



# starter guide to intentional communities

LIFE IN COOPERATIVE CULTURE

by Cynthia Tina



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[www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)

*[EcoVillage at Ithaca](#) on cover  
[Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage](#) on left*

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# Getting Started

**Welcome to the world of intentional communities! Get ready to learn about an exciting movement of people choosing to co-create and live in residential communities based on shared values and cooperative culture.**

People of all walks of life are starting and joining communities as a more attractive living option than what the normal housing market offers. Communitarians often report greater connectedness, support, safety, health, and enjoyment of life. While joining or starting an intentional community isn't possible or desirable for everyone, the existence of such places shows us how we can move towards a more just, sustainable, and cooperative world — *together*.

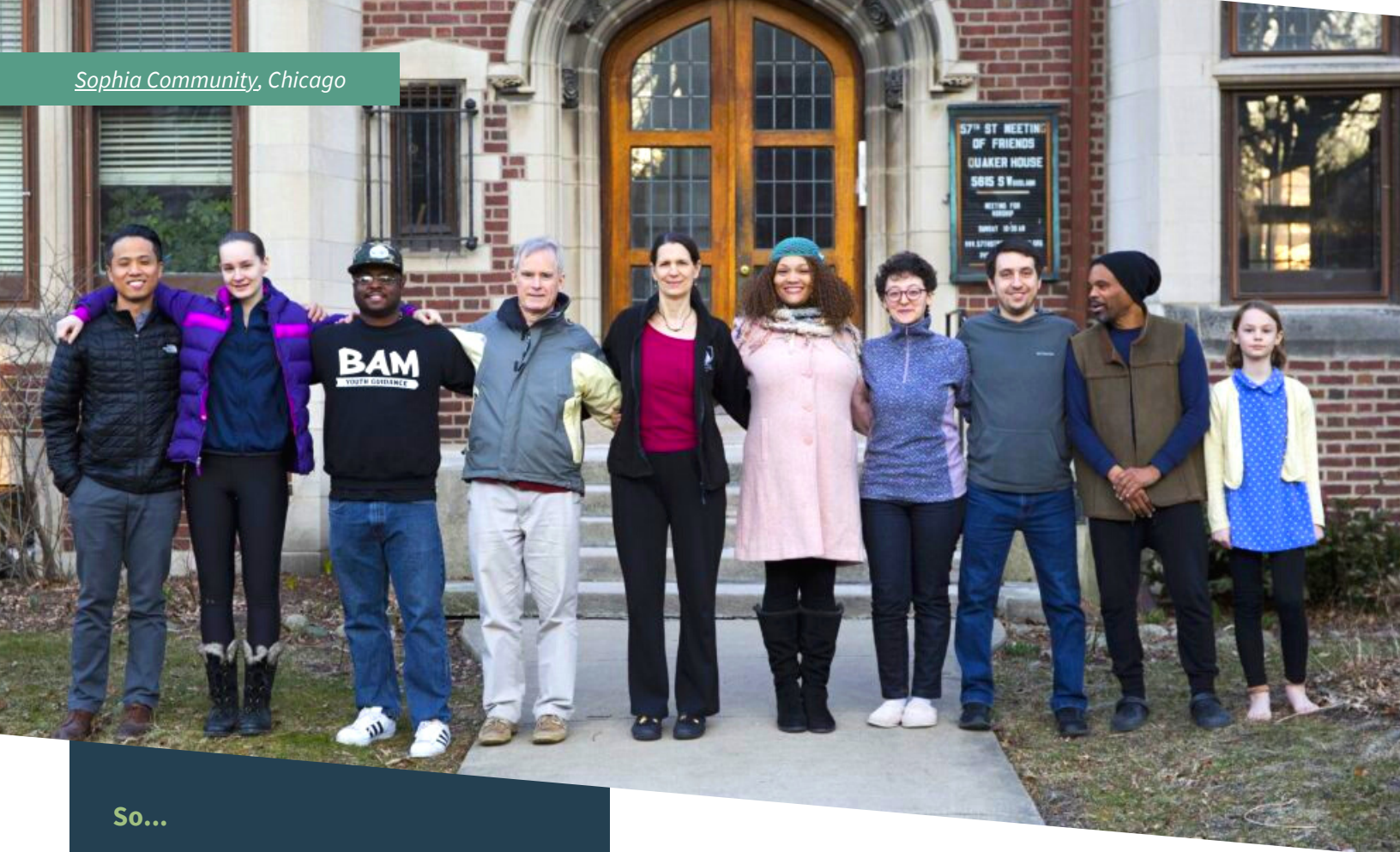
Intentional communities can be found all around the globe. They are rural and urban, small and large, progressive and conservative, secular and religious, alternative and (almost) mainstream. They go by many names, including: ecovillage, cohousing, housing cooperative, co-living, tiny house village, and more.

