

Home is a family affair

Relatives find helping hands and economies of scale when they share the same address

BY PEDRO ARRAIS, TIMES COLONIST OCTOBER 29, 2011



The Lagah family's house was designed to suit the needs of multiple generations living under one roof.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, timescolonist.com

The multi-generational home is making a comeback - but for some families the concept of living under the same roof as one's parents is old news.

Western families have traditionally raised their children to be independent and able to take care of themselves. It was expected they would stand on their own feet after they left home and strike out on their own. But with the rise of the price of housing and the economic downturn, that goal is elusive for some.

The dream of settling down and purchasing a detached single-family house with a white picket fence may still be the dream for many.

Some have opted for a condominium but for others, sometimes referred to as boomerang children, are returning home - some with their own children in tow.

For some cultures, however, multi-generational housing has always been the norm.

"I moved into my in-laws' house when I got married 26 years ago," says Usha Lagah, 45, who works in a seniors home. "Today, they still share a house with me and my family."

Lagah says the arrangement benefits both parties. By saving on rent, Usha and her husband, Pargan, were able to save up money for their own house faster. When her three children, who are all in their 20s, were younger, her inlaws could always be relied upon to babysit. They would also be there for the children when they came home from school.

When the time came to build their own house, the Lagahs naturally made the house a bit larger to accommodate Pargan's parents. They live in one of the five bedrooms of their new house.

For other people, living with children makes good financial sense, especially in light of the local real estate market.

Stephanie Jenkins lives with her 37-year-old daughter and son-in-law in a 850-square-foot suite above the three-car garage of a house on 0.8 hectares of land in Sooke.

"There was no way my daughter and her husband could have afforded to buy the property on their own," says Jenkins, who is semi-retired. "We managed to buy it only because we pooled our money together."

She used proceeds from the sale of her own home as a down payment on the new property.

What she would have paid for in rent helps offset the mortgage on the property.

She says the extended family shares meals together occasionally and respects each other's privacy. When the young couple go away on vacation, she looks after their cat.

"I see it as an equal partnership."

Having seniors under the same roof is good for their well-being as well. Members of one's family are usually the first line of support for many seniors. Without someone to look after their needs, many seniors are left without a caregiver at a time when they need care.

"Some of my elderly clients move to Vancouver Island because they love the weather here," says Jack Barker, a real estate agent with Re/Max Camosun Peninsula. "But the problem is that they often don't have any family here, so when circumstances change, there isn't anybody to look after them."

Sometimes neighbours will pitch in to take care of a senior, but in some cases elderly people fall through the cracks in the social safety net.

Builders and municipalities have taken note, with in-law suites a common addition to new house construction.

"Over half of my South Asian clients ask for their homes to have extra accommodation," says Rov Dosanjh, a builder and president of Rayn Properties.

"In the south Asian culture, it's almost expected of the oldest son to look after his aging parents' needs."

Along with their parents, Dosanjh says South Asian clients also have their children's as well as their own needs in mind when they build.

"They will build an in-law suite today for their parents, but at the back of their mind they know that they may, one day in the future, live out their own old age in that same suite."

The suite may also serve as a fall-back for the children or as a rental when nobody in the family needs it.

Long-term multi-generational living arrangements aren't without friction. Sometimes family members just don't get along with others or may need a level of personal care that a family cannot provide.

"When I get older, I know I don't want to live with my kids," says Dosanjh. "I value my privacy - and I think my kids do, too."

But for Lagah, who has been living with her in-laws for most of her adult life, it's not a problem.

She is happy in the knowledge that the 600-square-foot, one-bedroom suite in her new house - which is currently rented out - might be where she spends her twilight years, perhaps spending time with her grandchildren. parrais@timescolonist.com

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