

Beyond Squat or Rot : Anarchist Approaches to Housing

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First in a continuing series

[upcoming issues will focus on squatting, community land trusts, tenant associations, intentional communities, and more]

Introduction

It's time to renew your yearly lease and once again your landlord wants to raise your monthly rent. Should you stay or should you go? Are there options to leases, rents and mortgages? Why does the landlord get away with raising everybody's rents, when they probably haven't made any improvements to your building in the last year? This issue of Practical Anarchy looks at some of the answers to these questions, what alternatives exist, and how to challenge the traditional way housing is provided.

Why are we addressing this issue?

Those active in the alternative housing movement should not automatically assume that everyone wants to join them. After all, suburban living is rather entrenched. Suburbanites may not fully like their living situation, but they aren't exactly clamoring for something different. It will take some time before more suburbanites realize that the suburbs are the cause of that disappearance of community that everybody talks about. They'll also realize the tremendous costs commuting and car-dependence has on the environment, their families, their psyche, and their health.

Alternative housing activists have one thing in their favor when it comes to convincing the mainstream to join them. They have existing examples to point to, be it a co-op, a squat, a land trust, an intentional community, or a cohousing community. And there are hundreds of examples of successful projects. The challenge is to spread the word to folks who are unaware of this movement. What would be an effective method of outreach? More media coverage? Field trips?

Critical Mass

One of the big challenges of the alternative housing movement is how to expand beyond a handful of houses/projects to a widespread system of alternative housing. How do you get to a critical mass of alternative housing in a city, where it becomes easier to start and finance new projects? A small city like Madison Wisconsin has over ten co-ops and most of these co-ops have been around for ten years or longer. Through cooperation these existing co-ops can pool their money and start a new co-op, or at least help some folks get a new one started. That is, if the members of the current co-ops have the inclination to do such a thing.

Dishes

One of the big things that will go unexamined in this segment of the series is gender relations in alternative housing. The members of co-ops and squats often say that they are for gender equality in everyday life, yet only some will actually live according to the principles they preach. Even today, all too often women are still being stuck with the housework and child care in these alternative projects. A whole article could be devoted to the inability of men to do the dishes. In order for the alternative housing movement to grow, these concerns need to be addressed, and ACTED UPON.

Cooperatives

When one thinks about housing cooperatives, one generally thinks about student co-ops in university towns. Traditionally university towns such as Madison (WI), Berkeley (CA), and Oberlin (OH) have been fertile grounds for student-occupied housing co-ops.

These co-ops generally consist of a large house with 5 or more bedrooms, common living and dining areas, and several bathrooms. Some co-ops are "unofficial," that is, they consist of several people renting a multi-bedroom apartment and sharing costs. But I am concerned here with "official" co-ops like the one I lived in for two years in Madison, WI. Official co-ops usually average around 10 to 20 members, with the extremes having over 100.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Co-op Living

Advantages

- Rent for each person can be cheaper. None of your rent money is going into a landlord's pocket. If the co-op is a nonprofit organization, you may get a small refund each year from the co-op treasury.
- A sense of community is created. You develop a vested interest in making things work between the members of the co-op. You may also make some good friends.
- The food co-op can keep your expenses down, feed you healthy and yummy food, and free you of some of the time you spend each week preparing dinners.
- You get to share in disasters. Enjoy the group effort as everybody bails out the leaking basement, chases bats around, haul heavy furniture up flights of stairs, and order pizza after a miserable communal meal.
- You get a balance of private and public space. You can fight over the TV, or retreat to your room.
- You can learn useful skills like composting, home repair, mail forwarding, handling house finances, budgeting, negotiating with contractors, cooking for large groups, and cleaning up after basement floods.

Disadvantages

- Residents can be transient. If the residents are mostly students, the turnover can become quite frequent and sense of ongoing community is not formed. Another aspect of high turnover is that these transient residents treat the co-op as just another apartment.
- People who unfairly take advantage of the co-op. Some folks are irresponsible about paying the rent [the nature of a co-op lets the occasional member be tardy with a rent payment, but not everyone!]; others rip off the co-op by using house funds to buy food for themselves.
- You may not like the lifestyle flavor of the house. A young punk may not like living with studious grad students; conversely, grad students may not like living with loud young punks. Diversity can benefit co-ops if the residents are tolerant of differences.
- Too frequent, long, and contentious house meetings. Some co-ops think they have to have a meeting every week, regardless if there is anything to really talk about. Other co-ops don't have enough meetings and co-op problems fester.

