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# ALTERNATIVE HOUSING MODELS IN ACTION. PUBLIC-COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEMS FOR TERRITORIAL AND BUILDING STOCK REGENERATION FOR LIVING.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **New needs for access to building stock for living: public-community ecosystems.**

In recent decades, the deregulation of markets, the consequent commodification dynamics, and the financialization of real estate and territories are some of the main criticalities in Europe, exacerbating trends already underway since the 1980s. These create unprecedented socioeconomic inequalities and amplify exclusionary dynamics.<sup>1</sup> Many assets available to communities have undergone a long and paradoxical process of deconstructing their social, cultural, and political nature, transforming them into financial and liquid assets.<sup>2</sup>

Hence the emergence of new needs and prerogatives of access to assets and building stock, of primary importance access to housing and the “new housing question”,<sup>3</sup> which give rise to challenges posed by a mature society characterized by social fragmentation, a significant demographical shift, and a new need for community linked to dynamics of growing relational poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The research observes a new pluralism and renewed public-private ecosystems that work for the regeneration of land and building stock for living. In response to new needs these ecosystems produce a strand of practices that concretize values such as subsidiarity, democracy, and cooperation. They bring to light dynamics that unhinge the discipline of public-private collaboration based on the opposition between general interest and the economic convenience of the individual. Here, the private actor is collective and cooperative and is triggered by active communities committed to regaining rights and produce new simpoietic<sup>5</sup> models and settlement possibilities. In contrast, the public actor is aware of obsolete dynamics and the need for transition and enters into a transformative circuit of mutual learning with communities and other public actors to actualize its tools.

In particular, the research proposes an interpretation of communities as key ingredients<sup>6</sup> in the triggering of heritage regenerative processes, in the production of alternative housing models, and in the activation of the public actor in favor of a new centrality of the use value of heritage. Community-led action can trigger innovative approaches and new cultural visions capable of solving deep-rooted problems<sup>7</sup> starting from the actual utilization needs<sup>7</sup> of the city, villages, and territory.

The research proposes a comparative method of analysis introducing and comparing two emblematic European cases, both inspired by the Canadian housing cooperatives: La Borda housing cooperative, in Barcelona's and the Kraftwerk residential cooperative in Zurich.

The chosen cases show different ecosystems and approaches to the production of alternatives. Barcelona and Zurich are two cities with common objectives: safeguarding their real estate assets and territories from long-term speculative logic, widening access to housing, and proposing new, more inclusive housing models<sup>8</sup> to relaunch a virtuous market.

On the other hand, they have been able to accept, with different processes and timelines, requests and projects deriving from civic actions from below, processing them proactively.

With many difficulties, typical of civic engagement and activism, and contradictions, due to the multifaceted and multi-actor nature of housing,<sup>9</sup> communities in chorus with public actors and other necessary stakeholders succeed in producing alternatives to the traditional housing market. The alternatives consist in:

- Alternatives to the housing production and development process, introducing housing within a social and solidarity market of actors;
- Architectural alternatives that stimulate new spatial typologies for private housing and the community, shared and collective structures, introducing flexible, gender-friendly, cluster apartments types;
- Alternatives to social fragmentation, producing new forms of community, new elective family forms, intergenerational social mixite.

### **LA BORDA HOUSING COOPERATIVE IN THE SANTS NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE NEW POLICIES FOR THE RIGHT TO HOUSING IN BARCELONA.**

A severe housing crisis affected Catalunya and Barcelona from 1997 to 2007, as a consequence of a deregulated market favored by public policies and which led to a growing dynamic of housing exclusion from urban centers.<sup>10</sup>

In 2011, the Barcelona City Council, under the new Colau junta, produced a trend reversal<sup>11</sup> with the production of measures to support new and more inclusive housing projects.

The context of the crisis favored the emergence of new housing models and the participation of new actors where a renewed cooperative movement has been seen since 2011 that has already produced four generations of right to use cooperative housing with twenty-five new projects.

An emblematic case in this sense is the Sants neighborhood in Barcelona, with its community and cooperative network that has triggered a strong movement related to the urban renewal of the former industrial site of Can Batlló. They strongly promoted affordable housing development through an alternative, non-market-driven model.

