ULI DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDIES

Wild Sage Cohousing

Boulder, Colorado

Project Type:
Residential

Case No:
C036002

Year:
2006

Courtesy of Wonderland Hills Development

SUMMARY

Wild Sage, a 34-unit, mixed-income, environmentally friendly cohousing project, is one of several small communities being developed in the Holiday Neighborhood, a new urbanist, sustainable, and affordable neighborhood rising from the site of a former drive-in movie theater in Boulder, Colorado. Wild Sage's construction incorporates many sustainable features and all of the homes in the development are rated Five Star Plus, the highest score given by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Residents are expected to drive an estimated 30 percent less than the average American, pay 50 percent less in utility bills, and use 40 percent less water. Designed to encourage interaction among residents, the homes resemble tightly grouped townhouses.

FEATURES

- Mixed-Income Housing
- Cohousing
- Pedestrian-Friendly Design
- Infill Development
- Sustainable Design
- Green Building

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LOCATION

Outer Suburban

SITE SIZE

1.48 acres/0.6 hectare

LAND USES

Low-Income Housing, Affordable Housing, Townhouses, Habitat for Humanity Homes, Market-Rate Housing

KEYWORDS/SPECIAL FEATURES

- Mixed-Income Housing
- Cohousing
- Pedestrian-Friendly Design
- Infill Development
- Sustainable Design
- Green Building

PROJECT WEB SITE

www.wildsagecohousing.org

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GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Cohousing communities, which originated in Denmark during the 1970s, are small-scale communities that are planned, designed, and managed with a high degree of resident participation. Since the late 1980s, about 80 cohousing communities have been developed in the United States and another 50 or so are being planned or developed as of March 2006, according to the Boulder-based Cohousing Association of the United States. Although cohousing frequently is confused with communal living, its residents lead economically independent lives in fully equipped, privately owned dwellings and pay homeowners association fees to maintain common areas. Most major decisions are arrived at through a consensus decision-making process. Such communities strive to maintain a balance between privacy and interaction, and typically seek a diverse group of residents with a mix of incomes, ages, interests, lifestyles, and household sizes. Most are designed with an emphasis on walking and keep cars on the periphery.

Wild Sage, a 34-unit cohousing project, is one of several small communities being developed in Boulder's Holiday Neighborhood on the 27-acre (11-hectare) site of the former Holiday Twin Screen Drive-In Theater. The community incorporates many sustainable features, including wet-blown cellulose, a shared hydronic (hot water) heating system, and roughed-in solar capability. Designed to encourage interaction among residents, Wild Sage's homes resemble tightly grouped townhouses, reflecting the look of a western mining town. Front and back doors open to sidewalks and walkways, which lead to an approximately 3,000-square-foot (279-square-meter) central green and a 2,375-square-foot (221-square-meter) common house where residents receive their mail and take part in community meetings, twice-weekly shared meals, and other activities; garages and parking areas are clustered on the outskirts of the community. Wild Sage is an intergenerational, multiracial, economically diverse community with three price-point levels, including four homes built by Habitat for Humanity, nine permanently affordable units, and 21 market-rate units.

Wild Sage was developed by Wonderland Hill Development Company, a local firm with extensive experience in the development of sustainable and cohousing projects. Since working with cohousing advocates to create Colorado's first cohousing community, Nyland, in the early 1990s, Wonderland has developed 16 additional cohousing projects in Colorado, California, and Arizona. The firm has evolved into a niche developer that is responsible for almost one-quarter of the cohousing units produced in the United States. It typically develops cohousing projects as elements of larger planned communities, often politically challenging ones with some public sector involvement. The firm's president, Jim Leach, was a leader in the creation of Built Green Colorado standards for residential construction. One of his goals for each project Wonderland develops is to push the envelope of sustainable building and community development a little further, to build places that have a real impact on the larger culture and society.

