**Headline:** Oakland-Based Cooperative Builds Community Through Collective Property Ownership

**Teaser:** East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative takes historic real estate off the speculative market in West Oakland.

By Aric Sleeper

**Author Bio:** Aric Sleeper is an independent journalist whose work, which covers topics including labor, drug reform, food and more, has appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle and other publications local to California’s Central Coast. In addition to his role as a community reporter, he has served as a government analyst and bookseller.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Local Peace Economy*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/local-peace-economy/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Community, Social Justice, Economy, Activism, Law, Human Rights, Interview, Social Benefits, Tech, Interview, Opinion, North America/United States of America

**[Article Body:]**

In 2015, after the economy began to fully recover from the Great Recession, the tech industry witnessed an explosion in [the San Francisco Bay Area](https://www.bayareamarketreports.com/trend/bay-area-home-price-appreciation-since-1990). This resulted in an influx of people in the Bay Area, driving housing costs up and displacing the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) residents from their homes in cities like Oakland—a trend that continues in 2022.

According to data from the [U.S. Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/oaklandcitycalifornia/RHI225220#RHI225220), the City of Oakland’s population of Black residents has dropped from 28 percent in 2010 to 22.7 percent in 2021 compared to 44 percent in 1990.

“Around 2015, the People of Color Sustainable Housing Network (POCSHN) was finding that despite the economic boom in Oakland and the Bay Area, and the explosion of diversity, who you weren’t seeing housed [were] Black and Brown folks,” says [East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative](https://ebprec.org/who-we-are) (EB PREC) Executive Director Noni Session.

Volunteers from POCSHN attended one of the Sustainable Economies Law Center’s (SELC) [legal cafés](https://www.theselc.org/the_blueprint_legal_cafe_20151104) in Oakland in 2015. The volunteers were searching for legal mechanisms to help BIPOC communities in Oakland and the Bay Area collectively own and co-steward land and housing outside of the conventional real estate market. Both of these organizations’ members found they held a common goal. They soon [teamed up](https://www.pochousingnetwork.com/ebprec) and started writing bylaws for a cooperative corporate entity that could hold the title to a property or land.

East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative was launched in 2018 through the [efforts](https://ebprec.org/about-us) of POCSHN and SELC to attain and reinvigorate land, housing and cultural hubs for BIPOC and allied residents in Oakland and the East Bay. The organization is led by Bay Area activists and organizers, like Session, who started as a volunteer at EB PREC, and now serves as the executive director.

In addition to their work co-designing the framework for EB PREC, lawyers at SELC have partnered with organizations like the [East Bay Community Law Center](https://ebclc.org/) to create and bolster [AB 816](https://www.theselc.org/governor_brown_signs_california_worker_cooperative_act), the California Worker Cooperative Act, which was passed in August 2015. The bill created a new business entity specifically for worker cooperatives within California’s [Consumer Cooperative Corporation Law](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB816), which made the formation of EB PREC possible.

Session and other co-founders of the organization, [Ojan Mobedshahi and Shira Shaham](https://ebprec.org/who-we-are), began to devote their time to EB PREC in 2017. At the time, Session was recovering from a 2016 city council campaign for Oakland’s District 3 seat, which she lost to incumbent Lynette Gibson McElhaney. However, through the campaign, Session gained many insights.

“It was clear to me that cooperatives were a potential engine for economic recovery,” says Session. “When folks with the idea for EB PREC came to my book club to ask me to be on the board, I declined, but what I did volunteer to do was launch their cooperative element as a living lab for myself, to see how effective cooperative economics could be for disinvested communities.”

East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative is a cooperative of [“owners”](https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-22872016/documents/2c4611b3f8254976b305e3655eb345ce/EB%20PREC%20Bylaws%20-%20Adopted%204-21-2022%20%5BDO%20NOT%20EDIT%5D.pdf) with four different classifications, ranging from those with roots in the East Bay, to businesses and organizations who want to invest in EB PREC, to those working for the organization and those living on its properties. Any California resident or California-based organization or business can become an owner in EB PREC by purchasing one $1,000 share of the cooperative, which aims to return dividends at [1.5 percent](https://ebprec.org/offering) annually.

“The return is minimal because it’s an impact investment, meaning that bringing down the cost of capital is what makes these projects possible so that folks are servicing their communities instead of servicing debt,” says Session.

All of the investment capital is meant to purchase, build, rehabilitate and preserve real estate in the Bay Area for BIPOC and allied communities. For those who can’t pay for an entire share but still want to contribute, EB PREC offers payment plans for up to five years and also provides volunteer opportunities.

“We want to make it clear that money should not be the barrier to community control,” says Session.

The cooperative’s first donated property came from writer and dance therapist Carolyn North, who [donated](https://ebprec.org/blog/prince-st) a [four-bedroom home](https://ebprec.org/blog/openings-in-prince-st-co-op) with a detached dance studio on Prince Street in Berkeley, California. North opted to live part-time at her home of 40 years. The other two bedrooms were awarded to EB PREC resident-owners, who moved in there in January 2021.

“It’s often less that you choose a project and more that a project chooses you because it’s the right time,” says Session. “Prince Street chose us.”

Tenants from a four-unit residential building in North Oakland approached EB PREC for help when they found out their landlord was selling the building. EB PREC [organized](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-21/affordable-housing-activists-push-back-real-estate-capitalism) with the tenants and partnered with the Northern California Land Trust to [purchase](https://ebprec.org/properties) the property in June 2019—with the help of subsidies from the City of Oakland through [Bond Measure KK](https://www.oaklandca.gov/news/2021/city-of-oakland-awards-millions-for-affordable-housing-preservation-projects). The project, called Coop 789, includes educational workshops to teach residents about what it means to live in a cooperative.

“It’s been a perfect opportunity to test out our concept for the first time, particularly with folks who are already cooperatively inclined. We built a lot of infrastructure that is feeding into and supporting our subsequent projects with the Coop 789 project,” says Session.

The cooperative’s latest [acquisition](https://ebprec.org/esthers) is Esther’s Orbit Room, a mixed-use building in historic West Oakland, which plans to feature a café and juice bar, a music performance venue and bar, and an art gallery on its first floor; and, on its second floor, there are three residential units, which can house about eight to 10 individuals. The building was a gathering place for West Oaklanders until the owner passed away in 2010 and the property was abandoned. The acquisition of Esther’s Orbit Room in September 2021 is the first step toward EB PREC’s 7th Street Cooperative Cultural Corridor Revitalization Plan, which focuses on community-centered development.

“We recently brought the first jazz [club] back to Esther’s after 10 years, and really 20 years of it being defunct,” says Session. “We’re also working on a plan to replicate the Esther model along the West Oakland corridor.”

Alongside developing new projects and moving forward with Esther’s Orbit Room, Session hopes that EB PREC can create a rubric for developing similar projects in the future, and encourages people to “invest in their communities, not commodities.”