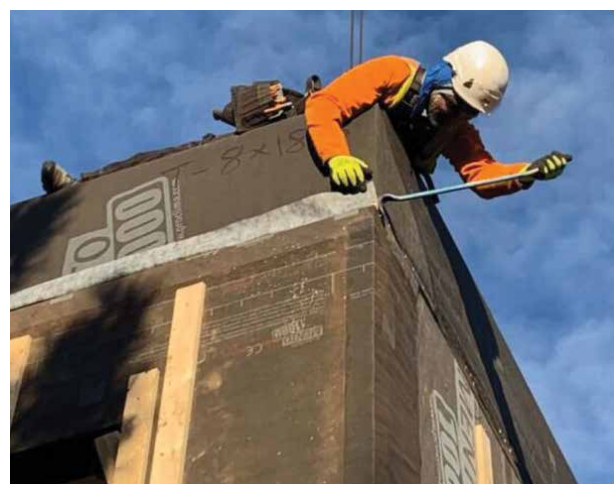


MARCH / APRIL 2022

STRENGTHEN THE THINGS THAT REMAIN

# GREEN FIRE TIMES

*News & Views from the Sustainable Southwest*



NORTHERN RÍO GRANDE ORAL HISTORIES

VOLUME 14 NUMBER 2

GREENFIRETIMES.COM





## OFF-THE-GRID EARTHSHIP HOMES MADE OF RECYCLED MATERIALS BECOME CLIMATE-CRISIS "ARKS"

Earthships are homes made out of recycled materials like tires, cans and bottles, and they are totally off the power grid. Mike Reynolds, 76, started building them in Taos more than 50 years ago. Most people thought he was nuts. "Why is this idiot using garbage to build with, and why is he trying to make buildings that don't need utility companies?" was commonly heard.

Climate change, COVID-19 and people spending more time at home have precipitated a shift in attitudes. Now Reynolds' ideas have become more accepted. Increasing numbers of people are buying in, including some who have created upscale, luxury earthships. They are now in nearly every state, ranging from \$200 to \$400 per square foot to build.

Reynolds' premise is to give people "six points of sustenance" that they need to stay alive: comfortable shelter without fossil fuels, electricity, water, food, sewage treatment, and treatment and use of garbage. The climate-resilient dwellings follow guidelines from the Earthship Academy, a course which explains water systems, solar and indoor farming. They use about one-sixth the power of a regular house and are

made from at least 40 percent recycled materials. The same water used for drinking and bathing goes to a garden and flushes toilets.

Reflecting on the ice storm in Texas in 2021, when the state's electrical grid failed and many people died of hypothermia, Reynolds said, "I'm walking down my hallway, barefoot, picking bananas and spinach, and I'm seeing on TV people waiting in lines in cars for a sack of food, and mothers taking their kids out to their cars to turn the heater on to keep them warm. And I'm thinking, we need to get people to know that this is possible and available. It's not just a concept." In response to tornado devastation in Kentucky, he announced that he was seeking a half-acre of land there and support for building "a fully sustainable, affordable, storm-shelter demonstration home."

Reynolds offers Zoom lectures on sustainability and Earthship-related topics. The [WORLD ECOLOGIES.COM](https://www.worldecologies.com) website provides updates on the evolution of the Earthship concept.

*"Truchas Global Model"*

*Courtesy Earthship Bioteecture ([HTTPS://EARTHSHIPBIOTEECTURE](https://earthshipbioteecture.com))*

# Cohousing ABQ

## An Innovative Way of Living Together

BY PENINA BALLEEN

Marlies Metodi and her husband dreamed of raising their children, a nursing toddler and a preschooler, in a supportive and sustainable multigenerational community, like the one in Austria where she had been raised. Both extended families were far away, and the isolation of parenting has many challenges. Marlies wanted her children to have playmates who live nearby to cut down on time spent making playdates and driving children around. And she yearned for her children to grow up with freedom of movement and not need to have hawk-eyed vigilance at every moment for their safety. She also wanted neighbors to share items they only used occasionally, like a truck for hauling, a flour mill for baking fabulous bread and a chipper for the garden. She was familiar with a net-zero carbon construction method called Passive House, which is so highly insulated that it requires very



*Cohousing kids play at the beach, walking distance from the land.*

little energy to heat and cool. These dreams of living lightly on the planet with a community of close neighbors motivated Marlies to create Cohousing ABQ in 2017 and find like-



*There are currently over 170 cohousing communities in the U.S. and just as many in formation.*

mindful people to build it from the ground up.