THE SITE

After the Holiday Twin Screen Drive-In Theater closed in 1989, the land—which lies at the northern edge of Boulder—remained vacant for several years. In 1990, the city annexed it, along with several other north Boulder parcels. Although the landowner signed a letter of intent with a big-box retailer to build a warehouse store on the site, a community planning process determined that this was not what the city wanted there. The city thus began negotiations to acquire the land, which was one of Boulder's last undeveloped land parcels. In March 1997, the city purchased the land for about $4 per square foot ($43 per square meter), then sold it to Boulder Housing Partners (BHP) the following year. BHP, the municipal housing authority, is a public entity separate from the city. Established by state charter, Colorado housing authorities are able to issue debt, as well as condemn, develop, own, and manage property.

BHP's goal was to create a desirable, diverse, sustainable, and affordable community. When complete, the Holiday Neighborhood will contain 333 homes, 138 of them affordable, and 5,000 square feet (465 square meters) of commercial space—including a restaurant, a coffee shop, a fitness center, and offices—plus a community garden, a large city park, and several pocket parks.

Wild Sage is located at the center of the Holiday Neighborhood. The almost 1.5-acre (0.6-hectare) Wild Sage site consists of one roughly square block bounded by Zamia Avenue and 17th Street on the north and east, Yellow Pine Avenue on the south, and 16th Street on the west. It lies across Zamia Street from the Holiday Neighborhood's community garden, several blocks from a planned city park, and within walking distance of the neighborhood's community retail facilities, bus stops, and bike paths.

DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

Acting as the master site developer, BHP hired a master site planner, Boulder-based Barrett Studio Architects, to create a site concept plan for the Holiday Neighborhood that emphasized sustainability's "three E's": economy, equity, and environment. From the start, BHP aimed to create a variety of housing types in the neighborhood, including a cohousing community. Public input into the project also began early on, with a kick-off barbeque on the site, and continued with a series of public meetings designed to determine what various stakeholders wanted to see happen there. Affordable housing was near the top of everyone's list. Consequently—and to meet municipal requirements

described in the Approvals section below—BHP required that more than 40 percent of the neighborhood's homes be affordable to low- and moderate-income households (those earning less than 80 percent of area median income). To help developers meet this goal, BHP discounted land sales. It also held two acres (0.8 hectare) of land for a city park and dedicated another 70-foot-long (21-meter-long) corridor to the city for a noise buffer and bike path along the edge of the site.

After the initial Holiday Neighborhood site plan was completed, BHP issued a letter of interest, to which 45 developers responded. From those, it selected six development partners to design and develop specific sections of the neighborhood through public/private partnerships. Because of Wonderland's past experience with cohousing, BHP chose it to develop the cohousing community. The project benefited from a streamlined approval process that took about a year, followed by a one-year design and community building process and construction, which took an additional year. All in all, nearly four years passed between the time Wonderland was selected as developer to the time residents moved in.

Wonderland's aforementioned past experience developing cohousing communities has evolved into a tiered decision-making process that involves future residents in the planning, design, and development processes through a series of workshops. "Because of the participatory nature of cohousing," explains Leach, "there are always lots of challenges and frustrations, since everyone's a partner." Leach likens the development process to "building custom homes—only we are building custom neighborhoods."

Wonderland hired a general contractor, Fort Collins, Colorado–based Drahota, Inc., to construct most of Wild Sage. Volunteers and future residents from Flatirons Habitat for Humanity—the local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International—also were involved in the construction process, doing much of the framing for the structures in which the Habitat units are located. The Habitat workdays had the added benefit of bringing future residents together and building a spirit of community among them.

The use of a general contractor added an extra layer of coordination between the design and construction processes, which resulted in additional costs and time delays and created problems, particularly during the installation of complex elements like the central heating system. Parts of the heating system initially were overdesigned, creating noise issues, and had to be rebuilt after construction was well underway. Wonderland eventually brought in a second contractor to modify the heating system and build a sound-control system.

