

LGBTQ community turns to shared accommodations to build safe living spaces

Rising housing prices are creating a volatile market, particularly for LGBTQ community members, who are often more likely to face housing discrimination. As a result, many of them are turning to shared accommodations to build safe living spaces

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Dan Mackay, his partner Paul Pitre and dog Smokey in front of his home in Halifax on Aug. 1.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Dan MacKay likes sharing his Halifax home, but he wants to be very clear.

“All of my ads specifically say this is a gay room in a gay house with gay men and gay pets and gay plants,” said Mr. MacKay, who has been renting out the two extra bedrooms and attached apartment for the 40 years that he’s lived there. “I don’t want anyone in my house with even one tiny sliver of homophobia.”

Mr. MacKay – whose boyfriend, Paul Pitre, is also in the process of moving into the home – said there’s not only a safety element to sharing their home with members of the queer community, but also a shared cultural element.

“You don’t want to feel like I have to hide anything from people that I’m living with,” he said. “You can either do that by living by yourself or you can do that by being very open with the people that you’re with. And I choose that path.”

Mr. MacKay is also an administrator of the Homes for Queers Halifax Facebook group, which allows people in the community to find roommates or available housing spaces.

This Facebook group is how Caitlyn Horne found out that Mr. MacKay had an available room in his home. At the time, the lease on her apartment was ending – and with her roommate moving out, she couldn’t afford to live alone. As of September, she will have been living in Mr. MacKay’s house for three years.

“It’s about as gay a home as you could imagine,” Ms. Horne said. “[Dan] tries to make it a safe and accessible home for everyone that lives here.”

As the housing market in many major Canadian cities becomes ever more expensive, many people are relying on apartment or housing shares to offset costs. And housing can be especially volatile for LGBTQ community members, who are more likely to face financial and housing insecurity, according to Statistics Canada. The Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces showed that in 2018, LGBTQ Canadians were more than twice as likely as those outside the community to have experienced some type of homelessness or housing insecurity in their lifetime.

As a result, many people have turned to social media groups or collective living spaces created by and for the LGBTQ community as an affordable, safe and comfortable housing option.

Variations of the Homes for Queers Facebook group exist in cities across Canada, including Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. The Montreal group is the largest, with more than 18,000 members, and Toronto is the second largest, with more than 16,000 members.



Mr. Mackay and his roommate Caitlyn Horne share space in their living room.

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Oleanne D’Souza is a moderator for the Toronto Facebook group, and had initially joined the group to connect with people in the community. When they were trying to leave an unsafe situation after being outed, they were able to find another queer roommate through the Facebook group.

“It wasn’t just affordable housing,” they said. “It was also a queer-accepting, non-binary-accepting, trans-accepting housing that was super required for me.”

They added that they were lucky that they had savings to afford a place to live, but that there are many people in the community who have to use transitional housing or emergency shelters – such as Friends of Ruby, Rainbow Railroad and YMCA’s Sprott House – when they are outed or running away from abusive situations.

Samia Marshy, who runs the Chez Queer Montréal Facebook group, said the group was created for queer people, but is really meant for all marginalized people, including people of colour and people with disabilities.

“It’s just a resource for people who are more vulnerable in a volatile housing market,” Ms. Marshy said. “It’s so important for people to come home to a place where you feel safe – [in] really literal ways safe from violence, but also just comfortable and at ease, not worried about judgments.”

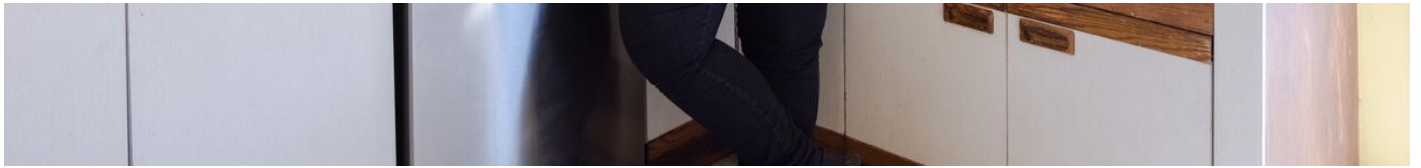
In addition to housing shares, some Canadians have created co-operative living spaces for the LGBTQ community.

In Ottawa, Abiwin Co-Op was founded by a group of LGBTQ members in the 1980s to create a safe housing space for people in the community, along with any other members of marginalized groups looking for a safe home.

There are 90 units on the property that house a total of about 120 members. The co-op tries to keep their rent prices below average, and have also converted some apartments to shared living spaces to make them more affordable, said Verna Shackleton, who is on the co-op’s board.

Ms. Shackleton is originally from Ottawa, but lived in rural Ontario for decades before moving back to the city about two and a half years ago.





Ms. Horne in the communal kitchen at Mr. Mackay's home.

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“Typical of my age with LGBT people, I had done the usual thing of getting married and having a family and so on before getting to the point of my life where it was safe to come out,” Ms. Shackleton said. “Even then, in rural Ontario, it was still not as welcoming. So I wanted to have my last years in a place where I could be totally me.”

She said she had many conversations with friends in the community about “where on earth do we end up” when they get older. LGBTQ seniors are particularly vulnerable when it comes to housing – many Canadians have shared their fears that discrimination in long-term seniors housing could force them back into the closet.

Ms. Shackleton has family in Ottawa and so decided to move back to be closer to them. Abiwin, she said, seemed like the place that would accept her for who she is – and soon after she moved into the co-op, she joined the board to get more involved.

“I like to think of myself as being a grandmother in the building,” she said.

Abiwin has communal laundry facilities, and everyone pitches in with cleaning and gardening. The co-op also has a community room and a backyard, and residents often used to have potlucks and other social gatherings before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms. Shackleton said co-op members do their best to look after one another. Recently, the co-op held a yard sale to finance a community food shelf, which helped provide food for people who were struggling financially, as well as for people with disabilities who had trouble going out during the pandemic.

In addition to affordability and safety, these shared living spaces can help people find families within the community.

“It’s very much more like a family situation than a tenant and landlord situation,” Mr. MacKay said. “We have biological families and we have logical families, and I’ve made a logical family.”

Trish Spark, who has been living in the apartment at the back of Mr. MacKay’s house for 13 years now, said he’s become “like a brother” to her – they even picked out the house dog

together.

“I’m almost 71, and so I haven’t been out all of those years,” she said. “Being able to move into a place where I wouldn’t have to offer any explanations or wonder when people would ask me questions – right away, it was kind of like a family.”

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