Going green in the burbs

**So you want to live in a co-operative community
where materials are recycled, nature respected and water and energy conserved.
What'll the neighbours say?**

By Bruce McDougall
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ALAN CARPENTER HAD BEEN A BUILDER and developer in Vancouver for more than a decade when he decided in the early 1990s to pursue "a better way to live." The now 54-year-old native of Grande Prairie, Alta., envis-aged a community in which the residents themselves made all the important decisions, from where to locate their homes and how to build and maintain them to what type of plants they would grow in their organic gardens.

A few like-minded friends, including an engineer named Howard Staples and his wife Miriam Evers, an accountant and corporate manager, located an ideal site: an empty field in the township of Langley, B.C., an expanding suburban community in the Fraser Valley about an hour by public transit from downtown Vancouver. A creek tan thoough the 2.5 hectares, creating a wetland that was brimming with ospreys, deer, turtles and the occasional coyote. Part of the property was covered by a forest, which they would preserve. "when we start considering ourselves and each other," says Carpenter, "we start considering the Earth as well."

Today, their community - WindSong - is one of 13 belonging to the Ecovillage Network of Canada. It is noteworthy simply because it exists. As Carpenter's group quickly found out, the promoters of ecovillages face formidable chal-lenges as they struggle with the nuts and bolts of a housing project--obtaining zoning approval, regulatory permission and mortgage financing for their development, commissioning a developer and contracting a builder. And then there are the neighbours. First, though, enough people have to buy units in the development to keep the sheriff from the door. "It's quite a leap of faith," says Carpenter, who is now a consultant to other groups that aspire to building an ecov-illage. "People have to be able to commit themselves to the project" - then wait years for their dream to be realized.

BY 1994, CARPENTER'S GROUP had grown to more than 20 people and included a town planner, several school-teachers, a doctor, a lawyer and an electrician. Another new member was Valerie McIntyre, a committed social activist involved in movements for peace, social justice and the envi-ronment. At the time, McIntyre, ber husband and three chil-dren lived in a two-storey house in suburban Coquitlam. But they were ready to make the move to a more co-operative set-ting. "I

had this obsession, really" she says. "I wanted to find out how we could create peace in the world."

McIntyre was convinced that world peace depended on individuals learning how to live together in small communities. "It's all about collaborative decision making - sharing power and participatory democracy."

All WindSong's founding members shared a similar phi-losophy. Langley's existing 25,000 residents, however, were skeptical. Carpenter, McIntyre and the others spent countless bouts in meetings and less formal conversations with local officials, community leaders and neighbours, especially those who lived in Chelsea Green, the gated adult community of upscale townhouses right next to their land. "There was sonie concern among the residents there when they heard we were a community that planned to eat together and support each other," recalls McIntyre. "But when they met us and real-ized we were ordinary, well-balanced individuals, they began to understand what we wanted to do."

Still, the advance work rock five years. During that time, WindSong's founders not only addressed the concems of their neighbours with a consistent and well-orchestrated public-relations strategy, they also invested more than $300,000 in fees, surveys, designs, plans and architectural drawings. At a substantial cost, they modified their plans so that WindSong's 34 townhouses would stand far enough from the creek to comply with Langley's evolving environ-mental regulations. They made progress, Carpenter says, because they hired an American consultant with experience in developing communal housing projects. "There were no Canadian ecovillages in existence yet, so there was no one in Canada qualified to help us." In addition to sharing a vision of community, WindSong's sponsors wanted to minimize their environmental impact. They clustered the attached bouses and amenities and left two-thirds of the property, including the entire wetland and forest, untouched. They also incorporated into the project some recycled building materials, as well as non-toxic floor-ing and cabinets and water-preserving toilets and appliances.

While none of this deviates radically from conventional building practices, banks and mortgage lenders found the con-cept of WindSong difficult to understand. To finance the $7 million project, the founders eventually tumed to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and paid a premium for a CMHC-insured loan.

