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A Story of the Social Life of Yulupa Cohousing

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A STORY OF THE SOCIAL LIFE OF YULUPA COHOUSING

Kayla Ho

University of Arkansas

Fay Jones School of Architecture + Design

Department of Architecture

Spring 2022

Committee

Noah Billig, Department of Landscape Architecture (chair)

Rana Young, Department of Photography

Brian Holland, Department of Architecture

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ABSTRACT

This capstone is a study of the lived social experience of one cohousing community. Cohousing communities are designed with the intention of fostering a community with a mixture of privately-owned units and publicly shared spaces and responsibilities. The study is conducted at a significant point in American history: these communities are a fast-growing phenomenon in the United States yet they remain unknown and/or unattainable to many Americans.

Qualitative information from the community's current residents is gathered by using research tools of interviewing and photography. Interviews were completed virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Photographs were created during a three-day visit to Yulupa Cohousing in Santa Rosa, California. As part of the capstone, a book, *Pulse*, was crafted using the contents from the interviews and photographs to tell a story about the social life of Yulupa Cohousing.

INTRODUCTION

In my neighborhood where I grew up, it felt like everyone lived a separate life. Everyone had their own houses and yards, and people would drive their cars directly in and out of their garage or driveway. There was very little interaction between neighbors. I could count on one hand the number of times I played on the street with other kids or the number of neighbors I know by name.

This capstone stemmed from my interest in community and housing and the idea of the two existing together. Growing up, I felt that a sense of community was lacking in my own neighborhood. As a designer, I have developed an interest in housing; throughout our lives, we spend so much time in our homes, and these are the spaces we feel most comfortable in.

Neither a specific housing type nor location was determined when I began my research. As I sought out a sense of community within a neighborhood, I eventually learned about cohousing communities. Cohousing communities are intentionally designed to become sustainable communities. By reaching out to many cohousing communities, I discovered Yulupa Cohousing, a semi-urban cohousing community in California established in 2005. The goal of the capstone is to understand and craft a story about the lived social experience of one cohousing community, Yulupa Cohousing.

BACKGROUND

Changing Lifestyles

Across the country, people are shifting the way they live. The traditional nuclear family household (or two-parent household) is declining as the culture surrounding marriage and parenting changes; divorce, remarriage, and single-parent households are on the rise while fertility is dropping.¹ In addition to a shifting culture, there is a national affordable housing shortage. According to a report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the United States is facing a shortage of 6.8 million more affordable housing units for extremely low income families, and no individual state has enough affordable and available housing for extremely low-income renters.² Approximately half of Americans see a “lack of affordable housing in their local community as a major problem”.³

There has been a rise in discussions about new ways of living, and people are looking toward models of shared housing as an alternative to the single-family home. These models include intergenerational housing, coliving, co-ops, cohousing, informal shared living, and more. Although some of these alternatives may have new names, these ways of living are not necessarily new: people have been living in these ways throughout human history. Shared housing has many benefits including affordability, a sense of community, and amenities.

Community

In this capstone, community is defined as a social network and the nature of relationships between the people of that network; it is this view of community most commonly cited by people when asked what “community” means to them.⁴ Another way to think of community is in terms of

¹ “Parenting in America: Outlook, worries, aspirations are strongly linked to financial situation” (Pew Research Center, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>

² “THE GAP: The Affordable Housing Gap Analysis 2022” (Washington, D.C., 2022), <https://nlihc.org/gap>

³ Katherine Schaeffer, “A growing share of Americans say affordable housing is a major problem where they live” (Pew Research Center, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/18/a-growing-share-of-americans-say-affordable-housing-is-a-major-problem-where-they-live/>

⁴ Smith, “Community” from The Encyclopedia of Pedagogy and Informal Education.

social capital, which refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁵

This sense of “togetherness, belonging and community” is important to human happiness, and it is one of the six factors used for determining happiness by researchers at the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen.⁶ Not only a sense of community, but the quality of our relationships. As Meik Wiking, CEO of the Happiness Research Institute, says “In every study we do, in every data set we look at, whether it’s local, national, international, the quality of our relationships is often the best predictor of whether people are happy or not.”⁷ Additionally, social interaction has been argued as a human need that is critical to health and wellbeing.⁸



*Roger Mayne, Boys playing football, Park Hill Estate, Sheffield, 1961 ©
Roger Mayne Archive / Mary Evans Picture Library*

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

⁶ “IMAGINE Podcast, Episode 2: The Happiness Factors”, December 10, 2018.

<https://space10.com/imagined-podcast-episode-2-the-happiness-factors/>

⁷ “IMAGINE Podcast, Episode 2: The Happiness Factors”.

⁸ J. T. Cacioppo and Patrick, W., *Loneliness: Human nature and the Need for Social Connection*. (W W Norton & Co., 2008)

Cohousing

One alternative kind of housing currently gaining popularity in the United States is cohousing, which are typically comprised of privately owned homes with shared spaces and facilities. Like other models, these communities are unique because they are designed with an intention of fostering a sense of community between neighbors.

Cohousing communities originated in Denmark in the 1960s, where they are called *bofaelleskaber* (translated as “living communities”).⁹ Since then, they have been introduced to other countries including the United States in the 1990s. In the United States, California currently has the greatest number of cohousing communities in the country, and the Bay Area in California is known for having an enthusiastic perspective toward new ways of living. Currently, the Cohousing Association of the United States, a national nonprofit organization, cites over 150 cohousing communities in the country (and about 150 projects in the making).¹⁰ If this number of projects currently being developed serves as an indication, this movement will only continue to grow in the United States.

Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett of Durrett Architects first became aware of cohousing while visiting Denmark, and in 1991, they created the first cohousing community in Davis, California. As they explain it, “[t]hrough the word “cohousing” is relatively new, it really is the modern version of age-old community ideals where children were adored and elders were looked up to, and both were cared for by the community.”¹¹ From their book, *Creating Cohousing Communities: Building Sustainable Communities*, common characteristics of cohousing include the following.¹²

Participatory Process: Residents organize and participate in the planning and design process for the cohousing community, and are responsible as a group for all final decisions.

