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COOPERATIVE URBANITY
Risks and opportunities of scaling-up self-managed housing policies. The case of Uruguay

ABSTRACT

The Uruguayan cooperative housing movement, a pioneering global example, emerged in the late 1960s from grassroots efforts and gained rapid institutionalization through an innovative legal support.This experience has grown over the last fifty years to become the mainstream procedure for social housing provision in the country having a strong impact on the process of building Uruguayan cities. In this sense, it could be understood not only as a prolific architectural experience but also as a social movement involving new understandings of urban governance. However, contemporary challenges persist, particularly in adapting strategies to evolving urban environments. This article examines three key debates: cooperatives' limited autonomy in addressing socio-economic changes, the creation of mono-programmatic and socially homogeneous urban spaces, and the enclosed nature of cooperative developments. In this respect, the establishment of an institutional framework that can articulate different actors in order to include a variety of stakeholders by widening the current operation of existing organisations in the Uruguayan context, as well as finding more flexible legal frameworks for state support that doesn't compromise the cooperative's autonomy, are proposed as possible paths for further development of the model. This work grows for a master's thesis dissertation.

Keywords: Cooperative housing, Public policies, Urban project
Topic: espacio público y proyecto urbano en la metrópolis contemporánea.

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Introduction

Uruguayan Cooperative housing movement is one of the largest and more elaborated cooperatives experiences in the sector worldwide. It grew in the mid-60s from grassroots organisations, e.g. workers unions, and a group of architects interested in searching for new possibilities to face the shortage of housing for mid and lower income households. In this scenario, as a consequence of the strong pressure from these civil organisations and the successful result of a few cooperative housing initiatives seeing as promising from the government, a pioneer legal framework (Ley n°13728 del 13/12/1968: Plan nacional de viviendas) was established in 1968 and remains until today as the protocol under which the housing cooperatives are developed. This experience has grown over the last fifty years to become the mainstream procedure for social housing provision in the country having a strong impact on the process of building Uruguayan cities. The cooperative housing movement in Uruguay is distinguished by its robust democratic character, exemplifying a profound commitment to participatory governance and collective decision-making. Central to this model is the principle of democratic control, wherein members actively engage in the management and operational decisions of their housing cooperatives. This participatory framework empowers residents, fostering a strong sense of community ownership and accountability (Nahoum,2013). The movement's democratic ethos is further reinforced through regular assemblies and transparent electoral processes, which allow for the equitable representation of all members' voices. By embedding democratic principles into its core, the Uruguayan cooperative housing movement not only addresses housing needs but also cultivates civic engagement and social cohesion.

Fig. 01 Mesa 1 Cooperative Housing complex, built from 1971 to 1975, comprises 420 units and several communal facilities. Source: (S.M.A., F.A.D.U. 1981).

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In this sense, it could be understood not only as a prolific architectural experience but also as a social movement involving new understandings of urban governance. It could be stated that one of the main reasons behind its success is the development of a model that proposes a deep interrelation among a specific governance model fostering citizen participation, a vision for urban and architectural development and strong state support. In other words, the concurring interest of civil organisations and their long-lasting demands (self-determination, democratic decision-making process, affordable housing) with a group of architects with a spatial understanding of the economic-political ethos of the cooperative movement and the state as a supporting agent, were the key elements that lay behind the origin and the development of the model.

However, contemporary projects seem to struggle in formulating an array of strategies to address emerging challenges, particularly concerning the urban environment generated within the model. Various stakeholders—including residents, cooperative federations, and nascently, academics—are advocating for a thorough process of critical examination of its current performance (UPV, 2013).

1. Cooperative housing Institutional framework

The establishment of the normative framework described above positioned the state as a pivotal actor, guiding the entire process and laying out not just procedures for accessing land and state funding, but also a comprehensive set of architectural regulations that pre-define many aspects of the projects with high detail. These regulations encompass everything from the spatial organisation within units to the dimensions of domestic and communal spaces. It could be said that behind this strong regulation of the spatial dimension of cooperative housing lies the necessity of simplifying the protocol of state control of the constructed outcome of cooperatives.

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Fig. 02 Mesa 1 Cooperative Housing complex. Source: (S.M.A., F.A.D.U. 1981).

A notable innovation within this legal framework was the creation of a dedicated entity to assist the cooperative during the whole process, from formation to occupancy. These entities, known as 'Technical Assistance Institutes' (T.A.I.)[1], are private organisations offering holistic support from multidisciplinary perspectives, covering architectural design, construction, and the socioeconomic dimensions of cooperative projects. Recognizing the intricacies inherent in self-managed initiatives, the law mandates that each T.A.I. include professionals such as architects, accountants, social workers, and notaries.

The operations of these Institutes are closely tied to the two types of cooperatives outlined in the law: 'Savings Cooperatives' (S.C.), where members save funds while organising and awaiting state loans, and 'Mutual Aid Cooperatives' (M.A.C.), tailored for lower-income populations whose members contribute through labour during construction. This dual cooperative structure has broadened access to the system, encompassing low and moderate-income individuals, and has given rise to diverse projects due to differing construction methods required by each type.

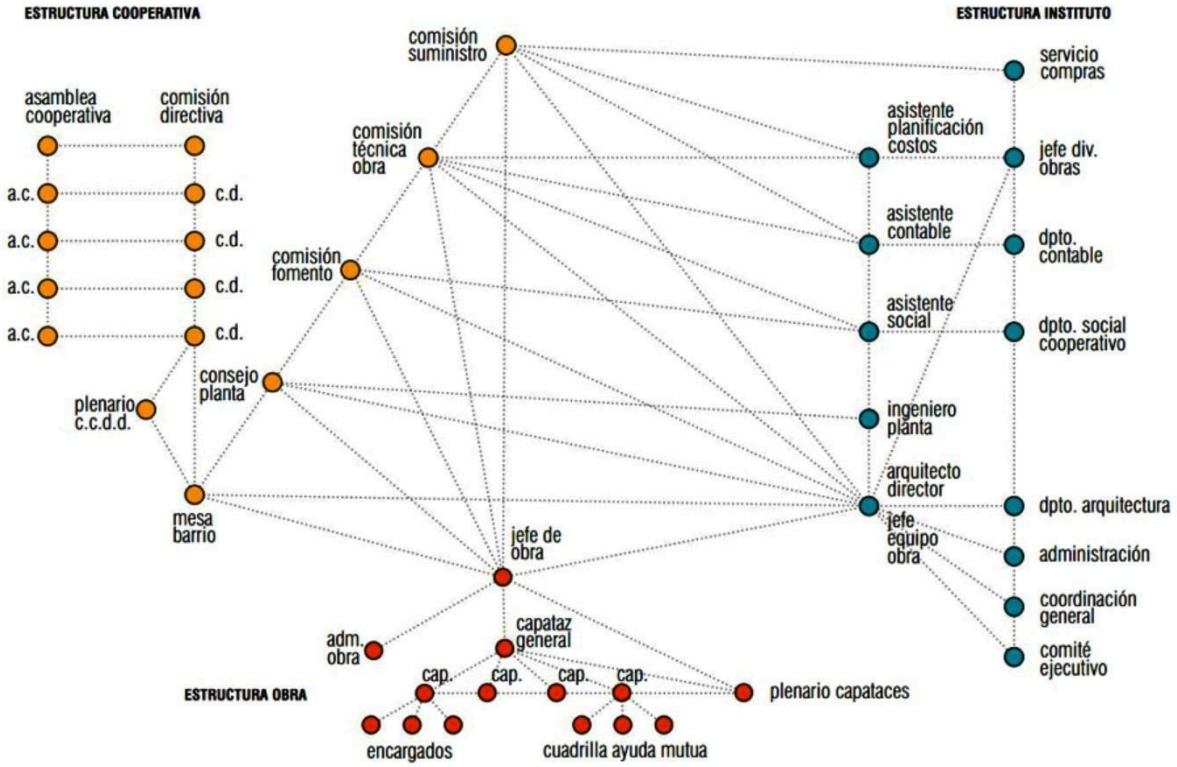

Fig. 03 Diagram of the internal organization of a Mutual Aid Cooperative and its articulation with the 'Technical Assistance Institute Source: Drawing by the author.

One of the main aspects that emerges in relation to Cooperatives- state relationships relate to the particularly complex contradiction that guarantees support while habilitates independence of action. On one hand, there is an inescapable need of state support for the development of cooperative housing in the context of underdeveloped countries like Uruguay while, at the same time, this support involves the risk of threatening the autonomy of the cooperative by defining a rigid framework for its development, or by co-opting the system. In other words, housing co-operatives have not been able to grow and expand significantly through self-help mechanisms alone in developing contexts, given their inherent scarcity of economic capital, compared with other co-operative sectors (Lang and Roessl, 2013). Rather they required some form of external support, such

[1] Institutos de asistencia técnica

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as that of public housing programs, which at the same time threaten organisational autonomy and participatory governance, and as such the whole cooperative nature of these housing providers as well as its efficiency: when the autonomy of the cooperative grows, its capacity to create an environment which matches up the expectations, needs, and preferences of the residents and encourages innovation is enhanced (Minora, Jones and Mullins,2013).

With this in mind, this article argues to discuss the possibility of an institutional design that habilitates what Ganapati (2010) defines as “state embedded autonomy”, “a balance between ties with the state and cooperatives autonomy”. This would imply a strong state support framework, while, at the same time, habilitating a high level of autonomy that assures the full development of the model’s potential.

In this sense, the strong process of institutionalisation regarding the Uruguayan case implied a two-fold characteristic; on one hand it can be understood as its main virtue in the sense that it institutionalised the overall political support and habilitated the extensive application of the model, but on the other hand it has defined an extremely rigid normative framework which has a negative impact in the capacity of the system to respond to emerging issues.

2. Problematization of the current performance of the model. The need for a more comprehensive multi-sectoral and multi-scalar approach.

Cooperative autonomy

As many studies suggest, and the Uruguayan case can clearly testify, there is a correlation between the process of self-management and the production of cohesive and resilient social environments (Fromm, 2012) The autonomy of the cooperative group to collectively move forward their initiative is one of the central reasons behind its capacity to foster social capital growth. In the Uruguayan case, the will for scaling up the system led to define quite a rigid set of rules in order to easily control the procedure of each cooperative by the government's agents. The first form of control regards the cost, and that is limited by the amount of the loan that the cooperative gets from the state. Then, the legal framework establishes also an extra set of control rules that relate to the architectural project: it defines the type of spaces allowed (living-rooms, bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms) and doesn’t discuss the possibility of including any other space that relates to not-dwelling activities such as work spaces, commercial stores, public facilities for the complex or the neighbourhood or recreational facilities with the exception of a communal space which is explicitly defined in size in relation to the amount of units. In the same line of simplifying the spatial dimension of the dwelling, the normative defines a limit regarding the maximum area for each type of space and for the entire unit.

It can be argued that in the current context, even though the cooperative has a high level of autonomy regarding the management of its process and its finances, regarding the architectural and urban project, the regulations define quite a bureaucratic obstacle to innovative projects that question traditional domestic organisation, search for new arrangements in relation to communitarian spaces articulation or propose to rethink the relation between work and living environments

Urban articulation

Another aspect that stands out regarding the structure of the model is that even though the legal framework has a very sensitive and elaborated approach regarding the organisation of the cooperative itself, by connecting its different levels of action (social, architectural, financial), it lacks of specific procedures to articulate the cooperative project with a wider range of stakeholders that can contribute to deliver a more complex and diverse urban environment. In this sense, it can be argued that projects developed in the last decades are mainly mono-programmatic (only residential) and socially homogeneous. As Haan and Tummers

(2007) states in relation to self-managed projects: “By collectively assuming the role of client, inhabitants can create more functions in their living environment. This has a positive effect on the time management of inhabitants, social infrastructure and liveability of the neighbourhood.” In other words, due to the fact that cooperative members are not only future inhabitants but also could be considered *activists* engaged in the design of their own urban environment, they are usually proactive about the possibility of developing networks to incorporate spaces related to activities that go beyond housing. The current regulations don't take advantage of this possibility, but, on the contrary, define a clear obstacle in this sense.

