

communal living 1960s

The 1960s was a decade of profound social and cultural upheaval, and few phenomena captured this spirit of change as vividly as the rise of communal living. From the counterculture movement's embrace of alternative lifestyles to a broader societal questioning of traditional norms, the idea of sharing resources, living collectively, and fostering a sense of community resonated with many. This era saw the proliferation of communes, intentional communities, and various forms of shared living arrangements across the globe, offering a stark contrast to the suburban ideal that had dominated the preceding decades. Exploring communal living in the 1960s offers a fascinating glimpse into the aspirations, challenges, and enduring legacy of a generation seeking new ways to connect and build a more equitable future.

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Understanding Communal Living in the 1960s

Communal living in the 1960s was far more than just sharing a house; it represented a deliberate rejection of established social structures and a search for alternative ways of organizing society. This movement was deeply intertwined with the broader counterculture of the era, which challenged materialism, individualism, and conventional family structures. People involved in communal living sought to create environments that fostered cooperation, shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging, often moving away from urban centers to establish self-sufficient rural communities. The core idea was to build a life based on shared values, mutual support, and a rejection of the perceived

alienation of mainstream society. The 1960s saw a surge in interest in these alternative lifestyles, making communal living a significant cultural phenomenon of the decade.

The concept of communal living in the 1960s drew inspiration from various historical precedents, including early utopian experiments, religious communities, and even the kibbutzim of Israel. However, the 1960s iteration was distinctly shaped by the unique social and political climate of the time. Factors such as the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the burgeoning environmental consciousness all contributed to a widespread questioning of authority and societal norms. This fertile ground allowed for the widespread experimentation with communal living as a tangible means of enacting personal and societal change. The desire for authenticity and a more meaningful existence fueled the attraction to these collective living arrangements.

The Roots of 1960s Communalism

The seeds of 1960s communal living can be traced back to earlier social reform movements and philosophical ideas that emphasized cooperation and collective living. Thinkers like Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, prominent in the 19th century, advocated for utopian communities where resources and labor were shared. These early experiments, though often short-lived, provided a blueprint and a conceptual framework for future communal endeavors. The Beat Generation of the 1950s also played a crucial role in paving the way for the 1960s counterculture by challenging conformity and promoting alternative spiritual and artistic pursuits, fostering an environment where communal living could be seen as a valid lifestyle choice.

The post-World War II era in America, characterized by suburban expansion and a focus on consumerism, also inadvertently created a desire for something more authentic and connected. As the 1960s unfolded, there was a growing disillusionment with the perceived superficiality and conformity of suburban life. This sentiment, coupled with the intellectual currents of the time, which included the ideas of figures like Herbert Marcuse and Marshall McLuhan, encouraged a re-evaluation of societal structures and individual roles. The rejection of materialism and the search for spiritual fulfillment further propelled the interest in communal living as a means to achieve these goals.

Motivations for Embracing Communal Living

The motivations driving individuals to embrace communal living in the 1960s were diverse and deeply personal, yet often coalesced around a shared desire for profound social and personal transformation. A primary driver was the profound disillusionment with mainstream American society. The ongoing Vietnam War, the perceived hypocrisy of the establishment, and the rampant materialism of the era led many to seek an alternative that prioritized peace, love, and cooperation. These individuals felt alienated by the prevailing culture and looked for ways to create a more just and harmonious existence.

Beyond political and social critique, spiritual and philosophical seeking played a significant role. Many who joined communes were on a quest for deeper meaning, exploring Eastern religions, mysticism, and various forms of alternative spirituality. Communal living offered a space to explore these beliefs collectively, often engaging in meditation, yoga, and communal worship. The desire for self-

sufficiency and a connection to nature was another powerful motivator. Escaping the perceived pollution and artificiality of urban and suburban life, people sought to live closer to the land, grow their own food, and reduce their ecological footprint. This connection to nature was seen as a pathway to greater authenticity and well-being.

Furthermore, the concept of building intentional communities that fostered strong interpersonal bonds was appealing. In a society where traditional family structures were being questioned, communes offered a surrogate family, providing emotional support, shared labor, and a sense of belonging. The rejection of traditional romantic relationships and the exploration of more open forms of partnership were also facets of some communal experiments. The emphasis was on creating a supportive network where individuals could grow and thrive together, free from the pressures and expectations of conventional society.