Designs that Facilitate Community: The physical design encourages a strong sense of community.

⁹ Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities*. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2011), 5.

¹⁰ Gimnig, “Cohousing Association of the US.” <https://www.cohousing.org/>

¹¹ Durrett and McCamant, “Durrett Architects - The Cohousing Company.” <https://www.cohousingco.com/>

¹² Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities*, 25-30.

Extensive Common Facilities: An integral part of the community, common areas are designed for daily use, to supplement private living areas.

Complete Resident Management: Residents manage the development themselves, making decisions of common concern at community meetings.

Non-Hierarchical Structure: Responsibility for decisions is shared by the community's adults.

Separate Income Sources: Residents have their own primary incomes. The community does not directly generate income for its residents, nor (with rare exceptions) do its residents share income from community-owned retail or office spaces. All the residents pay a monthly fee, in addition to membership dues, to a homeowners' association to cover shared costs, as is typical of a condominium arrangement.

While these six elements commonly characterize cohousing, cohousing communities continue to vary from each other in many ways: size, location, site and building design, environmental advantages, economic advantages, types of financing and ownership, and priorities.¹³ From a social perspective, cohousing communities vary from each other in their residents, and thus they vary in their social networks and relationships.

Demographically, cohousing communities tend to be homogenous since they attract a certain demographic of people: white, middle class or upper middle class, well educated, and very liberal.¹⁴ There are also many cohousing communities just for seniors.

¹³ Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities*, 30-36.

¹⁴ Angela Sanguinetti, "Cohousing: A Behavioral Approach, Transformational Practices, and the Retrofit Model." (University of California, Irvine, 2013).



Plan of Silver Sage Village, Colorado. © The Cohousing Company



View of Silver Sage Village, Colorado. © The Cohousing Company

METHOD

In a study like this, building a relationship with the subject of the study, the community, was incredibly important. My first contact with Yulupa Cohousing was in August 2021. At that time, I had identified and reached out to several cohousing communities in the Bay Area that had been established for 5+ years, had 8+ units, and were not exclusive in their demographics (e.g. cohousing for seniors). The desired community for this capstone was one that had a longer lifespan (relative to other communities in the United States), was large enough (to have enough participants), and open to having all kinds of residents (to hear from diverse residents). Aside from these minor limitations, there were no other limitations for what kind of cohousing community could be the subject of this capstone.

I first reached out to cohousing communities to tell them about myself and my project, asking whether they would be interested in participating in the study by allowing me to visit their community, interview residents, and photograph the community. Although a few interested communities responded to me, planning for travel and visitation had to be held off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For several months, I continued speaking with several communities to further explain the project and build a relationship with them.

Yulupa Cohousing was interested in participating in the capstone early on and the community eventually became the subject of the study. Yulupa Cohousing is a semi-urban cohousing community that was established in 2005. With 29 units, Yulupa Cohousing is considered a large cohousing community with a variety of unit types including studios, 1 bedrooms, 2 bedrooms, 3 bedrooms, 3 bedroom townhouses, and 4 bedroom units. Like many other cohousing communities, the demographics of Yulupa's residents tend to be white, single, female, and seniors.



*Yulupa Cohousing Property Map. Photo from
<https://www.yulupacoho.com/>.*

My relationship with the community primarily consisted of communicating with a key member of the community's membership committee, who acted as my point of contact for the community and spoke on my behalf to her committee. For example, she would often send me questions from various residents in the community about the project; I would provide her with any answers and other information to share with her community.

Throughout this time, I learned more about the community's history, organization, and design to have a base understanding of the community. I wrote an informative consent form for residents to consent to participating in the study. I wrote a set of interview questions to be used for conducting in-depth interviews with residents. Since the study involved human subjects, the capstone had to be submitted (with the consent form and set of interview questions) to the University of Arkansas's Institutional Review Board for examination and approval prior to conducting any research. See Appendix A for an approval letter from the Institutional Review Board. After their review, I was granted approval from the board to photograph and interview adult residents with informed consent from all participants.

After the community officially agreed to participate in the study, I planned a five day visit for January 2021. Prior to visiting the community to conduct the research, I attended two of the

community's meetings virtually to introduce myself, discuss my project in more detail, and begin building a relationship with other members of the community. This visit was unfortunately canceled by the community two days before due to rising COVID-19 cases in their county. This led to splitting the process of gathering information into two parts. The first part was conducting interviews virtually in February 2022. The second part was photographing the community during a shorter visit in March 2022 provided the COVID-19 situation improved and the community felt comfortable with my visit, which fortunately happened. Note that the university's Institutional Review Board was updated on the change in my research process before I started conducting interviews.

Throughout the process of completing this capstone, I continued to ensure the community felt comfortable with their participation in the capstone. In addition to providing each participant with information about the study and gathering their informed consent, it also included things such as starting each interview by letting the participant know they could decline to answer any question or stop at any point, offering to take photographs that obscured faces, and not printing the names of any participants in the capstone. The strong relationship I had begun building with Yulupa Cohousing back in August 2021 continued not only during the process of conducting interviews and making photographs but also while I deciphered and edited the information. The deliverables from this capstone were sent to my primary contact in the community prior to being finalized for their review and approval.

