

# Los Angeles Times

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## An 'Alternative' Life Style

# Group Household Helps Elderly Stay Independent

By JONATHAN PETERSON, *Times Staff Writer*

At ages 72 to 90, the residents of a roomy, Spanish-style home in the Fairfax neighborhood are unlikely candidates for a bold social experiment. Yet social pioneers they are.

The five women and three men live in a cooperative household that, in many ways, substitutes for the support of a conventional family. "If there's an illness, people rally around to help," says Dorothy Eletz, 83, a former radio announcer. "You don't have to worry about being alone in a house without anyone, you don't have to depend on relatives."

Residents, who must be relatively healthy and earn less than about \$16,000 a year, pay \$395 monthly to the nonprofit Alternative Living for the Aging, which leases the house from the City of Los Angeles. In return, they have private rooms and bathrooms, five dinners a week, some house-cleaning services—and a life style free of the regimentation found in some retirement homes.

### **Freedom, Responsibility**

"You don't have to have breakfast and lunch at a certain time," Eletz notes approvingly. "And you're not without responsibility—which is good for older people." Household members are responsible for maintaining their private rooms and taking care of most meals. They divvy up other chores, such as tidying the living room and other common areas.

The unusual household, begun more than four years ago, is one of two run by the alternative living program, which also operates a "house-sharing" service that places helpful boarders with older homeowners. According to the program's director, Janet L. Witkin, the projects have a common philosophy: that cooperative effort among the elderly can be the key to successful independent living, especially for those who do not—or

"I think it definitely is the future," she says. "As more and more people get older and don't look at it as a disease—but think of how they're going to live best—many more will be trying to get together with other people."

The Fairfax home caters to the elderly not only in spirit but in design. The two-story house has modifications that young people—including most designers—never think about, but that will become more common as the general population grows older. Electrical outlets are easy to reach, at knee level. Knobs on closet doors have been replaced with handles that arthritis sufferers can grasp without pain.

Other adjustments guard against falling. Shower stalls have ledges to sit on. For those whose eyes are not what they used to be, the beige carpet on the stairwell has been colored dark brown on the first and last steps.

For all the amenities, however, it is not endless peace and good will in the pioneering household. Residents squabble occasionally over chores, and current events (after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, politics was banned as a topic at dinner) yet they exhibit a family-like forbearance toward their own.

More than a year ago, for example, the other residents released Rose Becker, 90, from her kitchen duties because of the arthritis that forces her to walk with two canes. "I'm an old lady," says Becker with a smile. She is looking forward to the birth of her first great-great grandchild.

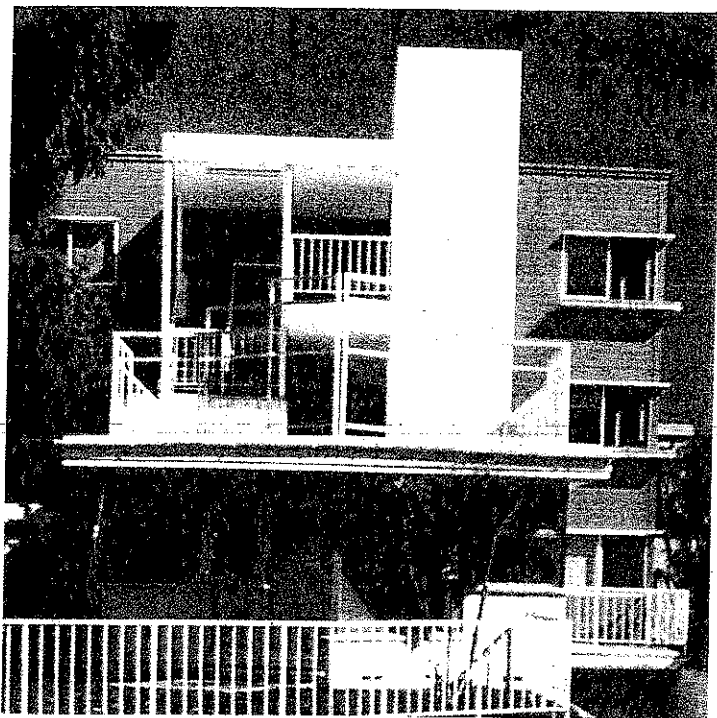
### **Story of Mutual Aid**

Estelle Chean, 83, told of how another house mate recently entered her room late one evening "in a panic" over chest pains. Chean, who wears her white hair in a youthful braid, telephoned 911 for her. She recalled with amusement that "none of the others even heard the alarm when the paramedics came. I had eight burly men in my room."

Her frightened, 80-year-old friend went to the hospital, where anxiety, not a heart attack, was blamed for her pains. She remains jittery about venturing alone on busy Fairfax Avenue, so another house mate, Sylvia Kussner, at 72 the "kid" of the household, now accompanies her to the bank and on other neighborhood errands.