THE FIRST RESIDENTS OF WINDSONG began moving into their homes on a sunny day in mid -July 1996. "By the time we arrived, we had a community of people who all trusted each other very deeply," says McIntyre. "It was euphoria all round when we saw out dream come true after six years of hard work."

Over the next two weeks, earlier arrivals helped later ones unload their fumiture and belongings. "Then we cooked out first meal in the common house," recalls Carpenter. "That tradition continues today." Residents also prepare a meal for

anyone who moves out of the community. When this happens, the persoris home becomes available for purchase just like a conventional townhouse.

Currently, you can buy a three-bedroom, two-storey row house at WindSong for about $240,000. In return for your investment, you become a member of a community of about 100 people, ranging from babies to seniors and including couples, families, singles and single parents. WindSong's website also lists outdoor enthusiasts, bookworms, artists and intel-lectuels. "We have a book club, a Life Purpose Circle, a seasonal choir, keen groups of barbecuers and bridge enthusiasts, lots of vegetarians, recreational walkers, runners and tennis players. Our members give instructional classes in Tai Chi, body rhythms, watercolour painting and various areas of personal growth. We also have several happy pets in the community"

From the busy road outside, WindSong looks pretty much like any other condominium complex. A sign directs motorists to a handful of visitors' parking spaces, and a dou-ble front door opens onto a large foyer where guests ring residents and identify themselves through an intercom system before being buzzed in. Inside, however, it is far from ordinary. Residents' front doors open onto a glass-covered atrium, which offers respire from the tain that falls frequently on this part of the world and provides a sheltered and tidy commu-nal space. As kids play a game of tag, adults read, chat to neighbours and tend to their container gardens. Some residents of WindSong work at home in the Internet-wired office included in their townhouse. Others commute to nearby businesses in Langley or Vancouver. When they're not working, singing, walking, painting or growing, residents try to rack up some time in the Community Con-tribution System by collecting garbage, cleaning floors, wash-ing windows or attending to some of the paperwork in the WindSong office. "We expect a minimum of three hours a month from every adult at WindSong," says McIntyre.

Some people are more inclined than others to meet their commitments to the community When conflicts arise over, for example, a resident's inactivity or a noisy neighbour or chil-dren playing right outside people's front doors in the atrium, WindSong follows an established but informal protocol to resolve the issue. First, says McIntyre, neighbours try to talk to each other about the problem and seule their differences amicably. "Neighbours usually co-operate when they know each other," she says. A face-to-face meeting also teaches the person with the complaint to deliver a censorious message "in a way that elicits a smile instead of guilt or anger. Every interaction is an opportunity for learning."

If the problem continues, McIntyre adds, the person who is bothered will usually check with a couple of other neigh-bours to see whether they feel the saine way. "Sometimes, we may discover that were the only person who's bothered about something." If the problem is affecting several people, they may go together to speak to the one creating the per-ceived problem to find out its cause. "We've had situations where a family member is under severe stress," says McIntyre, "and the

stress affects the behaviour of the test of the house-hold. In ibis case, a group of neighbours may get together with the family to hear more details and offer suggestions for support."

Community meetings are held regularly at WindSong to discuss more chronic issues of, say, neatness or aesthetics. "Peo-ple's understanding and acceptance of diversity really grows," says McIntyre, "because out discussion invariably gets into val-ues. We discover that some people ca e much more than others about appearances, sortie people are more aware of how their behaviour affects others. There is always leaming in these discussions and a change in people's perceptions about them-selves and others."

