

When Do We Begin to Flourish in Senior Cohousing?

The answer is: Sooner than you'd think

By Margaret Critchlow and Andrew Moore

Look at all these old people!" exclaimed one of our members as she joined the group walking toward a property for sale in Sooke, outside Victoria on British Columbia's Vancouver Island. Then she reminded herself that she is one of them, a person who is young at heart in an aging body.

Everyone in this group was stepping out of denial about getting older. We had bonded through 10-week study groups on "Active Aging in Community." We looked forward to finding a site on which to build our own senior cohousing. Perhaps the site we were walking toward along the road that day would be it? Committed to

improving on the alternatives available to our own parents and to leaving the world a better place, we have chosen to start a cohousing group that will allow us to flourish for the rest of our lives and to model an alternative way of living as our legacy.

What we discovered on the road and at the other sites we visited that day is that our new community has already begun. Far more than a place to live, it is a way of living. And we have a lot of living and learning to do!

Long before we have a common house or a place to call our own we are already building the skills to work effectively together. We are sharing the experiences



Photos courtesy of Margaret Critchlow



that show us how much we enjoy each other's company, most of the time, and we're learning how to work through our difficulties when we don't see eye to eye.

As we imagined our houses overlooking this stream, or peeked into that kitchen, wondering if it could be adapted for a common house, our hopes and dreams became the community we shared. Suddenly we were no longer just talking about senior cohousing; we had started living it.

We are working hard at building communication and rapport with each other, which is an important prerequisite if we are going to live in proximity and collectively look after the communal property (something that is crucially needed when you examine the failure of the condominium model). But we will be looking after more than property. Communication and rapport become essential if we shall be looking after each other—sometimes in quite intimate ways—as we age.

Senior cohousing includes the principal of “co-caring,” or neighbourly mutual support. Building on Charles Durrett's foundational work in *The Senior Cohousing*

Handbook (2009), we are developing a model of co-caring for neighbors, not just those in cohousing, so as to foster community.

Co-caring, which can include physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual caring, aims to enable ourselves and others to flourish through mutual support and live in an optimal range of human functioning for the rest of our lives. It is likely that conventional health systems will be considerably strained as the proportion of seniors in the population grows with the aging of us Baby Boomers. With social structures changing rapidly, traditional ways of looking after elderly family members are becoming less viable options to provide for the care that is already needed and will become increasingly required.

On the one hand we are all taking this journey into senior cohousing very seriously, investing time and money in study groups and workshops with Ronaye Matthew (Cohousing Development Consulting) and others so we can all be aware of and meet the challenges that might be ahead of us. On the other hand we often replace seriousness with fun; collective potlucks, visiting sites together, making new friends from amongst the members of the cohousing group.

We are already encouraging each other to flourish in our 50s, 60s, and 70s, when many might have been starting to live our lives in isolation for want of any better choices. As one group member put it, “I have not met and enjoyed the company of so many new people since my adolescent years. I look forward to working and living closely with this group of mature adults in cohousing and co-caring—probably until the end of my days!”

By the end of our site tour, we “old people” were like kids in summer camp fording a stream and befriending cows. Walking back up a hill to leave the final site, one panting city dweller said to her new senior cohousing friend, “When I live in cohousing you all will get me more fit. Oh wait, you already are!” ☺

Margaret Critchlow is an anthropologist and retired professor who is convinced it takes a village to raise an elder. Andrew Moore is an architect and community developer in charge of special projects for the T'Sou-ke First Nation. His experience as a manager of rock bands may be his most useful preparation for senior cohousing. They, and other members of our community, can be reached through seniorcohousing@gmail.com.

