

BACH: A Medium Length History

written for co-op GISP in 1995, revised, updated 2002

BACH's Emergence and History

In 1969, responding to widespread student activism and agitation for change, Brown University's administration and faculty approved the New Curriculum, granting students more power over their course choices, their grade options, and their independent studies. When, in 1970, Bryant College (which had previously shared College Hill with Brown) relocated to the suburbs, Brown University purchased all of Bryant's buildings; at the time of the purchase, Brown had no specific plans for the use of these buildings. The Brown Association for Cooperative Housing coalesced in 1970 through a Group Independent Study Project entitled "The Cooperative Movement in America", the result of which was the submission of the "Proposal For The Use of Bryant Houses As Cooperatives." Following a series of negotiations and compromises, Brown University agreed to lease two houses (which became Milhous and Carberry) to BACH for \$1 per house per year for a five year term with the option to renew. Although BACH saw this as a "less acceptable plan" (preferring to purchase rather than lease the houses they planned to renovate and occupy), within one year of its inception, the idea of cooperative housing at Brown University had become a reality.

Though somewhat tenuous and shadowed with suspicions and doubts, at this stage in BACH's history, the relationship between Brown and BACH was largely one of mutual respect and consideration. The University understood BACH as an extension of the New Curriculum, as a means to achieving the resolutions and principles the University claimed to endorse, primarily that which states that "education for the undergraduate has as purposes the fostering of the intellectual and personal growth of the individual student. The student ... must be an active participant in framing his own education ... Structures, rules, and regulations of the University should facilitate (this) and should provide the student with maximum opportunity to formulate and achieve his educational objectives." Recognizing BACH as an educationally valid venture, as a solution to immediate university housing needs, and as the embodiment of some of the highest hopes the New Curriculum espoused, Brown University actively supported BACH through the leasing of its newly acquired properties at a symbolic rate and through the cosigning of a bank loan with which BACH was to renovate the Bryant houses. This support was once again illustrated in 1971 when BACH independently purchased a third house (Watermyn Co-op), the mortgage of which was guaranteed by Brown and would be paid off by BACH over a 25 year period.

Over time, relations became increasingly strained between the University and BACH. Dealings with BACH switched hands from the Deans of Student Life and Education to the Dean of Residential Life and the Director of Brown Rental Facilities. More significant than a bureaucratic consolidation or shifting of responsibilities, this changing of hands represented a shift in Brown's understanding of and relationship with BACH. Rent rose from \$1 in the early 1970's to \$15,000 annually in 1994. As

Residential Life and Rental Facilities began to deal with BACH increasingly as a troublesome tenant (e.g. one who insists on doing his/her own maintenance) and as a housing competitor (offering a significantly cheaper housing alternative to undergraduates) and as BACH distanced itself from the University, BACH's value as an educational alternative, as a valid and legitimate way of living, and as an asset to Brown University through the embodiment of the University's principles began to slip through the cracks.

Recent History, Lease Terminations, and Evictions

In 1994, BACH purchased a fourth house, Gnuhouse, which was later renamed Finlandia. This was the culmination of an active house-search process which had gone on since 1991. The house initially required a tremendous amount of unanticipated work in order to pass city fire inspections under the "boarding house," zoning clause. In absence of an appropriate zoning title for cooperatives, the BACH houses range in zoning title from "Bed and Breakfast" to "Boarding House". BACH obtained the Finlandia mortgage independent of Brown- by 1994, having paid off 24 years of the 25 year mortgage on Watermyn Co-op, BACH was granted a mortgage loan from Citizen's Bank, one which did not include Brown as guarantor.

In September of 1995, Brown University terminated the leases on Milhous and Carberry. Offering the two years notice they were under legal obligation to offer, the University announced their intention to repossess the houses in order to renovate and use them as office spaces. BACH was expected to vacate the premises by May 31, 1997. Outraged, determined, and inspired, BACH engineered an extensive campaign incorporating stickers, posters, puppet shows, a student referendum, petitions, phone calls and letters from BACH alumni. The houses implemented a "Deans to Dinner" project in which they invited every Dean and many faculty and staff members to the houses for dinner. The "Deans to Dinner" project was an attempt to demonstrate to the University the educational and social value of a lifestyle based in shared space, consensus, and non-hierarchical, deliberate, ungendered distribution of house and food related tasks; to illustrate BACH ingenuity and creativity in maintaining and decorating the houses; and to demonstrate the unique way in which a cooperative of twenty students can create a comfortable, dynamic living space in which innovative projects and people converge and from which individual and collective strength and energy emanate.

Coinciding with these dinners, coffee houses, shows, and campaigns, a formal process of negotiations between University administrators and select representatives of the BACH Board of Directors (all of whom were students) continued. These negotiations were somewhat excruciating. It often felt as if BACH and Brown were delivering two separate monologues in two separate and mutually unintelligible languages. The administration did not understand the value of these houses as cooperatives, nor did they grasp the centrality of the two Charlesfield houses to BACH's future financial viability. As BACH's two largest and oldest houses, Milhous and Carberry were both the corporation's cash cows and its spine. They are beautiful houses, both built in the early

1870's. They house twenty people each. They are neighbors, with only the Brown Police and Security building between them. They are the foundation of the corporation historically. The walls (inches thick with layers of paint, with colors rejected and new ones chosen) are covered with murals, stencils, and writing; the spaces between these walls, a monument to 26 years of cooperative history and culture, a testimony to the creativity and motivation inspired by the invitation to do "whatever you want" with a room.

