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Arts & Books

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REIMAGINING HOMES FOR SENIORS

More and more people are exploring the concept of co-housing – semi-communal living that gives residents a sense of community while letting them maintain their independence

When Montrealers Robert Majzels and Claire Hout were choosing a place to retire, Vancouver Island seemed ideal: temperate, picturesque. But after they settled into a Victoria condo, they realized this home didn't provide everything they needed: While road traffic disturbed them from outside, their building provided few shared spaces to get to know their neighbours. "Everyone was isolated in their own condos," Hout says. In short, they were lonely.

So, this winter they settled into a small co-housing development in Sooke, B.C., known as Harbourside, where they share some facilities – and often common meals – with a few dozen neighbours. "Our lives started to change," says Hout, who describes her age only as "over 55." She explains: "All of a sudden there were people around us. Smart people, who had things to say. And our lives were completely different." The couple now know all of their neighbours in their complex of 31 homes across seven buildings on a hill overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca. They see each other daily in the complex's common house, which has a large kitchen and dining area where neighbours cook and eat together daily.

Majzels and Hout are explorers, and many baby boomers may experience a similar journey as they enter their retirement years. Right now, if they don't live independently, their choices are limited. Condo and apartment buildings generally don't provide common spaces for socializing, and retirement homes are relatively crowded and have an institutional atmosphere.

■ HOUSING, R8

In 2010, a group of friends and acquaintances got together to plan the community that would become Harbourside, a seniors' complex on the waterfront in Sooke, B.C. Their goal was to create a place where they could live in their own private quarters, but have a collective decision-making model and a commitment to sharing meals and activities. CHAD HIPOLITO/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Behind TV's recent obsession with predators

JOHANNA SCHNELLER

OPINION

On Valentine's Day, Netflix released the eight-episode series *Dirty John*. Based on a hit podcast, which itself was based on a series of articles in the Los Angeles Times, it dramatizes the true story of Debra Newell (Connie Britton), an interior designer in tony Newport Beach, Calif., who was swept off her feet by John Meehan (Eric Bana), a serial liar and later, much worse.

On Feb. 25, the singer R. Kelly was charged with 10 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse, in part because the documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly* – which aired in January on Lifetime and is available here via Rogers on demand – ratcheted up the scrutiny on his alleged predatory behaviour.

Dirty John and *Surviving R. Kelly* are two of a host of current series and films that focus on predators: Why they fascinate, and how they get away with it. In the Netflix series *You*, baby-faced bookstore owner Joe (Penn Badgley) massively creeps on budding writer Guinevere Beck (Elizabeth Lail). In the current HBO documentary *Leaving Neverland*, two men open up about the long-running relationship they had with Michael Jackson when they were boys. The second season of the smash hit *Killing Eve*, in which a contract killer (Jodie Comer) is obsessed with a British agent (Sandra Oh), arrives April 7.

Britton has a theory about why the liar/stalker storyline is so relevant now – and so popular, particularly among women. "In this #MeToo and #TimesUp culture, we're really asking questions of ourselves," she said in a recent phone interview. "We're looking at ourselves differently than we have before. We're examining ideas about who we're supposed to be, and how we're supposed to behave – ideas which have been handed down to us through generations of our families, our culture. Those ideas really came into play in the decisions Debra made. So many women don't think about protecting themselves, because they're too busy trying to get the thing they think they're supposed to have.

■ STALKING, R2

The co-housing complex known as Harbourside opened in Sooke, B.C., in 2016. Its residents range in age from their 50s to their late 80s. PHOTOS BY CHAD HIPOLITO/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Housing: In 12 years, nearly a quarter of Canadians are projected to be seniors

FROM R1

Facing these two choices, some individuals and architects are exploring different models that split the difference between an apartment and an institution: designing new blends of private and public space, and perhaps reshaping the architecture and our social understandings of home.

A demographic wave of seniors has already begun to arrive. In Canada, seniors are the fastest-growing segment of the population. In the 2016 census, people 65 and older outnumbered children younger than 15. A dozen years from now, almost a quarter of Canadians are projected to be seniors.