APPROVALS

Although the city's planning board supported the Holiday Neighborhood concept site plan when it reviewed it in 1999, the plan itself created a barrier to development because it called for an overall density of 23 units per acre (56.8 units per hectare)—twice the density specified in the city's subcommunity plan for the area. It took the city a year to draft and adopt an ordinance that created a density bonus to allow the level of density required by the site plan. A city of Boulder inclusionary zoning ordinance passed in 2000 requires 20 percent of housing in all new residential developments (except condominium conversions) to be permanently affordable to households earning less than 80 percent of area median income. The ordinance that created the density bonus required that 40 percent of the units in denser projects be affordable—double the aforementioned amount. Further site review and approval of the technical document for the Holiday Neighborhood took until the end of 2002.

Both BHP and Wonderland structured their planning processes to be inclusive, inviting public involvement throughout. In a city famous for public debate and opposition to development, neither the Holiday Neighborhood nor Wild Sage faced significant opposition. According to Leach, Wild Sage set a record for public approval and political processing in the city of Boulder, a process that still took almost three years.

PLANNING AND DESIGN

After BHP selected Wonderland to develop a cohousing community in the Holiday Neighborhood and gave it a free option on the land, Wonderland went out in search of potential residents to begin to form the community. The developer put the word out through a "guerrilla marketing" campaign that contacted its database of people interested in cohousing via E-mail and newsletters, and reached out to the broader community with posters and flyers distributed at local farmers markets as well as through public meetings, slide shows, and site tours. Early meetings helped build excitement about the project among prospective residents. From these efforts, a core group of a dozen people began forming in 2001. Importantly, this group included prospective purchasers of market-rate, affordable, and Habitat for Humanity homes. Although this economic diversity inevitably created conflicts during the planning and site design process, it also helped sensitize future residents to each other's concerns and needs.

The collaborative planning and design process was accomplished through a series of workshops. The process began with a programming workshop, where future residents—in conjunction with architects, developers, and a facilitator—worked out the community's exterior layout, using wooden blocks and construction paper to help them visualize it, after which the architects presented a site plan that was approved by the community as fulfilling the goals of the site program. The common house and unit design processes followed a similar pattern. Future residents determined which types of units appealed most to them, and attended one or more sets of seven separate unit design meetings to program their unit types. The fees that potential residents paid to attend these workshops were later applied to the purchase price of their homes.

The design groups paid particular attention to Wild Sage's exterior spaces and circulation patterns. The back doors of most units open onto small, private patios/dining areas (a limited common element), which in turn open onto paths that lead to the central courtyard facing the common house. Garages and parking spaces are located at the edge of the community to encourage incidental contact and the resulting informal interactions among residents. Likewise, the common house's location at the center of the community encourages residents to gather there and on the greenspace around it. The common house serves as a "lantern to the community," notes architect Bryan Bowen, who adds that the arrangement of the housing units around the courtyard—with some directly facing it and others farther away—helped Wild Sage attract different people who wanted differing levels of social interaction.

As the physical plan for Wild Sage evolved, so did the group forming the community. Prospective residents moved through a predictable cycle that Leach describes as starting with the "dreaming and planning" phase, which eventually gives way to a "disenchantment" phase that, in turn, leads to a phase defined by acceptance and a deepening of commitment, followed by another dreaming and planning phase as the cycle begins again. "Once people understand this cycle," says Leach, "they get more comfortable with the process," and are less likely to be discouraged when they find themselves in the midst of disenchantment. Although some of the initial participants dropped out—and one family was asked to leave—as the process continued, others took their places.

Wild Sage contains seven different unit types, ranging from 693-square-foot (64-square-meter), single-level carriage houses above garages to 2,712-square-foot (252-square-meter), three-level end units. All units are attached, sharing one or two common walls. Market-rate, affordable, and Habitat for Humanity homes are mixed throughout the community, and the affordable units are indistinguishable from the market-rate residences. Two of the seven unit types were available to all three economic groups, one was developed for both affordable-housing and market-rate purchasers, and the remaining four were developed solely as market-rate units. The construction budget for the residential space was $85 per square foot ($915 per square meter).