"You know, it's quite different from the usual retirement home," said William Seligman, an 86-year-old retired labor negotiator born in Poland. "There is freedom to live the way you want to."

# Shared Housing



The Liffman House, Santa Monica. Architect: Koning Eizenberg Architecture.

## INDEPENDENCE THROUGH INTERDEPENDENCE

By CHESTER A. WIDOM, AIA

**A**lternative Living for the Aging (ALA) was formed in 1978 to provide alternatives to institutional housing for the ever-increasing senior population. Due to a change in the status of the nuclear family and to advances in medical care that result in longer and healthier lives, more and more seniors are finding themselves no longer able to live alone, yet not wanting or requiring the environment of board and care, congregational care or skilled nursing facilities.

The housing needs of the healthy and reasonably active 70 to 90 year old include not only economical shelter, but also safety and companionship. ALA is pioneering the development of a continuum of housing options by matching seniors who wish to live with another person in a private home or apartment, and by developing various prototypes for cooperative extended family living environments.

An estimated 300,000 California homes with three or more bedrooms currently are occupied by one senior. While many of these people are perfectly content in this lifestyle, others face economic problems, feel insecure or unsafe and are hungry for companionship. Our shared housing program facilitates the matching of seniors who see advantages in shared housing.

To date ALA has matched over 2,500 people. While most "matches" are between seniors, some seniors are matched with students who provide shopping, transportation or household assistance as their contribution to the "family." The program includes extensive counseling by professional social workers before and during the matching process. Funding for this program and the general administration of ALA is through a combination of government grants, grants from various foundations and private donations.

## PROTOTYPE: CO-OP HOUSES

For many seniors, co-op houses are a viable alternative to institutions and to living alone. This family-type living arrangement brings together 9 to 14 older people who contribute their time, funds, work and cooperation to the daily functioning of the homes. In each house, residents have their own private bedroom and bath. They prepare most of their own meals in the house kitchen. On five evenings a week, residents share meals and assist a cook in planning, preparation and clean up. Common areas provide space for normal "family" activities.

Co-op #1, completed in 1982 by Bruce Sternberg, AIA, is a remodel of a vintage 1930 two-story duplex. A new elevator and stairway were added to connect the existing apartments internally, and four new bedrooms and baths were added. Renovation to the existing building included the addition of three new private bathrooms, remodeling the kitchen and general updating to meet the specific safety and comfort needs of the residents.

Co-op #2, the Rothman House, completed in 1985, was a renovation by Martin Gelber, AIA of two adjacent one story houses originally designed to house teenage girls. The work at Co-op #2 focused on connecting the two buildings, providing private baths for each bedroom and adapting the house to the specific needs of seniors.

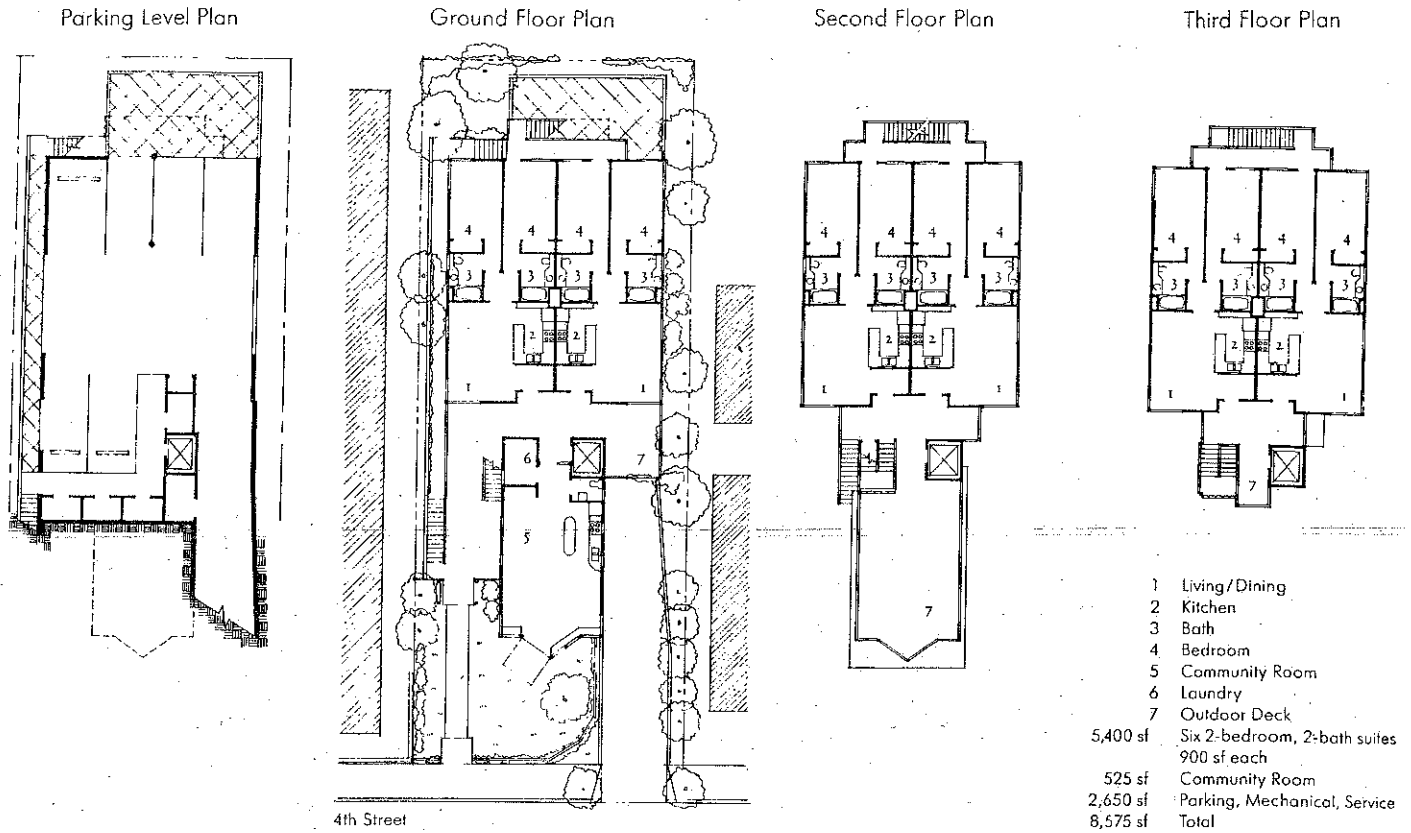
The Co-op concept works for those seniors in a low income level who have the spirit and willingness to experiment within a more adventurous lifestyle. As one resident told me upon moving into Co-op #1, "For the first time in many years, I am part of a living family." ALA provides ongoing counseling to both houses and assists the "family" in their internal management of the houses. Funding for these houses was provided by a combination of government grants and loans and private contributions.