The residential cooperative La Borda project arises in this context and is a development self-organized by the local community. The city perceives it as a pioneering and experimental project that has opened new paths for producing affordable and socially inclusive housing and possible public-cooperative relations.<sup>12</sup> La Borda has chosen and uses a legal and economic model uncommon in Spain, the right to use cooperative housing, together with an alternative process of funding. Together with Barcelona municipality, La Borda studied international models of housing alternatives, declined in several legal or economic frames, and produced affordability and social inclusion.<sup>13</sup> This comparative study helped build the right formula for the city. The cooperative models analyzed are mainly the Canadian cooperatives system with its 2.339 cooperatives with 96.742 houses that represent the one percent of the national housing total with a very rooted public-cooperative system; the Uruguayan and Danish cooperative movement and legal systems; the Mietschauser Syndikat in Germany and Radical Routes in UK.<sup>14</sup>

Delving into the legal and economic model chosen by La Borda, the right to use cooperative housing, derived from the Danish Andel Model, was created with the social and political objective of preserving the long-term housing affordability and de-commodification of buildings by allowing a

mixed economic strategy in which the cooperative is the legal owner of the property, while the residents and members of the cooperative are collective shareholders and individual tenants.<sup>15</sup>

Building credit for the project's development is also crucial for understanding the project's sustainability. La Borda found strong and social partners interested in experimenting with alternative models of access to credit, not-for-profit, such as the solidarity financial services cooperative Coop57 and the 'social capital fund' and participatory bonds.

The architectural design of La Borda, by the architects' cooperative Lacol, works to produce affordability, prioritizing communal spaces over private ones, innovating the housing typology, making it flexible, and choosing a low-tech, self-build approach. The building program proposes modular housing units with a flexible structure and community spaces such as a kitchen-dining room, laundry room, multi-purpose space, guest rooms, care space, storage space on each floor, and terraces. The whole is articulated around a central courtyard, a sizeable relational space reminiscent of the 'corralas,' a typology of popular housing in central and southern Spain.

The community developed around the project comprises 28 intergenerational nuclei, some of whom come from the municipal social housing lists and some activists from the Can Batllò neighbourhood, like the architects Lacol. The residents participated in the design, construction, and self-promotion process of the building they now use and manage. They are organized into a general assembly and several working groups or commissions that manage the many tasks.

The success of this pioneering project was made possible by the commitment of the Barcelona City Council, which has prioritized affordable housing production over the last ten years.<sup>16</sup> The municipality's housing department created an internal infrastructure to react to the city's critical settlement situation, founding three new institutions and promoting a Right to Housing Plan. One of the most critical steps, also realized thanks to civic pressure, was to grant the use of public land to develop cooperative housing projects through direct contract or competition, as happened in 2015 for La Borda and 2016 for Princesa.<sup>17</sup>

The reception of right to use cooperative housing by municipal administrations allows for expanding the stock of affordable public housing in the municipal territory within a plan that favors a social and cooperative economy. Within the municipality's housing division, the presence of figures such as architect and professor J. M. Montaner and his team has allowed the development of an architectural evaluation committee. The latter set up architectural competitions to trigger an evolution of housing typology in response to new social needs and accessible trends without gender discrimination.

Following a great deal of civic pressure, the municipality also produced an important policy that makes parking spaces in social housing projects non-compulsory. This new parking regulation allowed for a ten percent cut in the construction cost of La Borda.<sup>18</sup>

La Borda is now a nationally and internationally recognized emblematic case, winner of numerous architectural and social awards. New local actors, such as La Dinamo, La Ciudad Invisible, Coop 57, and Lacol, produced, together with Barcelona's housing department, a local model for the right to use cooperative housing, retracing good practices and mistakes of La Borda.

From this pioneer building, new cooperative housing projects have already been realized in Barcelona, such as La Balma in Poblenou, Sotrac in Sants, Le Raval in Manresa, La Closca, and La Morada for the La Dinamo Foundation, but also internationally.