The three-level common house has two main entrances, one facing a public street (Zamia Avenue) and another that opens onto the community's interior courtyard. (A third one—a back door—provides easy access to an area with mailboxes, cubbyholes for each household, and community bulletin boards and calendars.) An arched roof faces the streetfront, while a high, open-ceiling dining/meeting room creates a feeling of expansiveness not found in the community's individual homes. The building also features a commercial-style kitchen, two guest rooms, a small children's playroom, a meditation/yoga room, a laundry room, and additional unfinished space, as well as a living room/library furnished with sofas and chairs, built-in bookcases, a piano, and a gas fireplace. Although the common house was designed primarily for the use of Wild Sage residents, they are able to reserve spaces within it for functions that reach out to the broader community, such as concerts and poetry readings. The community also contains a shared tool shed/work area.

GREEN BUILDING FEATURES

One of the planners' primary goals for the Holiday Neighborhood was to limit its environmental impact. In addition, to receive a building permit, the city demands that builders comply with the Boulder Green Points Building Program, a program that requires residential builders to meet rigorous criteria designed to conserve land, water, and other resources. From the beginning, architect Jim Logan stated his intention to exceed these requirements and to make every practical effort to limit Wild Sage's consumption of fossil fuels. All participants expressed a desire to include both passive and active solar energy use and to keep the community as green as possible. In 2001, the Sustainable Futures Society (SFS) secured an EPA Sustainable Challenge Grant to help green the greater Holiday Neighborhood, with special attention to the Wild Sage community. The SFS/EPA grant made it possible for those planning the community to evaluate the effectiveness of a variety of proposed features. In the end, the team decided to focus on energy-efficient, sustainable building systems; state-of-the-art lighting guidelines; and innovative stormwater management strategies.

The primary aspects of the green strategy at Wild Sage are energy efficiency and sustainability. Clustering and downsizing housing units allowed for a great deal of energy efficiency, since shared walls and smaller units prevent heat gain and reduce the amount of materials used. Future residents agreed early on that solar energy was an important goal, and reached consensus that the community would not use forced-air heating or central air conditioning. Although the design team initially explored the use of alternative energy sources such as fuel cells, microturbines, and photovoltaic panels, the team ultimately determined that a more traditional system that eventually will be converted to an active solar system made more sense financially. Each of the project's eight buildings is preplumbed for radiant solar heating and has a single hydronic baseboard mechanical heating system run by a central, high-efficiency boiler that is zoned by unit. Each mechanical room sits atop an open space that can be used to store hot water from the active solar system. The community will begin installing donated, used solar panels on two seven-unit buildings in mid-2006, and the savings derived from this system will be invested in an account that will pay for the installation of solar panels on the remaining buildings in the future.

All exterior walls are insulated with 100 percent recycled wet-blown cellulose and covered with durable fiber cement (Hardiplank) siding. Roofs are insulated with R50 insulation, and all flat roofs—which were designed to house solar panels—are covered with a white single-ply membrane, which reduces the need for cooling and the urban heat-island effect. Throughout the project, designers avoided the use of old-growth timber as much as possible, using mostly engineered lumber, including Trimax structured plastic lumber for exterior decks and railings. The primary exception

is in the common house, where large-dimensional wood was used for aesthetic reasons; however, the use of insulated concrete forms in the common house helped reduce lumber use and increase energy efficiency there. Residents were able to choose from a variety of interior finishes, including carpeting made from recycled soda bottles, exposed concrete floors treated with ecostains, bamboo flooring, wool carpeting, low-VOC paints, and more. Today, Wild Sage uses approximately 40 to 60 percent as much energy as a comparable housing project.

State-of-the-art lighting guidelines also contribute to energy efficiency. Wild Sage's site plan was designed to prevent winter shading, resulting in mostly north- and south-facing windows that allow daylight into all homes but keep heat from escaping. Architects Logan and Bowen were surprised to discover that the low-emission (low-E) glass commonly used to prevent heat loss actually can create a net energy loss by preventing passive solar heating. They therefore varied the window glazing at Wild Sage by orientation: south-facing windows contain standard double-glazed glass to allow passive solar energy into the homes, while those facing other directions contain low-E glass. Effective daylighting also reduces residents' dependence on electric lighting.

