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Employee housing: Messy vitality's incubator

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It's been interesting living in employee housing for over a dozen years. In retrospect, it's probably the one thing that's kept me here in Aspen. Out of all the comically insane living conditions out there, employee housing is a relatively safe bet. And speaking of crazy, employee housing is responsible for keeping this town's signature dish — messy vitality — hot and plentiful.

There's a transitional time in your life when you go from the safe confines of the nest to your own personal living space; freedom. When I had to make that inevitable transition from growing up in the West End to getting my own apartment in Aspen, it was a sobering experience. There was nothing out there under \$1,000 a month and some of the living situations were borderline illegal — and that was in the early '90s. It definitely caused me to see our town a lot differently.

Being a single father at the time made the prospect of living in Aspen in an apartment with a kid daunting, and seemingly impossible. You know what motivated me? Snowboarders. I figured if they could move to Aspen and figure out a way to live, what was my problem? I found a carriage house in the West End for \$600 a month in a freak stroke of dumb luck, and moved in with a guy twice my age I'd never met. It was the perfect transitional living situation, close to home, in town, price was right and the landlords were generous and understanding. It was a far cry and relief from some of the other walk-in closets in people's houses I was staring down the barrel of.

Ultimately, my roommate got married and moved out. My new roommate was a guy I went to Aspen High with. We were both single in our 20s, athletic and happy go lucky — he grew up in a teepee and I had a 5-year-old kid. It was a lot like that TV show "Two and a Half Men," only a lot better and more realistic. We had a nickname for our dear old Victorian carriage house — the "Love Shack." It was a prescient moniker considering everyone who lived there is now happily married.

When it came time to move on to the next living situation, employee housing was just about the only realistic option for me. You gotta understand, moving out of the West End was one of the hardest things to do. After looking around at some available employee housing units to buy, something came up on the outskirts of the city limits. The lottery balls bounced this way and that till our number came up.

I was really bitter about moving west past the Castle Creek Bridge. I still am. Depending on the day, I realize how lucky I am to live in employee housing. Moving downvalley was never an option for me. It still isn't. I have two businesses in town, and living downvalley just wouldn't work for me mentally, physically or spiritually. I don't hold anything against all of my friends who moved downvalley, I just don't understand it. I guess I'm mad at them for doing it. Their replacements just aren't the same. Interestingly enough, I've seen a trend in recent years. People who moved downvalley with families are now moving back to Aspen and living in employee housing. Maybe it's the schools or they've had enough

of the commute, which at times feels aggressive and dangerous.

If you're one of those people who hate the employee housing program, the housing projects themselves and the people who live in them, you can rest assured that living in employee housing in Aspen is no pleasure cruise. It's not like we're lying around in bathtubs full of caviar, eating lobster tails all day. Even we residents of employee housing are faced with real world problems like sporadic cell service, periodic cable outages, incessantly barking dogs, inconsistent snow removal and bad water pressure in the shower. Not to mention the piles of junk, abandoned skis, bikes, old cars and sporting equipment driving the property values down. Want to see how successful the employee housing program is? Just look at the bus stop on a school morning as a barometer.

A lot of people balk on employee housing because it's not free market. They are unable to see beyond the modest deed restricted investment. A community has an obligation to house the people it consists of. Whatever you think is wrong with Aspen, the employee housing program is part of the solution. Probably the smartest thing I ever did was buy an employee housing unit.

I've heard it said that each generation should try to do better than the previous one. By my helplessly crooked yardstick, living in employee housing is a far cry from the West End of Aspen. I am however thankful that the program exists. If there's one lasting tangible legacy I will leave behind to my children, it's my employee housing home.

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