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The Journal of The American
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Bay State Cohousing Malden, Mass. French 2D

TEXT BY MADELINE BILIS

Ten years ago, a group of nearly 30 households, comprising millennials, baby boomers, and ages in between, banded together with the goal of funding and creating co-housing for themselves in the Boston area. Now, their dream, Bay State Cohousing, has come to fruition.

When the group selected French 2D, a local architecture studio, to help bring their vision to life in 2016, principals Jenny French and Anda French, AIA, relished the challenge. Though the sisters keep an eye toward collectivity and novel housing solutions in their work, they don't specialize in co-housing. Yet this self-described “naïveté” gave them an edge; rather than lean on previous ideas about what co-housing should be, they could create a new—and custom—model for the clients.

Before French 2D started designing, the firm hosted workshops for the group to drill down on the wants and needs of the collective. “On any given day, there’d be 30, 40, 50 people in a room [with] all of their different perspectives, all playing different roles—the mediator, the question-taker—keeping each other in check,” Jenny says. Clients identified the features they knew they wanted, such as proximity to a train station, while using game-like exercises including rearranging images of home features—large and small closets, double vanity sinks, built-in shelving—to decide what was necessary in each unit. The group also laid out a charter to organize the residents’ core beliefs about co-living, as well as formalize their expected participation in self-governance and events such as movie clubs and game nights.

The culmination of their thoughtful workshops is Malden Center’s Bay State Cohousing. The Frenches trace their inspiration for the 48,700-square-foot



The Bay State Cohousing community in Malden, Mass., is the first project to be completed under the city’s co-housing zoning ordinance.

structure to the colorful, rambling Victorians lining nearby streets in Malden. The complex mimics an enlarged single-family home with a bright, cheerful color palette; outside, soft pastels such as light pink and sea-foam green lead into an interior punched up with brighter accent colors, including sunny yellow and Kelly green. “[It’s a] playfulness, I think, that matches the community,” Anda says. “They didn’t want something that was too serious because it would not be the right backdrop to the kind of community that they want to create.”

The building’s 30 units range from studios to three-bedrooms, and the

ownership model is similar to that of a condominium complex. The difference, of course, is the emphasis on collective space. The dining room—connected to the shared living area, the central outdoor patio, and the common kitchen, which residents can use for cooking weekly group meals—anchors the building as one of the largest common areas. With 100 seats, it could just as easily host a combined Thanksgiving dinner as it could offer a casual workspace for remote workers. The room’s bright yellow banquettes serve as a transitional tool—it can seat many or be used by smaller groups for more intimate conversations. “When there

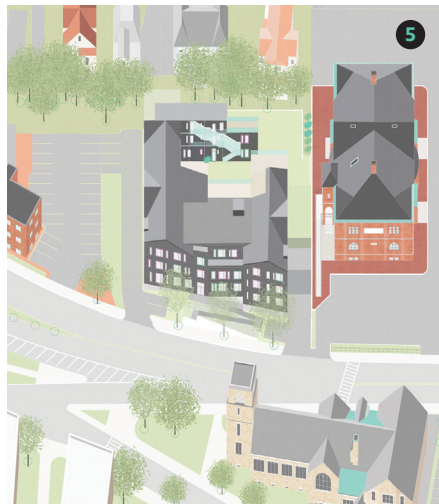
Residential: French 2D

aren't 100 people in there, and you're in there working, drinking coffee, or hanging out with kids, how do you not feel like you're in a cafeteria or a space that's just out-scaled for you?" Jenny says of the colorful design detail.

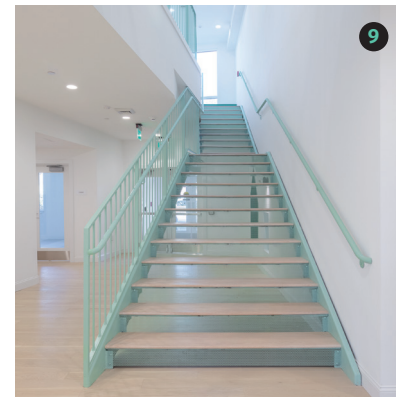
Elsewhere in the building, common spaces include a craft workshop, a yoga room, a music studio, a pantry, and more. Each household brought furnishings and art from their previous homes to contribute to both their own units and the shared areas. The result is what the Frenches call "an aggregate of their personal histories."

The collectivity theme continues outside, where residents wanted as many communal lounge areas as possible. None of the building's four balconies are private to any unit, and the patio, gardens, and dog run are open to all community members.

So far, the project has offered a promising model of collaboration in both design and co-living. "We designed the project with the clients through consensus decision-making," Anda says. "At every step of the design process, we aligned it with the values of the community."



1, 2, 4. NAHO KUBOTA; 3, 5. COURTESY FRENCH 2D



1. The Bay State Cohousing complex includes an interior courtyard. 2. Inspired by the colors of the neighborhood's historical Victorian houses, the pastel palette of the building's exterior lends a joyful vibe. 3. A felt ceiling in the dining room sports a custom pattern designed by French 2D. 4. Per a description from the firm, the complex's "pooling of space and certain resources, while maintaining individual household ownership and separation of finances, encourages mutual aid and support between households." 5. An aerial rendering of the complex. 6. Colorful built-ins dot the interior. 7+9. Indoor staircases match the sea-foam-green hue of their outdoor counterparts. 8. Dubbed the "wallflower banquette" by the designers, a yellow bench in the dining room offers "smaller seating conversation zones," according to a description from the firm. 10. Angular, built-in niches under stairways, beside entryways, and in hallways serve as reading nooks and what the designers call "interior stoops," providing pockets of privacy in an otherwise shared floor plan.