Stormwater management techniques also support Wild Sage's sustainability. In conventional high-density development, much of the landscape is covered with impervious surfaces, and stormwater is channeled off site as quickly as possible. At Wild Sage, low-impact development techniques are geared toward infiltration rather than removal. Water running off rooftops is directed to shallow, vegetated trenches or swales, where it waters ornamental and edible plantings as it gradually infiltrates into an underlying sand bed, reducing the need for supplemental watering as well as the amount of pollution in runoff.

FINANCING

Though Wonderland once had difficulties obtaining financing for its first cohousing projects, it now has a well-established track record with local lenders. The financing process resembles that for a traditional single-family attached development. Wonderland generally raises $200,000 to $300,000 to pay for design work and other soft costs from investors, who may include future residents. The firm was able to obtain a construction loan and break ground when Wild Sage was approximately 75 percent presold. Wild Sage's buyers paid at least 5 percent of their unit's purchase price upfront; those who invested more received a discounted note that could be applied to the purchase of their unit and entitled them to a discount that was typically valued from 10 to 15 percent of the note amount. Although Wonderland's construction loans usually come from local lenders, Wells Fargo provided the loan for Wild Sage. Additional funding came from the city, which contributed approximately $250,000 toward the construction of the Habitat for Humanity and permanently affordable units through the city's affordable housing trust fund, the Community Housing Assistance Program.

Wonderland's accounting department kept separate budgets for the development process and project management. The development finances were set up as a profit share, with half of the profit going to Wonderland and the remainder split between the Wild Sage community and outside investors. The community's portion of the profit share must be spent on capital projects. Wild Sage began receiving its share of the profits in early 2006, and is using the funds for a variety of improvements to the common house, including installing a hot tub on the roof deck, finishing and furnishing a family room, and adding cork flooring to another room.

MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT

About a dozen of the households involved in the initial planning stages ultimately purchased homes at Wild Sage. Others involved in the planning process—including Bowen—were drawn to the community and its residents and wound up buying residences there. While most of the smaller units were presold well before construction was completed, the largest ones were the last to sell. Although Wonderland worked with real estate agents and held several open houses, most buyers learned of the project through word of mouth. The final original purchasers, a family from California that had lived in a cohousing project elsewhere, learned about the home through the Multiple Listing Service. Initial prices ranged from $94,000 to more than $490,000.

Because Wild Sage was legally established as a community association rather than a cooperative, owners can resell their homes without the approval of the community. Since the first residents moved in, four of the market-rate residences have been resold, at prices ranging from $277,000 to $513,000 that represent increases in unit value ranging from 4 to 13 percent. Deed restrictions enable owners of permanently affordable units to sell their homes at a small profit; the increase is tied to the consumer price index, typically about 3 percent per year. Similar restrictions are in effect for the Habitat for Humanity dwellings, which also must remain permanently affordable but can be sold at a profit of up to 5 percent per year.

All households pay a flat $50 annual membership fee as well as homeowners association dues, which are determined by the square footage of their units. Paid through the homeowners association, the energy bills also take into account the size as well as the number of residents in each unit.

Residents volunteer to work on teams that maintain landscaping and common facilities, take care of community finances, and handle governance and stewardship issues. The community has a well-articulated vision statement and a set of ground rules and written policies on a variety of issues, ranging from participation, guests, and renters to common house usage, shared meals, and pet guidelines. It also has clear communications, decision-making, and conflict resolution policies. Community-wide decisions are made by consensus whenever possible.