The Foundation for Intentional Community (FIC) has served as a resource hub for people wanting to join, start, and build intentional communities since 1986. Our Communities Directory is searched by thousands of visitors daily and features hundreds of communities. We host weekly networking and educational events, online courses, classified advertisements, and an extensive bookstore and resource library on [ic.org](https://www.ic.org).

**Keep reading to learn about the communities movement and how you can take part!**

*Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland*





So...

## What is an intentional community?

An intentional community is a group of people who live together or share common facilities and who regularly associate with each other on the basis of explicit common values.

- *Foundation for Intentional Community*

Intentional communities are formed when people choose to live with or near enough to each other to carry out a shared lifestyle, within a shared culture, and with a common purpose.

- *Bill Metcalf, communities researcher*

**Think “intentional community” is just another word for a hippie commune or a fringe cult off in the woods? Think again.**

Communal living with a shared intention is nothing new. The first intentional community in recorded history was Homakoeion, a vegetarian commune, in 525 BCE. Early Christians lived communally, as did a variety of religious and political minorities throughout time. Utopian idealism spawned the creation of hundreds of communities during the 19th century, and later waves of young people in the 60s and 70s decided to quit society to create alternative communities. Some of these "hippie era" communities are still around today. See [this timeline](#) of intentional community development.

There's been a surge of interest in intentional communities over recent years, in part due to the development of more mainstream communal living models (such as cohousing and co-living), growing dissatisfaction with the isolation of modern life, as well as a search for more affordable and sustainable ways of living. While some stigma still exists, community living is being seen in a new light.

**Community — the longest, most expensive, personal growth workshop you will ever take!**

- Zev Paiss, cohousing activist

**Cooperative culture is a radically different approach, where you trust the wisdom of the collective as superior to that of the individual.** Instead of a battle, you want to have minimal barriers to soliciting relevant input and to welcome divergent views. Rather than responding to differences with combat (We were doing fine until you spoke), in cooperative culture you try to respond with curiosity (Why does that person see this differently — maybe I'm missing something).






- Laird Schaub, co-founder of the FIC

*EcoVillage at Ithaca, New York*





## Intentional Community Key Elements

-  Residential or place-based
-  Shared values or purpose
-  Common agreements and social processes
-  Opportunities for a shared lifestyle
-  Commitment to building cooperative culture

"We estimate there are between 10,000-30,000 intentional communities worldwide. Many are quite informal or are based in a traditional village setting. Communities often fail to get started, others stay small and choose not to list on ic.org, others can grow to a significant size."

- Foundation for Intentional Community

## Coming together around what matters most.

Intentional community founders are brought together by shared values and a common purpose or vision for how they want to live. Members who join after a community is established agree to the same or similar intention. Sometimes that intention is simply to foster social connection, sometimes it's centered on ecological values (such as [Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage](#)) or spiritual practices (such as [Lama Foundation](#)).

Unlike a typical retirement community, the residents of intentional communities have a high degree of collective autonomy. Residents make group decisions about how they live — deciding who becomes a member, how often to share meals, who does the dishes, etc. — often using [consensus](#) or [sociocratic](#) processes (both participatory, or non-centralized, forms of decision-making).

Community living is not without its challenges of course! But the opportunity in community is to work through interpersonal dynamics, and hopefully to learn more about yourself and others through the experience.



### Top Reasons to Live in

## Intentional Community

- Connection
- Shared resources
- Living lightly
- Resiliency
- Community support
- Feeling safer
- Growing as a person
- Saving money
- Co-creation
- Experimentation
- Fun!

