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Like a fellow traveler of organizers:
A conversation with Allan Heskin on multicultural housing organizing

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in conversation with

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Abstract

In March 2023, RHJ editors Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia and Mara Ferreri had a long online chat with Allan D. Heskin on his life and committed work linking community advocacy, housing organizing and planning scholarship, as collected in books such as *The Struggle for Community* (1991). This is an edited, re-ordered version of that conversation. It contains some conversational references to Allan's work, which may read as gaps in the structure but rather than explaining things in smoothed detail, we invite readers to delve into the rich material Allan has written. We cannot overstate the value of his ethnographic analysis and planning perspectives.

Keywords

Community work, Los Angeles, housing cooperatives, housing organizing, multiculturalism, translation, Route 2

Now 85, **Allan Heskin** has a career as a lawyer and planner working with low income communities of color. He worked first as a poverty lawyer in Oakland, California and later with various communities in Los Angeles as a professor at UCLA. He became known for his work with housing cooperatives. **Melissa** and **Mara** are RHJ Editors.

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Positionality, community advocacy and scholarship

On how Allan ended up doing the work he did…

Allan Heskin: I don't know why, I've never understood why, it just happened. And it *does* feel right. I like community, I like home. So maybe that's why I always wanted to do community work. And I had no idea even what that meant. But I would say that when I

graduated from law school and they said, 'what do you want to do?' I said, 'I want to do community work'. But there was no such thing in those days. Poverty law, legal services, [it] hadn't been created yet. So they sent me to the county council, to the public lawyer as the community person. But then legal services happened, and I decided I wanted to do that. Then, I finally got on a path of doing community work...

I really was an advocate before I became a scholar, an academic. I had spent much of my time defending communities. When I was a poverty lawyer, I had a big map, a geography of the neighborhood. And after a person would tell me their story, I would go to the map and put a pin in the map and say, what is it like to live there? And sometimes I discovered things that I could do to improve the quality of their life. Like, a trucking company had been running 24 hours a day in a residential neighborhood, which was against the law. And so we shut down that trucking company.

I was very successful, but frustrated. I won a lot of cases. I went to the California Supreme Court, changed landlord tenant law, but all of this seemed defensive. It was like I was fighting an amoeba or standing on the beach trying to stop the waves, because as much as I knocked down, more would come at poor people. I mean, there's no end of the flow of degradation that approaches. So, I went back to school to try and figure out what to do. I knew how to defend people and their community, but I didn't know how to go on the offense, if you will, how to build community, how to build a safe space.

I went to planning school in hope of finding out how to go on the offense. I did learn a lot from the other students mostly, but the school I chose was not the right place. With a friend, I wrote the article "Foundation for a Concept of Radical Planning" in response to the place. We actually shut down the school after that. We led a student strike, and set up an alternative curriculum with the other PhD students to teach what the masters students wanted to know about social change. But we finally decided that the faculty was only capable of what they were doing and that there was no end to this. So, we sent the faculty roses and ended the strike! I would not like to have had me as a PhD student because I was full of energy and violence from what I had seen and what I had encountered as a poverty lawyer. I was a very passionate PhD student and had no fear whatsoever. I don't know why a lot of PhD students are very timid but I was not in the slightest. They actually had me teach a planning law course while I was a first year PhD student. So I was a faculty member while I was a student, and I was offered a job to teach at UC Irvine before I took my qualifying exams that I turned down. So that made me sort of even cockier. From planning school I went to Berkeley to be part of a special program where the undergraduate students worked and the teachers help them understand their experience. It was there I learned how to teach praxis, and a job opened up at UCLA. UCLA had just lost Peter Marcuse who was a lawyer/planner. My law background, the radical planning paper and my ability to teach praxis got me the job. UCLA was by far the best place for me to be of any planning school in the United States, they allowed me to do what I do best.

Melissa: And do you feel that it was the planning school, or was that Los Angeles, or was it both?

Allan: Well, it was both because planning school allowed me to do what I wanted. I'm very dyslexic and not a normal professor. I mean, I can't give a usual lecture because I can barely read lecture notes. So if I give a lecture, it's extemporaneous. I'm really good at process education.

One of my friends wrote a song about me, which I wish I had the lyrics of, called 'The Concatenation Blues', which is taking a lot of the little pieces and making something whole of them. And I used to be really good at that and that allowed me to take the students' desperate experiences and made a coherent lesson. Like at Berkeley. I found places for the students to work, which meant I had to be in the community to find out what was going on. And I structured the class by what jobs that focused on issues in the city. I would try and find jobs all around those issues. So that in the class, that issue was there in reality because a group of students would work each issue.