RESEARCH TOOLS

In the social sciences, a case study is considered to be “both a method of analysis and a specific research design for examining a problem, both of which are used in most circumstances to generalize across populations.”¹⁵ In this capstone, a case study method is being used for its “ability to deal with a variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations—beyond what might be available in a conventional history study”.¹⁶ Using more than one method can help lead to triangulation and create a convergence of evidence, giving more credibility to the study.¹⁷

Documents, specifically photographs, and open-ended interviews are being used in this capstone for their ability to gather qualitative information and craft a story that viewers and readers can relate to. In the field of architectural research, using tools like photography and interviewing in this way might be considered underutilized. While photography as a tool is used by many to document information quickly, understand a place, or depict beautiful spaces, the artistic making of photographs to understand a sense of place and/or people is underutilized in my opinion. Interviewing with a focus on qualitative information is also often overlooked in favor of interviews or surveys that focus on quantitative information such as building function and user satisfaction. Both photography and interviewing as tools offer many advantages and are well suited for studies focused on understanding a place and/or an experience. Importantly, the tools place a value on the insights of the users of the architecture in addition to the insights of the researcher.

¹⁵ Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, eds. *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397>.

¹⁶ Robert K. Yin, "Case Study Research: Design and Methods." *Applied Social Research Methods* 5 (2009).

¹⁷ Robert K. Yin, "Case Study Research: Design and Methods."



"'When I'm bored, I call up Radio Pakistan and request a song, then I start dancing. I'll even dance on a rainy day. It's my way of expressing how grateful I am. I am the happiest man in Pakistan.' (Passu, Pakistan)"¹⁸



Looking west along Yarnton Way © Tara Darby

¹⁸ Brandon Stanton, *Humans* (Pan Macmillan Australia Pty, 2020): 27.

As a tool, photography has advantages of “fast-freezing situations for later documentation and analysis”¹⁹, seeing “without fatigue”²⁰ — meaning that we can take image after image wherein each image can have as much information as the first image — and relating to a wider audience because “image speaks directly to the senses and emphasizes the human body and objectifications of culture and social aesthetics and social interaction, instead of ideas, meanings, and concepts”.²¹ Essentially, photography as a tool captures qualitative information quickly and can be used to tell a visual and relatable story. In this capstone, photographs depicting people, objects, activities, and spaces were created during a three-day period of visiting Yulupa Cohousing. I spent each day talking with residents, attending an event, and photographing the community. A mixture of types of photographs were included such as aerials, mediums, close-ups, and both posed and candid portraits. I had the opportunity to see and photograph almost all of the shared facilities as well as approximately half of the residents and a couple of guests to the community.

As a tool, interviewing allows for hearing directly from residents in a setting that is “inherently more social than self-administered surveys”.²² While photographs tell a visual story, direct quotes from interviews tell a literal story. They allow people to hear from someone who has lived a certain experience in their own words. In this capstone, the interview questions were written to be open-minded to create a conversational setting that provided comfort to the participant and allowed for a variety of answers from participants. These questions asked residents about their challenges, favorite parts, compelling architectural spaces, previous living situations, adjustments, etc. The comprehensive list of interview questions is listed below:

- Name?
- Who do you live with?
- How long have you lived here?
- What has been the greatest challenge of living here?
- What is your favorite part of living here?

¹⁹ Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 31.

²⁰ John Collier, 1913-1992 and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography As a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986.

²¹ Jonathan S. Marion, “Reflecting Visual Ethnography: Using the Camera in Anthropological Research by Metje Postma and Peter I. Crawford, eds.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 25 (2009): 81-83.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2009.01020.x>

²² Don A. Dillman, Smyth, J.D. and Christian, L.M., *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: the Tailored Design Method* (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 99.

—Could you describe your involvement in this community? →

For example, how often do you interact with your neighbors, use the shared spaces, contribute to chores, or participate in events?*

—What is a memory (or experience) that stands out to you?

—How do you feel about the balance of public (or shared) to private spaces?

—Are there any concerns you have using shared spaces? →

For example, safety or lack of privacy?*

—How close do you feel with your neighbors? →

Compared to your previous living situation?*

—How do you like living here? →

Compared to your previous living situation?*

—Would you recommend cohousing to others?

—What kind of person do you feel would benefit most from this kind of living arrangement? → —What advice would you give to someone who wants to move here? What should they expect?

—What was the adjustment to cohousing like?

—What is your favorite space in the community of shared spaces?***

—How has cohousing impacted you?***

—Is there anything else you would like to add?

**These questions were only asked to those interviewees who needed some guidance in answering the initial question.*

****These questions were added during the process of interviewing residents.*

In total, 11 interviews were conducted with Yulupa residents, which was approximately 25% of the residents currently living in the community. These interviews took place in virtual meetings face-to-face over the course of one week with each one interview lasting about 45 to 75 minutes depending on the participant's preference.

Further discussion and reflection of the research tools can be found in Appendix B: *Interviewing And Photography As Tools For Studying A Housing Community*.

OUTCOMES

This capstone creates a book entitled *Pulse* which tells a story of my impression of the social life at Yulupa Cohousing. This story about a social experience is organized in chapters, which can also be thought of as the different lens through which I viewed this community: making it work, relationships, space, memories, impact, and adaptation. Some of these lenses relate directly to an interview question I had written while others emerged from the interviews and conversations I had with residents.

While the crafting of the book reflects my impressions of the social life of Yulupa Cohousing, conclusions about the community are left open to allow readers to form their own impressions. The outcomes discussed below are my impressions of the community after conducting the research. They serve as a reflection of the question forming this study: What is the lived social experience of Yulupa Cohousing?

Making it Work

Community functions rely on public participation and volunteerism with the primary organization consisting of committees comprised of residents. There are currently seven committees — community life, facilities, finance, gardenscape, kitchen/common house, legal, and membership — as well as a diversity, equity, and belonging group. Decision-making happens through facilitated discussion and a form of consensus.

"Engaging in the facility and maintaining where you live is part of the glue that keeps people together. You can design something where people live in their apartment and do activities and there's a lot more of that, but that's not cohousing. That's like living together separately whereas cohousing is living together. It's engagement on a different level."



