

Canadian Cohousing Network: helping retirees form bonds

CASE STUDY | 29 May 2023

Between high costs of living and a loneliness epidemic, the golden years of ageing feel less golden. But as values shift toward community and ageing in place, seniors are turning to co-living models like those designed by the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society to improve their quality of life.

AUTHORS

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LOCATIONS:

GENERATIONS:

OLDER ADULTS (BORN
PRE-1946)

BOOMERS (BORN
1947-1966)

SECTORS:

HOME AND RELATION-
SHIPS

CITIZENSHIP



EXPERTS

Daniella Gunn-Doerge

HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** The Canadian Cohousing Society offers cohousing opportunities for older adults, grounded in community, shared spaces, and resources
- 02** The model is becoming popular across age groups facing pervasive post-pandemic loneliness and a cost of living crisis
- 03** For older adults, cohousing offers a way to maintain independence and age well in place – a welcome alternative to long-term care homes

DATA

- In Canada, the number of roommate households increased by 54% from 2001 to 2021
- 28% of seniors lived alone in Canada in 2017-18 compared to only 14% of the general population
- Though 78% of Canadians want to grow old in their current home, only 26% think they'll be able to do so

SCOPE

People are living longer, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're living better. In Canada, although life expectancy is around 80 years old, the health-adjusted life expectancy – or how long people might live without significant disabilities – is only 70.5 for women and 69 for men. [1] This, compounded with the pervasive isolation and loneliness faced by older adults in long-term care homes begs the question: how can we improve retirees' quality of life in an increasingly ageing society?

Senior cohousing may be part of that solution, as touted by the [Canadian Senior Cohousing Society](#) (CSCS). The CSCS creates communities that live together based on a model of neighbourly interaction, co-care, shared spaces, and responsibilities. Though disbanded in 2022 after 11 years in operation, the CSCS has left a lasting impact on the long-term care industry in the country. Its work, now under the Canadian Cohousing Network jurisdiction, is rapidly growing thanks to shifted attitudes that favour community and connection in response to the passivity, isolation, and dependency that's stereotypically synonymous with ageing. "Older adults are looking for some degree of independence while still having the support they need. Their living situation should be adapted to fit their needs rather than fitting a person into a type of housing," says Daniella Gunn-Doerge, a Canadian community organizer leading projects tackling housing and isolation among seniors. [2]

With a variety of [intentional communities](#) across the country and more in the works, the Canadian Cohousing Network is redesigning seniors' living systems. [3] Designed with physical accessibility in mind, its hallmark community, [Harbourside Cohousing](#) – the first senior-oriented cohousing project in British Columbia – shares amenities and caregivers to cut down on costs and shared spaces that balance independent privacy and community, all of which promote better environmental sustainability. What can this tell brands about supporting an ageing process where seniors thrive, instead of just surviving?



The Canadian Cohousing Network works to instill community and connection

Canadian Cohousing Network website (2023)

CONTEXT

OLDER CANADIANS REASSESS HOME LIVING

Many elderly suburbanites are empty nesters with a lot of unused space, struggling with property upkeep, and paying for a home that doesn't suit their needs. Rentership is helping overcome this aging-in-place gap – though 78% of Canadians want to grow old in their current home, only 26% think they'll be able to do so, with affordability and behavioral preferences fueling the shift to new living arrangements like CSCS cohousing. [4] Today Boomers have become the fastest-growing age group of renters, surpassing Gen Yers and younger residents. [5][6] Community-based apps like [Tuktu](#), which connects contracted caregivers to run errands and provide support for older adults, are making these shifts possible. [4]

BATTLING THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Cohousing is seen as a way to improve Canadians' quality of life no matter their age, with home-sharing platform Sparrow raising \$1 million in funding to achieve its goals of addressing housing affordability and loneliness in the country. [7] For older adults, however, loneliness is more acute, as 28% live alone compared to only 14% of the general population. [8] During COVID-19, the loneliness epidemic in long-term care homes became apparent, causing a fear of retirement homes and an interest in alternative ways to maintain independent living while still having a support network readily

available. [9] As Boomers age, the Canadian government predicts increased pressure on health and home-care systems making the CSCS's radical shared housing model even more viable and appealing. [10]

THE RISE OF CO-LIVING

The turn to cohousing has grown in recent years as the pandemic and inflation crisis made the social and economic benefits increasingly clear. It's clear that the CSCS and similar models are gaining more traction, with the number of roommate households increasing by 54% from 2001 to 2021 in Canada. [11] In Ontario, the 2019 [Golden Girls Act](#) made senior living easier, as homes can be mortgaged and sold to unrelated parties. [12] Brands like [Golden HomeSharing Connections](#) are now specializing in senior home-sharing solutions or intergenerational options like [Canada HomeShare](#) which matches older adult home providers with students willing to support in exchange for cheaper rent.



CSCS-style co-living is a way to reduce environmental footprints

Canadian Cohousing Network website (2023)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

BOOST OLDER ADULTS' INDEPENDENCE

Older generations are looking for ways to maintain their independence while also making changes that bring about easier ways of living. People are seeking solutions like CSCS communities that not only provide that ease and confidence but also fit into their lives – not the other way around. Home modifications are a key piece of the puzzle, with 93% of seniors agreeing that they help people age in place and 83% seeing them as a cost-effective solution – and even more so in a shared cohousing arrangement. [4] Supporting older adults' independence also requires breaking down ageism stigma, as [Love of Gray](#) is doing with ['gero influencers'](#) working to change how younger generations view and treat seniors.

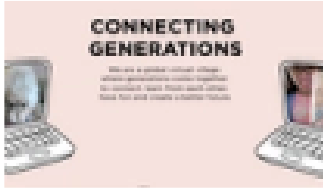
TAP INTO COLLECTIVE MENTALITIES

People are reassessing their proximity to loved ones, actively looking for ways to stave off loneliness and prioritizing community as they age, clear in the 90% of Canadians who want to spend at least an hour a week with family and friends and the four in ten Canadians who want more friends. [13] A major whitespace opportunity exists for CSCS-like social innovations to help tackle the loneliness that 60% of Canadians feel since the pandemic. “Cohousing allows for more informal community care, providing a sense of reciprocity that’s not common in assisted living facilities,” says Gunn-Doerge. [2][13] Brands like [Node](#) providing co-living spaces for digital nomads may provide inspiration for what’s possible for seniors.

CAREFULLY CURATE COHOUSING

“Most older adults report that they prefer aging in place so that they can maintain their independence, privacy, comfort and connection to their community,” says Gunn-Doerge. [2] Plus, CSCS-style co-living boasts more than social perks. It’s also a way to reduce environmental footprints and address housing affordability at a time when rental rates are growing at 3% but incomes aren’t keeping up at 1% each year. [14] In addition to supporting marginalized and older adult populations, cohousing is a tangible example of the ways that people are turning to structural organizations that help them connect with one another and live life together. [Husmates](#), a platform that connects people for co-ownership opportunities, is a great example of a brand responding to these values in a still under-tapped market space.

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SOURCES

1. The Globe and Mail (October 2022)
2. Interview with Daniella Gunn-Doerge conducted by the author
3. Fast Company (January 2022)
4. Newswire (April 2021)
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7. News Wire (October 2022)
8. Financial Post (August 2022)
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13. Newswire (July 2021)
14. Toronto Sun (July 2022)

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