Going out looking for issues and jobs also got me into the communities, which is where I was really happy. I got to be part of lots of things and I used to hang out with women a lot because a lot of community leaders are women. I used to joke about my feminine side at that point. The big expression was 'girlfriend'. You called 'Hey girlfriend!'. So I'd be in a room with all women and they'd be going, 'girlfriend!'

Mara: This is something that we have seen a lot of in housing in Spain, perhaps not in terms of the spokespersons necessarily, but in all the informal community organizing going on. It is so women-led, and there just seems to be a bit of a pattern with housing organizing, even though they might not go down in history as the actual community leaders.

Allan: I was *like a fellow traveler of organizers*. I guess in some ways I was an organizer, but I worked more with organizers than I was an organizer myself. Sometimes they 'used' me, like one lawyer used me as an expert witness. The main tenant organization in Los Angeles at the time used me as an expert witness in the city council. And to lobby for them, they would go to the Los Angeles Times, the main paper, and make a pitch for rent control, and they would take me along to make the arguments. So I legitimized a lot of stuff, I think because I was a professor and all that comes with a lot of status. Los Angeles itself was a wide-open place. It was the frontier. Maybe because of the movie industry, I don't know why, they're very open to ideas. At least they were. So if you had an idea, it was like you sold a movie script. If I had an idea for a reform, it was possibly first of all, they had never done it. And second of all, they were open to the idea. So in that sense, it was a great place to work, like non-profit housing.

That [non-profit housing] didn't really exist in Los Angeles. There were a couple of Ford Foundation groups, one for each ethnic group. There was a black group, a Latino group, and an Asian group, but that was it in the city, and they were very localized to their neighborhoods. One of the things I did is start a community based non-profit housing organization in Santa Monica, and it had never been done before in Los Angeles. How often do you get to do something like that for the first time in a place? So Los Angeles was a great place to work in that sense if you were a housing reformer, because whatever

had been going on anywhere in the world, if they hadn't done it, they were open to trying it.

Melissa: One of the questions we had, based on what we have read of your work, on the intersection of community and housing organizing, particularly in relation to the Route 2 co-operatives,[1] the way that organizing and that struggle happened, in relation to gender, ethnicity, multiculture and race...

Allan: The Route 2 co-operatives are my true love. Including marrying the leader of the group. People used to joke that I'm the most integrated academic they ever met. I married my work! Route 2 was the realization of the radical planning article I wrote years before. I was lucky to be part of it.

…And on the gender chapter, [Chapter 6 in *The Struggle for Community*] I can tell you how that happened. My sister in arms, Jacqueline Leavitt knew I was working on the book, and I told her about it. She said, 'there's no chapter on gender!' She yelled at me and handed me a giant stack of feminist literature, feminist theory, and said, you must write a chapter on gender. I said, 'yes, ma'am', I wrote a chapter on gender, which was pretty popular in women's circles. That's how it happened.

The women in the leadership of the co-ops were very powerful women, but they didn't call themselves feminists in the Anglo sense. They were in a lot of ways feminist, but more a bell hooks feminist. The women's most popular story was with an Asian woman who was very much a housewife, sort of very stereotypical quiet, private person who came to the meetings but said nothing, but after her experience in the co-op went out and got a job , and they were quite thrilled that this woman had liberated herself to the point of going out and getting a job. That was a major woman's success, that this woman had freed herself from her house and got 'out in the world'.

Mara: Interesting. Well, it was also a very specific moment in history as well. For some communities, probably also, if there were migrant communities, the breaking of certain kinds of cultural molds, I guess.

On mediation, translation, and multiethnic organizing

Mara: I read both your article on multicultural organizing (Heskin and Heffner, 1987) and the chapter dedicated to it in *The Struggle for Community*. It's very interesting as I had not come across anything specifically written about multicultural and bilingual organizing for housing justice - can you say something about that, and your position in relation to it?

[1] Route 2 was the name of a freeway corridor proposed by Caltrans (the California Department of Transportation, an executive department of the U.S. state of California) in the Echo Park-Silverlake district of Los Angeles. Before the planned demolition, the houses had been leased to tenants, who occupied them in 1975 to resist eviction. By the end of the struggle in the early 1980s, the tenants had become owners, either individually or through collective co-operative ownership (Heskin, 1991). Route 2 involved more than 270 housing units and over a 1,000 people spread over 2 1/4 miles.

Allan: I thought that was the best thing I wrote. Route 2 was a very mixed group ethically, racially linguistically, nationally and by class. You have a mixed group, so automatically you have the suspicion of racism or another form of bias in the group when you have different languages and different cultures. So people on both sides are going to make 'faux pas'. They're going to say stupid things. Any of us would do it because we are who we are. The group could either laugh that you said something really dumb, or they could get angry that you said something really racist. In groups there is usually a person who decides whether to get angry or to laugh, and that person is called a multicultural mediator. If the mediator chooses to laugh your group is more likely to succeed. Because racism is everywhere, and everybody's sensitive to it. It took a lot of work in Route 2 to get to laughter.

