

4. Beyond the “select few” – the inner workings of a socially diverse housing cooperative

This series of articles provides a summary of the discussions held with the *Yes, We Rent!* Advisory Council on how to consolidate and build on the projects' legacy in Mataró.

Yes, We Rent! is a bid for improving access to affordable housing by working on policy in tandem with citizens, and by drawing on their capacities and potential for self-help.

One of the key drawbacks of cooperative housing so far, has been that it has mostly tended to involve a “select few” of members who were socially rather homogenous - typically people with higher social and cultural capital than those most in need of affordable housing. The latter group often lacked resources (including time) for involvement, or simply lacked information about the opportunities to become part of housing cooperatives.

Bloc Cooperatiu, the tenants' cooperative that was created and supported through the Yes, We Rent! project differs from most other housing cooperatives in ways that have an impact on its inner workings:

- As an initiative supported by the municipality, the bottom-up processes of setting up a housing cooperative were limited by the municipal institutional framework and its legal restrictions.
- In the context of an EU project, the cooperative had to be set up fast, cutting short the process of building a trusting community of cooperative members.

- As a project involving the city hall and aiming at a great scale, the cooperative has been widely advertised, which drew many “unusual suspects” to the cooperative making its membership highly diverse.
- The new housing cooperative is multi-local, as units under cooperative control are distributed over the city, which makes community organising potentially more complex.

These particular conditions make Bloc Cooperatiu atypical, but at the same time replicable for other tandems of municipalities and citizens who want to jointly achieve a more impactful and democratic affordable housing policy.

Internal organisation and community development in a diverse housing cooperative

“And here we are, bringing this new structure to life, which has been hard. Imagine! We have gone from being 10 members who constituted the cooperative on February 18 (2021) to 60 in October of the same year. Of course, managing this community growth is a complex and difficult thing, but also a wonderful thing.”

Ivet Companyó, Bloc Cooperatiu

A tenants cooperative is not just a tool for generating affordable housing, it is also a community project bringing together a diverse group of people who commit to working together for the right to housing. One of Bloc Cooperatiu's first successes was to have extended its membership –within a relatively short period of time– from the founding group to a larger mass that included people with severe housing and other problems:

“We have joined up with people with whom we would probably never have crossed paths; a super-heterogeneous, super-diverse community of people who would never have otherwise met through their work or social environment, is forming. Those of us who started the cooperative were, let's say, well off people who wanted to transform the rental market and, of course, benefit from the cooperative and have an affordable rent, because even if we are well-off, we are part of a generation for whom access to housing isn't easy!

When the first flats enter the cooperative, they are in peripheral areas of Mataró, where the owner cannot find a, let's say, “acceptable” tenant. And then (through Yes, We Rent!) people come along who are happy to move into this type of flat, people with financial problems, or people who, when they show their -foreign- ID to the property manager and the property manager tells this to the landlord they say, “Look, I don't want this type of person in my apartment.”

Lluís Ferrer, Bloc Cooperatiu

The hypothesis behind Yes, We Rent! is that citizens themselves are better at managing and developing an affordable housing stock than the municipality, and that they can change the dynamics of the local housing market by joining forces to work together. In order for this to happen,

the cooperative needs to empower all of its members and mobilise their capacities for the common project, to become recognised in Mataró as an organisation of responsible tenants that is competent in managing housing and an attractive option for flat owners to work with

The diversity of Bloc Cooperatiu's membership is not unlike that of the Community Land Trust Brussels (CLTB), who provided support to Yes We Rent! through the project's advisory body, so there are probably lessons to learn from the Brussels case on community organising. Joaquín dos Santos from CLBT stressed in particular the need to define ways for all members –with their different skills and capacities– to contribute meaningfully to the project's work. He also underlined the importance of how members are addressed, e.g. by coining a positive discourse and by organising meetings in an appealing way.

