CIIS Housing Guide

Special thanks offered to the author(s), a current CIIS doctoral student and an international student.

This document covers lessons learned from our experience moving to San Francisco from out of state to attend CIIS. This process is challenging in any city, but the current Bay Area housing crisis requires another level of care and attention to find a housing situation that works. Don't worry - it's a difficult market, but it is possible to find a good situation for yourself if you are willing to put in the work!

Philosophy

Finding a good housing situation is like fishing, sometimes you will get lucky but success is really determined by how long you have your hook in the water. The key is “hook-time,” or time with the hook in the water. When finding a place to live, this means putting as much effort as possible into the shopping process to get a feel for the market. If you see enough places (maybe 5-6, maybe more?) you will eventually reach a stage where you will know exactly what you want. At that stage you will know as soon as you walk into a place that it should be yours. This is especially important in the current competitive Bay Area rental market because you will need to be in a position to commit to a place before the showing is over or someone else will beat you to it.

Even with leases, nothing is permanent. The Bay Area is a large and diverse region, and you will have an infinitely better feel for what you want after your first semester. So the key is to get your foot in the door - either in a landing-pad for the first month, or a starter place for the first semester - to let that process unfold naturally. The following is a possible outline of the rental process that might help show you what to expect.
Pre-Move

- Find a temporary landing pad: Airbnb, Craigslist, Student listserv (sign up at http://listserv.ciis.edu/).
- Get a sense of the Bay’s regions and neighborhoods; Google Maps, Trulia.
- Get a sense for the market by shopping online; Craigslist, HotPads, Zillow, Facebook groups, Universal Student Housing, HomestayMatch etc.
- Get started on your renter’s packet.
- Visit the area.
- Contact a rental agency if looking for an apartment.
- Contact roommates if looking for a shared space of private room.

There’s nothing like hitting the streets in person, but there is quite a bit of research and preparation you can do before the move to The Bay that will make the processes easier.

FIND A LANDING PAD

The most important thing you can do to help your search once you arrive is to buy yourself the time to search properly. It takes time to find the right place, and finding a temporary place in a central location on Air-Bnb, Craigslist, or through the CIIS Student listserv before you move can significantly reduce your stress level on arrival and give you a home base to search from. This will cost a little more than an ideal month of rent, but the investment will pay off when you are able to search with a calm mind and have a better living situation.

One month in a temporary central location is hopefully all you need. Good central locations are anywhere near BART and the CIIS campus, Berkeley, North Oakland, etc. Keep in mind that it takes an hour on public transport to get from downtown SF to Ocean Beach, and about 45 minutes from most of Berkeley to downtown SF, so you will have the time and energy for seeing two places in one day considering travel time.

GET A SENSE OF THE BAY AREA’S REGIONS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Living in the City of San Francisco is exciting, convenient, and very expensive, but gems do pop up every now and again. Many CIIS students live in Berkeley and Oakland in the East Bay. Marin (North of SF, across the Golden Gate Bridge) is beautiful with its mountains and ocean, but it is expensive and social life is harder. Commute times are roughly equal in all three areas. Online tools like Google Maps and Trulia can help give you a sense of the area. Most listings are organized by neighborhood. It can be overwhelming to learn all of the names of the neighborhoods in the Bay but it just takes time.

The City of San Francisco is exciting and convenient, but very expensive. It’s common for a

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$1400/mo rental in the East Bay to Cost $3000/mo or more in the City. However, rent in the outer neighborhoods like Outer Sunset, Inner Sunset, Outer Richmond, Glen Park, Excelsior, Outer Mission, etc. generally equal to the East Bay like Berkeley, Oakland, and El Cerrito, and you just pay in travel time. A general benchmark for decent small two-bedroom apartment is $2600/mo before utilities, which is $1300/mo split two ways not including utilities. One private room in a shared apartment depending on the neighborhood ranges from approximately $1350/mo to $1850/mo.

Your results may vary. Travel via street car to campus from the Outer Sunset can take over an hour by MUNI but can also be under an hour. Travel times anywhere on the BART are very fast.

The East Bay is where most students live to save money, and The Bay’s famously vibrant creative communities are slowly being pushed across the Bay into areas like Berkeley and Oakland for the same reason. It’s common to pay $1300/mo to share a house with roommates, or less for a small apartment. It is definitely possible to pay under $900/mo if you are willing to share with several people. There is generally very good access to BART and community resources in most of these areas. If you live near to a ferry terminal you can get to the city in about 20 minutes with a ten-minute rail car or bike ride straight down Market Street to campus, and the cost is similar to taking the bus or BART.

Marin County is the region just north across the Golden Gate bridge. It is known for its stunning natural beauty and high quality of life, but is more expensive, relies on Golden Gate Transit’s busses for transportation, and is socially more isolating. There are lots of bus routes, but travel can get particularly difficult when busses fill up at rush hour or if you are returning home after 7pm when routes become less frequent and reliable. Travel times on the bus can exceed an hour or can be as short as 40 minutes. If you live near to a ferry terminal you can get to the city in about 30 fun minutes with a ten-minute rail car or bike ride straight down Market Street to campus, and cost is similar to taking the bus or BART.

