

No Funds? How One Community Did It

# COMMUNITIES

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## *Can We Afford to Live in Community?*

*Inventing a Rural  
Community Economy  
Business by Business*

*The Making of a  
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Economy*

*Focus Article  
by Magic!*





Magicians and guests interrupt lunch on the front porch for a group photo.

HILARY HUG

# Can We Afford Not To?

BY HILARY HUG AND ROBIN BAYER

Can we afford to live in community?

Can we afford not to? Can we afford to spend more money and work more hours than are required for simple material comfort? Can we afford to make unnecessary demands upon other people or on the rest of the environment? Or to forgo the insights and support of caring friends who know us as only those who live with us can?

At Magic, a residential service-learning community in Palo Alto, California, we live comfortably by North American standards, and luxuriously by global standards. We do this on less than half the average per capita income in our area, and with less than half the per capita pollution and resource depletion of an average US resident. We earn our livelihoods by studying and teaching how people can learn to apply ecological principles to further the common good, and enjoy round-the-clock access to each other's thoughtful counsel. We can afford all this by living in community.

"Homeless Population Hits All-time High." "Housing Shortage Worsens." "Home Ownership Beyond Reach." You've seen the headlines. As more and more people crowd onto the Earth, resources sufficient to house every individual or couple in a suburban home are simply unavailable. William Rees of the University of British Columbia estimates that we would require on the order of ten more Earths to support all six-plus billion of us in the current American lifestyle.

Sharing housing can help improve personal well-being, reduce social inequality, and protect environmental quality. Renting or purchasing a four-bedroom home or apartment is less than four times as expensive as renting or purchasing four comparable one-bedroom dwellings. Providing a kitchen and bathroom for every bedroom increases environmental impacts and labor burdens as well.

Consider, for example, effects of seven adult and two three year-old residents sharing one bathroom in our community, often with one or more overnight guests, and with as many as two dozen daytime visitors. Homebuilding costs in our locale are \$250-300 per square foot. Even a

modest bathroom can entail a \$15,000-30,000 investment.

The average US household contains between two and three occupants, and between one and two bathrooms. Because at Magic we lay claim to fewer than "our share" of bathrooms—about one tenth of a bathroom per person instead of one half—we've avoided \$100,000 of capital expenditures. With that amount we can generate an inflation-adjusted \$4,000 of annual income without drawing down principal!

We also reap savings by cleaning one, rather than five bathrooms. Cleaning each of four bathrooms for one to two hours per week requires 200-400 hours per year. At current hourly wages in our area, that labor is worth at least another \$4,000 annually.

With the global average wage less than a dollar an hour and the average work week more than fifty hours, the \$8,000 per year reduction in capital and maintenance expenditures we achieve by sharing a bathroom is enough to support three people in full-time public service!

To make floor, walls, pipes, wires, mirror, tile, toilet, sink, and so on for a bath-

room, we cut trees, mine ore, pump oil, and more. We burden the environment with everything from greenhouse gases to toxic waste. To wrest the ton of materials in a small bathroom and its fixtures from the Earth, humans process ten or more tons of raw materials, most of which we turn to waste. By sharing a bathroom in our community we reduce our waste by forty tons!



HILARY HUG

Heather coaches Jen and Hil in dental hygiene.

We've applied "bathroom" savings towards purchasing our home, and we've loaned money and provided tenants below-market-rate lease-option agreements to assist others in purchasing theirs. We've supported ourselves and others in work aimed at furthering common good. And we've slept, danced, exercised, read, sung, and cared for children with life energy not spent in building and maintaining bathrooms or working to earn money to pay others to do these tasks..

What do we "give up" for these savings? Mostly privacy and convenience. To the extent that we're willing to see and be seen while bathing or using the toilet, we surrender only privacy, because we rarely want the toilet or shower at exactly the same time as someone else, and we can

easily share the sink. In fact, the Magic shower and toilet are each in use less than two of every twenty-four hours.

Surprising as it may seem, we're coming to view loss of privacy as a benefit. As each of us endured or imposed the unnecessary inconvenience of waiting, we've had impetus to question why we extract and pay that price. Sitting on the toilet we've asked, "Why do I think of using the toilet as something to hide?" Standing in the shower we wonder, "Why do I conceal my naked self?"

Increasingly, we see desire for privacy as a cue that we're being dishonest—that we're laboring to maintain a distinction between the personae we present to others and the persons we are. We're learning to distinguish privacy, by which we seek to prevent others from knowing us, from solitude, by which we aim to know ourselves better, and to redirect energy and other resources we once wasted pursuing the former to ensure that all of us have

adequate access to the latter. Such shifts in consciousness and behavior, in which we move from lack of awareness, to insight, to transformative action, are a benefit of community living that most people see dimly, if at all, and that we at Magic ponder how to value accurately. What is it worth to be more relaxed, open, and honest? To be more effective and satisfied as parent, worker, or friend? To avoid illness and injury? To simply feel better?