In my particular case I am very direct. One of the Latinos told me "We like what you do, but not how you do it." There's a lot well, you would know from Barcelona, there's a lot of the Spanish language thats very polite and very circular. It's not a linier language. So here I am going against this polite, circular language I talk in a straight ahead, rough American way. And so, what he said made total sense because I'm just like a bull in a china shop, and that's not acceptable in polite-talk.

Mara: Well, and I guess there is also a question of cultural and intracultural translation that takes place even with people who speak multiple languages. On this point, I was thinking that since the Route 2 co-operative emerges from a struggle, it's not an intentional community, so how did this translation issue play out? Or maybe there were some elements of intentionality there?

Allan: It was a random group of people. It was not an intentional community. So it's interesting in that sense that it's whoever rented Caltrans, the state transportation agency, property. So whoever happened to live there when they decided not to build the freeway was part of the group. The area is a place where immigrant move after they have settle, called a second neighborhood. It was full of garment workers and those kinds of folk from twelve different countries, called Latinos regardless of the country they came from in the Route 2. They did not always get along with each other. There were also whites, blacks, Asians, Chicanos, called Americanos in the co-ops, living there.

There was conflict about what form of Spanish to use. There was a committee was set up to resolve the problem that was finally disband in failure. In particular, the Cubans and the Mexicans don't get along at all. Then you have the African Latinos, who said a lot of the white Latinos don't like them. So you not only had this mixed ethnic Americano group, but you also had a mixed conflicted national group in the Spanish-speaking group.

We eventually had to get a court-certified translator to translate meetings. She was the only person who was really capable of doing this, of handling all this. And the nuance, too, because you're talking about co-operatives and mortgages. You're not talking about what you say to your mother or your brother. You're talking business language. So that's not a language that every bilingual person has.

Melissa: And do you feel then with that whole perspective and that trajectory and that understanding that you gained of what was needed and what are these roles that facilitate the process, do you feel like those lessons have been learned? That they've been carried through? That this kind of figures now exist in a more, I don't know, a more institutional way?

Allan: I'll tell you an interesting story about that. Somebody in the labor movement read that paper on multicultural organizing and invited me to talk at a labor gathering about it because he was so thrilled. The Latino organizers were mad and started giving the person who invited me a hard time. Not me so much, but really sort of poo-pooing my ideas. This was not surprising because I was attacking their jobs. I was saying having a Latino organizer is not enough that you need a translator and mediator and you don't want your organizer being the translator and mediator because that gives too much power in the organizer's hands. Also you cannot hire a mediator... You just have to acknowledge that need and encourage that mediator role.

Mara: Going back to the article about multicultural and bilingual organizing, I was wondering about these lessons, or this way of understanding what could be a positive way of dealing with these tensions, acknowledging structural racism, structural classism, gender dynamics, and that intermediating roles are needed. Do you know if these ideas have been taken up more widely either in practice or in scholarship? Not necessarily thinking about co-operative housing building, but just housing organizing more broadly in the cities that we live in, which are more of that and often in ways which are incredibly overly simplified when we come to thinking about 'community organizing'.

Allan: Organizing often means segregating groups. I mean, in the article that you sent me, there was a Black group and a feminist group.[2] So they solved the problem by segregating. But segregating does not solve the problem. I'm a person who loves multiculturalism. In fact, one of the stories I tell in my memoirs is one of the reasons. There are 100 reasons why I love my wife, but when I was first with her, she brought me to dinner at a local restaurant and I walked in and there were a group of, I don't know, ten, a dozen people sitting around a table. They got there before us, and every ethnic group was represented. And I basically almost cried because that's how I always wanted it to be, but I never was in that kind of environment where it just was like, racism free, a racism free zone. And that's what I mentioned in what I wrote to you, that my wife is African American and very much a multiculturalist.

In Route 2 there was not your normal pledge of allegiance, instead there was a pledge of non-discrimination. You just could not discriminate. You just didn't do that. And they would articulate this; different people would articulate this: the pledge of non-discrimination in their own way. There were individuals who would try, but they were criticized if they tried.

[2] Reference to an early draft of Ferrer, M. 2023, Radical difference in 'transitional commoning': hidden histories of London's squats to co-ops. *City*, 27(3-4), pp. 360-376.

Melissa: I think probably in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter recently, I know a few groups from the UK that have done this, but they've come to terms with the reality and now are kind of understanding that they need or should have this as part of their internal policies and ways of doing within community. They would not call it pledging, but essentially, it's pledging to a kind of non-racist or anti racist work, how they do things and how they recruit as well for the future, and things like that. But it's very much kind of 'in the moment' of this historic period.