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

"You have to hold your opinions and your desires a little more lightly in order to prioritize the bigger goal of harmony in the community and mutual care for each other. I don't think you'll find a person who hasn't been frustrated in the sense of you don't always get what you want. I made a proposal, for example, to a committee and nobody else liked it so it didn't happen. That was when I was fairly new to the community. I was like 'wow, that feels bad, it feels suppressive of my creativity'. But if we remember what the actual bigger priority goal, which is community harmony – if so many people didn't want to do that particular garden project, okay. So I've gotten much more used to the fact, to how to work within that bigger framework of how do we all get along well without giving up ourselves or giving up everything we want, having to ask for what we want and maybe being turned down."



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Relationships

Within this community of approximately 40 residents is a mix of relationships as well as relationship types: neighbor, committee member, friend, family, and anything else in-between.

Each resident interacts with the community in different ways and to different degrees, balancing their sense of privacy and choice of companionship.



"Every day, every day. If I go to my car to do an errand or something like that sometimes it takes me 15 or 20 minutes to get to my car because people stop me on the corner and say 'oh, by the way, did you hear about this?' or 'I want to talk to you about this.' If I'm sick in bed then I'm not going to be talking but usually I'll be texting. The emails. You always see somebody out in the courtyard even if you're going to get your mail or you're going to the laundry or you're just walking out to your car to go do an errand. You always talk with somebody. We know everybody in the community, even though maybe you have chemistry with certain people and you don't have chemistry with other people, but you know them by name and by personality, by social perspective. You know them because we have meetings and we have conversations."

Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Space

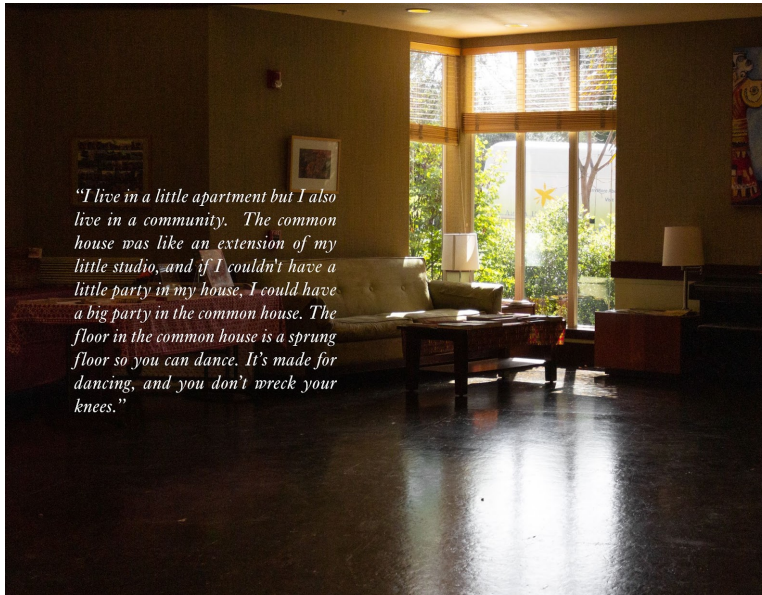
While units are privately owned by residents, the community shares the ownership and responsibility of the shared spaces: courtyards, gardens, playground, parking, workshop, and a common house with a kitchen, living/dining space, library, and play room. In-between spaces such as walkways, porches, and balconies connect these shared spaces to private units.



"There's four buildings and the buildings surround the inside courtyard and then all of the cars are out on the periphery. So the courtyard during the day feels really, really safe. If you are looking out the window and you see something or you hear some kid crying or something like that, you try to attend to what's going on. Maybe alert the parents or see what's going with the kids. There's a lot of casual supervision of what's going on in the community in the courtyard area."

"It is an oasis in an urban environment. I look out and see green out of all my windows and beautiful fruit trees. It's urban. I can walk to the grocery store. When I was younger my fantasy of being old was I'm going to be in some cabin in the woods. It will face a meadow, I'll sit on my porch, it will all be quiet, no traffic, nothing, and the deer will play. Now I realize it's completely unrealistic. More and more older people are moving into cities where they can walk to get a coffee or go to the drugstore and I can see why. Old age is turning out to be really different than what I imagined."

Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

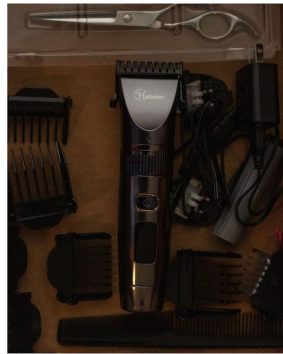


"I live in a little apartment but I also live in a community. The common house was like an extension of my little studio, and if I couldn't have a little party in my house, I could have a big party in the common house. The floor in the common house is a sprung floor so you can dance. It's made for dancing, and you don't wreck your knees."

Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Memories

Over the course of its 15+ year history, many memories have been made within this community. Residents have come and gone, and new residents are moving in to make new memories. These memories and new experiences illustrate the energy, or pulse, of the community — how that energy felt and how it currently feels.



"Last year in October, I was diagnosed with a serious form of endometrial cancer, which was just shocking because I am a person who has had no health problems and my medical record has been described by people as boring. There's nothing. This was very shocking. I had to go and get surgery within a week, boom boom, and then they give you six weeks to recover before you start chemotherapy. I went through five months of chemotherapy, so it was just so shocking, and people were great. One of my best friends, who I have known since before I've known my husband, just moved here about three years ago. She organized one of those meal trains for me and it was not limited to this community at all. In fact, I didn't ask the whole community, because I just know there's so many people here who have their hands full. I just picked some of the people here and then friends from other places of my life. I got support. Two residents here shave their heads. They get buzz cuts because they're both Zen practitioners, and so they asked me when I was losing my hair, 'are you ready for a buzz cut?' and I said yeah. We went to the Greenway and she put a towel around me and she got her electric kit and shaved off the rest of my hair. Things like that. People checking in, offering to help, just really being supportive. There is no doubt that this is a supportive place to live, where people are generous with their support and it's just incredible."

Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.



