, renter, 2007). Another said, "We still do not seem to be on the same page about what the community should be" (female, 80-plus, renter, 2007). Some respondents had also hoped Parkside would be more green in its practices and were disappointed that it was not more ecologically friendly.

Most of the work of running Parkside was managed by committees and as of 2010 there were 12 committees. At this point, many committees were able to meet only quarterly instead of on a monthly (or more frequent) basis, as was necessary early on. Some committees are no longer needed and have disbanded altogether. According to community documents, representative committees included Buildings and Grounds; Care; Common Buildings; Common Meals; Finance; Landscape; Membership; and Programs.

The year 2008 seemed to mark a turning point in the evolution of Parkside. The first two years were filled with the demanding work of trying to deal with the physical, financial, and policy/procedural aspects of launching a brand new lifestyle concept. For many, this period was frustrating because it took so much time and energy. Representative comments reflect a new perspective:

> I think we're finally to the point where we've stopped having to concentrate totally on the physical aspect and now we're just beginning to do the neighborhood part of it, learning to live with each other and get along together and develop better friendships. So, I have seen that in the last month or two, I think, beginning. (female, late 60s, renter, 2008)
>
> There's a lot of connections that are happening, and it's not all work. See, a year ago it was mostly work. (female in early 60s, owner, 2008)
>
> It's developing nicely. First year was tough, second year was not a piece of cake either. But . . . experience [is helping us] to see what works and what doesn't work. . . . We're in phase 2 now. I'd venture to guess maybe by year 3, it'll be a well-oiled machine. (female in late 60s, owner, 2007)
>
> Things are more settled; a lot of setup stuff has taken place and now even far enough along that some of it is being re-evaluated and changed, which I think is good. (male, 2008)

The completion of the Common House in November 2007 was a significant enhancement too, as this respondent describes, "The Common House getting finished was just a big boost in many ways, psychologically as well as logistically. And then once the common meals started, I think that gave people a much greater sense of cohesiveness" (female, early 70s, renter, 2008).

Common Activities in 2010

Although efforts to bring people together had started even before the buildings were constructed, and certainly continued while the Common House was being completed, the availability of the Common House facilitated ways for residents to connect. Instead of trying to crowd into someone's home, residents now had space to gather for meetings and dinners, as well as a large kitchen that allowed for teams to work together to prepare meals. Resident participation is a hallmark of cohousing communities and at Parkside the greatest involvement (Table 1) was in the residents' association (97%) and common meals (84%). Interestingly, fewer residents help with meal preparation (66%) than those who partake. About half of the residents help with outdoor and indoor maintenance. Residential responsibility for landscaping and ground maintenance, such as planting trees, spreading mulch, and mowing, caused both pride and concerns. Some residents actively participated in grounds keeping, but several did not participate and even thought others (younger) should come in and do this work, either as volunteers or for pay.

TABLE 1 Participation in Common Activities (2010) (N = 32)

Common Activity	No.	Percentage
Coffee meetings	4	12.5
Attend common meals regularly	27	84.4
Preparing common meals	21	65.6
Common hobby activities	10	31.3
Common exercise activities	15	46.9
Outdoor maintenance	18	56.3
Indoor maintenance and cleaning	16	50.0
Planning special events	18	56.3
Residents' association meetings	31	96.9
Steering committee/board	9	28.1
Other committees	21	67.7

One activity that had not yet been well established is the idea of a "coffee hour." A respondent specifically noted:

> I'm just disappointed that there isn't a group that goes down, you know, has a cup of coffee in the morning, and says, "Hey, what are you doing today? Let's go do such and such," and that sort of thing. (female, late 60s, renter, 2008)

However, many such impromptu activities were arranged within the community and others were announced in the weekly e-newsletter. A review of these newsletters documents a variety of activities, ranging from gatherings at Parkside for various purposes, including regular weekly meditation, special forums, and "work days," as well as trips to nearby attractions and events, such as the local dinner theater. Requests such as a ride to the airport were also included in the e-news.

When asked about the overall frequency of common activities, 27 (84%) participants thought the current schedule was just right, whereas 5 (16%) thought they were too frequent. No one responded that there were too few. Another activity that was mentioned by respondents was the men's breakfast club, an informal gathering of the men from Parkside at a local restaurant almost every week. Because there were a limited number of men, this get-together served as an important bonding opportunity.

