

## **Common-sense approaches to common house design decisions**

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### **What should be the most important considerations when designing the kitchen and dining room in a common house?**

The kitchen and “great room” are the two most important spaces in a common house - they should feel like a natural extension of each individual home. Your community can begin to create this homey environment during the design process by allowing everyone to have a say and ownership in the decisions. The design itself - balancing functional requirements with coziness - is equally important.

We usually refer to the dining room as the “great room,” not because we see it as big or pretentious, but because people use it for many community functions, not just dining. Optimizing the space is an exciting design challenge. Ideally, the great room should work as well for big functions with large crowds as it does for typical community dinners or even intimate gatherings and quiet meals. You’ll want to create a space that provides an inviting, homey ambiance for daily comfort and can be “dressed up” for special events such as weddings, Bar Mitzvahs or birthday bashes.

Regarding size, one rule of thumb works for most communities. Dining rooms designed to accommodate two-thirds of the entire community population (adults and children) often function well. Nobody minds a tight squeeze for a fun celebration, but it’s nice to have some elbowroom for your regular meals. Make sure that your architect shows table and chair layouts on schematic and design development drawings and that you’ll have ample room to circulate in the dining room near the kitchen. You’ll also want to serve yourselves food and return dishes without interrupting the dining atmosphere.

The kitchen’s size and its connection to the dining room can vary a lot according to community size. Small kitchens (220 square feet) can function for small communities, while larger communities usually want enough space for a commercial dishwashing setup (300-350 square feet). Most small communities want a homey, efficient kitchen that opens to the dining space. Larger communities may prefer a kitchen that they can close off when they need the space for overlapping uses,

such as conducting a committee meeting while a cooking team prepares dinner. One simple solution is to install a set of large, folding shutters that remain open except when noise is an issue.

The design challenge is to optimize for both efficiency and hominess, but you don't necessarily need to choose one over the other. A central butcher-block island, for example, feels like home and allows several cooks to chat while preparing meals together.

### **What tips can you offer for achieving the best acoustics in the dining room?**

Acoustic treatment of the ceiling is the single most important investment you can make to moderate noise in your common dining room, particularly if you plan to have large glass windows and wood floors, which reflect a lot of sound.

According to our acoustical consultants (Acentech, Cambridge, Mass.), the best sound absorption bang-for-the-buck is a fiberglass panel product called "Nubby" by Armstrong. We glue it directly to the ceiling and then cover the seams with wood battens to create a "craftsman" paneled look. Many communities have had success with panels manufactured by Tectum, Inc. Acentech also recommends high, well-treated ceilings over lower ones, treated or otherwise.

For aesthetic reasons, you can vary the ceiling height to create a nice mix of cozy and grand. Regardless of height, be sure to cover all ceiling surfaces. Good ceiling treatment goes a long way toward reducing noise, especially if you have lots of children (well behaved or otherwise).

### **Which other kinds of rooms do community members most frequently use?**

Although most communication happens by email these days, snail-mail deliveries to the common house each day are still the best way to get folks inside. Once there, community members' opportunities for meaningful connection increase exponentially.

An indoor play space is a must for communities built in cold-winter climates or less-than-safe neighborhoods, especially if there are many young children. If you have enough space, you may want to consider dividing the space into two sections, one for rowdy play and the other

one for quiet activities. Otherwise, rambunctious children 6 and older tend to overpower the toddlers, and roughhousing can make reading a book or drawing a picture nearly impossible.

Laundry rooms are successful if they're convenient to use and maintain good air quality. Guest rooms tend to attract frequent visitors if they offer plenty of privacy. In my own community, Pioneer Valley Cohousing, the bicycle storage room is one of the important rooms in our common house. We built the room in a walkout basement, which is easier to access than the small storage spaces in the residents' private units.

### **What kinds of rooms or spaces tend to be underutilized?**

Very specialized rooms, such as libraries and teen or craft rooms, tend to stay empty most of the time. Instead, you might want to consider a multi-functional game room with a television, bookshelves, a crafts closet and a folding ping-pong table. With ping-pong, the room shouldn't be smaller than 450 square feet.

### **Which rooms should be located closest to the dining room?**

It's nice to have a living room or seating area next to the dining room, especially if big French doors can connect the spaces together. This multi-functional room is great for hanging out around the fire on a cold winter night before or after dinner. It's also perfect for parties, committee meetings or even escaping from the "kids' room" for a gaggle of giggling girls. Many communities want their playroom for young children adjacent to the dining room so that adults can keep an eye on the children while preparing or eating meals. You want just enough acoustical connection to hear a screaming child, but enough distance to keep meal disruption to a minimum. We often suggest keeping the door down the hall, while installing a viewing window between the two.

