

The Solution Builders

PORTRAIT: GRACE KIM AND MIKE MARIANO TEXT: ANNA MARTIN



Photo: Mary Grace Long Photography



Photo: William Wright Photography

Grace Kim and Mike Mariano are two architects, living and working in Seattle, Washington. The setting is a less common one: an urban cohousing community in a building that they designed and developed. They've been advocating cohousing – a model of communal living – for a long time now. Does cohousing influence their work-life-balance and what could this way of living do for us all?

Imagine the end of a long, exhausting working day. Before sitting down on your sofa and putting up your feet to relax a little, you have to get home first. Riding your bike may already be a welcome change from your day at the office. If you commute by car you might be stuck in rush hour traffic. Or the underground might be delayed, as it is so often, because of engineering work or broken trains. Finally home, you probably want to have dinner – but it needs to be prepared first. Maybe you're cooking not only for yourself, but also for other people in your household. And groceries need to be on hand, too. After a long day at work, that's quite a bit to organize.

Of course, this is only a fictional scene. But some of it might seem familiar to you. Another scenario could look like this: In preparation for dinner, a member of the community living in the same building has posted on an internal Facebook group what they will be cooking. The person is a lead cook in a group of three on this evening. Three times a week there are such communal dinners; the current team is responsible for nine evenings. Then it will be the next team's turn. Everyone knows about specific allergies or dietary preferences such as veganism. The agreement: Meals are nutritious and delicious for everybody. In the Facebook group, you can write that you'll join, decline or announce guests. The lead cook then knows what quantities of ingredients to buy. When it's time to prepare the meal, the other two team members join to help. And in the evening, maybe after a long working day, the other community members simply come to the community dining room, sit together, enjoy dinner, and socialize. The dinner might also take place outside in the courtyard, or on the rooftop. If the day was tiresome and stressful, a resident might just get a plate of food and take it home. And the others would respect that. This is how Grace Kim describes the dinners that the community of Capitol Hill Urban Cohousing – or CHUC for short – shares three times a week. She also says that for her and her family, these shared meals are a regular relief.

Community building and building a new home

Grace Kim and Mike Mariano are both architects, and they are also married. After graduating from architecture school, they worked for some time in Chicago and then returned home to Seattle. In 2004, they founded their own architectural practice: Schemata Workshop.

In a 2018 article in the *Communities* magazine, Mariano describes how they both first heard about the concept of cohousing during a study-abroad program in London in 1992, from a Danish architecture professor.

The concept of cohousing is generally assumed to have its origin in Denmark in the 1960s or 70s. In the late 80s, the architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett coined the name "cohousing" with a book of the same title. In a TED Talk, Kim once shared that it's not something new – instead, it's an "age-old way of living", still existing around the globe in many cultures. She explained cohousing like this: "Cohousing is an intentional neighborhood where people know each other and look after one another. In cohousing, you have your own home. But you also share significant spaces, both indoors and out." The architectural shapes and sizes of these communities vary. But the most central thing, she points out, is the intention to live in community.

The topic of cohousing stayed with Kim and Mariano, professionally and in their personal life. Kim studied cohousing as part of her master's degree at the University of Washington. She spent two months in Denmark with a scholarship in 2004, accompanied by Mariano, and they visited 24 cohousing communities there. She subsequently published her findings on community space in cohousing in a book. Schemata Workshop has also designed buildings for other cohousing projects, including Daybreak Cohousing in Portland, Oregon, and Skagit Commons in Anacortes, Washington.

The project CHUC, in which Kim, Mariano and their daughter have been living for nearly seven years, was developed over many years in a long process. It involved finding people for the group, community building as

well as designing and building their new home. After breaking ground on their site in Capitol Hill, a dense neighborhood in Seattle, in 2014, the nine households moved in in early summer of 2016.

Shared meals as a relief

Kim and Mariano's architectural practice, Schemata Workshop, is located on the ground floor of CHUC, with a team of fifteen. So it's only a short commute to work for the two architects. When asked about her work-life balance, Kim initially responds: "I would say I don't have it very well." In what follows it becomes clear that she means that she works a lot. "I work hard because I want to play hard," she explains. Mariano makes a similar point: "I would say – both of us are in our early fifties now, so we've been working for thirty years – I'm at the point where I feel like I need a better balance." One way of doing that, he mentions, would be reducing working long hours.

The balance seems to tilt more toward work for both of them. That's probably not the answer anyone wants to hear, says Mariano – "but that's kind of the reality". He continues, "I think us living in cohousing above our office has allowed us to consolidate our life into a community here, in a great neighborhood. So we don't have to go very far, we don't have to commute." And Kim adds that she personally doesn't feel like she has a bad work-life balance. She sees three parts in the balance: work, social life, and the individual self. She says that the first two parts are quite full right now; for the third part in the balance, she needs to make more time. She explains that she might not have much alone-time for example. "But I feel quite satisfied on the other pieces – because there is a fluidity between my work and other aspects of my life. And it does not feel like I'm now at work or that I'm now enjoying my life. I think there's a lot of cross-over between the two."

