

## Shared accommodation: Let's stick together

Shared accommodation in a clean, spacious, modern house is an alternative to buying a poky pad and living alone. Charlotte Metcalf meets a landlord carving out a niche in a tough market .

By Charlotte Metcalf

Published: 12:00PM BST 28 May 2010

When I left university in 1980, it was easy to find big houses with rooms to rent in London. Few of us could afford to rent alone or buy, so we lived communally, sharing the bathroom and the fridge – and throwing parties together.

Then along came Mrs Thatcher, exhorting us to own our homes, and soon developers were procuring houses and converting them into flats. Decent shared accommodation became elusive as studio flats flooded the market. Toughing it out in a tiny, one-bedroom flat became the norm.



Full house: left to right, Marie-Noelle Calderan, Christian Goldsbrough, Adam Goff, Ahmed Eltohamy and Aodh O'Lionaird are all converts to communal living Photo: PHILIP HOLLIS

### Related Articles

[It's chic to share](/property/buyingsellingandmoving/3439906/Shared-ownership-Its-chic-to-share.html) (/property/buyingsellingandmoving/3439906/Shared-ownership-Its-chic-to-share.html)

[Let it out and let the money roll in](/property/rentingproperty/6485891/Let-out-a-spare-room-and-let-the-money-roll-in.html) (/property/rentingproperty/6485891/Let-out-a-spare-room-and-let-the-money-roll-in.html)

[Pass the student housing test](/property/propertymarket/6087546/Pass-the-student-accommodation-test.html) (/property/propertymarket/6087546/Pass-the-student-accommodation-test.html)

[Living together: Return of the extended family](/property/3360341/Living-together-Return-of-the-extended-family.html) (/property/3360341/Living-together-Return-of-the-extended-family.html)

[Sandwich generation keep it in the family](/property/propertymarket/5794864/Sandwich-generation-keep-it-in-the-family.html) (/property/propertymarket/5794864/Sandwich-generation-keep-it-in-the-family.html)

[Money talk: Shared ownership](/property/investmentinproperty/3360443/Money-talk-Shared-ownership.html) (/property/investmentinproperty/3360443/Money-talk-Shared-ownership.html)

For newcomers, London suddenly became a whole lot lonelier... until now.

It was when I was returning to London in January and looking for a flat to rent that an estate agent asked if I would consider communal living. With a five-year-old daughter it wasn't for me, but that word "communal" harked back to the good old days, and I was intrigued to know what was on offer.

So that's how I find myself in Parsons Green, knocking on the door of a house that, at first glance, looks nothing out of the ordinary. Christian Goldsbrough, the landlord, doesn't actually live here but has done – he makes a habit of inhabiting his properties for a week or two as the first tenants move in so he can spot and iron out any problems. Now he shows me around with pride.

The house has a neutral décor and simple but decent furnishings, certainly a big step-up from the tired, sagging furniture I've seen while flat-hunting. There are five ample bedrooms, each with its own television and separate Sky connection.

The kitchen, which doubles as a communal area, includes comfortable sofas, a big flat-screen television with DVD, Sky and Wii, a chunky American-style fridge and lots of sleek, shiny storage. This is a long way from the chaotic, cramped communal kitchens that I remember. There's also a garden with a barbecue and a big table, to encourage group activities.

Christian sees himself as a pioneer, offering a personal brand of communal living that is proving to be increasingly attractive to young professionals. He already has 18 communal houses in Reading and five other London houses in Fulham, Wimbledon and Clapham. All are decorated and furnished to the same standard.

Christian believes that if the formula is right, people will definitely choose to share: "There are basic rules. My houses only have one living space so people don't split into groups. I don't take couples as it throws out the communal dynamic. You can't control everything and people might pair off, but in principle the best solution for a communal house is to have a mixture of men and women within a 10-year age gap."

Matt Hutchinson, who wrote *The Essential Guide to Flatsharing* with Rupert Hunt and runs [www.spareroom.co.uk](http://www.spareroom.co.uk) (<http://www.spareroom.co.uk>), has identified that people are now sharing for much longer than before.

"A few years ago you'd be looking to own by the time you were in your late twenties, but not any more. High property prices and having to put down such a huge deposit, plus student debt, which is a relatively new phenomenon, have changed the way young professionals are living. They may start off living communally for financial reasons, but now we're definitely seeing that people prefer it."

Matt set up a London property website in 1999 and there was such a demand for sharing that in 2004 he branched out and set up Spare Room: the site has 1.3 million registered users.

Christian believes he was the first to catch on to the growing trend away from living alone: "Just after my 35th birthday in 2003, every Tom, Dick and Harry was buying up one-bedroom flats, doing them up and renting them out. I looked around and saw how isolated people had become, including myself. We'd moved a long way from that golden age of the Seventies when people were having Jubilee parties in the street and getting to know each other," he says.

"I was living in a two-bedroom flat, and I rented a room out so I could save up for a new car. I enjoyed sharing so I decided to recycle the idea of communal living but with a modern twist. I bought a house in Brighton – and I've based all my houses on that model."

The first person to move into Christian's Parsons Green house was Ahmed, a 34-year-old software developer. Ahmed's marriage had collapsed and, he says: "I hated coming back to an empty, dark house. I decided I needed to be around people." On the way to see the house, Ahmed did have second thoughts: "It was a bit far from the Tube and I'd seen a lot of rubbish places, but when I walked in and saw how clean, new and sunny it was, I changed my mind."

Now the house is full. "I wouldn't have necessarily chosen to live with these guys but it's worked out great," says Marie-Noelle, a medical rep and the only woman. "We do Sunday lunch with anyone who's around, we go for walks together and if someone's getting a takeaway they call to check who wants to share it."

Ahmed likes the fact that Marie-Noelle occasionally works from home as he does. "I can work but then have a break for a cup of tea and a chat."

For Aodh, a web designer and the youngest member of the house, the biggest bonus is that Christian pays all the bills, including heating, council tax, Sky and a weekly cleaner. "For us hurried professionals, life's complicated enough without having to work out who owes what when," he says.

Christian's newer house around the corner is also full. Jenny, 36, works for British Telecom and says: "I could afford my own flat but when I saw how spacious the house was, I immediately took a room. Christian's houses are on three storeys so I have my own flat within the house."

Christian says: "My houses are full because I'm the one person in London offering affordable shared accommodation at this high standard." His confidence is borne out by estate agent Simon Gresswell, who co-owns Finlay Brewer in Brook Green.

"Christian's all-inclusive price is very reasonable and attractive," Simon says. "I've got titchy one-bedroom flats around the corner for the same price but you close the door and never meet your neighbours. Plus there's no garden or big kitchen. There's certainly a market opening up for communal living."

With 16 people waiting for a place in one of his London houses, Christian is taking on a new house every month. "People of all ages are fed up with the harshness of living alone in the city," he says. "There are more single people than ever and communal living gives you an instant family. If you provide affordable, comfortable surroundings, who wouldn't want to share?"

- [www.fulhamrooms.com](http://www.fulhamrooms.com) (<http://www.fulhamrooms.com>)

## **CHRISTIAN'S CREED**

### **Do**

- Make it your home – it's a place you need to feel happy in
- Have dinner at least once a week with the rest of the house
- Keep your room as you like but shared areas must be kept clean and tidy

### **Don't**

- Party until 2am during the week. Unwind at weekends
- Fall in love with your housemate – although we've had a few long-term relationships
- Set fire to the house – we provide a BBQ so house mates can bond through flame-grill