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Our Equity, Ourselves



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

As a writer and single woman, Michelle Huneven hesitated to buy her fixer-upper. Today, freshly painted and furnished, it symbolizes her revelatory path, by way of mortgage brokers, credit ratings, close friends and contractors.

By [PENELOPE GREEN](#)
Published: January 26, 2006

DOES one have to live out one's neuroses in every darn encounter? If real estate is the topic, absolutely. Such was the wry conclusion of Michelle Huneven, novelist, first-time house-buyer and co-author, with Bernadette Murphy, of "The Tao Gals' Guide to Real Estate: Six Modern Women Discover the Ancient Art of Finding, Owning and Making a Home," published this month by Bloomsbury.

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Their book is uniquely of its moment in blending America's top two obsessions: real estate and self-help with an Eastern flavor. It offers instruction in mortgages and Taoist detachment, as well as much insight into what happens to otherwise levelheaded folks when "home" morphs into "real

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\$50K HELOC	6.83%	15 yr fixed	5.48%
\$30K Home Eq	7.83%	5/1 ARM	5.49%
\$50 Home Eq	7.72%	30 yr jumbo	6.12%
\$75 Home Eq	7.58%	5/1 jumbo ARM	5.62%

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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Before marrying, Michelle Huneven and Jim Potter owned houses side by side. In a new book she guides women through the real estate market, comparing it to a hundred bad boyfriends.

estate."

Its lessons are gleaned from a women's group organized by Ms. Huneven, 52, and Ms. Murphy, 42, which met twice a month for six years to chew on life's issues, using a translation of the Tao Te Ching as a kind of spiritual backstop. Each woman was a therapy veteran, "old enough," as Ms. Murphy, a book critic, explained recently, "to know that we were as 'transformed' and 'improved' as we were going to get." She added, "Our hope wasn't so much self-improvement as self-acceptance."

Meanwhile, Los Angeles's real estate market reached a boiling point, and the group became infected by the frenzy. Pretty soon their evenings were spent hashing over the oh-so-freighted concept of buying, or not buying, a home. The issues that erupted as each woman contemplated home ownership were largely those of self-worth: Do I deserve a home? What kind am I allowed?

For many single women, as Ms. Huneven was at the time, the issues are complicated by the notion that home-buying is something couples do. "It seemed like giving up," she writes. "Like saying, O.K., this is it. I'm not getting the spouse. I'm not getting the family."

After married couples, single women now make up the largest segment of home buyers — 21 percent in 2005, up from 18 percent the year before, in contrast to single men, who make up 9 percent of home buyers, according to a survey published this month by the National Association of Realtors. Ms. Murphy and Ms. Huneven contend that the disparity between single men and women in this regard results from the fact that the "concept of home profoundly matters to women," as they write in the book. Not the happy homemaker model, where the woman fluffs up the nest for her mate, but the Virginia Woolf ideal: a room of one's own.

For women, first-time home-buying, they realized, is "both a painful and revelatory process." How you handle it, they said, tells you a lot about how you handle life in general. Ms. Huneven and Ms. Murphy leaven a therapy-infused vernacular with an appealingly dry, seen-it-all tone. "The market will tell you where you belong," Ms. Murphy said with a snort, "but you can't take that as a reflection of who you are. At least you're not supposed to. Of course we all did. The market will also tell you to 'get in, get in, before it's too late.' The point of the book, what we learned after years, is not to let our lives be defined by externals."

What Ms. Murphy meant was: You may see yourself as Malibu, but your mortgage broker has you pegged as Altadena, a funky neighborhood with some bleak bits on the edge of Pasadena. And maybe, just maybe, this is a good thing, as Ms. Huneven learned.

Ms. Huneven had always been a renter. Like a lot of freelance writers, she lived dollar to dollar, and was bored and frightened by all things financial, she said. She went looking for a house only because her landlord of nine years evicted her from a little house in Atwater. He hoped to refurbish the place and double the rent.

"Look, there's this really awful house behind me that's for sale," said Michele Zach, a high school friend who lived in Altadena — where Ms. Huneven had grown up, another downer — in a grand, 20's-era Spanish-style house on an acre of land. A little background: When Ms. Zach bought it, 15 years ago for \$150,000, Ms. Huneven asked her father, a mortgage dealer, for a loan so she could also buy something. She said he turned her down instantly. Single women, she said he told her, are a bad risk. Ouch!

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In any case, "awful," was not the most enticing come-on for a house. Its only feature was a huge yard, 16,000 square feet filled with citrus trees — orange, blood orange and lemon — junipers and 100-foot eucalypts. The day Ms. Huneven and Ms. Zach hopped Ms. Zach's fence to check it out, the yard was also filled with trash, growling dogs and a crumbly basketball court. The house itself was one of two rectangular concrete boxes — like calcified mobile homes — built a few yards apart for two brothers in 1953, the year Ms. Huneven was born.

