

Mi Casa Su Casa

Looking for that mythic close-knit neighbourhood? The grown-ups, kids and retirees who live at Prairie Sky know just where--and how--to find it.

Written by Tyee Bridge

Calgary Herald Swerve Magazine

Friday, April 13, 2007

All the action in the summer happens outside the Prairie Sky common house. At seven o'clock the sun is still high and a light breeze brushes the fruit trees and flower beds in the courtyard. Joan, a retired newspaper columnist, carries out a three-course meal for three from her ground-floor apartment to the two plastic picnic tables: gazpacho followed by Simple Simon meat pies and roasted potatoes. For dessert, mini chocolate lava cakes. "Some things I had in the fridge that needed to get used up," she says. Bernie, a landscape architect whose wife is out of town for a few days, chips in with a bottle of red wine. He's clearly delighted to be sitting down for a shared dinner. Ann, a science editor and single mother of three, teases him about schmoozing his way into a home-cooked meal. "Did you do that poor 'my wife is away' act and get some food?"

"No," Bernie says, smiling. "It was way more direct than that."

Ann laughs. "Maybe the first year you would have done that. Now you just ask and you get it. Rick used to walk up and down looking forlorn."

"Couldn't find Lorn, but Cathie will do." Someone sounds a rim-shot at the joke.

Three people sat down at the table 40 minutes ago; now there are eight, sipping wine, drinking Keith's and Labatts, lingering over a late dinner. Half a dozen more stop by as they cross to their units, to say hello or ask about getting more of those organic gala apples that were selling in the common house for \$1.20 a pound. At least three conversations are going on at once. Several people are planning to watch a DVD in the lounge on Bernie's projector tonight, and he mentions some favourite films--Maelstrom, a love story narrated by a dead fish, and Seducing Dr. Louis, an indie film set in a Quebec village.

Children of various ages saunter up at random, crawling into laps or tapping shoulders to ask if they can play at so-and-so's place. A game of foursquare starts up near Joan's doorway. Dennis was a gymnastics teacher for nearly three decades; now he works in oil and gas communications. His wife Kathi teaches ESL. They have two young children and two cats. "We compromise on everything," Kathi says of their relationship. "He didn't want to go into cohousing, so we went into cohousing. He didn't want a cat, so we got two cats."

"Connor and Alex, put your shoes on!" Patty, the co-owner of an organic grocery store, yells at her boys as they run off. "Take off your socks, go back and put

your shoes on." She turns back. "I swear they wear out a pair of socks a week."

One of Ann's daughters, Samantha, now a University of Victoria student back home for a couple of weeks, watches the boys dutifully yanking off their socks. "I remember that," she says nostalgically. "I got special slippers just so I could go from house to house without having to tie any laces."

Dennis smiles. "Now that is a cohousing thing."

Mention the term cohousing in North America and most people won't think of worn socks. Unless you're an architect or an urban planner, cohousing probably sounds like a free-love commune or a nouveau form of project housing. But cohousing isn't a hippie cult or a municipal welfare experiment. Developed in Denmark in the 1960s, cohousing neighbourhoods are clusters of private homes arranged around a shared commons. Designed to increase social interaction, conversation and community relationships, hundreds have been built in northern Europe, with more scattered from the U.K. to Australia. Architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett introduced them to North America in a 1988 book titled *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, and the movement has since grown to about 90 completed North American communities, seven of which are in Canada. About a hundred more are in development. (Given the five-to-seven-year span of time it usually takes to build a cohousing community, and the interpersonal and financial hurdles inherent in the process, the latter figure should be taken with a pinch of salt. If it's not a cohousing axiom,

it should be: One community on the land is worth 10 in the planning stages.)

The Canadian Cohousing Network (CCN) defines the trend as "a return to the best of small-town communities," recreating the kind of close-knit neighbourhoods that are now, for most of us, the stuff of myth. The CCN continues, "Futurists call them an altogether new response to social, economic and environmental challenges of the 21st century... that combine the autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of shared resources and community living." Cohousers, confronted with relatives and friends who think they've gone off the deep end, take pains to clarify why they are not communes or cults. The reality is that cohousing is exceedingly normal, simple, even banal when compared with the exotic lifestyle experiments of the late sixties and early seventies. Cohousing homes--which can be apartments, townhomes or detached houses, usually 12 to 40 per development--are privately owned. Residents are a mix of singles, couples, families and retirees that share no religion or ideology other than the desire, as the CCN puts it, "for a more practical and social home environment."

Because they're custom built, in most cases they don't come cheap.

