

HOMES



COURTESY OF DAVID CHARD

Developer David Chard included a courtyard in this Victoria project to encourage socialization among neighbours.

Building friendships

Shared spaces and front porches foster interaction between neighbours

BY PEDRO ARRAIS

The backyard fence may be absent, but today's condo dwellers are developing new ways to get to know their neighbours.

There was a time when the latest gossip was exchanged over a common fence. With the move to condos and busier lifestyles, many people hardly know who their neighbours are, let alone chat with them.

Socializing between neighbours can have a positive influence on well-being. To increase interaction among residents, some developers have designed communities instead of just homes.

"We have to go back to the way we were, to design neighbourhoods on a more human scale," says Doug Makaroff, developer of Living Forest Communities, a community set within a 385-hectare managed forest in the Cowichan Valley Regional District in Victoria. "By mak-

ing services only a five-minute walk away, there is less dependence on the car and an increase in face-to-face interaction among residents."

Another way to increase interaction is to place a home's porch within four metres of the sidewalk. This is the best distance to initiate conversation with people passing by on the street, Makaroff says.

He says a successful community needs to offer services near its homes. Developments should include a mix of uses, such as commercial spaces with residential units. Housing should also attract homeowners of different ages and income levels. For seniors, there should be a range of affordable living options.

While the ideal development scenario will have a community hall or recreation centre where residents can meet and interact, residents of new condos don't have the luxury of a common space. The new focal point for some condo dwellers might be

their neighbourhood coffee shop.

Some developers include common areas in each project to foster everyday interactions between neighbours.

Instead of a fitness centre, developer David Chard put in a rooftop patio with a barbecue and an outdoor movie viewing space in one development, and a ground-floor courtyard and movie room in another project.

"With condos getting smaller — some are only 450 to 550 square feet — people need an area to socialize and meet other people," says Chard. "Our common areas offer residents, who enjoy the urban lifestyle, the opportunity to entertain and lounge around outside their living spaces."

One couple took the concept a step further, booking the rooftop patio of their condo building to hold their wedding reception last August, soon after they moved into the building.

While developers try to provide the threads to weave a community's social fabric, it is ultimately up to the residents themselves to sew together relationships.

Continued and frequent interaction between residents is the basis of a community, as Wendy Pryde will tell you.

"We have potlucks and a group of us, three or four couples, regularly have dinner in each other's condos," says Pryde, who lives in the Corazon in downtown Victoria. "We don't have to drive, we don't care about the weather. It's great." When the weather is good, the group may walk to a nearby restaurant instead.

In her condo building, returnable bottles are collected and the money put toward funding two events a year — a barbecue and a wine-and-cheese party. She credits the building's managers for their part in organizing social activities for the residents.

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