



Evolution is the Essence: The Sechelt Arts Festival transforms itself

Connection & Consensus: Roberts Creek Cohousing celebrates its 20th anniversary

The Heart of Roberts Creek: The Gumboot has been serving up community for over 30 years

Connection & Consensus: Roberts Creek Cohousing celebrates its 20th anniversary

The Heart of Roberts Creek: The Gumboot has been serving up community for over 30 years

Spruced Up: New owner ushers in his vision for the Stonewater motel

Connection & Consensus



Roberts Creek Cohousing celebrates its 20th anniversary as Canada's first rural cohousing community

STORY BY
HEATHER CONN

MAIN PHOTO: THE HOUSES ARE ALL DESIGNED BY MOBIUS ARCHITECTURE OF SECHMET AND CLAD WITH HARDIE BOARD SIDING AND CEDAR BATTEN. **BOTTOM LEFT:** MAP OF THE COHOUSING RESIDENCES. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** WELCOME TO ROBERTS CREEK COHOUSING. **RIGHT:** PAUL TERNES, SEQUOIA, PHOENIX AND TORMATHA BAIGENT



THE GRASSY YARD OF A TWO-STORY home in Roberts Creek's Cohousing opens into deep forest, which evokes a welcoming den of wilderness. Sequoia, 13, quickly climbs over horizontal branches on a high-reaching cedar, rests comfortably as if in a lounge chair, then scrambles down to join her sister Phoenix, 8, on a trampoline next to the house.

Both sisters and their parents, Tormatha Baigent and Paul Ternes, readily praise life in Canada's first rural cohousing community, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Words like "total magic" and "one serendipity after another" pepper comments about moving from East Vancouver to this special place in 2016, where they started as renters, then bought their own home in 2021. Both girls have attended nearby Roberts Creek Elementary. Phoenix notes that if she sprints, she can make it to school in just 1.5 minutes. >>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COMMON HOUSE GROUP KITCHEN AND DINING AREA; COMMON HOUSE EXTERIOR; GARY KENT AND STACIA LEECH, TWO OF SEVEN ROBERTS CREEK COHOUSING CO-FOUNDERS; ANGELA SKENE, JULES SMITH AND MOLLY GRAHAM IN THE COMMON HOUSE KITCHEN. BOTTOM: RON SKENE AT THE CHICKEN HOUSE.

ABOVE: RAISED BEDS NEXT TO A WALKWAY. "VEGETABLES AND HERBS ARE GROWN ALL OVER THE SITE."



PHOTO: LISA BARBIZO

"I vowed I would never raise a child in the city," says Tormatha, a home support worker who grew up on Salt Spring and Cortes Islands. "Having children here has been a blessing. I trust that people will care about my kids." She describes how Phoenix, at age one, would stand on the front porch and wave at everyone who passed, and a year later, would walk two doors down to call on her best friend, an 11-year-old. "I knew that she would be safe with everyone she met."

Paul, a theatre artist and healthcare simulation educator, applauds the community's nurturing senior role models. "There are all of these amazing grandparent types in this neighbourhood. They [his daughters] see 80-year-olds hiking, kayaking, biking who are very active and positive."

Such intergenerational living is a core tenet of cohousing design and philosophy: prevent the isolation and sprawl of single-

family housing and encourage spontaneous connection. This global neighbourhood model, which began in Denmark in the 1970s, clusters homes around shared gathering places. In Roberts Creek, that includes 31 households on 10.7-by-29.9-metre (35-x-98-foot) wooded lots arranged around car-free lanes that join a 269.4-square-metre (2,900-square-foot) common house.

This latter hub includes a professional-style kitchen, where teams of self-appointed cooks aim to prepare shared meals every week. It's been the site of children's cooking sessions and countless celebrations. At dinner time, someone rings a gong to gather people in. Recently, a small group spontaneously sang around the piano after supper, creating what residents fondly call one of many ineffable "Co-ho moments." As the location for birthday parties, fun talent nights and bake-offs, dances, guest speaker

events and a panoply of other group activities, the common house includes an office, guest suite, children's room, laundry and film screening room.

Elsewhere on site are two school-style portables, one with a woodworking shop, the other exercise machines and a pool table. The community has two greenhouses, raised beds and garden rows. "Vegetables and herbs are grown all over the site, wherever there is a sunny spot," says Stacia Leech, who co-founded Roberts Creek Cohousing with her woodworking partner Gary Kent and five others: Alison Leduc, Rona Leduc, Joyce Chong, Marje Umezuki and Cindy Sutherland.

