

## westsidebeat

Covering Dunbar – Kerrisdale – Oakridge – Marpole neighbourhoods in Vancouver, B.C.

# Artists-in-residence salon series brings cohousing idea to Dunbar-Southlands

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I met Keiko Honda in the shower room of Kerrisdale pool last year. The elegant young woman was supervising her daughter Maya, who just finished swimming lessons. I, on the other hand, was undressed and wet, showering off the chlorine, after having enjoyed half an hour of lapses in the pool. Our eyes met, but we only smiled at each other.

Our shower meetings went on for several months, but I never had the opportunity to speak to her. Keiko and Maya had already left the dressing room long before my kids and I were ready.

One day we met on the bus, and we started a conversation. We found out that we were both émigrés, having left our home country for a second one. Keiko, who has a post-doc in cancer epidemiology, left Japan to work as a successful research scientist in the epidemiology department at Columbia University in New York. I left Belgium to become an award-winning commissioning editor at Germany's largest public broadcaster, WDR. We both followed our Canadian husbands to Vancouver and found ourselves working part-time and volunteering.

Soon after, Keiko emailed me an invitation to her home in Dunbar-Southlands. I was astonished that I was invited to “an



— Keiko Honda is a community builder in Dunbar-Southlands and Kerrisdale.

afternoon filled with music and poetry.” Could it be that I was just being invited to my first salon? How lovely!

### Salon a hub of creative and engaged minds

Although people of all times have come together to voice their opinions, be it at tribal gatherings or church meetings, the origins of the salon as we know it lie in pre-revolutionary, 17<sup>th</sup>-century France. People of the rising bourgeoisie came together for intellectual gatherings held by a hostess, who would moderate the conversation and ensure the cohesion of the group. Participants were to consider themselves equal to one another and to be refined in their conversations, according to sociology professor [Benet Davetian](#). The salon tradition, which evoked the idea of enlightenment in France, spread throughout Europe and became part of the American cultural landscape in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Keiko was inspired to have her own salon after being invited to speak at one of Sam Sullivan’s private salons, which could be seen as incubators for the former Vancouver mayor’s [public salons](#). “I really liked the idea of sharing passion with people,” she said about her experience.

“I always liked the concept of French 17<sup>th</sup>-century salons, where people exchanged ideas through conversation. As a newcomer, I needed to create a community to be inspired,” Keiko said. “Being a Manhattaner, I miss so much mingling with emerging artists and art-lovers and wanted to recreate a kind of cultural creativity hub where like-minded people come together and exchange ideas,” she said. “By doing so, we create a community and connect each other from the heart.”

In her artist-in-residence series, she invites keynote speakers or artists to her home and invites selected people from a wide range of different professions to attend and discuss the issue.

### Evening inspires fresh ideas about building communities



— Renee Mynott facilitates cohousing projects in the Lower Mainland.

Last Friday, I was invited to come and listen to Renee Mynott, a [facilitator for cohousing projects in the Lower Mainland](#). I packed a box with bigos, a Polish cabbage dish, on my bicycle for the potluck dinner and off I went.

I spent the first hour nibbling home-cooked dishes and chitchatting with a wide range of people, including a painter, a library technician, a designer and a forester, who offered me a delicious cup of dandelion tea. Most of the people didn’t know each other and Keiko was a terrific host, making sure no one was isolated.

After the meal, our group of 17 gathered around the fireplace and Mynott spoke about her business, which

she defines as “creating a better world one neighbourhood at a time.”

A typical cohousing facility will have around two dozen self-contained units, including their own kitchen and living room spaces. But residents also share a collective kitchen, dining room or office space. The resident community will often self-manage strata costs.

Mynott grew up “extremely rich in people,” in a family with 12 uncles and aunts, always around her parents’ house in Surrey. Of Danish origin, Mynott was inspired by a cohousing community in Denmark.

With her first grandchild recently born, and two of her four daughters getting married this year, Mynott experienced firsthand how difficult it is for young families to find a space to live in the Lower Mainland.

“The level of stress is crazy,” Mynott said, who has teamed up with Alan Carpenter and Marilyn Fischer to start a [business of facilitating multigenerational cohousing communities](#).

“Marilyn was a gift from God to me,” Mynott said about Fischer, who consults the cohousing team on solutions to integrate seniors in the communities. Fischer, who describes herself as a “perennial late bloomer,” finished a degree in social work at age 54. She said that co-care, including a suite for a caregiver, is an element increasingly important to seniors. [“A thousand people a day turn 65 in Canada,”](#) she said.

### **Cohousing desired by some Dunbar residents**

“I have an agenda,” said Mynott, who sees her role in facilitating a meeting group for at least 6-8 like-minded families and individuals, who express interest in living in an cohousing unit in a specific area. Once a group has formed, and the candidate families have gotten to know each other better through a series of workshops, Mynott will meet with local city councillors in the Lower Mainland to address the need for rezoning. When a piece of property is found, she will set up a budget and try to get additional grants.

A good example of cohousing includes the [WindSong community](#) in Langley. Currently, Mynott is guiding a couple of Dunbar families looking for like-minded people and an available lot.

The evening was not entirely an exercise in preaching to the converted, and a long discussion about the pros and cons of cohousing, and of being good neighbours and citizens unfolded. Mynott mentioned the [Connections and Engagement study](#) by the Vancouver Foundation, which stated that many people in Vancouver feel they have “nothing to offer” to the community.

When the group gave their final remarks, it was painfully obvious how lonely and isolated some felt, in spite of living in an increasingly dense part of the world. At least four newcomers to Canada in the group said they were lonely in Vancouver and felt privileged to have met Keiko and been invited to her select group of friends.

“Keiko saved my life, really,” said Alison Fung, who moved from Australia to Vancouver seven months ago with her busy husband George and elementary-school daughter Bella. She has now joined Keiko as a board member of [Kerrisdale Community Centre](#) and is looking forward to community work and more evenings at the salon.

Whereas Keiko’s artists-in-residence salons are per invitation only, she also organizes a similar, public discussion forum, [Kerrisdale Playbook](#).

*Report and photos by Katja De Bock*

*In this video, [Keiko Honda](#) explains her community vision in her own words:*

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