“For people in a precarious life situation participating in a cooperative is not easy. Although that does not mean you have to fall into the self-defeating position that people with few resources cannot achieve anything, one has to organise wisely. For instance, trying to ensure that meetings are friendly moments, with meals and things like that. And use the typical ways of community organizing: every achievement is a small victory, encouraging each other and having a more positive discourse about what can and cannot be achieved. We also realized that many people are used to being told “no”, that “it is complicated”, so that the last thing they need is a project which gives them a headache with complicated things. Of course, there are things that are complicated, but you have to be positive.”

Joaquín dos Santos, Community Land Trust Brussels

CLTB tested different methods of community organising to develop its work with members. These included asset-based community development (ABCD), a method that starts by creating an inventory of each member's skills, interests and dreams with the goal to connect with similar minded people to develop a project. This led, for instance, to setting up a bike-workshop and training and a canteen to allow members' interests and skills in cooking to find its way into the cooperative's development.

Another method used by CLTB is group analysis, a method for identifying experiences, problems and successes from individuals to then be interpreted

in group work and passed on to public authorities (See Community Land Trust Brussels, Community Work at CLT Brussels, Learning from Collective Experiences: The CitizenDev Project). A dedicated project led by CLT Brussels identified the following 9 building blocks for their own community work, which are a valuable resource for Bloc Cooperatiu and other nascent tenants cooperatives. See table:

- 1. Acknowledge and highlight value** - Enthusiastic and motivating attitude that shows everyone can contribute to the development of the community. Call upon local skills rather than looking for them elsewhere.
- 2. Asset inventory** - Identify the resources, dreams and wishes of the community to organise and network.
- 3. A Physical space** - Allow community members to meet in person in a space that they ideally manage themselves.
- 4. Thematic openness** - Support initiatives regardless of their themes. Show community members that professionals will not influence the projects that go forward.
- 5. Connections** - Work with the figure of 'connectors' that invest themselves in the community to create links and foster collaboration.
- 6. Self-management** - Foster community ownership. Make it possible for community members to organise initiatives however they see fit while reaching a balance between autonomy and support.
- 7. Group analysis** - Collective analysis of experiences, obstacles and success factors.
- 8. Engaging public authorities** - Create a dialogue with public authorities.
- 9. Remuneration** - Financially value the contribution of community members as experts, or when they carry out professional tasks.

Meanwhile, in Mataró, Bloc Cooperatiu set up "Working Blocks" as a first organizing structure to develop its community work and the cooperative.

They include a block on communication, another on the mobilisation of new flats, a bloc called "welcome", whose task is to inform new members about the project and to accompany them in their first steps in the cooperative; and a community block, which takes care of the relationships between the members and provides support on the use of the cooperative's IT tools for online meetings and communication.

In Mataró's brand new housing cooperative, the model of how to organise the community internally is still evolving. A better understanding of the skills and assets of all members will soon allow the cooperative to understand which parts of its work can be covered through its internal resources, and in how far this work can be remunerated.

"I think it is important to start from peoples' competences, even informal ones, and involving them in whatever needs to be done in this project. In Vienna, back in the 1920, there was the 1000-hours house. The cooperative model was that people who did not have money would contribute with 1000 hours of physical work to the construction of houses. What happened is that you were not building your own house, they were building all of them. So they did not know which one they would get in the end, which meant that they had a sense of ownership for the whole, and I think this is a very good model for involving people along with their competences and create ownership."

Michaela Kauer, City of Vienna

Summary and outlook

Bloc Cooperatiu has been, from the outset, an atypical tenant's cooperative, which needed to start functioning early on and incorporate its fast-growing, diverse membership. Having achieved this in the short time-span of a European project is already a great accomplishment.

In the coming years, Bloc Cooperatiu will need to further develop its community by starting from the capacities of its members, and make sure they find their place in the project. At the same time, Bloc Cooperatiu needs to fulfill an increasing number of technical tasks in the mobilisation, renovation and management of flats and relations between tenants and landlords. Bringing together the members' capacities and the demands for running the cooperative will be a challenge, but it can be overcome with the inspiration similar initiatives, and the support of partners including the city council and cooperative networks.

Yes, We Rent! Advisory Council

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