A now-empty chicken house once held up to 60 egg-layers (lately, no one wants to take charge of raising chickens, says resident Ron Skene). After moving to Roberts Creek Cohousing from 100 Mile House, he oversaw the care of chickens from 2008 to the summer of 2023 while others collected eggs and did related chores. His tasks ranged from buying feed, installing an electric fence and gravity-feed water system to power-washing walls and operating an ad hoc infirmary for sick chickens. He sometimes kept ailing hens in his bathtub for up to three days and let them recuperate on his porch. >>



ALL PHOTOS: LINDSEY ADAMS FOR



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STACIA LEECH AND GARY KENT'S HOME IS ACCENTED WITH GARY'S FINE WOODWORKING; DAVID ROCHE AND MARLENA BLAVIN'S WELCOMING PORCH IS FILLED WITH COLOURFUL FLOWERS AND PRAYER FLAGS; DAVID AND MARLENA'S LIVING ROOM FEATURES A MURAL BY ARTIST AND FRIEND, LINDSEY ADAMS; STACIA AND GARY'S BACKYARD IS A PEACEFUL OASIS.

"There's no other chicken coop like this on the Sunshine Coast," says the former director of a wilderness adventure school, standing over a wheelbarrow next to the hen haven. "It's chicken heaven."

Ron calls Roberts Creek Cohousing residents "a sensitive, environmentally concerned group." Ecology is one of their six shared values, along with diversity and acceptance; interconnection and relationships; learning and play; participation and contribution; and affordability. "These values are key to our decision-making, our touchstones," says Stacia, who adds that it took two years to refine 75 original values down to the current ones.

During creation of this community, two hectares (five acres) of forest were preserved in a land trust. For the cedar trees that had to come down, members of the shísháhlh Nation performed a ceremony to honour their loss, says Ron.

Today, seven 9,092-litre (2,000-gallon) water tanks stand in the community's forest to help respond to water restrictions.

Some residents have left because their expectations of a commune-like life weren't met, says Stacia: they thought they would be digging wells, growing all of their own food, pooling their earnings or achieving an LEED

gold standard for buildings.

Others have called their community "elitist" because it's affordable only to middle- or upper-middle-class people and is comprised of people of mostly higher education, says Gary.

Paul admits that Cohousing's consensus decision-making process is not for everyone, especially if you're impatient for results.

Guest facilitators have offered workshops in conflict resolution, nonviolent communication and similar content. During the pandemic, Zoom meetings replaced many group activities and residents offered differing views on COVID vaccinations. >>

Although participation is expected in one of the community's five committees (legal and financial; buildings, infrastructure and landscaping; common indoor spaces; family; kitchen and pantry), nothing is obligatory, says Stacia, a board trustee with School District 46.

Self-described loner Marje is the community's oldest original resident. She lives with her cat Babe ("Bibi"), surrounded by framed originals of her watercolours and oils. (She spent four years at Cooper Union art school in New York City.) Raised in Vancouver, she and her Japanese family were forcibly uprooted during wartime in 1942 and relocated to Slocan, B.C., then moved to nearby Kaslo. She has since lived in Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Paris, and London, Eng., yet says she feels content in this village-like place. "I don't feel like moving anywhere else," she says, noting that Cohousing's forests and sense of community bring her the most satisfaction.

Since inception, the community built 31 households, including one- to

four-bedroom homes and two duplexes on about 1.62 hectares (four acres) of common land, with Clack Creek at its eastern boundary. Eight hectares (20 acres) were purchased in total near the heart of the Creek. The homes, designed by Mobius Architecture of Sechelt, are clad with Hardie board siding and cedar batten.

All residents own their houses privately in a fee-simple structure. Financial and legal decisions are guided by BC's *Strata Property Act*, says Stacia. "Since cohousing communities are regulated by the *Strata Act*, this structure supports their sustainability."

Today, 19 of the original households still remain in Roberts Creek Cohousing, which is part of the Canadian Cohousing Network. The nation-wide organization includes 48 member communities, either forming or established, on its website.

Seated in his shaded yard, Gary confides: "I'm proud that it [Roberts Creek Cohousing] has lasted as long as it has. It has a feel of permanence."

When former resident Hannah Crudele was nine (she's now in her



MARJE UMEZUKI WITH HER CAT BABE

(twenties), she wrote a glowing essay about this community: "It is truly a privilege for a child to be able to walk to the store without having to worry about things like kidnapping, busy streets, and speeding cars...Living in Roberts Creek Cohousing...[w]ith the forest and beach so close, I think it is what every person deserves and should have... PARADISE." CL