



REAL ESTATE

These once-strangers want to live alone, together — and are designing and financing their own community to do it

Co-housing is on the rise in Canada, with groups forming in Toronto, Ottawa and elsewhere, and dozens of projects already built or in the works.

By Diana Zlomislic Investigative Reporter

Jan 27, 2024

Article was updated Jan 29, 2024



Members of Kawartha Commons Cohousing group gathered for a potluck supper near Peterborough, Ont., to talk about the latest developments in their cohousing project that they hope will see 40 families living as part of the community. FRED THORNHILL/For the Toronto Star

PETERBOROUGH COUNTY, ONT. — Kris Robinson Staveley grew up on this farm but she doesn't want to grow old here.

Her father, a therapist from California, bought the acreage overlooking Lower Buckhorn Lake in Peterborough County to open what he called a human growth potential centre. He wanted to help people work on their relationships. The country retreat, with more than 40 hectares of meandering trails through relatively isolated woods and meadows, seemed an idyllic setting to do that. And for two years in the 1970s, he ran the site as a commune, complete with a geodesic dome, when Robinson Staveley was just a kid.

When her dad discovered a practical limitation in his vision for human growth — it wasn't a sustainable source of income — the commune folded but some of the ideas and experiences stuck with Robinson Staveley, who earned a doctorate in social psychology at Princeton University.

On a chilly night in late fall, Robinson Staveley is back at the original farmhouse. She casts a hippie vibe in an oversized T-shirt with wavy blond hair that grazes her shoulder blades. She welcomes a dozen guests into the small cottage a few hours before nightfall. Many have just finished a hike on the property and are settling in around a giant octagonal table — a remnant of the commune days

— to talk about the latest developments in a new social experiment they’re leading that will soon change the way they, and dozens of others, live.



Alan Slavin, right, and his wife, Linda, centre, with Marc Staveley near Buckhorn, Ont. They are part of group involved in building community living project in Peterborough.
FRED THORNHILL/For the Toronto Star

The group is embarking on a co-housing project, a living and real estate arrangement that allows residents to have their own home while being surrounded by neighbours who know their names and are willing to share a glass of wine or a story in the garden after dinner. Like in a condo complex, co-housing residents would own their own suites but there is an expectation that residents pitch in to manage the property. In most cases, co-housing owners are financing, planning and designing the space themselves. The concept is part of a growing trend across Canada with new groups forming in Toronto, Ottawa and Kingston.

The Kawarthas group has worked hard to create a community first by organizing regular gatherings. They kept their community alive throughout the pandemic with weekly dinners over Zoom. They’ve pooled just over \$500,000 and purchased a large plot of land — the grounds of a former convent — within walking distance of downtown Peterborough. They’ve hired a Toronto based architect and are now elbow deep into planning an energy efficient development large enough to house 40 privately owned households centred around 4,000 square feet of common amenities including expansive gardens, a commercial kitchen, dining hall, exercise room, and workshop/crafting space.

“We’re trying to recreate the concept of a village,” explains Aukje Byker, a former college professor

who was among the first in Peterborough to join the Kawartha Commons Cohousing group. She raised her children on a farm in Binbrook, Ont., with the help from two other families and fell in love with the supportive lifestyle.

From concept to co-housing

In Ontario, the number of co-housing developments is set to double over the next few years when three more communities cross construction finish lines, including Robinson Staveley and Byker's group in the Kawarthas.

Co-housing is unique in that these developments are typically planned and financed by future residents.

In Toronto, Kingston, Ottawa and Sudbury, co-housing groups have formed but their members are still hunting for land, which can be challenging when competing against the deeper pockets of developers.



"We're trying to recreate the concept of a village," says Aukje Byker, a member of the Kawartha Commons Cohousing group.
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"Land costs are through the roof," says Lysa Dixon, a Vancouver based board director for the Canadian Cohousing Network, which provides resources for existing and developing communities.

British Columbia is home to the greatest number of co-housing communities in the country with 15 completed sites and four more under development.

Dixon recently moved into a six-storey, 25-unit, multi generational co-housing site in Vancouver

near Queen Elizabeth Park where the residents range in age from four months to 80 years.

The group purchased three plots of land in an area newly designed for multi-family residences with help from a professional co-housing consultant in 2015 and moved in six years later. The project cost roughly \$22 million; an amount they divided based on the unit owner's suite size and location.

"We were priced at pretty much market value when we moved in," said Dixon. "You're not paying developer profit. It's built at cost. But co-housing tends to use better building materials. We were also building in the middle of COVID so we had some cost overruns."



Little Mountain Cohousing community lives in a six-storey, multigeneration building in Vancouver.

