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Territories in dispute: habitat self-management as a strategy for the reappropriation of urban commons?

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INTRODUCTION

The neoliberal restructuring of capitalism in the 1970s brought about, in urban matters, a profound space-time reconfiguration focused on the creation of new circuits of valorisation by commodifying cities, common goods, public assets, and social relations previously alien to the logic of capital. This meant the plundering of new commons and the loss of collective rights by huge portions of the population, orchestrated through intensive processes of nature and land use depredation, with dispossession and extractivism being the structuring axis of this dynamic.

In Latin America specifically, this dispossession-exploitation was implemented through a series of public policies targeting the extraction of natural and urban goods and services necessary for the reproduction of the daily lives of large portions of the population (such as water, means of communication, transport, social security and, most importantly, access to education, health and housing.)

These transformation processes in the cities have unmoored community forms of subsistence and were the basis for the emergence of new forms of social organisation, new autonomies, renewed disputes and new agents of resistance, many of them mediated by the State.

In Argentina, especially in the city of Buenos Aires, neoliberal adjustment policies and the deregulation of the housing market imposed by the last military dictatorship –and their perpetuation in democratic times– have ignited territorialised and organised resistance. Learning from the experiences of housing and mutual aid cooperatives from neighbouring Uruguay, such resistance has driven self-managed cooperative organisation as a form of access to housing for low-income sectors. As a result of the interaction of these social organisations with local legislative power, Law No. 341/00 was enacted, which promotes the creation of a housing policy: the “Self-Management Housing Programme” (*Programa de Autogestión de la Vivienda -PAV-*). With this programme, these organisations play their part in the dispute for state resources in order to fund self-managed housing and habitat production through cooperatives.



OBJECTIVES

The aim of this article is to reflect on the existing disputes surrounding self-management practices in the framework of housing cooperative experiences under Law No. 341/00 and the “Self-Management Housing Programme” in the City of Buenos Aires (Argentina), from 2001 to the present day, based on Anglo-Saxon and Latin American theories on “urban commons”.

METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative methodological framework. This decision was motivated by the need to explore the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of cooperative members regarding their journey in a self-managed cooperative. Using the grounded theory approach, data from primary sources were recovered and built to provide concrete evidence of the theories that underpin this work. Primary data previously designed by the author were recovered through a longitudinal follow-up of the progress shown by experiences under the “Self-Management Housing Programme” and its cooperative projects. In addition, 10 semi-structured interviews with cooperative members were conducted during 2018, and these were supplemented with 8 online interviews in 2021 (during lockdown due to the pandemic). These data were processed with Atlas.ti software whereas the thematic analysis was based on the identification of dimensions of analysis that could be intertwined with theory.

MAIN RESULTS

Three dimensions emerged from the analysis that made it possible to identify nuances between completed and ongoing cooperative experiences of the “Self-Management Housing Programme” which, throughout their development, were either re-commodified by the logics of urban neoliberalism or, on the contrary, promoted processes of reappropriation of urban commons. These dimensions were: (1) the forms of interaction with the State; (2) cooperatives’ forms of organisation and the modalities involved in the production of their own houses; and (3) how living in cooperative houses and community life look like.

In relation to (1) *the forms of interaction with the State*, two moments have marked the evolution of these experiences. The first was a concrete demand for decent housing by social organisations (and the practice of self-management as a form of access to it) against the local legislative power. This resulted in the enactment of Law No. 341/00, which created the “Self-Management Housing Programme,” applicable in the City of Buenos Aires, to purchase urban land and build cooperative housing through self-management. The second moment of interaction with the State took place during programme execution, this time with the local executive power. The early years of programme deployment were very dynamic, as the cooperatives had a significant influence on programme implementation modalities. This removed bureaucratic nuances from the traditional structures of the Housing Institute of the City of Buenos Aires (*Instituto de la Vivienda de la Ciudad*), allowing cooperatives to interact with new actors, resulted in the purchase of 110 housing units in the heart of the city centre –with deeds being signed by the cooperatives (an issue strongly demanded by cooperatives because of fundraising)– and prompted construction work in many of them. However, with the advance of neoliberalism in the local government, that initial dynamism was obstructed with the abandonment of the programme and the manipulation of final ownership over housing units, as a state strategy to dismantle self-managed cooperative groups and resume housing built with the municipal administration’s commodified logic. Several organisations resisted these actions –such as the signing of individual deeds– and advocated for collective ownership as a strategy to protect urban commons that had been built collectively against the individualistic and predatory logics of capital.

Another dimension that marked differences in the self-management conception was (2) *the forms of cooperative organisation and the modalities involved in the production of their own houses*. From the fieldwork carried



out, it follows that there are two types of organisations: organisations that have emerged “from below” and others that have been designed “from above”. The first ones emerged from grassroots groups with broad territorial representation, involved in the construction and maintenance of some sort of social, political, and cultural organisation. As they elaborated their demands, they found ways to articulate them, constituting themselves as counter-hegemonic collective actors. Once organised as housing cooperatives, they started shaping their self-management experience with a decision-making process based on mass meetings and collective work committees. While constructing their units, they managed to build a meaningful interaction with their technical teams (implementing actual participatory design practices), allowed non-traditional construction actors to enter the public housing system, and even combined traditional construction work with mutual aid practices not only to reduce costs, but also to generate processes of appropriation of what had been built. These cooperatives are the ones that implemented intense self-management practices aimed at building and recovering urban commons.

The common denominator behind experiences designed “from above” –starting with a call made by the Housing Institute of the City of Buenos Aires (*Instituto de la Vivienda de la Ciudad*) to families living in hotels or boarding houses or facing other housing issues– is that they resembled the management modality of “turnkey” state housing production. Most of the cooperatives consolidated a “hierarchical” organisational structure where housing construction was delegated to traditional production actors from the local housing system. While these experiences propose alternative forms of social organisation, they fail to put the structural bases of capitalism into question.

These ways of handling the self-management process had an impact on (3) *how living in cooperative houses and community life look like*. These “hierarchical” cooperative groups would disassemble cooperative collectives once construction was finished, with individual ownership over the units and a building administration based on owners’ associations. In contrast, cooperatives that put actual self-management in practice have adopted joint and direct forms of management in the way they inhabit buildings, have built community-based forms of daily life, and are currently disputing access to collective ownership over their homes.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the experiences driven by the “Housing Self-Management Programme” have triggered collective, organised habitat social production processes. However, only a few of them have intertwined with concrete habitat self-management practices able to dispute and reclaim urban commons. In this process, the State (as a tool of capitalist domination) has managed to take some of these experiences and make them its own, going against both the symbolic and material meanings of self-management practices. Conversely, other experiences rooted in political processes of social transformation have managed to truly reclaim urban commons in the heart of the capital of Argentina, proving that alternative forms of community life are possible.