

Author: Mary Rose, graduate diploma of social ecology, resident in a shared house.

Editor: Margaret Bond

Title: **Liveable Communities: Shared Houses for Older Women.**

PO Box 7097, Hamilton 3247,

Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

Telephone: 64-9-843-6718

E-mail: mary.rose@clear.net.nz

Abstract

Liveable communities that are sustainable come in many shapes and sizes: like the people who live in them. I am interested in one particular form of liveable community: that of older women living in shared houses.

I will describe it, give some rationale, discuss the advantages of such community, tell you what it needs to be sustainable, list some experiences overseas and in New Zealand, discuss how it can be supported by planning, then offer some thoughts about what this particular form of community has to offer the collective understanding of sustainability. I write about women, for that is where my experience and interest are. It may be that what I write is relevant also to men.

Introduction

The liveable communities I am interested in are small households of older women. This means that three, four, five or more women share one house instead of living in three, four, five or more houses, each woman on her own in one house.

My interest in this form of living began some twenty years ago. For many years I lived in a farmhouse on the outskirts of a small rural town. Typical of small town life, I knew almost everyone who lived on the road between the farmhouse and the town. Mostly I drove past, busy about my life as a farmer's wife and mother of four. Sometimes, with more time to spare, I walked. As I walked I had time to look at gardens, chat to people as I passed and to think about the people who lived in the houses and what their lives might be like.

I soon realized that at least one third of the houses were occupied by one woman living alone. Some of them had never married, some were widowed and had children and grandchildren living nearby. I used to wonder about that. Were those women content to live alone? Or was there some way they could've shared their houses? Were they lonely? I didn't know. It was the beginning of my interest in housing for older women.

The wondering led into wandering. I found myself, at fifty, out in the big wide world, alone, looking for a home for my old age. I realized that, for me, living alone is not a sustainable option. I got lonely, short of cash, burdened with maintenance and was generally grumpy and garrulous. That realization led me into thinking about and exploring the possibilities for sharing houses.

What would co-operative housing for older women involve? Who would build it? How would it be maintained? How would difficulties among residents be sorted? I would love to be part of such a household. Who else would? Would it be sustainable?

Rationale

In 1994 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) held a conference in Paris called “Women in the City: Housing, Services and the Urban Environment”. The report of that conference had many comments relevant to the idea of co-operative housing for women.. It agreed with what I’d noticed as I walked from the farmhouse to town: that many houses are occupied by one woman living alone. It named two causes for this. One is that women are living longer than men: the other is that an outcome of women’s striving for control and autonomy in our lives is that more are living alone: one woman in one house.¹

Oldies are numerically a force to be reckoned with: worldwide. New Zealand, like most OECD countries, has an aging population. 11.8% of our current population is over 65 years old and that proportion is increasing.² In France, it is said there will be, 17 million people over 65 years old by 2010.³ Japan claims 25% of its population will be in that age bracket only ten years later.⁴ In each of these countries women live longer than men.

Therese Clerc, a 79 year old Frenchwoman who is building a residence for ‘liberated grannies’ said ‘We must take charge of our own lives’.⁵ I agree with her. And that means, for me, finding sustainable ways of housing older, women sharing houses.

Advantages

The five primary advantages of living in these communities are social, spiritual, financial, environmental and safety. Let’s look at these.

*Social. It’s hard to over-estimate the benefits of companionship at home. Women who live with good companionship are likely to be healthy and happy.. We are likely to have great conversations over breakfast, enjoy the pleasure of eating meals cooked by others and, in turn, cook for others who eat with appreciation and humour. The sharing of different interests and experiences encourages women to keep open minds and to be out and about and contribute to the community. It’s much easier to go to a concert or film when another housemate says “Who’s coming with me?”

Housemates can easily support each other to mutual benefit. Like something that happened in the house I live in now. A housemate, newly shifted in, asked if anyone had things to give to a garage sale for her choir’s money-raising effort. She was thinking there might be half a boot full of stuff she could take. The owner of the house was delighted. She had a whole heap of furniture she wanted to get rid of to clear out her back shed. The

¹ OECD: Women in the City: Housing, Services and the Urban Environment. 1995 p54

² Statistics New Zealand web-site

³ Adam Sage: Home for Liberated Grannies Founded: Christchurch Press 29.2.2006. pB2

⁴ OECD: Women in the City

⁵ Adam Sage: Home for Liberated Grannies Founded

two of them loaded a trailer. But how to get it across the city to the garage sale? I could see the space in the shed would make it possible for me to empty my costly storage unit and bring the last of my stuff home. I willingly offered the use of my car with tow-bar and drove the trailer across town. The new housemate followed in her car to shepherd the faulty lighting on the trailer. Together we found the garage, unloaded the goods, stacked them for the sale, then drove home. By working together, the three of us benefited. Very satisfying. Especially satisfying was the way the exploring and planning of the operation took place over cups of tea, preparing meals, hanging out washing and was generally part of the ebb and flow of the household.

