

Sustainable sharing

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Ruth Mullen

Two years ago, Peninsula Park Commons was just another aging apartment complex with leaky plumbing and an absentee landlord.

Located on busy North Albina Avenue, the 1938 Tudor-style structure drooped with neglect and disrepair. But its peeling paint and patchy lawn didn't deter Eli Spevak and Jim Labbe . The two friends spotted its potential immediately: a southeast-facing central courtyard just a Frisbee toss from 16-acre Peninsula Park. Inside, they discovered oak hardwoods under worn carpet, along with arched doorways and original 1930s tiling.

"We knew we wanted to stay in the neighborhood," says Spevak. "We didn't look anywhere else."

The property was within an easy bike ride of cafes and shops on North Mississippi Avenue, so the pair knew they wouldn't have to stray far from favorite neighborhood haunts. What's more, the price was right: \$400,000.

In January 2003, the two pooled their resources and bought the seven-unit complex, moving into one of the two-bedroom units. Their goal? To convert the apartments into condos and create affordable housing for their friends.

"We wanted to have our own space but also be close by our friends," says Labbe, 33, an urban conservationist with the Audubon Society. As seasoned veterans of shared housing, they were all too familiar with its downside. This way, they hoped to combine the benefits of group living with the security and privacy of homeownership.

During the next two years, they repaired and renovated apartments as they became available, painting, refinishing floors, soundproofing, moving walls and replacing plumbing. They also made the complex more energy-efficient by insulating the attic and some exterior walls. A brilliant pumpkin paint job and professional landscaping transformed the exterior from drab to charming.

By the summer of 2004, Labbe and Spevak had converted the property to six condominiums, reserving the seventh unit, a studio, for group gatherings, shared meals and out-of-town guests. Labbe and Spevak each moved into one-bedroom condos, selling the remaining four units to friends and acquaintances they met through local nonprofit organizations and cycling groups. The 630-square-foot one-bedrooms sold for \$90,000; the 720-square-foot two-bedrooms for \$100,000 to \$112,000. That's well below the city's average condo price of \$185,600, according to the Regional Multiple Listing Service, which serves the Portland metro area and surrounding counties.

"There's a huge pent-up market for this kind of thing," says Spevak, 34, who works part time as a project manager for the Housing Development Center, a local nonprofit devoted to affordable housing in the city. "Developers build housing; they don't build communities."

Unlike most condo conversions, the community -- not profit -- was their primary motivation. If you count their labor, they barely broke even, says Spevak. No matter: Now they have an affordable home with good friends who are just a knock away. They met one another through their work with nonprofit organizations such as the Oregon Food Bank, Habitat for Humanity and the cycling group Shift. They even got a permit from the city to install two bike racks at the corner of their property. As part-time workers, graduate students and community activists, most were priced out of Portland's soaring real estate market, resigned to renting apartments or rooms in shared housing. "One of the biggest drivers of housing costs today is square footage," says Spevak. "Since the 1950s, the average square footage of homes has doubled, and much of it is wasted space."

But residents such as Amy Stork, 31, a part-time city employee and a full-time PSU graduate student, are bucking that trend. She immediately snapped up one of the two-bedroom end units with an original 1930s tiled fireplace. "I wouldn't have ever considered leaving the city," she says. "I don't drive a car, and I wanted to live within a 15-minute bike ride of the Alberta Co-op."

But on her income, most houses in Portland's close-in neighborhoods were out of reach. Even with low interest rates, she couldn't afford a mortgage without roommates. And she dreaded the financial stress if one of them decided to move out.

As a result, Stork, like many of her friends, continued to rent a room in group housing -- not an ideal situation for a thirtysomething professional who longed for a little privacy and a garden that would have a chance to grow.

"I wanted to put paint on the walls and plants in the ground," says Stork. "But I never wanted to lose the sense of community I had with shared housing."

Peninsula Park Commons offered all the benefits of community living without the headaches, she says. "It's sort of like living in a college dorm but having your own space to retreat to," says Stork. "If you want company, you just walk out your front door and see if anyone else is around."

What's more, she added, "I don't have to do my dishes right away."

On a recent Saturday, residents lounged on lawn chairs in the sunny courtyard, sharing an informal lunch after a morning spent cleaning out the building's basement. Front doors stood open to catch the afternoon breeze, and residents moved easily from one apartment to the next, collecting snacks, glasses and serving plates.

In the center of it all, 1-year-old Cody Folz grinned and cackled as if on cue, basking in the attention of his doting new neighbors. Cody, along with mom Carie Weisenbach-Folz, 30, and Allan Folz, 31, moved into a two-bedroom condo in February. New to Portland, they were eager

to own property in a neighborhood they loved, with a mortgage they could afford on one salary. Now Weisenbach-Folz can stay home with Cody and still enjoy life in the city. Folz carools to work at Wind River in Beaverton.

"I definitely wanted to be able to stay home and take care of my family," says Weisenbach-Folz, "and the suburbs were an absolute no."

Space is not an issue, she adds, since there is plenty of shared storage in the building's basement and attic. Her moms group meets in the common unit, she says, and her parents stay there whenever they visit from Indiana. Plus, she added, "my friends are right next door, and I don't have to get in my car."

She and Cody walk or bike most everywhere, and Cody especially loves going across the street to play at Peninsula Park. Eventually, the family may consider moving to one of the larger, three-bedroom units Spevak and Labbe are planning to build next year on the Commons' north lot, where the building's garages are located. But for now, their cozy two-bedroom with its cheerful raspberry living room suits her just fine.

"I'm glad we found this situation when we did," says Weisenbach-Folz. "Everybody cares enough about everybody here to help make life better."

Granted, co-housing is not for everyone. Community work days are part of the deal, and there is always weeding and watering, as well as routine cleaning and maintenance of the common unit. But for the residents of Peninsula Park Commons, there's freedom in giving up space, and all the stuff that collects in it: lawn mowers, televisions, canoes, snowshoes, grills, gardening tools, etc.

Here, there is one of everything, and all is shared, including informal evening meals for whoever happens to be around. In their quest to live sustainably, even their shared, architect-designed landscape was created with the community in mind: "We wanted to put our edible landscape at finger level for whoever happened to walk by," says Stork.

Residents bike wherever they can, or hop the No. 4 or No. 40 bus downtown. A \$148-a-month condo fee also includes a shared newspaper subscription and one \$40-a-month high-speed DSL hookup that serves the entire complex. A television and a stereo system are available for use in the common unit, along with board games, a lending library and, yes, even an ice-cream maker.

"It's easier to live lightly if you're with other people who do it also," says Spevak.

Best of all, there's the built-in social life: "It's way too easy to be single here," he adds. "There's always something going on."

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