Community living allows for resource-sharing and lighter-living, while meeting our deep needs for connection and belonging.

### We are experiencing a crisis of loneliness.

Many of us are part of communities with varying degrees of intentionality. You may be connected with a school or religious community, or engage in online communities through social media. Yet the depth of connection and belonging in these groups isn't always enough.

The Covid pandemic has made us more aware of how much we need human connection for health and wellness. We are a species that has evolved within close social groups and in relation to our home environment. Unfortunately, access to community has shrunk over generations in a society that places greater value on consumption, competition, and individualism.

Intentional communities are a key solution to the **loneliness crisis**, if only as a source of inspiration for people who have only known limited options for how we can live. Intentional communities are also critical experimentation centers for human-scale living systems, including: renewable energy, local food production, alternative governance models, ecological building, etc.

**Because we treat human landscapes more as commodities than as human places, we design our own problem.**

- Mark Lakeman, founder of the City Repair Project

**An ecovillage is a human-scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities can be harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development, and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.**

- Robert Gilman, originally coined “ecovillage”

*Earthaven Ecovillage, North Carolina*





# 10

## Common Types of Intentional Communities

### 1 **Cohousing**

the fastest growing type of intentional community, model originally from Denmark where residents have their own housing units with many shared services and facilities

### 2 **Ecovillage**

focus on sustainability across social, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions of life

### 3 **Housing Cooperative (co-op)**

members live in housing they own and govern themselves, often student groups

### 4 **Shared Housing**

unrelated people sharing housing for their mutual benefit, also called “coliving”

### 5 **Spiritual/Religious**

communities organized around shared spiritual or religious beliefs

### 6 **Tiny House Village**

intentional communities comprised of majority tiny houses or small homes

### 7 **Senior Community**

intentional communities with 55+ or other age restrictions for membership

### 8 **Commune**

income-sharing communities with work required of members, about 10% of all intentional communities

### 9 **Traditional/Indigenous**

communities with long histories of intentional and communal ways of living

### 10 **Transition Town**

grassroot community projects within existing municipalities that aim to increase self-sufficiency and sustainability

And more...

[activist collectives](#), [kibbutzim](#), [artist communities](#), [Camphill communities](#), [agrihoods](#), [retreat centers](#), [ashrams](#), [community land trusts](#), [permaculture farms!](#)

**Cooperation is the secret ingredient to sustainability.**

- Danielle Williams, Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage

**Bottom line is that we can't solve the climate crisis without simultaneously looking deeply at racism, sexism and economic injustice...** The intentional communities movement has a role in all of this. Essentially, we are offering a platform in which deep issues (like race, class and gender) can be both dialogued about in a mature, deliberative way, and can be worked on through creating a new system with different power relationships between groups and individuals than our current ones.

- Mayana Ludwig, *Together Resilient*

*Heartwood Commons, Oklahoma*



# Interesting Facts about Intentional Communities Around the World

The EcoVillage Ithaca is the largest ecovillage in the US, with over 500 residents.



Camphill Communities create a unique home for people with disabilities and number over 100 worldwide!



Arguably, the largest intentional community in the world is Auroville in India with 3,000+ residents and visitors.



A new generation of communes are popping up with a loose network of over 300 communities in the Bay Area, California. US.



Damanhur's magnificent Temples of Humankind were dug in secret from the Italian government for 16 years.



The largest cohousing community by land area is Heartwood Cohousing in Colorado, US, with almost 400 acres.



Thanks to the work of O.U.R. Ecovillage and Yarrow Ecovillage, Canada has an official "ecovillage zoning" permitting category.

The common denominator of the thousands of people I know who live in cohousing... is that these folks believe that it's more **readily possible to live lighter on the planet if they cooperate with their neighbors, and their lives are easier, more economical, more interesting, and more fun.**

- Charles Durrett, The Cohousing Company

Lama is unusual among spiritual communities in that no one teacher resides here permanently. **The practice of living in community is the real teacher.**

- Scott Thomas, Lama Foundation Resident

*Woodward Land Cohousing, Washington*





## How to Visit and Join a Community

Searching for an intentional community to join is quite different than searching for a new job, school, or a normal housing option. You are embarking on forming a deep relationship with people and place.

