

# **COHOUSING: A SCANDINAVIAN LONGHOUSE, OR A TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO MODERN HOUSING?**

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## **Abstract/Resume**

It is possible that a new approach to residential design which has become popular in Scandinavia could ease the housing crisis on Canadian Reserves while yielding benefits beyond mere shelter. Coincidentally, some of the Danish designs closely resemble housing used by many Aboriginal communities at the time of first contact with European settlers.

Il est possible qu'une nouvelle façon de développement résidentiel qui est devenue populaire en Scandinavie puisse détendre la crise du logement des réserves canadiennes en rendant des avantages au dessus d'un simple abri. Coïncidemment, quelques-uns des plans danois ressemblent beaucoup aux logements utilisés par beaucoup de communautés indigènes dans le temps de leur premier contact avec les colons européens.

## Introduction

At scarce intervals in human history the convergence of ideas, needs, political will, personalities and capital can create exceptional opportunities for meaningful change in the way we live. As an example, the convergence of desperate housing conditions following the industrialization of England with new technologies, public and private capital, and the timely designs of reformers like Ebenezer Howard, led to radical new approaches to housing and urban planning. Now—one hundred years after the first public housing, greenbelts and new towns were conceived—a strikingly similar challenge and opportunity looms for the housing of Canada's First Nations. In the 1990s, Native people still struggle with a severe housing crisis and poverty that is unmatched in this country's worst urban ghettos. Yet it is possible that similar opportunities may now exist for fundamental changes in the way Native society lives in the next century. The critical need for more and better housing can even generate solutions yielding far-reaching benefits to First Nations beyond mere shelter.

## The Path to the Present

Almost five centuries ago, French, British and Dutch explorers first encountered the Iroquoian people in the region now comprising New York, Pennsylvania and southern Ontario and Quebec. Their homes were “long-houses” of wood and bark within villages surrounded by log palisades. The longhouses accommodated not only the five tribes of the fledgling Iroquois League, but also their Huron, Petun, Neutral, Erie and Susquehannock neighbours. The very name by which these tribes referred to themselves, *Ongwanonsionni*, meant “People of the extended lodge.”

When the five original tribes forged their historic alliance, the Longhouse became both model and metaphor for the structure of the League and Confederacy. The visionary Hiawatha and the politically astute Mohawk Chief, Deganavidah, compared their proposed league of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca Nations to a longhouse for five clans. In order to convince the reluctant Onondaga Chief, Atoharho, to join, the Onondaga tribe was given the important role of fire-keepers in the centre of the longhouse and leadership of the five-nation League of the Iroquois. The process of decision-making at League level was similar to consensus building among families and clans within the longhouses. After the southern Iroquoian Tuscarora tribe fled persecution in North Carolina to join as the sixth nation of the Iroquois Confederacy, they too became identified as a room built onto the side of the Longhouse next to the Oneida

family. The 19th century scholar, Lewis H. Morgan, even wrote (Nabakov and Easton, 1989: 89) back in 1851:

To an Iroquois the League was not `like' a longhouse: it `was' a longhouse, extending from the Hudson to the Genesee, in which, around five fires, the five tribes gathered (punctuation added).

After the American Revolution, the Seneca mystic Handsome Lake founded a revivalist movement based on traditional Native religious beliefs, with some Quaker influence, which became known as the "Longhouse Religion." In recent years, traditionalist Mohawk activists at Akwesasne and Kanasatake still identify themselves with the Longhouse Movement. More than mere dwellings, the traditional longhouses were the foci of tribal organization, culture and religion, and have since become evocative cultural icons for the 20th century survivors of "the people of the extended lodge." Tragically, the same cannot be said for the contemporary housing stock on Canadian Reserves.

Canada's Auditor General, Denis Desautels, noted in a recent report that Canada's Status Indians are suffering from a horrific housing shortage that the government has caused, yet has no strategy to fix.<sup>1</sup> The government estimates that more than 11,000 housing units are needed on Indian Reserves, and that more than one-quarter of all housing on Reserves is in poorer physical condition than the worst non-Native housing in Canada. With the Native population growing at three times the national average, and with one-half of all Status Indians below the age of 25, the present Native housing crisis can only grow worse. Author Alan McMillan sums up the scale of the problem as follows (1988:300):

A 1985 evaluation of reserve housing indicates that conditions in general remain poor, (particularly in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, as well as in all rural and remote areas). Almost half of the housing fails to meet basic physical standards, and more than one-third is seriously overcrowded or lacks basic amenities such as running water. Inadequate housing subjects the occupants to greater risk of disease and fire, and inhibits the children's academic performance.