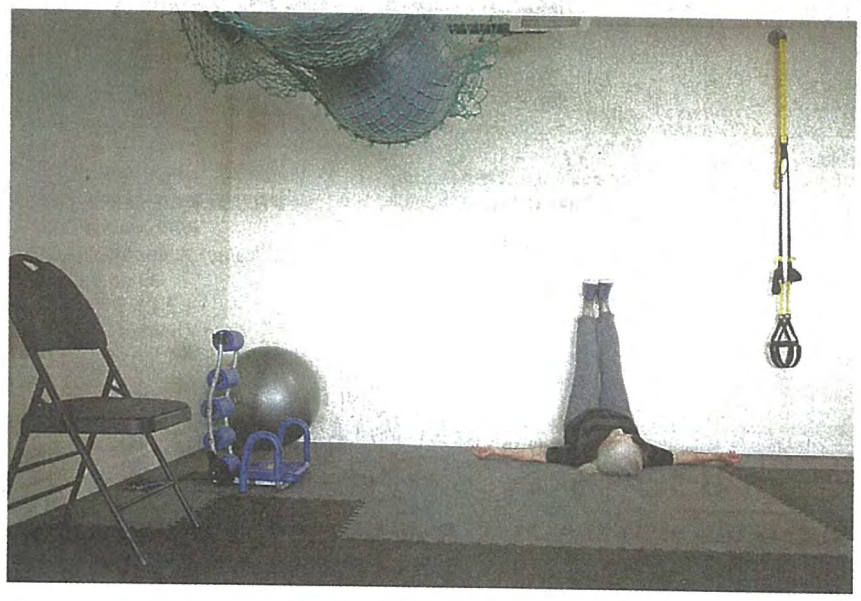
Many of them, out of choice or necessity, will not be living with family; they have fewer children to take care of them than did previous generations. Home care is unaffordable for many. And retirement homes have their own challenges: They are expensive, and many boomers – generally healthier than their parents and with a stronger desire for independence – balk at living in a place that feels institutional. "People want an alternative that's not available in the conventional market," says Ronaye Matthew, a trained architect who runs CDC Cohousing Development Consulting in B.C. Among boomers, "There's an awareness that may come from watching their elder parents not do as well," she says, "deciding 'I don't want any of that.' "

This is how Harbourside, in B.C., came to be. In 2010, a group of friends and acquaintances began planning a community where they could live together in a semi-communal way: with private quarters of their own, but a collective decision-making model and a commitment to share meals and activities. They worked with Matthew and hired the Sechelt, B.C., firm Mobius Architecture to design a 31-unit strata complex.

The ringleader was Margaret Critchlow, a professor emerita of anthropology at York Univeristy in Toronto. She and her husband, John Boquist, helped bring together a community of people who jointly contributed to the design of the complex, which includes a common house and seven quietly modernist, big-windowed buildings scattered across a hillside. The homes are all conceived with universal design principles to easily accommodate people with physical disabilities.

"People didn't want to be looking into each other's windows," Critchlow says. But they did want water access – many of them have canoes or kayaks – and they were willing to negotiate some steep paths. "It wouldn't be accessible for some people," Critchlow acknowledges, "but keeps you fit."

The complex opened in 2016. The residents, who now range in age from their 50s to late 80s, share in light property maintenance duties. "We've gardened every inch of this place that can be gardened," Critchlow says. They also share the cooking of collective meals and a variety of social activities, ranging from a book club to Iyengar yoga. (The oldest resident in the place takes part in that strenuous yoga practice. "We want to be like her!" Majzels says.)



Harbourside residents share in light maintenance duties around the property, as well as the cooking of collective meals. They have a variety of social activities available to them, ranging from a book club to Iyengar yoga, and there are also communal gardens. 'We've gardened every inch of this place that can be gardened,' says Toronto professor Margaret Critchlow, who together with her husband helped bring together the group of people who jointly designed the complex.

Every resident has good physical mobility; should someone need active care, the complex's guest suite could house a nurse or caregiver, Critchlow says.

That suite is part of the common house, which was once the main building of a resort. Here, the neighbours share a collective kitchen and dining room, a library and multipurpose rooms. All of this is unusual only in scale; these are the sort of shared amenities that you might find in a strata of 150 or 200 units, all for the use of a smaller group.

Aside from that crucial difference, the complex is not especially radical in its architecture and site planning. It's a middle-density multifamily housing project that works well for people in good health – and, as Critchlow points out, for people with means. Many of the Harbourside residents have bought their condos with the proceeds from selling their previous homes. "If you can't afford a condo," Critchlow says, "you can't afford co-housing."

There are many Canadian seniors who might be able to do this; the home ownership rate among seniors in Canada was 74.6 per cent, according to Statistics Canada.

And many of those have too much house. According to a report from the Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis, the City of Toronto has a sizable "overhoused" population (70 per cent of them seniors) who have more space than they need. The prospect of aging in a big house – particularly in a car-oriented neighbourhood or rural area – is not necessarily attractive.

