

Post-Pandemic Nomadic Cohousing

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The COVID-19 pandemic showed what post-pandemic life might be like: a digitally enabled existence of working, learning, and shopping from home, with most goods and services delivered to our door. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of having a “bubble,” a community of people who we can trust and depend on for our health and safety. This paper describes two experiments in extremely affordable, post-pandemic housing. Both projects, one in partnership with the health community and the other with the faith community, represent a “community-first” approach to housing: accommodating a small group of people who care for each other and who occupy small, mobile units clustered around outdoor space and a shared common house. Such nomadic co-housing represents a new way of affordable living in the post-pandemic era and a form of housing old as humanity itself.

Pandemics have historically had at least three long-term impacts. They tend to:

- accelerate us into the future, rapidly advancing trends already underway
- reveal long-running inequities and dysfunctions in existing systems
- create challenges and opportunities through the disruptions they cause.

The 19th century cholera pandemic, for example, arose in overcrowded cities with inadequate water infrastructure. While technologies like indoor plumbing and sanitary sewers existed prior to that pandemic, it accelerated their widespread adoption, which enabled cities to accommodate higher-density development and larger buildings in the latter half of that century. And the 1918 influenza pandemic, which spread through the troupes returning from World War I, had an equally profound effect on cities. While automobiles and single-family houses existed prior to 1918, that plague accelerated a demand for them in the broader public, socially distancing from others, which helped spur policy reforms that made the ownership of cars and houses more affordable and with that came the suburbanization of cities over

the last century. In both cases, the pandemic ended in a matter of a few years, but their impact on the built environment—and on how people lived, worked, and moved around—lasted for decades afterward.

Those same effects have already become apparent with the COVID-19 pandemic. Distance learning, online shopping, and telecommuting all existed prior to this pandemic, as did the mobile digital devices, app-based platforms, and broad-band access to the Internet. But the pandemic accelerated their adoption, demonstrating how much we can now do remotely and giving us greater choice in terms of what we do in-person or remotely, in physical or digital space. At the same time, the pandemic highlighted the unequal access that under-served populations have to that digital space and the lack of choices some people have, restricting their economic and educational opportunities. A focus on digital equity may be one of the lasting impacts of this pandemic.

But its impact on the built environment may be just as long-lasting. For the first time in human history, the physical world must now compete with the digital one in almost every aspect of our lives. Prior to the pandemic, despite the widespread availability of digital tools, most people still went to an office in order to work, a store in order to shop, or to a school in order to learn, something that fueled the design and construction of a lot of specialized buildings to serve those needs that end up sitting empty for part of the day or night, week or weekend.

That presents the architectural profession with a profound paradigm shift. The modern profession coincided with the rise in demand for these diverse building types, and most firms define themselves, in part, in terms of their expertise in designing specialized structures. But our acceleration into a digital future revealed how much we can do from our homes. By some estimates, 2/3rds of the U.S. economy, for example, now comes out of our homes, something that hasn't happened since the early 19th century. It's as if we have entered a digitally enabled, post-industrial economy that has less in common with the industrial economy of the last century-and-a-half and more in common with a pre-industrial economy of farmsteads and the home-based production and delivery of goods and services.



Figure 1. Our clients, the members of Streets Voices of Change, were invaluable in the design of the Envision project. Image credit: Willian Walsh.

Architecture, of course, existed prior to the industrial revolution, but the COVID-19 pandemic presents our field with a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The challenges have to do with all of the excess real estate that this pandemic has both revealed and created. What will we do, for example, with the enormous amount of under-utilized built space that currently exists: the Federal government, alone, has an estimated 45,000 half-empty buildings? And how will we fill the space vacated by so many organizations: nearly 2/3rd of the office tenants in one recent survey expect to reduce their leased space from 11% to over 40%.

The opportunities also lie in the space that the pandemic has created. For example, the demand for affordable housing continues to grow. Just prior to the pandemic, one study showed that the U.S. needs 7.2 million affordable housing units to keep up with demand, with only 35 units for every 100 extremely low-income household in need. Excess office space offers an opportunity to meet some of that unmet need, as some have advocated, the challenges in doing so remain significant, both in terms of physically outfitting an office floor with the requisite services as well as operationally, with residential and office tenants having very different needs. Nor do we just need extremely affordable units. Many of those who lack housing also lack the extensive support system of family and friends who can keep an individual or family from ending up on the streets.