Allan: Well, coalition is what it's all about. But it's hard to do. It's just hard to do. I mean, there are so many pitfalls. You have all this attack and all this experience, external experience in the United States, particularly in Britain, too. It's just that racism is so pervasive…and very hard to deal with.

Mara: So many of the projects that Melissa and I are encountering in the research, the different types of research that we do across Europe [on collaborative and cooperative housing] become a bit tokenistic. So, on the one hand, you might have the segregation of the population, or you have this idea of integration and inclusivity, which then pigeonholes people in very specific subject positions, which are inherently subordinate to a dominant culture.

Melissa: It's such a small percentage of the very small percentage of alternative housing projects that are going on. But there's this move towards having things like [diversity] quotas, in the allocation of housing units. And you talk about your experience with the co-op sector, the whole question about allocation, and who has the right and who's the better fit and why…

Allan: There was this great debate in Route 2 among the people about whether you pick the neediest or the most capable for vacant units. That was a constant tension.

Melissa: Moving to the question of translation, we both found your discussion on language so provocative and interesting and important for our own thinking. Also thinking of the *Radical Housing Journal* as a project in housing organizing of sorts. Even though it's just a written online publication, it involves a lot of organizing as well. And we've been kind of circling the question of what languages can we publish, given that we're all English speakers. For many editors, English is our second or third language, not necessarily our main language. Others are monolingual. And the journal itself doesn't have the resources to translate, we're completely, entirely, a voluntary affair, we can't hire translators… So there's this question, I guess, that came up in my mind as I was reading it, which is on the one hand, we have this idea as a journal that we want to publish in different languages. But are we then recognizing the issue of translatability in the way that you've told it? Or are we still glossing over all sorts of other differences?

Mara: Well, we try to be sensitive to differences in cultures and languages of housing organizing, but it's not easy to do.

Melissa: Right, but if this universalist approach to language is what we end up with, then this is a translated knowledge that isn't actually translating the kind of knowledge that

should be getting translated, if you see what I mean? Like you say in your chapter, Allan, the phrases and there's the things that have a tone that unless you translate it I mean, this is why there's amazing fiction book translators and others that are crappy, right? It's like being able to capture and truly find the equivalent phrase in another language. That kind of thing. It just, for me, really highlighted that tension. What is it that we might want?

Allan: Well, the only thing you can do is to have accurate translation, because if you don't have accurate translation, then it's impossible. In that part I talk about how the Latinos thought they were being lied to because those people who did know English said, the translator is telling me something different than what you're saying in English. So their initial reaction was that they're trying to trick us, not that we had a bad translator. The English speakers didn't know that it was a bad translation and at first took offense as the accusation of lying, but finally figured out it was a translation problem.

That's really hard because it was expensive to hire a court certified translator. That's not a cheap thing. Luckily, there was a woman who was both a community activist and a court certified translator. And that's very lucky that such a person existed because she was reasonable. She wasn't charging her court rate. She did it for the movement.

Mara: Simultaneous translation is so complex. Once I volunteered to do simultaneous translation in a large meeting of the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City. Even just choosing the correct terminology, across technical and non-technical language, was very hard... And another aspect of that is appreciating differences. For example, if you're bringing together groups that are setting up co-operatives across different contexts and political cultures, acknowledging that the term 'housing co-operative' itself means something completely different.

Allan: Right. The word itself gets translated differently in different languages.

The translator controlled the meeting because people would get very excited and start talking a mile a minute and she would say, 'Stop, I can't translate that. You have to slow down.' So she would calm people down so she could translate. So she was not only a translator but a sort of sergeant of arms.

Mara: It probably made some of these gatherings so much more interesting because you have to take the time to listen, and you create these artificial pauses that break the flow. At this meeting [of the European Action Coalition], it was fascinating. I think there were simultaneous translations in five or six languages at the same time.

Melissa: Also, you started your chapter talking about how important conflict and tension are to growth, and we've seen that. In the groups that Mara and I have studied over time, it's always with the conflict and it's always with tensions that things happen, move and shift. To what extent do we need to intervene in processes in order to ease the tension? And to what extent do we need to let these things happen on their own? Group learning often happens through tensions and conflicts.

Allan: The group delt with conflict by at the drop of a hat would call a mass meeting. Anything that caused any kind of controversy, they would call a mass meeting. Many of these meeting were among the most interesting

Mara: It's great that it was possible to do it.

Melissa: But I'm wondering in terms of when we think about who gets to attend those meetings… you know what I mean? Like, at a drop of a hat, can a mother that's feeding her child just go? Probably not.

