C.A.L.L.

Communities At Large Letter

INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES DESK

YAD TABENKIN

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Dear readers,

One need not look very far to see that the trends of co-housing and co-working have become a global phenomenon. Living together and sharing resources is becoming a more and more attractive option, particularly for millennials left behind by a ruthless global economy.

And the private sector has been quick to catch on. Many of those purporting to offer "communal" solutions for housing and sharing are nothing more than large, profit-driven companies seeking to capitalize, literally, on the growing trends.

The 37-year-old Israeli-born CEO of WeWork, a company that rents out office space in open-plan work areas and calls it's clients "community members," is one of America's youngest billionaires. Earlier this year in an interview with Haaretz, he described his company as "making a capitalist kibbutz."

Recent controversies surrounding such "sharing economy" giants as Uber and Airbnb have shown how effectively capitalist modes of exploitation and competition can disguise themselves as communal and collaborative initiatives.

Driven by profit, companies seeking to tap into the communal trend have simply developed more sophisticated tools for playing the market while doing nothing to combat the conditions that entrench inequality and injustice.

Meanwhile, as these mega-phenomena develop, so do the instances of true human communities seeking out a better reality. In their modest, authentic attempts to heal, liberate, repair and unite, they are perhaps not always as easy to find. But that only makes it more important to find them.

In this winter's edition of C.A.L.L we seek to bring you stories of intentional communities, past and present, that challenge convention, counter oppression, and create new avenues for all societies and *all* people, no matter who they are, to create a better, freer, happier life.

Gabriel Freund, Editor

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Home for everyone: Breaking bread and communal walls

A new intentional community in Delhi seeks to bring together members of all religions in the pursuit of peace transcending boundaries

Mohammad Ibrar, Delhi; Times of India

Justice Rajinder Sacher inaugurating Sabka Ghar. Photo: twocircles.net

NEW DELHI: There are no religious divides here: on the contrary, you will find Hindus and Muslims living under the same roof, sharing meals – and their lives. Welcome to 'Sabka Ghar' – a home at Gaffar Manzil in Okhla – run by a non-profit organisation called Khudai Khidmatgar with the express aim of promoting communal harmony.

Its doors are open to everyone, irrespective of religion, gender, caste or region.

When this correspondent visited the home, he found one Hasnain Beg – with his skull cap on and a flowing beard – sitting crosslegged and sharing lunch with his new friend, Swami Anand Rajneesh. In the current politically charged atmosphere, it could have been a scene out of a Bollywood film; only, these otherwise deeply religious people are as real as the roof over their head. Beg and Rajneesh, like several others, have been staying at Sabka Ghar for several days now and have got used to each other's company.

While they go and pray at their respective places of worship, their debates and discussions are held with mutual respect and admiration for each other. "Living here among Muslims, I don't feel any difference. It seems that I am living with my brothers," said Rajneesh, who hails from Motihari in Bihar and is currently pursuing a diploma course from Aligarh Muslim University.

Rajneesh said he joined the organisation after he became disillusioned with politics. "Here, I realised that people can come together despite differences." Beg concurred: "It is only after you spend time together can you get rid of pre-conceived notions. Often, the ground reality is quite different."

Right now, Rajneesh and Beg share their room with three others. Their days are spent either studying or discussing current affairs. "I come from an orthodox Muslim sect and Rajneesh is a Pandit; so, it's natural that we have differences in opinion. But we respect each other," said Bilal Zaidi, a lawyer from Surat. Their food habits differ too, in most cases. "I am a vegetarian. Whenever non-vegetarian food is made, they ensure that my portion is served first," said Suyash Tripathi, a student at Jamia Millia Islamia's Law faculty.

The idea of Sabka Ghar was conceived by Kush Kumar Singh and Faisal Khan, members of Khudai Khidmatgar. "Our intention was to bring together people with different ideologies so that they could see each other's viewpoints," said Khan.

New initiative seeks to grow community through urban farming

Locals hope a communal garden will make their neighborhood a community

Drew Gerber, Spokane, WA; Spokesman Review

Several times a week, Christian McKinney and Brandon Gibson can be found crouched down working among beds of lettuce, carrots and other vegetables they've carefully nurtured in a small plot on the lawn of the Shadle Park Presbyterian Church in Spokane, Washington.

Growing Neighbors volunteer Brandon Gibson smiles as he collects carrots to take to a farmers market. Photo: Kathy Plonka

But while their garden, along with a number of others scattered around the Northwest neighborhood, has cultivated a bevy of fresh produce to be sold at the Emerson-Garfield Farmers Market, volunteers like McKinney are hoping that working the rich soil will help something else sprout: a sense of community.

Part of the Growing Neighbors project, these urban farming plots make use of donated portions of people's yards – space otherwise dedicated to non-productive patches of grass – to help bring fresh foods to an area of Spokane lacking in healthy options, said founder Johnny Edmondson. Initially planned as a restaurant concept, which Edmondson said remains a possibility down the road, the project will hopefully act as a catalyst around which community members can engage with one another, he said.

Before starting the project this spring, Edmondson said he didn't know much about gardening – but he knew about patience.

"I'd been dreaming up a way to care for the community," he said. "It's been a long time coming, and things finally came together."

Though the main goal was building community, it was important that any potential project also focus on values like feeding the hungry and stewardship of the Earth, Edmondson said.

The Growing Neighbors idea first took root at Shadle Park Presbyterian Church, where Edmondson is director of family ministries. The church planted its own community garden about three years ago, and was the first location that agreed to allow volunteers to set up shop. The program now has expanded to include 12 urban farming plots in the neighborhood and roughly 30 community volunteers, with several

more residents offering up their lawns on a waiting list as demand outstripped their supply of workers, Edmondson said.

McKinney, a recent graduate from Whitworth University who works in youth programming at Shadle Park Presbyterian Church, said he's been hearing Edmondson talk for several years about a way to bring the community together. While a lot of volunteer turnout is still tied to church events, the project has brought in children from local schools and other parts of the community, McKinney said.

"It's been great to learn from others, and it brings a fun feel to the yard," he said. "Gardens can be intimidating, so it's been good encouraging people."

One of the challenges to building community is that people have become closed off, afraid that anyone who engages them just wants something from them, McKinney said.

"There are pockets (of community), but for the most part people are pretty disconnected," he said. "Even on my street, it's still developing, where people are being intentional in forming community."

By building up their local networks, people in a community can help one another instead of struggling to rely on outside organizations and services, Edmondson said.

Growing Neighbors volunteer Brandon Gibson smiles as he collects carrots to take to a farmers market. Photo: Kathy Plonka

More than just the volunteer work itself, Edmondson said he hopes the project will grow to include neighborhood walks, communal meals, and block parties. The point is to build a neighborhood family that, even going into the winter, will feel comfortable inviting one another into their homes, he said.

Though the project is still in its early stages, with volunteers like McKinney still working out technical snags like watering schedules and planting for the winter, community members say they are already beginning to feel its effects.

