

Where Will I Live?

The Green House[®] Alternative

Caring for elders who can no longer care for themselves is a major policy issue in the United States, as lifespans increase and baby boomers approach retirement. Nursing homes — the usual “end-state” care facility in our current culture — tend to require their residents to conform to the institution rather than adapting to individual needs and desires. The movement toward nursing home reform has been underway for at least twenty-five years; gradually, old ways of doing business have begun to give way to more humane alternatives.

Pioneered by William Thomas, MD after he studied residential nursing facilities and found them unsatisfactory, the first Green House[®] was built in Missouri in 2003; there are now more than a hundred across the U.S. Designed to be “warm, smart, and green” and to combat the perils of aging — loneliness, hopelessness, and boredom — Green Houses[®] honor residents and staff while fostering physical and spiritual well-being. The physical environment, staffing, administration, and philosophy of care in a Green Houses[®] are all radically different than those that have drawn so much criticism, and combine to create something very different from the nursing homes we have come to fear.

Nursing home reform has been underway for twenty-five years, but only recently have the reforms started to bear fruit.

The key concepts of a Green House® are to be warm, smart, and green. Among the ways they accomplish these goals is through shrinking the size of the home to that of an ordinary house. The design also emphasizes ordinary life, ease of movement, social interaction and privacy for each resident.



What is a Green House?®

Physical features are what a visitor is likely to notice about a Green House.® Each one is the size of a large house; bedrooms are arranged around a hearth room, with an open-plan kitchen and dining room opening off that central space. The administrative office is made deliberately inconspicuous, reflecting an overall philosophy that emphasizes ordinary life.

Access to all parts of the house and to the outdoors are important features, too. Green Houses® are designed to encourage social interaction. The houses are laid out so that each resident's bedroom is close to the shared living spaces. The floor plan works with the relatively small size of the house to make it easy for the resident elders to get around and participate in the life of the household. At the same time,

there's privacy — everyone has his or her own bedroom with full bath, furnished with their own furniture, artwork, family photos, and keepsakes.

Outside, gardens offer a place to enjoy birds, flowers, and fresh air — and, for those so inclined, to dig in the dirt and harvest fresh food for the table. With home-like décor and furnishings and smart technology to meet special health care needs effectively and unobtrusively,

plenty of sunlight, and plants inside and out, the houses are designed to feel good — and, as much as possible, like home.

People make a difference, as well. Green Houses® provide round-the-clock skilled care and medical oversight as part of the package. However, residents do not face a bewildering array of caregivers who come and go. Each house has at least one *shahbaz* — a certified nursing assistant who manages the

household and are authorized to make certain care decisions. The term “shahbaz” is Persian; its literal meaning is “royal falcon.” Chosen to reflect the caregiver’s role in supporting resident elders (as hunting falcons provide support to humans under the direction of falconers), the name is also designed to provoke questions and reinforce the unique role of Green House® caregivers.

Each house’s shahbaz works with an administrator, known as a guide, who may oversee several houses located nearby. The guide’s office is unobtrusive but accessible; the guide is part of the community, too, rather than a distant administrator who lacks day-to-day contact with residents. Clinical care is provided by a support team — people such as doctors, nurses, and physical therapists — whose members visit to provide care that is beyond the qualifications of shahbazim.

The philosophical underpinnings of the Green House® concept show themselves in other ways, as well. Friends and relatives are welcomed into the household, and children and animals are considered

particularly important. Some Green Houses® have pets of their own; in other cases, dogs accompany shahbazim to work. Birthdays and other occasions are celebrated by the household as a whole. Each day, the elders share an evening meal in the dining room, where the focus is on good food, fellowship, and a pleasant atmosphere. Meals enjoyed together are known as *Convivium* in the Green House® lexicon, and embody the concept of a shared household that does far more than provide nursing care.

The concept extends to all facets of daily life. Green House® residents participate in planning meals — which may feature the elders’ favorite recipes — and in making decisions about management of the household, as well as about their own schedules and lives. They may bring plants from their gardens to establish in the Green House® garden. Visiting relatives bring birthday cake for the whole household to share. Friends drop by and hang out with whoever is in the mood for a chat.

A small study published in 2007 found that Green House® residents enjoyed better quality of life than their counterparts in conventional nursing homes.

The Green House® model has received support at state and federal levels, and Green Houses® are eligible to receive Medicaid and Medicare patients. The concept has also found favor with industry and advocacy groups, and in 2011 was included in *Long-Term Living* magazine’s list of the Top Ten most significant changes in senior living. Although they are as yet few in number, Green Houses® are clearly having an impact.

Jamie’s Place.

I visited Jamie’s Place in Winthrop, Washington to get a feel for what life in a Green House® is like. Winthrop is a small town in a remote rural valley. There are a handful of nursing homes some fifty miles away, but until Jamie’s Place was built, there was no such option within the community, so seniors who needed skilled nursing care had to leave their beautiful mountain valley.

