

Rest homes with a difference

Boomers are reworking the idea of aging for co-housing

BY ROSA HARRIS-ADLER, FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 30, 2011

Presented By:



Local Input~ Elderly couple walking through the parc hand in hand. Keywords: 70 years active activity adult cane caucasian couple female happiness happy health healthy hike hiking love lovers loving male man marriage married mature men movement moving outdoors people person retired retirement romance romantic senior seniors smile smiling sport summer sunshine walk walking walking cane woman women.

Photograph by: Fotolia, Fotolia

"No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps in." - American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978)

All 85 pounds of her were wiry, tough and snappish. She had an arch, honed wit that slid into cruelty from time to time: she wanted you to know that she was no one's idiot. She smoked like an oil refinery.

She'd given up giving up years ago. She was 81 and no one was going to stop her now, not with the dwindling number of days she had left.

She was going blind. She was proud, but finding it harder and harder to manage on her own. She was also a handful. Her daughter - that would be me - was caring for an infant, a schoolboy and a recalcitrant husband. No room at the inn, there. Her sons? Same scene, more or less. Not a chance.

A nursing home seemed the only option - but funds were low and the choices were limited.

In the end, she was inducted into the kind of facility where fluorescent lighting casts a bluish hue on shuffling people with vacant eyes and stained housecoats. The authorities confiscated her pack of Export A's. A friend smuggled more in. Soon, she was trafficking in cigarettes.

When she died, she was on the verge of being turfed out - a rebel without a view.

I think of her often as I take my first, tentative steps into dotageville - and about how much easier I've always had it than she ever did.

Some of us will live longer than our partners, who might otherwise have been persuaded to care for us. Some of us have no partners at all. Still, I just know that many people in my cohort will not tolerate living in "retirement lodges," that smell of institutional talcum powder, where Big Nurses with a little power make arbitrary rules.

As always, we are mighty in number. We are boomers. We have standards. Hear us roar.

Case in point: There is some activity afoot to create new living arrangements for an aging demographic that doesn't want to suffer fools or brook condescending authority figures. The trend is called senior co-housing and a Danish architect, Charles Durrett, is considered the father of this movement.

Of course, forms of co-operative living have existed throughout all recorded history. This latest version seems to be driven by both practicality and sentimentality. We may be city slickers, but something innate in us apparently longs for a village green where friends can gather, gossip and look out for one another.

At any rate, there's one model in the works in Victoria, B.C., where a group of some 30 or 40 interested parties, ranging in age from their 50s to their 80s, have been meeting for about a year.

At present, they're busy looking for a site where they can all live together as they get on.

Some might have learned from experiences with communes that failed in the '60 and '70s, because they're working hard to make a go of it before they commit. They hold workshops to thrash out issues. They toss around design ideas. They explore the meaning of neighbourliness. And one thing is certain. They will buy property together, but they will not all live under one roof.

They'll have - no, they'll demand - their privacy.

But by pooling their resources, they'll reduce their footprint, live more economically and form an intentional community for support and friendship.

One of the driving forces behind this project is Margaret Critchlow, a York University anthropology professor with an expertise in housing co-ops who retired to Sooke a year ago and has taken on this project.

Critchlow has also launched a non-profit society and a website called Canadian Senior Cohousing.

"I must like what I do," she said, "because in retirement, I'm still doing it."

According to Critchlow, evidence suggests that seniors who live in co-housing arrangements often remain for up to a decade longer in their own homes. Such an enterprise rekindles the ideals of an earlier era - without the naivete. Who says youth is wasted on the young?

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald