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A Commune Grows in Brooklyn

By JED LIPINSKI

ON a recent drizzly afternoon in Bushwick, Brooklyn, members of the Bushwick Food Cooperative gathered beneath a tent in a ramshackle backyard to claim their share of the weekly harvest. They picked through crates of cilantro and rosemary from a rooftop farm in Long Island City, Queens, and examined pastured eggs from an Amish farm cooperative in Pennsylvania.

Benn Rasmussen, a 29-year-old dancer who lives with nine people in a sprawling loft nearby, was signing people in. Shira Shaham, 30, a member of the collectively run bike shop Band of Bicycles, was keeping track of the price list. Then Ariel de Leon, who is affiliated with the Food Not Bombs anarchist movement, arrived with an extra blue Ikea bag for Ms. Shaham to carry her produce in.

"My friend makes women's swimsuits out of those," someone said.

"I use them to plant tomatoes in," Ms. de Leon replied.

It was a fairly typical scene in Bushwick these days. In fact, such scenes are not atypical across the greater metropolitan area, where a kind of renaissance in collectives is under way. Concepts like sharing and bartering — whether it's fabric at Etsy Labs in Dumbo or powerboats at SailTime on the Chelsea Piers — are being revived and updated for the Twitter age.

"The groundswell of social technology today is creating unprecedented opportunities to share and collaborate," said Rachel Botsman, an author of the new book "What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption." "Farmers' markets and Facebook have a lot in common. All around us we're seeing a renewed belief in the importance of community, in both the physical and virtual worlds."

Despite the lingering hippie connotations, collectives, which might be described as self-managed groups of people with similar interests working toward a common goal, are a thoroughly modern phenomenon. And nowhere in New York is this collective mind-set as embraced as it is in Bushwick. The persistently cheap rents, surplus industrial space and neo-bohemian vibe have drawn artists and creative entrepreneurs priced out of the

Lower East Side and Williamsburg for over a decade, and many are now experimenting with collective lifestyles as never before.

"Given the way the real estate market is today, no wonder people here are finding new ways to organize their living space," said Laura Braslow, 30, a coordinator for the "non-hierarchical" volunteer organization Arts in Bushwick.

Bushwick is host to a staggering variety of collective organizations — including [bedbug](#)-ridden "freegan" cooperatives, handball-court movie theaters and activist bicycle collectives that double as bluegrass rock bands. Even the area's formalized small businesses tend to work collaboratively, pooling resources and sharing employees.

Roberta's, for example, the locavore pizzeria near the Morgan Avenue L stop, acts as a kind of community headquarters for area residents and local business owners. In a backyard tent, the managers of the Wreck Room bar and the Deth Killers of Bushwick, a fashion company, can be found doing inventory on their laptops.

Chris Parachini and Brandon Hoy, owners of Roberta's, are also two of the founders of the Brooklyn Grange, a rooftop farm in Long Island City. The farm sells produce to the restaurant and local markets, and recently raised \$23,226 through [Kickstarter.com](#).

In Roberta's backyard, three greenhouses growing peppers and eggplants sit atop two metal shipping containers. These containers house the Heritage Radio Network, an Internet radio station sponsored by Heritage Foods USA, which, in exchange for the space, supplies Roberta's with pasture-raised pork.

Other [urban farms](#) look to Roberta's for inspiration. Lee Mandell, a wild-haired hydroponicist, started Boswyck Farms with a partner in 2008 to "eventually connect all the farms in Brooklyn." He put his life savings into the project, and finds interns and volunteers through word-of-mouth. In the meantime, Mr. Mandell has transformed his loft on DeKalb Avenue into a hydroponic laboratory, crammed with grow lights and gurgling trays of bok choy and Pink Beauty radishes.

In addition to food advocates, Bushwick is loaded with artists. Many have formed collectives to combat the isolation of the studio, the disappearance of state arts funding and what they see as the commercialism of the art world. Rather than petition fruitlessly for Chelsea gallery representation, these groups exhibit their work wherever they can — bedrooms, stairwells, street corners.

