



MY LIFE IN CO-OPERATIVES

A short story by Andrew Moore



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I can still quote my family's Co-operative Society's membership number from over 50 years ago,

1141585. My mother made all her children learn this number so that we could give it with every purchase we made with our local co-operative store. This routine provided us with a much needed 'DIVI' every Christmas.

'DIVI' was short for dividend, an amount the LCS (London Co-operative Society) divided out from its profits every year to all its members in proportion to how much they had spent with the store. Our "DIVI" number suggests that the co-operative had well over a million members in London.

Although London was the largest city in the world at over 8 million people in the 1950's it is likely that half the families were members. I had forgotten how much the co-operative was a part of our lives. When we heard a horse and cart clatter down our road at six in the morning we knew it was the co-op milkman delivering bottles of milk to our doorstep. By midday another co-op horse and cart delivered bread, butter, eggs and potatoes. My mother hearing the commotion in the street would send one of us to stock up with staples, buying 'on tick' and remembering to give our number. If this was not enough, once a month, yet another co-op horse and cart would clatter down the street this time delivering coal.



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The coalman would carry enormous sacks on his back from his cart to a hole in our front path and miraculously the contents would appear in our coal cellar which we approached from inside the house. It was a co-operative that kept on giving. My mother kept a bucket and shovel by the front door, and we were regularly expected to scoop up the horses dropping and place them around my fathers prized roses in our front garden

Every Christmas my father would take all of us five children to the co-op store in the High Street and cash in our 'DIVI' for a huge 20lb turkey, an icing covered Christmas Cake with a snow scene on top and a Christmas Pudding which we could set on fire with blue flames from Brandy liquor poured over it.

We all had great loyalty and affection for the co-op that provided us with essential services so conveniently and then a bonus of 'free' Christmas delights.

Twenty years later, still in London, I had qualified as an architect, full of ideas for changing the world but quickly dismayed at the corporate projects I had to work on. I think that it was working with a 'starchitect' practice designing a futuristic cigarette factory with very expensive cladding that convinced me that there was a better way to use my skills.

With a group of colleagues, I founded an Architects Co-operative focussed on finding new ways to design and build affordable housing for a growing proportion of homeless people in the UK. This initiative luckily coincided with a Labour Government in power. A new Minister for Housing, who had been sponsored by the Co-operative Party, was appointed and his first move was to introduce a National Co-operative Housing Program.

The minister called us to his office in Whitehall to tell us that he saw us having a significant role in implementing his policies and getting this movement off the ground. We even assisted with writing the legislation; the 1974 Housing Co-operatives Act and the 1975 Co-operative Finance Act.

In my experience you only get an opportunity like this once in a couple of decades, so we fully embraced it. Our fledgling Architects group, with access to a huge budget, expanded at light speed. Maybe because we had the security of guaranteed work far into the future, we decided not to follow traditional professional ways of working but to experiment.

After a short time where we paid everyone in the office according to classic socialist principles of: "if everyone is working to their capacity then they should be paid according to their need", we settled on "equal wages for all".

This amazingly worked well for about ten years largely I think because the practice earned so much money to share out. Our cleaners thought that we were crazy but never complained at their huge salaries.

I had trained as an architect but found that after 10 years I was spending all my time managing a still fast expanding office and having to constantly pull in new work to feed the more than 30 Architects in our practice.

Although everyone loved working in this novel environment, we were getting too big and losing touch with our ideals. We all decided to split the office into three. Each group was given their projects to work on, a large budget and encouragement to start up again.

One group went to East London another to West London and the original North London group, of which I was part, let out the empty floors (to other co-operatives) and continued as a small intimate practice again.

I am pleased to say each group continues to thrive as independent architectural co-operatives.

Our co-operative was quite unique in England. It enabled architects to develop new ways of working with their clients, to follow their passions and to introduce experimental designs. Everyone's devotion to the organisation we realised had a downside. Employees found that they had no life outside the group, many somehow forgot to get married and have children. We introduced a recommendation that you had to take a year off in your seventh year with half pay. If you were still there after 14 years you had to take a year off with full pay, 'get a life' and not come back.

This is what happened to me.

In my second 'year off' I married one of my previous clients. She was the chairperson of a housing co-operative I had worked with in the borough of Kensington and Chelsea near Notting Hill. She is Canadian and after our son was born, whisked me off to the other side of the world, to Vancouver Island, where we live now. Here I worked for Rooftops Canada who specialised in establishing housing co-operatives around the world.

I soon found myself in South Africa working in an Informal Settlement of around 20,000 squatters on the outskirts of Johannesburg where they survived under makeshift cardboard and polythene shelters. I was the only white person for miles around and the only male in a thousand plus Zulu and Xosa women's group called Masisizane Women's Housing Co-operative.

After a year of skillful political work enabling us to take over a large portion of land, intensive training on the part of about 50 women in construction techniques and an offer of government housing subsidies, we started building. The women, building with their own hands, had 14 teams each constructing three houses a month, collectively 500 a year.

Men were encouraged to join the construction teams, but each group had to have a woman leader who attended all our progress meetings and picked up plans for new houses when others were completed.

Within two years the original thousand co-op members and their families were housed. The co-operative changed their model to become a building co-operative, negotiated more subsidies and continued building homes for the rest of community in the settlement. This model now called PHP (Peoples Housing Process) took off like wildfire across the country.



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Back in Canada, I once gave a presentation to MEC (Mountain Equipment Co-operative) a large retail co-operative that is struggling to survive in these times. I had been invited by their membership department as they were desperate to find better ways to engage with their huge membership – a common problem with large commercially successful co-operatives like Credit Unions. I suggested that they go back to their roots and that each store should be encouraged to become an autonomous worker/consumer co-operative including staff and community members.

MEC Headquarters, owned by the stores, could continue to provide support services such as marketing, distribution and using its huge buying power to provide the highest quality but inexpensive equipment. MEC seems to have gone in an opposite direction and accepted a corporate takeover but if it does not work out maybe there would be a chance to try a 'ground up' co-operative approach.

My final co-operative experience I hope will be with Co-operative Funeral Services. They are well known for inexpensive but jolly 'send offs' to the next world, hopefully a world that is co-operative in nature.

If those I have left behind give the funeral services my co-op number 1141585 they will probably get a "DIVI" which I hope they will spend on a Christmas Pudding doused in Brandy. Setting fire to it they can watch the bright blue flames flicker away in the dark.