House-hunting, Ms. Huneven said, is always a rude awakening, the three-dimensional reality of one's place in life, as determined by income, credit rating and market forces. She writes of the "palpable shabbiness" of the house where she had lived for years, her deep desire for a beautiful space and her fear of wishing for it.

"It's hard for women to wish for something," she said. "It's like they'll jinx it. That's a big mistake. You have to pay attention to your dreams."

While women are still earning 25 percent less on the dollar than men, they are earning much more than their mothers ever did, and making the sort of financial and investment decisions their mothers probably ceded to a spouse. "Now that we are in a position to buy, we are doing so with unrivaled enthusiasm," Ms. Huneven and Ms. Murphy write.

And largely without a road map. "As the first generation to realize in a large way that home ownership is within our grasp," they continued, "we are pioneers in a world we weren't raised to know."

Since their mothers could not be looked to for guidance and inspiration, these women relied on the stories they told one another in their group.

"I couldn't have bought my house without the group, and the book arose because I wanted to share that," Ms. Huneven said.

The Tao Te Ching's 81 sayings are like little psalms to detachment: do the work, have patience, let things unfold. Applying Taoist principles to real estate may seem counterintuitive. Is it possible to practice detachment when buying a home? Certainly that is what successful real estate investors do: They play with their heads, not their hearts.

Ms. Huneven has a rule: Don't fall in love with a house. "As all-consuming as house love can be," she writes, "I don't like it or trust it."

Multiple bids will fan the flames; that was another situation Ms. Huneven avoided, comparing this real estate market to a hundred bad boyfriends. Just because others want a house does not mean that house is for you. And if there's a house that seems unattainable, do not stick like glue to the idea of it. Obsession, she said, comes from trying to control the uncontrollable.

She said: "To paraphrase what a friend's mother used to say about men: 'Don't worry, honey. Houses are like trolleys. Miss one and another will come along soon.' "

Ms. Huneven toured open houses, mostly little postwar bungalows, all lovely, and all about \$50,000 more than she could afford. She had worked through the mortgage issue. Banks, unlike fathers, do not see single women as bad risks, and she prequalified for a loan. (As tedious as mortgage shopping is, what Ms. Huneven quickly discovered is that a mortgage is just a product, something to buy, not a reward for good behavior or even good filing skills.) In the end she signed a contract for the house she did not love, the ugly box on the big lot in Altadena, for \$232,000 — \$12,000 less than the asking price — and made herself a series of promises: that she would make the place beautiful, right away, before inertia set in; and that if she really did not like it a few years down the road, she did not have to stay.

She moved in on Sept. 10, 2001, her timing as destabilizing as everything else in the house-buying process, and for the next few months a series of male characters out of a Richard Russo novel wandered in and out of the house, either assisting or obstructing the renovation process. (Renovations provide another lesson in detachment: Ms. Huneven cautions fellow renovators not to become "ultradilated" to imperfections.)

There was the good friend, a set designer, trying to make it as a contractor. Ms. Huneven was his first client. He obsessively built her a beautiful closet in her office, though what she asked for was a gate to close off the yard from the driveway and a door in her garage. "I used to practice saying, 'I want a gate, I want a door,' " she said. "Talking to men was like talking into the void." (It has its own chapter in the book.) There was the very good painter with very bad boundaries whom she found in her living room one day, happily chatting on her phone, weeks after his work was finished. Bewildered by her irritation, he said, "But I thought we were friends like that!"

Her once-awful house, with its main space now open to the lush gardens she created behind it, seems not so much painted or renovated as flavored and spiced. The house, as she writes, "had been nothing special." She had not overinvested in it, financially or emotionally. "But then I invested myself in it, reasonably and slowly," she concludes. "And it became a part of me and I of it."

Shortly after finishing her second novel, "Jamesland" (Knopf, 2003), Ms. Huneven went away one weekend and asked her neighbors to pet-sit. They brought a friend, Jim Potter, an environmental lawyer who was in the middle of redecorating his apartment. "I saw the bold colors and the open space," he said the other day. "And I was awestruck. It changed how I wanted to live."

Mr. Potter not only redecorated in homage to Ms. Huneven's house, but he read her novel and introduced himself to her at one of her readings.

When he moved in a year ago September, Ms. Huneven said: "We decided he should keep his apartment, just in case things didn't work out. We tried to keep real estate out of the equation."

Real estate being real estate, it refused to stay that way. Within a week or so, the twin house next door was for sale, and Mr. Potter sold his apartment and bought it, for \$475,000.

In September they were married in his yard, under the persimmon trees they had strung with yellow and orange paper lanterns. The reception was in her yard, where the basketball court used to be. And when Mr. Potter asks Ms. Huneven if she thinks they will be together forever, she just shrugs and says, "At least we'll be neighbors."