

The Urban Middle-Class Communal Movement

LEWIS E. DURHAM

THE MOVEMENT OF MIDDLE-CLASS people into communal or shared housing in urban areas is a recent and unique phenomenon in the communal history of the United States. While there is evidence of student and faculty cooperative houses from the 1920s, and one could speculate that this occurred from the beginning of university life, the urban middle-class communal household dates from 1970 on.

Before going further, we need to define some terms. First, we are using middle class to define those people who usually are college educated, engaged in professional or semiprofessional work, and whose values and income would place them directly in mainstream America. However, people who are drawn to shared living seem to be more liberal, interested in issues of ecology, health and peace, and more experimental by nature than most people considered middle class. In other words, it would be hard to find a conservative Republican in a communal house. However "loose" the term may be, middle class has stuck as a description of these types of houses.

David Bradford, faculty member at Stanford, takes a different tack in an unpublished paper of February, 1973.

We are defining "middle-class commune" by the values and behaviors of the members, not by the class from which they came. To do the latter would wash out any distinction among intentional communities for most members of even the most extreme counter culture crash pad come from the middle class.

Professor Durham is on the staff of the office of the Dean at The Institute For Advanced Study Of Human Sexuality, a private, non-sectarian graduate school. The Institute is located in San Francisco, California.

Communes we have observed are more likely to place stronger emphasis on preserving the tie to the nuclear family, to have members holding outside employment, to live more affluently and to place more emphasis on organization and rules than their more radical cousins. [But] generally there is a greater transfer to behavior patterns from traditional family to the commune.

One can go further in stating that the middle-class communal house lives easily within the urban context and does not share the traditional utopian "back to the land" dream. Thus, this household movement varies markedly from the Utopian tradition in America. And, as indicated by David Bradford above, these people are striving to stay within mainstream urban society and are not interested in "leaving" or making radical changes in society. They are creating an option for living more happily and efficiently in a contemporary urban setting.

The term communal is also used in describing these groups. There may be some question by historians as to the use of the term communal, but this is the word used by the people in these households. Many were friends and parents of the "hip" and radical generations of the sixties and were influenced by their institutions. The media-contaminated word commune was picked up by these innovators of the 1970's and the term middle-class commune was born. Rather than being an ideological statement, the word communal became a statement of identification with a commitment to community. The new nonrelated extended family was born.

1. Emerging Signposts

This writer has had the privilege of being involved in the birth of this movement and has personally been a part of some of the events and publications described below.

The writer knows of a few houses that date back to 1970 in Boston, Minneapolis, and the San Francisco Bay Area. One of the difficulties in identifying these houses is the intentional low visibility maintained. They shun publicity, and often people can live next door to a middle-class house and not know that it is a communal group. By the end of the year 1970, there were known houses in Daly City, Berkeley, and North Oakland in the Bay Area.

In 1971, a group of people in San Francisco, many from Glide Methodist Church, began meeting at Bethany Methodist Church in the Noe Valley area. This group discussed living together for a year, and ultimately four houses came out of the group energy. In the Fall of 1972, David Bradford, a faculty member at Stanford University, held a course on "Middle-class Communes" through the University of California Extension Division. One hundred and seventy-five people took the class

and the paper cited above was a result. The paper rather accurately describes what was to occur even though David and friends had not yet started living communally (they finally did). People from this class interacted with the Bethany group, and the movement really began to develop momentum.

The period 1972-73 saw the development in Boston of the New Community Projects, which serviced middle-class communes as well as those of a more radical nature. Also, the Unitarian Church began sponsoring groups that considered intentional living, and some houses began appearing such as one in Santa Barbara from these study groups. Dick Fairfield had also begun his newsletter out of Los Angeles and later produced significant books in the field.

In 1974-75 the Middle-class Commune took off in earnest. First, there were the publications such as *Families of Eden* by Judson Jerome, the first of only a few books which identified this phenomenon. *Communities: Journal of Cooperative Living* came out with a special issue (20, May/June, 1975) on the middle-class commune, in which a number of houses across the country were described. In addition, how-to information and procedures were beginning to develop on subjects from how to start a communal household to getting the dishes washed. Major newspapers published articles, and *Ms. Magazine* did an article by expert Rosabeth Moss Kanter, called "*Communes for All Reasons*," which devoted a large section to urban families.

At the same time, conferences and workshops were beginning to be held. One of the first was an Urban Commune Conference at Camp Kilawana in June 1974, near Napa, California. Eleven houses were represented, and subjects such as care of children, leadership versus followership, how to deal with anger, networking and many others were dealt with (forty-one adults and fourteen children attended). The "big" conference was held in October 1975 at Aptos (near Santa Cruz) in California. Over one hundred people formed a large communal setting and worked on their mutual problems. Over thirty houses were represented. It was this conference that sparked the special issue of *Communities Magazine*.