## **A Newfound Ancient Way**

A better result might be attained if Bands were enabled to look beyond the sort of housing with which government bureaucrats are familiar, (and that which contractors prefer to build), to consider instead the larger

community needs. To date, government approaches have been policy-driven, and have simply emphasized the statistical quantities of housing units built without a qualitative assessment of the design of the housing. In the 1970s, a new approach to housing design began to spread from Denmark, throughout Scandinavia and across Northern Europe. This design movement, known to the Danes as *Bofællesskaber* (for “living communities”), also offers a unique potential to Canadian First Nations to meet particular Reserve housing needs. In the English language, the movement has been dubbed *cohousing* by Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett in their indispensable book on the subject (1988). Hundreds of cohousing communities in Europe offer the privacy of individual dwellings while fostering a closely-knit community through innovative building designs and an extraordinary level of shared facilities.

Co-incidentally, some of the Danish designs resemble the Iroquoian longhouses of past centuries. Like longhouses, some of the Danish and Swedish cohousing structures have two long rows of individual family dwellings facing each other across a central pedestrian row. When the central pedestrian streets are covered with glass roofs, (to keep the elements out), the long structures closely resemble the traditional longhouses in layout. Many other designs have been used for cohousing communities, however, and other plans may be quite different. Yet regardless of the degree of design correlation between past and present structures, the new approach to housing design could significantly improve the Reserve housing stock while meeting additional social and community needs as a corollary benefit. Further, the low sun and short summers of Scandinavia inspired environmental design modifications in places such as *Drivhuset* and *Handvaerkerparken*, Denmark which could benefit housing built in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, Wikwemikong, Ontario, or Port Simpson, British Columbia.

## **COHOUSING: What it is, and What it is Not**

More than just conventional residential units sharing a clubhouse, the entire design of cohousing communities revolves around the allocation of private and shared living areas. While extensive use is made of shared facilities, each dwelling unit is still complete to offer privacy. The physical structures and layout are designed to maximize the efficiency of shared facilities such as playrooms, guest bedrooms, large entertaining areas, laundry, sewing rooms, and workshops, rather than trying to duplicate these uses in individual residences or denying them altogether. In addition, the design attempts to encourage social interaction and a sense of community

by re-directing pedestrian traffic patterns.

What cohousing is not is just another name for more familiar contemporary living arrangements such as cooperative (co-op) or condominium housing. Cooperatives, condominiums and private rentals all refer to the type of ownership of a housing unit rather than to the architectural design. Each of these forms of ownership has a distinct method of management, and each is regulated by a different legal regime.<sup>2</sup> Although one might associate condos in large cities with high-rise towers and co-ops with mazes of low-rise brick buildings, neither form of ownership relates to architectural design. For example, any multi-unit building could change from private ownership to that of a condominium corporation, and from that into a cooperative, without altering the building design.

“Cohousing,” on the other hand, refers to an architectural approach based on lifestyle considerations and sociopetal design features, regardless of the type of property ownership.<sup>3</sup> Cohousing communities' property may be “owned” by condominium or cooperative corporations, as well as by private owners including governments, Indian Bands or individuals. The convenience, lifestyle and cost of cohousing have drawn many in Europe and the United States to this type of housing, yet, it is submitted, the benefits to Native communities may be still greater than those enjoyed by the general populace. Native traditions and history, whether Iroquoian, Algonkian or Athapaskan, may dovetail with this modern (or traditional) type of housing in a way that yields special benefits for Reserve cohousing communities.

## **COHOUSING: Design Features**

As stated above, cohousing design is an attempt to better house the resident families by providing both privacy and access to numerous shared facilities and services. The actual physical design and siting of buildings are an attempt to assist residents in childrearing and household chores, as well as to encourage social contact with neighbours and friends. Most cohousing designs have attached, or semi-attached dwellings clustered around pedestrian streets or courtyards. Front doors open onto the pedestrian streets, and cars are kept in small lots off to the sides or corners of the buildings. A number of recent Scandinavian communities have dealt with the harsh northern climate by covering the central corridor with glass.