Dorene Hagen grew up in the Northwest neighborhood, and she decided to donate a portion of her large yard after hearing about Growing Neighbors at a neighborhood council meeting. Hagen, who is in her late 70s, runs an upholstery business out of the childhood home where she still lives and said she has fond memories of life in the neighborhood.

Hagen said she has enjoyed getting to know several of the young people who volunteered to work her plot – as well as getting to use some of the organic lettuce and tomatoes grown in her yard. Property owners can tell the volunteers what types of produce they prefer, but most residents are just happy to let the gardens grow whatever the volunteers see fit, McKinney said.

Both gardening and building community can be hard work, but McKinney said he has been impressed by what the program has harvested so far.

"No program like this takes off overnight," he said. "But I've learned to appreciate the victories you get."

Coming out communal: Being queer at Virginia's oldest commune

Communal life at Twin Oaks creates ideal conditions for liberation

Brittany Lewis, Richmond, VA; GAYRVA

The word "commune" conjures images of hippies and free love, and while the stereotype isn't exactly wrong, today's rural counterculture looks a little different at the US's oldest secular commune. Known locally for their soy foods and hammocks, members of Twin Oaks Community in Louisa County are just as likely to show up to the back door of a Richmond restaurant with a delivery of extra-firm tofu as they are to come to the front door holding tickets for the latest queer music show. Because Twin Oaks was founded in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement – with an acknowledgment of patriarchy and racism as well as a mandate to oppose both, the community has been attracting social progressives "back to the land" for the last fifty years. Yet when other communal living experiments quietly closed their doors, Twin Oaks continued to build an alternative agrarian culture that welcomes home folks who find themselves on society's sexual margins.

Unlike the few queer land experiments that remain – Radical Faeries and the Landyke movement come to mind – Twin Oaks is not explicitly a queer community. Founded in 1967 based on behaviorist B.F. Skinner's utopian novel, Walden Two, Twin Oaks has expanded to a 100-person membership on 450 acres. While the community's behaviorist foundations were discarded, a commitment to egalitarianism and income-sharing remains, and all members live collectively and work full-time in the community. In addition to shared businesses, the community boasts extensive domestic supports–a vegetable garden, a dairy herd, a community preschool, and guaranteed healthcare. Stay as long as you want and all your needs are met.

Valerie, a 49-year-old queer Canadian feminist, discovered Twin Oaks over 20 years ago.

"I was already involved in alternative activist activities," she says, "and when I came to Twin Oaks, I realized it was the closest to the Platonic ideal of what alternative culture could look like."

Stephan, a 33-year-old genderqueer trans-guy, moved to Twin Oaks three years ago after tiring of living paycheck-to-paycheck in West

Photo: Brad Kutner

Philadelphia. For them, moving to a commune was the logical end of their coming-out process.

"I realized a crush on the same gender, realized I needed to rethink the default of heterosexuality, and then I asked myself what other defaults I needed to question. Religion, history, it's like dominoes. Now I share income, housing, cars, everything."

Like other Twin Oak residents, Stephan now lives in a house with ten to twenty adults, and works for "labor credits" instead of money, pocketing only about $1000 of spending money each year while the rest goes toward common expenses like food and medicine. For many of us living in the US, this level of counter-consumer sharing would be considered extreme, but for Stephan, that's part of the appeal;

"I enjoy personally a specific definition of queer that's related to subversive politics, going against the grain of people telling you how you should be in the world."

Photo: Brad Kutner

The process also works in reverse: If one can question, and reject, the norms of personal bank accounts and private living spaces, what else is up for consideration? Then the answer is 'everything'. The handbook distributed to new members encourages personal exploration, calling Twin Oaks "a safe place for playing with your definition of self." Sometimes that exploration illuminates new sexual behaviors and identities: Stephan says they kissed men for the first time after moving to Twin Oaks, while one of their current partners came out fully as a lesbian after joining. Many new members dive into polyamory upon their arrival. But other changes are more subtle, and personal. Valerie just recently began growing her natural facial hair. As a yoga instructor in local towns, she had to grapple first with the concern of how her non-commune students would see her.

"I decided to just let my light shine, be who I am, and let people who were drawn to that be drawn," she says. "I feel much freer to be who I am here."

Recognition of the blurred boundaries of gender likely contributes to the cultural acceptance of queer bodies. For decades, Twin Oak residents have been using the gender-neutral pronoun "co" in their official documents, keeping bathrooms open to all, and encouraging playful dress among adults and children alike.

Adder, a 29-year-old new father, is grateful that the children of Twin Oaks see adults exploring all the options of gender presentation. Although identifying as a straight man, his relationship to that identity has shifted since he moved to the community and started wearing skirts regularly, as many straight men at Twin Oaks do. When another member threw a "Genderbender" themed party, one of the commune's children was confused about why people were cheering a man who arrived at the party wearing a skirt and blouse. Adder explains,

"She just didn't get it. As the kids grow older, I think the gender markers will become clear to them, but because they experience so many of their early years without feeling the need to divide the world on gender lines, they'll be more open their whole lives."

While part of that openness comes from a "you do you" acceptance of diversity common enough in urban centers, what commune life offers uniquely is a promise of sanctuary. As evidence of the community's success at addressing feminist concerns of gender-based violence, members often quip that "women feel safe walking alone on the paths at night," and any woman who learned how to walk across a dark parking lot with her keys protruding from her fist will recognize the significance of that statement. But public spaces are often unsafe in other ways for people who are visibly queer, and Stephan says that Twin Oaks gives a sense of physical safety to LGBT folks: "Knowing each other and knowing the group's commitment to nonviolence, there's no fear of attack when going about your daily life. You would have to have your guard up if you were in the mainstream, and at Twin Oaks you don't. You you don't really realize what a relief that is until you don't have think about it all the time. It's not a small thing."

Photo: Brad Kutner

And the security offered by commune life is more than physical. People sometimes come to Twin Oaks from less-than-ideal domestic situations, forced by economic vulnerability to maintain unhealthy family relationships. Daniel, a 21-year-old gay man, says moving to Twin Oaks has allowed him to shift focus from survival towards self-actualization.

"Before I moved here I pretty much assumed I would never have relationships that satisfied me. Because I don't have to scramble to get my needs met, I feel like I have a lot more options for how I want to live, structure work, who I want to hang out with. I finally promised myself that I wouldn't enter into relationships that won't work for me, and I'm much less insecure about my sexuality in general."

While the commune lifestyle won't appeal to everyone, what it has in common with queer culture is a questioning of received wisdom. Which of our default beliefs nurture us, and which stifle us? When the physical, emotional, and financial constraints on our lives are removed, what versions of ourselves will unfold? Says Daniel, "The kinds of relationships you want are absolutely possible. You just have to put yourself in a place where they can flourish." This is a lesson we can all take to heart.

