



At Whole Village, urban luxuries needn't be sacrificed for a pad surrounded by maples, clucking hens

Photo By Jo-Anne McArthur

IT TAKES A VILLAGE GREEN COMMUNAL LIVING MAY BE THE FUTURE, BUT CAN WARY URBANITES HACK IT?

By ADRIA VASIL



From the road, there's nothing to indicate you're pulling into anything but your typical Caledon farm. A long gravel driveway leads up to a red brick house, and a faded barn spills hens onto the muddy ground nearby.

But this is far from your traditional rural set-up. This is Whole Village, an experiment in green collective living. To envious city slickers, it's like sneaking a peek into a parallel universe of alternative housing but it does beg the question -- can urbanites used to ignoring people in 4-by-4-foot elevators handle this much community?

No doubt Whole Village is a curiosity. You don't see many "intentional communities" in this part of the country. Well, other than co-ops, which are sometimes included in the broad definition of the term for "planned community housing." Old-fashioned communes, land trusts and eco-villages also fall under the IC rubric, as do cults, Quakers and all sorts of groups that choose to live together in weird and/or wonderful ways.

In this case, it was a collection of parents from the Waldorf School in Thornhill who dreamed of developing an eco-residence on a biodynamic farm. Most dropped out when they couldn't get land near the school, but a few pushed ahead with the concept and bought the farm, so to speak, in Caledon. Five years later, about 20 adults and five kids are now slowly moving out of the creaking, overcrowded farmhouse and into a sprawling buttermilk-yellow residence aptly named Greenhaven.

Ironically, the ultra-earth-friendly rez seems kind of out of place in the country, like a condo in the wild. The spanking-new one-storey building surrounded by a muddy yet-to-be-landscaped grounds seems less inviting than the farmhouse of old, but it is, no doubt, the future.

Each member has his or her own eco-suite, with a public and private entrance. As we peer into one of the units, complete with strawboard cabinetry and bamboo flooring, another onlooker is clearly impressed. "You're out in the country living an alt lifestyle, but you've got this city-chic house. I love the juxtaposition."

For my tour buddy, it's this new take on a sustainable lifestyle that sweetens the deal. You don't have to give up your urban luxuries to live on an organic farm surrounded by maple trees and clucking hens.

But the ultimate draw, besides living lightly on 191 acres of rolling organic farmland, forest and wetland just an hour from Toronto for less than a comparable sized condo, comes from hitching up with like-minded people.

"Our whole society is so individual-focused," says Whole Village member and retired teacher Martha Saunders. "By learning to share responsibility, share resources, I think this is the way we're meant to live."

And share they do: appliances, cars, food, organic CSA (community-supported agriculture). But no free love, wife-swapping or putting all your cash into a common pot. Several members have outside jobs. Whole Village, Saunders insists, is no commune.

But they do eat together. Indeed, thanks to rigid zoning laws, Greenhaven wasn't allowed to put full kitchens in every suite, so nearly everyone is sans oven. Dinners are thus communal five days a week.

Most admit balancing the tension between private needs and communal demands can be a challenge. Says Julie Kenny, the youngest and newest member of Whole Village, "Sometimes you're excited that you get to come home and whole bunch of people are going to be around. And other times you just think, "Ah, man, do I ever wish I could just walk by and not have to say hi to anybody. ""

Which makes me wonder, am I missing the communal living chip? When does living in such a tight-knit group get too close for comfort for traditionally isolated urbanites?

Vancouver-based housing consultant Ronaye Matthew believes that despite the way we've carved out boundaries for ourselves in cities, we secretly crave more intimacy with those around us. "People are looking for more connections with other people, and they want to be able to make them easily." But she adds, "Our current design in condos is to try to provide as much privacy as possible so that you don't have to see your neighbour. The fear is that if we start talking to someone, he or she will then intrude on our lives."

This is where Matthew's specific expertise in co-housing comes into play and why she was hired by a group in Toronto (the Sun Spirit Association) to get their vision off the ground and give a talk here two weeks ago.

Co-housing allows for more independence than many other types of IC. Everyone gets his or her own private house or apartment, with a complete kitchen and private entrance. Everyone has his or her own source of income.

What members do often share are gorgeous courtyards, people-friendly walkways and a communal building complete with everything from a yoga room and craft space to play areas and a stage you know, in case anyone wants to pull out a guitar or put on a play. All of which they design as a group. Yes, community dinners are held, but only once or twice a week, and you only go if you're in the mood.

In most cases, co-housing communities are initiated by a group of old friends but it isn't necessarily affordable housing, since higher-quality earth-friendly materials are often used. Bulk purchasing, carpooling and overall resource sharing, however, do make life in typical co-housing cheaper than going it alone, not to mention more neighbourly.

From the steady hum of "oohs," "ahs" and occasional "wows" at Matthew's workshop, excitement about the approach was palpable. And while most in the audience were smartly dressed over-50 types (co-housing tends to be kick-started by seniors with time and money), the gathering seemed almost radical in a city known for its condo mania and frigid vibe.

Slides shown from urban, suburban and rural examples out west got the crowd fantasizing in technicolour. You could almost hear the mental doors opening to a future of possibilities they hadn't known they had.

NOW magazine March 21, 2006