



*Mutual Aid: How We Can Learn from  
Communal Housing Movements*



## *Op-Ed Background: Communal Living*

- + What does it mean for us socially and psychologically when land and resources are held collectively versus privately?
- + As people born into a culture where the private ownership of property remains a core tenet of success, can we begin to envision versions of success and quality living that diverge from the mainstream narrative, beginning with housing?



Source: Google Images



## Op-Ed Background: Communal Living

- ✦ **Examples:** communal households in Bangladesh, Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, my personal experiences living in cooperative housing
- ✦ Communal housing represented as an alternative lifestyle grounded heavily upon collaboration and the sharing of resources
- ✦ Culture of private ownership and fanatical individualism has caused us to become increasingly alienated from each other and our communities.



# Communal Households in Old Bangladesh

- ✦ Only 20-30 years ago (and still today in some pockets of the country), the cultural norm was for people to live in their ancestral home generation after generation. When a child gets married, the new family moves in rather than out.
- ✦ The *Ekannoborti Poribar*, or the “joint family” (literally: “one family using one kitchen”), usually lived in one compound consisting of multiple structures and shared their resources and lives together.

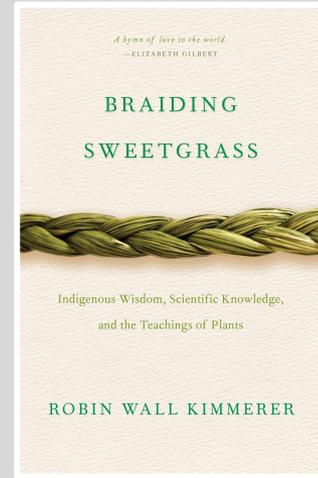


Family portrait of my father's family and ancestral home



## Source: *Braiding Sweetgrass*

- ✦ “Council of Pecans” → discusses the power of collective ownership
- ✦ “Whether it was their homeland or the new land forced upon them, **land held in common gave people strength**; it gave them something to fight for. And so—in the eyes of the federal government—that belief was a threat” (Kimmerer, 17)
- ✦ “Stick together, act as one. We Pecans have learned that there is strength in unity, that the lone individual can be picked off as easily as the tree that has fruited out of season” (Kimmerer, 18)



Source: Google Images

## *Source: Braiding Sweetgrass*

- + “The leaders were offered the American Dream, the right to own their own property as individuals...They’d never be forced off their lands again... All they had to do was agree to surrender their allegiance to land held in common and agree to private property (Kimmerer, 18).
- + By accepting citizenship, they ensured that their allotments could not be taken from them. Unless, of course, a citizen could not pay his taxes... Barely a generation after land was “guaranteed” through the sacrifice of common land converted to private property, most of it was gone” (Kimmerer, 19).



As we all spend our time thinking about how to ensure our own survival, we spend more energy doing so. True to our self-sufficient natures, **we turn to each other for help less often**, and we utilize more natural resources than we would if we shared some of it collectively



Mutual aid efforts rely on our ability to turn to others in our community for support.

How can we build up successful mutual aid efforts if we do not feel comfortable with the idea of receiving help from others?



*Source: Solidarity Not Charity by Dean Spade*

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- \* “...social movement activists and organizations face two particular challenges...The first is how to address the actual changing conditions that are increasing precarity and shortening lives. **The second is how to mobilize people for resistance**” (Spade, 131)
  - \* How do we mobilize people to get involved with forms of resistance in which we must fully rely on each other’s support?

## *Source: Inter-Cooperative Council Ann Arbor*

- + “Co-ops are organizations and businesses that are owned and operated collectively, for the mutual benefit of their members. In 1844, a group of English textile workers formed a shop to purchase goods they couldn’t afford by themselves. This group, later known as The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, was the first official cooperative. Today, co-ops exist in variety of sectors, such as farming, retail, manufacturing, energy, and (of course) housing.
- + Struggling college students established the first housing co-op in Ann Arbor in 1932”  
(*Inter-Cooperative Council*).



## *Source: Inter-Cooperative Council Ann Arbor*

- + Housing co-operatives in Ann Arbor essentially started off as mutual aid but wasn't framed that way.
- + Students during the Great Depression could not afford the price of living by themselves → banded together to buy a house and share meals, establishing first housing cooperative in Ann Arbor
- + Framed as a collective effort which succeeded because everyone pooled their resources. Everything was cheaper and more efficient, which made living possible.

video: <https://icc.coop/icc-community/icc-roots/>



Instead of “what do I need” what if we thought:  
**“What could I do with others that I can’t achieve alone”**