"Cohousing people, we aren't some special breed of person who's just enlightened and kind to everyone and never gets angry or irritated by our neighbors. We're all people just the same as anyone else. We aspire to something different for that bigger priority of community. It doesn't mean that I haven't had people say things that offended me, but I didn't jump down their throat or reject them as a person. I still care about them and the fact that they have an opinion that might differ from mine, as long as it's not something I truly can't live with. We're struggling to try something different: a bunch of strangers coming together and creating a social network. We start off as strangers to each other, but there's an openness."

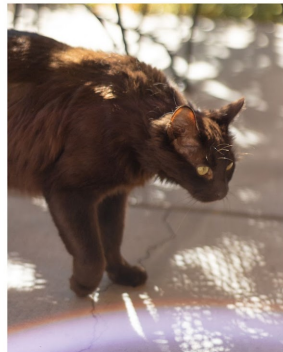
Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Impact

The lifestyle and opinions of one person can impact others and can impact the community as a whole. While an individual can impact a community, the community can impact them back. This living experience has impacted the people who live it, helping them grow, become more open, learn about others, and more.



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.



"I have a cat who decided she wanted to be an outdoor cat. She clawed through multiple screens and so now she goes outside. Most of my cats were indoors but she was her own kitty and so she decided to go outside, so I have to make sure she has her bell and her little bird collar, because we have people in the community, including me, who love birds and love to watch birds. Another resident built a nest and I was terrified my cat was going to kill one of her birds. I do have to do a lot of things just to make sure that my pets don't impact my neighbors too negatively, bark or go into their houses."

"Kids leave messes and they're not very controlled and sometimes you live with this feeling that we're impacting these people, because our kids left a mess and we didn't know about it. In the studio apartments, there's nowhere for the sound to escape so if the kids are running through the courtyard, the sound echoes in their space, so we kind of just had to learn to talk about it and try to find ways to mitigate that but still allow the kids to be kids. It's a feeling of guilt. Living upstairs, these houses are supposed to be soundproof but they're not, so you can hear pounding feet. That's also the feeling of my dogs or my son walking and stomping their feet. There's probably just those challenges of having things that you know are going to impact your neighbors because we're in such urban infill and just trying to not make it so much that it drives them crazy and living with that."

Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Adaptation

For some there is a process of adaptation to the lifestyle of the community. Some residents had lived in similar living situations prior while others moved into something they hadn't experienced before. Like the residents who live here, the community has also changed and adapted over time: rules, residents, energy, events, group dynamics, and identity.

"I had to get used to being more publicly viewed or publicly connected. There can be privacy issues. You almost want a sign that just says 'I need me time', but I quickly moved away from that over time. Now I really appreciate that and I've learned how to have the privacy I need and still have that permeability with community members."



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.



Spread from *Pulse*. Created by Kayla Ho.

Synthesis

While cohousing communities are a less common housing type in the United States, the social experience of Yulupa Cohousing is not unfamiliar to those of us who live in other types of housing. The interviews described experiences of attending meetings and events; having too many emails to read; learning how to make decisions with other people; being challenged and frustrated over the opinions of others; getting to know somebody over time; eating meals together; no longer eating meals together; and more. Many people, myself included, may not experience all of these things in their neighborhoods, but everyone experiences some, if not all, of these things in other parts of their lives. Cohousing is a synthesis of these experiences at home.

Additionally, the kind of person that lives in cohousing is not a “special breed of person who’s just enlightened and kind to everyone and never gets angry or irritated by our neighbors” as one resident said during their interview. According to several of the interviewed residents, the qualities best suited for cohousing are ones that people aspire to generally: being social and open, willing to see another person’s point of view, knowing how to give and take, etc. This doesn’t necessarily mean having to be an extrovert either (yes, I did ask one resident this) since

cohousing communities, or at least this one, offer residents degrees of interaction, both organizationally and spatially.

CONCLUSION

Discussion

There are many possibilities for further research for a greater understanding of Yulupa Cohousing. First, a study similar to this one conducted without the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic is recommended and would lead to an understanding of the community's social experience without the pandemic. Without the risks, more people would be spending time together and spending time in the shared spaces of the community. The photography portion of the study would benefit greatly with more photographs of people and activities.

A study this one could also be conducted again at a later date, e.g. in 5, 10, or 15 years from now, which would add to the understanding of how the community changes throughout the years. It would be especially interesting to potentially ask the residents of Yulupa in 15 years the same questions and compare the answers. A study conducted during which the researcher has the opportunity to visit the community for longer periods of time or multiple times is also recommended. This would offer the opportunity to see and photograph different visitors and events in addition to understanding the life of the community throughout different months/seasons. Are there notable differences during different seasons? How might the energy of the community feel when new residents are moving in or when there are difficult decisions to make?

In any additional study of Yulupa Cohousing, the use of other research tools such as observation, surveys, mapping, videoing, and more could also offer new understandings. The use of interviewing and photography in different ways still offers great potential as well. The use of these different tools together would create a stronger convergence of information that helps to create a more full understanding of the community.

There are also possibilities for further research at other cohousing communities as well as shared housing communities that aren't necessarily cohousing. Because cohousing communities can vary greatly from each other, studies conducted at other communities would be required to gain an understanding of cohousing communities in the United States generally. Additionally, due to this variation, some communities might relate more closely to another type of shared housing than to a vastly different cohousing community. After these kinds of studies, it would be interesting to compare American cohousing communities to the cohousing communities of other

countries. These studies might offer insights related to culture or time (as other countries may have a much longer or shorter history of cohousing). In studies comparing cohousing or shared housing communities, there are many possibilities for questions: What is the community's organization strategy and how well do they work for the community? How much change happens in each community in terms of resident turnover, organization, rules, and/or spaces? Is it common to experience a loss of energy and/or participation, and are there solutions? Are there ways of attracting certain demographics into the community such as families with children, young adults, and people of color? How does different architectural planning affect the fostering of communities and feelings about ownership?

