

Housing projects for people with environmental illnesses (MCS or EHS) that did not get off the ground

Steen Hviid



There is a large unmet need for healthy housing, especially for people on a modest income. Many people have wanted to do something, but few succeeded. Here we cover projects in the United States, Canada, and Europe that went beyond the wishful thinking stage, but still didn't happen, and why not.

Keywords: environmental illness, chemical sensitivity, MCS, electrical sensitivity, housing projects

One of the top difficulties living with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) or electrical hypersensitivity (EHS) is housing. Regular housing tends to be toxic, moldy, and too electric. Then close neighbors tend to pollute the surroundings with dryer exhaust, pesticides, wireless radiation, and more.

Building a safe house is not terribly difficult, but it costs money and effort to do correctly. When people get sick, they tend to have less energy and a lot less

2 *Failed housing projects*

money. And there are very few builders who actually know how to build such houses, or are willing to learn.

Several multi-unit housing projects have been built, especially in the United States, but far from enough. Some were by good-hearted people who tried to help others, but they were closed when the owner was no longer able to maintain the place. There were also some projects with rents far beyond what people on disability could pay.

Several people have tried to get projects off the ground but were not able to make them fly. These are their stories.

Escalante House

A couple from California moved to the small town of Escalante in southern Utah. It was in Garfield County, which was as big as the state of Connecticut, but only 4500 people lived there. 98 percent of the land was owned by the government. This remote area had exceptional good air quality with dry desert air.

The couple moved into an existing house, but wanted to build a really safe house. And they wanted safe neighbors.

In 1999 they found a large 325 acre (131 hectares) piece of land that the State of Utah wanted to sell for housing. It was bordered on three sides by the gigantic Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument.

They envisioned subdividing the land, building roads, and bringing in phone and power. There would be fifty home lots, room for one or two apartment buildings, and a community center. The community center would have a large room that could be used for parties and showing film. It would also have space for a traveling physician to see patients, and maybe even a cafeteria.

The fifty lots would be sold to individuals who then built their own healthy houses. There would be covenants banning wood stoves, coal stoves, fabric softener, etc.

One of the organizers was a professional grant application writer and they thought they could get enough grants to build the apartment buildings so people on a low income could afford the rent.

They had gotten a \$20,000 seed grant and started a design committee. They had set up a website (www.escalantehouse.org) and sent out a survey to hear how many people were interested and what their needs and finances were.

This was a very promising project, which got a lot of interest in the years 1999-2000. At least two people moved there and lived in tents over the summer.

The remoteness of Escalante was a deterrent. The grocery stores did not carry any organic foods in those days, and there was no health food store in the region.

To get organic or natural foods, the people in Escalante had to drive for four hours each way to Provo, south of Salt Lake City. It was so far they did it only once a month, and typically stayed there overnight.

There were monthly deliveries by refrigerated truck from a co-op in Tucson (it closed a decade later). The co-op served a large area, including the MCS communities in Marfa, Texas, and Dolan Springs, Arizona. Their truck drove a long route with many stops. They offered a lot of packaged and frozen health foods, but only a few hardy organic vegetables (onions, carrots, etc).

The hope was that enough people would move to Escalante to make a local health food store viable. The organizers were in talks with someone who might open such a store. Otherwise, they encouraged people to put up greenhouses.

What killed the Escalante House project was allegedly the actions of just one person. He did not have MCS himself, but had moved there with his spouse/girlfriend. He had been a progressive activist in California and started doing the same thing in Utah.

People in rural Utah tend to be very conservative and found his activities upsetting. If you are a newcomer, you don't just ride in and try to change things in such a place. Any place, really.

His activism promoting the creation of the new Grand Staircase – Escalante National Monument caused a lot of hard feelings, as the community was strongly against what they saw as a limit on the community to do farming and mining in the area.

Since he was associated with the MCS-people and the Escalante House project, the animosity came to include that as well. There wasn't any violence or sabotage, but the obvious hostility apparently drove the MCS-people out of town.

4 *Failed housing projects*

It may not have happened anyway, we don't know how many people wanted to move there, and how many did the "wait and see" routine.

The Hay Hollow project

This project was about fifteen miles (25 km) northeast of Snowflake, Arizona. It was at the very end of a paved road in an area with just a couple scattered houses. An established MCS/EHS community was less than ten miles (16 km) away.

The property was a former hay farm of roughly a couple hundred acres. Electricity was available nearby.

The surrounding area was mostly empty ranch land, populated by free-range cattle. It was an exceptional good location and land was cheap. The picture at the top is taken near Hay Hollow.