Following, in 1976-79, came a further period of expansion. More sophisticated procedures for house meetings and dealing with conflict and mediation were developed by therapist Claude Steiner and the Radical Therapy group of Berkeley.

In the Bay Area, a newsletter called the *Grapevine* was launched in 1977 and within a year had nearly two hundred subscribers—mostly individual houses. The apex of the how-to period came in Eric Ramey's book, *Shared Houses, Shared Lives*, which was published in 1979.

In the Bay Area, at least, there seemed to be a plateau of middle-class

communal activity in the early 1980's. Houses still existed (some now ten to twelve years of age) and new ones were being formed. The *Grapevine* had become the *Collective Networker*, which still advertised monthly communal raps. But it was now a mature movement that knew how to make living together work. Most communal houses seeking new members were advertising that they wanted only people with previous communal experience.

Again, in the Bay Area, from 1984 there has been a burst of new energy by a nonprofit group called Innovative Housing, which has established twenty-five houses in Marin County alone. Innovative Housing is receiving United Way money to establish more of these houses—a sign of acceptance of the concept.

2. *What Do These Houses and People Look Like?*

Out of different surveys of houses in the Bay Area, sixteen in 1979 and seven in 1983, along with many reports and personal visits, a composite picture emerges of what the people and houses are like in the middle-class communal family.

Other than a desire for an extended family and a belief in the value of shared living, these groups are distinctively "nonideologically oriented." They evidence an interest in a variety of people and a tolerance for differences—as long as one will cooperate in household chores! Their interests reflect a very "middle-class" and "liberal" lifestyle. The members are "in the world" and do not reflect the traditional Utopian desire to be "apart from the world." In almost all cases, the people have outside interests and jobs and use the living situation as their family base. Invariably the groups have nice houses that would fit in any middle-class or upper-middle-class residential area. Some even hire maids to clean the shared areas once a week.

These houses are characterized by single, divorced, or widowed people in their thirty's or forty's, often college graduates who are or were professionals. There also will be a few couples, children, young adults and some older people as well. The groups are well organized and easily handle the management of household living. These are the people who organize PTAS, church groups, and volunteer at the drop of an issue. They believe in house meetings where feelings and interpersonal relations are regular agenda items. They pride themselves on skills they have developed in dealing with conflict. They are well-run groups that enjoy a facility for family living that most nuclear families lack.

Differing from the traditionally male dominated rural and religious communities, these groups are very egalitarian in nature. The equalizing

of the sexes is present in every house known and women members comment frequently on the value of shared living for this reason. There is an antileader bias and a firm belief in the value of decision making by consensus. This has been truly a "grass roots" movement within the middle class. Most of the people would identify with the concepts of "voluntary simplicity" or "living lightly on the planet" and value living well for less.

3. *Some Statistical Pictures*

In the 1983 study of seven houses in the Bay Area, the following data emerged and are similar to previous studies.

Age of the houses can be measured both by the length of time in the present location and by the age of the group which may have existed at previous locations.

	Present Location	All Locations	Present Range	All Locations Range
Average Age of Houses	5.29 yrs.	7.71 yrs.	1/6 to 10 yrs.	6 to 10 years

Three of the houses go back at least nine years with one having been in the same location for eleven years.

The *number of people* in a communal family is primarily determined by the size of the house itself since all groups require that members have a private bedroom to themselves (the exception being a couple sharing one room). However, all agreed that eight to twelve was an ideal size with the exception of the smallest house feeling that six to seven would be ideal.

	Average Number	Range
Number of People	9	4-13

Three of the houses had 11, 11, and 13 respectively and felt they were the ideal size, especially in terms of the workload.

Sex ratios seem to be an implicit norm for most houses and it is obvious that there is an attempt to keep a balance between women and men. There is one exception in that one house is composed of all women (five adults and one teenager) who seem quite happy with the existing situation. This particular house used to have an even balance of two adult men and two adult women. The explanation given for the change is that when the men moved out the best prospects for new members were women.

Sex Ratio		Total		Average per House	
of Mixed Houses	(6)	Male	Female	Male	Female
Age 15 and over		25	27	4.16	4.5

The *ages of the members* gives a picture of the makeup of the houses. Since teenagers tend to participate as adults in these houses and also have their own rooms, those fifteen and over are counted as adults. Two of the houses had teenagers and two other houses had younger children.

Ages of People	Total Range	Average House
15 and over	15-74	22-56

Another way to look at the age factor is to plot the number of people by age groupings.

Age Group	Number
0-14	4 (in two houses)
14-22	7 (in two houses)
23-30	10
30-40	26
40-56	9
56-74	6

4. *Why Do People Choose to Live Cooperatively?*

Individuals were asked to write statements about the benefits derived from shared living. The majority of comments centered around the importance of living among people with whom they could share feelings, perceptions, friendships, compassion, and love. In short, they had achieved to some extent and enjoyed a loving community.

