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## Birds of a Feather

By TIM NEVILLE

WHEN Gayla Groom scoots the cats from her bed and walks outside to check on the yard, the neighbors don't care if she is minus her clothing. Nor do they mind living next to her 20-by-20-foot slab-wood cabin that cost \$14,000 to build. It is also perfectly normal for one elderly neighbor to call her each morning, as a courtesy, to say she has not died.

Ms. Groom, a 50-year-old book editor from Portland, Ore., lives in Rocinante, a community in Summerville, Tenn., southwest of Nashville, designed for aging hippies. All of her immediate neighbors — there are fewer than a dozen at the moment with more on the way — have similar cabins and similar attitudes about nudity and toxin-free living. Each has come to spend the rest of his or her years in a low-impact, earthy manner, living as many did in the 1960s.

“I can be a real human being here,” Ms. Groom said. “I feel protected here, like freedom is being protected, without worrying about money. I have this great little cabin. I live in the woods. I do what I like and can live like a millionaire, all on six grand a year.”

For some Americans approaching their golden years, choosing the right place to grow old is less about golf and weather than about finding neighbors who share their attitudes and interests. Developments that cater to gays and lesbians have popped up from California to Florida. Retired Jews — or Catholics and other Christians — looking to continue a life of service and fellowship can buy homes and condos in religion-centered communities in Washington and New Jersey. Neighborhoods that attract retired pilots have taxiways and hangars. Looking for fellow neopagan anarchist pansexuals? Try Pumpkin Hollow, an all-ages collective in Liberty, Tenn.

Housing experts say more niche communities like these are likely to make their way to market, especially given the limited interest baby boomers are showing in traditional age-restricted retirement housing areas — the places their parents have found attractive. “There's not a connection to the modern world in a lot of those places,” said Ken Dychtwald, a gerontologist and co-author of “The Power Years,” a book about aging happily and healthily.

Boomers and their children have moved frequently and are often scattered across the country. As a result, said Maria Dwight, chief executive of Gerontological Services, a Santa Monica, Calif., group that studies housing for the over-55 set, many in the next wave of retirees will look for places among peers who share their interests.

“This old idea of being born in a town that you grow up in and know everybody is quite absent now,” Ms. Dwight said. “The whole concept of community has changed dramatically in the last few decades, and now people are looking for ways to socialize. Instead of sitting around growing old and moaning, they want to talk about plays, where they traveled, and be with people who like the same thing. If traditional housing providers don't create these options, you're going to see people doing it on their own.”

While reliable figures are difficult to find, John Parsons, publisher of [Cohousing.org](http://Cohousing.org), an online magazine that tracks communities formed by like-minded individuals, estimates that there are roughly 6,000 people of all ages in the [United States](#) and [Canada](#) living in communities where residents often share specific, common interests, like vegetarianism, ecological concern or even a desire to continue with higher education. (At University Place in West Lafayette, Ind., for example, residents can take classes through [Purdue University](#).)

It's logical that baby boomers, accustomed to approaching the world on their own terms and now facing decades of retirement, would embrace this trend. "When you get people together, you're not only creating genuine social situations, but you're also creating a support network," Mr. Parsons said.

ASIDE from building the traditional golf developments, large-scale developers are not doing much, so far, to create niche communities for retirees. Companies like Erickson Retirement Communities are still focused on the boomers' aging parents, who haven't made such demands. But with roughly 78 million baby boomers in the country, and about 8,000 of them now turning 60 every day, that may change.

"Every major housing developer is taking the idea of retirement housing seriously," Dr. Dychtwald said. "There's no question in my mind we'll see more retirement communities with a specific focus as the landscape of retirement grows more interesting with new tastes, new desires and new appetites. Maybe you like to [garden](#). Wouldn't it be fantastic if you could move into a house or retirement community that had a focus on horticultural activities? Talk to me in 10 years, and I think we'll say, 'Wow, look at what has happened.'"

In the meantime, construction of niche communities has depended on smaller, grass-roots developers who often share the passions of those they hope to attract. One such developer is no developer by trade at all, but George Patterson, a chief appraiser for a bank who lives in [St. Petersburg, Fla.](#)

Mr. Patterson, a devout Roman Catholic, said he noticed that there were few options for aging members of his faith to retire together — and none that he liked. Some of his colleagues have been through "scary experiences" like cancer, he said, and a question began to burn in their minds: How to create a community of Catholics living independently, where people could help take care of one another and still provide service to those in need? About five years ago, he and a small group of his brethren formed a nonprofit corporation to explore building their own community centered on the Catholic call to service.

If all goes as planned, Mr. Patterson hopes to break ground in six months on a small development near Lake Alfred in central Florida. As many as 24 homes, each about 1,000 square feet, will house up to 40 people. About half of the homes could go for as low as \$150,000 to serve as affordable housing — for people who have worked in low-income jobs at Catholic schools, for example.

A 3,000-square-foot community hall is planned to anchor the village, which is yet to be named, and it will be the site of communal meals. Each resident will be required to do at least four hours of volunteer work a week in local soup kitchens, schools or other public centers. Potential buyers will not be able just to show up and purchase homes, Mr. Patterson said, but will have to attend numerous "formation" sessions to learn about the community, its values and what would be expected of all residents. "We're not going to require people be Catholic, but we can require volunteer work as part of the covenants," he said.

“Developments like this have to be done on the grass-roots level,” he added, because large developers “can’t come in and say, ‘O.K., we’re going to build a place for only left-handed albinos,’ because that’s blatantly against the law.”

Building a community that caters to like-minded people requires treading a fine line between ensuring shared values and creating rules that lead to discrimination. Silver Sage, a collection of 16 duplexes and attached houses for older people in Boulder, Colo., uses a “reflective questionnaire” asking potential buyers whether they “appreciate diversity,” “respect other spiritual paths” and “value the environment.”

Just reading the questions “allows people to select in or out,” said Arthur Okner, a Boulder resident who has helped start niche communities. “They don’t wake up that first morning and think, ‘What the hell have I gotten myself into?’ ”

Joy Silver, chief executive of RainbowVision gay and lesbian retirement communities in Santa Fe, N.M., and Palm Springs, Calif., said that while just about anyone is welcome to buy there, only those who are gay or gay-friendly would probably want to, because community services and events cater to gays and lesbians.

“We’re not all queens, nor do we run up and down in dresses,” said Roger Bergstrom, 77, who along with his partner, Barry Baltzley, was among the first to move into the RainbowVision development in Santa Fe last June. “It’s an average community with normal people doing fun things together. Just the other night we had a two-step dance party and I danced with everyone, man or woman. I haven’t had so many delightful, fun-filled days as I have had here.”

Retirement communities that cater to the elderly gay and lesbian population could prove to be one of the more popular niches in coming years. Gary Gates, a senior research fellow at the Los Angeles-based Williams Institute who has studied gay and lesbian demographics, estimated that there are now nearly 2.3 million homosexuals 55 and older in the United States.

For people like Mr. Bergstrom and Mr. Baltzley, who paid \$297,000 for their three-bedroom, two-bathroom condo, moving into a development that is roughly 75 percent gay has offered a new way of living: a sense of community as a member of a majority population. “It’s so wonderful for me to live someplace where I’m not shunned,” Mr. Bergstrom said. “This is a real community.”

That feeling of community seems to hold enormous appeal no matter what someone’s interests are.

Ms. Groom, the sometimes-naked gardener at Rocinante in Tennessee, illustrates the point. “We’re a funky bunch,” she said of her community. “You have to be weird to end up in a place like this. But it’s a good weird. If I weren’t at Rocinante, I don’t know where I’d be surviving.”

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