The developer was Leonard "Nano" Nathan, who was a friend of the local EI community, but not sick himself. Unfortunately, he was not up to the task. The effort was poorly organized. He was fuzzy on whether he intended to subdivide the land and let people build their own houses, or he would build the houses himself and sell them.

He needed about two hundred thousand dollars to buy the property, build roads, and bring in power. He was only able to get pledges for sixty thousand dollars.

Quail Haven

Of all the projects listed in this article, this was the only one that actually got off the ground. But then it faltered.

Around 2003 Diane Ensign of Tucson bought a lot twenty miles (30 km) north of Tucson. The lot was about seven acres (3 hectares) and located in a cluster of homes on one-acre lots. The surrounding area was undeveloped government land.

She subdivided the land into five smaller lots and put a covenant on them to ban several pollution sources, including diesel cars.

She built her own house there, and was able to sell one other lot where a guy named George built another house.

She built her house so a part of it could be closed off from the rest and rented out. She had no trouble finding renters.

A couple from California bought a twenty-acre (8 hectare) lot about half a mile away, where they also built a house.

Diane hosted a few parties at her new house for the Tucson MCS community.

But Quail Haven was seen as too remote. It took 45 minutes to get there from Tucson, the last ten miles (16 km) was on Park Link Road, which was not paved in those days though it was maintained well. That discouraged both social visitors and prospective buyers.

The people who moved out there were not enough to create a community on their own. They felt isolated living there. George moved back to Phoenix, Diane moved back to Tucson. Diane rented out her entire house to a succession of EI renters, until the house became infested with termites and had to be pesticated (it was unfortunately built rather termite-friendly).

Another problem was the small lots. People who were willing to move away from the city would want larger lots, the non-EI houses were no more than a hundred feet (30 meters) away. But land prices were rather high so “close” to Tucson, so that was what Diane was willing to put into the project.

Puget Sound EI housing

This project was organized by Joy Jaber, who used to be a legal secretary before she got sick with MCS, and later got mild EHS too. She used Section 8 vouchers to rent various places around Puget Sound (Seattle area), but there was no really safe housing available. The best place she found she had to vacate again when a new house was built on the adjacent lot, just a few feet (couple of meters) away.

By 2016 she tried to get an MCS/EHS apartment building constructed. It was to have four apartments in two stories, and located somewhere with good outdoor air. That meant some distance to regular neighbors and probably near the water.

She knew several other people in the area who needed such a place to live. It would not be a problem to fill it with renters. But nobody had any money.

Joy talked to multiple government agencies, both State and Federal. One did encourage her to further develop plans and come back with a proposal, which they might fund. Housing was very expensive in the Seattle area, so government money was essential to make the rent affordable for disabled people.

She visited some architects or builders who constructed “green” or “eco” buildings, but she found their methods and material choices were not safe enough for people with MCS. It upset them that their designs were not “good enough” and they were clearly not interested in learning about MCS construction methods.

She looked around for suitable land with good air quality and some distance to neighbors. A friend who was an engineer came up with a first rough draft of the building.

The project died because Joy’s health declined and her energy sagged. She died of cancer in 2019.

Green Bank WAVR

Green Bank is a village inside the National Radio-Quiet Zone in West Virginia. The Zone was created in the 1950s to protect a radio observatory and later a CIA listening post.

The area has attracted many people with severe EHS. The first EHS-resident was Diane Schou, who became the booster for others to follow. She has been interviewed by many journalists.

Most of the newcomers keep a low profile, but a few have been very vocal about their disability. The local medical clinic was sued over accommodating people with EHS (with no success). This has not been well received by the local people.

In the 2010s, Diane, and her husband Bert, tried to create low-cost housing for people with EHS (and secondarily MCS). They started the non-profit organization WAVR, which was able to buy a densely forested lot of about ten acres (4 hectares). The trees help shield radio waves.

The lot already had a cottage on it, which was rented out to a series of people with EHS.

Diane held many phone meetings discussing developing the lot with more cottages, a community center, and some campsites. But bad experiences with some renters who were unruly, and then Diane’s declining health meant the visions never materialized.

Scott’s Mountain

An early project was mentioned in the Fall 1984 issue of *The Human Ecologist*. It was to be placed somewhere in the Texas Hill Country between Austin and San Antonio, where a number of people with MCS had already settled.

This was very much a pioneering effort, so the organizer consulted with NASA regarding the materials. NASA was very interested in healthy materials at the time as they'd found some astronauts got dizzy when sealed up inside the Space Shuttle.