In addition to the central pedestrian street, cohousing designs also include some form of central common House with facilities for the benefit of the residents. The pedestrian corridors will typically lead directly into the common house. Unlike the shared health clubs of large condo projects or the small stores in cooperatives, the common house in cohousing commu-

nities is much more of a continuation of the living space of the home. Although the individual dwelling units are complete and self-contained, the residents, to varying degrees, choose to do part of their domestic activity in the common house with their neighbours. Most of the common house designs include kitchen and group dining facilities, childrens' playrooms and daycare facilities, hobby/craft work rooms, laundries, and guest bedrooms to be shared by the residents. Other common house designs go much farther with shared facilities.

Not every family can afford the equipment or space for sewing rooms or workshops. Many of the cohousing common houses contain such facilities, as well as computer workrooms or libraries. Artists can benefit from shared studio space in the common area. Other plans include shared boats, snowmobiles and walk-in freezers, and most include a cooperative store for bulk food purchases. Group gardens and greenhouses are also common. The wasteful duplication of underutilized extra rooms is avoided, and many who would simply have no access at all to such facilities are granted access through shared space.

The most innovative facet about common house design is the group dining facility where group dinners are prepared each night. None of the residents have to participate in the group dinners, yet each night approximately half of most cohousing groups do eat supper at the common houses. Most will eat three or four times a week with the group, and the remainder of their meals will be at home. Those who participate only have to cook for the group about once a month. It is both easy for working parents, and a welcome chance to socialize for elderly residents. Costs are lower than eating at home because of volume buying and storage. The poorest and oldest residents often benefit the most from the complete and balanced meals. The typical cohousing common house will also offer a late afternoon tea and snack for residents.

Pedestrian streets, common house dinners, and shared workrooms contribute to the mixing of the young and the old, the working and the unemployed, and the artist and the childrearer. In addition to the benefit of group meals, the older residents are able to spend time with children without having to share their personal dwelling with them for twenty-four hours a day. Elders have more opportunity to share stories and traditions with younger residents, and still have a quiet place to which they can retreat. Families with younger children also benefit from group meals, group babysitting, and secure playrooms by freeing up time and easing the housework burden. A nurturing and efficient living design is thus created, which also provides superior facilities and services for residents through the sharing of space and certain domestic chores.

## **Cultural Aspects of COHOUSING for Aboriginal Communities**

When Giovanni da Verrazano first encountered the Algonkian people along Narragansett Bay in 1524, most of the Native population of North America lived in multi-family dwellings. Whether in longhouses or wigwams, pit houses or tipis, plank houses or igloos, and hogans or pueblos, most Aboriginal Bands lived in close contact with their clans or others. As the White settlers spread west from the Atlantic coast, most Whites lived in detached and isolated farmhouses and cabins. As a paradoxical result of a four century long evolution, today almost all housing on Reserves is in the form of single-family detached dwellings, while urban Whites are increasingly turning to multi-unit apartments, townhouses, condominiums and cooperative housing.

The emphasis on individualism in White society left its mark on Canadian and American settlement patterns. In a culture exalting the rights of the individual, "My own house" and "my fields" must be surrounded by "my fence" to mark and protect "my domain." Most Native societies of past centuries were organized on communal lines, with group survival paramount to individual interests. When Whites sought to "civilize" Aboriginal societies during the 19th century, they had to find ways to erode the bonds of group identity. One of the purposes of the infamous church-run residential schools was to remove children from their homes in order to insulate them from constant exposure to tribal elders and the traditional ways of the closely-knit communities. Residents on Reserves were also encouraged to live more like rural Whites. Through the use of "location tickets" in Canada and the "allotment" process in the United States, the system of communal land ownership was undermined. The stand-alone single-family house completely replaced multi-family dwellings on most Reserves and Reservations throughout North America.

