Members of Community Builders Cooperative at work.

letter from somerville, massachusetts

By Phineas Baxandall § The structure at 24 Webster Avenue sits on the Somerville border, alongside other businesses that serve the bustling city of Cambridge and take refuge from its high rents. A converted schoolhouse, the building is home to a no-nonsense construction shop with three large rooms of neatly arranged tools, big machines, and piles of lumber. Renovation has been the mainstay

For these builders, weekly meetings and a cooperative business model take the place of a boss

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHLEEN DOOHER

Each partner brings unique skills to the group, but the worst work is shared equally.

of the Community Builders Cooperative (CBC) since it was founded 23 years ago. As a worker-owned cooperative, CBC is an unusual business, but members see themselves as providing a model of how such a group can succeed. And along with many of the places they've renovated, CBC has been transformed over the years yet maintained its character.

CBC's 12 original partners first met in a Cambridge living room in 1979. Back in those days, they had no office, just an empty checking account and a home phone number. Some of the members were experienced carpenters and professional designers, others were relatively new to the business, but all wanted a change from the lack of input and frequent lay-offs that were common in traditional construction jobs. They agreed to try working together for six months, with regular Wednesday night meetings to collectively make the decisions that would take the place of a boss.

"The one thing I never envisioned was that we'd own this big building and have a fat bank account," says Marc Rudnick, one of the original partners. "We thought a handful of tools and a broken-down truck were a lot to have accumulated." The truck, a 1960 Ford pick-

up, was purchased from one of the partners for $100 when they realized they would need a vehicle for the business.

Their first job—and their big break—came that summer when a friend asked the group to gut-renovate his townhouse at a busy corner with lots of visibility. It was a hot summer and some of the first exercises in cooperative decision making were to leave work early and swim at Walden Pond. "A cooperative isn't necessarily the most efficient way to run a business," explains Sally Wetzler, another of the founding members, "but it's a great place to work."

Like many of the buildings it has renovated, CDC has been transformed over the years yet has maintained its character

During the first few years, the partners experimented with a four-tier wage system. The highest rates were for time spent on dirty and dangerous work like insulation and trash removal. Next came highly skilled cabinet making and carpentry, followed by general labor, and then paperwork. Over time, members found that this system became cumbersome and that their skills became more equal, so they moved to paying a single wage rate for all types of work, including any apprentices or workers hired for individual jobs. While each person in the cooperative has different skills that will always mean some specialization in work roles, when it comes time to fill up the garbage truck, the designer does that, too. The worst of the work still is shared equally.

Keeping the books is another task that originally rotated among members. A gray Stride-Rite shoebox passed from partner to partner each quarter along with receipts and a ledger. Rudnick, the son of a bookkeeper, recalls opening the box one day to find a wet blob of unlogged receipts. After that, accounts would be done only by those who were capable and interested. "But," he admits, "I didn't really know how to keep books." Finally in 1985, work-study students from the Boston College of Accounting helped them set up a binder-based system of double-entry bookkeeping. "That was a revolution for us."

Now that they are well established in the business, CBC partners can pick and choose among jobs. "It's pretty back there," says one partner in support of taking on a new renovation project in Waltham. "And it's an interesting job with slated oak paneling," adds another. "Is there any good food nearby?" Most of their jobs are in Cambridge and other relatively well-off areas, but the group also takes jobs at below-market rates if members feel strongly about the project, such as at a battered women's shelter, a poverty agency's food pantry, or a renovation at another cooperative.

The group has established some formal criteria for making its business decisions, such as refusing to accept jobs for condominium conversions that eliminate low-income housing or that use exotic woods from endangered rainforests. Clients are informally screened for their respectful attitude toward construction workers. And as partners have aged, the type of work they do has shifted toward cabinetry and dormers, and away from unpleasant and physically taxing tasks like demolition and floor sanding. "More and more," they find themselves deciding that "a particular job is just so unenjoyable that we are going to pay someone else to do it."

And while the 1960 Ford pickup is no longer around, it continues to serve as a reminder of CBC's unusual beginnings and a model for its distinctive path to success. Unlike most construction firms that strut their prosperity with shiny new SUVs, CBC members prefer to cut costs so that they can afford the luxury of paying their least-skilled workers the same wages as everyone else. Plus an older truck allows them to blend nicely into their surroundings.

"We park our truck where it belongs," says Rudnick. "Right in our mechanic's yard, across the street from the Waste Management transfer station in Somerville." ✻

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