THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Vancouver co-housing community that started a trend

KERRY GOLD
VANCOUVER
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED JULY 31, 2026
UPDATED AUGUST 1, 2026

Windsong co-housing community in Langley, B.C., was the first of its kind; now there are 24 co-housing communities across the country.

RON USHER/SUPPLIED

In Langley, B.C., around 70 people gathered on a recent Saturday to celebrate 30 years since the opening of the Windsong co-housing community, the first project of its kind in Canada.

The movement has grown slowly over the past three decades. There are now 24 co-housing communities across the country, most of them in B.C. But the housing model is getting a second wind – with 21 more communities across Canada in the development pipeline, according to the Canadian Cohousing Network. Members say the surge in interest speaks to the housing crisis but also a need for better connection with neighbours, a way of life lost to vertical living, where interactions are often limited to a few seconds in an elevator.

Co-housing involves a group of buyers getting together to purchase a property and act as the developers to build their own homes. The homes are market value, but they're designed and collaboratively managed so that the residents can choose how they want to live within the complex. Most value shared amenities, such as play areas, workshops, gardens, music rooms, guest suites and dining areas; and a community approach to helping each other out. That sharing of resources gives co-housing the affordable edge over the usual strata complex, said Howard Staples, who came up with the idea with his wife, Miriam, in 1990. She had given him the seminal book on the subject for his birthday: Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves, by the Americans who coined the term "co-housing," Chuck Durrett and Katie McCamant.

"Well, that was it, we just had to do it," said Mr. Staples. He added: "We had no idea what we were doing."

The founding members knew enough to get publicity in the local newspaper, which generated a lot of interest and helped them find buyers. They also brought on an experienced contractor, who led them through the building process. They invited the American experts who had inspired them, Mr. Durrett and Ms. McCamant, to come up and help them plan and establish goals for the community.

Ron Usher was one of those early buyers who, at the time, was living in a rental house with his young family in Point Grey. Mr. Usher said he was keen to be part of a housing model imported from Denmark and new to Canada. He even gave the community its name.

"I remember feeling like every real estate sign between downtown and Blanca Street was a slap in the face," he said. "I wanted to have something more, and it wasn't just a financial thing. I wanted some sense of community."

He quickly realized from the response that they'd tapped into an unmet demand. But the group of buyers also realized that the complexity of developing a property was onerous, and it wouldn't be cheap. Only the most dedicated made it through the five-year process, which required a lot of negotiation and consensus.

In Langley, B.C., around 70 people gathered on a recent Saturday to celebrate 30 years since the opening of the Windsong co-housing community.

RON USHER/SUPPLIED

After an extensive search, they settled on a 5.8-acre field in a suburban area north of Highway 1, in the Walnut Grove neighbourhood. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation helped finance the property. Mr. Usher recalls walking around the property and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans showing up to tell them that about four acres of the land was off limits because a salmon stream flowed through it. That meant the group had to condense their design for the 34 units with stacked housing and underground parking. The architect designed an indoor “street” under a cathedrallike glass roof spanning 10,000 square feet. The surrounding area became a preserved forest. The design won them a Gold Georgie Award for Best Environmental Achievement.

“We were endlessly dealing with trade-offs,” said Mr. Usher, who paid $215,000 for his three-level stacked home with an unfinished basement. “What was cool about it was this was not built by a developer to sell, so all kinds of decisions were made that were for the long-term use of the place – the long-term maintainability. At the time, you’ll recall we’d had the ‘leaky condo’ crisis,” he added, referring to the multibillion-dollar disaster of the

eighties and nineties that saw thousands of condominiums spring leaks due to design and building code failures.

And their project raised a lot of concern with the neighbours, he said.

“They had all kinds of ideas about it, fearful it was a bunch of drugged-out hippies moving in next door.”

A 1994 photo of Howard and Miriam Staples, and daughter Lani. Lani grew up to be a realtor who handles Windsong units.

COURTESY HOWARD STAPLES

The Staples raised their family in their three-bedroom unit. Today, they’ve converted the two bedrooms downstairs into a rental, which serves as income for the retired couple. Other people have sold off their bigger units and downsized to smaller units. Their daughter, Lani Evers-Staples, is a realtor who handles any Windsong listings. She’s listed a four-bedroom, two-bathroom townhouse in Windsong for $739,900, plus $553 a month for maintenance fees. The updated unit is only 1,324 square feet. Co-housing units are on the smaller side because of the shared amenities, said Mr. Staples.

Anyone can buy into the project. Residents don't vet buyers. But most people are a fit because they're already community-minded, said Mr. Staples.

Resident Caryn MacDonald purchased her co-housing unit specifically because it's part of a community. She bought into Compass Commons, which will open its doors in October and become Langley's second co-housing community. The Burlington, Ont., resident has been meeting with members of the Compass community since 2021, planning and designing its 40 units and public spaces. She wanted to move out west to be closer to her grown children, but because she doesn't know anyone else in B.C., she also wanted to be part of a community. After an online search, she discovered Compass Commons. Instead of dreading the turmoil of relocation to a new city, she said she's excited to be embracing the next chapter.

She's listed her Burlington condo and will continue working as a personal coach in Langley. Instead of dreading the upheaval and isolation of relocation to a new city, she's excited to be moving in a few months.

"My friends from here say, 'That's really courageous of you, moving out there by yourself,' but I already feel like I've got a group of people that I know, or at least a foundation to move to," said Ms. MacDonald.

"I'm looking forward to just sitting around and kind of having conversations with people, having a coffee or a glass of wine after work, and just hearing about people's stories or just making that kind of connection. People want that."

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/vancouver/article-windsong-cohousing-developments-british-columbia/

© Copyright 2026. All rights reserved.