## PROTOTYPE: INTERDEPENDENT APARTMENT LIVING

In 1986, the City of Los Angeles was faced with the possible destruction of the historically significant El Greco Apartments in Westwood. The 1929 Spanish Courtyard building designed by Walter S. and Pierpont Davis and consisting of six single and six one bedroom apartments was scheduled for demolition by a developer. The city convinced the developer to award title to ALA and contribute a portion of the funds toward relocating the structure to another site for development as senior housing. The building configuration and ALA's desire to develop a prototype for a different segment of the senior community led toward a new model type.

In this lifestyle, seniors live in independent apartments and community activities focus around the courtyard and within the residents' apartments. The ALA social workers work closely with the residents to develop and maintain a sense of family that includes a "buddy" system, whereby residents are paired and "check up" on each other at least once a day. In spite of the lack of interior community space on this project, the residents have developed a special bond. As one resident put it, "This place is an oasis in a social desert."

Funding for the El Greco was provided with public/private cooperation using California Historical Preservation grants, a grant from the City of Los Angeles, private donations and the creation of a separate partnership that used private funds to



obtain federal tax benefits for the preservation of a historical structure. The restoration architect for the El Greco (David and Sylvia Weisz Family Courtyard and Apartments) was deBretteville and Polyzoides.

**PROTOTYPE: SHARED HOUSING WITHIN AN INTERDEPENDENT APARTMENT COMMUNITY**

Completed in December, 1987, the Liffman House in Santa Monica combines our shared housing program with an interdependent apartment concept. Consisting of six two bedroom/two bath apartments and a community room, this project brings together two seniors to form a new family unit within each apartment and brings each of the six families into a large extended family.

As ALA's first new construction venture, we were able to focus on correcting many of the compromises required in the

earlier rehab projects. The architects, Konig and Eizenberg, placed more emphasis on various ergonomic issues relating to seniors and were able to develop specific interior and exterior community spaces. Again, funding for the Liffman House was a public/private venture with the City of Santa Monica and a private donor.

We architects often lament the secondary role that is given to our efforts and our diminishing leadership role in the community as a whole, and specifically within the building process. My involvement in ALA—as a founder, as the vice president for facilities and as the president—has allowed me to reverse that trend, at least for myself, and to realize great personal gratification as a citizen helping solve real societal problems.

*Chester A. Widom, AIA is principal in the Los Angeles firm of Widom Wein Cohen and is First Vice President/President Elect of the California Council, the American Institute of Architects.*



- Project:** Liffman House
- Client:** Alternative Living For The Aging
- Architect:** Koning Eizenberg Architecture; project architect, Chris Hendriks
- Engineer:** Fejes Davis Structural Engineers
- General Contractor:** Thomas Bedkosian with Randy Donabedian
- Interior Design:** Evelyn Cohen + Associates
- Landscape Architect:** Koning Eizenberg Architecture
- Energy Consultant:** Campbell Hendriks