Regina Rex, whose members think that "artist-run exhibition space" better describes their modus operandi than the term "collective," held its first opening in June during Bushwick Open Studios — a four-year-old art festival that now features more than 300

shows in over 150 locations. The 12 members, all of whom have day jobs and seven of whom got M.F.A.'s from the [University of Illinois](#) at Chicago, split the cost of a white box gallery inside a cavernous warehouse at 17-17 Troutman Street in Ridgewood, Queens, near the Bushwick border. In an e-mail written in the collective "we," the group said that they decide "everything by consensus or large majority" and have agreed that their own work would not be promoted in the space.

Paul D'Agostino's gallery Centotto (Italian for 108, his apartment number) functions on a similar premise. In 2008, he hung some friends' artwork in his shared Moore Street loft for Open Studios. More than 500 people passed through that weekend. "It's cool to have so many strangers in your living room just because you put some art on the walls," he said.

Since then, Mr. D'Agostino, who is 33 and teaches Italian and interdisciplinary studies at [Brooklyn College](#), has held a collaborative show every two months. A rotating group of established and emerging artists base their contributions — none of which are for sale — on a reading Mr. D'Agostino assigns. "It gets more dialogue into an exhibit," he explained.

The collective-minded aren't just defining how Bushwick eats and exhibits art, however. They're also influencing the way people live and sleep. The neighborhood has recently drawn notice for several communal living arrangements, including the [Cedar House mansion on Bushwick Avenue](#) and the "Bushwick trailer park" inside a former nut-roasting factory on Meserole Street, nearby in East Williamsburg. This bid to create an arts community around a fleet of salvaged, Wi-Fi-accessible campers was nearly thwarted in February, when the Fire Department declared the premises unsafe and issued a vacate order. But it still exists.

Surreal Estate, a collective living space and events venue that encompasses two adjacent buildings at 13 and 15 Thames Street, is one of the largest of its kind in Brooklyn. The three-story building at 15 Thames houses around 35 people — including transients seeking a place to stay for a few months and those who have lived there since its inception in 2008. Residents pay between \$250 and \$600 a month in rent, depending on room size, plus \$50 for utilities.

On a recent Monday afternoon, a few barefoot young people were drifting around the second floor, where a lending library with scores of old National Geographics abuts a kitchen full of bagels, vegetables and other morsels scavenged from Dumpsters across the city. Bedroom doors are stickered and stenciled with uplifting messages: "If money were no object, what would you do with your life?"; "Love is possible."

"Everyone here is super-creative and shares everything," said one resident inside her small, shared bedroom. "This has been the best time of my life." Her arms and legs, however, were freckled with bedbug bites — one of the downsides to communal living. "I sleep up there," she said, pointing at a lofted mattress encased in clear plastic.

Housemates range from 20-somethings to 40-somethings and hold all sorts of jobs. "Somebody's a waitress, somebody's a dominatrix, somebody works for the Parks Department," said Vanessa Cronan, 28, a former resident. Residents are required to contribute to the household in some way, so Ms. Cronan taught free [yoga](#) classes on the roof.

No such requirements exist at 13 Thames, the dilapidated building next door. "There's no structure here, it's completely chaotic in the way it operates," said a black-clad resident named Vladimir Teichberg. As he spoke and chain-smoked, shirtless men with dreadlocks painted over crude graffiti, carefully avoiding an upside-down American flag.

Mr. Teichberg is a founder of the Glass Bead Collective, a group that specializes in viral videos and uses the space as a part-time headquarters. He and about 12 other occupants — all of them male — pay the landlord about half what the residents next door pay, given the space's run-down condition.

Both 13 and 15 Thames have lately attracted police attention — the latter for a "3D 13: Dimensional Dance Party" (Trance! Hookahs! Tarot card readings!) during which nine arrests were made for assault, disorderly conduct and selling alcohol without a license, among other charges.

Despite playing host to anarchist book fairs and experimental theater performances, Surreal Estate is also a big party destination, which led Ms. Cronan to move out last fall. She now lives happily in a regular Bushwick apartment with four other people. Still, she regrets that she doesn't know the seven people in the apartment below her.

"We're not intentionally creating a community," she said. "We're just living next to each other."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 26, 2010

An article last Sunday about food collectives and other collaborative organizations in Bushwick, Brooklyn, misspelled the surname of an author of the book "What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption." She is Rachel Botsman, not Bosman.