EXPERIENCE GAINED

- Cohousing projects can play a community-building role that extends beyond the cohousing community. Residents become skilled at communication and conflict resolution, and are able to use these skills for the benefit of the broader neighborhood. Several Wild Sage residents are leaders in the Holiday Neighborhood homeowners association, which frequently meets at the Wild Sage common house.
- Shading the south faces of Wild Sage's buildings would improve energy efficiency, but the awnings originally planned were eliminated during the design process as a cost-cutting measure. The idea was that individual homeowners would add these later, but in hindsight it would have been more effective to include them in the initial construction phase.
- Asking contractors to bid alternative green products separately can make including such products less cost-effective if the contractor is not committed to using them. Wonderland faced difficulties in obtaining concrete with fly ash for Wild Sage, and now specifies a certain percentage of fly ash (typically 20 to 40 percent) for concrete in its projects.
- While planning and developing Wild Sage, Wonderland discovered a market for cohousing for seniors. As of March 2006, the firm is developing Silver Sage Village, one of the first U.S. cohousing communities geared to seniors, across the street from Wild Sage. Leach and his wife plan to be among Silver Sage's first residents. (He also moved the firm's offices to the commercial section of the Holiday Neighborhood.)
- Hiring a general contractor adds an extra layer of coordination between the design and construction processes, which can mean additional costs and time delays for a development project as complex as a cohousing community. Although Wonderland used a general contractor to build Wild Sage, in hindsight Leach believes the development process would have gone more smoothly, been more efficient, and, ultimately, been more profitable if Wonderland had brought the construction effort in house. The firm will be building Silver Sage on its own.

PROJECT DATA

LAND USE INFORMATION

Site area (acres/hectares): 1.48/0.6
Percentage complete: 100
Gross density (units per acre/hectare): 23/56.9
Number of off-street parking spaces: 48
Floor/area ratio: 0.93
Parking ratio (spaces per unit): 1.4
Common house size (square feet/square meters): 2,375/221

LAND USE PLAN

Use	Acres/Hectares	Percentage of Site
Buildings	0.50/0.20	33.7
Streets/surface parking	0.19/0.08	12.8
Landscaping/open space	0.79/0.32	53.5
Total	1.48/0.60	100.0

RESIDENTIAL INFORMATION

Unit Type	Number of Units	Area (Square Feet/ Square Meters)	Percentage Sold	Sale Prices (in Thousands)
A Unit: Three-bedroom, two-bathroom				
Market rate	1	1,548/144	100	$261
Permanently affordable	3	1,548/144	100	$170–$179
Habitat for Humanity	2	1,548/144	100	$107
AL Unit: Three-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom				
Market rate	3	1,009/94	100	$222–$250
Permanently affordable	1	1,009/94	100	$157
Habitat for Humanity	2	1,009/94	100	$94
B Unit: Three-bedroom, 2.5-bathroom				
Market rate	4	2,712/252	100	$465–$493
C Unit: One-bedroom, one-bathroom				
Permanently affordable	4	693/64	100	$108–$121
D Unit: Two-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom				
Market rate	9	1,608/149	100	$255–$304
Permanently affordable	1	1,608/149	100	$173
E Unit: Two-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom				
Market rate	2	1,896/176	100	$331–$346
F Unit: Three-bedroom, three-bathroom				
Market rate	2	2,352/219	100	$417–$427

DEVELOPMENT COST INFORMATION

Site Acquisition Cost: $1,017,801

Site Improvement Costs: $840,536
Land development/site work: $200,374
Landscaping/irrigation: $56,995
Fees/general conditions: $583,167

Construction Costs: $5,283,001

Soft Costs: $1,179,589
Architecture/engineering: $438,185
Project management: $412,746
Marketing: $160,507
Legal/accounting: $18,753
Taxes/insurance: $3,973
Construction interest and fees: $145,425

Total Development Cost: $8,320,927

DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULE

Planning started: December 2000
Sales/leasing started: March 2002
Construction started: June 2003
Site purchase completed: August 2003
Project completed: May 2005

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

From Denver International Airport: Take Peña Boulevard to I-70 west. Traveling west on I-70, merge onto I-270 west. Merge onto westbound US-36. Take a slight left turn onto Lee Hill Road. Turn left on 15th Street, then make a left on Zamia Avenue. The common house is at 1650 Zamia Avenue.

Driving time: 60 minutes in nonpeak traffic.

Julie D. Stern, report author
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Courtesy of Wonderland Hills Development

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The community incorporates many sustainable features, including wet-blown cellulose, a shared hydronic (hot water) heating system, and roughed-in solar capability. As a result of these features, Wild Sage residents are expected to pay 50 percent less in utility bills and use 40 percent less water.

