

Communes

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Due to stigma attached to the name title "commune", many communal residential communities that would have once been so named, along with other communities formed in similar spirits, are now called "intentional communities".

Anyone with access to a home or piece of land can start an intentional community or commune, but there are also many existing ones that people can join. There are many different sorts of communities, and many different ways for them to work, but plenty of general concerns for all people considering this lifestyle to consider.

Finding Communes

With communes constantly springing up and breaking up all the time the only way of keeping track is websites that list them, meaning you have to trawl through pages, searching addresses and plotting them on a map. Another method is volunteering, less communal but hundreds of farms, See Get a Job.

The Fellowship for Intentional Community (<http://fic.ic.org/>) has a large, easily searchable database (<http://directory.ic.org/records/?action=search&advanced=true>) of intentional communities, planned communities that promote social interaction, not limited to, but including, what were once called communes. This database allows one to search based on a number of criteria, including location, size, religious/spiritual path, openness to queers, use of drugs, dietary practices, and decision making and leadership style.

There are many other directories of intentional communities, including some with a more particular focus:

Intentional Communities Database - <http://icdb.org/>

Cohousing Association of the U.S. - <http://www.cohousing.org/>

Ecovillage Network - <http://www.ecovillage.org/>

Diggers & Dreamers - The UK Guide to Communal Living - <http://www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk/>

Directory of Intentional Communities and Ecovillages in Europe - <http://www.eurotopia.de/>

Christian Intentional Communities on the Web - <http://www.newcreation.org.uk/links/>

Fellowship of international communities - <http://directory.ic.org/iclist/geo.php>

European ecovillage directory - <http://www.gen-europe.org/addresses/EVindex.html>

Connects farmers interested in teaching with people interested in farming - <http://www.growfood.org/farms>

Archived list of anarchist groups, projects and collectives from Eastern Europe - [http://web-cache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:zUNVH-Dbng0J:abb.hardcore.lt/joomla/index.php%3FItemid%3D60%26\(Eastern+Europe\)&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk](http://web-cache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:zUNVH-Dbng0J:abb.hardcore.lt/joomla/index.php%3FItemid%3D60%26(Eastern+Europe)&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk)

In the city or in the country, communes can be a cheap and enjoyable way of living. Although urban and rural communes face different physical environments, they share common group problems. The most important element in communal living is the people, for the commune will only make it if everyone is fairly compatible. A nucleus of 4 to 7 people is best and it is necessary that no member feels extremely hostile to any other member when the commune gets started. The idea that things will work out later is pig swill. More communes have busted up over incompatibility than any other single factor. People of similar interests and political philosophies should live together. One speed freak can wreck almost any group. There are just too many day-to-day hassles involved living in a commune to not start off compatible in as many ways as possible. The ideal arrangement is for the people to have known each other before they move in together.

Once you have made the opening moves, evening meetings will occasionally be necessary to divide up the responsibilities and work out the unique problems of a communal family. Basically, there are two areas that have to be pretty well agreed upon if the commune is to survive. People's attitudes toward Politics, Sex, Drugs and Decision-making have to be in fairly close agreement. Then the even most important decisions about raising the rent, cleaning, cooking and maintenance will have to be made. Ground rules for inviting non-members should be worked out before the first time it happens, as this is a common cause for friction.

Radical Communes

Structures: A low-rise or multilevel warehouse can be subdivided with cinder block walls much like a storage unit center with cyclone fence for secure ceilings allowing the central heat to work. In very rural areas military tents at first transitioning to inexpensive storage sheds. Most of the day will be spent in community areas and the small rooms/cabins/tents are for solitude, sleeping, and secure dry storage. Other ideal remodels for apartments are closing nursing homes, Hotels, motels, small hospitals, or old office buildings. Most people will want to move on to more normal dwellings once they get a job or start a serious relationship. Squatting has more ideas about structures and organization.