A half dozen friends eat supper on Magic's front porch after practicing hatha yoga together in a nearby park. Persimmons are ripening near the porch, and ripe plums and apricots fall from other trees nearby. In the back yard another half

dozen diners engage in lively conversation about habitat stewardship fieldwork they just completed. In the kitchen two late-comers serve themselves salad from a counter laden with fresh organic produce and breads from local bakeries while two others take up pasta, tomato sauce, and vegetables from pots steaming on the

stove. Children roam from one group to the other, posing questions, climbing on laps, and sampling fare from those willing to share. It's dinnertime at Magic.

Food service affords another excellent example of how community living can yield both lower costs and higher quality of life. We've only one stove and two refrigerators to purchase and clean. One person shops for all. Because we use relatively large volumes of food quickly, we can take fuller advantage of "specials" and consume marked-down bruised and damaged items before they spoil. We purchase beans, grain, and so on in bulk from a wholesaler who delivers them to our door. One or two community members, often aided by guests, cook and clean up each night. The rest enjoy a catered meal at home with friends. Drawing on our individual social circles we provide each other a rich diversity of visitors with whom we share ideas and feelings.

**What do we "give up" for these savings? Mostly privacy and convenience.**

In a shared kitchen as in a shared bathroom, we find thorns as well as roses. Our cooks burn an entrée or serve dinner late. Someone breaks the stove by using too much force and too little thought, and all suffer.

As we experience these events together, we become partners in shouldering responsibility, refraining from blame, accepting self and others, and thinking prospectively about how we can live better and contribute to others' doing so. We become enriched.

In almost any aspect of life at Magic a keen observer can see additional benefits of community. Seven adults in the US each living alone, typically pay for seven phone lines. They either answer their phones, let a machine do it, or miss their calls. At Magic we share two lines. We take calls for each other, serving callers and called, and becoming better acquainted with each other's family and friends in the process. For being each other's personal assistants, each enjoys the services of several personal assistants.

A high-speed Internet connection costs less and is faster and more reliable than seven dial-ups. Our single utility bill is a fraction of what we would pay if each of us lived alone. We've one washer and one dryer to purchase and maintain. We clean and repair less than two thousand square feet of floor space, including workspace, and we service one, rather than two or five or seven, of everything from an ax to a zoom lens. Our pooled tools, books, vehicles, musical instruments, recreational equipment, etc. are so extensive that friends and neighbors regularly borrow from us. The list goes on and on.

At Magic we consider the psychological benefits of community living to be even greater than the material benefits. Many people have difficulty understanding this, because they've only experienced relatively "unintentional" community.

Most of us grow up with parents and siblings acquired by chance. We live in dorms, barracks, fraternities, or sororities where we share only transient or shallow purpose with those around us. We form households of economic convenience by necessity, rather than by choice. We bring to all of the above settings much of the consciousness of "take as much as you can, and give only what you must" which is a guiding principle for participation in the commercial exchange economy in which we are increasingly immersed.

We're shaping a community in which each of us can give more, be freer in giving, and in an apparent paradox, get more out of life even while demanding less of each other and the world around us.

With single-parent and single-occupant households among the fastest growing census categories in the US, we are losing a critical context for knowing and



Franklin, a neighbor, returns Magic belt sander to Chris.

being known. Who can be surprised that so many people feel lonely, disaffected, alienated, afraid, and overwhelmed? Who can doubt that community can play a role in both preventing and curing anomie?

By sharing tears and laughter, concerns and triumphs in our community, we appreciate self and others more fully and deeply. We discern more clearly how each of us feels and projects, and we learn to allay fear with love. We become more adept at giving and receiving love at home and in other settings.

Do we sometimes find this difficult? Of course. When David failed to secure the proper building permit, he wished more than once that it were his own little secret, rather than a "public" failure. Is that really what he wants? To carry the burden of pretending to be a person who's above making such errors? In the end he thought he gained more by coming clean.

Our living and dining rooms are dark, and we've moved our furniture onto the porch. Music fills the air with Paul Simon on the stereo, Jeffrey on keyboard, Kent on guitar, Liz and Martin on drums, and kids clacking and jingling assorted rhythm

instruments. People dance alone, in pairs, and in groups. There's an easy flow to the scene.

Community living is cheap fun. A night in a club for seven adults is at least a hundred-dollar undertaking. It can entail travel, childcare, tickets, and the possibility that music, food, or other patrons may be little to our liking.

When we party at Magic, we're without any of these costs and concerns, and we easily include a dozen or so neighbors and friends in our fun. With a weekly dance party we save \$5,000-10,000 a year, and give this much or more value to our guests.

## **What is it worth to be more relaxed, open, and honest?**

Though our community members and many others are seeking to rehumanize commerce, the money economy remains a realm in which crying needs go unfulfilled and multitudes are disadvantaged. We perceive that by giving more freely to each other, we begin to remedy these ills.