Allan: You are correct because the people in different places in the economy are available at the different times. Working class folks mostly want to meet in the evening during the week while people working in the secondary economy want to meet on the weekends and then there is the question of gender. One of the most amazing things is that initially the Latinos at the co-op meeting were almost all women. Then co-op leaders called a mass meeting to let people know that the property was about to be purchased. At the meeting everybody laughed when we told them we're going to borrow a million and a half dollars to buy and rehab their co-op. Like, who's going to loan us a million and a half dollars?! But when it happened, at the next regular co-op meeting the men showed up, all the women stayed home. And all the men showed up, because now we're talking about property. We learned that the women were going home and reporting to their husbands what happened at the meetings. In fact, one woman said, 'I can't vote on this until I go talk to my husband'. The men only stayed for a month or two. And then the women came back.

On radical education and racial divides

Melissa: On the one hand, there are the functions of what is required [for multicultural housing organizing]. You talk about them in terms of distinct roles: the organizer, the interpreter, the cultural mediator, etcetera. And you talk about at some point there being funding for it, right? So there was a need, there was a point when you didn't have funding for the interpreter, but when the funding came from the federal government, with funding came other opportunities and developments. We found this very interesting because it connected to what we've seen sporadically within the community-led housing sector, around this role of education, at least in the co-op and cohousing sectors. You have these trainers of different kinds with different specialties that are becoming more and more professionalized with a kind of educational remedy, right? They're meant to teach nonviolent conflict resolution and other specific techniques that help to facilitate the social conviviality of groups, but also more technical aspects, such as finance. So we were curious about the role of radical education and maybe connecting it to what we were just talking about, on racial divides and the problem of addressing this.

Allan: They did training. They did hire people who did training periodically, but never on race, just on the operation of the co-ops. They were multi on so many levels and their leader was committed to multiethnicity. She repeatedly solved unsolvable issues. An

English friend who was involved in co-ops read my book and said it was very familiar to his experience but they never had the person who kept solving problems. Route 2 was fortunate to have that person.

There was a co-op, it was called the Four Streets Co-op because it was across four streets, it had 98 units and there was I think a 16 unit building with almost total land coverage except for a driveway and no parking, Next to it was a small duplex, side by side houses with a huge backyard and a big front yard. And one day four guys got drunk, two Americanos, a Latino and an Asian and two Latino immigrants in a good Route 2 multiethnicity form went into the neighbors' yard, moved all their plants, and created a parking area behind. And they wrote this thing that any anarchist would love about collective property and how it has to be equitable. The invaded were immigrant Latinos who didn't speak English, monolingual Spanish speaking people. And one of the people who invaded was on the board of the co-op. And he'd been saying they wanted this, but the board was doing other things and never got to it. The police came and he said this was co-op business and they left. So then, what should the co-op do?

The Spanish speakers found an advocate in a bilingual schoolteacher who was in the co-op. So the first thing the co-op did was remove the invading guy from his spot on the board and replaced him with the bilingual school teacher. Then the next thing they did was create a committee. There were 30 parcels in the co-op and they got a representative of all 30 parcels in the co-op. And toured all the property to see, were the invaders right about inequity? The 30 people then recommended to the board what to do. They acknowledged that these guys were right, that this made sense, to take part of this backyard which was infinitely larger than anybody else had. And the reason they wanted parking is kids, after they came out of school, passed through this neighborhood and they would pull the aerials off of the cars and key them. Then the next thing the board did with this, is that they required these four guys to build fences around the front yard and the backyard so the children of the Spanish speakers would have a place to play. Lastly, they prohibited the guys who invaded from parking in the parking lot leaving the space for the people who had not invaded their neighbors. Which I think is just brilliant.

So I loved to tell the story just up to the invasion and then say to a group, 'what would you do if you were on the board of the co-op?' It is great for co-op training.

Melissa: This connects back to training, being able to train and to teach on it, whether it's race or gender or class, being able to have that kind of role in co-ops, and who should be paying for it, because that's also one of the issues. And it seems that it's necessary to pay for it in order for it to happen, right? Like the story about the translator. There need to be the material conditions for that to happen. But then there's a debate sometimes happening in groups around losing your autonomy and your freedom and finances, potentially, by having to have this external kind of mediation. And I wonder if you have thoughts about how to finance this work, and who should be financing it.

Allan: Route 2 early on obtained foundation money for organizing and training. Their multiculturalism and low income were attractive to funders. Some of my students helped write those grant proposals. Once they had income, they used their own money. The whole story is that they fired an ineffective organizer and reprogrammed the money to translation. It is a matter of priorities.

