

Ownership is overrated: the joys of communal property

The Guardian, December 1st, 2015

One year ago I owned a house. Today I rent a one-bedroom suite with my daughter.

There were dozens of factors contributing to this drastic shift in my life, the majority of which were beyond my control. But from where I stand now, even after what might be called a downgrade in our living arrangement, I feel oddly happy.

This contentment comes in large part from the fact that when we needed to move, a suite became available in the same house my sister rented. It was a sweetly serendipitous coincidence, and I've felt grateful for it every day since.

At the time, I was mostly just overcome with relief. Relief because the decisions I'd made to live a life with few possessions meant that moving from an entire house into a one-bedroom suite was not only possible but easy.

We fit, with room to spare.

I was also relieved because I knew I'd need emotional support from my sister during this challenging transition (not to mention the free babysitting), but in the eight months I've lived here an unintended benefit has emerged.

Our possessions have become shared, ownership is fluid. Small appliances are constantly exchanged between my sister and I. We trade meals and split resources. This arrangement goes far beyond borrowing a cup of sugar: we pool resources together in order to save money, increase our quality of life, and reduce the amount of stuff we each have to own and store.

It's been eye-opening.

It had been years since I'd started consciously shifting my choices to mitigate my negative impact on the environment. I'd focused on decreasing my footprint, using fewer resources. And while I initially approached things like a well-intentioned martyr, I quickly learned that creating a life with less means more choice. This latest discovery was no exception.

An extensive wardrobe means you need somewhere to store it. A home with walk-in closets doesn't come cheap, and your university furniture looks shabby against a gleaming background of hardwood floors and polished granite.

Your cost of living increases with the amount of stuff you require, and so too does the amount of hours you work; your leisure time is reduced to evenings and weekends, and a one-week holiday here and there.

We choose that. Perhaps not consciously, but we do. Like a dieter who eats one small donut a day, the dozens of little decisions we make every day snowball into shaping larger life decisions.

There's a lovely quote by Thoreau which has remained close to my heart since I first read it: "The price of anything is the amount of life we have to pay for it."

We, many of us, have bought in and are paying dearly. We're mortgaged to the hilt and trying in vain to dig ourselves out of debt. We can't quit our jobs, or reduce our workloads, or even take more than a few weeks off a year because we need keep working for the things we want, and we pay for them with the minutes and hours that make up our lives.

Often we don't even question these habits, which is a shame because other options are out there.

I'd always focused on simply buying less, but moving just a few feet away from my sister meant that I began to see a different perspective – communal ownership. Shifting our lives away from needing to own everything and beginning to resurrect the traditions of sharing, lending, trading and borrowing.

Unconventional, perhaps, but freeing too.

If you, my neighbour, have a lawn mower you use one day a week, do I need to own one too? Do the other 15 people on our block? Or could we share it and do something else with our money and the space in our garages? Do we all need party tents and camping equipment and folding tables and paying presses and the hundreds of other garage-sale fodder items cluttering up our attics and basements simply because we feel uncomfortable asking to borrow it? Or because buying it outright was almost as cheap as renting?

I've learned that owning is not always better. I no longer have a house but I also no longer have a mortgage, repair bills or maintenance costs. It didn't feel like a loss, it felt like a weight being lifted. Ownership means you bear full cost for something, assume responsibility for it, allocate space to it, devote time to its maintenance and then, eventually, proper disposal. All of this, for every single thing you own.

I know it's slightly terrifying for a culture which values privacy and autonomy above all else to embrace communal property – these little webs of lending and borrowing, favours given and received. We fear we'll be taken advantage of. We fear someone will ruin our stuff. We fear that we will be accused of doing the same, and most of all we fear scarcity. What if it isn't there when we need it? But it doesn't need to be this complicated, I promise. Share what you have, ask for what you need, wait your turn. Treat your things and those of others with respect. You know, all the elementary school lessons we may have forgotten.

A great way to begin if you're not close with your neighbours is to check out sites like NeighborGoods, which is essentially a Craigslist for lending and borrowing. Create an account, list the things you'd be happy lending out, and search for things that you'd like to borrow. Be generous lending your belongings, so that you can feel comfortable asking to borrow in return.

Above all, question the need for ownership. Consider the often ignored options of collaborative consumption and communal property. As my three-year-old would eagerly tell you, sharing is caring.

(975 words)