

Remaking households 'Old hippies' make it communal



Paul van Reyk at home with Django, one of the household pets, and his flatmate, in the foreground making tea. Photo: Michele Mossop

Oldies take up new cohabits

Vivienne Pearson

Share houses are often seen as the exclusive domain of those aged in their 20s. A transient period in their lives. But due to a growing number of seniors choosing to live in share houses, the template is being reshaped.

At 73, Marie Theodore-Daly has lived in share houses with all ages, including those five decades younger than her.

"They never say anything but they come to the door probably thinking: 'Here's Grandma!'" she says when she opens the door to prospective housemates.

Though finances are a driver for her decision, the benefits are far greater. "I don't know if I could live any other way now," she says. "I've got friends who find it hard to understand why I would want to share ... but living in share houses, particularly with younger people, has kept me young in my thinking and in appreciation of life."

But the benefits flow both ways. Ms Theodore-Daly's life experi-

ence means that she is a very clear communicator and knows all the ingredients for successful shared living. "When people come in for an interview, I always set out rules and we all agree on the person," she says. In her home, housemates enter as strangers and quickly become friends, providing mutual support and connection.

This was the case for Paul van Reyk, 65, who shares a house with a woman, also in her 60s. "We're very old friends and now housemates," he says.

While house-sharing arrangements tend to be transitory and often in rented accommodation, Mr Van Reyk and his housemate co-own the house that they have shared for more than 20 years. They even share the ownership of two dogs. "Sharing has given me access to a property and lifestyle that I otherwise could not have afforded," he says.

Ms Theodore-Daly insists that good communication, and shared food, is the crux of a successful share house. "We email each other

but mainly use a communication book that is in the kitchen all the time," she says. "We have an evening meal together some days and we have regular house meetings with coffee and croissants."

In 2016, flatmates.com.au, recorded that the largest increase of house sharers was in the 60-64 age

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bracket with 43 per cent relative growth. This increasing demand from seniors for house sharing arrangements was enough to prompt independent website seniorhousingonline.com.au to start offering free senior flatmate ads. While the site was set up in 2004 to help people access information about retirement accommodation, in 2016, co-founder Amanda Graham saw

the site's potential for linking like-minded strangers to form share-house relationships.

"Some people are going into share housing because they can't afford an alternative," says Graham. "They might have divorced, or lost a partner, been made redundant, or relocated. Others are simply hitting their 50s still with a large mortgage."

Ms Graham reminds us that share housing is not a new concept to those who are now in their 60s and 70s. "This is the generation who pioneered share housing in their 20s," she says. "It's not foreign to them."

Ms Theodore-Daly grew up in a family who always welcomed friends and strangers into their home. Into her 30s she lived in commune-style houses. "I guess I am an old hippie at heart," she says.

Mr Van Reyk and his housemate have spoken about what might happen as they get older. "We don't know what's going to happen in five or 10 years' time, but we're comfortable enough with each other to talk about it."