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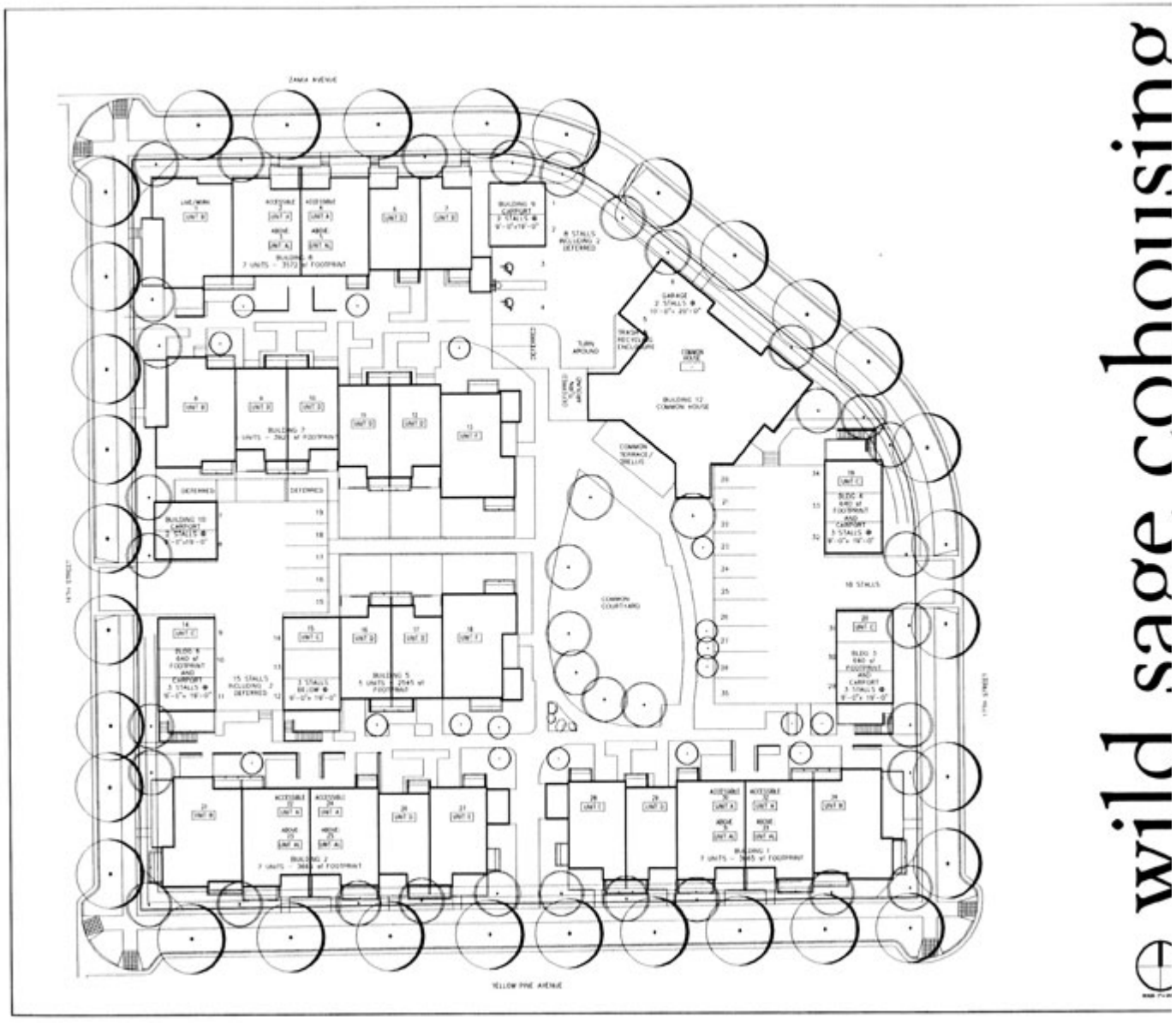

Wild Sage Cohousing site plan.