External Factors Affecting Co-op Success

- Housing market. It may be hard to find a large house that is available, not to mention affordable. Or the co-op may be located in a neighborhood whose value increases. This may raise the value of the co-op, leading to higher taxes. Another challenge could be that the city has a large number of cheap apartments.
- Time. People can be too busy to participate in the daily tasks necessary to keep the co-op running. Personal projects, hobbies, school, work, and families can divert time. Some amount of this is okay, but an excessive amount devoted to excessive activities could hurt a member's involvement in the co-op.
- Demographics, lifestyle trends. Living in a co-op could become hip, or apartment living could be hip.
- If a co-op is in a university town, caps on enrollment can cut the pool of potential members.
- Natural disasters. A risk wherever you live.

Co-ops / How To

How does one start a co-op? If you are lucky you may live in a town that has already existing co-ops. Give them a call. Find out how they got started (if anybody remembers). If your town doesn't have co-ops you will have to call a co-op in another town. Be prepared to find that the people you talk to may have no idea how their co-op was started. Some co-ops have been around for over 20 years and the original founders aren't still living there.

In order to have a co-op, you need people who are willing to live in one. You need to find these people and get them together to talk about starting a new co-op. One effective method is to put up posters around your town or community announcing a meeting and soliciting interest. These posters should go up in places where people will see them: food co-ops, stores, kiosks, laundromats, classrooms, or telephone poles. Another possibility is

to make an announcement on a local radio station or to take out a short ad in the local newspaper.

Once you have people together, you need to have lots of meetings, mainly to plan for the co-op, but also to shake out those who aren't serious enough to commit. Also, you develop relationships with your future co-ops. You'll need to set up bank accounts, determine officers, file as a non-profit corporation, and create by-laws. The by-laws are necessary so that you have organized procedures for member shipping new members and removing troublesome ones. They also cover many other facets of running a co-op; contact existing co-ops to find out what should be included.

There are several financial considerations that have to be included in a co-op. Normally in most co-ops you'll be needing to pay off the mortgage and other loans on a monthly basis. The rent collected from the members on a monthly basis should cover this as well as several other important finances:

- Utilities: gas, electricity, fuel oil, etc. (It isn't worth it to divide this stuff proportionately by use, if it's possible at all)
- Minor maintenance: A small portion of each person's rent should be set aside to cover things like light bulbs, visits by the plumber, etc.
- Major maintenance: Another portion of the monthly rent collection should be set aside in a bank account to cover future projects done to the house. This way the house has some money saved up for the day when the chimney needs to be fixed, the plumbing replaced, the house painted, and so on.
- PROFIT: Actually, there is no profit involved, so ignore this category.

After I left Rivendell, they were able to refinance their mortgage, which allowed them to finance several projects including a major remodeling of the kitchen and basement, fixing a frequent leak, tuckpointing, and painting the house purple.

Another major aspect of a co-op is the food co-op. This is a feature which involves the pooling of money to buy food for the co-op and a system of preparing co-op dinners. Some co-ops make cooking for the co-op a work job, but some, like Rivendell, expected everybody to take their turn cooking dinner for the entire co-op. In a co-op of ten people, this meant that I had to cook for everybody ONCE every two weeks. The other nights I just showed up for dinner.

The person running the food co-op collects money from each member once a month. An amount needs to be decided upon which is settled on after some experience (the food co-op at Rivendell was about \$70 a month). Several of the co-op members have the work job of shopping, which is done once a week. The cooks for the upcoming week list what ingredients they need. The shoppers buy groceries to cover this along with buying "basics." A food co-op can be inexpensive because you are buying in bulk. If money is spent on lots of processed foods, dairy products, and meat, the cost per co-op will go up. House philosophy may also determine the diet; an all vegetarian or vegan house won't buy any meat.

There are many tasks that must be done in order for the co-op to function harmoniously. These tasks can be managed by a system of work jobs. The co-op must decide at a meeting how to allocate work jobs. This is often done at a meeting at the beginning of a semester (if the members are mostly students). The members decide what tasks need to be done, how to weight each task involves on a weekly basis, and the amount of work each co-oper is expected to do. Then they negotiate who does what task. Work jobs include such things as bathroom cleaning, common area cleaning, food co-op treasurer, house treasurer, grounds keeping/gardening, maintenance, and others. Some co-ops may come up with special tasks such as bulk food preparation, composter, mail forwarding, and liaison to the co-op association.

LANDLORD, n. A pillar of society as necessary to its existence as a tick is to a hound.
-- Chaz Bufe, *American Heretic's Dictionary*.

LAND, A part of the earth's surface, considered as property. The theory that land is property, subject to private ownership and control is the foundation of modern society, and is eminently worthy of the superstructure. Carried to its logical conclusion, it means that some have the right to prevent others from living; for the right to own implies the right exclusively to occupy; and in fact laws of trespass are enacted wherever property in land is recognized. It follows that if the whole area of terra firma is owned by A, B, and C, there will be no place for D, E, F and G to be born, or, born as trespassers, to exist.

-- Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*.

Cohousing

Cohousing is an alternative form of housing that has become popular in recent years. The movement got its start in Europe, where Denmark in particular is a hotbed of this housing type. Cohousing has been getting lots of attention in the U.S. in the last couple of years, with several projects having been built and others on the drawing board.

What is cohousing? It is a planned community which is a cross between an intentional community and a housing co-op. The building or buildings in the project are often built from scratch, but sometimes pre-existing structures are adapted for the project. Cohousing is usually found in cities or suburbs.

A cohousing community usually consists of individual households or buildings clustered around a common building that houses group facilities such a communal kitchen and dining area, laundry facilities, a library, workshops, and child care facilities. Some cohousing projects consist of a single building divided up into individual residences and common areas. The residences in cohousing developments usually contain private kitchens, so a person, couple, or family can eat separately from the others once in a while.

Cohousing has many advantages over traditional housing. The residents have a say in the development of the community. They have a say in the day-to-day life of the community.

It gets more people involved in a cooperative lifestyle. Cohousing balances the needs people have for personal space and community space. It offers a way for several generations to live cooperatively, yet meet their diverse needs.

Some anarchists have criticized cohousing as bourgeois, a fad for rich yuppies. People involved in cohousing are often middle class individuals or families with the financial resources to devote towards making a cohousing project happen. Most of them are white professionals. It could be argued that these folks aren't doing anything to help poor people to start similar projects. Is it fair to make such a generalization? Don't most "revolutions" start with the middle class? Why can't we support "mainstream" people who are making a commitment to cooperative living? If the cohousing movement reaches a critical mass, more and more projects will be started, including ones that include poor folks. Cities like Madison, Wisconsin have a large number of co-ops because there is a pre-existing co-op scene with the finances to loan money to new projects. A project or movement doesn't have to include radicals to be radical.

This article won't go into depths on life in cohousing or the how-to in running such a community. The reader is directed to the excellent book on cohousing which is listed at the end of this article.

What is a TAZ?

A TAZ is a *temporary autonomous zone*, a concept first elaborated on by Hakim Bey in his 1990 essay "The Temporary Autonomous Zone." Bey wrote that a TAZ is hard to define, but that instances of it could be described. Bey was inspired by his study of the instances in history where independent enclaves sprung up, "whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life." He was also inspired by cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling's book **Islands in the Net**, which describes a near-future world filled with autonomous "experiments in living: giant worker-owned corporations, independent enclaves devoted to 'data piracy,' Green-Social-Democrat enclaves, Zerowork enclaves, anarchist liberated zones, etc." Bey thought that these *temporary autonomous zones* were not only possible in the future, but already existed.

Much of the essay is devoted to the discussion of the anarchist potential of developing a WEB to counterattack the Net in cyberspace, but that falls outside of this discussion. Bey also outlined the various instances of TAZs throughout history: pirate utopias, people defecting from civilization to the "wilderness" (the infamous Roanoke colony that left the message "Gone to Croatan"), revolutionary urban communes (Paris), and Makhno's Ukraine. A TAZ these days would be a festive, spontaneous happening , or it could be something else...

In a later essay, Bey introduced something he called a PAZ, or permanent autonomous zone. A PAZ is a TAZ that has put down roots and intends to stay around for a while. Bey wrote that in TAZ that a TAZ that put down roots would be something similar to a bolo, which is discussed in the next section.

What's a *bolo*?

The concept of bolos are introduced by author P.M. in the book *bolo'bolo*. This book details the structure and workings of a hypothetical near-future world. In many ways, this work of science fiction introduces anarchistic concepts in a new light. The world of *bolo'bolo* is dominated by such anarchist concepts a decentralized politics, cooperative living, cooperative trade, the lack of national borders, and confederated regions.

Individuals living in the world of *bolo'bolo* are known as ibus. Ibus can join with 300 to 500 other ibus to form a bolo. P.M. defines a bolo as a

"basic agreement with other ibus, a direct, personal context for living, producing, dying. The bolo replaces the old "agreement" called money. In and around the bolo the ibus can get their daily 2000 calories, a living space, medical care, the basics of survival, and indeed much more."

P.M. explains that an ibu can choose to join a bolo, remain alone, or transfer to another bolo. Bolos are largely self-sufficient, but do not exist in a vacuum. Other parts of the book detail how trade works in this world.