In terms of funding anti racist stuff? I don't know. The group I was in didn't have this problem because it had an antiracist leader, and it had other people who did not abide racism. The leader ran a multiethnic daycare center, a co-op daycare center, which was also very multiethnic. In fact, the kids could count to three in twelve languages. That's the kind of school it was. And people studied her childcare center because it was multiethnic. So we didn't have to create that. Whether people want to be multiethnic is a big question. Multicultural? Not everybody wants to be multicultural. Some people are so into their own identity that they just don't want to do that. Why do I want to give up any part of my identity?

There was a period after the co-ops were formed when a group of Latino activists moved into the co-ops and tried to do a power analysis and formed a Latino caucus, an interest group, power politics approach. But it just did not work. They could not find a power structure in this very decentralized cooperative organization. They all left a short time later in frustration. One from this group became president of one of the coops, but moved out after the other men in the coop came to a co-op meeting and told him to leave. One of these men who ousted the president told me the former president was trying to be patron and they would not have it. I knew about patronism, but it was interesting to hear the whole theory from this man lips. I asked him where the African American leader of the coop organizing fit in and he said she is the Madre. A very different tone.

Mara: And whose role then it is. Because I think in many of the groups that we've looked at, and also thinking about some of the examples in Spain, sometimes that's a burden implicitly or explicitly put on minorities, that the minorities 'have' to educate the majority culture.

Allan: Route 2 was an almost all-minority group. It was a multiethnic group. There really weren't a lot of white people. One of the white people sued them for discrimination after I left. But there were just not a lot of white people, it was really people of color finding a way to get along with each other.

Mara: My sense is that the situation in Europe right now is so constrained by the upfront costs of setting up any of these community-led housing projects that inevitably you will have the dominant white inhabitants, those with capital, cultural, economic or otherwise, driving some of this. Maybe I'm being overly pessimistic.

Allan: And then it becomes this organization out of a racist, violent society. And you put in this little organization and say, 'we're not racist here'. Not so easy to do. And I don't know that that's only a matter of training… It's a matter of commitment. Many of the success stories are heroic tales.

It is interesting that although the initial effort to organize and lead the co-ops definitely lead by largely working-class Americanos in English. At least in my coop the Latinos who always were the majority now make up most of the board and the meeting are now conducted in Spanish.

Melissa: Well, it's also a matter of the society that you're in. Because you were describing how the community was like 'the second neighborhood'. That once migrants have some kind of status and job, then they can move in. In Europe, every country will have its own context of how and when migrants actually have a sort of right to be visible, even to exist on paper. And that varies massively depending on economic status, but also how you arrive and what culture you belong to, etcetera. So there's just a lot of invisibility of that multiculturality because what has to happen is an immediate retreat or a kind of 'taking in' of migrants by their own groups that already exist, if there is a strong community in that way, or they get kind of parceled off by the government in ways that are deeply invisibilizing. And that makes any organizing very difficult, particularly multicultural organizing.

Allan: The tendency is to organize within groups. There are very few multicultural organizers, most organizers relate to their ethnic group, which is a problem. A lot of the Latino organizers wouldn't deal with Route 2 because it wasn't Latino. They were nationalists, and they wanted to deal with their nation. Right. So it was not easy. The heavy-duty organizers wouldn't work there. Plus, they're all conflict people, not community-building people.

Mara: Also, that identity politics in that forum is easy to read. It's a useful container for articulating certain kinds of struggles. I think the kind of research I was doing in London, some of these identities included Pan Africanists reconstituting certain non-nationalist identity politics. But even so, I just don't know to what extent work was done to actually understand different subject positions within that.

Allan: So you're asking me, how do we clone Madres, and send her around to all these groups?! I don't have an answer for that. I couldn't fill that role. I would not be able to do it. I mean, I could do and did anti-racist training to co-ops, but when it comes to the day-to-day trauma of interacting across racial ethnic lines, it's just hard. It's really hard.

Melissa: It makes me think of a group that I met recently, in South London, who are living in one of these properties. I don't know if you know these 'property guardians' in the UK. You know a lot about it, Mara. They are 'anti-squat' private companies that get hired to keep properties out of the hands of occupiers and keep them 'safe' for the owners. And they grant contracts to people to live there and act as guardians.

Mara: Technically, they give temporary licenses to occupy the premises, with very limited rights.

Melissa: And it can be all sorts of spaces, from enormous old libraries to sheds, sometimes places not equipped for habitation. As a guardian, you have little rights, but pay reduced rents per month. And this group I was mentioning is a multiethnic, multicultural group

that ended up being there by chance. They didn't know one another. They were just individuals looking for a place to live and ended up in this old school. And now they've gotten into a sort of legal fight and have organized as a co-operative. I interviewed them as migrants, because my research project was about collaborative housing and migration, and they had never self- identified or thought of themselves as such. They were talking about their identification as 'precarious', that's their unifying condition, the way that they think about themselves. But then they started to reflect a bit more about their differences and the practices. So it's been very interesting hearing you, because I want to now go back to that group and ask them 'who's doing the multicultural organizing here'? Because they're highly organized. And I have an idea, from the people that I've met, of whom those people might be. But I don't think they would identify themselves, obviously, in that sophisticated language. I think they just do it and it's working because they've been there for years and they seem to manage all sorts of differences.