Benefits and Challenges

Open-ended questions in the 2008-2010 surveys included "what I like least," and "what I like best" about the community, which capture to some degree the hassled versus hassle-free feelings described by Golant (2011). Respondents could list as many items as they wished. An analysis of comments produced groupings under themes or categories that varied by question, but the following categories were identified under both questions: (1) location/physical lay-out, which included both comments about the

setting of Parkside, as well as the physical design of the community; (2) purpose/community, which related to the vision for Parkside; and (3) social aspects, which dealt with residents and their interactions. One additional category—organization—also emerged among the like least comments, which addressed aspects such as the number of meetings. Numbers and representative comments can be seen in Table 2. The numbers of comments identified under each category for each year are also summarized; there were more positive comments (n = 113) then negative (n = 75) over the three year period. Among the like least comments, more dissatisfaction with issues of privacy and with the ratio of men to women emerged over the three year period, whereas complaints about the organizational aspects decreased. The like most comments emphasized the location and physical and social aspects in the first years, but satisfaction with the sense of community and mutual support strongly increased over the three years, as reflected in the comments. Below, the challenges illustrated by these lists and heard in the interviews are summarized further and more broadly, followed by the benefits.

Challenges

A major challenge was the complicated way in which Parkside was structured and organized. These ongoing concerns pertained to the awkward

TABLE 2 Numbers of Respondents Who Mentioned Features as Liked Least and Liked Best by Category (2008–2010)

Category	No.				Representative Comments
	2008	2009	2010	Total	
Feature liked least					
Location/physical layout	48	35	24	917	Distance to international airport; too small
Organizational	6	7	4	17	Too many meetings; complicated organizational structure
Purpose/community	8	8	10	26	Lack of common vision; some folks don't participate
Social	1	8	6	15	Lack of privacy; ratio of men to women
	4	2	2	8	Too small
Total per year	23	28	24	75	
Feature liked best					
Location/physical layout	15	14	6	35	The location; the view
Purpose/community	8	18	23	49	Sense of community; mutual support
Social	13	11	5	29	Collaboration/sharing lives; the "social security" of having friends close
Total per year	36	43	34	113	

[a]Respondents could mention more than one feature under each question.

relationship between the development board and the residents' association. Financial challenges and delays related to the development and building of Parkside caused some tension in the early years; these issues still have not dissipated entirely. Completion of the Common House was delayed and the planned Spirit House was not erected until after residents moved in. Having apartments in the Common House complicated the construction and added to the cost. An expensive retaining wall was also required, due to the steepness of the site.

Opinions were mixed regarding the choice to have both owners and renters in the same community. Although some respondents saw no problem with this, 15 identified it in interviews as a concern that has caused some bitterness, particularly when owners were asked to contribute additional funds, as was necessary to complete the Common House, for example. There is also the further complication of having government funding for the rental units, with the associated layers of bureaucracy. A benefit was making housing available to elders of limited income, and Parkside might not exist without this funding. It can also be seen by the respondents' comments cited above that many renters were just as emotionally invested as owners. However, the complication of properly interpreting rules has resulted in evictions and the need to hire someone to manage the required paperwork.

Furthermore, laws related to Fair Housing made it impossible for Parkside to require resident commitment to participating in a meaningful way in community life. Several residents identified the varying levels of participation in the community as a problem, with ramifications for mutual support. Comments revealed that there were residents who were mainly in the community for the inexpensive housing or were there to be "takers and not givers." This category was estimated by one resident to be 20% of Parkside's population. Another respondent stated that "there is a sense that some people moved into the community, but they're really not moving in to be part of the community, but rather to just have a place to live" (female, late 60s, owner, 2007).

Single men, whether owners or renters, have not thrived in this particular female-dominant cohousing community. Not having enough men was brought up in interviews and also identified as "what I like least" by two male respondents in 2010. Recruiting more married couples was also a suggestion for improvement in 2010.