Expecting to resume unfinished negotiations in the fall of 1996, the BACH board were greeted instead with an ultimatum granting two options. Option A consisted of a five year, non-renewable lease in which Brown denied BACH the right to control our own maintenance and included a rent increase of almost 600%. Option B was to leave the houses as Brown's original lease termination announcement demanded. If we did not respond by their stated deadline, they would assume that we had chosen Option B. BACH responded, making it clear that they did not consider either of their presented choices "options" and refusing their offer of the rent increase accompanied by eminent lease termination. Because fruitless negotiations had taken up the majority of the two years since initial notification of termination, and because BACH was thus left with insufficient time to obtain new properties before the Charlesfield houses were lost, negotiations continued in November 1996 and produced the following final decision: BACH would vacate Carberry by September 2, 1997 but would continue to occupy Milhous until May 31, 1998.

Simultaneously, upon close inspection of Finlandia, the Providence Fire Department evicted Finlandia residents from May 1996 through February 1997, pending construction and fire safety improvements. Fire doors, wired glass windows, stove hoods, a fire repression sprinkler system, and fire escape extensions were installed; walls were torn down and others put up. Further, in May 1997, the Providence Fire Department presented BACH with a list of Watermyn's fire code violations, a list which had been unenforced but pending since 1985. The Milhous and Carberry lease terminations compounded these devastations, further threatening BACH's financial situation and ability to offer cheap, cooperative housing to as many Brown undergraduates (within the University's 55 undergraduate off-campus limit) as possible.

Facing these challenges to cooperative stability, BACH members and alumni expended time and energy rivaling that needed to propel the initial GISP. This is evinced by the commitment to Finlandia's repairs, the devotion of energy to final lease negotiation, and the formation of an updated GISP. In the spring of 1997, in line with the founding of our corporation, ten BACH members participated in a Group Independent Study Project entitled "Co-ops in Context." The class was a forum within which BACH members hoped to gain an understanding of the legal, social, economic, and cultural framework within which cooperative housing exists while placing BACH and student cooperatives in general within the context of a larger cooperative movement. The GISP also worked to develop an organic produce distribution cooperative. Bringing together BACH, a Rhode Island farmer, and over 150 local residents, the program was based out

of Milhous common space. It opened up a cooperative market for organic produce in Providence, now continued by the Community Supported Agriculture program, CSA, hosted by the Wheeler school.

Beyond the GISP, repairs, and negotiations, BACH in the late 1990's was a remarkably pro-active corporation (and group of people). BACH history was explored and organized into accessible structures. Alumni contact was strong, culminating in a two day Alumni Reunion in October 1996, and another in the spring of 2000. Despite the smaller population of BACH, more representatives have attended the 1996 – 2001 NASCO (North American Students of Cooperation) Conferences in Ann Arbor than in all of the 1980s, and in 1997, BACH was added to the NASCO Hall of Fame. The co-operative activism fostered in this period contributed to the formation of new alternative housing options in Providence. Several BACH members helped with the foundation of AS220, an artist's residence and community space downtown, and, in 2000, with the women's art space in Olneyville, the Hive Archive.

In 1998, Carberry was closed. Milhous, one third of the occupants former Carberry residents, closed later that year. Finlandia's construction, complete and up to code, resulted in the final signature on our official Certificate of Occupancy. Watermyn's installations of a new, central fire detection system and a new kitchen fire suppression system were completed in the fall of 1999. More proactive construction was also undertaken, including repairs to Watermyn's roof, restoration of Finlandia's wood floors, replacement of the Watermyn porch, ethernet wiring in both houses, and replacement of internal lead pipes with copper

The switch from three to two houses has had significant impact upon BACH. Higher rents than in the past were necessary to counter the high interest rate of the Finlandia mortgage. The Corporation began to experience more rapid turnover rates within the houses. With two houses supporting the food co-op demand previously met by three, the average food co-op size increased from 10 members in addition to house residents to 14.

Although BACH is a relatively small group of housing cooperatives, each of the houses has used its space for open mike coffee houses, rock shows, meeting places for local activist groups (such as Food Not Bombs), and puppet shows. In recent BACH history, BACH houses have included dark rooms and community band practice spaces. Though shows are infrequent, the houses have become reasonably well known music venues and much loved practice space. Additionally, each house has an extended community of food co-ops, people who eat at our houses but live elsewhere. Like house members, food co-ops attend house meetings, hold house jobs, cook once a week, eat dinner every night with the house, and generally spend a remarkable amount of time in kitchens and common spaces. BACH's extended community of food co-ops and frequenting guests

is essential to each house's day to day functioning; is crucial to the maintenance of our ideals of a broad, open door policy, and ideal restricted by our space limitations; and is fundamental in creating a coalition of collective spaces whose energy, motivation, and membership base (both formal and informal members) cannot and will not be insularly confined.