Cohousing places more emphasis on the betterment of the group than on the walled-in property approach of the suburban individualist. The sharing of duties and facilities within a group gives all who participate more time and greater resources than would otherwise be possible. Such a new outlook in future residential planning may just provide answers to the housing crisis which are closely in sync with both present aspirations and the traditions of past centuries. Depending on the designs and goals laid out by Native communities, this approach could help residents to re-establish their places within the family, clan, Band and tribe. Children could mix more with elders, and might also have more exposure to the use of Native languages. Such improvement in the well-being of residents can be

accomplished without the constraints and lack of privacy inherent in more communal lifestyle approaches.

Because the cohousing communities would be on Reserves, they would be spared the encumbrance of rigid and anachronistic planning barriers typically imposed by myopic municipalities. As in traditional multi-family dwellings, the residents themselves would have to decide how to deal with management and upkeep matters, as well as how to deal with troublemakers within the community. Residents would also be shielded from interference by self-serving groups of non-Native "N-I-M-B-Y" neighbours. Native cohousing would similarly be spared from the problems associated with high turnover which plague some of the suburban commuter communities in Europe.

## **Economic Aspects of Cohousing for Aboriginal Communities**

Funding new cohousing projects from conventional sources such as Indian Affairs capital subsidies, CMHC's Social Housing programs or bank loans under ministerial guarantee would quickly deplete existing resources unless additional funds were dedicated to the development of cohousing. Ottawa would have to be pressured to provide fresh funds for capital subsidies to establish cohousing pilot projects in different parts of Canada. By offering potential cultural benefits in addition to supplying much-needed housing, the experiment could catch the attention of administrators at Housing and Indian Affairs or the major banks. Contributions made by individual Band members could include donations of labour and materials, as well as rent paid by those who would live in cohousing rental projects. Communities could also be planned where the residents own their housing units rather than renting.

Typically, residents of cohousing communities will do much of the work themselves in order to lower planning and building costs. Native labour, both volunteer and contracted, could be used wherever possible to reduce unemployment. The Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission could be approached for funding for labour and training programs. Other government departments could be approached for surplus materials and equipment loans. After building one such project, building crews could apply their expertise to cohousing projects on other Reserves. Traditional Native themes could be incorporated in both the physical structure and the ornamental design of the buildings in order to further enhance a sense of identity.

At the very essence of cohousing is the way that it allows such an



extraordinary level of input by the residents into the design of the communities in which they are to live. The first trade-off encountered in the planning of a cohousing community is that the greater the local (or individual) input, the longer the time that is required for planning and development of the project. In Europe, some communities took several years to go from the organization of potential residents, through the planning stage, and into the occupation of finished units. On the one hand it is important to have the maximum individual input in the design process in order to best meet the residents needs. On the other hand, with large numbers of Native residents living in substandard housing, it is essential that new housing is not unduly delayed by individuals seeking design perfection. Band councils could expedite the process by assuming a larger role in the planning process when planning deadlines are not met.

A second trade-off encountered in cohousing design is that the greater the effort to personalize or localize the design to reflect the needs and identity of small groups, the greater the cost per unit. Planners of cohousing developments will clearly want to tailor design models to best address local needs, as well as to reflect or bolster local identity. Yet, with so many people in need of housing or housing upgrades, Bands will be disinclined to restrict the number of units built by inflating costs at the development stage. Until Aboriginal groups have undertaken a number of cohousing projects, it will be difficult to predict the extent of individual identity to be built into future communities. Some Native cohousing plans could involve a high degree of standardization with little more than token ornamental touches to reflect the identity of the community or culture of the Band. Other groups might find all existing models to be wholly inappropriate and choose instead to pioneer more individual approaches. Original plans could be developed by larger groups of Ojibwa, Micmac, Blackfoot or Six Nations Bands, and then reproduced at numerous sites for Bands with similar cultural, economic and climatic conditions. Relatively inexpensive ornamental embellishment could go a long way toward personalizing standard structural designs. It is most important, however, that any trade-offs made at the design and development phases be made by the residents or Bands themselves rather than by Ottawa. There is no one master design which can serve the needs and preferences of all of the diverse Aboriginal societies in Canada.

Apart from the building and embellishment of the projects, cohousing would not provide a permanent answer to the chronic unemployment problem on Reserves. Residents with artistic and craft skills could, however, benefit from having studio or workshop space in which to pursue their avocations. Others with fledgling in-home businesses could share office space, computers, tools and workspace.

