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Condos Where Joiners Get Their Wish

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Just a few years ago, the abandoned office building on Eastern Avenue in Silver Spring was a bleak eyesore occupied occasionally by homeless people. Debris and weeds filled its parking lot.

Rescued from decades of neglect, the building was reincarnated as a 56-unit condominium in late 2004. The parking lot was reborn as a courtyard filled with sculpture, native plants and flowering trees.

And unlike the case at other new condos sprouting in Silver Spring, the neighbors at Eastern Village Cohousing know each other by name, sharing potlucks in the building's large common area weekly, climbing up to the roof for movies in the summer and celebrating birthdays, marriages and births throughout the community.

The concept of cohousing, imported from Denmark to the United States in the 1980s, balances private homeownership with community living. Residents share decision making on such things as keeping the building's common areas clean and how to design the roof (part of which has plants growing on it to absorb heat and rainwater, a small playground and a deck area; so far there's been no consensus on whether to install a hot tub).

They join committees overseeing such areas as landscaping and cooking, participate in twice-monthly meetings of the whole community and can take part in a variety of community groups, such as the Knit Wits knitting group and the Orange Hat Patrol, a neighborhood watch group.

A TLC Team helps out when residents are sick or need extra assistance. Resident Stephan Sylvan, 43, recalled, "One couple had a baby and said they loved all the help, 'but please no more casseroles. Our freezer is full.' "

"To walk out of your door and down the hall and run into people who care about you and the community is very satisfying," said Joan King, 63. "It's living near people you care about because you know them rather than some anonymous neighbor."

Naomi Friedman, who is in her 40s, said that while she enjoys the close-knit community, constant camaraderie isn't a requirement. "No one is going to come knocking at your door and make you come out," she said.

Friedman, like many of her neighbors, has been involved with Eastern Village since it was in its planning stages. A group of diverse people, some drawn by an ad in The Washington Post, spent several years sketching out plans for the community, which includes a playroom for the 12 children who currently live in Eastern Village, a game room, an exercise room and a lending library.

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Today, all the units, which run from 650 to 2,000 square feet, are occupied. Residents range from infants to those in their 70s, and women somewhat outnumber men. In all, about 100 people live in Eastern Village.

In addition to the possibility of developing close ties with their neighbors, many residents were drawn by Eastern Village's environmental features. With geothermal heat, an edict that allows only efficient Energy Star appliances, bamboo flooring, low-flow plumbing fixtures and a green roof, the building has won a number of green building awards, including Green Project of the Year from the National Association of Home Builders. The U.S. Green Building Council has given Eastern Village the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver rating for environmental performance.

"It's probably fair to say we're one of the greenest multifamily buildings in the country," said Sylvan, who works for the Environmental Protection Agency and helped design the department's Energy Star program.

"It's very exciting to practice what you preach," said Kara Strong, 36, an architect who is a green building consultant and works in a wing of the building that has 11 commercial and live-work units that are not part of Eastern Village.

For Strong, the environmental features go beyond low-emission siding and carpeting, however.

"There are also shared resources. For example, I borrowed my neighbor's laser level and didn't have to go out and buy something I'm only going to use occasionally," she said.

The environmental features are saving residents a lot of green, too. For example, Friedman pays an average of just \$30 a month for electricity, which includes heat, in her 960-square-foot loft unit. Because Eastern Village is close to the Silver Spring Metro and MARC trains and has a Metro bus stop in front of its courtyard, many residents, like Friedman, don't own cars.

Friedman, who is the assistant executive director of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, served as the coordinator of Eastern Village's landscaping committee, helping choose the dogwoods, red buds, cone flowers and inkberry bushes that fill the courtyard. The plants are species native to the area and also don't need much watering.

Strong enjoys being able to share her skills and get help from others in the community.

"It's my first home, and it's nice to know that people I know and trust [bought] before me. Neighbors negotiated reduced rates for movers. I may have not known about mortgages, but someone else did," she said. "I can contribute my architectural expertise in exchange. That's the kind of utopian version. But when it happens, it's great."

And when it doesn't happen?

"There are 80 people with 80 different opinions. We try really hard to reach consensus, and that can be really challenging. The good part is when you do reach a decision, everyone has a certain stake in it," Strong said.

Sylvan points to a year-long discussion over how clean the common areas should be. In the end, residents negotiated with the cleaning company they contract with for more flexible choices in cleaning.

Reaching consensus doesn't mean everyone has to completely agree with everyone else, Sylvan said. "But we want people to be able to at least live with the choice. Consensus addresses the underlying concerns. Sometimes decisions take a little longer, but they stick."

According to Elaine Barber, 32, "People who are most successful here are those who don't have a lot of preconceived ideas. It's almost like you have to be hopeful, but not too idealistic."

But residents say any frustrations with cohousing are overwhelmingly offset by the rewards.

Strong summed up cohousing's most important attributes this way: "It's knowing you're not alone in the world."

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