Cohousing is based on the Danish model and came to the U.S. about 30 years ago.

Community members have private homes fully equipped with a kitchen, bathrooms, bedrooms and some private outdoor space, but they also share plenty of common space with their neighbors. The Common House has guest rooms, a play room, living room and a dining room and kitchen built to host weekly shared meals—an important aspect of cohousing. Members come home from work to prepared meals and sit down to dine with family and friends without having to lift a finger. Everyone takes their turn as a cook or cleaner, and the common meals act as a glue that binds the community together.



*Cohousing ABQ members preparing a common meal*

Unsurprisingly, the inspiration for cohousing comes from the roots of human society—the village, where community members share tasks, resources, traditions and celebrations. In modern times, the craving for connection has gotten lost in houses that emphasize privacy and security rather than connection. In cohousing, all homes face common outdoor areas, and with kitchen windows looking out, the best possible security system is also in place: eyes on the common. Another crucial safety and esthetic feature is keeping cars on the periphery. Kids are free to roam and the common outdoor spaces such as a grassy knoll, gardens, orchards and playgrounds remain serene.

Cohousing is an inherently more sustainable way of living as people end up driving less and buying less when they share resources and social activities centered around their homes. There are also plenty of opportunities for carpooling, car-sharing and other practices with positive environmental impacts. Cohousing ABQ will take ecological goals further by building green and forgoing gas. The project will be all electric for kitchen appliances, heating and cooling. The community hopes to generate the energy needed on site with solar panels and will include electric vehicle charging stations.

There are currently over 170 cohousing communities in the U.S. and just as many in formation. Cohousing ABQ will be only the second cohousing community in Albuquerque, the first multigenerational one, and one of only

a handful in New Mexico. With a background in landscape architecture and project management, Marlies began the project by seeking experts. She created an LLC (limited liability company) and recruited new members. Recruiting took place with the website, info sessions at community centers and parks and events like Earth Day.

*The inspiration comes from the village, where community members share tasks, resources, traditions and celebrations.*

Architects with expertise in the Passive House and green building were hired and the members took part in designing the project. The design progressed over many months with a collaboration between RMKM Architects in Albuquerque and Needbased in Santa Fe. There is no developer involved. According to Marlies, who also serves as project manager of Cohousing ABQ, “Cohousing communities don’t just get built by developers as a finished off-the-shelf product. It’s a unique product created through the grassroots efforts of potential and committed community members. It requires lots of community building.” Building community has taken the form of work days on the land, bowling, potlucks, camping trips, bread baking, tours of sustainable buildings in the area, hiking, book groups and more. A Fall Lantern Walk has taken place in four Novembers, with homemade candle lanterns made by the children and special songs for the occasion. This tradition from Waldorf Education was introduced by an early member.



*Lantern Walk 2021*

In summer of 2018, Marlies and her team found and purchased a 3.8-acre plot along the bosque between Central Avenue and Bridge Boulevard. The land is bordered by the Río Grande. Migrating sandhill cranes can be seen flying overhead in the spring and fall. Ducks and geese serenade any visitor. The land is rich in history. The previous owner, Valentin Sais, has deep roots and a long history in the Atrisco neighborhood, and he and his extended family will be the community’s neighbors. Sais’ grandfather donated land on the east side of the river for the Albuquerque Zoo and Sais believes he is following the same community mission by selecting Cohousing ABQ as the next owner of this parcel. He sees the project serving the area by bringing in young families and he is excited that the land will be tended and farmed again. Ranching and

farming ceased on the property in the 1930s. Broken glass and goatheads are scattered among four-winged saltbush and tumbleweeds. Water rights to the acequia no longer exist but drilling a well for irrigation was one of the first projects Cohousing ABQ took on, along with building compost bins. The one magnificent cottonwood tree that remains is already being well cared for. Revitalization of the land is one of the community’s highest goals.