Physical design considerations have been described in more detail elsewhere (Glass, 2012), but parking at either end of the community is one physical layout aspect of Parkside that has caused challenges. Residents whose units were on the first level and opened out to the common space must walk to their cars. Some felt this was a hardship, either in terms of a lack of privacy or at times when a resident is physically challenged and requires a walker or wheelchair. On the other hand, the common space with parking at the perimeter is a cohousing design hallmark because it promotes the kind of daily interaction that builds sense of community (Durrett, 2009), and a wagon was available for transporting groceries. Another layout issue

was that this particular site required two-story buildings. Upper units face the parking lot and a retaining wall, instead of green space. The split-level has also created a barrier to upper-story residents interacting with those on the lower level. One respondent noted "the way the architecture makes us a separate community up here," saying "there's no casual [gathering] . . . down there I see people gathering spontaneously on porches and stuff" (female, 80-plus, renter, 2008).

Residents anticipated future challenges. They recognized a major challenge inherent in the varying declines in physical and mental health that can accompany the aging of the residents themselves. Some mutual support they had envisioned may ultimately exceed their ability. Parkside residents already exhibit health conditions common among older adults; examples of both increasing physical weakness and confusion have been observed among some residents. One respondent stated:

> . . . the aging process is going to be interesting to see where, how we can all maintain our independence. . . . There's going to come a time when a lot of us are having physical limitations, things you can't lift anymore . . . and then that transfers into how much you can do. (female, late 60s, renter, 2007)

Parkside residents see clearly that they will need to meet the challenge of "future-proofing" their community (Brenton, 2001). The community will need to attract younger residents to manage some of the physical work and provide mutual support as those of the older generations gradually become less able, need to move to more supportive facilities, or die. One resident put it very succinctly:

> We keep thinking about this group that's in here now, ten years from now, if we don't get young people in, like some of us hopefully will die off [laughter], isn't that awful? We're really going to be in a fix. (female, late 70s, owner, 2007)

Another said,

> I think logically what they should do is that as we, as an elder community, as somebody moves out . . . they should have younger people moving in so that there's a turnover . . . so that there's enough younger people. (female, early 60s, renter, 2007)

Finally, from the beginning of Parkside, and as happens with any cohousing community, when people with little or no prior knowledge of each other are living close together "in community," residents were challenged simply in getting along with each other. One thing that many respondents found helpful, especially in the first years, was to hold a clearinghouse forum that could be called together whenever there was an issue that was

controversial. For example, outdoor lighting and the installation of outside clotheslines were widely debated. The clearing house gave everyone an opportunity to voice opinions. By clearing the air, they were able to successfully proceed to make their community decisions by consensus. Overall, living together seemed to improve over time. Representative comments included, "What I think has happened over the past year primarily is that we've gotten to know each other and accept us as we are instead of how we want everyone to be" (female, late 70s, owner, 2008) and, "It's getting better as we go along. We know each other better" (female, 80-plus, owner, 2008).

Benefits

A definite sense of a close-knit community has evolved over time and mutual support is occurring. The model of mutual support developed by the Parkside Extension Team promotes the idea that residents must be willing to help others, ask for help when needed, and accept help. In addition, it is each resident's responsibility to take care of oneself. As part of their mutual support model, each resident has chosen other residents to be their care coordinators, or someone who will step in if help is needed; there is someone to call on, even in the middle of the night. Thus, if a need arises, the care coordinator can organize whatever assistance is needed for the recipient. These types of assistance have included grocery shopping, meal preparation, visiting, accompanying a neighbor on physician visits, dog walking, and even personal care.

Beyond assistance when people are ill or injured, there is another basic level of mutual support: people are looking out for each other. The sense that, in this neighborhood, "everyone knows you," and that they are watching out for each other, brought respondents a feeling of safety. They expressed freedom from worry about many aspects of life. They appreciated having their own homes but not being alone, as well as the security of knowing someone would notice if something happened to them.

There is solidarity in aging through living in this elder-only community that has helped individuals accept their own aging, and there is willingness among many to consider and discuss aging issues. Almost all respondents would agree with these typical statements: "It helps being with people who understand because the same things are happening to them" (female, early 70s, owner, 2009), and "I think that's one of the large benefits of having 55 and older" (female, early 70s, renter, 2009). Additional benefits were identified. One was the idea of looking out for other residents and gently helping each other respect their limitations. Related to this notion was the idea of role models. Some respondents saw others in Parkside, especially some of the older residents, as excellent role models for aging, and they reported learning a lot from observing them. For example, a 70-year-old respondent mentioned how much she learned from residents in their 80s. The theme of role models was also expressed in another way—some respondents

recognized that what they were pioneering at Parkside was being viewed as a model for the larger community.