They asked interested people to respond, especially about whether buying or renting was preferred.

The Texas motel

Around year 2001, someone tried to raise money to buy an old motel and convert it into MCS housing. It was located in a small town somewhere between Austin and San Antonio in Texas.

It was apparently inspired by Pride And Joy, which was a successfully converted motel on Melbourne Beach, Florida, that had opened a few years before.

The organizer of the Texas project apparently first got started once the motel was put up for sale, so there wasn't much time to raise the money. The appeals for investors from the MCS community didn't last long.

The Colorado ranch

There was a brief attempt at creating a small EHS community on a cattle ranch in Colorado. The idea was to rent out regular cabins without electricity to people with severe EHS. The cabins would not be built for people with MCS, though they might work for them after several years of offgassing (assuming the EHS residents didn't pollute them).

It was a very large ranch, in a remote part of the state. One problem was the nearest store was a couple hours away. The project soon died again.

The Toronto project

Around 2010 there was an attempt at building an MCS apartment building in Toronto, Canada. The project was organized by the president of the local MCS organization Environmental Health Association of Ontario (EHAO).

The project took so much time that she announced in their newsletter that she had to resign as president as she could not do both. We haven't heard anything about it since then. EHAO apparently became dormant soon after.

The Quebec project

About 2015 there was an attempt at building housing in Quebec, Canada. The location was undetermined, but some rural area around Montreal, most likely to the east. This project was to be for both people with MCS or EHS.

It is uncertain what organization was behind this, but it may have been the Association de la santé environnementale de Quebec – Environmental Health Association of Quebec (ASEQ-EHAQ).

The conceptual idea was to build something similar to a one-story motel. They had the expectation that the people with MCS would refrain from using wireless devices in their rooms, so they could share walls with people with EHS. This is unrealistic and bound to cause endless conflict. Just because people get sick doesn't mean they will be considerate of others, the sickness does not make people paragons.

This writer had a long phone conversation with them. They were very polite, but not interested in listening to experience.

The reason the project died is not known to this writer.

Soubey (Switzerland)

Soubey is a small picturesque town in the French-speaking part of western Switzerland. It is located in a deep valley with mountains that shield the radiowaves from the surrounding area.

Only 150 people lived in the entire valley. Young people moved away for better opportunities elsewhere, the average age of the residents was steadily climbing. There was a real fear that the town would die out.

Someone with severe EHS discovered the little valley and moved there in 2009. Along came two friends who also had the disease.

Some of the people already living there thought these younger people could revitalize the little town, so they welcomed the newcomers. That included the mayor.

The story of the refuge got around; newspapers in Germany, Switzerland, and France wrote about it. French television featured the little town in a program about electrical hypersensitivity. A tabloid got in on it.

Most people in the valley had not heard about the refugees before they read about them in the media, and the media was not overly sympathetic.

A problem was that the sick people rented rooms, so they shared a house with normal people. Their demands of keeping the electricity and computers off caused animosity.

There were rumors that the lone cell tower in the valley had to be taken down and cordless phones banned (this was before smartphones).

The local people feared an invasion of their quiet hamlet and what changes it would bring. This apparently put an end to the dreams of an EHS refuge.

If the three people had rented a house, and not tried to live with the regular people, it could have worked better. Perhaps people with EHS could slowly have taken over the empty houses as the population of regular people dwindled. That might not work for people who also have MCS or mold sensitivities, but their houses could be built later.

For the basic after-the-fact story, see Burkhard Strassmann's story in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* from August 22, 2013 (www.zeit.de). It is in German, but Google Translate can translate it.

Durbon Les Cros (France)

In 2023 there was an attempt at buying a retreat center and converting it into an MCS and EHS community. The center had been used for corporate training and meetings, and was on a very large lot, surrounded by mountains. It was somewhere in the French Alps.

The center had several motel-style rooms, each with a door directly to the outside. These could be rented out. They also wanted to sell off large housing lots for people to build their own homes.

The materials posted on the web included a picture of a smartphone stating there was no signal there.

They were looking for investors and people who wanted to buy the lots. Six months later all the materials disappeared from the web.

Husum (Germany)

Husum is a small town on the west coast of Germany, about 40 miles (60 km) from the Danish border. The general area is a haven for people with severe pollen allergies due to little vegetation and the steady wind from the ocean. The soil is very sandy and unsuitable for farming, it is mostly used for free-range sheep. The area is sparsely populated and has little industry.

