



STRONGER TOGETHER

All-female co-housing is an evolving solution to senior residences, says **Ellen Himelfarb**, while CARP proposes an out-of-the-box approach to the concept of “old-age” homes

ON A QUIET North London street in the shadow of a 10th-century Gothic church tower, I’m looking for a door marked “new ground.” The freshly mortared residential building has taken over the footprint of an old convent, and I presume this to be the “new” entrance on the “ground” floor.

But New Ground, I’m told, is less literal than that. It’s the official name for this architect-designed co-housing complex of 25 modern wide-windowed units. The reason: it is one of the first such residences open to women only.

The residents of New Ground are the unlikely foot soldiers for a slow-percolating revolutionary move-

ment on the fringes of third-wave feminism. A group that includes veteran artists, designers, academics and activists, they are hedging against the isolation they and many of their contemporaries will experience as they reach and surpass retirement. Part of a generation that came of age among the second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, they are exercising their independence for what may be the last time.

“The women who started this had had enough of being told what to do by men,” says Maria Brenton, a founding member of Older Women’s Co-Housing (OWCH), the vanguard of New Ground, as we tour a voluminous communal foyer and entertaining space facing landscaped gardens that, by summer, will be dotted with sun loungers and filled with the

laughter of visiting grandchildren.

She continues as we wander over to a three-bedroom suite whose great room opens onto the green with full-height concertina doors. “When you think about the profile of men in their 70s and 80s ... unredeemed and unreconstructed ...”

“Their sons and grandsons are okay,” pipes in Jayne Nelson, owner of the unit, with her dachshund Bertie, the only male resident. “But,” she leans in and whispers, “they’re male chauvinist pigs.”

Harsh as that may sound, it’s not the ultimate reason 26 women aged 51 to 88 have sold up, pared down and bought into this social experiment – in the works now for 20 years.

In the U.K., at least, the ratio of women to men in senior housing is four to one. And 60 per cent of

women over 75 live alone – nearly twice as many as men. In the 1990s, Brenton met some of them while working to save a postgraduate women’s studies course she taught at the University of Bristol. “Many were on their own with smaller material resources than the men we knew but larger social ones.”

She applied for and won a grant to look for examples of women who were co-living in old age. “I thought that was the logical answer for women left on their own.”

There weren’t many women co-living in older age. “The notion of older people running things themselves is novel. Either you’re left on your own, and nobody does anything for you, or you get into the care system, and they take away your autonomy.”

She began in Denmark, birthplace in the 1960s of the *bofaellesskab*, or “living community,” in which privately owned residences share communal facilities like a housing co-operative. The idea was to foster a sharing-and-caring community, sustain health and look out for one another – “but not,” says Brenton, “look *after* one another.” Like those first co-housing settlements, New Ground draws the line at personal care.

The Germans adopted the practice with *baugruppen*, or “building groups;” the Dutch with *woongroepen*, or “living groups;” the Americans coined the term “co-housing.” Yet in her travels, Brenton came across only one women-only facility – in Amsterdam.

Back in London, she presented

her findings to an audience of older women’s networks. “From that workshop, six of us went off to the pub,” says Brenton. “I said, ‘We’ve been talking about this for too long. Let’s do it.’ That was the start of OWCH, and we met every month thereafter.”

Brenton estimates about 4,000 women have been through the OWCH “experiment” over two decades. The only remaining founding member, Shirley Meredeen, lives in a garden-view triplex. (Nelson, the second in seniority, joined in 1999.) The other “main mover and shaker” died 10 years ago. Others, says Brenton, “drifted off.” That’s not hard to believe when you consider how many boroughs in which they’ve explored real estate (13); how many failed sites they’ve gone through (four); how many years of build- ➤

CARP Poll

In the 2017 federal budget, the Liberals dedicated \$11 billion to create new and update existing housing units. CARP recently asked its members:

What elements of a national housing strategy should be targeted to older Canadians?

38%
Affordability

36%
Allowing seniors to stay in their homes

10%
Availability

7%
Access to services/retail/etc.

3%
Special design/grab bars/etc.

2%
Doctor on call

1%
Downtown/central

4%
Other/Don’t know



Pop culture potentials for future female co-housing: *The Golden Girls*, the *Sex and the City* denizens, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s working women and the millennial *Girls*

ing delays (two) and construction (five) they've waited out.

In early 2016, the majority owners (eight residents are social-housing beneficiaries) were forced to sofa-surf after they sold their homes ahead of the move-in date, only to see it pushed off 12 months.

The story is a slightly more prosperous version of that experienced by the tenants of La Maison des Babayagas, a co-housing development outside Paris spearheaded by feminist and activist Thérèse Clerc. The six-storey block, named for a witch in Slavic folklore, finally opened in 2012 after 13 years in development. During that time, Clerc, who passed away last year, lobbied hard for government participation so the 25 lodgers, many living below the poverty line, could enjoy subsidized rates.

Her argument, that the government would save money in the long run on housing and health care for the residents, has been waged against other local authorities that resisted senior residents who might draw on the social-care budget. As the German co-housing guru Albrecht Göschel once said, "Collaborative housing produces a common good by reducing public expenses for health or care institutions and should thus stimulate a public interest in this form of living." Or, in Brenton's words, "A buzzy, useful community prevents people mouldering into self-neglect."

When CBC Radio aired a documentary in 2012 featuring Babayagas House, Beth Komito-Gottlieb, who lives in Toronto and is recently divorced, says, "It lit a fire under me."