The second major reason involved sharing the burden of surviving in the world. This meant more than just economics (less expensive) but also sharing responsibilities of keeping a household going and using resources wisely and efficiently.

Many referred to the "richer lifestyle" available to them not only in attractive physical surroundings but in intellectual and educational stimulation. They regarded this as a place to grow and learn and live fully.

Stability, family, "never lonely," and a balance of private versus social time were also important. There is a security that does not detract from independence: real support when needed including respect for the right to be left alone.

Skills of relating and living with diverse people were cited as benefits derived from shared living. Human relations skills are highly valued and sometimes learned with the help of professional facilitators. Managing the inevitable conflicts becomes routine. As one widow summed it up, " (shared living) . . . is an ideal alternative to marriage."

Finally, the reader needs to hear quotes that come from the respondents. At the very heart of shared living is the "why."

"Biggest advantage is to share the every-day process of living with others—It is extremely nonsensical emotionally as well as economically to live alone in 1980."

"The immediate impelling advantage is economic. The second advantage is social—a group of people with whom one shares the concerns of daily life and with whom there is some interdependency."

"Exposure to a wider spectrum of thinking. Stimulations for greater action and change within individual lives. Rigidity and calcification staved off."

"Keeps me flexible, aware, and lively. . . . Direct relationships that do not have a nuclear family basis are revealing, salutary and humanizing."

"Everyone has skills and resources which can be recognized and used by all. The end result is an optimum physical environment bolstered by a supportive psychological situation."

"Lower cost for space, food supplies and resources. Shared hot tub, computer, TV, sewing machine, etc. Shared skills—I don't have to be a plumber when someone else can do it. There is an impetus for actualizing my dreams and support for me when I have a hard time."

"As a mother of an eight-year old daughter I can say that communal living has given both of us a greater sense of freedom and independence. We co-parent at our house. This has provided Mindy with a secure and fuller experience."

"There is a sense of unity about living pleasantly with others. You *know* people don't live in isolation because you don't experience isolation. It is terribly reinforcing to work and live with others cooperatively. You learn you can 'do it' and that 'doing it' with others is *better*—*not* a second-hand substitute for doing it alone."

This last comes from a fifteen year old woman. "It is nice to have other people around to talk with and to keep company with. If I lived alone with my mother I feel I would often be lonely and / or home alone. Even if a person is in their private room. . . . it's very nice to know that someone is *there*. I also feel that we would be unable to afford such a nice house if we lived alone, but this isn't quite so important, because I have lived in group situations for so long I really know no other way, but I think I definitely prefer group living."

5. *Recurring Dreams*

There have been recurring dreams in the rather scarce literature on this movement. One of the more specific of these hopes and dreams is a statement that came out of a San Francisco house in 1972. The statement was partly an attempt at self-definition and also a way of describing to potential members what the collective dream was. This house still exists and

would still endorse this statement with one major addition. Since 1972, the issue of "living lightly on the planet" has come to the fore with all its emphasis on ecology, conservation and preservation of the planet. Adding this concern, the statement of 1972 was:

As an affirmation for our coining together at 232 to live and experiment with a new way of living out our humanness, we will commit ourselves, to the best of our abilities, to the following:

1. It is our belief that a life of openness and honesty is the best way of living together and we will be honest and open with one another. All feelings, including anger and passion, will be in the open, and support given to those who express and receive such feelings.
2. It is our belief that human fullness involves the giving and receiving of help. Recognizing that asking for help is difficult in our culture, we will be on the alert for the unexpressed need.
3. It is our belief that we live in a society where political awareness and action are essential, and we will work to improve our awareness of the issues and involvement in them.
4. It is our belief that the so called "middle class" is in need of liberation, as are many other groups in the United States, and we will work for the liberation of ourselves and all others.
5. It is our belief that the fullness of life includes a constant balance (even tensions) between individual freedom and group participation. We will aid each other in maintaining a creative tension that allows for survival of the individual and the group, recognizing at times painful choices may need to be made for separation.
6. It is our belief that money is useful (good?) as well as a problem (evil?) and recognize the need for all to share in the financial life of 232. Decision making and sharing the cost are the responsibility of all.
7. It is our belief that the sharing of work and responsibilities for the common life is essential to good feelings about each other, and commit ourselves to participate with a free will and joy.
8. It is our belief that the creative **life** is as important as the work life, and commit ourselves to developing a full life of arts, crafts, and leisure enjoyment.
9. It is our belief that we are in 232 as a group and will support each other in all ways, each fulfilling their commitment, even to supporting the person who finds life at 232 unsatisfying at this time. Joining and leaving the group will be cause for celebrating our right as individuals to take charge of our own lives.

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