Until about 2020 there was also an environmental health clinic in nearby Bredstedt.

Around 2015 a local person spearheaded an attempt at building an MCS apartment building in the area, but it never happened.

Frivolten (Sweden)

About 2006 an organization was created in Sweden to build a community for people with EHS. The organization was named Frivolten. It was an offspring of the larger Swedish EHS organization.

They held public meetings. They announced they intended to build log cabins in densely forested areas, as live trees shield radio waves. One conceptual project was named Fritorpet, which in Swedish means “Freedom Cottage.”

They wanted to get politicians to designate low-EMF areas, so people moving there would not later be chased away by new transmission towers.

The organization appears dormant. It never got anything built, nor any legally binding low-radiation zones created.

Honorable mention

Nancy Noren spent a lot of effort trying to get a project together in New Mexico in the 1990s. She traveled around the state and looked at land for sale, but a good project never materialized.

Perhaps she had eventually succeeded if she hadn't died. She was regularly forced to flee her home because of her neighbor's activities. One such right she was

camping on public land, when she was attacked and murdered. The murderer was soon caught driving her truck.

Build it and they will come?

A common problem with these projects is to get people to sign up. A lot of people express interest, but they want to “wait and see” before they commit their money. Few can afford taking the risk of buying a house in such a project, and then maybe be the only one there. People want to join a proven success.

And most people who are really disabled by the illness do not have money to buy anything. They no longer work.

Rentals rarely sit empty, even the high-priced ones in Dallas. It’s much less of a commitment to sign a lease than to buy a house, and most can only afford rent anyway.

Dr. William Rea had apartments for his patients. Despite charging some \$3000 a month, he sometimes had to ask people to leave if they were not actively seeking his treatments, as they prevented new patients from coming from afar.

Rentals can also be an important stepping stone towards ownership of a house. They allow prospective buyers of lots to try out the area first and then house them while the house is built. It can easily take a year to build and off-gas a new house, and it is best if the new owner is involved on-site.

If a project is not in a city, the project needs to quickly get enough people moving there so they don’t feel isolated. The way to do that is to provide rentals right from the start. A couple of units will not do it, as we saw with Quail Haven. How many are needed depends on the kind of people moving in, as some will not socialize.

The Snowflake community in Arizona is well established. The contact person there is contacted weekly by people looking for housing. What people ask for is rentals, not empty lots. Good empty lots are usually available, but few takers. It can be a couple of years between each new house is built.

Sometimes houses become available for sale in Snowflake. They rarely move fast, some have to sit well over a year before someone buys them. It has happened that a truly excellent house had to be sold to a “normie” because the seller couldn’t wait any longer.

Financing

Financing these projects is difficult. Several of these projects faltered because of financing problems. People found a good project and then expected financing to be available quickly.

Banks are not interested in unusual projects with a lot of uncertainties. They also do not like covenants and restrictions on who can live there. They want projects they understand, and that they can foreclose and quickly sell if the loan payments are not made on time.

There are not a lot of rich people with money to spare and sympathy towards the sick people.

The successful projects that were financed by investors (four in Dallas), all had high rents. Their monthly rents were higher than the entire payments of even high Social Security.

Grant money would bring the cost down, but it can take years to get that set up. Such fundraising must be started well before the project itself.

A special problem is the terrible image of illegitimacy – that many people think MCS and EHS is simply an imagined illness. This is a common problem for new and poorly understood illnesses. For MCS and EHS there are the additional problem that if they became “legitimate,” that would severely threaten the profits of powerful special interests.

As MCS began to become accepted in the late 1980s, the tobacco industry and chemical industry took action to turn the tide, as documented elsewhere on this website. Their campaign was very successful and became self-perpetuating with echo-chambers in the media and medical journals. It is impossible to obtain grant money for MCS research, unless the proposed study is based on the “all in their head” paradigm.

The only project listed here that was able to buy a piece of land and then subdivide it was Quail Haven. Lots sell very slowly, so the money behind must be very patient. Patient money is very scarce. The Escalante House project intended to let the State of Utah do the subdividing and retain ownership of the lots until sold. Unfortunately this model was never tested.

Sources

Much of this is based on the recollections of two long-timers in the EI community, including this writer. We were peripherally involved in a couple of the projects, and talked to many of the people at the time they were trying to get things organized. A few documents survived in our personal archives, but not much.

The Wayback Machine (www.archive.org) allowed a look at the old website for Escalante House (www.escalantehouse.org).

More information

Articles about several housing projects that were actually built are at www.eiwellspring.org/multiunit.html.