Types of Communal Living Arrangements in the 1960s

The communal living movement of the 1960s was not monolithic; it encompassed a wide array of organizational structures and philosophical underpinnings, reflecting the diverse aspirations of its participants. One common model was the rural commune, often established on purchased land where members aimed for self-sufficiency in food, shelter, and energy. These communities typically involved shared labor in farming, construction, and crafts, with decisions often made through consensus. Their focus was on creating an agrarian lifestyle, distinct from the consumerist culture they rejected.

Another significant category was the urban commune or crash pad. These were typically found in city centers and often housed a larger number of people in shared houses or apartments. While less focused on self-sufficiency, they emphasized shared resources, such as food, finances, and often creative or political activities. These urban communes served as hubs for countercultural expression, music, and activism. They provided a sense of solidarity and shared purpose in the heart of the urban landscape.

There were also religious or spiritual communes, which were organized around specific spiritual practices or beliefs. These could range from groups dedicated to Eastern philosophies and meditation to more eclectic spiritual communities. Membership often required adherence to a particular set of beliefs or practices, and the communal life was structured to support spiritual growth and enlightenment. These communities often sought to integrate their spiritual ideals into all aspects of daily living, from work to relationships.

Finally, political or activist communes were established with a primary focus on social change. Members might engage in organized protests, community organizing, or the dissemination of political literature. The communal living arrangement served as a base of operations and a support system for their activist endeavors. These groups often had a strong ideological commitment and aimed to live out their political principles in their daily lives, serving as models for a different kind of society.

Famous and Influential 1960s Communes

The 1960s witnessed the establishment of numerous communes that became iconic representations of the era's countercultural ideals. Among the most widely recognized was The Farm, founded in 1971 by Stephen Gaskin and his followers. While slightly outside the core 1960s timeframe, its roots and philosophical underpinnings are firmly planted in that decade. Located in Summertown, Tennessee, it aimed for total self-sufficiency, with a strong emphasis on vegetarianism, pacifism, and communal child-rearing. The Farm became a model for intentional living, attracting significant media attention and inspiring many other communities.

Another highly visible commune was Drop City, established in 1965 in southern Colorado by a group of artists and students. Known for its geodesic domes and brightly painted structures, Drop City was a hub of artistic experimentation and communal living. It embraced a free-spirited, experimental approach to life, attracting artists, writers, and musicians. While its existence was relatively short-lived, its innovative architecture and bohemian spirit left a lasting impression on the communal living landscape.

The Morning Star Ranch, founded by Ram Dass and Richard Alpert (later known as Baba Ram Dass) in Mendocino County, California, in 1966, was another influential community. It was deeply rooted in the exploration of consciousness and Eastern spirituality, attracting many seekers of spiritual enlightenment. The ranch provided a space for communal living, meditation, and the sharing of spiritual teachings, becoming a significant center for the burgeoning psychedelic and spiritual movements of the era.

While not always strictly defined as communes, many large shared houses and "crash pads" in cities like San Francisco and New York also functioned as de facto communal living arrangements, housing dozens of individuals involved in the music, art, and political scenes. These informal networks provided a crucial support system for the counterculture, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared experience.

The Ideals and Philosophies Behind 1960s Communal Living

The communal living experiments of the 1960s were underpinned by a rich tapestry of ideals and philosophies that challenged the prevailing norms of Western society. At the forefront was the concept of anti-materialism. Many participants rejected the consumerist culture that defined post-war America, believing that the pursuit of wealth and possessions led to alienation and spiritual emptiness. They sought to live simpler lives, focusing on shared resources and experiences rather than individual accumulation.

A central tenet was the belief in cooperation and mutual aid. In stark contrast to the competitive individualism prevalent in mainstream society, communes emphasized collaboration, shared labor, and collective decision-making. This extended to shared finances, food production, childcare, and housing, fostering a sense of interdependence and shared responsibility. The goal was to create a supportive social fabric where individuals could rely on one another.