Dreaming of a shared city: The Akko Educators' Kibbutz

A cooperative community of teachers, educators and activists works to empower its city's residents to shape a more tolerant, peaceful, and vibrant future

Gabriel Freund, Akko, Israel; Communities Magazine (Winter 2017)

When the 20 young founders of the Akko Educators' Kibbutz, a cooperative community of teachers and social activists, settled 12 years ago in the northern Israeli coastal city of Akko, they threw themselves into their project to facilitate social change by establishing programs to benefit the Jewish and Arab youth living in the city's impoverished areas. Things went smoothly for the first few years as they set up weekly youth movement activities and an afternoon club for at-risk youth. But that abruptly changed on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, in October 2008, when an Arab resident of the city drove his car playing loud music through an exclusively Jewish neighbourhood. Whether it was an intentional act of disrespect or an absent-minded faux pas, the response to the action soon turned violent. It took police three days to quell the chaos of nationalistic demonstrations, furious retaliations, and general ugliness on all sides that left a swath of destroyed property and injured people in its wake.

Jewish and Arab youth at a summer day-camp run by the educators' kibbutz - the only mixed summer camp in the city.

The event, which became known as the Akko Riots, exposed the depth of the mistrust, animosity, and racism that fissure the seemingly calm surface of day-to-day life in a mixed city of some 50,000 Jewish and Arab (primarily Muslim, but also Christian and Druze) residents—one of the few cities in Israel where the two peoples live and work so closely together. In addition to leaving a wound that has yet to fully heal, the riots also gave the members of the Educators' Kibbutz pause to reconsider their purpose and mission. Graduates of the progressive Israeli youth movement HaNoar HaOved VeHalomed and members of the social activist Dror Israel movement, they had come to Akko in 2005 in the spirit of Israel's original kibbutzim—agricultural communities that were at the heart of building the young country. Rather than toil on the land, however, a wave of new pioneers spearheaded by Dror Israel was settling in cities and towns throughout the country, establishing intentional communities with the goal to reinvigorate the ideals of the country's first kibbutzim and adapt that model to bridge the economic gaps and inequality that have contributed to poverty and an eroding social fabric within Israel's densely populated urban environments. A shared space for living and collaborating closely together, so the idea goes, would

create the best conditions for creativity and innovation. In this way, a cooperative of educators working a range of different educational angles in the city and its surroundings would be able to break through the barriers facing any lone teacher or youth counsellor.

The Akko Educators' Kibbutz would do this by working to bolster the next generation, building relations between the Arab and Jewish youth of the city, which exists on the periphery of Israel's overall economic success and suffers from high levels of poverty and urban decay. Their effort was embraced by the mayor of Akko, who offered the kibbutz temporary residence and work space in a vacant and run-down compound that once housed a military convalescent facility. Known by local residents as the *Nofesh* —"vacation home"— it proved to be an adequate platform from which this group of young idealists could launch their agenda for social change.

But the Akko Riots cast a harsh light on the rifts within the communities they hoped to serve and the role they would have to play to make a lasting and peaceful change in the city. Addressing the needs just of youth would not be enough to truly effect change; they would need to reach all of the city's residents— Jew and Arab, young and old. With the reordering of their priorities came the evolution of new projects to directly target Arab-Jewish relations and focus on cultural and educational activities for all the residents of the city and its surroundings.

Participants in Word-for-Word, a bilingual Hebrew-Arabic program for residents run by the Educators' Kibbutz.

So was born the Akko Advot Center. "Advot" is the Hebrew word for ripples, and the name reflects the approach of the community-education center to creating change through grassroots democracy and shared goals. With bilingual programs to encourage Jews and Arabs to learn each other's languages and cultures, annual celebrations and commemorations of days that promote unity and civic responsibility among all residents, and a training program for local business owners to make their establishments accessible and inviting to employees and customers from all national and religious backgrounds, the Akko Advot Center seeks to empower the city's residents to shape a more tolerant, peaceful, and vibrant future.

By building a broad network of local activists, the Akko Advot Center hopes to create the capacity to respond quickly to local issues as they arise. Just such an instance occurred in 2014, after a long summer

of heightened tension that followed Israel's military conflict with Hamas in Gaza. The cooperative environment of the Akko Educators' Kibbutz means that people are always discussing the projects that they're working on, sharing ideas, and identifying common challenges. This is how they recognized, looking ahead at the calendar, that Yom Kippur and Eid-Al-Adha, the holiest days in Judaism and Islam respectively, would fall on the same day. Advot went into action immediately. They printed fliers in Hebrew and Arabic and mobilized groups of Jews and Arabs throughout the city to talk with residents about the importance of tolerance and mutual respect. The Advot Center brought religious leaders from both communities into every school in the city to discuss the significance of the holy days and the importance of mutual respect. The plan of action was based on the concept that education is a more effective strategy to reach people and effect desired peaceful outcomes than enlisting the police to employ the threat of force to maintain order. When the day came, both groups celebrated their holy days in peace.

Michal Keidar is a founding member of the Akko Educators' Kibbutz and the director of the Akko Advot Center. "We believe that Akko's diversity is something to be celebrated, not begrudged," she says. "Right now, Akko is defined as a 'mixed city.' Our strategy is based on taking the reality of the mixed city and working towards a vision of a 'shared city.' If we can show that Jews and Arabs here can do more than just tolerate each other, but, rather, truly live together in solidarity, then it could shine as a beacon to the entire country."

Michal Keidar (center), leads a group of Jewish and Arab locals on a tour of the city's social history.

Port of the old city of Akko, with the El Bachar Mosque in the background. Photo: Oren Rozen

It is an ambitious dream. Now, as the Akko Educators' Kibbutz embarks on this new chapter, its members seek a better vantage from which to help implement change. For 12 years, the *Nofesh* has been a good home. In spite of its dilapidated state, the place has a certain physical charm. Built near the city's southern shore, it offers commanding views of the Mediterranean Sea and across Haifa Bay to Mount Carmel and, to the northwest, the ancient stone walls and turquoise minarets of Old Akko, which is best viewed as the setting sun paints the Levantine sky shades of violet, pink, purple, and red. But the members of the Educators' Kibbutz—which has grown from the original 20 to

nearly 100, and includes 11 children—did not come to Akko for the views. They came to make a difference, and that is taking place in the heart of the city.

It is no longer possible for members of the kibbutz to achieve their goals from the physical outskirts of the city; they must move into the social and cultural core of the community they want to serve. About 18 months ago, the kibbutz identified a building near the city's commercial center and Akko's mixed inner-city neighbourhoods. The four-story building of white stone was just seven years old and had been a private nursing home until it went bankrupt. With only modest changes, the building would be perfect for the needs of the kibbutz. Renovation of the top three floors would turn them into living areas for communal residential life and creative collaboration, and the ground floor would provide public activity space—a physical interface between the kibbutz and the broader community. These were the precise conditions that would allow the unique social innovation that the Educators' Kibbutz represents to become what it needs to be. The building would allow for a model of urban communal living combined with activist outreach. Nothing like it existed anywhere in Israel.

