

## **Berlin - A selfmade culture**

Future-oriented self-initiated co-housing and residential projects

by

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays, Berlin has become a typical selfmade city rather than a ready-made one. There is no other city in Germany that has such a diverse and, at the same time, large share of the population interested in breaking new ground in housing provision. The city is made by its residents, fulfilling their dreams of housing while respecting the rights of others.

Berlin has multifaceted models of cooperative housing projects where the end-user is involved in the whole process from the beginning based on the main cooperative principles developed by Rochdale. This is particularly manifested in the well-maintained, self-management system based on equal rights and benefits of the residents, the democratic elections of the advisory board, and the self-organization and self-responsibility giving space to their needs to be fulfilled within the common interest and identity of the cooperative community. Moreover, there are varied residential spaces and community-oriented facilities, which are non-profit-oriented and cost-effective, offering a safe alternative of shared ownership through a sustainable housing settlement integrated into the neighborhood.

This paper aims to address a specific model of cooperative housing in Berlin to unravel its process, as well as the involvement of its members (residents) in such process, including 1- Financing, 2-Planning, 3- Construction, 4- Habitation.

In fact, the study will explore the apparatus of Housing Cooperatives in Berlin, its historical and contemporary status, showing diverse examples of cooperative housing forms in Berlin, regarding the need of affordable housing, their social structure, as well as their maintenance. It will critically investigate the role of community participation in all its phases.

*Keywords: self-made, cooperative, Berlin, community-oriented, participation*

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### **Future-oriented self-initiated co-housing and residential projects**

by Salma Khamis, M.Sc.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Housing Cooperatives have long been known as a means of providing affordable housing, owned by their residents, and offering continuing economic incentives and social opportunities for its residents who are interested in controlling their social environment and improving the quality of their lives. (National Cooperative Law Center 2011)

The double character of Housing cooperatives combines an economic business model and the self-help principle under one hat. This distinctive form of housing provision is the third form between the traditional ways of housing; the rental system and the ownership. It connects social and economic aspects in a constructive participating way, fulfilling common goal of housing, not only in planning and constructing but also the future use of spaces and the democratic management system for its members. It is more than 'a roof on top of the head'.

At present, Berlin has become a typical self-made city rather than a ready-made one. Among German cities, Berlin holds a diverse and, at the same time, large share of the population interested in finding new ways for housing provision, a place where diverse possibilities of transforming unused and empty spaces and old buildings to new programs regarding the needs. As a result, different forms of self-determined designs of spaces and buildings for living and working occurred which includes the form of builder collectives, co-housing, co-op's, co-working spaces, surrendering an architectural variety and quality in Berlin over the last fifteen years. It became typical Berlin, "the city that is made by its residents, fulfilling their dreams of housing and respecting the rights of others". (Ring 2013)

#### **FLASHBACK INTO COOP BERLIN**

The industrial revolution and the increasing mechanism of the associated economy transformed societies and threatened the livelihoods of many workers in the western world. The concurrent labor, social movements and economic issues attempted to address and describe the climate at that time. The Industrial Revolution had a profound effect on the way businesses were organized and simultaneously on the working conditions and economic situations of the people.

Traditionally, Housing cooperatives provide a solution to housing shortages which arose when industrial development attracted people into the cities. In the beginning it targeted the working class families who could not afford to purchase a home. They offered sound shelter at affordable prices relying on self-help efforts of members to reduce costs. A primary advantage of the housing cooperative is the pooling of the members' resources so that their buying power is leveraged, thus lowering the cost per member in all the services and products associated with home ownership. (National Cooperative Law Center 2011)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the model of housing cooperative started in England and was spread in Western Europe further to Japan and North America. In 1834 with the industrialization in Germany and due to the influx of young people from rural areas to cities, the urban population in industrial cities grew rapidly consequently led to a catastrophic housing situation and overcrowded residential areas. As a result rents had rose and therefore a vast housing shortage happened. This was the impetus for local civil reformers to react and initiate the first housing cooperative which focused on workers and the low income people based on Cooperative principles.