Utilities and Services: Have plans for garbage disposal, network, electricity, water, sewage, and heat. Also have in mind that some people will fill a room with junk then freak out and leave. Fire sprinklers and a good sprinkler water supply for every room is a must. If you can't get the city to accept your settlement try to make an arrangement to get power and utilities from a nearby property. Have private meters installed at the utility split so your group will pay for it's fair share.

Internet: Internet with a fat connection is a must for rebels, rugged computers could be placed in common areas. Consideration should be given to unofficial caches of pirate media on the network to keep the connection from bogging down from downloaders, an internal PTP setup can help share files. You could install a VOIP asterisk server and make a communal telephone exchange. A large file server for internal use is useful.

Activities: Regular activities and social gatherings are key to making a working large commune. Look into the history of the YMCA. Evaluate the services provided by a university dorm and try to come up with low cost options to many of these for your tenants. If you are able to pull this plan off and not be a filthy slum lord rents should be very low. Services for bicycles is important, the shop must be crewed to prevent tool theft and help to those new to bike repair.

Rules: Security physical and network should be a high consideration as you will surely have occasional pigs undercover in such a radical crash site. All questionable legal activity must be kept at the individual level as official endorsement could endanger the co-op or owner. Strict rules preventing interference in the lives of others and violence must be enforced, there is always the offer of the road to trouble makers. Rules requiring securing personal items will reduce distrust from theft.

Making it Work: This dream of ultra cheap housing is thwarted by local zoning regulations it is difficult to get variance for housing in an industrial area where you might find a warehouse. Try lobbying the city council if you have the backing to try such an idea. We have seen churches be allowed to ignore zoning on church owned property. Try organizing as the "Mosque-Church-Synagogue-Temple of no Homelessness" and really teach the religion of nobody left behind (Registering your group as a church through the Universal Life Church (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110914133838/://www.ulc.net/>) can save on paperwork, and having all your members Ordained Ministers can be a strong show of solidarity).

An idealistic democratic power struggle, while appealing, may fail and lead to power struggles that destroy a commune. It might be better to run a slightly impersonalized apartment building with a radical landlord than a failed radical commune with an overly specific goal and too much group planning.

Starting your own Commune

A commune is a commitment to a specific way of life and a commitment to other people. It's an extended family. Within a commune you get to set the goals and rules for a whole community. It's needed by people who feel society's goals and rules don't fit their own. Rather than compromise one's life for the sake of a lifestyle you can't abide, you get to try your own ideas in a private utopia.

Starting a commune is no small task. You can't just say I'm going to start a commune and viola! you have instant commune. The first hurdle is finding like-minded people to join you. You would have to have some friends or people you've already spent some time with and shared ideas.

The second hurdle is finding a place for the commune. Actually a commune can be anywhere, even in the middle of a city, depending upon those principles discussed earlier. If you're a back-to-nature type you'd probably like to be out in the country somewhere. You'd could buy or lease an old farm, one where there hasn't been too much soil contamination (again good luck). Old farms usually have lots of out buildings that can be usefully adapted to commune living. Old farms have another advantage, they're old. That means they're cheaper to rent or buy, and the commune can fix up the buildings.

It's good to be in an area where the surrounding community won't immediately be against you. It takes years to build trust in farm communities, and it would be easier if you had a measure of acceptance to begin. This would be the case if there is another good commune in the area. Some places where there are lots of communes are Oregon, and Tennessee. Of course there are many other places, and some communes are so low key, the neighbors might not even know it's not a family.

I recommend if you are serious about starting a commune you go visit one, and maybe live there for awhile. This way you can really checkout the lifestyle, the commitment it entails and whether you could really dig it. In any case you would learn a lot, and maybe get some good ideas for your own commune. You can also get some ideas by reading up on Utopias and learn more about the philosophy behind the communal concept. Check out the Farm's website to see how one of the more successful communes did it! You can also visit our Communal Living Forum and discuss this with others who've lived on communes. A good resource for finding existing communes is the Intentional Communities Website.

