



CARLES BAIGES AND CRISTINA GAMBOA, LACOL

'We are convinced that architects can do much more for society.'

Photo: Lacol



LA BORDA HOUSING COOPERATIVE, BARCELONA, SPAIN (2018) Photo: Institut Municipal de l'Habitatge i Rehabilitació de Barcelona

Cooperating with private groups of home seekers lies at the core of **Lacol**, a collective of young architects who work together in Barcelona. "People already know a lot about architecture. They live their whole lives in buildings, so they are experienced."

Working non-hierarchically and with attention to gender equality, Lacol's idealism is not restricted to their own internal organization. It also extends to the way they deal with groups who ask them to design collective housing projects. Both internally and externally, Lacol perceives architecture as a political act. At their office in Barcelona two members of the collective, Carles Baiges Camprubi and Cristina Gamboa Masdevall, explained how they came to start their alternative practice.

Carles: "It originated from when we worked together as students. Our university didn't give us the room we needed for drawing and making models, so we decided to rent a place of our own to work on our projects. From there on we began to help one another, not just to share the space and the printer. We collaborated a lot, especially in the last phase of our studies as we approached the final exams, instead of following the traditional path with a tutor who prescribes rigidly how to do architecture. Our professors asked us to design a five star hotel in London. They thought that students could never demonstrate that they had become competent architects just by designing a housing complex or doing a refurbishment. The university's idea of architecture was still modelled on star archi-

tects, creating big pieces of art. To us, this didn't make sense. Never in our career would we do a real five star hotel. We would do projects here, in Barcelona. That is why we chose heritage for our graduation project."

Cristina: "Apart from a few exceptions, the architectural faculty was totally apolitical. The political aspects of our discipline were not questioned at all. In reality there is always a political aspect to architecture. Shortly before the global financial crisis of 2007-8 there was an economic boom in Spain, spurring a flood of commissions for theatres and huge museums – all buildings costing a fortune. Every city, every village in Spain wanted to have its own icon. Architects took part in this flurry of erecting very expensive buildings. By the time our studies came to an end we were in the middle of the financial crisis and commissions like those ground to a halt. We faced what seemed like a severe problem. But we saw it as an opportunity to find out what the role of the architect should be in society, and to think critically about our profession."

What is the main attraction of working as a collective, or should I say cooperative?

Cristina: "A cooperative is basically a democratic structure that people share to achieve a certain goal. Historically, in our neighbourhood, it started



Photo: Baku Akazawa



Photo: Lluc Miralles



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Photo: Lacol

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mainly with food and welfare. Nowadays it is also linked to social economy, and is based on shared values regarding ecology, diversity, and inclusion. 'Cooperativism' first appeared in Barcelona at the end of the 19th Century and it was very strong in the thirties, until the dictatorship. Then it revived in the seventies after the death of Franco. We have tried to learn from these experiences and to take advantage of the tools that have been developed since then."

After the seventies, cooperatives like those came under pressure or disappeared altogether, due to the ubiquitous neoliberalism and its emphasis on individuality. What do you do to prevent your own initiatives from fading away?

Carles: "In Spain, most of the alternative movements arose because the State was weak. When it recovered its grip, many activists became civil servants. Health care and education have advanced a lot since then. Unfortunately, the government has since gone the other way as far as housing is concerned. That is why we build alternatives like the La Borda social housing complex, and we try to learn how to do it better with every new project. To give it more substance and more permanency, we also lobby in political circles and we propose changes in municipal law."

Cristina: "Cooperatives, which are often organized through neighbourhood associations, represent the community. So they are soundly based democratically. It is important that the municipality recognizes this. For cooperatives like these to be successful, it is also essential to reach a balance between private and public, to establish a joint control. This is because both sides may tend to move away from the original goals, for instance when a new government changes its policy or the members of the cooperative get more individualistic and try to sell their apartments for profit. This means that there should be regulations, for example against selling within in a certain period, or to guarantee leases of public land for fifty years."

Could you work anywhere in Spain, or does your method imply that you are restricted to do this kind of projects for cooperatives in Barcelona?

Cristina: "We could work anywhere in Spain, and we do indeed collaborate with people from other cities. But it is true that you need to know the context in order to do the kind of work the way we do. Therefore we operate mainly as advisors for communities and municipalities from other areas in Spain, and communicate a lot with them, meet them regularly, or organize workshops."

Who are the people in those cooperatives that you deal with?