GET A SENSE OF THE MARKETS BY SHOPPING ONLINE

15 years ago, we had to rely on newspaper classifieds and bulletin boards, but today finding rentals has never been easier with online tools. Using a combination of Craigslist, Zillow, Facebook Groups, HotPads, and the CIIS Student listserv will give you an adequate sense of what’s available and help you manage your listings.

Craigslist is still a great option to find good housing but be aware of scams (**See Editor’s note below!) Ads are listed by owner or subletting roommates, so you might get a feel for their personality or the vibe of the place.
from the get-go. If you create a login on the CL website, they have a feature where you can mark your favorites with a star to help sift through the massive number of listings.

Avoid roommate listings that have excessively long criteria, this usually means that they are picky and possible not very flexible. You should **definitely post your own want ad** with short description of what you are looking for, limiting your description to **objective** and absolute red-flags (i.e. price range, known allergies, number of roommates, etc.) and save your **subjective** preferences (i.e. attitude of roommates, cleanliness, etc.) for the in-person showing. Remember, the key searching as well as posting is to initially cast your net wide and then filter your choices as they come in. Set yourself up to enter the shopping process, not to score a slam-dunk from the outset. You are not obligated to reply to every response, instead just flip through them *en masse* and pick out the ones that interest you. CL now also has a new **essential** feature to save your search criteria and to get **email notifications** when new results show up. There is a very helpful iPhone app for Craigslist called **cPro** that allows you to manage a list of favorites and send an email to the house.

**Zillow, HotPads, and Trulia** manage listings by real-estate agents and also come with very nice tools to help manage your search. For example, they have online maps where you can draw a search area, good management of favorites, and they show how listings compare with the neighborhood at large. Like Craigslist, these tools’ essential features are saving a search and getting email notifications whenever a new listing is posted. **Google Maps** have very reliable bus schedules and travel times when you find a new place. Also, **Trulia** offers local heat maps that can give you a sense of crime and rental prices around The Bay (http://www.trulia.com/local/).

**Facebook groups** is also a very good way of finding housing. There are great communities of people in the same situation as you are looking for a place to live. Connecting is essential for success.

Other great resources are pages like **Universal Student Housing** a platform that helps bridge host families and new coming students in an easy and simple way.

If you are looking to get a feel for each neighborhood in more detail visit **Neighborhood Scout**.

It’s best to use all of the above tools in tandem. Post a want-ad on Craigslist, save searches with email notifications on Craigslist, Zillow, HotPads, Facebook and Trulia, and continually use Google Maps to find each place and check travel times to campus.

**GET STARTED ON YOUR RENTER’S PACKET**

The renters market is very competitive, and it is important to make yourself stand out, particularly if you are going to open-house showings organized by real-estate agents. More on this in the section below:

**VISIT THE AREA**

If possible, it can help tremendously to visit the area for a few days before the semester starts to get a feel for the area. Find a few listings online and see what it feels like to take public transport to campus, maybe even go to a few open houses. The online search will get you part of the way, but nothing beats directly experiencing the logistics and feel of the area.
CONTACT A RENTAL AGENCY

If you have the cash, contacting a good full-service rental agency can get you in the right place in a couple of days. Some agencies guarantee to find you the right place in a single day of marathon shopping. The benefit is that they know the listings and can match you up with your preferences, scheduling a day of 10-12 listings and negotiating a lease. The downside is that they will generally charge a month’s rent. Depending on your preferences and situation, it's possible that you will spend more than this during your search and/or backing out of the wrong rental situation. So, you will have to decide if such a cost is worth it to you.

ROOM HUNTING

Contact a few places you are really interested in. Prioritize! Be selective because running around San Francisco can be a bit stressful even more so when you are struggling with study, work and house/room hunting. If you are persistent you will find a place to call home while you are here.

The Move & Search

- Prepare/update your renter’s packet.
- Conduct your search.
- Manage your listings; Paper, Email, Favorites.

PREPARE/UPDATE YOUR RENTERS PACKET

Two things are most important when attending open-houses: 1) be prepared to commit to a rental on- site if you like it, and 2) prepare a renter’s packet before the open-house. It can seem intimidating to be prepared to pass judgment on a place immediately, but if you spend enough time shopping around this will become quite easy and other applicants will be prepared to do so. A renter’s packet includes a generic rental application (easily found online), bank statements showing cash holdings or loan statements, a current credit report, and a photo. Every agent or landlord will give you their own application on-site, require bank statements to prove that the monthly rent is no more than 33% of your monthly income, and 90% of the time will charge an application fee to pay for a credit report. You can show that you mean business by bringing all of this information to the open-house, and also be willing to decide on renting the place immediately. Serious agents sometimes only accept renters that have all of this information prepared up front.