## **THE KRAFTWERK RESIDENTIAL COOPERATIVE, UTOPIA AND COOPERATIVE HISTORY IN ZURICH.**

In 1907, the first housing cooperatives were established in Zurich, building on various social experiences that were already firmly rooted. Switzerland's largest and historically most industrialized city was not subject to the social polarization and gentrification processes typical of other European

metropolises. Precisely because of a hundred year tradition of non-profit housing.<sup>19</sup> Zurich's cooperative movement, which found a new impetus in the 1990s, is one of the city's leading promoters of welfare, and housing cooperatives own approximately nine percent of the city's building land and eighteen percent of its housing stock, promoting its de-commodification in the long term.<sup>20</sup> These offer collective spaces of extraordinary architectural quality and rent in the city center at a third of the market price, supporting experimental forms of living together.<sup>21</sup>

In Zurich, in the aftermath of the crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, innovations in housing quality were mainly driven by two actors. On the one hand, the citizens, particularly the activists of the social left who opposed the interference of finance in the new urban development processes, triggered a new development of the city housing cooperatives. On the other hand, the public actor supported this process with a new production of instruments.<sup>22</sup>

It was in this context that a group of architects, philosophers, and artists, A. Hofer, C. Thiesen, M. Blum, H. Widmer, began the search for a different way of inhabiting the city, one that was more communitarian and capable of realizing a solidarity-based and sustainable economic system. In 1983, the philosopher Widmer published the book *Bolo Bolo*, which became a true cult, proposing a utopian, or pragmatopic,<sup>23</sup> housing model whose protagonists are intentional communities, the *bolo*. The book was a founding text for the *Kraftwerk* cooperative, one of the most emblematic cases of Zurich neo-cooperative with a strong solidaristic and inclusive basis. The cooperative has developed three large settlement projects, *Kraftwerk 1 Hardturm*, *Heizenholz*, and *Zwicky South*, with two-hundred-forty-eight units and approximately seven-hundreds inhabitants.

*Kraftwerk 1 Hardturm* is the pioneer project of the cooperative. It comprises four residential buildings with commercial, associative, and coworking spaces. At the same time, the resident community comprises households with a very varied composition, thirty-one percent of families, sixteen percent of couples, twenty-five percent of singles, and twenty-eight percent of shared housing by students, the elderly, and the disabled. Two overlapping distribution systems articulate its typological organization, the *Le Corbusier* type, i.e., duplex on the model of the *Unité d'Habitation* and the *Loos* type, i.e. a *Cluster-Wohnungen* of twelve rooms on staggered floors or the *Wohnen Gemeinschaft* with nine rooms.

The economic model of the Zurich cooperatives, taken up by *Kraftwerk*, privileges the use value over the commodity value of real estate, which means that the cooperative is the legal owner of the property. In contrast, the residents and members of the cooperative are collective shareholders (i.e., they pay an entry fee or membership fee) and individual tenants (the monthly fee for the use of their flat). It is thus a hybrid model between collective ownership and renting in which residents, as long as they are cooperative members, have the right to use the dwelling. This notion of use value has been institutionalized in Zurich's municipal governance for over a hundred years. This is the case's most remarkable and forward-looking aspect.

Cooperatives have preferential access to credit, supported by municipal legislation, which, through indirect measures dating back to the early 1900s, acts as a guarantor with local banks and allows cooperatives to expose themselves with only six percent of equity (as opposed to twenty percent) to access finance. The cooperatives have also produced two self-managed instruments, the cooperative savings bank and the solidarity fund that collects contributions to help residents in case of financial need.

From the point of view of internal governance, the Zurich cooperatives consider members as co-owners, co-managers, and users of the housing asset simultaneously. The statutes define the co-management rules, which generally respect the democratic principle 'one member, one vote'. The commitment to non-speculation is an integral part of the statute of every Zurich cooperative, "collective action for shared benefit rather than competition for individual gain".<sup>24</sup>

New architectural strategies have emerged in the experiences of neo-cooperativism, which produce innovative private-collective spatial configurations that meet the needs of a mature society. These include the reduction of the size of housing units and the increase of common spaces. The placement of intermittently used spaces outside the flat and Cluster-Wohnungen (micro-units assembled with large and shared spaces) combines conventional flats and triplex solutions.

At the neighborhood scale, cooperatives are proposed as new urban micro-centers that seek to bring urban qualities to new developments in the suburbs.