The possibility of broadening the range of stakeholders involved in the Cooperative development brings, as well, the possibility of establishing links between the cooperative and the neighbourhood. In the case of cooperative housing projects built in recent years in Uruguay there is a tendency to work more and more as enclosed projects that don’t engage fully with the surrounding urban life (Tognola, 1999). They usually don’t propose a graduated relation with urban environments and in some cases repeat the logic of other types of enclosed urban spaces (UPV, 2018) that started to emerge in Latin America in last decades like gated communities. This surprising relationship between these two different types of urban development that are located in completely different extremes of the political spectrum, is an emerging situation which hasn’t been yet discussed nor by the academia nor by the state.

3. Cooperative Urbanity. Dilemmas, questions, and challenges to rethink the Uruguayan cooperative model.

This part of the article explores possible paths for the process of re-thinking the model by pointing out a series of debates and questions that intends to articulate the institutional framework and the built environment. These are understood as triggers, rather than recipes, to open discussions in a field that lacks reflection in the Uruguayan context. It intends, then, to contribute to the collective construction of the project for a cooperative city, as Aureli (2013) reminds us, the etymology of the word Project refers to the Latin word for “something thrown forth”, in the sense that the project implies a future vision, a proposition to change the current state of things. “The project thus addresses a potential future situation, but in doing this it seeks to organize the available means towards a possible end.” (Aureli, 2013: 16)

Embedded autonomy. Spatial potentials of an increased design autonomy.

The cooperative housing experience in Uruguay faces a fundamental contradiction: it relies on state support for viability while striving for independence to uphold its core political principles and efficiency. Balmer and Bernet (2015) emphasize that the autonomy level of cooperative projects significantly impacts housing as a Common Pool Resource, directly affecting their self-determination capacity. Miazzo (2014) underscores the importance of policies supporting open-ended processes rather than predetermined outcomes to effectively integrate bottom-up initiatives with top-down procedures.

In Uruguay, cooperative regulations have shifted towards standardisation rather than fostering effective and innovative design processes, resulting in a catalogue of urban elements rather than enabling tools. This regulatory approach limits diversity in recent projects, as regulations “should establish the broad reasoning and argument for value propositions and for quality, character, consistency, and hierarchy (…) It should set the principles for diversification, integration, and synergy, set against a background of changing conditions and emerging opportunities. If they are too dogmatic, then the richness and diversity one is striving for can quickly disappear” (Batchelor, Karakusevic and Papa, 2017: 114).

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Widening the spectrum of stakeholders. Looking for an intense, multi-programmatic urban environment within the Uruguayan cooperative system.

Last decades have found the spatial disciplines immersed in a discussion about a more desirable future for cities that understands central areas as an unavoidable reference, offering a concentration of opportunities and comparative advantages. As profuse literature in recent years discusses, there has been a strong advocacy for “the compact city instead of the dispersed city. The interaction of functions instead of the segregation of uses.” (Fernandez Per et al, 2015) In the case of Montevideo, Uruguay’s capital city, this is of particular interest given the process, starting in the last decades of the 20th century and still ongoing, of large growth of the city area with almost no population increase which led to a loss of density in central urban areas (Instituto de Teoría y Urbanismo, 1994).