1886 BBG - Berliner Baugenossenschaft: oldest and most active housing cooperative in Berlin.

1953 AWG - Arbeiterwohnungsbaugenossenschaft: self-help worker cooperative based on solidarity principle.

1989 MUT - Mietergenossenschaft Unionplatz Tiergarten eG: middle sized cooperative in Berlin.

Fig. 01 - Housing cooperative in Berlin, (Salma Khamis, 2016)

In 1989 after the reunification of Germany housing cooperatives lost their economic significance by reason of public funding programs and provision of affordable housing by the City of Berlin. Thus, housing cooperatives changed their target towards middle-income groups, meanwhile the self-made culture started.

## BERLIN SELF-MADE CULTURE

A big city like Berlin had to deal with the rising demand for alternative and mixed forms of housing. The current housing market does not meet those needs which results in community-led housing initiatives that try to fill in the gap between supply and demand. Future residents took over the active roles (project initiators, founders and decision makers) mostly self-organized and self-financed as prospective residents and users.

Berlin has a variety of models of cooperative housing projects, where the end-user is involved from the beginning in the whole process based on the main cooperative principles (Fig.02) developed by Rochdale in the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is particularly manifested in the well-maintained, self-management system based on equal rights and benefits of the residents, the democratic elections of the advisory board, and the self-organization and self-responsibility giving space to their needs to be fulfilled within the common interest and identity of the cooperative community. Moreover, there are varied residential spaces and community-oriented facilities, which are non-profit-oriented and cost-effective, offering a safe alternative of shared ownership through a sustainable housing settlement integrated into the neighborhood. (Co-operative Heritage Trust 2016)

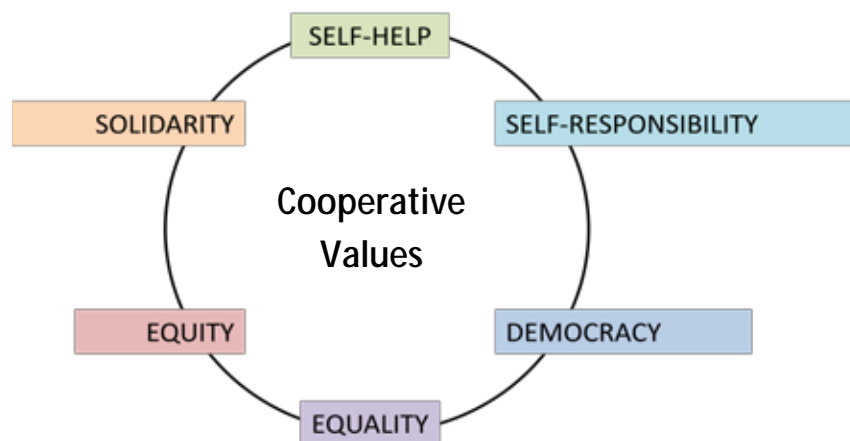


Fig. 02: Cooperative values according to Rochdale, (Salma Khamis, 2016)

For young families, cooperative housing is a real alternative compared to conventional purchase through developers. It is considered affordable and safe, since cooperative members enjoy a lifetime right of residence in a co-owned housing project, enabling small groups of 15-20 families to collaborate and fulfill their requirements in having a self-made residency.

Many of these community-led projects need to clarify two essential questions, the financing of high cost of buildings (Self-help principle) and the social level who can afford such project contributing to its society (Solidarity principle). Usually these projects affiliate prospective occupants and owners together as self-funders or as a young co-op association acquiring a third party for funding, if occupants are coming from different levels of income.

On the other hand, the degree to which the project contributes to society and its local neighborhood is highly important for the sustainability of the project in its surrounding. Creating and finding a group of people with whom to build now and live later is one difficult aspect for a community-led project. The whole idea of social commitment, low-cost housing, ecological sustainability and social inclusion is essential for the residents of such collaborative project, where residents feel responsible for a joint property that creates the sense of a community. (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

What is important to future projects, is the question of land ownership. So many municipalities integrated community-integrated housing into their housing property agenda. Also politics have to support community-oriented projects with appropriate land use policies. Zurich for example strongly supports co-op housing. Approximately a quarter of the rented housing is provided by non-profit-oriented housing providers. And until 2030 the authorities aim to reach one third. Furthermore it could be a target to develop sites that have been discounted as unsuitable. (Erich Schmidt 2007)