Over the past several days, Dave fixed Hilary's bike, Hilary cared for Robin's daughters, Robin paid Daniel's bills and balanced his checkbook, and Daniel took phone messages for Dave. These

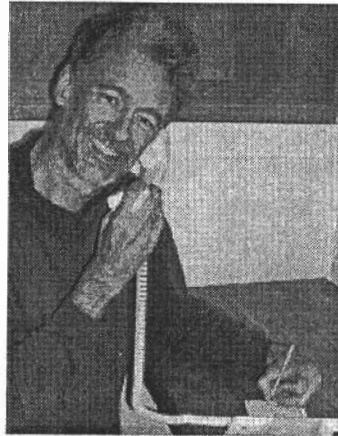


Dave repairs  
Hilary's bicycle.

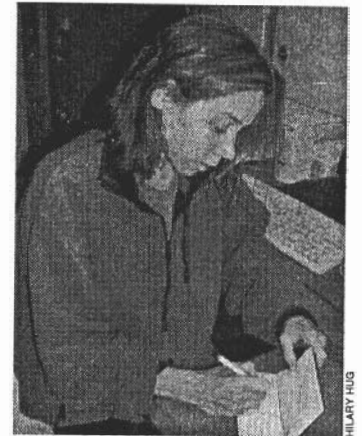


Hilary feeds  
twins for Robin.

Daniel takes  
Dave's calls.



Robin pays  
Daniel's bills.



## Gift Economy at Magic

services are likely to be valued at quite different rates in the marketplace. People concerned with keeping track of such discrepancies devote an enormous amount of life energy to doing so—life energy unavailable to render other services.

Robert Axelrod, a biologist who has studied cooperation, has observed that humans and other animals are more likely to cooperate when we expect to interact in the future. By living together we ensure such future interaction. As we become more aware of our common humanity, we look for ways to give more, and take less, both within Magic and without. We live our days remembering that the less resources we channel into keeping track of who gets what, the more we have available to increase what everyone gets.

We think of money as “soft” guns, a way to command others in which underlying power relationships are made less visible. When we enlarge the money-free realm of our lives, we strip away camouflage. We see more accurately what we give and what we take, and from whom. We reduce our reliance upon those who

ask that we compromise our commitment to common good, and upon people all over the world who compromise theirs to serve us because they fear the consequences of refusing to do so.

As we grow and diversify our community, we create additional opportunities for generating and receiving goods and

## Community living is cheap fun.

services within it. We can shape interaction with each other and with people elsewhere to reflect the value we place upon consensuality and freedom. This restructuring of our social relationships is an essential element of what we consider our spiritual path.

Although we've touched upon how we at Magic secure food, shelter, communication, recreation, and personal and spir-

itual fulfillment, we feel that we've only begun to describe the benefits we reap by living together. We find the experience of intentional community immensely enriching, even in its most difficult moments. As we look at current trends in population, resource use, environmental degradation, cultural evolution, and individual well-being, we see intentional community as a viable, perhaps necessary strategy to slow our collective impoverishment, and to maybe even someday realize age-old, near universal aspirations to prosperity and well-being for all. Ω

*Hilary Hug and Robin Bayer, who hold degrees from Stanford in Human Biology and Civil Engineering respectively, have each lived at Magic for more than a decade, where they teach how people can apply ecology to become healthier, more cooperative, and better stewards of the environment. They are co-mothering Robin's three-year-old twin girls.*

## ABOUT MAGIC

**M**agic, founded in 1972 and incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit in 1979, demonstrates how people may live better by learning to see self, surroundings, and interactions between these more accurately.

Magic program participants apply methods and principles of ecology to: (1) clarify values; (2) improve health; (3) increase cooperation; and (4) steward the environment. Our activities include lectures and seminars about the nature of value; life-planning workshops; swim, run, and hatha yoga instruction; youth mentoring; mediation; community organizing; planting and caring for trees and other vegetation; habitat stewardship; water and land resource planning and advocacy; and publishing.

Central to Magic is a residential education program. Individuals in this learning community shoulder primary responsibility for operating Magic and for conducting its public service activities. At home and at work we aim to model how ecological analysis and dedication to common interests of humankind are a foundation for living well.

Magic is a vehicle for giving. Each year hundreds of donors contribute attention, advocacy, labor, material, and money. With this generous support, we are able to adjust, and sometimes entirely waive, fees for Magic services to make them more widely available.

We are currently gathering resources for two major initiatives: (1) expand and diversify teaching and publishing about an ecological approach to value; and (2) establish additional research and teaching facilities in Palo Alto and in settings where we may develop our model of ecology-based service-learning community while living closer to nature.

If you perceive that you or someone you know may benefit by receiving Magic services, or by giving that others may enjoy them, we'll welcome communication from you. Please visit <http://www.ecomagic.org>; e-mail [magic@ecomagic.org](mailto:magic@ecomagic.org); phone 650.323.7333; or write Magic, Box 15894, Stanford, CA 94309.