Respondents also reported that they exerted positive influences on each other through gentle pressure to prepare healthier meals (demonstrated through the common meals) and encouraging exercise. Another theme many respondents mentioned was the ability to laugh together and have a sense of humor about their limitations. Finally, an advantage associated with living at Parkside was the excitement of being part of pioneering a new model of how the later stage of life could be lived. Many respondents reported finding this opportunity to be energizing. As one said, "We can really appreciate it so much more than having been dropped in where everything was up and running. . . . We got it done!" (female, late 60s, renter, 2008). Another stated, "Two years is an extraordinary time for 40-some people to be able to run our community successfully, and I think we have. I think we are. It's a big accomplishment" (female, 80-plus, renter, 2008).

Residential Turnover and Recommendations

Related to turnover, one respondent noted:

> I think that it changes something every time somebody moves in . . . if you think about the community as a system. So it becomes one way, but every time you lose a person or gain a person, then it adjusts, it becomes a little bit different than it was before. (female, early 70s, renter, 2008)

Clearly, this community has had to make several such adjustments over the years since it opened. Of the 39 charter residents, an analysis in 2010 found that 22 (56%) were still residing in their original units, 2 (5%) had moved to another unit within Parkside, and 2 married couples (10%) had moved out of Parkside, but live in nearby houses and are still involved in Parkside activities. Thus 28 (71%) had remained involved in Parkside four years after opening. Of the other 11 residents, 4 were the original residents in the Common House studio apartments and none of them became very involved in the community. One died and the other three (two of whom were related) moved away. Three other residents found that Parkside or the cohousing lifestyle did not suit them and moved away, whereas two others left due to family reasons. Finally, one was forced to move due to the no-smoking policy and another due to the income eligibility requirements in the rental units. (Later, another resident had to move out due to similar issues with eligibility.) When asked in 2010 about their perspectives on moving out, 21 (66%) participants said they "do not consider moving out," 6 (19%) had thought about it "a little," and 5 (16%) had thought about it "a lot." One of these latter individuals was, in fact, about to move out due to family and personal reasons.

When asked whether respondents would recommend elder cohousing to other people their age, the response was almost unanimously positive,

with 97% saying yes. Of these, 21 (66%) said "yes, absolutely," and 10 (31%) said "yes, with some exceptions." Only 1 person said "no, never." It is not for everyone, however. As one respondent noted, "We think of this as a good way to retire and to help each other, but it's so strange to most people" (female, 80-plus, owner, 2008). It was suggested that arrangements be made for prospective residents to come for an extended stay from a week to a month to allow them to determine how they would fit into the community before making a commitment.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned, this model is so strange to many people. Indeed, widespread acceptance may be a challenge because the interdependence intrinsic to cohousing is contrary to a nation that so strongly values complete independence. Like other unconventional forms of housing before it, will elder cohousing remain one of the "small gerontologically invisible housing arrangements that never reached their full potential because there was no one who could effectively challenge the existing housing industry. . . . [leaving] a disturbingly narrow definition of acceptable alternative living arrangements[?]" (Folts & Muir, 2002, p. 14).

This project has produced a wealth of data documenting the evolution of one of the first elder cohousing communities in the United States. A careful review of the abundance of quantitative and qualitative data is ongoing, and the community itself is continuing to evolve, demonstrating its dynamic nature. However, some observations can be made, while recognizing that a limitation of this study is that it is only a small group of people representing one unique community. Still, some recommendations for others who are considering the development of an elder intentional community can be shared (Table 3).

First, it has been challenging on many levels to establish this new community. Tensions linger between the board and residents' association and between renters and owners and some are related to funding-related regulations. As Grant (2006) noted, monetary issues are often the matters with the greatest potential to affect the harmony of a community. Furthermore, one study has documented that the ownership of the land is a key determining characteristic to the life history of retirement communities (Streib, Folts, & LaGreca, 1985).