*Financial. It is much cheaper to pay rent for one room than for a whole house. It is cheaper to buy a share of a house than to pay for it alone. A bill for power, water, phone, rates, insurance or broadband is much less when shared among three, four or five housemates. Whether or not one is on a benefit, sharing expenses frees up money to spend on much more interesting things. Furniture, appliances and other household items are shared. It is possible to live comfortably without owning much at all. Repairs and maintenance are also cheaper when shared. Medical expenses are likely to be less when one is supported at home.

*Spiritual. Older age is a time of spiritual reflection and growth. Being able to share the wonderings and wisdom of these years with others in the same phase of life in the same house can be a rich experience. This richness flows into the community around it.

*Environment: When three women share a house, there are two fewer houses that have to be found. If six share a house, that's five less. That leaves a substantial piece of precious land that doesn't have to be built on and a whole lot of appliances that aren't needed. Heating, entertainment and cooking energy is shared. Better use is made of the land around the house for gardening and for recreation. Car pooling is easy and so is the encouragement housemates can give each other to use public transport. As people learn to think about their impact on the environment, individuals learn different things. Sharing a house with others mean that each shares her concerns with others in the house e.g, one could be interested in re-cycling, another a compost nut, a third a lover of buses and so on. Gradually the whole household changes the footprint they have on the planet.

*Safety: The OECD Conference reported 'Elderly women are particularly vulnerable to crime and violence.'⁶ The safest place to live is one where other people are around. Intruders avoid a house that is full of people. There is great comfort in knowing that when terror or illness strikes, one is not alone.

What Makes Shared Houses Sustainable?

So what stops us? Why isn't there in every street at least one if not two houses where a number of older women share the house? What would it take for such houses to be sustainable? There are three factors I know of. One is communication, another, design, and the third is how I get my money out when I leave the house.

⁶ OECD: Women in the City p47

*Communication. To make this notion of shared houses work the residents must be able and willing to communicate with each other, even when difficulties arise: particularly when difficulties arise. It can be called the 'three women in a kitchen' dynamic. To mention this brings horror in some circles. 'Three women in a kitchen! How can that be?' The OECD report 'Women in the City' says that one reason why so many women live alone is the striving for greater control and autonomy in their lives⁷ I agree and see this is the inevitable outcome of better paid jobs, women leaving marriages and the move to equality for women. For some, living alone in her own house is a highly desirable state. A woman in her own house, living alone, has the say of how things are done in her house: it is her place of autonomy and control.

Others, including me, are happier and better off when sharing a house with other women: when companionship is alive and well in the home. But a woman sharing a house also needs some autonomy. She needs to have some say about what goes where and how things will be done in her home. How do three women share a kitchen? It is the ability to communicate around this question that is the foundation for sustainability of shared houses. Some households do this by talking about anything that comes up whenever it may be. Others have a set time for a house meeting and put up a piece of paper on which any house mate can write items to be talked about: delights, doubts or difficulties. The ability to talk about difficult things and to appreciate the good builds trust among housemates.

*Design affects the sustainability of a household. A shared household needs a number of bedrooms of liveable size, at least two living rooms, somewhere for guests to stay, a generous-sized kitchen, extra garage, storage or recreation room and outdoor space for gardening, relaxing and parking. Mobility access to all living and service rooms is important, as many older women are frail. Houses should be near public transport.

*How Will I Get My Money Out? Questions about what happens when a resident moves on need to be thought about carefully before a co-operative house is set up. These questions are likely to be; How will I get my money back? What happens if another decides to leave or gets too frail to look after herself? What happens if I get too frail to contribute to the household? The answers to these questions will vary according to the circumstances of the residents and the household they are putting together. They need to be thought about in the planning stage and written into a legal agreement. Knowing how a household can be ended helps to make it sustainable.

Overseas Experiences

*OECD Conference: 'Women in the City: Housing, Services and the Urban Environment' was held in Paris in 1994. The report comments on the increasing proportion of populations of older women. Thus there are more and more of us world-wide needing housing that takes into account matters of security, mobility, social contact, affordability and 'gentle environment'. It describes liveable communities as those which 'facilitate

⁷ OECD: Women in the City p54

creative human activities and promote well-being' in contrast to many city neighbourhoods for the elderly that exude loneliness.⁸

*Liberated Grannies, France. A current French project is the building of a co-operative residence for 19 old women. Situated in Montreuil-sous-Bois, east of Paris, the house is being built by a group of women planning to live in it. They have bought land, designed the house and raised money for construction from a housing association. 'We're going to run it ourselves,' said Therese Clerc, founder of the group. 'We're going to take all the decisions. We want to change the way society looks at old people, the way old people look at society and the way old people look at themselves.'