At the time, women's housing existed for seniors in larger Canadian cities but, like Toronto's Older Women's Network co-housing project, only in conjunction with mixed-gender housing. Neither the Canadian Cohousing Network nor the Co-Operative Housing Federation had a project on the

books for women only; they still don't. But Komito-Gottlieb, then in her late 50s, helped form a steering committee with a handful of other galvanized peers to develop such a model in Toronto. Since then, they've attracted a community of nearly 150 women – most of whom, Komito-Gottlieb believes, would move "tomorrow" if they found the right property to develop.

"As some of us enter our senior years, we're realizing we don't like what's out there," she says. "The accepted model of senior housing – the nursing homes, assisted living, comfortable retirement communities – is not built around our needs. A lot of us bought into the idea of the house in the suburbs for our nuclear family. Those things took us away from the idea of community. But we've always been interested in the kibbutz or co-op housing ... this is a return to our roots."

Baba Yaga Place, the virtual network of potential residents of which Komito-Gottlieb is chair, stays true to the French Babayagas model of affordable rental, rather than going the condo route. And in the typical Canadian fashion of inclusivity this model would allow men. "We want this to fill a need – not just for people who can afford to be there. Women, especially later in life, are likely to be poor, be by themselves ... My generation was full of nasty surprises."

The Canadian group expects to privately finance the endeavour through grants, fundraising and partnerships with developers. With no proven benefits to the social safety purse, governments are reluctant to get on board, though Komito-Gottlieb hopes to hold conversations at the federal level. For now, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has "no resources that speak specifically to senior women's housing," according to its spokeswoman Karine LeBlanc. Its recent report, drawn up from six months of consultations to inform the 2017

THE CALL OF COMMUNAL LIVING

CO-HOUSING IS A CONCEPT that's not new to Canada.

A group of older like-minded people get together and buy shares in an existing house. The house is then renovated in an age-friendly manner and run like a fractional – residents split the costs of food, utilities, taxes, insurance, maintenance, property management, etc.

The idea is they can age in place affordably in the community without losing their privacy or independence as they might in a seniors residence. British Columbia has embraced the idea – there are 17 co-housing projects currently running in that province, followed by Ontario with five and Saskatchewan with three.

In order to further these alternative living opportunities, CARP's Barrie Chapter has been working toward the promotion of co-housing for a number of years. In a letter from chapter chair Gwen Kavanagh to her MPP Ann Hoggarth, she spells out that the Ontario budget doesn't allocate enough money to meet the housing needs for all the province's senior citizens.

To overcome this hurdle, Kavanagh proposes that the Ontario Government provide the necessary funding to build and/or renovate 100 co-housing homes in communities throughout the province. The government would provide an interest-free loan over a term of five years to take care of build-

ing or renovation costs. And, as the units are sold, the monies from the sale of the suites would be paid back to the province.

"Traditional models of senior housing just aren't cutting it," says Wanda Morris, CARP's director of advocacy. "CARP strongly supports a Canada-wide roll out of innovative solutions like the one proposed by our Barrie Chapter."

Because it's a low-cost plan that fills the gap of affordable seniors' housing, cash-strapped provinces should find it appealing.

"And, instead of being forced into high-rise senior residences, people can choose where and with whom they live," says Morris.

Not only does this co-hous-

ing concept solve the critical shortage of affordable housing for seniors but it addresses a number of other issues as well, including:

- Prevents escalation of health problems
- Splits expenses among residents, making living costs more affordable
- Provides support with activities of daily living
- Reduces isolation and the likelihood of elder abuse
- Eliminates worries of geographically challenged family members
- Meets all requirements of the provincial initiative to Age at Home and remain independent
- Maintains community linkages and engagements
- Employs up to seven local staff

National Housing Strategy, fails to mention women outside at-risk groups and indigenous.

Reconciling the principles of shared living with personal finances and affordability is delicate work for Beverly Suek, who two years ago opened her Winnipeg home to four women aged 53 to 70, *Golden Girls*-style. Her inspiration? While campaigning for a local political candidate in 2011, she was struck by the sheer numbers of older women living alone or "infantilized" in senior residences. With real estate prices soaring, she was determined to provide an intentional community.

Suek bought back the family home from her son, who'd been winding down his B&B operation after adding several plush en suite rooms. But

her goal for shared ownership and shared governance required having the house revalued and would have proven too costly for everyone. Today, her housemates pay a "reasonable" shared living cost she deems "affordable to anybody." Yet the decision-making ultimately defaults to her as sole owner.

Nobody sets out to be a revolutionary. Suek had practical reasons for wanting only women around: "Because I wanted to be able to walk around in my pyjamas. And because often women act differently when men are around." Safety, too, was a motivation. Ultimately, though, the housemates ended up hosting potlucks for Amnesty International and salons highlighting indigenous issues. Last January, they marched

on Washington together. "We're not just women living together," says Nicoline Guerrier, 54, youngest tenant at the time. "We try to be a network of support for each other and use the house as a community hub for engaging people in social issues."

Not least their own: "So many people come to visit and say they want to do this with their own house," says Guerrier.

Baba Yagas Place fields daily emails with the same sentiment, regardless of still being a work in progress. "Ultimately," says Komito-Gottlieb, "we could have a network of Babas."

And back in London, Brenton says there's a waiting list to get into New Ground, even though none of the residents seem poised to, er, default.

"It's something you want to start thinking about early." ☐

CARP is a national not-for-profit, non-partisan association committed to advancing the quality of life for Canadians as they age. To become a member, call 1-800-363-9736 or go to www.carp.ca.

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