

## ECONOMY

HOUSEMATES WANTED  
FOR SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

Cooperative Run Houston Style at Project Haus



IN 1994 I VISITED A STUDENT HOUSING CO-OP in Northfield, Minnesota. I remember drunken handstand contests and an experimental sense of décor—they hung egg beaters and plungers and a crumpled up bag from McDonald's on the walls inside hollow frames. Much of the furniture was homemade by people who'd never taken a class in woodworking. The air was suffused with the sweet smell of compost and sweaty late adolescence. Dinner was cooked by a sophomore music major with good intentions, but it was nevertheless the tofu version of the neon slime that crawls off John Cusack's plate in *Better Off Dead*. However: the conversation was satisfying and intense, the housemates were generous and impish, and as I left to put the finishing touches on some essay I had to turn in the next day, I was won over by the house's magic.

After college graduation, I had little contact with cooperatives, primarily because I didn't live in any co-op meccas. Which is to say, when you look up "housing cooperative" online, Google suggests a list of possible third terms to narrow your search, terms like "Austin," "Boston," "Portland," "Minneapolis," "Berkeley," "D.C.," ... all cities I have never lived in.

It's easy to understand the search engine's results, because until January 2011, when Project Haus launched, there weren't any other co-ops in Houston. As you might expect, one of the founders, Jay Blazek Crossley, had previous cooperative housing experience in Austin. In spite of that, the house is a distinctly Houstonian co-op.

"[T]here is a massive, untapped market for this housing model in Houston, especially if it means providing young people with the option of living a low-carbon lifestyle in the region's walkable urban areas," writes Crossley in a post for the website of Houston Tomorrow, a nonprofit founded by his father, David Crossley.

The first noticeable deviation in Project Haus is that its inhabitants aren't students: they're young professionals whose ages are closer to thirty than twenty. The additional years of life and experience translate into tangible house benefits. The meal I enjoyed on a recent visit, for example, bore no resemblance to the one I described earlier. It included burritos with lots of toppings, a leafy green salad, an avocado and mango salad I must get the recipe for, and iced tea. The ingredients were organic or local or both. The essential detail was that it was cooked by a woman who wasn't learning to cook on the fly.

Another big difference is that the intense but unharnessed creativity I associate with cooperative living is, actually, harnessed at Project Haus. Housemates have installed a rainwater retrieval system to flush toilets; they gather 2.5 liters per hour of water from their AC condensers to water their gardens; they have split AC units to allow them to cool the house efficiently area by area; they harvest coffee grounds from a chain store and use them to enrich their compost; and they have dreams (and a grant proposal underway to realize them) of solar panels on the roof and a shared house vehicle that

will run on vegetable oil. (They have the car and oil source now. They just need to set up a way to process the oil.)

Their no-drama attitude and the amount of work accomplished in a short period of time at Project Haus seems characteristic of this Houstonian affair.

Unfortunately, the décor in Project Haus is depressing. The building itself is a beautiful 3,300-square-foot house built in 1925 on Rosalie Street near Baldwin Park in Midtown, but the interior suffers for lack of a warm, homey feeling.

I assume that with time, however, and the love and eye of a perhaps yet-unknown future inhabitant, this problem will be tackled.

What impresses me most about Project Haus isn't the sustainability measures, but the re-envisioning of the co-op as a pragmatic approach to living well in economically unpredictable times.

Young people who move to Houston for jobs often end up in expensive apartments that are lonely and alienating. Indeed, at Project Haus one such prospective resident came to visit: he was a medical student who said he had gone months without speaking to people outside of school because of his prior living arrangement.

At Project Haus, \$500 per month gets you a good-size room, shared use of the rest of the house, utilities, meals four days a week, and neighborliness. You have to chip in with house chores but you do so based on your curiosities or talents. With a deal like this, it's easy to imagine a blossoming of co-op variations making a big difference in the way many people live in Houston. Some might pay more for co-ops in fancy school zones or walkable neighborhoods. Still other co-ops might be created to serve workers who now spend hours driving and busing into areas where they can't otherwise afford to live.

Project Haus itself is envisioning its second project: a family co-op. The plan is young, as are negotiations between prospective families and Project Haus' leaders. At a meeting my family caught the tail end of, current and prospective residents discussed whether childcare labor would be spun off from regular chores. Parents requested no smoking allowed on the premises, which is not the case at Project Haus.

When I pried into problems that have cropped up at Project Haus, nobody would confess. Since the cook is a woman, I wondered out loud whether or not gendered labor issues crop up. Everybody agreed that all genders do all things, mostly. Except the men do most of the repair and construction work while a woman heads the kitchen.

"Also," a woman noted, "we did decide that the bathrooms need to be cleaned based on when the women say they're dirty, not the men."

Ah well. - *Miah Arnold*