There are as many possibilities for studying social experiences of cohousing or other shared housing communities as there are lived experiences. The capstone stemmed from a personal interest in community and housing, and the experiences I had hearing stories from residents, visiting a cohousing community, and making thousands of photographs only increased my interest. As a designer, I hope to incorporate this level of research, with a specific focus on insights and experiences of people, into my professional career going forward. It would be a dream to start every design project with a research project and to explore ways design and research might work together.

Acknowledgments

This study could not have been possible without the support and participation of so many others. Thank you to the professors on the capstone committee for their help and support. Thank you to the University of Arkansas Honors College for their funding of this project. Most importantly, thank you to the residents of Yulupa Cohousing for welcoming me into their community and for their eager participation in the project. It is an honor to learn about and share a story about your community.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

—Letter of Approval from Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B

—Interviewing And Photography As Tools For Studying A Housing Community

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APPENDIX A:

LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD



To: Noah Billig
From: Douglas J AdamsJustin R Chimka, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 01/10/2022
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 01/10/2022
Protocol #: 2110362530
Study Title: The Social Experience of Cohousing in the Bay Area

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Kayla T Ho, Investigator

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEWING AND PHOTOGRAPHY AS TOOLS FOR STUDYING A HOUSING COMMUNITY

INTERVIEWING AND PHOTOGRAPHY AS TOOLS FOR STUDYING A COHOUSING COMMUNITY

Kayla Ho

Sustainability Minor Capstone

University of Arkansas

Fay Jones School of Architecture + Design

Department of Architecture

Spring 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The sustainability capstone acts as an addendum to the honors capstone, which is a study of the lived social experience at Yulupa Cohousing in Santa Rosa, California. The capstone asks what the lived social experience is for residents living at Yulupa Cohousing. Yulupa is a semi-urban cohousing community established in 2005.

Both the honors capstone and the sustainability capstones focus on ideas about social capital, which is a key aspect of social sustainability. While the honors capstone focuses on telling a story about the social experience, the sustainability capstone acts as a discussion and reflection on the research tools used in the honors capstone. These research tools of interviewing and photography are suited for studying social capital.

BACKGROUND

Sustainability

With a subject of the lived social experience residents have at Yulupa Cohousing, the capstone essentially has a focus on the experience of social capital of a community. Social capital is defined as “the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively”.¹ The interview questions asked residents about their experience living in a cohousing community with others regarding things like involvement in the community, memories over the history of the community, feelings toward publicness and privateness, challenges they had experiences. Although the question “What is the social network of this community and what is your place in that network?” was not asked, many of the questions provided insight into the social network of the community and the specific resident's place within it.

When looking at networks of communities, there are three types of social capital: bonding, bridging, and linking.² Bonding social capital are the links between people “with similar objectives”; bridging social capital is the “capacity of such groups to make links with others that may have different views”; linking social capital is the “ability of groups to engage with external agencies”.³ All three of these types of connections were mentioned in the interviews by the participants.

The idea of social capital is that “social bonds and norms are important for people and communities⁴, meaning that social capital is an intrinsic aspect of a socially sustainable community. This occurs “when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities.”⁵ Communities which are socially sustainable are “equitable, diverse,

¹ Lexico Dictionaries. “social capital,” https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/social_capital.

² Michael Woolcock, “The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes,” Canadian Journal of Policy Research 2, no. 1 (September 2001): 11-17.

<http://faculty.washington.edu/matsueda/courses/590/Readings/Woolcock%20Soc%20Cap%20Development.pdf>

³ Jules Pretty, “Social Capital and the Collective Management of Resources.” Science 302, no. 5652 (Dec 2003): 1912-4. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/213574535/fulltextPDF/C6E2895F051C40E4PQ/1?accountid=8361>

⁴ James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” American Journal of Sociology 94 (1988): S95-S120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780243>

⁵ “Model of Social Sustainability,” Western Australian Council of Social Service, WACOSS (1988). <http://www.wacoss.org.au>

connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life”.⁶ Note that developing sustainable cities and communities is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

Essentially, this capstone is related to sustainability because it is a study of the social sustainability of a community, which is one of the three types of sustainability (with economic and environmental sustainability being the other two types). The capstone uses research tools of interviewing and photography to study the social capital of a community because these research methods are suited to that.

Research Tools

The honors capstone uses a case study method, which is considered to be “both a method of analysis and a specific research design for examining a problem, both of which are used in most circumstances to generalize across populations.”⁷ The case study method is suitable for a study like this in which the goal is to understand a specific community. The method also has the “ability to deal with a variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations—beyond what might be available in a conventional history study”.⁸ In the honors capstone, two methods are used to collect documents (photographs) and interviews. Using more than one method can help lead to triangulation and create a convergence of evidence, giving more credibility to the study.⁹

Photography is frequently used for studies of public life because it can capture information quickly, “fast-freezing situations for later documentation and analysis”.¹⁰ When using a camera, John and Malcom Collier relates it to seeing “without fatigue”¹¹, meaning that we can take image after image wherein each image can have as much information as the first image. Additionally, photographs can illustrate information well to a wide audience because people can understand and identify with photographs. This is because “image speaks directly to the senses and

⁶ Western Australian Council of Social Service, “Model of Social Sustainability.”

⁷ Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, eds. *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397>.

⁸ Robert K. Yin, “Case Study Research: Design and Methods.” *Applied Social Research Methods* 5 (2009).

⁹ Robert K. Yin, “Case Study Research: Design and Methods.”

¹⁰ Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2013), 31.

¹¹ John Collier, 1913-1992 and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography As a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986.

emphasizes the human body and objectifications of culture and social aesthetics and social interaction, instead of ideas, meanings, and concepts”.¹² Another way of saying this is that in photographs, the “viewer can identify with the people in the pictures, which are often snapped at eye level”.¹³

In this capstone, there is a specific focus on the social life and public space of a cohousing community. Photography as a tool gathers “selective information, but the information is *specific*”.¹⁴ Essentially, photography gathers certain information while leaving out other information, which makes it a good fit for this capstone that focuses on qualitative information.