But buying the building wasn't possible without partners from Israel and abroad. Members of the kibbutz sought resources throughout the country and overseas. It was a difficult task—not everyone, they learned, is supportive of the idea of financially backing a large cooperative community. They came close several times to signing an agreement for the building, only to have their financial backing fall through. Sometimes it was difficult not to become disheartened.

"The kibbutz has made such a huge commitment to the future of Akko. I truly believe that if we succeed in what we're trying to do, others will follow in our path," said Mirit Sulema, a member of the Educators' Kibbutz and one of the leaders of the fundraising drive.
"Not just those seeking to live communally like we do, but also people throughout Israel, and maybe throughout the world, who want to make change in the places that they live. That's why we do what we do."

Mirit Sulema, one of the directors of the Akko Educators' Kibbutz, outside City Hall.

An agreement was recently signed with the previous owner of the new building, and the kibbutz is now one major step closer to making the dream a reality. But as of the writing of this article, the campaign is still underway. According to Sulema, it will take several more years to find enough economic partners to help fully realize the kibbutz's dream. For now, all eyes are turned resolutely to the future of the kibbutz and that of the community it serves.

Urban Kibbutzim: A growing movement

Urban kibbutzim like Mishol are revitalizing the principles of egalitarianism and social responsibility and applying them to life in 21st century Israel

Anton Marks, Nazareth Illit, Israel; Communties Magazine (Winter 2017)

The first kibbutz was established over 100 years ago, and over the following century, a network of almost 300 full income-sharing agricultural communes was established all over Israel. The plan was based on anarchist principles, whereby this federation of communities would coalesce into a whole cooperative society, without centralized government or borders.

Fast forward to the year 2017. The rural kibbutz communities are in retreat, there's a strong central government and, albeit for very different reasons, the country has no clear borders.

However, there are those who have taken up the mantle of taking responsibility for shaping the society, young people who are establishing hundreds of urban communes that, both individually and as movements, are effecting change in the inner cities—communes of educators who are working against violence, racism, homophobia, and poverty.

I am a member of Kibbutz Mishol, one of the many intentional communities that have been established over the past 20 years. We are 130 people, all living under one roof, making decisions together, bringing our children up together, sharing all of our income, 10 cars, our living spaces, and a handful of dogs, cats, and chinchillas.

Our kibbutz is in the city; in fact, we are situated in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country—and it's a choice. We've made this choice to work together with our partners in the local municipality, and together with our partners who live in this city, to shape the wider

community for the benefit of all of its citizens—Jews, Arabs, those from the former Soviet Union, from Ethiopia, asylum seekers, religious, secular, left, and right.

We have established a nonprofit organization through which we run all of our educational projects. For example, we run a local public elementary school, non-formal education in after-school centres, a youth movement, a coexistence project, and educational tours to Poland. In addition, we have teams of people working together taking responsibility over the inner functioning of our community—looking after our cars, our building, our children, our finances, our learning, our relationships, and our culture.

It's a healthy tension in our lives: to what extent are we focused on the internal—living together and improving our relationships, creating a community that makes decisions by consensus, challenging societal norms when it comes to gender roles, understanding the different needs and different abilities of our members—and to what extent on the external—our interactions and impact on the surrounding society? Do we exist for ourselves, as a lifestyle choice, or is our aim to use community as a vehicle for changing the world around us?

The kibbutz-building enterprise started as a way of taking responsibility over the needs of a developing society and a developing economy—agriculture, creating towns and villages, defending the borders, building a public health system, a nationwide union, newspapers, etc., etc. Today the needs of the country can be found in the inner cities, draining the social swamps of society, rather than the physical mosquito=infested swamps of the early 20th century backwaters of the Ottoman Empire.

These urban communes, largely situated in the geographical and economic peripheries of Israel, springing up like mushrooms after the rain, are a model of how an alternative society can be built within the existing capitalist society—not as isolated independent communities, but as a network of communities which together offer an example of how society can be structured in a more just and equitable way.

From socialism to the suburbs: The Life of a fading community

Usonia was an intentional community built by Frank Lloyd Wright in the 1940s. Has it become little more than a Westchester suburb?

Amelia Schonbek, Westchester, NY; Curbed.com

If you look at an aerial photo of Westchester County from the 1940s, as the founders of Usonia may well have done, you'll see a number of towns dissolving into farmland or woods, divided by a few highways but not much else. It was exactly what the founders were looking for: some verdant, empty land on which to build affordable homes, raise their children, experience nature, and form a community together. They were a group of mostly young Jews from New York City, not really hippies—they had professional jobs and intended to keep them—but they had socialist leanings, a strong desire to escape the claustrophobia of New York, and a set of plans drawn up by Frank Lloyd Wright for a 47-family intentional community: a long swath of land with houses scattered across it on circular plots that all blended into one another. Wright was against fences, and they wrote a prohibition on demarcating property into Usonia's covenant.

Photo: Ashley Gates

Standing in the middle of Usonia today feels almost like standing in the middle of that midcentury vision. Hundred-foot trees rise all around, and the homes, made of wood and glass and stone and designed by Wright or his apprentices, are so well placed among the hills that it feels like they grew out of the land. It's very, very quiet. But walk outward and the spell breaks a bit. In the driveway of one home, a basketball hoop has been affixed to a Wrightian natural stone wall. On the northern edge of the neighborhood you can hear cars whizzing by. Today's aerial maps show, all around Usonia's deep green woods, rows of tiny square houses and square lawns. And next to one property in

the middle of Usonia is a winding section of chain-link fence. Modern suburban life has, in the decades since the community was built, crept increasingly close.

And Usonia has changed. Children of the original members still live in the community, but now they share it with newer families, some of whom have less interest in the ideals that shaped it. Some don't live in Usonia full-time, but come up only on weekends. "When I was growing up, this was a community where doors were open," says Josh Podell, who has lived in Usonia for much of his life. "Every adult was almost like your secondary parent. All of those things have changed. There isn't as much community spirit."

Whether that shift was inevitable, and whether it matters, is the subject of a lot of debate in Usonia. Are all experiments in cooperative living necessarily short-lived, made for and defined by the particular moment in which they took shape? Or has Usonia become some looser version of itself for another reason, perhaps generational or cultural? Frank Lloyd Wright regularly made lofty, outsize claims about the power of his architecture: it could shape experience, he argued, could lead to freer, more democratic lives. Was there ever any way for his houses to deliver on those promises?

Before it was a place on the map of upstate New York, Usonia was an idea that David and Priscilla Henken had for a cooperative inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's philosophies of the ideal American community. Wright wanted to dismantle American cities and replace them with a vast network of small communities modeled after Broadacre City, his utopia. He believed, he wrote in 1932, that every family should have an acre of land and a beautiful home. ("No distinction exists between much and little, more and less. Quality is in all, for all, alike.") He went on to write that "each citizen of the future will have all forms of production, distribution, self improvement, enjoyment, within a radius of a hundred and fifty miles of his home now easily and speedily available by means of his car or plane."