Affordability is the exception, market value is the rule.

To encourage interaction, dwellings face each other across a courtyard or pedestrian avenue. Prairie Sky is a mix of townhouses and apartments, each from 790 to more than 2,000 square feet and self-contained

with its own kitchen, bathrooms and all the usual features. While compact in the tradition of urban European housing, shared facilities make a big difference. The common house is a unique feature of cohousing--a simple concept, but core to the life of the community. "The whole concept of the common house is really positive," says Lynn Hannley, managing director of Communitas, an Edmonton-based community development consultancy. Prairie Sky residents say the organization was indispensable in getting their project built. "The common house allows for formal and informal interaction, and it's part of what distinguishes cohousing from other approaches. It's not to say cohousing is better than other forms like co-ops, but the common facilities do allow people to interact on a regular basis. It's a place for sharing meals, skills, resources."

Potlucks or shared dinners happen in the common house once or twice a week, along with various birthday celebrations, jam sessions, spontaneous parties and the ever-popular movie nights. The 3,200-square-foot space includes a guest room, an office currently rented to one of the residents, a workshop replete with shared power tools and landscaping implements, a laundry and a former "teen room"-cum-workout centre. (The teens rebelled at being relegated to the basement and have since taken up residence in the lounge.) In a space formerly known as the crafts room and now tagged as the "quiet room" is a \$5,000 Ceragem thermal massage table, the kind that does the massaging for you, purchased collectively by six households. Coming together has its benefits.

Gathering capital, finding land, deciding on design, and convincing municipal bureaucracies that they aren't a menace to zoning bylaws usually takes groups about seven years. In Prairie Sky's case, residents moved into their brand-new units in May of 2003, eight years after the first seed group was started in 1995. The upside of the often emotionally fraught development process-- imagine a dozen people coming to consensus on kitchen layouts and colour schemes--is that it begins weaving the community fabric long before residents have moved in.

"Back then we were thinking that we wanted to own our own home, but we wanted to have close contact with our neighbours," says Cathie, a gourmet-produce distributor and sole remaining member from the original 1995 group. "We wanted, I guess you could say, a little village in the midst of the big city. Especially because we were bringing up kids. You do need interaction with other people to have a rich, fulfilling life. You can survive the other way, but..." She trails off. "This way is just really nice. I love the accidental things, the spontaneous things that happen. And I've found that it's even surpassed what I could have imagined it would be."

Sitting at the picnic tables with a chatty klatsch of Prairie Sky residents, it's obvious cohousing is a world apart from my neighbourhood, or any middle-class Canadian neighbourhood. The impressive mash-up of talent and personality is nothing you wouldn't find at a Sunday backyard barbecue down the street, but this is what makes it interesting: This isn't a Sunday barbecue. Or a wedding, or a birthday party. It's just a pleasant summer evening. Something, or everything,

about cohousing makes it easy to be spontaneous. And that means not just shared food, but shared skills, knowledge, jokes, all the elements of social capital. In fact, if social capital were measured in dollars, Prairie Sky residents would be laughing all the way to the credit union. Bernie gives advice about watering a newly-planted tree; Pat agrees to help someone with a Windows XP glitch; Donna recalls some near-disaster from the annual summer canoe trip in northern Saskatchewan. Ray tells me that he's been going on that trip for six years now and has yet to rent a canoe or any outdoor camping gear. Someone else makes a barbed joke about the one of the cleaning "flocks"--rotating groups charged with keeping the common areas clean--that seems routinely incapable of doing a decent job. (A few people grind their teeth at this dereliction of duty, while several others have simply accepted that the members in question have other gifts and act as "Secret Sanitizers" on their behalf.) "We're a very strong group," says Kathleen, an occupational therapist. "The process of developing cohousing is not for the faint of heart, but people here are honest and respectful, and they have a lot of great skills. There are people good at facilitating meetings, people with building experience, one accounting person, one journeyman carpenter, a bunch with computer skills."

You know you're in cohousing, a joke goes, when it takes 45 minutes and a beer to get back to your unit. One resident revised this for Prairie Sky. "Here it takes an hour and a half, two beers and a plate of nachos." Cohousing architect Charles Durrett--"Chuck" to Prairie Sky residents--noted after his Calgary consulting visits that the community was, even by cohousing standards,

particularly chummy. Ray, an investor, agrees. "I lived in my other house for five years and I knew two neighbours. Here I can walk over and say I've got nothing to do today, just go talk to someone because I feel like talking."