Allan: It is possible, it is possible. But whether you can do it intentionally, I don't know. That's what you're really asking. Can you do it intentionally?

Melissa: Is it the thrown-together nature of it?

Autonomous organizing with/out professionals

Allan: There is another co-op I helped start, which is an equally fantastic story that's in the memoir (Heskin, 2020) that involved immigrants that is closer to your case called 'Comunidad Cambria'. The underground newspaper said this was the worst slum in Los Angeles. The head of the housing department came to my housing class and said, nobody's dealing with slum property in the city. They were all into new construction. So I went out and I talked to the heads of the non-profit groups. And none of them were

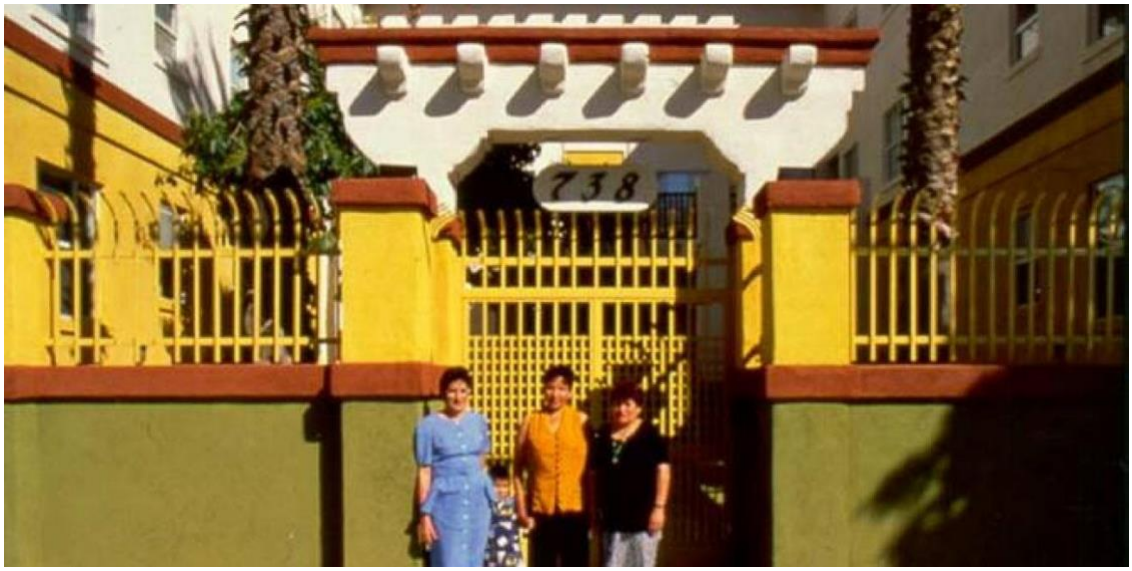

Figure 1
Photo of the three women who lead Comunidad Cambria in front of their building. Author and date unknown.

interested. They all just wanted to do what they did. So I said, 'okay, I'll do it. And I'll do a co-op in a slum building'.

So I talked to the local poverty lawyers who knew what rent strikes were going on and stuff, and they started taking me to buildings. And many of the buildings, people said, 'we don't want to own this building. It should be torn down'. But I came to this building that was designed by a famous French architect. He had come to LA and designed this building and a hospital, and it was a very nice building, but a gang lived in the building, and there were actual bullet holes in the building from gang fights. And it was a drug supermarket. It had many entrances and at night someone would come to your window, tap on your window and put a gun in your face and say, 'open the door', because there were lots of doors. There also was a pedophile who lived in the building and people with mental health issues, too.

They did have somebody equivalent to me in the building. They had a Catholic Worker. I don't know if they exist in Britain, Catholics who go and live with poor people? So they had this guy there who could translate, who was a very sophisticated guy, and I make my pitch, and I liked them immediately. They were led by three Spanish-speaking women from different countries, who were amazing. Three women. And so we did it. And it's an amazing thing that it happened.

My role was talking to their management company and I convinced them that it would be a brilliant idea to turn this into affordable housing and they should sell it to my non-profit. They would never sell to the tenants, but I had a non-profit, and the landlord agreed to sell to that organization. There's a lot more to the story than this, of course, but most importantly at the last second, as the escrow closed, I turned the building over to the tenants' organization.