Bolos would be as diverse as the region in which they are located. The inhabitants would also contribute to the look and feel of the bolo. P.M. suggests some possibilities for how bolos would look:

"Larger and higher housing projects can be used as vertical bolos. In the countryside, a bolo corresponds to a small town, to a group of farmhouses, to a valley. A bolo needn't be architecturally unified. In the South Pacific, a bolo is a coral island, or even a group of smaller atolls. In the desert, the bolo might not even have a precise location; rather, it's the route of the nomads who belong to it (maybe all members of the bolo meet only twice a year). On rivers or lakes, bolos can be formed with boats. There can be bolos in former factory buildings, palaces, caves, battleships, monasteries, under the ends of the Brooklyn Bridge, in museums, zoos, at Knotts Berry Farm or Fort Benning, in the Iowa Statehouse, shopping malls, the University of Michigan football stadium, Folsom Prison."

Ten to twenty bolos can form a tega, which can be thought of as a village, small town, or large neighborhood. What kind of function does a tega serve? P.M. explains:

"A tega (let's call it 'township') will fulfill certain practical tasks for its members: streets, canals, water, energy-plants, small factories and workshops, public transportation, hospital, forests and waters, depots of materials of all kinds, construction, firefighters, market regulations, (sadi), general help, reserves for emergencies. More or less, the bolos organize a kind of self-administration or self-government on a local level. The big difference to such forms in actual societies(neighborhood-councils, block-committees, 'soviet', municipalities, etc.) is that they're determined from 'below' (they're not administrative channels of a centralized regime) and that the bolos themselves with their strong independence limit the power and possibilities of such 'governments'."

Bolo'bolo is a thought-provoking exploration of an anarchist alternative to current society.

Anarchist Neighborhoods

Is there strength in numbers? Should anarchists try and live in one place? Would it be effective to set up an example so that other people could see what we are proposing, and then start their own project? Would people defect from "normal" society to join "anarchistic" housing projects? Would such an example promote separatism or the possibility of government repression?

There are some anarchists who argue that in order to show others the alternatives, we need to construct some living examples. One possibility would be a project in a big city that houses local anarchists and others who have flocked there. Why can't we, for instance, start an anarchist neighborhood made up of row houses in Philadelphia or New York? The proponents of this approach suggest that anarchists from other cities and towns move to this one neighborhood so that a big concentration of anarchists is formed. This "critical mass" of anarchists would serve as a catalyst for similar projects, and at the same time would start other projects such as cooperative economics and cooperative workplaces. This neighborhood would be a crucible for anarchist ideas to be enacted, thus becoming an example to the rest of society.

There are several drawbacks to this approach. An obvious one is government repression. A large grouping of anarchists would give the state an easy target for a misinformation campaign and eventual violent assault, like MOVE or Waco. This could happen even if the neighborhood kept a low profile. Another complicating factor, arising if the neighborhood intended to do outreach to the rest of society, is the misrepresentation of the project by the mainstream media. This could dilute the message so that the project is written off by others as a hotbed of weirdoes. Hopefully, the neighborhood would spread the word through alternative media. This type of project could also be a magnet for counterculture bums, you know, the folks who come to gatherings or hang out at DIY projects and never give anything back. The guys who talk but won't do the dishes.

Anarchists, like many other radical activists, also overlook the fact that we have lots of allies who aren't anarchists. Many people are interested in anarchistic housing projects, but they aren't necessarily anarchists. Would you really want to live in a big neighborhood with only anarchists? There are many successful alternative housing projects that are filled with people who aren't political all the time.

Undoing suburbia

All the alternative housing in existence today is little compared to the square miles of suburbia around the world (not to mention all the apartment blocks). How do we change the current way of living in our suburban society? Why should we convince these people to try something different? What are the possible alternatives to tract-living? Do we tear

all of suburbia down, or do we convert it to a more cooperative, egalitarian form? How would that alternative look?

Unfortunately, those of us interested in getting more people involved in cooperative living are up against some tough, deeply-held, cherished beliefs. We all know about the "American Dream" of every person owning their own home and lot. I read recently about a survey which asked suburbanites if they'd be willing to live in something other than suburbia. Most were willing, but didn't want to give up their "land."

Resources

- Madison Community Cooperatives / 306 North Brooks, Madison, WI 53703, (608) 251-2667 (wk) An umbrella organization that manages 9 cooperatives in Madison, Wisconsin.
- Call housing co-ops in cities that have them and ask questions of the member who answers. Co-op members are usually willing to talk about their experiences living in their particular house. Talking to co-ops is the best way to find out if the co-op approach is right for you.
- Communities with co-ops include Berkeley, CA; Lawrence, KS; Madison, WI; Ann Arbor, MI; and Oberlin, OH.

Further Reading

Communities: journal of cooperative living / 1118 Round Butte Dr., Fort Collins, CO 80524; (303) 224-9080. Quarterly. *A good resource for information on intentional communities, cooperatives, cohousing, and other housing/community alternatives.*

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