Because the residents of WindSong know each other so well, McIntyre contends, they make better decisions in administering their community. "We already know ahead of rime how each of us will react. We know, for example, that a certain person will always want to know the second-band prices for potential purchases. So we'll do out research to obtain that information before we bring a recommendation to the community for a decision." With its communal spaces, 5,000-square-foot common house, shared responsibilities, organic gardens and wetlands, and its inclusive style of communal decision making, Wind-Song comes as close as any community in Canada to meet-ing the criteria of an ecovillage, which is loosely defined as a commitment to living in an ecologically, economically, cul-turally and spiritually sound way. Yet technologically, at least, it still falls short of the ideal. BUILDINGS IN AN IDEAL ECOVILLAGE would be constructed from recycled or renewable materials, including wood, tires, pop tins, straw and sand. They would generate their own solar and wind power, process their own grey water, incorporate gardens on the rooftop and fertilize next seasods roses with one flush of the solar toilet. All these technologies were tested and proven during the last two decades of the 20th century. Not only do they work, they also contribute to more efficient housing, while reduc-ing colts. "My only utility bill is electricity," says Rolf Paloheimo, owner of one of two healthy bouses built in Toronto in the 1990s, "and for that, 1 pay $700 to $800 a year."

As primary developer of his healthy house, Paloheimo incorporated hundreds of ecologically sound elements into his building, including triple-glazed windows, grey-water recycling, solar power, biological waste treatment and low-energy appliances. The house's corrugated roof is made from plastic auto bumpers, and the test of the building depends heavily on recycled steel and an engineered wood product that reduces waste. It sits on a small inner-city lot that measures 6 by 20 metres and is not connected to the municipal water and sewage infrastructure. Instead, it collects rainwater from its roof and processes the water through biological filters and ozone gas that make it safe for drinking.

One healthy house does not make an ecovillage, however. So why not build 15 of them in a duster, add a common space for business and call them an ecovillage? In fact, that's what most of the other ecovillage developers in Canada are trying to

do, with varying degrees of success. But, as the founders of the Whole Village northwest of Toronto have discovered, such a process can take a decade or longer, cost thousands of dol-lars and wrap you in red tape before you even put a shovel in the ground.

Whole Village bas been 10 years in the planning stages, says Lee Davies, chair and national coordinator of the Ecovillage Network of Canada. "The residents have ownership of their property, but their neighbours are upset." In bucolic and upscale Caledon, not only do the inhabitants disfike the idea of living next to 30 families on a 77-hectare farm, they also wonder about the intentions of the Whole Village founders, who want to pursue such activities as biodynamic farming and ecologically responsible energy, water and waste systems.

In addition, Whole Village professes attitudes about shar-ing and consensus building that remind its neighbours of the sixties, and the last thing the property owners of Caledon want is a commune of hippies. "People are acculturated to private ownership," says Davies. "And most of us aren't into sharing stuff, especially financial sharing. It's a challenging concept."

The amount of money required for ecologically sound technology can also be daunting. Although it may pay for itself over time, it often costs more than standard building materials and appliances. And as Paloheimo points out, it may have little or no resale value. Solar panels for an average house, for example, can colt as much as $40,000, and it could take up to 100 years to recover the investment in energy savings.

The economics tend to dissuade private developers. Yet a few intrepid individuals have tried to incorporate some healthy-houle concepts into an entire housing project, hop-ing to attract purchasers with a vague but uncommitted interest in preserving the planer. Instead of sharing the risk communally, these developers take the financial risk them-selves and potentially reap the rewards if they can attract enough buyers.

AS DEVELOPER AND PROMOTER of Hawthorn Hill in Mahone Bay, N.S., Ian Startup bas sold nine single-home plots on an 18-hectare site that devotes six hectares to walking trails and green space. Startup's development emphasizes sustainable building materials, energy efficiency, low toxin levels and responsible land use. "We'll use linoleum (made with linseed oil and powered cork) instead of carpet-ing or sheet vinyl," he says. In the houle he built for himself, Startup bas also used thin-coat plaster, which can be applied quickly and requires little or no painting, instead of dry-wall. At $115 per square foot, including the $35,000 to $46,000 cost of the land, an average single detached house in Hawthorn Hill will cost about $230,000.

