

The GOOD Guide to Better Neighborhoods: Join a New-and-Improved Commune

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That 1960s experiment is back—but the rules have changed. To ease the awkwardness, here are some dos and don'ts for modern-day communal living.

Say the word “commune,” and it calls up certain associations: hippies, yurts, big pots of bean stew, awkward free love experiments gone wrong. But the idea of cooperative living arrangements predates all of that, and if current-day advocates like Stephanie Smith of WeCommune and Alex Marshall of Brooklyn Cohousing have anything to do with it, it will survive long into the future.

Smith, an architect in San Francisco, is aware of the sex, drugs, and yurts cliché of communes, but she defines the essence of a commune as a simple and sensible pairing. “To me, a commune just means community and resource-sharing together,” she says. It’s the economic advantages of sharing, combined with the “low hum of support” that comes from knowing that the people around you are watching your back. Struck by the lack of traditions around sharing in our society, Smith is at work building simple, web-based tools to make

our society, Smith is at work building simple, web-based tools to make resource sharing easier.

Marshall is a journalist who in 2007 became the leader of a group seeking to acquire a building in Brooklyn and live in it as a community. Their model is cohousing, an idea that originated in Denmark in the 1960s and is on the rise in the United States. Cohousing developments are intentional communities, in which residents own their own homes and jointly own a common indoor and outdoor space. In practice, they often look more like standard condo developments than bastions of the counterculture. Decision-making is by consensus, and privacy is respected, while supportive interaction among neighbors is prized.

We asked Smith and Marshall how to make the most of such unconventional living arrangements—without stepping on your neighbors' toes.

DO decide on your community's values early on. Once your vision is in place, says Marshall, "getting a good group together is largely a self-selection process. You tend to attract other people who like that vision, and people who aren't attracted to it go away."

DO keep lines of communication open. In Smith's four-person apartment, a notebook and pen live on the kitchen table.

Householders use it "almost like a collective journal." In a commune,

Smith explains, “there needs to be a way to have collective dialogue that doesn’t necessarily lead to dispute.”

DO trust the power of consensus. “I think the consensus process is really helpful in building a group,” says Marshall, “because it forces you to communicate well and to listen. People often disagree, but there’s rarely a feeling of being forced out.”

DON’T think being in a community is the same as being friends. “I think it’s really crucial to understand the difference between friends and fellow communards,” says Smith. “It can get very claustrophobic if you feel you need to be friendly to your housemates every time you seen them.”

DO enjoy the economic benefits of communal living. Marshall’s group plans to leverage their strength in numbers to buy a large portion of a condo building at an attractive rate, taking advantage of their appeal to strapped developers.

DON’T repeat the mistakes of the past. Smith names two patterns that led the communes of the 1960s into decline. Rural communes failed because they were founded by would-be farmers who didn’t know how to farm. Urban communes succumbed to social chaos. “Sex and drugs and rock and roll was the spirit of the times,” says Smith. “Today, you can divorce it from those aspects and do it for logical reasons.”

DO learn from the success stories. Smith observes that in the few

1960s communes that thrived, the members found a common cause to rally around. Child-raising, well-managed farming, or shared creative pursuits have all acted as the “glue” binding an intentional community together for the long haul. So find your glue, and stick with it.

Illustration by Trevor Burks.

This article first appeared in [The GOOD Guide to Better Neighborhoods](#). You can read more of the guide [here](#), or you can read more of the [GOOD Neighborhoods Issue](#) [here](#).

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