The building block of Wright's vision was the Usonian home, an affordable house for the masses. (Wright advocated replacing the word American with Usonian, to indicate the country's unique architectural vernacular.) The standard Usonian home would be a single story, oriented away from the street and toward nature. Large windows were meant to bring the outdoors in, but overhangs helped people feel protected from the outside world as well. Wright wanted to encourage families to spend most of their time together, so he made open-plan living and work spaces, centered around a hearth that would draw people together. Bedrooms were kept very small to discourage inhabitants from spending too much time away from the communal space.

Photo: Ashley Gates

In 1940, the Henkens had seen Wright's models for Usonian homes and Broadacre City at the Museum of Modern Art, and promptly uprooted their life and moved to Taliesin, where David Henken joined Wright's fellowship program. When David completed his training, he and Priscilla moved back to New York, and, with David's sister and brother-in-law and a small group of friends, launched an all-encompassing, years-long campaign to get their community off the ground. They decided to name it Usonia in honor of Wright, who signed on to design the master plan and some of the houses himself.

It was the early 1940s, and, coming out of the financial distress of the Depression, cooperatives were hugely popular. Some of the early informational meetings about Usonia drew hundreds. But for the core group, the appeal was far more than economic. They felt that cooperative living "could help create a more just society," wrote Roland Reisley, an early member, in his book *Usonia, New York: Building a Community with Frank Lloyd Wright*. Two Usonians who were psychologists drew up a questionnaire to assess whether prospective members fit in well with the group's ideals. Could potential members imagine living with an Active Musician? Trotskyite? Pacifist? Chicken Raiser? They had dreams of creating a racially diverse, integrated community, and hoped a black family would join Usonia. But they stopped short of actively recruiting families of color, believing the community's self-presentation as a group of people interested in diversity would speak for itself. (It took decades before a black family joined the community.)

Photo: Ashley Gates

The founders wanted to combine Wright's concepts of affordable home ownership and organic architecture with classical cooperative ideals like democratic governance and joint ownership of resources. Hammering out the details took years. Co-op meetings "were loud, they were endless, they sometimes were pointless, and I can't say nobody's feelings got hurt," one early Usonian told Reisley. "But they were invigorating, and everybody took part." Over time, the group came up with a series of legally binding covenants which members would agree to when they joined Usonia. They governed things like architectural style (all building designs must be approved by the whole group), communality (no property delineations were allowed), and political neutrality. The covenants could only be amended by a unanimous vote.

The Usonians bought 97 acres of land in Westchester in 1947 and broke ground on the first houses a few years later. Each weekend, members took the train from the city to help clear land and assist in construction to try and keep costs down. Hope Sobie, who was a small child when her parents joined Usonia in the early 1950s, remembers watching her father chase after the bulldozer that was clearing their parcel to make sure the driver didn't take down any more trees than was absolutely necessary.

By the time Sobie's family moved in, there were already a handful of families living in Usonia. The day they arrived, Sobie remembers, "we just bopped in to all the houses and we met 'em all. Anyone you'd meet would be friendly, sharing things."

In a lot of ways, life in Usonia in those years was idyllic. Children were on a first-name basis with all the adults in the community, and could walk into anybody's house and open the fridge without a second thought. Originally, the Usonians intended to build a shared community house for meetings and activities, but they soon realized it wasn't necessary, because all their houses were de facto community space. They formed a cantata singing group that rehearsed in the Friedman family's living room; children got cooking lessons in the Lurie family kitchen; the women held an exercise class that rotated among their houses. Sobie remembers that when her mother hosted the group, she opened up the folding doors separating the master bedroom and the living room to make sure the space was big enough for the women to jump across.

Money was tight, but they helped one another out. "We were very tolerant with our members," Reisley remembers. "Somebody was a little slow with their payments, okay, you're slow." In his book, Reisley writes that "through the years the cooperative maintained a semiofficial slush fund for members' use"; whenever it seemed like someone was in need, he or she would receive an anonymous offer of assistance.

Not everything was perfect, of course. The Usonians fought over the things that members of every community fight over: how to spend shared resources; who was shirking their volunteer responsibilities. And the larger financial problems they faced continually threatened to sink them.

One of Usonia's main draws was the idea that you could build a beautiful home in the community for very little money—$5,000 to $7,500, according to Wright's original estimates. "Well, you should never let an architect give quotes for the price of houses," says Podell, who was David Henken's nephew. "They have no concept of money." Though Wright wanted Usonian homes to be affordable for a wide swath of people, he was unbending about the quality of materials that should be used. Amid the postwar building boom, costs quickly rose out of control.

The cooperative's structure entailed group ownership of both land and houses; families held 99-year leases on their homes. Each family had a Usonian account in which they put money that was then directed toward the costs of building their home and investing in common space. "Essentially," Reisley told me, "members invested in the cooperative and had equity that was equal to their investment." It had been a struggle to obtain mortgages as a group; now, the spiraling construction costs meant that they risked foreclosure. A series of fraught discussions resulted in the decision to dismantle part of the cooperative structure, giving each family individual ownership over its home and maintaining cooperative control of communal land. "Almost three years of tumultuous meetings—held several times a week and for hours—followed," Reisley wrote.

But they stuck together, maybe in part because going back into the wider world didn't seem all that appealing. The rest of Westchester was deeply conservative, and it was the height of McCarthyism. Rumors swirled that the young Jewish families from the Bronx living in those radical houses were actually communists. In the stately Center-Hall Colonial houses of Pleasantville and Chappaqua, Usonia was sometimes referred to as Insania.

So, in spite of the committees and the meetings and the financial stress, nobody really left Usonia in those early years. They dammed a stream to make a natural swimming pool, carpooled to their jobs in the city, got dogs, sent their kids to Sunday school at the Ethical Culture Society, wrote for the Newsonian ("All the news that fits, we print"), threw parties to which everyone was always invited. And then, as their children grew up and left home, things began to change.

The train up from Grand Central Station is crowded even early on a Saturday morning, full of weekenders headed for the dense network of towns that stretch north from New York City: White Plains, Valhalla, Mount Pleasant. Pleasantville Station is surrounded by a farmers market that may as well be in

Brooklyn; the road out of town is lined with sprawling old houses. One minute you're driving past verandas and white picket fences, the next, after a quick turn onto a narrow, unmarked road, you're in Usonia.

It's early spring, and a cloud of new, bright-green leaves fills the woods. All around is stillness and quiet. I'd heard stories about flocks of children on bicycles trailed by a neighborhood's worth of dogs, but I pass only cars on the road as I approach Roland Reisley's house at the southern end of Usonia.

There are three homes in Usonia that Wright designed himself, and Reisley lives in one of them. "Without exception, you enter a Frank Lloyd Wright house through a narrow entryway," Reisley tells me as he opens his door, gesturing to the low ceiling overhead before stepping aside to welcome me in. Wright, he explains, wanted to create a feeling of compression when you walked in the door, so that once you stepped into the common space of the house, you'd feel expansiveness and release, the relief of coming home. Reisley ushers me outside to his deck, cantilevered into the trees, and begins to tell me what's shifted in Usonia in the more than six decades since he moved in.