The watchwords of this house – La Maison des Babyagas – are self-management, solidarity, autonomy and ecology. Clerc has a clear vision of how the residence will work. The occupants will help each other rather than relying on their families and a mediator will visit once a month to help resolve disputes. Already 12 of the 19 places in the house are signed up by women aged between 58 and 87 years old. They expect to be living in the house by 2008.⁹

*Shared Houses for Oldies: Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Two groups worked together to write a handbook for community groups wanting to build houses or set up households in which smallish groups of older people could live companionably, doing as much as they could for themselves. The book describes a number of projects already achieved. Some involved building a specially designed house, others renting or buying existing houses or apartments. One set up a shared house for women who had been in a rest home, wanted to return to the community, but were unable to manage living alone. In this case a local body subsidized the rent to make it possible for the women to move out of the rest home and into community housing. Local bodies were deeply involved in planning and supporting these houses. Many options and guidelines for interested groups are explained. The two groups, Action for Boston Community Development, Inc and Concerned Citizens for Elder Affairs published the book in 1980.¹⁰

In New Zealand

*Three Women Bought a House

Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood, New Zealand's first co-housing neighbourhood, is a co-operative housing project built in Ranui, Waitakere City. In the first batch of seventeen houses was a four bedroomed house bought by three women. The three were involved in the co-operative venture that built a whole neighbourhood. To buy their house, the three raised finance, managed unequal capital and wrote an agreement that included a process for getting out.

When they moved in, the three did well, enjoying the social, spiritual, financial and environmental advantages of co-operative living. They shared cooking, had house

⁸ OECD: Women in the City p81

⁹ Adam Sage: Home for Liberated Grannies Founded

¹⁰ Action for Boston Community Development, Inc: Planning and Developing a SHARED LIVING Project. Published by Boston Community Development, Inc 1980

meetings, celebrations and talked through delights, doubts and difficulties that came among them. Many people came to visit, enjoying the atmosphere of the house. Some people in the neighbourhood said that the way the three women worked things out among them was an example and encouragement to others.

Lives changed and one left the house, then another. The house was sold and the women went their separate ways. I was one of the three. In spite of that house ending, I am so convinced of the value of shared houses, I am still willing to buy a house with other women.

*Anecdotes. On a train one day I chatted with a woman who told me she was living in a house with two other women. Widowed and not particularly well, her church people had suggested the three of them should share a house. She was enjoying the experience. Other conversations tell me that there are houses of older women in New Zealand and that other women are thinking about it as a possibility for themselves.

I am at present renting a room in a house occupied by three women, one of whom is the owner. Incidentally, we are all grannies and, among us have 21 grandchildren!

*Local Government Act 2002. Section 10 'The purpose of local government is (b) to promote the social, economic and cultural well-being of communities'.¹¹ A council looking for ways of providing housing that contributes to the social, cultural and economic well-being of its citizens would do well to consider including in the plan at least one house suitable for sharing by four, five or six older women. There is the added advantage of environmental sustainability.

What shared houses have to offer:

How does anyone in any circumstance share a resource when there are different values and different needs? The resource may be oil, money, education, land, power, housing, goods: the dynamics are the same. 'Three women in a kitchen' are in a situation where they have to learn how to share resources and to attend to each other's need for autonomy or the household won't work and their home will be lost.

I have stories about households where the willingness and ability to learn how to work through the difficulties that come up about whose way will prevail, who will do the dishes, who ate what and what will go where, simply wasn't there. 'War' broke out, the atmosphere in the house became strained or stormy and the household ended. Women lost their home.

The learning by people in shared houses will be an important contribution to the sustainability movement. Women in a successfully shared house can show others how difficulties can be worked out. What use is it to have a neighbourhood or city built with the most thoughtful of sustainable design when people deal with difficulties that come up among them by retreating behind locked doors, setting up war with their neighbours or resorting to litigation?

When older women share houses the advantages are social, economic, environmental, spiritual and safety. The wider community benefits. For such households to be

¹¹ Local Government Act 2002 Section 10 (b)

sustainable, communication skills of dealing with difficulties that come up as resources are shared must be developed. And this is so for all aspects of sustainability.

Conclusion: One form of liveable community is for older women to share houses. The advantages I have outlined are in keeping with the OECD: Women in the City Conference report. For such households to be sustainable, appropriate design of houses is necessary. So is the development of communication skills.

The resources needed to support such housing are likely to be repaid not only by the increased well-being and happiness of its occupants, but also by having in the community a centre of wisdom in the working out of human relationships: a cornerstone of sustainability.

Appreciation: Margaret Bond, who edited this paper and showed me new ways to use my computer, is one of my housemates.

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