Interviewing as a research tool is beneficial for gathering direct information from subjects both qualitatively and quantitatively. In this capstone, an open-ended interview focused on qualitative information was employed. The interview was chosen as a research tool because it is “inherently more social than self-administered surveys”¹⁵ since there is the presence of the interviewer who can “provide extra motivation and assistance to respondents when needed”.¹⁶

Key Projects

In addition to theory, there are a few notable projects using one or both of these research tools which capture the essence of the research tool well. These projects are great examples of how these research tools are suited for sharing information visually and emotionally.

Documentary photographer Brandon Stanton’s work successfully conveys both a story and a sense of a person. Stanton started his career by photographing strangers on the streets of New York and over the past ten years he has since traveled to over 40 countries to photograph and interview strangers. His work is known for the “candor and intimacy of its stories”.¹⁷ In his

¹² Jonathan S. Marion, “Reflecting Visual Ethnography: Using the Camera in Anthropological Research by Metje Postma and Peter I. Crawford, eds.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 25 (2009): 81-83.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2009.01020.x>

¹³ Jan Gehl and Birgitte Svarre, *How to Study Public Life*.

¹⁴ John Collier, 1913-1992 and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography As a Research Method*.

¹⁵ Don A. Dillman, Smyth, J.D. and Christian, L.M., *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: the Tailored Design Method* (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 99.

¹⁶ Don A. Dillman, Smyth, J.D. and Christian, L.M., *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: the Tailored Design Method*.

¹⁷ Brandon Stanton, *Humans* (Pan Macmillan Australia Pty, 2020): 2.

approach, he typically starts by asking to photograph a person and after they say yes and takes a few photographs of them, he will then move into the interview part. In his approach, he typically starts by asking very broad questions with the goal of starting a conversation and turning it into a very personal one.¹⁸ He even describes the interview as an “energy exchange”.¹⁹



"'When I'm bored, I call up Radio Pakistan and request a song, then I start dancing. I'll even dance on a rainy day. It's my way of expressing how grateful I am. I am the happiest man in Pakistan.' (Passu, Pakistan)"²⁰

¹⁸ Brandon Stanton, "On how I approach strangers in the street | Humans of New York creator Brandon Stanton | UCD, Dublin," April 24, 2015, educational video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPxzIGPrM3A&ab_channel=UCD-UniversityCollegeDublin

¹⁹ Brandon Stanton, *Humans*, 2.

²⁰ Brandon Stanton, *Humans*, 227.



“I can draw a lot of things. I can draw trees, the sun, clouds, my mom, and my dad. I once drew a picture of a house that was so good, I had to hide it so nobody would steal it.” (Tehran, Iran)²¹

Another project, *The Town of Tomorrow: 50 Years of Thamesmead*, is a collaborative effort between artists to tell a story about the people and architecture of Thamesmead, a famous social housing project in London, England created in the 1960s.²² The book uses photographs, maps, posters, and interview quotes to tell this story.

²¹ Brandon Stanton, *Humans*, 271.

²² Marigold Warner, “The Town of Tomorrow: 50 Years of Thamesmead.” *British Journal of Photography*. 1854 Media Ltd., February 12, 2019. <https://www.bjp-online.com/2019/02/thamesmead/>.

OUTCOMES

Method

The following describes the method used in the honors capstone, which is necessary for understanding the discussion and reflection of the research tools used.²⁴

In a study like this, building a relationship with the subject of the study, the community, was incredibly important. My first contact with Yulupa Cohousing was in August 2021. At that time, I had identified and reached out to several cohousing communities in the Bay Area that had been established for 5+ years, had 8+ units, and were not exclusive in their demographics (e.g. cohousing for seniors). The desired community for this capstone was one that had a longer lifespan (relative to other communities in the United States), was large enough (to have enough participants), and open to having all kinds of residents (to hear from diverse residents). Aside from these minor limitations, there were no other limitations for what kind of cohousing community could be the subject of this capstone.

I first reached out to cohousing communities to tell them about myself and my project, asking whether they would be interested in participating in the study by allowing me to visit their community, interview residents, and photograph the community. Although a few interested communities responded to me, planning for travel and visitation had to be held off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For several months, I continued speaking with several communities to further explain the project and build a relationship with them.

Yulupa Cohousing was interested in participating in the capstone early on and the community eventually became the subject of the study. Yulupa Cohousing is a semi-urban cohousing community that was established in 2005. With 29 units, Yulupa Cohousing is considered a large cohousing community with a variety of unit types including studios, 1 bedrooms, 2 bedrooms, 3 bedrooms, 3 bedroom townhouses, and 4 bedroom units. Like many other cohousing communities, the demographics of Yulupa's residents tend to be white, single, female, and seniors.

²⁴ Ho, K. (2022). A Story of the Social Life of Yulupa Cohousing. *Architecture Undergraduate Honors Thesis*.



Yulupa Cohousing Property Map. Photo from <https://www.yulupacoho.com/>.

My relationship with the community primarily consisted of communicating with a key member of the community's membership committee, who acted as my point of contact for the community and spoke on my behalf to her committee. For example, she would often send me questions from various residents in the community about the project; I would provide her with any answers and other information to share with her community.

Throughout this time, I learned more about the community's history, organization, and design to have a base understanding of the community. I wrote an informative consent form for residents to consent to participating in the study. I wrote a set of interview questions to be used for conducting in-depth interviews with residents. Since the study involved human subjects, the capstone had to be submitted (with the consent form and set of interview questions) to the University of Arkansas's Institutional Review Board for examination and approval prior to conducting any research. See Appendix A for an approval letter from the Institutional Review Board. After their review, I was granted approval from the board to photograph and interview adult residents with informed consent from all participants.

