



SOCIETY

# COMMUNES FOR GROWN- UPS

A 1960s ideal  
gets a modern makeover  
in cohousing projects  
designed for  
living in close quarters

BY ANNE BOKMA

**B**rian Ast always dreamed of sharing space with people beyond his family. As a young man in the 1960s, he opted out of the mainstream by experimenting with living on a commune in northern Ontario. Eventually he married, had three kids and spent 28 years as an executive in the energy industry. He lived in a ranch home in the suburbs where the backyards had high fences and people coming home from work disappeared into their garages at the end of the day. “It was really boring,” he says. “We never saw our neighbours except in the summer.”

As he entered his 60s, his youthful desire to live in community still tugged at him. So when he heard about a new cohousing community being built in a working-class neighbourhood in Saskatoon, he and his wife, Mary Lou, were among the first to sign on. Last year, they sold their family home and purchased an 1,100 square foot, \$420,000 unit in Wolf Willow, a 21-residence cohousing facility that bills itself as “an intentional, evolving community fostering belonging and purpose.”

The facility, which cost \$6.5 million to build, is owned by its



occupants, who range in age from 54 to 85. Boasting plenty of shared communal spaces — a large dining room and kitchen, laundry facilities, craft room, music room, workshop, exercise room and sitting room with a fireplace and plenty of comfortable seating — the building is designed to promote meaningful connection among the people who live there. Residents share everything from cars to tools and regular potluck dinners. Ast, who

became ordained as a United Church minister 10 years ago after leaving the corporate world, has never been happier. “This is where we want to spend the rest of our lives,” he says.

Part condo, part commune, cohousing is a type of residence that originated in Denmark in the early 1970s and was imported to Canada in the mid-1990s with the construction of the WindSong Cohousing Community in Langley, B.C.

Cohousing offers people privacy in their individual units but also promotes old-fashioned neighbourhood values of mutual concern and sharing of resources. Each community is unique. Some are built with seniors in mind, while others are multigenerational. Residents own the facilities, which include common amenities such as dining rooms, recreational spaces and gardens, and may integrate eco-friendly features such as solar panels, insular radiant heating, rainwater collection and composting. In Canada, cohousing units range from a low of \$160,000 to a high of \$600,000.

There are about 500 cohousing communities (either existing or in the process of forming) in North America, with 30 in Canada, mostly in British Columbia, according to the Missouri-

based Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), which provides a listing of cohousing sites on its website, [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org). (It also tracks other types of intentional living arrangements, including ecovillages, communes, student co-ops and urban housing co-operatives.)

Laird Schaub, the FIC’s executive secretary, says cohousing communities are the most successful form of co-operative living in terms of their longevity and peaceful co-operation among residents. “The people involved tend to have more life experience, are less naive and, because their investment is larger, they want to be sure to protect that investment.” Intentional communities have doubled in number over the past 20 years, and while the figures are small overall — about 100,000 North Americans self-identify as living co-operatively — they are continuing to rise, Schaub says.

“That’s because there’s dissatisfaction with the American dream; there’s a sense of alienation and estrangement. People want something different — a sense of neighbourhood and connection.”

Ronaye Matthew is one of the key advocates for cohousing in Canada. She heads Cohousing Development Consulting, a B.C. firm that provides project-management, marketing and community-building services to many of the completed cohousing communities in Canada, including Wolf Willow and Cranberry Commons Cohousing, where she resides. At this multi-generational complex of 22 townhouse and apartment-style homes in Burnaby, B.C., Cranberry Commons residents share potluck dinners every Monday night, take yoga classes together in the building, work the community garden, hire speakers for presentations and participate in book clubs and music and movie nights. Ask Matthew what drives people to cohousing, and she’ll tell you it’s simple: “They believe having more connection with their neighbour is going to enrich their quality of life.”

Living in community has a host of benefits — particularly for seniors — including easing loneliness, sharing chores such as meal preparation and snow shovelling, and having the peace of mind that there are people around who care about you. When a 90-year-old resident in Matthew’s building fell and broke her shoulder, her neighbours drove her to and from the hospital, brought her meals, helped with shopping and checked in on her daily, all of which helped speed her healing. “Normally, this would be the sort of incident that would push someone into a care facility,” says Matthew. “Instead she was able to stay in her home.”

Cohousing isn’t just attracting seniors. Anne Easton and her husband found suburban life in Surrey, B.C., isolating until they moved into a 1,000 square foot, \$220,000 unit in Cranberry Commons 12 years ago when their two children were five and three. Without any extended family nearby, they wanted to find a way to raise their children in a close-knit community. “When my kids were little, I never had to structure playmates — they could just knock on doors until they found someone who could come out and play with them,” says Easton.

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Today, her teens hang out in the lounge, where they watch TV and play video games with their friends. The downside? “Everyone knows everyone else’s business,” she says with a laugh, before adding, “and sometimes there’s conflict. But we try to look at conflict as a way to learn more about each other and find solutions.”

Having the ability to work through the inevitable conflicts that arise while living in close quarters is the

biggest challenge in co-operative living, says the FIC's Schaub, who often acts as a consultant to intentional communities that are struggling with problems. "Most commonly, I'm asked to help out when there are uneven levels of participation — when you have some people who are doing too much, and others who aren't doing enough. I call them the martyrs and slackers."

ties to be clear about expectations around behaviour and to have a conflict-resolution process in place. She helps residents in cohousing communities understand that working through problems together can strengthen them as a community. "There is lots of potential for learning and growth, and the more mature a community becomes, the less conflict there is," she says. "We can't always all

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live in complete harmony, but we can learn to be better humans." Schaub echoes this sentiment: "It's my view that there is

When tensions arose at Wolf Willow because some residents felt there was too much noise from their neighbours coming through the floorboards, the problem was discussed openly at a regular monthly council meeting. It was decided that further investigation — and possible soundproofing renovations — might be necessary. "There was a lot of conflict at the meeting, but afterwards we had a potluck dinner. It happened to be Valentine's Day, and we entertained ourselves by singing French love songs. We proved that we can scrap it out and end the night with wine and love songs," says Ast. "Instead of complaining and alienating people, we have a process where we try to mediate the problem and work it out as best we can."

no more intensive way to learn and practise group skills than to live in intentional community, where a person is called upon to grow in the work every day."

For many, this way of living — co-operative, sustainable, democratic and rooted in real connection with one's neighbours — is a reflection of their spiritual values. Matthew says some people are drawn to cohousing because "connecting with community is one of the ways we connect with the Divine."

Ast couldn't agree more. "We are called to live in community. Society tries to keep us separated and isolated, but we aren't meant to live alone."

Matthew says it's imperative for cohousing communi-

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