After browsing the [Communities Directory](#) and visiting the websites or social media pages of communities that appeal to you, it's time to plan a visit. Most intentional communities are open to visitors, but nearly all visits need to be pre-arranged with the community. Never just show up! And remember, communities are the homes of people, so be a courteous guest.

Visiting a community can be a life-changing experience, especially for those who have never experienced cooperative culture before. It's also an important step in the process towards membership in a community. The actual process of joining can take several weeks to years.

### Top Resources for

## Joining Community

- Take the online course [How to Find and Join the Intentional Community for You](#) if you are serious about joining a community and new to the process.
- The book [Finding Community](#) by Diana Leafe Christian is an essential resource on how to join community.
- Make sure you have the print version of the [Communities Directory](#) to support your research.
- And consider getting [this bundle](#) with the Directory as well as a compilation of articles from *Communities Magazine* about finding community.



## How to Start a Community

Get ready for the journey of a life time! Most folks underestimate the amount of time, energy, and skill required to assemble a founding group, pen the necessary agreements, search for property, and then set up residency or build infrastructure... all while maintaining a healthy community culture.

The failure rate of new communities is high, but this doesn't have to be the story of your group. First, check your ego at the door and examine your intentions for wanting to start a community. Many already exist. Have you visited lots of them? Is what you want to create already out there?

If you are committed to starting something new, make sure you and your group are well versed in the organizational structures, fundraising, and zoning or permitting options in your location. Consider hiring outside consultants. Better yet, first take an online course to know what you are getting into!

## Top Resources for Starting Community

- The online course [Starting an Intentional Community](#) is the best way to learn about the process and know what you are walking into.
- And/or consider taking the [Legal Basics for Forming Communities](#) course to understand the legal options for starting community.
- The book [Creating a Life Together](#) is an essential resource, as is [Creating Cohousing](#) for those who want to start a cohousing community specifically.
- You can also follow the story of one brave community founder in Robin Allison's book [Cohousing for Life](#).



## How to Learn from Communities

Not quite up for joining or starting an intentional community? You can still benefit from the decades of experience and knowledge accumulated in these places about how to build cooperative culture.

Social technologies, group processes, self-governance, alternative economic systems, conflict mediation, personal development tools — intentional communities have much to teach about how to overcome the challenges of living and working together. This wisdom is of benefit to any individual, group, or organization.

Glean the wisdom of these places so you can create more community in your life and embody what it means to be a communitarian (even if you don't live in a formal intentional community). Check out the fantastic resources on the right so you can start your community journey without leaving home!

### Top Resources for

## Community Wisdom

- *[The Cooperative Culture Handbook](#)* is a practical toolkit for social change based on the wisdom of communities.
- Here are excellent resources about [sociocracy](#) and [consensus](#), two decision-making processes common in communities.
- *[True Stories of an Aging Do-Gooder](#)* is a part memoir / part how-to manual for using the lessons of cohousing to bring cultural divides.
- Learn how to thrive in cooperative culture and build your self-literacy with the online course [Becoming a Communitarian](#).

## Your Next Steps

**At whatever stage in your journey — from the skeptically curious to the ardent community founder, from the active community seeker to the long-time resident — we hope you can find a home at [ic.org](https://ic.org).**

We invite each of you to join one or more of our weekly [online events](#). That's the best way to connect with a vast network of individuals that make up the intentional communities movement, plus learn new skills to aid you in creating a life in community. We also invite you to explore the many books and resources in our [Communities Bookstore](#), check out the advertisements in our [Community Classifieds](#), consider taking an [Online Course](#) with us for deeper training, and become an [FIC Member](#) for special access to resources and a network of support.

**The world needs intentional communities now more than ever.** We are living through a time of increased isolation and polarization. If we have learned anything from the experience of Covid and global pandemic, it is that we need each other. We need intimacy and connection for our well-being, we need to listen to each other to solve complex problems, and we need to first know our neighbor in order to feel comfortable reaching out when times get tough.

Intentional communities show us a way forward that puts the collective good before individual gains and teaches us the humbling art of getting along even when we disagree. Cooperation is key to our survival as a species. A cooperative culture is the legacy of the communities movement.

**So get out there and build some community!**





Heartwood Cohousing, Colorado



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