

## Communal housing is coming of age

Seniors are beginning to see the advantages of shared-living complexes.

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GRASS VALLEY, CALIF. — Suzanne Marriott's brave drive into the future started with a traffic jam, which gave her a lot of time to think about what she was getting herself into – and out of.

Newly widowed and recently retired, the lanky 64-year-old was making her way to the Sierra foothills to meet a group of complete strangers that she might just spend the rest of her life with.

Left behind in the rearview mirror was a sprawling ranch house in Castro Valley, near Oakland, that managed to be full and empty all at once, jammed with the stuff of a long, happy marriage but drained of life since the death of her husband, Michael, from multiple sclerosis six months before.

For decades, the couple, avid backpackers and mountain bikers, had wandered the world together. Now she was striking out on her own, placing big bets on the rest of her life and on a nascent movement called senior cohousing.

Marriott was betting that she could join a group of like-minded people – all relatively healthy and not that old – and together they could build a community that would be something between commune and condo complex.

She was wagering that they could all live there to the end without burdening family members or enduring life in an institution picked by somebody else. And she hoped they would have fun in the process.

So as Marriott navigated Interstate 80 toward her fellow pioneers in late-life living, she was more curious than terrified.

“I wanted to see if there was a way to make more meaning in my life now that Michael was gone,” she said. “We'd been together 30 years. I thought I was being led to something that would be meaningful and be a way to move forward.”

In the 18 months since she hit the highway, Marriott and her future neighbors have done something only a few groups of forward-thinking seniors in America have accomplished.

Along with the architects who imported the idea of cohousing from Denmark 20 years ago, they have designed their 30-unit complex from the ground up, complete with an elaborate common house where they plan to dine together several nights each week.

They've attended scores of meetings, made thousands of decisions – all by consensus – buried one beloved member and welcomed others. They have pledged to “support each other through rough times, whether physical, emotional and/or spiritual.” They have learned how to listen and how to disagree.

"Many people don't have an extended family, or it's an extended dysfunctional family," Marriott said. "We'll have this close community for, well, the rest of our lives."

### **‘A team sport’**

The idea of cohousing was born in Denmark in the 1960s and imported to the United States nearly three decades later by Charles Durrett and Kathryn McCamant, husband and wife architects from California who have written extensively on the topic.

There are about 100 multi-generational cohousing communities in the United States – more in Northern California than anywhere else – and they usually consist of town houses or separate residences built around a common house and shared open space, Durrett said.

The basic premise of cohousing – that life is better together than apart – is an even neater fit for people as they age, because “aging is a team sport,” said Dr. Bill Thomas, geriatrician and author of “What Are Old People For?” But cohousing communities specifically geared for seniors are just beginning to take off.

“For a long time, the team was your blood kin. Now the team, more and more, is going to be the people with whom we choose to live,” Thomas said. “Elder cohousing is a response to the fading away of our traditional understanding of family and care-giving.”

It is also a search for the elusive ideal of community: that remembered or dreamed-of network of people who won't cramp your style but will make sure you're OK as you grow up or grow old.

In fact, many of Wolf Creek Lodge's members, who live throughout Northern California and Washington, were drawn to cohousing after watching friends or relatives founder alone at the end of their lives and deciding they wanted better for themselves.

Butch and Virginia Thresh, both 69, live on 15 acres in rural Nevada County. They chop wood for heat, revel in the peace and quiet of their isolated hilltop homestead and have no intention of hanging up their hiking boots, bicycles and petanque equipment.

But after reaching 65, they began to wonder what would happen if one of them became disabled. Then one day, Butch was out fixing up a house they own in Grass Valley. Their elderly tenant had called four months earlier and said his wife had died and he needed to move.

As Butch labored away, Virginia recalled, “the neighbors came by and said, ‘What are you doing here?’ They didn't even know the wife had died or the husband had moved. We don't want that.”

The Threshes each have two children from previous marriages, and “they all think it's a good move,” Virginia said.

What they do want, her husband said, is to live in a place where “if you break a hip, your neighbors will help you buy groceries. . . . We're trying to re- create the neighborhood, so the neighbors will look out for you.”