## A Scandinavian or Traditional Longhouse Model?

Figures 1 and 2 are included at the end of this article to provide a simple graphic representation of what an Aboriginal cohousing development might look like. The figures show a twenty unit structure, including a common house, drawn in the longhouse style. This plan could also be modified to include ten or twenty more units, and additional rooms could be added to existing dwellings (see Figure 2). Because flexibility is an integral part of cohousing design, some of the rooms can be traded to adjacent residences by simply moving a door. (These rooms are marked with an “x” on Figure 2.) This would allow for easy adjustments in cases where one family had a child moving out, while a neighbour's family was expanding.

Energy efficiency is another benefit of designs such as this over traditional single-family detached housing. Because of shared walls and the covered pedestrian street, the exterior wall area exposed to the elements is greatly reduced with resulting savings in fuel costs. In addition, the southern facing wing is only one story high in order to allow sunlight to reach the taller wing on the north side of the structure. The glass cover on the pedestrian street protects residents from the elements while walking to and from vehicles parked beside the common house. An additional benefit is that less land is consumed than with comparable single, detached houses.

## Conclusion

In post-industrial northern Europe the cohousing phenomenon has been fuelled by a desire for the security, warmth and sense of community which was lost in the rush to sterile, sprawling suburbs. Other contemporary forms of housing, such as cooperatives, still lack the social and physical design flexibility exemplified by the Danish “living communities.” What is being proposed here is a new variant of *cohousing* designs based both on Scandinavian models and various traditional Native forms. This article does not propose building carbon-copies of Swedish villages in Canada, nor does it advocate the reproduction of the red-brick cooperative housing mazes of Toronto, with their incumbent regulations or model by-laws and Letters Patent. Indeed, such canned co-op models and provincial regulation are neither necessary nor welcome on Reserve lands. First Nations alone should decide the type and degree of organization needed to build and allocate housing on Reserves, as well as how it is to be managed and maintained. Various cohousing communities on Reserves could have very

different approaches to design, management and financing.

Cohousing will not be a panacea for all Native housing ills, nor is it a brave new world of strange, alternative lifestyles. It is simply a modern alternative design for living space which, coincidentally, may be in close step with the traditional ways of many of Canada's First Nations. Buildings are designed to foster, rather than to impede, social interaction between neighbours. The facilities offer the means, but not the requirement, that allow fellow residents to share chores, tools, conversation and meals. Each resident has more than he or she could afford independently. The sharing often requires groups of residents to seek consensus and to work together, whether for babysitting, making repairs or cleaning a greenhouse. The longhouse illustrated in this example is only a convenient model; most of the same principles could be applied to a variety of other designs of clustered housing tied by ribbons of pedestrian streets to common living facilities. Whether inspired by the Delaware Bighouse or the Odawa Ridgepole Wigwam, the First Nations of tomorrow may find hope in dwellings that draw people together for the good of all, rather than fracturing the group into individual "haves" and "have nots."

### Notes

1. As reported in *The Toronto Star*, p.A8, on 4 December, 1991.
2. For example, in Ontario cooperatives are regulated under the *Cooperative Corporations Act*; condominiums are regulated under the *Condominium Act*; and privately owned rental housing comes under the *Landlord and Tenant Act*, the *Residential Rent Regulation Act*, and the *Rental Housing Protection Act*.
3. Designs have been referred to as *sociopetal* if they "encourage, foster or enforce the development of stable interpersonal relationships such as those that are found in small face-to-face groups." (In other words, designs that bring people together.) The opposite type of design is known as *sociofugal*. These terms were coined by Osmund (1957). As examples, Saarinen (1976:56) listed the teepee and igloo as highly sociopetal, and train stations, hotels and jails as highly sociofugal.

