

COMMUNITY AND HEALTH: Immigrant Senior Cohousing in the Netherlands

By Dorit Fromm and Els de Jong

All photos courtesy of Anand Joti



Top image: Two apartments per floor were made available to Santosa group members, who also share a meeting room. The service provider, Laurens, is located on the ground floor of the seniors-only building. Above: The group members of Santosa on an excursion to view other cohousing projects during the development of their community. Opposite page left: The common house at Anand Joti, located on the ground floor, left, is available to be rented out. Apartments are located above. Middle: The future residents of Anand Joti participated in the development process. Right: Andre Bhola received training in checking blood pressure and blood sugar levels and he staffs the clinic at Anand Joti once a week.

When cohousing was initially transplanted to the US from Europe (starting with a community built near the state capitol in Sacramento in 1991), Californians commented that of course the model worked in Europe—its countries didn't have diversity issues like California. In cohousing, residents own private homes, and share common spaces which they manage and maintain together. Now, 18 years later, it's clear that the concept works in the US, with over 100 current cohousing communities—and that what binds them together are not homogeneous residents but a shared interest in creating community and the willingness to work through challenges.

Still, cohousing communities in the US are not particularly diverse. People sharing similar viewpoints do often seem to feel most comfortable with each other; and unlike their European counterparts, American communities usually develop without the help of nonprofits or welcoming municipalities, so they are limited to offering mostly market-rate housing.

For those reasons—and counter to American assessments of homogeneity—a much wider diversity of residents lives in cohousing in a country like the Netherlands than in the US.

Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, holds a rich mix of cultures with more than a third of residents first or second generation immigrants. In their traditions, many generations typically live under one roof. But the same cannot be said for the Dutch, at least since the 1950s. Most modern Dutch housing units are apartments for the nuclear family, with little room for extended families.