Under this specific context and the new emerging paradigm of urbanity discussed previously, the cooperative movement can start to discuss the potential of the model to adapt from delivering *new pieces of the city* with introverted, low-density qualities to propose a denser and more diverse city that engages with a more *intense* urbanity. So far, the discussion in the Uruguayan context has been focused on the densification of central areas, but as Jan Gehl discusses; ”what the lively city really needs is a combination of good inviting city space and a certain critical mass of people who want to use it. There are countless examples of places with high building density and poor city spaces that do not work at all.” (Gehl, 2010: 68) Similarly, the lack of diversity found in contemporary cooperative projects in Uruguay has become a key issue; homogeneity in a socio-economic and also in a typological and morphological level appear as a central characteristic of the built environment produced by the cooperative model. This has a clear consequence on the urban environment produced, as Sennet (2018) proposes: “mixed form and uses invite mixed users. Whereas in a stripped-down environment, the more form becomes simple, clear and distinct, the more it defines who belongs there and who doesn't.” (Sennet, 2018: 129)

To explore a more diverse environment is fundamental to discuss the possibility of including different activities that serve not only the cooperative but the neighbourhood, and enrich the urban space and expand only-residential projects. At the same time, the possibility of including a wider heterogeneity of typologies could define a wider variety of households enlarging the heterogeneity of lifestyles of the project and the neighbourhood. Both possibilities appear as big challenges within the Uruguayan context which call for, on one hand a more flexible normative framework as argued before, but at the same time to discuss the institutional channels to include and connect a series of stakeholders that could join the cooperative development process.

Cooperative housing as urbanism

Across Latin America urban segregation appears as a widespread phenomenon that defines a fragmented spatial organisation (Balbo, 1993) with clear negative social consequences as “the denial of basic infrastructure and public services, (…) intense prejudice and discrimination, and higher exposure to violence.” (Feitosa et al, 2007) Is in this sense, that connection and accessibility in relation to urban upgrading and housing policies emerged as key topics at the turn of the 21st century.

As previously outlined, the cooperative housing movement grows from a contradictory urban dynamic. On one hand, it has a high potential to deliver social cohesion within its limits but, at the same time, it tends to strongly define its separation from the surroundings. This characteristic appears of particular importance against the emerging problem of segregation in Uruguayan cities. This issue has started to be outlined by some voices like cooperatives, urbanists and architects, but hasn’t been properly studied by academia or faced by state agents.

With this in mind, it can be stated that new specific urban governance tools could be developed to habilitate cooperatives and the surrounding urban environment to co-create spaces and work as platforms for shared

activities between the neighbourhood inhabitants and the cooperative: “common spaces can be experienced as such because they emerge in the process of being collectively used, defined, conceived and communicated.”(Stavrides, 2016, p. 210) Gehl argues for the potential of the edge along ground floors to provide the opportunity for life in the buildings to interact with life in the city as this is the zone where activities inside the buildings can move out into the common space of the city or vice versa (Gehl, 2010). In this sense “whereas efforts are made to graduate and soften transitions between private and public areas (…) the likelihood of contact from zone to zone increases, and residents gain the opportunity to regulate contacts and protect private life. A well-proportioned transition zone can keep events at a comfortable arm’s length” (Gehl, 2010, p 75). This appears as a major challenge, but also as a key opportunity to embrace the potentialities of the cooperative model in relation to emerging socio-spatial problematics in the Uruguayan context.

Conclusion

The case of Cooperative housing in Uruguay appears as a complex system of housing provision developed over decades with a series of remarkable achievements such as its scale, its affordability, and the development of social environments with an increased interaction and cohesive quality. Nevertheless, it lacks a more elaborated framework in relation to its understanding as an agent of urban development, such as specific procedures to articulate the cooperative project with a wider range of stakeholders that can contribute to deliver a more complex and diverse urban environment. The shift to a comprehension of *cooperative housing as urbanism* appears as a key challenge for further development of the model. In this regard, a partial re-design of its institutional framework could habilitate a more comprehensive approach to the cooperative movement that addresses its potential not only in relation to housing provision but also as the cornerstone of a more democratic, open and inclusive model of urbanity.

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