In 2006, Jamie Finlan, a resident of Winthrop, left her estate to The Cove, a non-profit organization with a mission of community outreach. Board members decided to invest the bequest in a senior living facility, and



COHOUSING — ANOTHER ANSWER FOR ELDER WOMEN?

Our global economic downturn has created a housing crisis for many senior women. A 2012 GAO (Government Accountability Office) study presents a disconcerting set of circumstances for senior women, “Women face a unique set of circumstance that warrants special attention... and may have a more difficult time saving for retirement and avoiding poverty late in life, partly due to the fact that they have a greater likelihood of being single, living longer, taking time out of the workforce to care for family members, and having lower average earnings when they are in the workforce... for recent generations of older women, late-in-life events, such as widowhood and divorce, can have devastating effects on women’s income and asset levels.”¹

I count myself among them the woman of whom this study speaks. After raising my three children and encouraging them to pursue their dreams, divorcing, and relocating for employment and academic pursuits, I am finally pursuing my own dreams. However, I miss having family members nearby to chat with over a cup of tea, drive to the library to select a DVD and then snuggle together to watch at home, or even share a lively post-movie conversation the next night over dinner. (Not to mention worries about living alone with no one to notice if I am missing for days.)

Living in an intentional senior women’s residential community might be an ideal solution to this dilemma. Home sharing could be a more viable long-term economic solution as

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the Cove’s Director, Glenn Schmekel, began to look for a humane alternative to nursing homes that would work for this remote community. The Green House® model proved a good fit, and Jamie’s Place was born.

Jamie’s Place comprises two houses, each home to six elders. The first house opened in 2007 and was so popular that a second house was built next door in 2009. The two houses share a single guide (Sheila Brandenburg, RN), but each has its own team of shahbazim.

When I walked into the first house, I felt almost as though I was in a private residence. The hearth room was quiet, as residents were gathered around the dining table with their shahbaz and a couple of visiting relatives. Maggie, a golden retriever, lay snoozing under the table. A bank of windows offered a view of flower baskets hanging from the patio roof and a blooming garden just beyond.

As is often the case, the kitchen felt like the real heart of the house, where leisurely visiting reinforces the concept of household as community.



Ms. Brandenburg (the guide) explained “a lot of the elders who live in these facilities have lost their friends, and don’t have a great support group, so to grow a community...really puts support back into their lives that they didn’t have.” That sense of warmth and community extended to the second house I visited.

Both houses gets a lot of visitors. Says Ms Brandenburg, “We open up the doors for the families and really try to integrate the whole community.” Jamie’s Place draws regular visitors outside of just families, too: Montessori students, a church choral group, a middle school student who comes to help with

Emy and Eileen spoke to me in their home’s kitchen.

housework twice a week, the daughter of a former resident, a church youth group, a team of Outward Bound students and the members of a local real estate office who spent half a day painting the hearth room.

Managing the energy with so many visitors can be a challenge. Ms. Brandenburg comments, “Some days it’s really important just to try and calm the chaos a bit ... and make sure we respect the privacy and the space of the elders, because it is *their* home...” One of the residents confirmed that adjusting to the busy environment had been challenging. Emy Hallowell, in

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opposed to our current practice of living in individual units. The concept of shared housing with other women to whom we are not related, does raise concerns.

I recently conducted a research study on intentional community and affordable housing for women over 50. The women I interviewed had many concerns over loss of privacy, respect of

boundaries, noise levels, and tolerance for other's pets. Other concerns pertained to cleanliness, substance abuse, preferences about tv/computers within the household, special dietary restrictions, compatibility between participants, governance and agreements, having a sense of belonging and living within a community of like-minded women. Many women also expressed a desire to have their own apartment — not just a bedroom — and share a communal gathering space much like the current cohousing model that Charles Durrett and Katie McCamant are creating across America.



Thérèse Clerc, 85, is one of the most stubborn feminists in Europe. Enraged by the conditions in which older women live, in 2000 she formed a group to lobby French politicians to fund a female-only women's senior home. This spring, her 13-year campaign finally succeeded and 19 women in their sixties, seventies and eighties are beginning to move into the Maison des Femmes de Montreuil a newly-constructed six story home in the Paris suburb of Montreuil. "I want to transform my life, I want to transform the world," she says.²

greater affordability — perhaps by using materials for new construction that will include cob, straw bale, and yurt cottages. That said, senior women who have existing houses, condominiums, or apartments can easily open up their homes to be shared by other senior women seeking housing affordability and housemate companionship.

Senior women's intentional communities — whether for a neighborhood, or for a single household — may be a wave of the future. Potential

Durrett and McCamant have built intentional cohousing community neighborhoods in which homes or condos are constructed only after several years of meetings in which future neighbors get to know one another and design the physical and social architecture of their community.

The current cohousing model, while innovative, does tend to result in higher-than-average unit prices. I'd prefer to see ecovillages which feature

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her nineties, admitted, "I had to learn how to get away from it all. All the noise and talking... [at times] I have to go in my room and shut the door, keep it all out."