It's still operating. LA is full of buildings that were built for single people when people were flowing into Los Angeles. And they have dance halls in them, in their basements. So it had this wonderful community space. And we had to rehab the place totally for families because it was small units. It's a great story, too. But I didn't live there, so it's a great story from the outside

I have no training in anthropology, but I think if I had to pick a discipline, I'm most probably that because that is what I really care about. I'll tell you this one story that a woman told me that was wonderful. She was from Central America, and she said, 'I don't know what you people are all about. I come to this country, they tell me it's all about individualism, that I have to be an individual.' She came from a collective in her little village. 'And now you come around and say we're going to be collective again. Will you make your mind up?!' People are very theoretical. That's what shocked me, how theoretical people were. When I would talk to someone, I'd be going in my mind, 'that's so and so's theory', it really was amazing to me how theoretical people are. None of it comes from books, but they lived it. I was blown away virtually every day by what somebody would tell me.

Melissa: In your book you had a good story about public housing programs, like Section 8, and that when you're in these groups there are some people that are more subject to those programs than others.

Alan: Are you referring to the story of how they got the section 8? Do you remember that, at the beginning of the book? The government was not at all supportive. The politicians were supportive, but the bureaucracy was not at all supportive. And they had this terrible housing bureaucracy at that time. It got better as my students took over, but it was terrible at that time. And there was a thing called moderate rehab Section 8 that existed at that time, a rent subsidy, basically, with the agreement that you're rehabilitating the place. The city had lost millions of dollars of this subsidy because they hadn't used it and the co-op wanted that subsidy.

A former student of mine, assigned to the project by the state knew about this. And we had this war council meeting to talk about this. The war council was made up of leadership and professionals that agreed to me on a moments' notice to deal with things between co-op meetings. I was on the war council and many times I drove across Los Angeles to one of these meetings. Route 2 was totally resident controlled, so it was the residents who allowed the professionals to be there.

The former students working for the state found out about the city losing the Section 8 funding and she asked what do we do about this? We needed that subsidy. They had lost it, but she knew the city could get it back if they used it right away. And she wanted to know, should she go to the city and say, if you don't give us the Section 8, we will make public that you have lost millions of dollars of subsidy? And the war committee voted to do that. She went to the city and got the subsidy back from the federal government and got it for the project. That's what it took to get that subsidy.

Another of my favorite things that you haven't read yet is the 'no staff' wraps. This is how community-controlled they were. They had a staff of maybe eight or nine people. And periodically they would throw the staff out and say, we want to talk among ourselves. And they let me be there because I was sort of this in-between person. And they would just talk about what they were doing and why they were doing it and what they really wanted to do to get clear in their minds what they wanted because the professionals are always throwing things at them, and they would then come back and tell the professionals what they wanted. I don't know of any other group that had these 'no staff' wraps where they threw out all the professionals and just talked among themselves about what they were trying to do.

Mara: Wow. I don't think I've ever come across that.

Melissa: No. And it really takes that notion of autonomy to the next level, right? Because we are, yes, this co-operative, which is kind of semi-autonomous, but we also have this extra level of, like, we don't need to be controlled. We can hire professionals, but we can also be in control…

Allan: …and they often treated the professionals like crap, like they were treated. They treated them like workers, not like the professionals who deserved merit badges for working, except for the leader, who always had a pot of something on the stove, and the staff would always come over, drop it at dinner time. She's a sensational cook. But what else can I tell you that I know about this group? Anyway, I was like in 7th Heaven because I had written this radical planning paper in 1973, not ever imagining that I would encounter it. And then I encountered it. I am very theoretical, but not 'big theory'. I like big theory. Ed Soja and I were buddies, we used to hang out together, and I could talk big theory with him, and I appreciated the big theory that he used, but we would joke because he was a very massive human being. I don't know if you ever encountered him. He was well over 6ft and very heavy, he was a massive human being, and I'm a very small person. I'm five seven, and I'm not skinny, but I'm small. And so we would joke that he dealt with the big things and I dealt with the little things. And we helped each other.

This other project, Comunidad Cambria, in its own way was unbelievable. They got lots of money because people fell in love with them. These three ladies, they did a wonderful thing. The gang said, 'if you do this, we'll burn down the building'. Of course, it was a concrete building, so not so easy to burn. But what the head of the organization did is buy fire extinguishers for everybody in the building. So [they could react] if the gang set it on fire. Then the president had a daughter in a wheelchair. And the gang threatened to kill the girl, and she went on with it anyway, even though they threatened to kill her daughter, which was pretty impressive.

Mara: I'm looking forward to reading more about it! Thank you so much, Allan.

Melissa: Thank you. It's been so wonderful to get to know your work properly.

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