For the first 40 years that Usonia existed, the community was incredibly stable. Only 12 of the 47 houses changed hands, and six of those were transferred from parents to children. But since then, as original members have grown old and died, and children have moved away, it's become possible to join the community without being particularly interested in the "shoulder-to-shoulder, egalitarian" ethos that the original members fostered. (The covenants, which are still in place and remain legally binding, don't require community members to commit a certain amount of time or labor to Usonia.) The houses have also become markedly more expensive, sometimes selling for over $1 million. "The community would acquire a reputation as an upper class haven," Reisley wrote in his book. "The thought of Usonia as an enclave for elitist millionaires would have appalled the founders."

Original Usonians tend to see this as a generational shift. "This generation has different priorities," Podell tells me. "They come in expecting the community to give more to them. And this community, in the past, was based on everybody giving to one another. That's a big difference."

There are, of course, some new residents who wish the community was as cooperative as it was in the '50s and '60s. "I liked the idea that this would be more than just people living on a street together," says Ellen Vellensky, who moved to Usonia from New York City around four years ago. "I did get the impression that it was more of a community than it is. For me, that's a little bit of a bummer. I haven't met all of my neighbors. Everyone moves in at a different point in their life. I think if I said to them, I'm going to go rebuild the playground or something, some neighbors would be like, what are you doing? Because they don't have children."

But others are less invested in the idea. Sarah Lash and her husband are also newer residents of Usonia—the type who refer to themselves as residents, rather than members—who moved from Brooklyn four years ago. "We weren't assuming that this was going to be our social network, but it was nice to know it was a patently more close-knit community than the typical," Lash tells me. "The community is something you can opt into, or not. Some people are really gung-ho, others do their own thing. I don't think there's any pressure to be part of the community."

Lash is right, in a sense: Usonians don't need to actively build their community anymore. There is no land to clear, no well to dig, no group mortgages to negotiate. And in the absence of make-it-or-break-it moments, the decisions that preoccupy them—whether to cut down invasive trees, whether a proposed addition to a house is in keeping with Wright's Usonian principles—can feel rather insignificant compared to the high-minded striving of the early days, when a bunch of kids in their 20s were trying to create something like utopia.

Does living together make us happier?

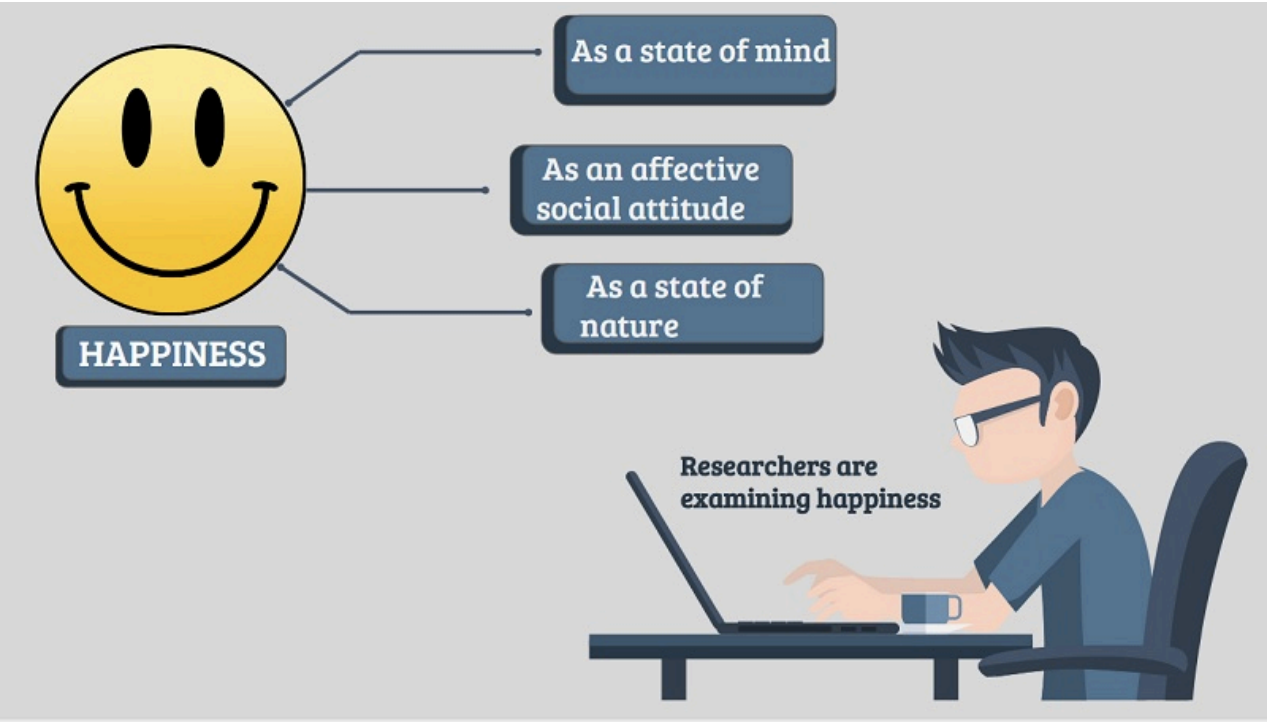
Canadian anthropologist Catherine Fisher is studying intentional communities in Vancouver and Japan to find out

Tobin Resnor; EQWnews.com

Catherine Kingfisher, professor at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, recently published an anthropological study of urban collective living, and her study outlines a metric by which to discern that collective living may actually contribute substantially to making people happier in general. This comes amid an inundation of happiness studies trending throughout the social science fields. More and more researchers are examining happiness as a state of mind, as an affective social attitude, and even as a state of nature. One other study on the forefront of this research trend looks at the correlation between popularity in high school and happiness in adulthood.

"Happiness became a really popular topic in popular culture and also academia," Kingfisher said in an interview with Jennifer Keene on Calgary Eyeopener. "There was a rise of happiness economics and positive psychology." Kingfisher also added her empirical perspective, saying, "As an anthropologist […] one of the things I noticed was that happiness studies were overwhelmingly focused on the individual, which made sense since it emerged from positive psychology […] but it's incomplete from an anthropological perspective because we live in social systems. We are social animals.