Ray loves Prairie Sky now, but he had to be dragged to it kicking and screaming. His wife Lydia heard about cohousing through her sister, who lives at Windsong in B.C., the first formal cohousing development in Canada. Ray appreciated the Windsong community when he and Lydia visited, finding the residents to be, well, surprisingly normal. "They were good people," he says. But that was as far as it went. "Lydia wanted to go ahead and get into cohousing, but I wasn't interested. I came from the Prairies and to me group living was colonies of Hutterites. I was averse to any kind of group situation like that." Over Ray's resistance, Lydia opened their house to occasional meetings of the Prairie Sky seed group. "After a few meetings they were like friends," Ray recalls, "so it wasn't a big transition. That's how I changed my mind."

Dennis and Kathi have a similar tale. After travelling in Central America and Fiji, Kathi had been impressed by the tight bonds and rich community culture in both areas. When she had her first child back in Calgary she was "flabbergasted" at how isolated she became. "We're well-connected, we have lots of friends, but when you have a baby you end up very much on your own." Frustrated and unsatisfied, in 1997 she started searching online for information about cooperative housing. A reference to a cohousing group in Vancouver led her in turn to the group that would eventually become Prairie Sky.

Kathi was thrilled by the cohousing concept. Dennis, who grew up on a farm north of Medicine Hat, wasn't. "I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I liked my privacy in the city, my house, my yard." The thought of living cheek-by-jowl was intimidating, if not repulsive. "Interacting with this many people, in close proximity, on purpose--it scared the heck out of me. I had the same images as most people. The word commune springs up. I had no desire to be that intimately involved in a community." But like Ray, hanging out with the core group at meetings and potlucks won him over. "As I got to know people more and more I really started to like the concept. I felt like I was back home, on the farm. It's a similar philosophy, you know your neighbours really well. And now I love it. I would never move back to the other way."

Hazel, an executive director of the Canadian Worker Co-op Federation, agrees that Prairie Sky is like an idealized version of small-town life. "The negative image of a small town is that people talk about you if they don't like you, but there's none of that here. This is like a small town without the perceived disadvantages. Many people go to church, others don't, but no one is judgmental. People keep finding things we can do together."

Men like Dennis and Ray get a great benefit from cohousing, says Kathi. "They didn't want to come in, but now they're the kings of cohousing. It's a great situation for men. Women naturally make social circles; men don't. Seeing men get close relationships and getting to do buddy-buddy things is great." It's good for marriages, she says, and also for parenting. "We

have so many friends and opportunities, we don't have to be everything for each other. And we don't have to be everything for our children, either. So many people interact with our kids on a daily basis. If I don't sew or if they need math, there's somebody there. We couldn't buy that--enough music lessons, art lessons for what they get here." Another mother felt the same way. "I hate that cliché that it takes a village to raise a child, but it's true. It's so good for the kids. It's shaping them to be conscientious citizens and think outside the box. My sister has a huge mansion, and when we go there my kids ask, 'Why do you need a living room and a dining room if you don't use them?'"

Prairie Sky is not conspicuous. Drive down Edmonton Trail on a summer afternoon, heading north from downtown, and on either side is the usual blurred corridor of single-family homes, strip malls and low-rise apartments. At 30th Avenue, besides an Esso station, the only eye-catching sight is a dense little garden on the northeast corner, sprung with orange poppies and annunciatory sunflowers. The Victory Garden, as residents call it, sits to the left of Prairie Sky's courtyard entrance. Behind it are three two-storey complexes, painted an unappealing combination of avocado and pink. The Victory Garden's name, it turns out, is related to the unfortunate colour scheme.

When the question of colour is raised, three people respond simultaneously. It's almost eight thirty in the evening but people are still lounging at the picnic tables. "What's wrong with the colour?" Ann says, laughing. "You don't like it?"

"You have to understand these are not the colours we wanted," says Donna, a hospital unit clerk.

"Oooh, here we go," somebody says.

"We wanted blue and yellow," Bernie says, "but the city turned down our development permit because of the colours. "

"That's city hall's choice of our colour scheme," says Donna.

"That shade of pink is called Dusty Rose," another person says drily. "We tried really hard to get to Pepto-Bismol."

Between Bernie and Dennis--Dennis is the most outspoken in offering expletives for the planning officer in question--the story comes out. The neighbourhood around Prairie Sky had already OK'd the blue and yellow colour scheme, which suited the community's poetic name, but a young planning officer nixed it. The colours, he said, didn't blend with the surrounding environs. "He was arguing for the values of the neighbourhood, but it was a completely spurious argument. He had some power and he wanted to use it," says Bernie. "This is four years ago and it still makes everyone crazy."