After the community officially agreed to participate in the study, I planned a five day visit for January 2021. Prior to visiting the community to conduct the research, I attended two of the community's meetings virtually to introduce myself, discuss my project in more detail, and begin building a relationship with other members of the community. This visit was unfortunately canceled by the community two days before due to rising COVID-19 cases in their county. This led to splitting the process of gathering information into two parts. The first part was conducting interviews virtually in February 2022. The second part was photographing the community during a shorter visit in March 2022 provided the COVID-19 situation improved and the community felt comfortable with my visit, which fortunately happened. Note that the university's Institutional Review Board was updated on the change in my research process before I started conducting interviews.

Throughout the process of completing this capstone, I continued to ensure the community felt comfortable with their participation in the capstone. In addition to providing each participant with information about the study and gathering their informed consent, it also included things such as starting each interview by letting the participant know they could decline to answer any question or stop at any point, offering to take photographs that obscured faces, and not printing the names of any participants in the capstone. The strong relationship I had begun building with Yulupa Cohousing back in August 2021 continued not only during the process of conducting interviews and making photographs but also while I deciphered and edited the information. The deliverables from this capstone were sent to my primary contact in the community prior to being finalized for their review and approval.

Interviewing

When conducting the interviews, I used open-ended questions with a goal of starting conversations and creating a comfortable atmosphere for the interviewees. In total, I interviewed 11 people individually on Zoom with each interview lasting between 45-75 minutes. The interview questions I wrote and used are listed below:

—Name?

—Who do you live with?

—How long have you lived here?

—What has been the greatest challenge of living here?

—What is your favorite part of living here?

—Could you describe your involvement in this community? →

For example, how often do you interact with your neighbors, use the shared spaces, contribute to chores, or participate in events?

—What is a memory (or experience) that stands out to you?

—How do you feel about the balance of public (or shared) to private spaces?

—Are there any concerns you have using shared spaces? →

For example, safety or lack of privacy?

—How close do you feel with your neighbors? →

Compared to your previous living situation?

—How do you like living here? →

Compared to your previous living situation?

—Would you recommend cohousing to others?

—What kind of person do you feel would benefit most from this kind of living arrangement? → —What advice would you give to someone who wants to move here? What should they expect?

—What was the adjustment to cohousing like?

—What is your favorite space in the community of the shared spaces?*

—How has cohousing impacted you?*

—Is there anything else you would like to add?

**The questions after the arrow were only asked to those interviewees who needed some guidance in answering the initial question.*

***These questions were not written initially, but were added during the process of interviewing residents.*

Conducting interviews was a new experience for me. I feel that my goal of creating a conversational atmosphere in the interviews was successful, and that's in large part due to the relationship I had built with the community prior to conducting the interviews. Having open-ended questions allowed me to hear many different answers and to lead each interview in a different

direction. After completing approximately half of the interviews, I decided to add two questions to the set. The first question added was “What is your favorite space in the community of the shared spaces?” This question was added because I wanted to hear more insights about the physical space of the community. Although I did have a question about the balance of public to private space, people tended to answer that generally and not everyone discussed physical space. The second question added was “How has cohousing impacted you?” One of the interviewees brought this subject up, and I was intrigued by the idea of being impacted by cohousing. I decided to add this question so I could hear about this from other residents as well.

After conducting the interviews, I began to organize the interview content into common “chapters” or themes. These themes are making it work, relationships, space, memories, impact, and adaptation. While some of these themes related directly to an interview question, other themes are ones that came from the interviewee’s answers to various questions.

A few quotations from the interviews are listed below:

“They’re there for you. You don’t just come and go to your apartment. Usually people make a choice that yes, I’m going to come, I’m going to interact with a lot of people whether I like them or I don’t like them. My brother told me “why would you go live with a bunch of people you’re not gonna get along with?” That’s not the point. The point is to be an active alive person. That’s life. That’s activity. That’s the experience I want.”

“There’s a group of us who meet up on Thursdays at three and play a game called Mexican Train. It’s a dominoes game, and that’s my favorite thing. I look forward to that every week.”

Photography

I visited Yulupa Cohousing for a few days to photograph the community. Before traveling, I created a list of photograph types, locations, and people (for portraits) in preparation. Having a plan allowed me to dedicate my time at the community to photography, but while there I still tried to allow the physical space and the people to dictate my work. For example, a few residents

allowed me to see and even photograph their units, which I did not originally plan on but still took advantage of during my visit.



Yulupa Cohousing. Photograph by Kayla Ho.



Yulupa Cohousing. Photograph by Kayla Ho.

The tool of photography allowed me to experience the community, gather information, and talk to residents quickly during my short visit. I was able to take many photographs in almost all of the

shared spaces and photograph about half of the residents and a couple of guests. Like the interviews, I tried to maintain a conversation when taking portraits to make the experience more comfortable and enjoyable. I tried to keep my camera on me at all times and to photograph each space at least twice. When photographing events, I of course only had one opportunity and had to balance between photographing and participating. For example, on one of the afternoons a couple of residents played a game of Mexican train outside together. I took a few photographs, but eventually joined in for a few games as well. Trying to figure out the balance of how much participation versus photographing was probably my biggest struggle during this experience, and is one that will likely be a part of any future research work I do involving photography.



Yulupa Cohousing. Photograph by Kayla Ho.

Discussion

For both conducting interviews and making photographs, I approached the research tool as a social act. In addition to gathering information, I was also building a relationship and learning about another person and/or place. Even the crafting of the deliverable, a book, might be considered a social act. Quotes and photographs are mixed together. The words from each person are placed across the entire book rather than grouped together, so that they can be compared to the words of others. The photographs of each space are also mixed throughout the book. While each individual quote derived from an interview and each photograph provides information on its own, it is the synthesis of these together that creates a more full understanding of this community. Both the tools used and the approach are fitting for a study that seeks to understand social capital — for a study focused on a social experience.

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