** For those of you who are coming from other parts of the world and you are reading this Please don’t stress on the Renters Package there are ways around it and the International Student Affairs Office is willing to help you with letters if you need them.

CONDUCT YOUR SEARCH
Responding to listings and attending open houses can be a full-time job. Remember to act professional on the phone and in person, and always carry a note pad to open-houses. Most agents are fairly mellow, nice people, but in the end if they have three people at a showing they are going to pick the best candidate. Bottom line: don’t be afraid to see as many places as you can summon the energy and patience for. Use this as an opportunity to really get a feel for the neighborhoods and remember to explore the area around each listing a little. Planning your appointments to reduce travel times can help as well.

MANAGE YOUR LISTINGS

You will encounter a large number of listings if you are looking seriously, so try to develop a system to keep track of each one. Start with a paper notepad and log the phone number, name, address, a single line of notes about the place, and most importantly the status (i.e. left message; booked showing; etc.). You will leave a lot of phone messages, and then they will call you back and you will need to find the listing in your notes with just the phone number and/or the agent only saying, “I’m returning your call about the listing.” You should remember which listing it is as quickly as possible or they might not take you seriously.

It’s good to send emails to lots of listings, and if you do it will help to find a way to mark them somehow to remind yourself that the ball is in their court, so you can move on to other listings. For example, if you get a reply from an agent about a showing and then call and leave a message, archive the email to get it out of your inbox so you can forget about it until they call back. That way your inbox serves as a convenient TODO-list and you don’t have to keep any information in your head.

Similarly, Craigslis, the cPro iPhone app for Craigslislist, Zillow, HotPads, Trulia, all have very good favorite’s features that allow you to mark listings you are interested in. That helps you keep track of the listings you like. Once you see a place or otherwise decide you don’t like it, just mark it off the list and forget it. The cPro app is particularly helpful in this way, as it keeps a list of favorites, keeps track of whether you sent an email to the agent or landlord, allows you to save and send canned email responses, and also organizes the listings by neighborhood (very helpfull) and day of listing. Sometimes this is much easier than managing on paper or through email.

Committing to a Rental

As stated above, searching hard and long enough will make committing to a place much easier. Chances are that by the time you see 5 or 6 places you will know exactly what you want. It is usually tempting to jump on the first or second place you find, but it’s almost always worth waiting to get a feel for the big picture. Generally speaking, if you get any feeling of apprehension about a place on the first viewing, this feeling will likely only be amplified down the road and can cause lots of problems for you. You know you’ve found the right place when you can’t find anything wrong with it.

Once you do decide on a place, remember that nothing is permanent. Leases are generally six months to a year (usually the latter these days), but after that time passes you will have a very very good idea of where you want
to live and what you want it to look like. Also, California has very forgiving renter rights and it’s important that you familiarize yourself with them so that you know where to stand if problems arise with the landlord.

Remember not to commit to a place you can’t afford and make sure that you get a copy of the lease or anything that you sign for your records.

**What should I ask before deciding to rent**
*The University of San Francisco gives good advice on this piece. Check out their page.*

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<tr>
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<th>Question(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>How much; When is it due; Starting date; is there a penalty/fee if the rent is late?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deposit</td>
<td>How much; How will it be used; How and when is it refunded</td>
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<td>Damages</td>
<td>Who pays for breakage or other damages over and above normal wear and tear – individuals or all occupants?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subletting</td>
<td>Is it permitted; what is the procedure?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Should all roommates sign the lease; are roommates responsible for only a portion of the rent; if someone moves out must the remaining roommates make up the difference?</td>
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<td>Alterations</td>
<td>May the unit be altered, such as painted; Can you hang pictures on the wall (and how)?</td>
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<td>Laundry Facilities</td>
<td>Are they available and are there any restrictions; are they coin operated?</td>
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<td>Noise Restrictions</td>
<td>For musical instruments, stereo, TV or social events?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspection by Landlord</td>
<td>When may the landlord enter your unit; how much notice must be given?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>Is it available; is it included in the rent or is it an added charge; do you need a permit?</td>
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<td>Pets</td>
<td>Are pets allowed; is there an added charge for having a pet?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>What utilities are included in the rent; how much is the installation fee for those not included; what are the billing and payment procedures?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lease</td>
<td>How long is the lease; when does the lease end/begin</td>
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Good luck!

**Editor’s Note:** Be aware of scams through online rental/housing search websites. If you see the following, be aware that this may be a scam:
- Home owner/landlord is unable to physically show you the inside of the property, meet you, or is out of town or of the country
- If money is requested to be transferred without viewing the property or meeting with the landlord.
- If the home owner/landlord offers to mail you the keys to the property in exchange for money (rent, deposit, etc.)
*** The California Institute of Integral Studies has no relationship with any of these vendors. This list is provided as a guide to accommodations in the area and is neither comprehensive, nor favors these providers over others in the area.