

The New York Times

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1997

Living Independently in Old Age, Without Going It Alone

By ROBERT W. STOCK

Mary E. Zoeller, 65, is a technical writer with plenty of reservations about typical retirement communities.

"I don't play bridge, and I don't want to be with people my own age exclusively," she said.

Last year, she heard about an unusual housing alternative and decided to check it out.

Today, Ms. Zoeller is one of 29 residents of an intergenerational co-housing "village" in Berkeley, Calif., one of the growing number of new housing options for older Americans who are looking for ways to balance their desire for privacy with their growing need for companionship and support.

What Ms. Zoeller found on her first visit to the community was a cozy group of cottages and town houses around a common yard, on a property abundantly landscaped with redwoods and stone pines, fruit trees and palms.

There was only one home for sale, a three-bedroom unit she thought was too large for her needs. "But I'd promised to attend a community dinner in the common house that night," she recalled, "and afterward people sat around chatting. A toddler came over and leaned against my knee. I felt like it was home — a comfortable family gathering. I changed my mind on the spot and bought in. It's been like family ever since."

Most older Americans want to remain in their own homes: 84 percent, according to a 1996 survey by the American Association of Retired Persons. But physical weakness, loneliness and financial need lead millions to give up that dream. Some move directly into assisted-living sites and nursing homes because they require continuous medical care. Others are healthy enough, but they sell their homes because they have trouble with the activities of daily living: opening windows, getting out of a tub, driving a car. Perhaps their neighborhoods have deteriorated or they can't pay their heating bills.

"For these people, some form of communal living seems only logical," said Deborah Chalfie, a senior program specialist with the association, in Washington. "It's less expensive and it's personally supportive."

Across the country, the idea of communal housing options for the elderly is growing, albeit slowly. Possibilities range from a low-cost apartment complex in Los Angeles to the middle-class co-housing condominiums in Berkeley where young and old live independently side by side to a sprawling Tudor house in Staten Island, with rooms by the month. But there's one major stumbling block: For now at least, many older women especially, who far outnumber older men, take pride in maintaining their own homes and resist moving.

"A lot of them are widowed or divorced and living alone, and they can concentrate on their own needs for the first time in their lives," Ms. Chalfie said. "They also worry about the group dynamics, about getting along with the other people."

But Ms. Chalfie says she suspects that women of the baby boom generation, who are more likely to have experienced group living in college, may be more receptive to the idea.

Following is a closer look at three evolving styles for communal living.

Alternative Living for the Aging

Janet L. Witkin was years ahead of her time when, in 1978, at age 32, she founded a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles called Alternative Living for the Aging. "In most places, there were just two basic kinds of housing for seniors," she said, "independent living and institutions. I wanted to find a way to give them something in between, a bridge, where they could help each other — independence through interdependence."

She has since created five rental apartment complexes for middle- and low-income older residents in the Los Angeles area. At three of her "villages in the city," as she calls them, units have no kitchens and everyone helps with dinner. At the others, residents do their own shopping and cooking, except for an occasional holiday or birthday celebration held in a common room.

Prospective tenants of the West Hollywood residence must be at least 62 and healthy enough to be on their own, since no medical services are provided. They may have an annual income of no more than \$17,000; most have incomes far below that. The rents range from about \$400 to \$500 a month.

On a recent afternoon, Sylvia Rainey, 67, was seated with a few of her 15 neighbors in the neat, grassy courtyard of the complex. All the units in the two-story building face the courtyard, which functions as a kind of town square.

"If I feel I want to talk to someone, I can come down here and be with people," Ms. Rainey said. "If I want to be private, I can do that, too."

Looking out for one another is a comfort for the residents. When the building opened, two years ago, a formal buddy system was organized, but gradually a free-form buddy system has replaced it. Ms. Rainey told of receiving a phone call from a neighbor who was worried after noticing that her car had not moved for several days.

New kinds of housing offer privacy, but with a buddy system.

Ms. Rainey is African-American; seven of the residents are from the former Soviet Union, and they tend to stick together. "Even if we can't really talk with some of them, the friendliness is there," Ms. Rainey said. "We use body language."

Bertha Bunimovich, 80, who was born in Latvia, agrees. "I feel very good and safer because everybody has a care about you," she said.

Ms. Witkin makes certain that new residents in any of her villages have a cooperative spirit. "The idea is to set up a situation where older people will be there for each other, whether it's help with shopping or a sympathetic ear," she said. "Everything I've seen tells me they live longer that way."

Further information about Alternative Living for the Aging is available from (213) 650-7988.