"So I got interested in the idea of looking around to see what kind of models for well being are out there that are not focused exclusively on the individual, that actually locate happiness and well being—at least

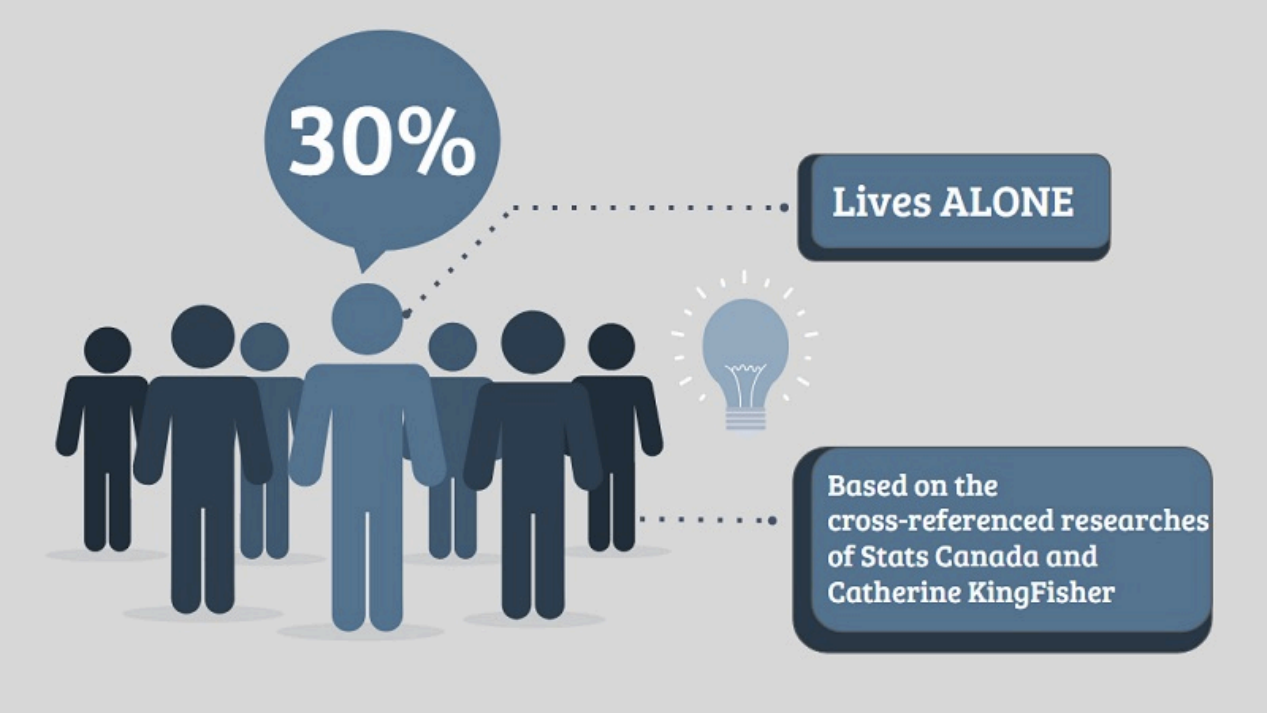


in part—in social relations." Kingfisher is using this fall semester at Lethbridge to study two urban collectives, and she describes both as "intentional communities planned intentionally by people who want to interact more with other people/families within a complex.

"It can happen organically with roommates, but we're looking at communities designed architecturally for this," Kingfisher explains. One of these collectives is in Japan while the other is in Vancouver. She negotiated with every collective for three years for the opportunity to visit their sites for eight weeks to study their degrees of happiness. According to Kingfisher, both collectives availed themselves in response to similar motives.

"The philosophies are pretty much the same (with both collectives)," says Kingfisher. "To have private space—but also [to] have [a sense of] community," instead of some of the emotional reactions typically associated with urban living like isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Kingfisher concedes that she's not attempting to study happiness itself as some psychologists have done. "I'm not a psychologist. I don't do psychological studies. I'm not measuring happiness in this study at all. It's about looking at how these communities operate as potential models for well being."

Stats Canada recently conducted a survey that shows when cross-referenced with the data from Kingfisher's study that the city life she studied was in areas where up to 30 percent of the population lives alone. Other pundits say this makes a lot of people both sadder and sicker. "There's one academic at Harvard who has argued that […] living in these collectives is better for people's physical as well as psychological health, and that these communities are a response [to that]," Kingfisher says.



"People who move into these communities, and certainly those who start them, have said something is wrong here. Our kids are in daycare, and old people are isolated and lonely, single people are isolated and lonely, we're consuming too much stuff—so why don't we pool our resources? Why don't we get together?" Kingfisher explains. "Absolutely I would argue that these places are models for how to deal with some of our current social problems, but I am not about the business of measuring individual happiness."

Communal housing and women's liberation: A forgotten history

Molly Mckew recalls the role that communal living played in radically challenging the role of women in Australia in the 1970s

Molly Mckew, Melbourne, Australia; The Conversation

The 1970s was a decade of political agitation, when activism won women a range of legal and cultural freedoms, from no-fault divorce to work rights to escaping the "ladies' lounge" in pubs. One little acknowledged aspect of feminist history at this time is the demographic and cultural shift that led to a new way of living: the share house.

For the first time, women could live independently of families or husbands, and find support networks outside the nuclear family model. In these experimental living arrangements, typically located in inner urban suburbs, women were free to become activists, creatives, hedonists and intellectuals.

Before this time, women had usually gone from the family home to homemaking with a male partner. Even if studying or working part-time, they generally lived temporarily with a relative, an older, trusted family friend, or a landlady.

In my interviews with women who lived in share houses in Melbourne and Sydney from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, most described these as places of freedom from the expectations of one's upbringing – particularly gendered ones.

"It was as if parents didn't exist," said Amanda, an artist. "I could be whoever I want to be. I could do whatever I want, and my art could be what I wanted."

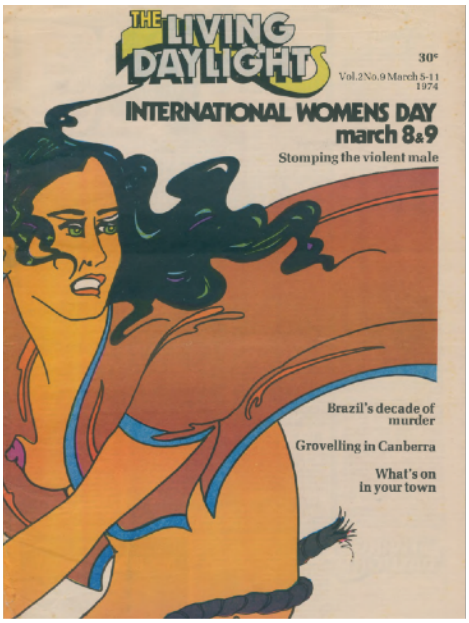
Many of my interviewees spoke of disillusionment with their suburban upbringing. It represented conformity, a predictable life trajectory and narrow-mindedness, and was often viewed as a place of entrapment and confining gender relations.

In a 1974 edition of the countercultural magazine The Living Daylights, for instance, "Trapped" of Wodonga begged readers for advice on escaping a marriage where she was "checkmated by the rules of this life into a state of living death". She spent her days awaiting her husband's return home, when he would use her as a "corpse to masturbate into".

In a 1974 edition of the Melbourne University newspaper Farrago, a woman named Leanne observed that: "to me, the way people live is political. What most people see as a 'natural' way to live, in a family … is in fact, a value judgement imposed by a dominant middle-class culture and ideology."