Many communes were driven by a desire for social and political change. They often served as incubators for radical ideas and activism, seeking to create alternative models of society that were

more equitable, peaceful, and democratic. This often involved experimenting with different forms of governance, such as consensus-based decision-making, and challenging traditional hierarchies and power structures.

The exploration of alternative spirituality and consciousness was another profound philosophical underpinning. Many individuals sought to break free from traditional religious dogma and explore new spiritual paths, including Eastern philosophies, meditation, and psychedelic experiences. Communal living provided a space for these explorations, fostering a sense of collective spiritual journeying and shared enlightenment.

Finally, the emphasis on personal liberation and authentic living was paramount. Participants sought to shed the constraints of societal expectations and live more genuinely and freely. This often involved exploring different forms of relationships, experimenting with artistic expression, and striving for self-discovery within a supportive collective environment. The communes were seen as laboratories for reinventing individual and collective life.

Daily Life and Practices in 1960s Communes

The daily rhythms of life within 1960s communes varied significantly depending on their specific location, size, and philosophical orientation. However, several common practices and characteristics defined the lived experience of communal living during this era. Shared labor was a cornerstone of most communes. Members typically participated in tasks such as cooking communal meals, gardening, maintaining living spaces, and contributing to the upkeep of shared resources. This often involved rotating responsibilities, ensuring that all members contributed to the collective well-being.

Communal meals were a central daily ritual, providing a focal point for social interaction and a tangible expression of shared resources. These meals often featured vegetarian or vegan fare, reflecting the health and ethical consciousness of many commune members. Discussions and conversations during meals often revolved around community issues, philosophical ideas, or current events, fostering a sense of shared intellectual and social engagement.

Decision-making processes were another defining aspect of daily life. While some communes had designated leaders, many adopted consensus-based decision-making, where all members had an equal voice and all concerns were addressed before a decision was made. This process, while sometimes lengthy and challenging, aimed to ensure that all members felt heard and valued, promoting a more democratic and inclusive form of governance. This often involved regular meetings or "sit-downs" where community matters were discussed and resolved.

Child-rearing practices often differed from traditional models. Many communes embraced communal child-rearing, where children were cared for by all members of the community rather than solely by their biological parents. This fostered a broader sense of family and shared responsibility for the younger generation. Education also often took alternative forms, with an emphasis on experiential learning, creative arts, and hands-on skill development.

Throughout the day, there was often a strong emphasis on spiritual practices and personal growth. This could include communal meditation sessions, yoga, chanting, or the study of spiritual texts. Many

communes also encouraged artistic expression, with opportunities for music-making, painting, writing, and other creative pursuits. The goal was to cultivate a holistic lifestyle that nurtured the mind, body, and spirit.

Challenges and Criticisms of 1960s Communal Living

Despite the idealistic aspirations, communal living in the 1960s was not without its significant challenges and faced considerable criticism from both within and outside the movement. One of the most persistent issues was interpersonal conflict. Living in close proximity with a diverse group of individuals, often with differing personalities and expectations, inevitably led to friction. Disagreements over chores, finances, lifestyle choices, and personal boundaries were common, and effectively resolving these conflicts often proved difficult.

Financial sustainability was another major hurdle for many communes. While many aimed for self-sufficiency, achieving this consistently was a formidable task. Reliance on external income, such as members working outside the commune or selling produce, could be inconsistent, leading to economic instability. The shared nature of finances also meant that individual financial contributions and the distribution of resources could become a source of contention.

Internal leadership struggles and decision-making inefficiencies also plagued some communities. The ideal of consensus was not always practical, and the lack of clear leadership or decision-making structures could lead to paralysis or the dominance of certain voices. This often resulted in frustration and a breakdown in the communal spirit.

From an external perspective, communes faced criticism for their perceived deviance from societal norms. Their unconventional lifestyles, often involving communal living, different approaches to relationships, and different attitudes towards work and authority, were often viewed with suspicion and disapproval by mainstream society. This could lead to social isolation and difficulty in integrating with the wider community.

Furthermore, some communes were criticized for fostering cult-like environments or for being dominated by charismatic leaders who exerted undue influence over members. Concerns about personal freedom, the potential for exploitation, and the blurring of lines between collective living and individual autonomy were raised. The challenges of maintaining a balance between collective ideals and individual needs were a constant balancing act.

