

Treehouse Village:

NOVA SCOTIA'S FIRST COHOUSING COMMUNITY

by **BECCA GRADY** /// EAC Volunteer

The goals of a new housing development in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia are threefold: to live lightly on the land, to create a supportive community, and to provide residents with a well-designed and durable place to call home. Throughout the lengthy process from idea to design to construction, members, architects, and engineers returned to these touchpoints when it came time to make decisions.

In August 2021, construction crews broke ground on Treehouse Village Ecohousing, the first cohousing community development in Atlantic Canada. Treehouse's fifteen-acre site abuts the Centennial Trail, a rail trail that loops through Bridgewater. Designed by RHAD Architects, a Dartmouth based firm, in conjunction with Caddis Collaborative, a Colorado based firm specializing in sustainable design and cohousing communities, the development will be comprised of 30 individual units, a common house, a workshop, gardens, and shared outdoor space. Buildings will be clustered together on five acres of the property to keep the remaining ten acres of forest intact.

A cohousing community is a group of people coming together to create and maintain a neighborhood. The design and layout of these communities vary and can be found in cities and rural areas alike. Cohousing developments prioritize intergenerational community as well as shared spaces and amenities, but each resident, or family, also has their own private home in the development. The idea of cohousing communities came out of Denmark and was brought to North America in 1988 by architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett. Today there are 19 established cohousing communities in Canada, and over 175 in the United States. In Denmark, their popularity has also increased, with 10 per cent of new housing developments in the country now required to be cohousing projects.

After learning that there were no cohousing communities in Nova Scotia, Cate and Leon de Vreede decided to create their own cohousing community in Bridgewater, a town they already lived in and loved. Future residents have come to Treehouse in different ways. Member Susan Jermy says that she had an interest in cohousing and living on the East Coast. When she read about Treehouse online, the project prompted her to make the move from Ontario. It was the project's Passive House design and sustainability goals that brought Dartmouth resident Emma Savage to an information session about the project. Treehouse was Emma's first exposure to cohousing communities and she was immediately drawn in by the opportunities the lifestyle could offer her and her family.

Susan and Emma went on to become explorer members to learn more about Treehouse and to meet the other residents, before investing in the project as equity members. They attended meetings and workshops, initially in person and later virtually, as members are currently spread across eight time zones, from British Columbia to England. Treehouse uses a non-hierarchical, participatory, and consent-based decision-making process called Sociocracy that is common among cohousing communities.

In 2019, Treehouse members organized a series of design workshops with both members and architects. Each workshop focused on a different aspect of the project. The first was to create a site plan, determining what activities were important to people, such as a common house, gardens, parking, homes, and play spaces. One workshop focused on the common house, and another on the individual homes. The architects, RHAD and Caddis, took all of this information and came back with the schematic designs to present to members.



Images courtesy of Treehouse Village



The Community Workshop under construction, using a FastSlab foundation and QuadLock insulated concrete form walls

Treehouse is the largest multi-unit residential passive house development in Nova Scotia. All of the units will be built to the rigorous energy efficiency standards of Passive House Institute US (a higher standard than international passive house requirements) with high insulation values, clean energy requirements, and good air flow. To meet these standards, and keep within its budget of \$12 million, a number of changes have been made over the course of the project. Windows were upgraded to prevent heat loss. A proposed gable roof was swapped for shed style, done to minimize the area from which heat could escape the building, provide more room for solar panel installation, as well as save on cost and materials. Initially individual units were housed in six buildings, but this was revised to four, so that there was a smaller total envelope area for the project, resulting in fewer construction materials as well as a smaller footprint on the site. When the cost of timber soared, the timber frame construction was changed to insulated concrete form, which offers increased soundproofing between units. More recently, the project has shifted from conventional flooring to polished concrete.

In addition to energy efficiency, the community aspects of cohousing will enable other forms of sustainable living. The 5,000 square foot common house features guest rooms, communal kitchen and dining, laundry, gym, playroom, a library, and office space. With these shared amenities, residents can opt for smaller individual homes. Residents will be able to share tools in the workshop, minimizing the number of items individual households need to own, while encouraging skill sharing and repairs. The large group will make farm share and bulk food purchasing easier to coordinate. There will be electric vehicles charging stations, and residents are even discussing a car share.

TAKE ACTION
To learn more about Treehouse Village Ecohousing or to book a virtual viewing, visit treehousevillage.ca

With 83 per cent of the units presold, Treehouse is on target to reach completion by the end of 2022. It's a rolling build, which allows many different trades to be at the site working on various elements of the project, like grading, pouring foundations, and putting in utilities. Founding member Cate says that there has been a lot of interest in the project from local tradespeople, who are eager to work on such a large passive house project. At the end of the building phase, Treehouse will take on the legal structure of a condominium, as most Canadian cohousing community projects do. And when all of the residents move in together next year, they will already be on a first name basis with their neighbours.

Treehouse's goal is not only to inspire more than just a cohousing community, but also to promote more energy efficient building in Nova Scotia. Cate hopes that funders and governments will also see the benefits and help to support more affordable home* options for future cohousing projects.

**Treehouse tried to get Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation support to enable some of the homes to be able to be sold below cost, but was unsuccessful.*

Becca Grady is a writer, photographer, and artist living in Halifax.