A place OF THEIR OWN

As their housing needs change with age, a group of Toronto women are turning to co-living, a community-focused housing option.

BY SARAH TRELEAVEN

PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY UNITED

DOROTHY GOLDIN ROSENBERG WAS THINKING ABOUT AGING. It was 2012, and her son had just called to tell her there was a documentary on CBC Radio's *The Sunday Edition* about La Maison des babayagas, or The Babayagas' House.

A new-build apartment building in Montreuil, one of Paris's eastern suburbs, it looks like any other complex from the outside: six storeys with a modular façade and 24 private studio units, plus ample shared spaces, including a gym, a library, a meeting room and a garden. But inside, the documentary revealed, its differences were clear. For starters, everyone who lives there is elderly and female. Like a mature activist sorority, it has overflowing bookshelves, community engagement, collective meals and regular workshops on topics ranging from nutrition to memoir writing.

The residence is characterized by a playful but radical joie de vivre; even the term "baba yaga," which means witch or crone in Slavic mythology, is a tongue-in-cheek tribute to society's enduring negative perceptions of unattached women, the "cat ladies" of yesteryear.

Purpose-built for single senior women to age in dignity and companionship, the entire project is a state-funded and self-administered intentional community—a residential option designed to emphasize social connections and to serve members who share a common lifestyle. "Women who live alone are often lonely, especially once most of their friends have died," says Dorothy, now 79. "It's the caring that appeals to me and to a lot of us."

That's why, for women across Canada who tuned in to the documentary, or heard about it from friends or family, learning about La Maison des babayagas felt like a call to action. In fact, soon after the airing, a group of about a dozen women, most previously unacquainted, began meeting to discuss a potential Toronto project. Dorothy was one of them, of course. All of the women in the group were worried about their own prospects for aging, and it didn't take long for them to come to the same conclusion: This could be the perfect alternative to the lonely future often experienced by single senior women. A small steering committee formed and has now been working for nearly four years to gather the necessary funding and community partnerships to open its own version of the French residence, Baba Yaga Place. (Though there is one major difference: While the Toronto project will be primarily for women, since their need is greater, it will reserve a small number of units for men or married couples who believe in their philosophy.) There's still a long road ahead, but plans are certainly in the works.

Senior co-living has long been a compelling, if under-the-radar, option, both in Canada and abroad. Models vary significantly, from mixed-generation co-ownership models to more classic roommate arrangements. The first Canadian versions were technically cooperative housing projects that prioritized older women's housing needs without excluding other groups. Vancouver's Mature Women's Housing Co-op launched in the 1980s, followed by a 142-unit building in downtown Toronto that officially opened its doors in 1997, an initiative spearheaded by the Older Women's Network Ontario. Wolf Willow Cohousing, a 21-unit condominium that opened in Saskatoon in 2012, was the first official co-living project. Then, in 2014, 68-year-old Beverly Suek transformed her three-storey Winnipeg home into an "intentional community for senior women." (As you might expect, comparisons to *The Golden Girls* have been irrepressible.) "Everyone has her own life, but if you want to watch a movie or do some gardening, there's someone to do it with," says Beverly.

Demographics are partially responsible for driving interest among women. As in most of the world, many women in Canada outlive their male counterparts, with an average life expectancy of 84 years versus 80. According to the Canadian Labour Congress, 30 percent of senior women who reside alone live below the poverty line—twice the rate of senior men—so pooling resources makes sense.

"For women of my generation, we're finding that our situations aren't what we expected," says Beth Komito-Gottlieb, 61, who spent much of her professional life supporting those on the autism spectrum. "Our money's not going as far as we expected, our pensions aren't what we hoped and, often, our marriages have broken down."

The core pillars of Toronto's Baba Yaga Place project closely mirror those of the French model: self-management, feminism, interdependence, community engagement and environmental responsibility. In the CBC documentary, the women of La Maison des babayagas

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speak passionately about integrating their planned community into the broader neighbourhood and teaching the French language to new immigrants; their social-justice narratives spill beyond the gates.