Models of social entrepreneurship and architectural innovation merge in Zurich to produce sustainable, non-profit residential alternatives. These affect design innovation that produces, on the one hand, affordability and, on the other high-quality architecture that reverses the neo-liberal paradigm, according to which housing built for low-income groups should be of lower architectural quality.<sup>25</sup>

Important to note is that the sustained growth of cooperatives over the last century in Zurich has only been possible thanks to the link with the municipal administration.<sup>26</sup> The city council has developed instruments to grant public land use, defiscalise building charges for community spaces, and introduce spatial and social innovations in the municipal regulation.

Around 2010, with the market deregulation, access to land for cooperatives in Zurich depended on the municipality's action, which activated leases granted for sixty-two years, extendable up to ninety.

In order to extend this possibility, the Special Area Plan or Gestaltungsplan, was produced, which is necessary to plan the re-zoning of large areas and useful to allocate public land for the development of cooperatives.

In addition, the city made it mandatory for assignees of public land to go through an architectural competition. The principles of the competition were developed in 1877 by the Swiss Association of Engineers and Architects, SIA, and are still valid today.

Another significant accomplishment of the city of Zurich was the acceptance of new typological models for living, such as the cluster apartments, the floor plan, the WG in its regulations, and the inclusion of new family models producing an epochal shift.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to Kraftwerk, the city is dotted with numerous other innovative and award-winning cooperatives such as Kalkbreite and Mehr als wohnen, Nena and Karthago.

The model produced in Zurich can be transferred to other places by reproducing the approach of the activists, citizens, municipal officials, cooperative organizations, and architects. They use legal, financial, and regulatory instruments and architectural imagination to promote a non-speculative form of housing development and new forms of co-existence.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND NEW LEARNING**

Through the analysis of the cases reported here, communities can be understood as a key ingredient in the production of new housing models and the public-community relationship as a fundamental element for the sustainability of such projects in the short and long term.

The article reveals how community-led housing models are generally pilot projects, which imply a great civic effort on the part of communities to counter the commodification of heritage and produce housing affordability, social inclusion, and new forms of shared living. These models, which aspire to generate not-for-profit real estate developments within the traditional market, stimulate the activation of the public actor and manage to include it in a mutual learning circuit to produce innovative and inclusive processes.

These processes value the built heritage as a pivotal node for constructing a more inclusive and economically accessible city. They do not focus on its economic value and trends that expel inhabitants in favor of the big finance groups, ex. Blackstone. These projects support local

communities in processes of social and civic valorization for the liberation of the heritage in the long term from the dynamics of the speculative market.

On the one hand, the intervention of the public actor turns out to be indispensable in activating these projects and in the possibility of their reproduction.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the cases analyzed highlight the capital importance of specific tools and practices produced by the public actors, such as the concession of public land for the development of cooperative housing, the implementation of policies that produce tax relief, and reduced charges for community-based projects, the facilitation of access to credit, and a push for architectural and typological quality of housing.

What emerges is how non-speculative processes produce innovation in the choice of legal and economic models in which use value prevails over market value, promoting affordability and low rent and expanding access to housing. These economic and legal models shift the value axes triggering more inclusive social behavior through the use value, civic use, and common goods.

It also emerges how there is room for typological and architectural innovation in the not-for-profit dynamics with the compulsory introduction of architecture competitions that innovate the residential typology to give space to a more collaborative living. Public-community processes also produce greater social inclusion - low-income groups, young people (an example is young architecture firms experimenting in pioneer projects)- and territorial with developing peripheral areas or derelict buildings.

Over the last fifteen years, the need for alternative housing models pushed local communities to produce new models for access to a more affordable and socially inclusive houses. Communities around Europe and the globe work together in a mutualistic way in order to transfer these functional models. Because of this, in the last decades, many international networks for community-led housing production have arisen and are working together to make it possible to enlarge the right to housing and produce fairer cities.

## NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Manuela Olagnero, *La questione abitativa e i suoi dilemmi*, (Meridiana, n. 62, 2008), 14-18.
- <sup>4</sup> Olagnero, 14-18
- <sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *Chutlucene sopravvivere su un pianeta infetto*, (Roma, Not-Nero edizioni, 2020).
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- <sup>16</sup> Mara Ferreri, Lorenzo Vidal, "Public-cooperative policy mechanisms for housing commons". *International Journal of Housing Policy*, (2021), doi: 10.1080/19491247.2021.1877888.
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