"It was, let's say, character building," says Dennis. In the end, residents had to obey the letter of the planning officer's commands and allow the painters to slap on the Pepto Bismol and avocado. But the little garden became a symbol of eventual triumph over various city bureaucracies. "We called it the Victory

Garden because we had victory over the city in getting it in there." Victory didn't come cheap: Loan interest that accrued during permitting delays, plus additional construction costs, amounted, one resident estimated, to about \$100,000 dollars over budget.

Those who suffer together, stay together. As with the ongoing decisions that have to be hashed out at weekly business meetings--whether certain unpredictable pets should be allowed to remain, how shop tools will be signed out, who will paint the railings and steps that are starting to get rusty--the homely truth is that social capital does not grow on trees. Community, residents admit, means time-consuming and unglamorous work. But cohousing meetings, they add, do not resemble the fractious and sometimes bitter confrontations often experienced in less close-knit organizations like, um, condo and neighbourhood associations. "We went through a lot of trials, problems with the city and money," says Kathi, "but it's incredible how it brought the group closer together. It was worth it--for what we have now. It's such a refreshing way to live, and I like our kids seeing us live honestly. You don't have to please everybody, you don't have to agree. And people get to see you looking like crap."

Besides being seen in your sweatpants, one further downside of cohousing is the crimp on personal privacy. Put 18 residences and 45 people on three-quarters of an acre and you increase interaction but decrease personal space. After a period of adjustment and growing some healthy boundaries, most residents say it works surprisingly well. But for a few it becomes too much of a good thing. One mother said that if her

kids weren't thriving there, she would likely move. "My business is very much out in the public. I'm dealing with people all the time. So when I come home and I just want to chill, if I'm outside or down below people will want to come chat. So I have to go up on the balcony. I'd want maybe to move somewhere that isn't so congested, where there's more space."

For every person who feels this way, however, there are a dozen, or 20, who are happy as clams. "You're never going to pry me out of my unit," says Ray. "There may be ups and downs in community, but there's no way we're going back to the suburbs. I'm gone for two weeks and I can't wait to get back here." (Ironically, Cathie, the last of the 1995 group, just sold her two-bedroom unit for \$310,000 to move into a house with her new husband, who comes fully loaded with a hang-glider and at least one homemade cedar-strip canoe. "He loves the community--his best friend of 20 years lives here, which is how we met," she says. "But 790 square feet is a bit small for the two of us.")

On the subject of which careers suit the cohousing lifestyle, I ask if cohousing tends to attract sensitive types from the helping professions--nurses, teachers, counsellors. The half-dozen people left at the picnic tables laugh. "Actually," says Bernie, "we have a disproportionate number of computer geeks. You could call it Geekville."

"We have a disproportionate number of Donnas," someone adds. "And Anns."

Conversation eventually turns to a discussion of artisan cheeses, briefly touches on the debate over

unpasteurized milk and from there to the upcoming potluck.

"It's hard to get things done when the weather's nice," says Kathi, looking up as the sun sinks below the avocado stucco. "People are always socializing somewhere and I'd rather do that."

"So there is a dark side to cohousing?"

"Oh yes," she says. "That's the dark side."

Websites

www.cohousing.ca/

Website of the Canadian Cohousing Network, with a short historical overview, contacts in existing and currently forming Canadian cohousing communities and links to news-letters and articles. Video and radio documentaries also available for sale.

www.cohousing.org

The American version, offering a magazine, national conference, links to resources on elder cohousing, a list of defining features and tons of other resources.

www.comunitas.ca/

Website of The Communitas Group in Edmonton, community development and housing consultants who were, according to Prairie Sky members, "instrumental" in its creation.

Books

Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community by Robert D. Putnam. Based on sociological and anecdotal research, Putnam warns that social capital--the fabric of our connections with each other--has dangerously declined.

Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves by Kathryn McCamant, Charles Durrett, and Ellen Hertzman. The original "Bible" of the cohousing movement, heavy on European examples.

The Cohousing Handbook: Building a Place for Community by Chris ScottHanson and Kelly ScottHanson. Published in 2004, this is a step-by-step guide to building a cohousing neighbourhood.

Reinventing Community: Stories from the Walkways of Cohousing by David Wann.

A collection of first-hand experiences from people living in cohousing communities.

Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities by Diana Leafe Christian. A guide to launching and sustaining "successful new ecovillages and sustainable communities" and avoiding common mistakes.

© The Calgary Herald 2007

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.