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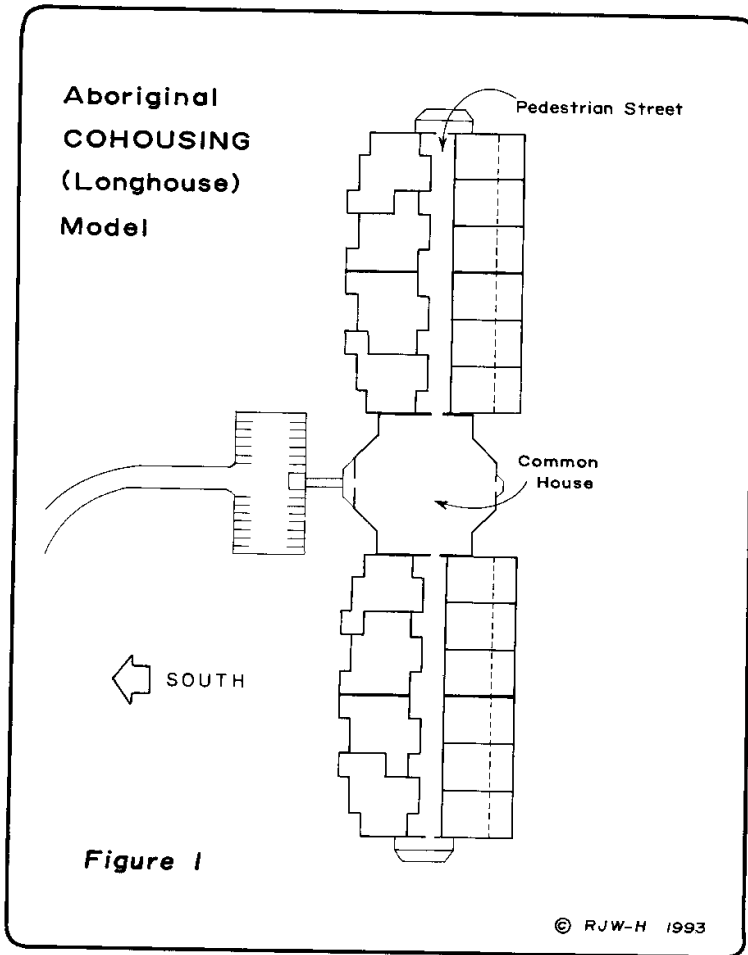
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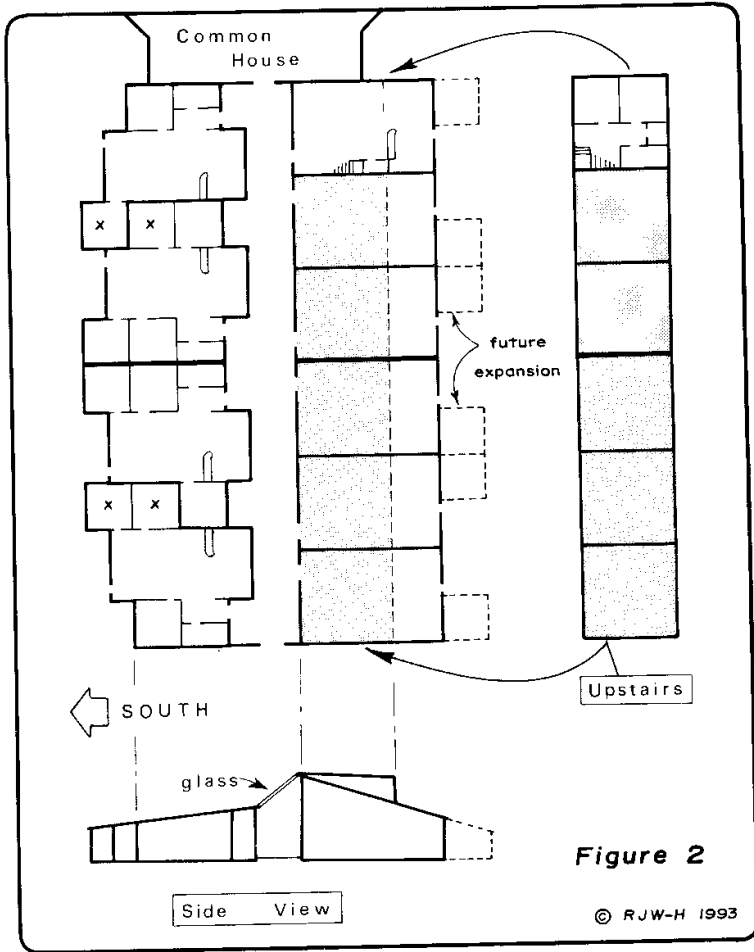


Figure 2

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