Selected observations about the physical layout provide demonstrations of how physical and social environments interrelate with behavior; the need for better understanding of these relationships is often overlooked (Wahl & Lang, 2003). As these researchers note, behavior is "embedded within given physical and spatial surroundings," and "places" are "socially constructed, socially filled out, and socially shaped physical environments" (Wahl & Lang, 2003, p. 17). One example of this relationship is the barrier the two-story

TABLE 3 Lessons Learned From the Evaluation of an Elder Cohousing Community[a]

- Consider having all residents be owners or renters rather than a mix.
- Buildings should be designed such that residents of all units, including those on any upper stories, enter and exit through the same common area.
- Carefully evaluate the options for financing and developing the residential community. These options include contracting with a professional developer and creating or working with an already existing housing development corporation.
- Carefully consider the benefits versus the costs of having living units in the Common House (other than guest rooms).
- Bring prospective residents together regularly while the buildings are under construction to begin to build a sense of community and to discuss expectations about the community.
- Residents should be in agreement about the goal of their community in terms of expectations regarding mutual support and other shared values, and consideration should be given to having residents sign some sort of agreement to participate, with consequences if they do not participate in at least some minimal way.
- Unless some kind of waiver arrangements could be made, use of government-funded subsidized housing monies is not ideal because participation requirements for admission are not allowed.
- Consider making the community "green," with a focus on sustainability. For example, with a washer and dryer in the Common House, individual units do not necessarily need to contain their own laundry facilities.
- If mutual support is to be part of the culture of the new community, consider using the model of mutual support developed by the Parkside Extension Team, which promotes the idea that residents must be willing to give help to others, ask for help when needed, and accept help. In addition, it is each resident's responsibility to take care of oneself.
- For a new community, expect to spend the first two years focusing on establishing policies, procedures, and covenants for operation, unless you have many residents with prior cohousing experience. You will not be able to foresee all of the issues that can arise and will need to deal with them when they surface. Much time will be spent in committee meetings. When possible, establish some ground rules during the preliminary meetings of prospective residents and learn from the experiences of other communities that may have application for your community to minimize the amount of time spent in committee work.
- Provide all residents with training on consensus decision making, if that is the chosen method for reaching agreements.
- Promote open discussion and provide a forum or "clearing house" for residents to voice their opinions, free from judgment by others, especially when differences arise.
- If mutual support is to be part of the community's culture, consider having each resident name a care coordinator, who would then organize any assistance from the other residents that an individual may require, such as grocery shopping, meal preparation, or visiting.
- If dealing with aging issues together is to be part of the community's culture, make frank and open discussion of aging part of everyday life and provide events that promote such discussion.
- Consider hiring outside help for work that the residents cannot or do not want to do, such as building maintenance, yard work, and accounting.
- After the community is operating, allow prospective residents to come for an extended stay, such as a week to a month, to allow them to see how they would fit into the community before they make the move.
- To the extent allowable by law, consider implementing a policy that as units become vacant, they can only be filled by individuals under a certain age to allow for future proofing. In some European models, they operate on the broader basis of "adult only" rather than a specific age restriction.
- Be patient and keep a positive attitude!

[a]These lessons learned are not listed by any ranking representing respondents' priorities.

layout causes; upper-level residents do not exit the buildings via the common area, thereby lessening their casual interaction with lower-level residents. The common space does bring people into contact; people were observed by the author to stop and chat with neighbors as they walked to their cars or the Common House.

Although neighbors are definitely already helping each other in many ways, it is not yet clear how much care the community will be able to provide and how it will provide it. Respondents do not expect it to serve as a nursing facility able to provide long-term care, but there has already been a resident who would have been sent to a skilled nursing home for six weeks after a hospitalization. Instead she was able to return home, with help from her neighbors supplemented by home health care. Current Medicare payment for skilled nursing home care is about $400 per day (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, 2012), meaning that a cost of $16,800 for this six week stay was averted. Some respondents suggested that an aide could live on the campus, if the need warranted. Associated with this concern is the ability to future-proof the community. The challenges of having individuals willing and able to lead a more limited form of self-government as the residents age in place has been recognized in other types of retirement communities (Streib et al., 1985). This challenge will be even greater in self-managed elder cohousing.