HOUSING FIRST VERSUS COMMUNITY FIRST

The COVID-19 pandemic not only revealed inequities in the availability of affordable housing; it also highlighted the dysfunctional way in which we have gone about providing it, especially for those who have experienced homelessness. The widely accepted housing-first approach to extremely affordable housing has served to get people who have experienced homelessness into units as quickly as possible, enabling them to work on their other challenges. But that approach has not always been as effective as its advocates have claimed, in part because it can wrongly reduce homelessness to being without a house. That had led to a growing interest in what my colleague Gabrielle Clowdus calls, a community-first approach to extremely affordable housing, in which people live with those who they see as their community, who they care about and who care about them.

That approach seems particularly relevant to the post-pandemic period. The rebalancing of the digital and physical worlds, prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, promises to affect not only how people may increasingly live, work, shop, and learn, but also how we think about housing. On one hand, the pandemic showed how a home could also serve as an office, a classroom, a shop, and any number of other activities that occurred in residences once COVID-19 started to spread. On the other hand, the pandemic also revealed how much we can access digitally and share with others in our COVID bubbles, without necessarily

having to own ourselves. Isolated from our pre-pandemic social interactions, we all saw the value of having a small community of people who we care about and who care about us, be they family, friends, or simply those with whom we quarantined.

That experience, while novel for most of us, has deep roots in our history as a species. Humanity existed for 95% of our history living in nomadic communities, sharing much of what we had with community members, carrying with us the few things that we needed, and constructing shelter from the resources that a particular place had to offer. Then, around 10,000 years ago – 5% of our history as a species – we began an experiment in what it means to be human, living in permanent settlements on fixed foundations.

In the post-pandemic era, we may see a future that combines aspects those two past eras in new, digitally enabled ways. Some estimates put the number of people living as “digital nomads” at 4.8 million with as many as 17 million people reporting that would want to live that way someday. And an even larger number – almost 80 million worldwide – live nomadically and mostly involuntarily as refugees, escaping conflicts in their native lands and moving to other places in search for safety and a better life. Meanwhile, in the U.S., over 500,000 people experience homelessness on any given night, with that number likely to increase with the end of eviction moratoriums instituted during the pandemic.

The housing-first approach to people experiencing homelessness rests on the assumption that that population lacks something: a home. The community-first approach flips that on its head; it recognizes the value of what many of those experiencing homelessness have long known: the importance of having and living close to a caring community. People experiencing homelessness also have a lot of experience living as digital nomads: owning very little, accessing what they need (often through their phones), and appropriating a lot of different spaces for their occupation, most of it temporary in nature. If we want to understand what a post-pandemic existence for a growing number of people might be like, we would do well to listen to and learn from those who have lived lives that many digital nomads – and future political or environmental refugees – may someday lead.

NOMADIC CO-HOUSING

For several years, my colleagues and I at the Minnesota Design Center have worked to get municipalities to address the needs of their residents experiencing homelessness, something that a surprising number of community leaders, especially in the suburbs, will not even recognize as a problem. For too many, homelessness is big-city problem and a county, state, or federal

responsibility, in what can only be called municipal NIMBYism. The more comfortably housed people may be, the more uncomfortable some of them seem to be about those who are not. Nomads, for some reason, make some people mad.



Figure 2. Envision provides privacy and security with living units enclosing outdoor courtyards, and it maintains the community with a central common house that includes cooking, dining, showers, and laundry facilities. Image credit: Alchemy Architects.



Figure 3. The prototype units were built by faculty member, Jacob Mans, with students and Envision Community members. Image credit: Jacob Mans.

So we started to look elsewhere for partners who might be interested in ending homelessness. As we worked with people living in tents, vehicles, and other forms of shelter, we learned how much homelessness involved not just a lack of shelter, but also a loss of their family or friend networks beyond those who they lived with on the streets. While the dominant housing-first approach to homelessness does get people into housing so that they can then work on their other challenges, simply putting a person in a housing unit can isolate them from their community and do little to improve their long-term prospects.

Based on a “community first” approach, we created housing clusters that enable people who have experienced homelessness to live in communities with others who they care about and who care about them. That approach recalls the way in which our nomadic ancestors lived, in small tribal communities, among people who we cared for and who cared for us. Community First! Village, in Austin, Texas, first modeled this community-first approach, but its very success has created its biggest problem: its large scale, with hundreds of units, changes the nature of what constitutes a community. Our work showed that people living on the streets had a much smaller group of friends who they considered to be their community, and so we decided to focus on micro versions of this approach, scaled to the size of the communities in which most people felt connected.

