

The high life

A quarter of Australians now live in apartments. For some that means being part of a close-knit community, for others life has never been lonelier. **Sue Williams** reports.



Beverly Pinder in her Melbourne apartment and opposite, Ash Bansal, who runs the Republic Cafe in Melbourne.
PICTURES: WAYNE TAYLOR

When Anne McAlaney moved her family to a house in the inner suburbs while their city apartment was undergoing renovations, she was shocked to discover what life there was really like. While friends had waxed lyrical about a burning sense of community warming the neighbourhood, she found only the acute chill of social isolation.

"You know, I've never been as lonely in my life, living here," says Anne, 39, sitting in the house in Middle Park. "In our apartment block, you talked to the other people there, and walked out the door straight into the business of the city. It was great. Here, if you walk out and see a seagull, it makes your day. We can't wait to get back to our apartment and our own community."

Anne — who runs her own cafe while also looking after her 20-month-old twins, with partner Bradley Matthews, and his two teenagers, Keri, 14, and Bradley jr, 10 — is one of a growing band of people championing the potential of apartment buildings to become real communities.

Conventional wisdom may have it that suburban neighbourhoods have the monopoly on community, with their potential for street parties, knocking on doors to borrow sugar, garage sales and neighbours chatting over fences. But as the population continues to decamp from houses and backyards on the city outskirts into city and inner-suburban apartments, increasingly these residents are seizing the initiative to establish their own tribal communities.

Future analysts at KPMG are in no doubt that this has now become a discernible trend. Sarah Breen, senior manager in the property division, says it's only likely to grow stronger with time. "In the five years to the last census, from 1996, there's been a huge population move to within five kilometres of the CBD," she says.

"They're quite densely populated areas, so a lot of those people are moving into apartments. Many of them are younger professionals but there are also a large proportion of older empty-nesters. They have more of a sense of community from living in the suburbs, so they want to re-create that when they move into apartments."

Even developers now take this factor into account when designing new apartment blocks and complexes. They see good building facilities such as gyms, swimming pools, saunas and spas as all providing residents with forums for meeting each other and forging friendships, while there are more and more plans for cafes and restaurants within, below or next to apartment blocks.

Builder and developer The Brady Group is part of this movement. General manager of sales George Keith says its latest development, the Wills Street project, close to the Queen Vic Market and Flagstaff Gardens, includes plans for both a cafe and restaurant on site.

"It gives residents another place to meet each other informally," he says. "Also, a sense of community can grow from careful planning of the mix of types of apartments."

"It's different from being in the suburbs, but not many people there know their neighbours any more anyway. Longer working hours have created a situation where many