However, having noted these challenges, clearly something positive is happening at Parkside, and it is an example of active people engaging themselves in the "construal or even the production of the social environment" (Wahl & Lang, 2003, p. 11), rather than the more typical view of older individuals as dependent recipients. Environmental change can be positive if it leads to a better living situation and meaningful roles (Golant, 2003, 2011; Wahl & Weisman, 2003). Life at Parkside definitely improved after the first two years, which were so focused on the work of determining policies for everything that arose, requiring many committee meetings. Respondents reported that much of that foundational work has been done, and less time needed to be expended on committee work and more time was directed toward community and fun. Interviewing the respondents over four years also revealed distinct indications that some of their earlier irritations faded as people have gotten to know each other better, and most feel that the community is moving in the right direction. All of these considerations are part of the temporal context (Golant, 2003; Parmelee & Lawton, 1990), as the residents created a community and now look to the future.

The community is continually changing with people transitioning and through developing and reevaluating policies, and each change affects the whole system. As one respondent noted earlier, each time a resident leaves or joins the community, the system changes to adjust and becomes slightly different, reinforcing the dynamic nature of community. If we consider the "social-physical place over time (SPOT)" concept described by Wahl and Lang (2003), another aspect can be overlaid adding to the dynamic nature of this community. As they discuss, with old-old age, the relevance of agency

typically decreases while the relevance of belonging increases; they further suggest that within the SPOT dynamics, stimulation and activation decrease and safety/familiarity and continuity/meaning become more important with age (Wahl & Lang, 2003). Observing evidence of the existence and consequences of such an evolution over time will be fuel for further research.

Overall, satisfaction is high; by 2010, almost all (97%) respondents said they would recommend elder cohousing to other people their age. It is clear that mutual support is occurring and not just in the context of helping each other during sickness or hospitalizations. The mutual support is part of a larger phenomenon that is helping residents have a better experience with aging by going through the experience together. All of the Parkside residents know each other, which facilitates convenient companionship and a sense of looking out for each other. Here, a new resident can know all of her neighbors within a few days, in contrast to the traditional suburban subdivisions where one may live for years and not know any neighbors at all. This familiarity is important because there is a strong connection between social networks and improved health outcomes (Christakis & Fowler, 2009), and friends can play a significant role in well-being and mental health (Blieszner, 2006; Fiori, Antonucci, &Akiyama, 2008). Referring to the conceptual model by Wahl et al. (2012), experience-driven belonging could be seen as a strength in this community. Both the civic engagement and empowerment and social relationship building activities viewed as important in a recent conceptual framework related to aging in place (Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, & Davitt, 2012) are positively represented in this cohousing model. Furthermore, although caring relationships and a sense of community certainly may develop among residents in assisted living and other settings, one of the aspects that differentiates the elder cohousing model is the strong sense of mutual responsibility and the residents' realization of their interdependence on each other. The residents of this community serve as each other's safety net; there is no administration and service staff standing by to help as needed.

Although it has its challenges, living in this interdependent community engenders feelings of safety and security among residents, and it is well established that these qualities are greatly appreciated by older adults (Parmelee & Lawton, 1990). This option supports the longing of some younger retirees who are looking to recreate the feeling of the old-fashioned small town (Timmerman, 2006), and living in an adult-only community too was valued. Kahana et al. (2003) observed that "personal preferences for age mix of residents . . . have not been extensively studied. . . . [but] are likely to pose important influences on older adults' residential satisfaction" (p. 439). A self-directed elder cohousing community is the ultimate example of residents being proactive and taking full responsibility for what happens in their retirement community, and the positive benefits of this type of initiative in other types of communities have been noted (Golant, 2011; Grant, 2006; Wahl et al., 2012). Pride in what they have accomplished in this elder cohousing community was evident. Wahl et al. (2012) suggested that "it is likely

that future built-environment solutions for older adults may not only better support agency-related processes . . . but also nurture or even 'provoke' new forms of belonging" (p. 310). It could be argued that with the social contact design of elder cohousing, the future is now. The culture that has developed at Parkside offers a significant alternative compared to the lives tinged with loneliness and isolation (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007; Perissinotto et al., 2012; Tamaka et al., 2006; Thomas, 1996) that some elders lead in our country.

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