### **Are two-story common houses acceptable? What about wheelchair accessibility?**

Wheelchair accessibility is a big issue with two-story common houses. Most cohousers want a fully accessible common house regardless of code, but many cannot afford an elevator. Some communities attempt to resolve this concern by limiting "public" access to the basement or to second-floor space, and/or by designing space

for a future lift. If you build your common house on a slope, it's also possible to create entrances on two levels – this however is not allowed by some codes, and frowned upon by access advocacy groups.

I'm not comfortable with labeling rooms to get around code requirements. Common houses are often used for political meetings, class parties and all sorts of events that attract the public and enliven the community. Most building codes require accessibility for these "public use" events. Furthermore, if we plan to live in our communities into retirement and beyond, we all need to consider ourselves only "temporarily-abled".

### **What is the optimal size for a common house in relation to the number of units or residents in a community?**

This question is impossible to answer without consideration of budget and climate. The most attractive common house with all the right features is NOT optimal if you and your friends can't afford to live there. And while a small common house might work in a mild climate, it wouldn't be functional in the blustery northeast without adding large entries, adequate coat storage, fireplaces and a large play space.

Even the smallest communities must meet certain requirements that they cannot scale down. For instance, many local ordinances require two handicap-accessible toilets. This means that members of small cohousing groups often end up carrying a higher proportional cost per person than members of larger communities. They are left with fewer dollars for the spaces they care most about - the dining and living rooms, kitchen and play areas.

For the record, recent data on 14 common houses in the United States show a typical range of 2,000 to 4,000 square feet for ground-floor space, plus an average of 1,700 square feet of usable basement and/or second-floor space.

### **What other lessons have you learned about common houses since you began designing them?**

I encourage all new groups to design the common house BEFORE the units. We've seen that if they wait until later, they never have as much money as everyone would like. Upgrading and personalizing your own home over time is relatively easy, but you might discover that living in

community will decrease your need for a bigger, more customized home.

Working together to design your common facilities helps build community. You'll also feel more secure about living in your new community when it's time to focus on your own home. You'll find yourself letting go of some dreams and differentiating between what you truly need versus what you thought was expected as a result of years of conditioning in our consumer-driven world.

Connecting the common house with exterior spaces, such as a courtyard and green space, is another important part of the design process. You can define and enhance your outdoor environment through thoughtful design of transitional spaces such as porches, just as you can heighten your experience indoors with scenic views. The courtyard or pedestrian street is where folks meet outside and children can ride tricycles, jump ropes or play with chalk. A green is a peaceful space to look upon, throw a Frisbee, play tag or simply relax. Both spaces provide multiple options for an abundant community life and should have a positive connection to the common house.

And don't forget the mundane. You and your friends most likely will be responsible for maintenance, so do yourselves a favor and design a common house that is easy to clean and sustain.

### **What about the design process? Does it have to be onerous?**

While working as cohousing architects with nearly two dozen communities, the number one question we've asked ourselves is how can we balance the need for communities to be involved in the process and feel ownership of their common house, while avoiding the inefficiency of reinventing the wheel and repeating mistakes of earlier communities. How do we do this seemingly impossible task - AND have fun at the same time?

This process is always evolving for Kraus-Fitch Architects, and we feel good about where we are. We educate and prepare our cohousing clients well in advance of any design-related decisions. This helps them use our expertise to full capacity, make informed decisions and enjoy a light-hearted, efficient process. We hold four intensive weekend workshops that address site issues, the common house, unit programming and design development respectively.

Programming is the process of writing the design goals prior to sketching out potential solutions. We begin with overarching goals such as the degree of affordability, accessibility and sustainability. We then list each function or room and finally focus on specific details, such as the connection between the kitchen and dining room, ceiling heights and kitchen equipment.

Attempting to create consensus on diverse issues in a group of many individuals in one weekend is a formidable task. That's why we developed a homework process that we send to groups well in advance of the workshop. The assignments include prioritizing goals individually, reading through a typical design program and answering questions that may provoke the most interest and/or controversy. The responses help us determine what types of workshop discussions will be most relevant for the group members.

We share what we've learned from the homework and prepare an agenda in advance for the group's review. Participants can see some of their own comments incorporated in the first draft of the design program and read comments from other group members. The feedback from our clients has been very positive. They feel informed and prepared to focus on the issues before them. The process of building consensus has begun!

**As a 10-year resident of Pioneer Valley Cohousing, how does your personal experience of your common house influence your design decisions as a professional?**

The common house at Pioneer Valley is the living room of our community and a part of my home. At times I reserve it for my own personal use and more often I join my neighbors for a meal or function. It's both mine and ours. When I work with a cohousing group on the design of their common house, I don't want to come to the task with pre-conceived notions about the design, but I hope that each community member will have similar passion, experience and ownership of the final product.