The development will also incorporate a communal dimension, although its initial approach to decision making did not resemble participatory democracy so much as

enlightened dictatorship. Before Startup will sell a building lot, purchasers must agree to a three-page list of covenants that prohibit a variety of residential sins, including the construction of semi-detached, duplex or apartment housing, the use of a house for any purpose other than a private residence and overhead wires of any kind. In some cases, these covenants contradict the principles of an ecovillage. Ecovillages emphasize self-sufftciency, for example, and encourage individuals to work at home or within the community. They provide a common space for meetings and recreation, and they emphasize self-sufficient services such as heat, power and lighting. They also welcome a diverse group of residents, accommodated within housing units that range from apart-ments to wheelchair-accessible shared dwellings.

Startup will consider applications for home offices. The other options, however, were out of the question. "We con-sidered the ecovillage approach," he acknowledges. "But my wife and I had to ask ourselves what kind of community we ourselves wanted to retire to. We didn't avant to live in a commune. We didn't avant to live in a retirement village. We wanted to live a normal life. But if people buy into this community, they will avant to maintain the spirit of the covenants."

While it may seem a far cry from an ecovillage, Hawthorn Hill incorporates at least some of its features and is a radical departure from conventional development practices. And in the conservative world of building development, that con-stitutes a substantial risk. Before Startup could sell his first lot, local authorities required him to produce engineered plans and surveys, build sewer lines and a paved road, install power lines and poles, relocate the town's electrical-equipment stor-age facility and cover an abandoned gravel pit. They also asked him to build a medevac heliport, but he is still challenging that request. Over eight years, Startup figures he has invested almost $500,000. Against those risks, even the most pas-sionate idealism wears thin.

If Startup had incorporated such technologies as waste-water recycling systems and wind-power generators, he could have lost his shiftt. "There are complex concepts," says healthy-house builder Paloheimo, and they're not easy to sell to the public. To collect passive solar energy, for example, a buildings windows must face in the right direction. Recy-cling rainwater and reclaiming waste water require specific design modifications. And, in some cases, recycled building materials are regarded as toxic waste. "All this limits your options," says Paloheimo, and home buyers avant as many options as they can get. Furthermore, recycling water may make environmental sense, "but who wants to shower in water from the washing machine?"

For the saure reasons, real estate in an ecovillage is not easy to resell. Buying a house is the most expensive purchase most people will ever make. It's an emotional commitment, fraught with anxiety and second-guessing. And few people avant to spend additional money on such unfamiliar tech-nology as biofilters and living waste-disposal systems if they can get a simple toilet that flushes and weekly

garbage pickup at the curb. Paloheimo eventually sold his house in Toronto at its fair market value, but when he first put it on the market, a real estate agent told him that he'd have to pro-vide a discount on the selling price, because "everything is so unusual."

None of this has stopped committed ecovillagers from pursuing their dreams. Whole Village members continue to hold meetings and persuade their Caledon neighbours of their good intentions and potentiel contributions to the area and the world. In Vancouver, a development called Southeast False Creek is coming closer by the month to receiving con-struction approval. In Calgary, a development called Eco-Village 1 will soon begin construction. Smaller ecovillage projects dot the hypothetical landscape, particularly in British Columbia, many of them assisted by consultants like WindSong's Alan Carpenter.

"There's no question that it takes quite a shift in perception to be able to work together to create a common vision," Carpenter says. "For me, WindSong was a huge learning process. I'm a business owner, and I was used to making decisions by myself I had to do a lot of letting go to be able to work in the group process. But the rewards for me and my work have been huge. And the resulting community is much more than I could have dreamed about by mysel£ There is more safety, more caring, more sense of place, more community, more support, and more consideration for the envi-tournent. It's a great place for seniors, singles, single parents and families. It makes less impact on the environment and improves people's health. In fact, people who live in ecovillages often say it's like the difference between being alive and dead."

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