We also learned from those who have experienced homelessness that they do not necessarily want conventional apartments, where they often get placed by well-meaning housing agencies. Instead, most talked about wanting simpler things: a bed, a chair, and a table; a lockable door and a storage space for their few belongings; a flexible unit that could accommodate single people as well as couples; and a community space that could house the kitchen, baths, showers, and dining hall, where the members of the community can gather. They also wanted outdoor space that was private and safe, without feeling fenced in, with a design that would fit in with the neighborhood and not broadcast its difference from what stood around it.

We heard as well that many people experiencing homelessness have had numerous encounters with the justice and healthcare systems, having been arrested for loitering or occupying public property or having been injured as a result of spending so much time on the streets and in vulnerable settings. Many in this population were also surprisingly religious, perhaps in part because having faith that things will get better is all that some of them have. With that in mind, we began to work with the health and faith communities. Both had strong reasons to address the needs of this population, one for medical and financial reasons and the other for moral and spiritual ones, and both responded enthusiastically to the idea of our working together.

ENVISION COMMUNITY

Our partnership with the health community included staff from the largest public hospital in the region, Hennepin Healthcare;

an architectural firm, Alchemy Architects; a local housing nonprofit, PPL; and colleagues in my center and in the School of Architecture at the University of Minnesota. The effort we launched, called “Envision Community,” revolved around the recognition that what those who lack a permanent home need is not just housing, but a group of people who they know and trust.

We worked with Street Voices of Change, an organization comprised of people who had experienced homelessness, and developed a community design that consisted of flexible two-room housing units around a central courtyard, with a common house in the front containing kitchen, dining, laundry, and shower facilities. The housing units are portable so that the entire community could move if wanted to, a possibility that appealed to those who had been on the move for much of their adult lives.

The development’s design violated many of Minneapolis’s zoning restrictions, and so the city asked us to write a new section of the zoning code for “intentional communities,” which it approved just prior to the pandemic. While intended largely for people who have been chronically homeless, the ordinance would also benefit those who lost their homes during the pandemic and found themselves living on the streets, many for the first time.

The pandemic showed how quickly a population can face housing instability and how quickly the public sector needs to act in order to help people who have become unwilling refugees in their own communities. And as we learned from those who have experienced chronic homelessness, people can also quickly become nomadic, moving to places where there are better conditions and opportunities. If cities want to keep their residents, rethinking what constitutes residency is a good place to start.

SETTLED

In the neighboring city of St. Paul and in its suburbs, we took the community-first approach in another direction, working with the faith community in an effort called “Settled.” Most faith communities recognize their historic role in offering shelter to those who have nowhere else to go. In the U.S., faith communities have the added advantage of having the protection of the Federal “Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act” (RLUIPA), which lets faith communities sidestep zoning restrictions in order to fulfill their mission. While enacted to protect churches whose buildings and properties might not comply with zoning requirements, RLUIPA also allows them to host extremely affordable housing on their land that also may not comply with local codes. Settled also takes a community-first approach in the creation of intentional communities that it calls

“sacred settlements,” comprising six to eight tiny homes on land owned by religious groups, with the community able to use the kitchen, common rooms, and bathrooms in the nearby church or temple. Through the process of building the tiny homes in these settlements, with volunteer labor from the congregations, using both donated and purchased materials, Settled also builds

community among different faith groups. Liberal and conservative congregations from a variety of religions have stepped forward to participate in Settled, and however much they might disagree theologically or even politically, they have come together to make homes for those in need.

While protected by a Federal-government law, these faith communities do not take government funding. That constraint, along with the relatively unskilled, volunteer labor involved in the construction, meant that the tiny homes had to be simple, low cost, and easily built, so even a small congregation and a few donors could afford to participate. The freedom from government restrictions also allowed the sacred settlements to accommodate a diversity of occupants, not just people who have been chronically homeless, but also “missionals”: people who have lived in permanent housing and who choose to live among those who have not.

The missionals show that a life led with few possessions and a lot of community connections, can be something we choose to do rather than being something forced upon us. As people have toured the tiny homes that Settled have made, some visitors have said as much: that if they had a choice, the simple life, free of debt, would be what they would choose. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but resonant of the life our ancestors lived before humanity embarked on the experiment of living in permanent settlements.

As happened with previous pandemics, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the built environment will take decades to become fully apparent. But we can already see how the shifting it has brought between the digital and physical worlds has given us all more choice in how and where we live and work. And some number of people seem likely to choose to live as human beings have lived for most of our history as a species, in intentional communities of people who know and care for each other, in a digitally enabled version of the oldest form of human settlement: nomadic co-housing.

ENDNOTES

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