Dorothy, who has worked with the National Film Board of Canada and lectured at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, still rides her bicycle around the city. She can excitedly discuss a wide variety of interests, including but not limited to her granddaughters, her exercise schedule and that time she marched against the Vietnam War, shoulder to shoulder with legendary pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock. Mostly, though, she speaks of her lifelong activism and dedication to community—a commitment shared by Dorothy's cohorts, whose biographies highlight advocacy work of all stripes, as well as volunteering at libraries, singing in choirs and caring for rescued pets. "We're not just a bunch of old ladies," says Dorothy. "We have a lot of history, and the idea of social responsibility follows us."

The baba yaga vision is a stark contrast to aging alone, with or without the grim institutional norms of hushed dining rooms and social isolation. Ellen Passmore, 66, works for Ve'ahavta, a charitable organization that addresses homelessness and poverty, and was drawn to the baba yaga idea after dealing with the private assisted-living facility where her 92-year-old mother lives. "With traditional seniors' facilities, there's a lot of isolation from the day-to-day life of the community," she says. "It's all about loss of independence, loss of autonomy, loss of decision-making, and it's a very medical model. It's very clear to me that I don't want to go down that route."

In fact, several of those on Toronto's Baba Yaga Place committee can cite a moment—a car accident or a medical issue—when they started to more seriously consider the increasingly practical need for close community. Two years ago, when Dorothy, who has a son in Montreal and a daughter in France, needed hip-replacement surgery, her children were concerned about her ability to cope on her own. They were each able to stay with her for a week, but then the baba yagas took over, drawing up a care schedule to ensure that all of her needs were met.

The baba yaga emphasis on co-care comes with the promise that the women will be living independently, but in a supportive community—they will have the option to eat meals together in communal areas, and they can feel at ease knowing that neighbours are on hand if, like Dorothy, they need help. "I'm most looking forward to having people I can count on," says Ellen, who currently lives in a co-op.

Andrew Moore, the president of the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society, says co-living options build on the idea of extended families looking after each other, and they support a whole range of communities who want to live in a similar way, including faith-based groups, condo dwellers and seniors helping seniors. "It's about being able to flourish until the end of your days," he says.

The Paris project took 13 years to come to fruition, from the moment it was conceived by founder Thérèse Clerc in 1999 until the day the doors opened in 2012. Baba Yaga Place is hoping to get the Toronto project off the ground in a much shorter period, but the logistical issues involved are myriad and will require both political advocates and financial support to subsidize the development of a potential property. The four million euros in funding for La Maison des babayagas came from multiple public sources and was a pet project of the then-ruling Green Party.

As a group, the baba yagas here at home don't have sufficient personal means to buy land in downtown Toronto and build a community from scratch. And they don't want this project to be exclusive to those with big bank accounts. Instead, they're looking at rental options—anywhere from 20 to 60 units in a retrofitted disused church or school to a couple of floors in a new building (such as the massive complex destined for Toronto's Mirvish Village). Affordable housing is a major obstacle, but the baba yagas would like to remain in the downtown core. "We don't want to move to some beautiful spot in the country where no one's ever going to see us again," says Beth.

Despite these challenges, the women, like the various founders of senior co-living projects before them, have tapped into the need for a compassionate alternative to our present models for aging, one in which vibrant and supportive community looms large. Interest is likely to grow as the population ages; that's why, though there's no timeline for the Toronto baba yaga house, there's also no doubt about the demand for one. "If we started accepting applications, we would be flooded," says Beth. ●

CANADIAN CO-LIVING

Baba Yaga Place isn't the first co-living experiment in Canada. Here's what came before.

1980s
VANCOUVER
The Mature Women's Housing Co-op opens its doors.

1997
TORONTO
The Older Women's Network Ontario helmed this 142-unit co-op in Toronto.

2012
SASKATOON
Co-living is even more community-focused than a co-op. Wolf Willow Cohousing was the first official co-living project in Canada.

2014
WINNIPEG
Beverly Suek turned her house into a small-scale housing project for older women.

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