Driving to see your friends or to the grocery store is one thing when you're 64; it's another when you're 84. Critchlow and Boquist moved from a rural home near Sooke Harbourside, trading isolation and car-dependence for a more social and less resource-intensive lifestyle. "We wanted it to be beautiful, and more sustainable than the way many of us were living," Critchlow says.

But what about those who can't afford, or can't find, such intentional and attractive living situations? Part of the solution could be a new type of building and an associated real estate development model. The Toronto architects SvN have been exploring this, addressing a big question: "How would you reinvent seniors' housing, and also make it really affordable?" says Drew Sinclair, an architect and principal at the firm.

The architects have experience

Every resident at Harbourside has good physical mobility, but should someone need active care, the complex's guest suite could accommodate a nurse or caregiver.
PHOTOS BY CHAD HIPOLITO/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

in a range of public and private projects, including multifamily housing. And in working on a prototype for a client, a large non-profit agency, they've proposed a solution that brings together types of activity that would generally be kept separate. "Paradoxically, it is not only for seniors," SvN architect Sam Dufaux says.

Their idea is for a mid-rise building of about seven storeys, which could fit onto many suburban sites. It combines three things: co-living spaces for seniors; shared spaces; and retail or services, such as doctors' offices. The first piece, co-living spaces, are private bed-and-bath units of about 300 square feet. This is similar to what a resident in a nursing home, or a postsecondary dorm, would enjoy. The units would be clustered in groups of 12 around a shared kitchen, living room and dining room. They would be aimed at seniors with the ability to live alone, but who would enjoy some degree of communal living.

By stacking these into two-storey units, the architects imagine that they would feel a bit more like a house "and less like an institution," Dufaux says. "That difference is so important to people."

Indeed, in the architects' drawings, their wood-clad buildings look like dorms for a particularly chic Scandinavian university. SvN imagines shared spaces that include gardens and greenhouses, where residents could choose to grow their own food and garden recreationally. Downstairs hobby spaces and workshops would allow residents to continue with their interests "just as they would in their garage or the basement of a house," Sinclair says, "even if the spaces are arranged differently."

The buildings would also include retail and services. Some of these, such as a florist or a medical clinic, could serve the needs of senior residents and also other neighbours. Importantly, the architects imagine a daycare, where the kids could play in shared outdoor spaces or on the roof, within sight of older residents.

Such a mix has intangible advantages: Watching kids play makes people happy. That's a fact that developers of seniors' housing already understand. SvN is now completing a seniors' residence for developers Chartwell, in downtown Toronto's Regent Park neighbourhood, which is located next to an elementary school. The owners – Chartwell – "want their clients to be part of an active community."

When Harbourside was being designed, Toronto professor Margaret Critchlow says one of the things people wanted was water access, as many of them have canoes or kayaks, and they were willing to negotiate some steep paths if necessary.

Photos on left: The Harbourside complex includes a common house and seven big-windowed buildings on a hillside. The homes were all created with universal design principles to easily accommodate people with physical disabilities.
Photos on right: Architects at Toronto firm SvN have been exploring a new type of building and real estate development model that would cater to those who can't afford, or can't find, living situations such as Harbourside. Their idea is for a mid-rise building of about seven storeys that would combine three things: co-living spaces for seniors; shared spaces; and retail or services, such as doctors' offices. RENDERINGS BY SVN ARCHITECTS

And where a retirement home can cost upward of $4,000 a month for rent alone, SvN's thought experiment suggests a way in which denser, less service-intensive models could serve a larger population. It's theoretical, for now, although their clients (who prefer not to be publicly identified) are considering the model – and other non-profit organizations could easily adopt some variation of this system. Religious groups in particular, such as churches with surplus real estate, could find a use for their land in housing their congregants and neighbours.

The demand will certainly be there. But it will take institutional foresight to guide the mass migration of millions of Canadians from independent households into the next phase of life.

After all, few of us are prepared to look ahead – clear-eyed – to the realities of growing old. Even the visionary owners of Harbourside, in Sooke, B.C., have occasionally shown some ambiguity about their choices, Critchlow reports. "We've had people move in who, at first, weren't ready," and rented out their apartments, she says. "But then they've moved in from the countryside, stopped driving.

"To make this work, people have to get beyond denial about aging."

And if the collective idea of co-housing won't work for everyone, Majzels and Hout feel that living among peers, in an intentional way, is a sort of medicine that would be beneficial to all. "Especially as you age, when people have developed their own ideas and attitudes, it's healthy," Majzels says. "It makes you open up again."