In summary successful communes have been started in many different ways. Some starts have been very casual, with little structure - "hey, let's share a house" to form a shared household. Others, like new Housing Co-operative, may start with extensive professional planning using Cohousing consultants. These resources can help people start new communities by dealing with the start-up issues faced by most communities.

Some elements to consider working on in the first months you spend together. This assumes you have a core group of at least 2-3 households.

Vision/Goals Statement

This should define the intentions and directions of the community. It needs to clearly state what you hope to achieve as a group. Give it to every future member. Although some forms of community, like co-housing are not as ideological as other types of communities, in any community there are often values and assumptions which drive the participants. Define the goals and values clearly and carefully and write them down. You need to give this document to every prospective member. The more detail you can flesh out in a vision statement, the better it will be at filtering in like minded people. This document is very exclusionary. You can have diversity of many kinds in the group, but it really helps

you down the road, to have people who share the same vision. For example, if the group vision is to create low income housing, you may need to make a number of tradeoffs and decisions to accomplish the vision. If several people in the group do not share the vision of low income housing, when you get to the point where you have to make those trade-off decisions, you will very likely have problems, big messy group conflict problems, because those who do not share the vision, will NOT want to make the trade-offs required. Working in a group to form a community is a very challenging enterprise, and the more vision and common goals the group shares, the easier it is to move ahead.

Group Decision and Communications Process

This process is usually a very democratic one where consensus is used in decision-making. However many communes have a very strong leader with a vision, and the members heed this person's will. I have heard many horror stories of communes where one leader issued the orders and used all sorts of methods to achieve compliance. Let's see, there's Guyana (Jim Jones), Waco, Heaven's Gate (the internet comet cult), that Swiss one, plus many others that haven't ended in mass suicide, just mind control, sex control, discipline by fear, etc. It's a fine line between a commune and a cult, especially with a powerful charismatic leader whose authority is unquestioned. So we hereby warn those who would follow such a person. Much better to find a commune where there is no central authority figure, and power is shared equally among the members (good luck!).

You need to answer the following questions:

- Who are members? What is the process and qualifications to become a member?
- How are decisions made? Who gets to make them?
- How will meetings be run? Who gets to talk, when?
- How will conflicts be handled/resolved? When we don't agree how will we work it out?
- How will records be kept?
- How will new members be brought up to speed?
- For more info see Group Decision and Communications Process.

Start up Money

You should have answers to the following questions:

- How will expenses get paid?
- Who will keep records of what has been paid?
- Is there a membership fee? How much?
- Will payments be refunded? If so, how?

Define Your Legal Structure

There are many different legal structures that can be used for an intentional community. For complex community development projects, such as is often the case for cohousing, it is common for more than one legal structure to exist as the community and project goes through different phases. It costs very little to incorporate, which offers you some protection of your personal assets. Being incorporated also lends legitimacy to your organization in the eyes of banks and other agencies. For more info see Legal.

Community Bylaws

Based on the decisions made in Group decision and communications process, write them down as part of the bylaws for your organization. These will be changed several times as you evolve your group and the ways it operates - the purpose is to write down your agreements NOW so you don't forget them.

You need to create a record which you (and those who have yet to arrive) can refer to. Hopefully, the newcomers won't point out too many inconsistencies between what you agreed to do and what you actually do.

Get a Bank Account

Once you incorporate you will be able to get a tax ID number and a corporate bank account. Use this for all expenditures and put someone responsible in charge of keeping track. Remember, once you start spending peoples money you are a legal entity in the eyes of the courts and the tax man. Lots of communities have gotten in trouble from bad accounting. For more info see Community bank accounts.

Collect Assessments from Members

Start with a small sum, like \$20 a month. Along with an initial \$100 investment this will identify those who are committed and also painlessly raise some startup capital for mailing, legal paperwork, advertising, etc.



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