Courtesy Lysa Dixon

On paper, it's a condo building with each unit owner holding the title to their individual space. There is an understanding, however, that the condo's common spaces, which include a kitted-out music

room, workshop and rooftop garden, are meant to encourage socializing and that residents help care for the building and each other, as their interests and abilities allow.

When the group first formed, they had no problem finding more than enough people eager to participate.

“We’re a bit of a unicorn,” Dixon says. “We had 20 households committed before we had land. We stopped taking members at that point because we didn’t know what we could build.

Once we got the land, we filled the other spots from our wait-list.”

It’s not all wine and roses, though. The amount of collaboration required in communities like these can be challenging and exhausting for some. Decision making is done by consensus so residents don’t always get their way.

“There’s a lot of back and forth,” Dixon said. “It takes time to find a solution that’s going to be good enough for everybody. But you end up with more buy-in for a decision because you’re looking at the bigger picture.”

While Dixon is single, the mortgage specialist enjoys living among families with kids and other professionals from a range of backgrounds including teachers, lawyers, engineers and physiotherapists.

Three times a week someone from the community signs up to cook meals served in the dining room.

“I always joke with people that it’s a way I can live alone with other people,” Dixon says.

The community works to keep monthly maintenance costs down by encouraging residents to share their skills with the community.

Take landscaping, for example. The board budgets \$1,500 for this expense while other buildings spend 10 times that amount.

“We work with the skills, interests and capacity of members in the community,” Dixon said. “Our building hires a cleaner weekly to clean toilets in the common house because nobody is interested in doing that and that’s OK.”

Dixon’s Little Mountain Cohousing community has a wait-list of 600 people interested in moving in, she said. Since moving in in 2021, only one unit has been sold and it was snapped up before hitting MLS.

Dixon believes co-housing’s popularity in B.C. is a credit to full time consultants in the industry who are based in the province and help move projects along.

“Consultants help people set goals and reach them,” Dixon explained. “It can be scary. You’re dropping thirty, forty, fifty grand into something that is just a concept.”

Young families need apply

Members of the Kawartha group hired Katie McCamant, a California-based architect who is credited with bringing the Danish concept of *bofællesskaber* to North America, as their guide. McCamant and her former partner Charles Durrett actually coined the term co-housing, which now appears in the Oxford English dictionary.

McCamant says physical proximity is a critical component of building a community where people can meaningfully connect with and learn from one another.

In her view, fences do not make good neighbours. And single family homes make for terrible neighbourhoods.

“The radical thing about co-housing,” says McCamant, “is how unradical it is.”

She’s designed more than 55 co-housing communities across the U.S.

As of January, 11 households have each invested roughly \$50,000 in the Kawarthas co-housing project. The Peterborough group is still hoping to recruit younger families. They have a website and social media pages dedicated to explaining their development and host in-depth information sessions that typically involve group activities like potlucks, bonfires, skating and hiking.



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“We’re told these sites are typically started by older people who have time and money and that

younger families join when it's closer to being move-in ready," Robinson Staveley said.

Earlier this month, the group hosted its "design superweekend" where it revealed initial building and suite design plans mocked up by Sheena Sharp, the principal architect at Coolearth Architecture Inc. in Toronto.

Sharp and her associates attended the event to walk future residents through the plans and answer questions. The co housing members have to pin down a lot of decisions that most homeowners never have input on. Things like the size of the stair risers. A shorter rise, they're told, takes up more space but it can help prevent people from tripping and keep them out of hospital. Do they want a separate space for yoga in addition to an exercise room? To what extent will they incorporate permaculture into their design?

Helping the group make these decisions to keep the design plan rolling has become Robinson Staveley's volunteer full-time job as the co-housing board's president. The goal is to start construction next year and move in by 2026.



Alan Slavin and his wife, Linda, near Buckhorn, Ont. They are part of group involved in building community living project in Peterborough.

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Pati Beaudoin isn't worried about the timeline because she knows firsthand the community isn't going anywhere.

On the eve of a terrible snowstorm just before Christmas in 2022, the psychologist had developed a painful case of shingles on her torso. She had missed the window for an antiviral treatment.

She reached out to the co-housing group with a slightly strange request: could anyone come by her place to help wash, peel and grate potatoes for a few days? She thought a poultice would help soothe the terrible pain from the rash.

Pretty quickly, Byker and several other group members knocked on her door.

“One of them brought over a high-end whizzing machine that grates everything in its path,” Beaudoin recalled.

Beaudoin has travelled the world and lived alone most of her life. She’s excited for this next new chapter.

“Life is sweeter when your social life is just outside your door or window.”

Correction - Jan. 29, 2024

This article was edited from a previous version that mistakenly said Katie McCamant is a Nevada-based architect. In fact, she is from California.



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