The Legacy and Lasting Impact of 1960s Communalism

The communal living experiments of the 1960s, while often transient, left an indelible mark on subsequent social movements and continue to influence contemporary approaches to community and living. The core ideals of cooperation, sustainability, and shared resources that propelled the 1960s communes have found renewed relevance in the 21st century. Concepts like eco-villages, co-housing, and intentional communities, which are flourishing today, owe a significant debt to the pioneering efforts of the counterculture generation.

The focus on alternative spirituality and personal growth fostered during the 1960s contributed to the broader acceptance and integration of practices like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness into mainstream Western culture. The willingness of these early communes to explore diverse belief systems and spiritual paths paved the way for greater openness and experimentation in personal spirituality.

Moreover, the challenges faced by these communities provided valuable lessons for future intentional living initiatives. The importance of effective governance, conflict resolution, and financial planning became clearer, leading to more structured and sustainable models for contemporary communes. The recognition of the need to balance collective ideals with individual autonomy is a key takeaway that continues to inform the design of intentional communities.

The 1960s communal living movement also played a role in fostering greater awareness of environmental issues. The emphasis on self-sufficiency, organic farming, and a reduced ecological footprint predated the widespread environmental consciousness of later decades. These early communes served as living laboratories for sustainable practices, influencing the development of the modern environmental movement.

Ultimately, the legacy of 1960s communal living lies in its bold reimagining of social organization and personal fulfillment. It demonstrated that alternative ways of living were not only possible but could also be deeply meaningful and transformative, inspiring generations to seek connection, purpose, and community in diverse and innovative ways.

Conclusion: Communal Living in the 1960s: A Transformative Experiment

Communal living in the 1960s stands as a powerful testament to a generation's yearning for a more connected, equitable, and meaningful existence. Driven by a rejection of mainstream materialism and a desire for social change, thousands of individuals experimented with alternative living arrangements, forging communities based on cooperation, shared resources, and spiritual exploration. While these communes faced significant hurdles, from interpersonal conflicts to financial instability, their impact resonates deeply today. The ideals of sustainability, intentional community, and collective well-being pioneered in the 1960s continue to inspire new forms of communal living, proving that the transformative spirit of that era remains a potent force in shaping how we choose to live together.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the main ideological driving forces behind communal living in the 1960s?

Communal living in the 1960s was largely fueled by countercultural ideals. People sought alternatives to mainstream society's perceived materialism, conformity, and alienation. Key drivers included desires for self-sufficiency, spiritual exploration, rejection of traditional family structures,

experimentation with new social and sexual norms, and a move towards peace and environmentalism.

Can you name some well-known examples of communal living experiments from the 1960s?

Prominent examples include communes like Drop City in Colorado, a geodesic dome village; Morning Star Ranch in California, an early intentional community; and Twin Oaks Community in Virginia, which embraced principles of radical nonviolence and egalitarianism, though it was founded in 1967 and gained significant traction into the 1970s.

What were common living arrangements and daily life like in 1960s communes?

Daily life varied widely, but many communes emphasized shared labor, communal meals, and collective decision-making. Living arrangements often involved shared housing, sometimes in converted farmhouses or custom-built structures like geodesic domes. Emphasis was placed on cooperation and mutual support, often foregoing individual private ownership.

What were the primary goals or aspirations of people choosing to live communally in the 1960s?

Aspirations included creating more equitable and democratic societies, achieving personal liberation from societal constraints, fostering deeper community and connection, living closer to nature, and experimenting with different forms of social organization. Many sought to create a utopian society in microcosm.

What were some of the challenges or criticisms faced by communal living experiments in the 1960s?

Challenges included internal conflicts over leadership and decision-making, financial instability, difficulty in managing shared resources, interpersonal friction, and external societal disapproval or misunderstanding. Criticisms often centered on perceived naivete, lack of practicality, or the dissolution of traditional social structures.

How did communal living in the 1960s relate to broader social and political movements of the era?