*The community hopes to generate the energy needed on site with solar panels and will include electric vehicle charging stations.*



Albuquerque's South Valley is a historically agricultural area and Cohousing ABQ wanted to cluster their homes rather than subdivide the property in order to retain the greatest amount of open space. To do this, a Special Use Permit for zoning was required by Bernalillo County. Cohousing ABQ members canvassed the neighborhood to gain support for the permit. More than 130 Vecinos del Bosque neighbors signed petitions in support of the project and the permit was granted by the County Commission. The project was met with opposition by a few plaintiffs, but with overwhelming support from the majority of neighbors, the courts sided in favor of the project moving forward.

Originally slated for 30 units, the project voluntarily scaled back to 27 units. The buildings are designed with shared walls that help with a smaller building footprint, insulation and cost, as well as reserving 62 percent of the land as open space, including gardens, orchards, a chicken coop, bicycle shed and adventure playground. The plan includes casitas, one-two-three-and-four bedroom units. Six buildings will surround a central courtyard and other than the grassy knoll there and the edible gardens, the grounds will consist of water-wise landscaping.

In the 1960s and 70s, New Mexico was a haven for communes formed by young people intent on living close to the land. Their endurance, however, was scant. Cohousing, on the other hand, has proven to be stable, likely because of the structures in place for governance and land ownership by the residents. Although some of the same values remain, cohousing communities are more likely to contain members with employment in a variety of fields, and income is generated outside the community. Cohousing communities are self-managed by the residents. The purpose of making major group decisions based on consent is to cement community agreements with the strongest available glue: the will and desire for community relationship. If you honor



*Cohousing ABQ land celebration*

energy-efficiency and zero emissions, became a serious hurdle, and the community recently decided to abandon the dream of Passive House construction and use a site-built and N.M. GreenBuilt-certified construction model instead. The contractor's projected budget was high enough to raise eyebrows for all members, so some of the amenities were scaled down to keep it affordable. Even so, the price increase resulted in several households leaving the project.



*Rendering of Cohousing ABQ's central courtyard*

your relationship to the group, you're likely to respect and follow any agreements you made. To ensure every member's voice is heard, there are various committees called circles, which operate under a system called sociocracy. Some of Cohousing ABQ's current circles are: Governance, Finance and Legal, Socialhood, Development and Membership. But circles change and evolve along with the needs of the group and members can choose which to join and how they can best serve the community.

Building a cohousing community from the ground up is a difficult task, and COVID-19 presented added challenges. Because of the prohibitive cost of the prefab panels, due to supply chain snafus, skilled labor shortages and soaring construction costs, the community had to adapt in order to move forward. The original plan of using Passive House construction, with its super

But Cohousing ABQ has shown great resilience in the face of these challenges, taking the steps necessary to get construction started in the coming months. Members will soon sign purchase agreements, and a construction loan will precipitate breaking ground in mid-2022. The community already has 12 children and many "aunties" and "grandparents," who've created a culture of trust, fun and care. Members include computer engineers, physicists, a physical therapist, woodworker, mechanical engineer, massage therapist, hair salon owner, occupational therapist, social worker, writer

and nurse. They bring their interests in music-making, permaculture, cooking, and playing in nature, among other things. Cohousing ABQ is currently accepting new members who will contribute their own skills, perspectives and interests.

How does one join Cohousing ABQ? The initial step is to attend an info session online, which you can sign up for at [www.cohousingabq.org](http://www.cohousingabq.org). You can also sign up for a land tour where you'll learn more about construction plans and meet some community members. With a modest fee, interested folks can explore further and get to know the community through events and orientations, until they may be invited to join the LLC and invest money that will go into ownership. A few units in various sizes are still available. Inquiries can be made through the website or by calling Cohousing ABQ member, Cindy, at (505) 226-2802. ■



*Penina Ballen is a New Mexican Jew and a member of Cohousing ABQ. She is a veteran massage therapist, former Early Childhood teacher and Spanish Medical Interpreter.*