So, does she think that the way they live has an impact on her work-life balance, too? Kim regards the shared meals as a relief. She recalls how the other night she had a late meeting, but afterwards she could just go home and have a plate from the community dinner. "The whole preparation, clean-up and shopping – that is taken care of three times a week," she explains. She doesn't have to worry that they won't get to eat during the week if they don't go shopping at the weekend – they will still have home-prepared meals. "It just makes it a lot easier that we arrive for dinner and socialize, instead of having to work," she says. In their community, they made the conscious decision to keep the organization of their meal program simple. Instead of calculating who pays how much for each meal, the cook determines the menu and pays for the ingredients. So each cook can decide for themselves about the complexity and the cost of that meal. The agreement is to strive to prepare a delicious meal for all.

The secret sauce of cohousing

According to Kim, cohousing can mostly be found in rural or suburban settings in North America. She considers CHUC unique "in that we're in a very dense part of the city, and that we're also very small, with only nine homes." 25 to 30 units would be the more common size of communities in the US, and there are examples of even larger ones. CHUC's five-story apartment building fills the entire rectangular lot. In the center is an inner courtyard – space that the community shares. In most of the two- or three-room apartments, the kitchen faces this courtyard. On the same level as the courtyard is the common house, a community room with a large kitchen and dining room with space for all residents.

Kim says that the difference between their building and a typical multi-family apartment building is not that they have a common room – others might have such a space too. "But I think the difference is that ours gets used regularly by the entire community," she says. In the nearly seven years they have lived here together, all original families remain. Also, it's not just the sense of community in the building that's important to them, but also the connection to the surrounding neighborhood. "We're not a little fortress of socialization – we're very connected to the greater community outside our building," says Mariano.

The common house is what Kim considers the "secret sauce" of cohousing in her TED Talk, which she gave in April 2017 in Vancouver. She focused on loneliness, our social relationships with others, and how, from her perspective as an architect, our way of living can have something to do with that. In her talk, she points to cohousing as a possible "antidote" to social isolation. At the beginning of 2023, the talk has almost 2.5 million views on the TED website alone. Although the talk is now around six years old, it still seems to be relevant. "I think a lot of people realized during the pandemic how lonely they were and how isolated their living situation was, whether in the city or in the suburbs. And there were lots of people looking for options. We received a lot of inquiries during that time as well as following the original TED Talk," Kim says.

Increase the chance for connections

Of course, even in cohousing, everything is not always harmonious. "It's like any group of people. There are always going to be challenges," Mariano says. "Because our personalities are all unique, and people in relationships have conflicts from time to time," Kim adds. But she sees a difference in how they deal with conflicts when living in a cohousing community: "You know you're in it for the long haul. You try to understand the perspectives of others, you need to have the difficult conversations, try to work things out." Conflicts are considered from the perspective that they will be in a long-



Photo: Schemata Workshop

term relationship with each other. They don't always agree on everything, but in an emergency, each would be willing to help the other without hesitation – Kim is sure of that. Mariano says that they knew beforehand that it would not be perfect; that it would be difficult and there would be conflicts. But that's also life, he says, and life's not perfect. "It's all still worth the effort," he thinks. When asked whether cohousing might help many others, Kim answers that she thinks it's definitely a model that can do so. She also works a lot in affordable housing, with seniors, people with disabilities, young families, and low-income families. She thinks that many families could benefit from this way of living – "particularly because of the overall ease of life." She refers to shared work, or rather that more people can benefit from the work of a few. This is the case, for example, with the shared meals. Another example, she says, is their rooftop garden, which is taken care of by a team of residents that enjoys that work. Yet all can eat the produce it yields. Another example is that Mariano, as a former bicycle mechanic, offers a bike tune-up day twice a year. "There are people that will do things they're interested in and that benefits everybody. It's helpful to daily living for a lot of people," Kim says. And in addition, there is the social interaction that you have in the community: At CHUC, they celebrate birthdays and anniversaries together, they share cultural traditions like *Dios de la Muertos*, winter solstice, kimchi or tamale making. They also share hobbies like sewing or playing board games. The community also

supports each other in child minding. Kim explains that adults were initially watching the toddlers. Now, as they are older, the teenagers in the community can watch after the younger ones. And the community is also there to support each other through illness or grieving a lost family member.

When it comes to "work" in work-life balance, you might think that it's a special situation for Mariano and Kim because their office is located in the same building. But Kim says other community members also benefit in many ways. As an example she mentions a teacher who needed shoe boxes for a school project. By asking the community, he may quickly collect the large quantity he needed. Or if someone is looking for a book, maybe another person in the community has it. So on that level, too, the community can support.

With cohousing, people who work from home might still have regular contact with others. Of course, this is also possible in other ways, for example in your own family. "It just increases the chance for connecting with other people, outside your household," according to Kim. "So maybe the positive impact of the community on a work-life-balance might have a bigger share when you live in cohousing than in another way of living," she says.

Whether you can imagine living in a cohousing community yourself is something everyone must decide for themselves in the end. But in the conversation with Mariano and Kim it became clear that they are convinced by the concept – and think that others can also benefit from cohousing.