The process has been a lot of mostly enjoyable work, from the first two-day meeting of potential residents in June 2006 to the current tussling over a proposal to ban smoking complex-wide. (What about private property rights? Chemical sensitivities? Medical marijuana?)

### **Early lessons**

One of the first lessons was how to reach consensus, which is a lot harder than simple democracy. Everybody has to either agree with a decision or at least be able to live with it, and a single dissenter can bring the process to a standstill.

One early – and easy – choice was the name, inspired by the creek that borders the 7.9 woodsy acres where the complex will be built, just a short walk from a post office, grocery stores, restaurants and gourmet coffee.

Also simple – though legion -- were the environmentally conscious decisions the members made to ensure their new home's sustainability. No old-growth trees would die as it was built. Only the common house would have air conditioning.

A third of the acreage would remain in a natural state. Low-toxicity materials would be used whenever possible. Gray water would be recycled for nondrinking purposes. Landscaping would be indigenous and drought-resistant.

Although the idea of a Sierra summer without cold air on demand makes Mari Kobus, 61, “a little nervous,” she said, she is very proud of her new home's deep green pedigree.

“All of us,” she said at a recent group potluck, “are committed to living more lightly on the environment.”

Such complex decisions were a snap compared with writing the Wolf Creek Lodge pet policy, which took weeks of discussion in person and online. The joy that animals can bring was weighed against their potential for destruction, noise against security. Quantity was a serious sticking point.

In the end, the group decided on two pets per unit and nothing too exotic. But the policy is flexible enough so the falconer who is thinking about moving in would be welcome. Along with his hawk.

Exceptions will be considered case by case. Said Marriott: “We don't want to exclude someone on the basis of an extra cat.”

Although the financial details won't be firmed up until construction begins, the units are expected to run from about \$200,000 for those designated affordable to \$500,000. Seventeen have already been sold, and the project's marketing committee is seeking new members.

The complex is designed for adults, and there are no child-friendly amenities, although grandchildren are welcome and a multi-generational cohousing project is planned for the same property.

So far, the denizens of Wolf Creek Lodge are decidedly 21st century seniors. The common areas of their new home will include an espresso bar, a hot tub and a computer room. The residents communicate via listserv and e-mail and chide their future neighbors who don't bother to sign on often enough.

The complex will also have two guest suites and a unit that could be used for a shared caregiver, because these women and men are nothing if not pragmatic.

They have no plans to slow down any time soon, but they realize that someday they'll be glad their doorways were designed to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers.

They have also faced the reality that there may come a day when some of them will need the kind of intensive care provided by nursing homes.

But they are betting that Wolf Creek Lodge will accommodate them through, say, cancer or heart disease, the kinds of ailments that require some skilled assistance on a regular basis and a cadre of supportive neighbors nearby.

"My preference is to die at home with hospice," said Virginia Thresh, which would be possible at Wolf Creek Lodge. But "I am not at all thinking that if I'm really in need of 24-hour care, it will happen in cohousing."

### **Questions ahead**

Elder cohousing in America is so new that little is known about how it will actually work when residents become old and frail and ill.

This country's first two elder cohousing complexes opened their doors two years ago, Durrett and other experts said. Residents of the third moved in late this fall. Only one person has died in such a community in the U.S. And only one has been institutionalized for dementia.

Both were residents of Glacier Circle in Davis, near Sacramento, where most of the members have known one another for the last 40 years and belong to the same Unitarian Universalist church. The average age of the residents who moved into the complex when it opened in late 2005 was 80.

Glacier Circle resident Ellen Coppock, 81, says residents there have only one regret: "We all wish we'd started five years earlier."

The future residents of Wolf Creek Lodge are at a distinct advantage in that respect. Although they range in age from 59 to 84, most are in their 60s.

And that, said Marriott, is "the whole point."

"The idea is to make lifestyle choices now that can sustain you through your future but which provide a lot of fun," she said. "The idea is to maintain control over your own life as long as possible."