Communal living was deeply intertwined with the counterculture movement and often drew participants from or influenced other social and political movements. It was seen as a way to live out the ideals of peace, love, and social change, rejecting the perceived injustices and conservatism of the era, and often aligning with anti-war, civil rights, and environmental activism.

What was the role of gender and sexuality in 1960s communal

living?

Many communes sought to deconstruct traditional gender roles and explore alternative sexual relationships, often challenging monogamy and embracing 'free love.' This was part of a broader liberation movement, though experiences and outcomes varied significantly among different communities.

Did communal living in the 1960s have lasting impacts or legacies?

Yes, the experiences and ideas from 1960s communes influenced later intentional communities, ecovillages, and co-housing movements. They contributed to discussions about sustainable living, alternative economics, cooperative models, and the search for meaningful community, leaving a legacy of experimentation in social organization.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to communal living in the 1960s, with short descriptions:

1.

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Tom Wolfe chronicles the Merry Pranksters' odyssey across America in their psychedelic bus, powered by LSD and a desire to break free from societal norms. This non-fiction account vividly captures the spirit of the counterculture, exploring themes of consciousness expansion, freedom, and the blurry line between reality and hallucination. It's a seminal work that defines the experimental and often chaotic nature of communal living and exploration during the era.

2.

Walden Two

B.F. Skinner's utopian novel presents a thought-provoking vision of a society designed through behavioral engineering, where communal living is paramount. The book details the principles and practices of a self-sufficient community that prioritizes happiness, productivity, and social harmony through scientific management of behavior. It offers a philosophical exploration of how deliberate community design can achieve ideal societal outcomes.

3.

The Diggers: The San Francisco Oracle and the Summer of Love

This book delves into the story of the Diggers, a radical anarchist group that played a significant role in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district during the Summer of Love. It explores their philosophy of free culture, their communal living arrangements, and their free stores and free performances aimed at dismantling capitalism and fostering genuine human connection. The narrative highlights the artistic, political, and social experiments of a pivotal communal movement.

4.

Families of Freedom: The Communal Way in America

Edited by G. Ray Jordan, this collection offers a multifaceted look at various communal experiments that emerged in America, many of which took root in the 1960s. It examines the motivations behind people choosing to live collectively, exploring the diversity of their beliefs, structures, and daily lives. The book provides insights into the challenges and rewards of intentional communities seeking alternative lifestyles.

5.

The Communes of the Earth: An Illustrated Guide to the Communal Movement

While not exclusively 1960s, this book often covers prominent communes that flourished during that era, showcasing their unique structures and philosophies. It offers visual and narrative insights into the diverse forms communal living took, from agrarian settlements to more urban-based collectives. The guide serves as a historical record of the widespread interest in alternative ways of living and social organization.

6.

Communes USA: The History and the Future of the Communal Movement

This comprehensive history traces the lineage of communal living in America, with a significant focus on the explosion of new intentional communities in the 1960s and 70s. It analyzes the social, economic, and cultural forces that propelled the communal movement, discussing the ideals and practicalities of these shared living arrangements. The book provides context for understanding the lasting impact of these experiments.

7.

Utopia: The Story of the Twin Oaks Community

This book chronicles the founding and evolution of Twin Oaks, one of the most enduring and well-known communes in America, established in 1967. It details the community's efforts to build a sustainable and egalitarian society, focusing on their principles of shared labor, income, and decision-making. The narrative offers a grounded perspective on the practical realities of maintaining a communal lifestyle over decades.

8.

The Hippie Commune Cookbook

More than just recipes, this book offers a glimpse into the lifestyle and ethos of hippie communes in the 1960s through their culinary practices. It reflects the communal spirit of sharing food, often sourced from organic gardens or local markets, and the emphasis on simple, natural ingredients. The cookbook provides a tangible connection to the daily life and values of these intentional communities.

In the Shadow of the Mountain: The Spirit of the Farm

Allen Young recounts his experiences living at The Farm, a prominent and influential commune founded in 1971 by Stephen Gaskin. Though slightly later than the core 1960s period, it represents a direct outgrowth of the era's communal fervor and exploration. The book details The Farm's spiritual beliefs, communal structure, and their commitment to pacifism, sustainable living, and raising a large family collectively.

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