Talking to me, 40 years later, Leanne reflected that communal share houses were "very conscious efforts to take responsibility for children in a kibbutz-style way, sharing childcare, domestic labour, freeing up the women to live their own independent lives."

The inhabitants experimented with polyamory and spent many hours discussing "how not to be jealous" – with "zero success", Leanne noted.



Deidre, who lived in shared houses in Carlton in the late 1960s and early 1970s, remembers discussing communal housing in women's consciousness-raising groups as way of "creating a new way of living" where all inhabitants put equal work and love into the shared home. "The men were supposed to agree," she said, "and a lot of them did."

These communities were also crucial in fuelling a proliferation of women's creativity, with the rise of women's art and film-making collectives. Amanda remembers the very night she split up with her first husband. She had attended a women's consciousness-raising group and realised that as long as she was married to him, his artistic ambitions would be the priority. ("If we were both working, who would bring in the cup of tea?") In the share-house community of Carlton and Fitzroy, she found the space and support to focus on her own creativity.

Novelist Helen Garner famously captured this world in early works such as Monkey Grip and The Children's Bach. The women in Garner's stories resisted gendered identities like "mother" or "homemaker", often sharing lovers and childcare in communal arrangements. As Garner's protagonist Janet observes in Cosmo Cosmolino, she and her peers "despised our mothers for their sacrifice".

Still, while women found freedom in these communities, they sacrificed it too. Enormous emotional energy was spent discussing how to share their space, lives, domestic duties, resources and sometimes lovers. Leanne joked that her house was run "a bit like a military machine", and remembers her envy at the seeming simple pleasures enjoyed by suburban families she would watch at the supermarket.

Another woman, Gina, recalled the pain and jealousy she felt when sharing a home with her husband and his lover – an arrangement that at the time felt ideologically important. "It was interesting," she said, "because it was a philosophical decision, whereas the gut is completely prehistoric."

Many of my interviewees spoke fondly of the houses they lived in, and particularly the evenings, meals and music they shared. Some eventually shacked up with partners, as the wave of communal living experiments died down in the late 1970s.

Some, though, continued to live in alternative arrangements. One interviewee moved to Nimbin in the 1980s; one lives in a friendship arrangement with her ex-husband, who is in a gay relationship; one founded a publishing business and communal house in North Fitzroy, which lasted throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Looking to this period of history is useful at a time when many speak of increasing social isolation, and when housing is less affordable than it has ever been. Today, the proportion of over-30s adults living in share houses has risen. But the communal nature of these share houses is somewhat diminished.

Deidre lamented to me that young people today don't seem to enjoy the same sense of community that she did.

"It wasn't this individual thing, having your own food in the fridge and having it marked … it was like a family thing."

Co-housing for older women, by older women

New Ground is the first co-housing community in the UK to be designed by and for exclusively women over the age of 50

Heather Saul, London, UK; The i

Loneliness is a chronic problem in the UK. Last week Dr Helen Stokes-Lampard, the head of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), said loneliness was as damaging to health as long-term chronic illness.

Of the 3.64 million people over the age of 65 living alone in the UK, nearly 70 per cent are women. The Older Women's Co-Housing (OWCH) group's new community aims to combat loneliness, promote health and ensure women remain charge of their own lives. New Ground, in High Barnet, north London, is now fast approaching its first birthday.

Its residents helped design the 25 self-contained flats they now live in. Their open plan flats are modern, bright and airy, with high ceilings and large windows. Each has a patio or generous balcony looking over the communal garden, many of which are filled with a vibrant array of potted plants. Outside, a wisteria plant is slowly growing around a connecting pole between floors.

OWCH is a group of women over fifty who have created their own community in a new, purpose-built block of flats 'New Ground' in High Barnet, N. London.

Its physical design is impressive, but OWCH is keen visitors appreciate the social architecture too. "What the women have built socially, as a group, is more important than anything else, " says Maria, who has been with OWCH since its inception 19 years ago.

Anna, a freelance costume designer, joined OWCH in 2009. Her sewing skills have come in handy at New Ground, while New Ground is teaching her to refine her listening skills.

"I'm 64 but I'm not completely sorted," she explains as we sit around a dining table in the attractive two bedroom flat she owns. "You have to be open to that. You have to be open to a good friend saying: 'What you said hurt me' and then you explain yourself. You learn that it is very good to have a conversation."

Men often visit their friends and relatives at New Ground but excluding men from living there also ensures women remain firmly in charge. "There are women here who remember not being able to get a mortgage without their husband or fathers," adds Anna.

Sheila has just returned from a co-housing conference in Berlin where she accepted an award from their peers on OWCH's behalf. She joined OWCH 15 years ago. "When I came back to London after my family had all died, I thought I must find some community," she explains.

'We are all here for this purpose'

Each woman had to learn about each other, such as who prefers to sleep in later and who likes to get up early. "You [had to] get to know the habits of everybody so that you don't encroach," Sheila explains. But everyone is in a rhythm now. "It's very moving actually, getting to know about everybody, because we are all here for this purpose, this intentional community.

"I think it does help to know that we are all looking out for each other. We do everything in teams or pairs. It's getting easier all the time."

An older community filled with independent, healthy and happy residents is one that places less of a strain on social care and health services. Maria has spent years trying to persuade policymakers of the myriad benefits of developing senior co-housing in England, both for people and the state.

1998: The year it all began

After researching the senior co-housing model implemented in Holland, she led a workshop in 1998 about collaborative living for older women. Inspired by her findings, six women who knew each other went off to a pub afterwards and said: let's do it. "That was the beginning of the Older Women's Co-Housing group," Maria explains.

OWCH met regularly for the next two decades, building their vision of living together as helpful and caring neighbours in a mutually supportive community. But they endured a number of setbacks along the way. Sites would fall through. Housing associations would lose interest. Councils would argue there was already an abundance of sheltered housing in the area, to which they would always get the same unequivocal response: "We are not sheltered housing". Nor are they to be confused with a retirement village.

The residents of New Ground, who all know each other, are completely in charge of maintaining the complex. Women living there are aged between 51 and 88; there is no upper age limit. Some still work.

The blueprint for the future

One of OWCH's core values is promoting a community which looks out for each other. Eight years before New Ground was born, one of the group underwent heart surgery and was told she would have to spend three weeks in hospital because she lived alone. Keen to get home, she reached out to OWCH. Members rallied round and devised a rota to stay with her at home for the first week, do her shopping and cook meals. At the time, a doctor estimated this had saved the NHS somewhere between £4,000 and £7,000.

Almost one year in, they are an inspiring model for the 12 groups across the UK now trying to start their own senior co-housing communities.

Preparations for a weekly dinner are in full swing in the communal kitchen before I leave. On the menu this evening is pasta with ricotta and spring vegetables followed by fruit crumble. Hedi, the oldest resident and one of tonight's chefs, is busy making the crumble topping. "I love it here," she says smiling. "How could you not?"

Yad Tabenkin

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