

# The New York Times

## IDEAS & TRENDS; Extreme Makeover, Commune Edition

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DIPPY Hippie Bang Bang." That was the front-page headline in The Daily News, gleefully reporting the shooting of a commune leader on Staten Island by a disgruntled former member. Other newspapers described the recent incident with a mix of curiosity and condescension, likening it to the 1978 mass suicides in Jonestown, Guyana, or reminding readers that Charles Manson's mayhem was born on a free-love commune in California. The message was clear: Communal living is a dangerous petri dish of sex, rampant drug use and occasional spurts of violence.

For the tens of thousands of Americans who make their homes in shared living arrangements, the lurid coverage obscured the recent surge in what promoters of cooperative housing call "intentional living." After decades of contraction, the American commune movement has been expanding since the mid-1990's, spurred by the growth of settlements that seek to marry the utopian-minded commune of the 1960's with the American predilection for privacy and capital appreciation.

More than 1,100 such settlements, known as eco-villages and co-housing communities, have been built or are in the planning stages, according to the Communities Directory. That is more than double the number a decade ago, and Tony Sirna, a resident of the Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage in northeast Missouri who helps maintain the directory, said he received about 15 to 20 listings a month for new communities. Many of them, he said, are started by disaffected baby boomers who have grown weary of car-dependent, McMansion-filled sprawl.

The new breed of cooperative living, however, is far from radical. In co-housing, the fastest growing segment, participants design their own subdivision with an emphasis on closely spaced, modest homes and Norman Rockwell-style social interaction encouraged by communal areas and pot-luck dinners. Eco-villages, many with solar-powered homes that are constructed with hay bales, are driven by an environmentally minded ideology. Residents are likely to avoid meat, wear hemp-fiber clothing and resemble the hippies of yore.

"There are plenty of people in the mainstream seeking an alternative to the alienation of suburban living, people who want more connection and community in their lives," Mr. Sirna said, as he prepared a stir-fry for three erstwhile strangers with whom he now shares a home and pooled income. "For them, it's not such a far-fetched idea to want to share resources and cooperate with their neighbors."

Although a few dozen traditional communes continue to thrive, including Ganas, the 100-member community on Staten Island whose founder was wounded last month (and whose members say their lives are much more mundane than the headlines would indicate), and Twin Oaks, a 30-year-old colony in rural Virginia, most new projects are like ElderSpirit, seven co-housing communities under development that are being marketed to older people.

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At others, like Earthaven Eco-village in Black Mountain, N.C., residents revel in their off-the-grid existence, growing much of their own food, recycling wash water and debating the merits of straw-bale versus rammed-earth home construction.

"These days, you don't have to live in the boonies, chop wood, walk around nude and pool all your money to live an alternative lifestyle," said Diana Leafe Christian, an Earthaven resident who edits *Communities* magazine, the quarterly bible of the intentional living movement.

The on-again off-again passion for counterculture living is a thread that runs through American history, starting with the Puritans, who were chasing the dream of utopia.

Although most utopian settlements eventually failed, each generation seems to strive for a way out of the status quo. "These communities serve as a mirror for the mainstream to see what others view as society's problems," said Christian Goodwillie, a curator at the Hancock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Mass. "They offer the best-case scenario of what society would look like if mankind did away with personal ambition and greed. The problem is, they never seem to last very long."

Not surprisingly, adherents of modern-day communitarianism believe a new era has arrived. The few communes that survived the 1970's have come to appreciate pragmatism (budgets, bylaws and background checks are a good idea; banning cars and personal possessions, maybe not).

Purveyors of the new breed of intentional-living developments have learned to scale back on ideology and dogmatism. "Americans want to be able to close their doors, pull down the blinds and sell their home, but at the same time, they want more opportunities for community," said Raines Cohen, a board member of The Co-housing Association of the United States. "A lot of people also realize that not everyone has to have their own washer and dryer, their own lawn mower and their own backyard pool. Sometimes it makes sense to share."

Some say the time is ripe for a less atomized and wasteful existence. They cite an aging population that is seeking to downsize, the high cost of new housing and a surge in energy prices that will make old-school suburban life untenable.

Albert Bates, a lawyer from Connecticut who hitchhiked to The Farm, a commune in Tennessee, in 1972 and never left, says a flood of visitors seeking to learn about the 200-member community led to the creation of an eco-village training center that each year draws hundreds of people from around the world.

When gas hits \$20 a gallon, Mr. Bates said, suburbia will wilt and Americans will flock to tight-knit, energy-efficient communities where they can walk or bike to stores that sell pesticide-free produce. "That time may not come for another 10 years," said Mr. Bates, 59. "But at some point people are going to look for alternatives."