

Co-operative vision

'Intentional community' is an extended family that is bonded not by blood but with a shared vision

Inhabitants of Whole Village in Caledon's rolling hills plan to 'live responsibly with the land'

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A sturdy red brick farmhouse sits at the end of a long, dusty lane. Comfortably settled amid Caledon's rolling hills, its lines are softened by tree-screened sunshine and vivid clumps of native perennials.

There are other bucolic touches, like a fat black cat sunning itself on the front porch, a nearby barnyard filled with chickens and a great brass dinner bell that hangs close to the main entrance; all of which seem to place the scene in rural Ontario, northwest of Toronto, near the early part of the last century.

It's only the clutch of house trailers, clustered like chuck wagons at the far southwest corner of the lawn, that seems incongruous.

But the visual dissonance of the trailer park and barnyard scene is entirely appropriate for a community that has one foot in the past and another set firmly in the future.

Whole Village is an "intentional community," and it's being built — bit by bit — by a handful of 21st century pioneers who want to live in a sustainable agricultural community that's governed by consensus.

The term "intentional community" describes a social model that incorporates elements of co-housing and ecological-housing movements that began in Scandinavia in the mid-1960s. Both are based on the premise that several families will come together to build or retrofit a complex where each will own private space with a small kitchen, while sharing common areas for communal meals and recreation. Ecological co-housing puts extra emphasis on environmentally friendly design, building and social habits.

"We want to live today with a sense of the way people lived not so long ago," says Brenda Dolling, a Whole Village member who is responsible for community outreach and education.

"I come from six generations of farm families on both sides and they all used to live in extended families. That's sort of what we are doing here except we are creating our own extended families, and we're bonded not by blood, but by a shared vision of living responsibly with the land."

The growing movement appeals to people of every age who want to experience a deeper sense of community, says Dorothy Mazeau, who is on the board of directors of the Canadian Cohousing Network — formed in 1992 to promote awareness of and share information about co-housing.

"Many people now in their 50s and 60s grew up with the small-town sense of community, and they want to have that again, but also keep some privacy," says Mazeau. "But the people who started it in Denmark were young professionals with children, who thought it would be great to share responsibilities like cooking and childcare, while encouraging community interaction."

Mazeau says there are at least 21 co-operative communities in Canada.

"It takes a long time to get them together," says Mazeau, who is in charge of disseminating information throughout eastern Canada. "I get a steady stream of emails asking about where groups are being started. Often I have to tell people that there is nothing in the area, but that I've had emails from half a dozen other people close by who are interested and I put them in touch."

Whole Village was started more than a decade ago by a group of parents whose children attended the Waldorf School in Thornhill.

"They wanted to have a farm with biodynamic agriculture, which fit with the values of the school community," explains Dolling. "They came together and decided to form an intentional community and began looking for a farm that was appropriate."

Around the same time, Jeff Gold became a member of the community. When Gold, who was caretaker for the Caledon property, learned that the farm's owner wanted to sell, he advised the group to purchase it.

While several members of the original group thought the property was too far from the school, others found it perfect. To them, the site — with 3.6 hectares of maple sugar bush, 17 hectares of wetland, 81 hectares of hillside pasture, 45.7 hectares of cropland and two hectares that were already home to a farmhouse and a barnyard and a spring-fed pond — looked like Walden, the simplified and inspiring nature-centric community in the wooded lands of Concord, Mass., envisioned in the 1840s by writer Henry David Thoreau.

So in 2000, the nucleus of Whole Village's intentional, environmentally-based community was born. Since then, nine shareholders, a dozen members and teams of volunteers have offered time, money and sweat equity to the endeavour.

One of the pioneers was Denis Bowman, an architect and founding member of the Waldorf School in Thornhill. Both of his sons attended the school, which he helped design.

Bowman was also instrumental in shaping the design of the site in Caledon, which was actually two separate lots. This legal wrinkle allowed the group to obtain a building permit for the communal facility on the west lot.

But obtaining the permit wasn't easy.

"It got very political with the neighbours and some of the local officials," says Dolling, "even though from the beginning we talked to the neighbours and tried to explain what we were doing. (They) thought we were a cult and that we were probably going to grow marijuana — you name it."

"We're mostly too middle class for that," laughs Bowman. "The planners seemed moderately interested in our plans at first, but then they turned and went back to supporting the building of monster homes — maybe to boost the tax base. So we had to fight the zoning, and we waited three years to get to court."

Whole Village finally won the fight, and plans moved forward on a 15,300-square-foot building, with 11 suites. Most of the suites range in size from 780 to 800 square feet, except for a 2,000-square-foot space designed for a family of nine.

The common area includes a 1,400-square-foot dining and living area, a recreation area of about 900 square feet, and a 400-square-foot library.

There's also a "farm office" which includes about 1,200 square feet of space for members who work from the facility in educational, therapeutic or natural building disciplines.

Whole Village's commitment to sustainable building is evident in its design. On a hill behind the farmhouse is an anemometer to help determine if there's enough wind velocity to make it a suitable spot for a wind turbine, which would further advance the goal of getting off the grid and using renewable energy exclusively within a year.

A cluster of trailers that are home to several families waiting to move into the suites features a solar-heated hot and cold outdoor shower and sink, and a composting toilet. Hot water is provided by solar panels, which were bought from the MacMillan Centre, a health-care facility for children and youth with disabilities and special needs in Willowdale.

An engineered wetland sits to the north of the communal facility, covered with short tufts of emerging cattails that will eventually blanket the area. This is a constructed wetland that receives wastewater from the facility and manipulates it in an ecologically friendly way to remove contaminants before the water returns to the regional water table through a small leaching bed.

Energy-efficient design for the main building includes using geo-thermal, or ground source heat, a system that uses the earth's own heat, and channels it through radiant heat pipes in the flooring.

Back-up energy comes from a Finnish style Masonry heater. That, explains Gold, who now serves as construction/building manager, involves burning wood very quickly at a very high heat, which creates a clean gas that moves into a second chamber and is burned again. The heat released is absorbed by the thick masonry walls of the furnace.

The placing of the building was also carefully considered to make the best use of the sun.

"That's one of the most basic ways to make a home more energy efficient and comfortable," explains Bowman, "but it's rarely given much attention."

To help cool the structure in summer, a green-roof, planted with 15,000 succulents Dolling carefully nurtured over the winter, will eventually be in place.

For village members such as Bowman and Dolling, it's crucial to consider the future of the Whole Village.

"It's important that we give young people a toehold, a way to have some ownership through small shares," says Bowman. "Otherwise we'll just end up a retirement community."

Right now, there are plenty of volunteers under 30 who help with everything from farming duties and cooking to building. This gives them an affordable way to gain equity in the property, explains Bowman.

The village is also trying to find the funds to buy a 10.5-hectare plot of land just south the community. It's currently for sale, but since they already spent about \$1.6 million in hard costs, money for expansion is scarce.

Whatever its eventual size, says Dolling, Whole Village will continue to evolve as a community that exists peacefully with nature.

"That forms our vision," she says, "and the people who have done research into these kinds of groups say that shared vision is really, really important. Ours has already stood a lot of tests and we're still here. I think we're going to make it."