Carles: "The projects we work on now are initiated by the communities themselves. They choose us as their architects or advisors. Sometimes they already have a site, and sometimes they have to lease a piece of land from the municipality or even buy it. If the project is to be on public ground, then the

government sets the conditions. But there are certain restrictions, for instance about a maximum income, or how long the people concerned have lived in Barcelona. The community has the right to decide who is going to live there. What we now try to do is to make these projects more accessible to everyone. People who want to participate often have to put down a deposit, but that is a barrier for those who have been unable to save enough money for the purpose. Another barrier is cultural: you need to have some understanding of what a cooperative or social economy is, and to share its values.

Migrants who have arrived recently don't have the right contacts or the right knowledge of what is possible. Therefore we try to make life easier for them." Cristina: "If you have no idea of the project, you would never ask to take part in it. A cooperative consists of people who know one another from a cooperative movement or a social organization. That leads automatically to a kind of homogeneity: most of the inhabitants in the La Borda neighbourhood are white Europeans, but about twenty percent of the population of the area are from an immigrant background, mostly from Latin America and Morocco. In the La Balma social housing complex, which we finished last summer, one of the apartments is designated for former foster children, who aren't supported anymore by the government. And in La Borda we discuss how we can bring in more diversity when an apartment becomes available, for instance by cooperating with an NGO to house refugees. There is a lot of work to do, and I think it is also time-consuming."

It seems unavoidable that new inhabitants will have less affinity with the cooperative and its values, compared to those who started it. How can this problem be solved?

Carles: "In general people in Spain occupy a dwelling for a long time and are less likely to move elsewhere. But newcomers naturally feel less engaged with the community and the locality, compared to those who have always lived there, so they are less inclined to participate. Therefore we have to pay attention to how we select newcomers, and we have to make it very clear to them what kind of community they will enter and what values are shared by its members."

How do you organize participation in a cooperative?

Cristina: "First of all we define the needs of the community; in other words the functional programme and the spaces. Basically that comes down to a qualitative discussion about how they want to live with one another. This also contributes to the cohesion of the community, because it brings people closer together. Then we try to establish with them an infrastructure that is open to change and has lifelong resilience, because the community is going to change over time as well as the needs of its members. The shared values are the bottom line. They are fundamental and mustn't change."

Carles: "Participation in a cooperative requires a lot of discussion. As architects, we have to propose ideas and explain them thoroughly, because participation based only on people's ideas and backgrounds could lead to repeated mistakes and to cultural standards that may need changing. So we share knowledge, explain our ideas, discuss those ideas with the people and, finally, let them decide. We like to propose solutions that are more sustainable or support communal life, but they can live in a more conventional way if they want. It will be their home, and they have to live there. And don't forget that people already know a lot about architecture. They live their whole lives in buildings, so they are experienced."

Still, it must be impossible to involve all the future residents in the design process.

Cristina: "The important decisions are taken by the whole community. But to discuss all the aspects of the design with everybody doesn't work. So we always ask the cooperative to select a committee to represent the community. The committee itself participates closely in the design process. Every two weeks, we have a meeting in which we discuss what steps are to be taken. Conversely, the committee helps us to understand what decisions the

cooperative has made, and they become familiarized with the language and the process of designing the building. Finding a common language is very important, in the same way as when we make drawings and models: it often works better to make them technically less precise than we professionals are accustomed to. But there are no magic tricks to make participation work. Taking enough time and gaining trust are essential. Conflicts between what we propose and what they prefer, do not have to arise. In the end it is all about communication."

Carles: "We are still learning to improve the way we organize participation. In La Borda, the whole process was quite overwhelming for many people because we organized too many meetings and discussed every single detail. Now we try to identify key subjects that need to be discussed with the community. Smaller issues, with less impact, can better be discussed in a smaller group, and there may even be certain things that we have to decide for ourselves."

La Borda has a courtyard, or atrium, for the apartment building. The apartments can only be entered via the courtyard. Is this meant to boost cohesion of the community?

Cristina: "You can find this typology in central and southern Spain too. It is not that original. We like it because when you enter or leave your apartment, because you always see the people with whom you share the building. That really helps to increase the interactions with them. The courtyard expresses the core of the community. Something that also makes La Borda special is that it has some other shared spaces besides the courtyard: a common kitchen for cooking and eating together, a general purpose space for all kinds of activities, and two common guest rooms. We developed them one by one, and we are still exploring the potential of those spaces."

More and more alternative practices seem to be

emerging all over the world: working on a small scale, non-hierarchical, and with participation of the intended residents. Is there a paradigm shift taking place, a shift towards a very different role of architects in the building process at least for social housing?

Cristina: "Definitely. The role of the architect has broadened and diversified, and there is a growing interest in sustainability, gender equality and decolonization in architecture. The relationship between architects and communities or municipalities is also evolving towards closer cooperation. We are convinced that this is an important development to meet future urban challenges."



LA BALMA COOPERATIVE HOUSING, BARCELONA, SPAIN (2021)
Photos: Milena Villalba