Exposure to Jamie's Place helps the wider community gain a better understanding of aging, the role of elders, and the options for care. Ms Brandenburg believes that educating the community is part of her, and her staff's, roles. "People become a little less fearful of imagining what a long-term care facility is after visiting us...[it's a] subtle change, but I see it throughout the community."

The small size of each house means nobody has too far to walk to reach common living areas, and that's intentional; the design is intended to encourage mobility and independence; having private rooms and baths also means a great deal to the residents. Emy Hollowell cited her private bath as one of the chief advantages of Green House® living. "That means a lot to me — to be able to wash up when I want to," she said. Monica Pettelle, whose mother lives at Jamie's Place, says having a private room helps.

"[My mother] likes being by herself...because they each have their lovely little rooms, they can have privacy but also somebody's there at the drop of a hat."

When I asked Emy Hollowell and another resident, Eileen Taylor, about the experience of living in a Green House®, they talked about relationships. Eileen Taylor confided, "I care very much what happens with anybody that's living here..... it's a question of learning to live together. That's the biggest thing, I think."

But part living together means learning to live with disability and death. "Four out of six of us have dementia," noted Emy Hollowell. "It makes it hard, very hard sometimes, very very hard." Mrs. Taylor spoke of a resident who died some months ago. "I've had two husbands, but we just lived normal lives and when they died they died, but after you've lived with somebody like this, you get a different feeling....You care more for other people, let's put it that way, and realize what it could be like for yourself. It makes it a little easier for you."

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organizers would do well to spend some time getting to know each other before becoming housemates. Good communication, and clear, precise agreements on how best to resolve conflict is very important, as are carefully-designed legal and financial agreements.

I'm personally interested in jump-starting this kind of community. If that fits you as well, locating other women who are interested in cohousing and cohabitation may be as easy as beginning the conversation with the other women in your life. We are living in a time that an affordable housing revolution is beginning to take ground and enter into the consciousness of many senior women as a viable, sustainable, and thriving model for our senior years. ☺

Backnotes & Resources

¹www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-699

²www.maisondesfemmes.org/Communities Magazine, <http://communities.ic.org>, 800-462-8240.



CRYSTAL DAWN WALKER is the founder of Sister Circle Alliance Ecovillage— Women's Sanctuary, Moon Lodge Retreat Center, and Divine

Mother Temple — soon to be a 501(c)3 organization. She is also a Queen of herself. If you have an interest in creating a senior women intentional community contact her at sistercirclevillage@gmail.com.

Monica Pettelle, whose mother has also spent time in other care facilities, gave me her perspective as a daughter. "This Green House® ... is by far superior to anything that we experienced [elsewhere], everything from assisted living to nursing homes to adult family homes. It's very well organized, very personal and very aware of individual needs... It feels like a family, and as a daughter I feel like part of a team. So when I need support, I feel like the staff are really there for me."

Life in a Green House® is satisfying for the shahbazim as well as for the elders. They are integral to the household, know the residents intimately, and are empowered to make many decisions that would require approval from administrators in a nursing home. Ms Brandenburg described staff turnover as "very low... we mostly lose staff when the decide to move out of the area." That compares favorably to the notoriously high turnover in conventional care facilities, where staff members quickly burn out.

As locals have learned about Jamie's Place and come to understand what it has to offer, they've begun to think ahead, planning for their own needs or those of older family members. The long waiting list for admission (several dozen long) demonstrates both the success of Jamie's Place and the need for long-term care alternatives in the community.

Green Cronedom? As I spent time at Jamie's Place and got to know the residents and staff, my appreciation for their way of life and the opportunities for learning and fulfillment that it offers grew. Still, I pondered: How will I balance my needs for help and for community with my thirst for independence as I age? Would I be able to find room for ritual and connection with wildness in an institutional setting...even this one? Can an intentional community for elders — overseen by people who are not full members of the community — really fulfill its intention? The answers to those questions have yet to be discovered, but the Green House® movement seems, at least, to be asking the right questions. ☺

Resources for Further Research

The Green House® Project: <http://thegreenhouseproject.org/> and www.ncbcapitalimpact.org/default.aspx?id=148

William Thomas, *What are old people for? How Elders Will Save the World*, Vanderwyk & Burnham, 2007.

"Reformers Seek to Reinvent Nursing Homes," www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4713566

The Legend of Shahbaz: <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/reports/ltc-services/ShahbazLegend.pdf>

Jamie's Place: www.thecovecares.com/jamies-place.html and www.jamiesplacehomes.org/index.html. Jamie's Place, P. O. Box 1260, Winthrop WA 98862, 509-996-4417, Sheila@jamiesplacehomes.org.

"A Nursing Home Shrinks Until It Feels Like a Home," *New York Times*, November 1, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/01/health/shrinking-the-nursing-home-until-it-feels-like-a-home.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0



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