

Cooperative Housing for Cooperative Living

A thought piece, offered by Hope Horton

March 7, 2019

I'll preface this by saying that perhaps you, dear reader, are way ahead of me; that I've been slow to catch on to what our approach to home and village design could mean. Maybe it's just time for me to put words to something basic. But, I've had a couple of flashes lately, the first one of which you have already heard in some meeting or another. The second one came during Paul's and my meeting today with County Commissioner, Sally Greene, and Thomas Beckett, a lawyer specializing in co-operative development.

Realization 1: All of our homes could be shared homes with unrelated people sharing a common space.

Realization 2: Instead of seeing this as a compromise or bitter pill to swallow for people who want—but can't afford—their own, stand-alone home, we offer an opportunity for cooperative living where all of our homes and spaces are owned and used in common. This becomes a contribution to regenerative sustainability in that we're sharing space, support, and resources rather than promoting duplication and isolation.

The American Dream, so deeply embedded in our culture, posits that the gold standard of living is a detached house that one is sovereign over and wholly owns. As I sat with Sally and Thomas, I realized that I've been feeling apologetic about our architecture, subtly conveying that we've been "forced" into these designs in order to reduce carrying costs. We wouldn't do this if it weren't economically necessary to promote affordable housing. It suddenly struck me that I'm unconsciously thinking about this in an old way even though we're creating something new; that I might need to "settle" for a shared home because I can't afford one on my own.

Yet there is a deep, transformative germ within this concept that could grow and bloom into a new attitude, a new ideal of living—but only if we, as a collective, can see it and talk about it this way. What if being a member of our housing co-op means that we embrace and celebrate the opportunity to live cooperatively with people within a dwelling unit? And what if this is a feature—a way to develop a community truly dedicated to collaboration and sharing, even within the walls of our own homes?

We learned from Leah Gibbons that regenerative living systems have core characteristics in common:

- Traits: diversity, multi-functionality, redundancy, flexibility, adaptability
- Dynamic networks: connectedness, exchange of materials/information/energy, nodes, tight feedback, interdependence, reciprocity
- Structure: modularity, holarchies, being of value to larger systems

- Uniquely human qualities: Long-term thinking, reflection, holistic and systems thinking/acting

In our work with Leah last December, we created a statement that seemed to express what Hart's Mill is about at its core:

Hart's Mill is a connecting place, rooted in rich biological and cultural diversity and flows that bring forth vitality and life. At a time of great social and environmental dysfunction, we are called forth as a catalyst for collaborative transformation. We are an agrarian community of learning, inhabiting, practicing and service committed to healing our relationships to each other and the earth, within Hart's Mill and as an integral part of our larger community.

Our architecture and village design supports and express this regenerative path. It is an opportunity embedded in our residences and site plan. Our long journey has brought us to the point where shared housing need not be a compromise, but rather a benefit, even a model for the future. Cooperative living is not something we're resorting to but rather evolving towards as a community, as a culture, as a species. And it's already begun at Hart's Mill. This could be a saving grace. Let's name it and start cultivating the promise.