## **THE SELF-MADE QUALITIES**

Against the background of a more and more profit-orientated housing market especially in big cities alternative housing concepts become increasingly important and approaches like cooperative housing can be seen as an attempt to create affordable and sustainable housing solutions. Apparently, building communities seem like "practical solutions where single-family homes are stacked and combined to optimize the use of an urban site". (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

But taking a closer look, we can recognize the potential in producing affordable, customized, adaptable and sustainable housing concepts contributing to a mixed and vivid neighborhood. In summary, cooperative approaches seem to have three main qualities:

**1- Social quality:** for the residents as well as the entire neighborhood, where community spaces and open/public spaces (like shared living rooms, rooftop terraces, playgrounds or shared gardens) that help to create a sense of community and identity, strengthening responsibilities of any participant. Thus building communities can contribute to urban vitality and interaction in the local area. Additionally the prospective occupants get the opportunity to participate in the design, fulfilling their needs, which increase the quality and the satisfaction of living.

**2- Long-term affordability:** In contrary to most housing investments, cooperative housing concepts are non-profit-oriented developed out of specific needs (e.g. Spreefeld eG in Berlin), which secures long-term affordability and reduces the potential of market speculation.

**3- Ecological and technical qualities:** Usually, such community-led housing projects realize ecological living concepts and tend to try and invest in new hybrid technologies.

**4- Economical qualities:** Most important are the housing policies and funding programs that are encouraging such models of cooperative housing. Another city in Germany, City of Hamburg, has its own department that aims to make sites available. Currently there is 10% of the state-owned land allocated for such projects and it will extend to be 20%. Nevertheless, organized funding processes from the city are an essential support to establish and construct.

In view of that, it could be differentiated between two forms of communities, "privately-financed building collectives" and "community-orientated initiatives" which is developed as part of a rental housing funding program, generally in form of a co-op association. The extensive support of co-op housing in Hamburg can be understood as an extensive effort, on one hand to take into account the individual tendencies (in contrast to mass housing projects) and on the other to limit urban exodus due to reduced costs.

## **SPREEFELD, BERLIN - RIVERSIDE FOR EVERYONE**

Spreefeld eG is located in the district "Kreuzberg" in the centre of Berlin at the river Spree (Fig.03). The construction work of three new eight-storey residential buildings has been ended in 2014. In the total area of 7.414 m<sup>2</sup> and the diverse program of the project contributes to the debate of urban housing today. Instead of profit-oriented owner-occupied apartments the buildings constitute a communal living environment.



Fig. 03 - Spreefeld Berlin - Riverside view

### **The concept - Self-initiated participatory approach**

The idea of this project has been started as part of the initiative "Media-Spree versenken" (Stop the Spree Media Complex) replacing the City-planned concept of an office-building-area along the river Spree, with the intention to ensure that the riverside remain accessible for the public.

In June 2007, the project was initiated by Christian Schöningh, one of "Die Zusammenarbeiter - Gesellschaft von Architekten mbH" (The Co-workers - Architects corporation), together with prospective residents who established the Co-op association "Spreefeld Berlin eG". The site was purchased on the open market by the City of Berlin with total cost of ca. 16,5 Million Euros and a purchase option secured at cost by a notary for 18 months, during which all negotiations with local stakeholders and authorities were conducted leading to planning permission in accordance with §34 BauGB (conformance in type and structure with the surrounding context).



The group formation from October 2007 onwards ensued a three-year discussion on the legal form and property ownership model, followed by the securing of an option on the site and its subsequent purchase from March 2009 to August 2010. Regarding the finances as a co-op association its own capital assets of 40% and remainder financed through shares in co-op association, partially through a low interest KfW Passivhaus loan<sup>1</sup> and partial through KfW loans per residential unit. (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

### **Participatory design and varied program**

Three different architecture offices ("Silvia Carpaneto", "fatkoehl architekten" and "BarArchitekten") were asked to collaborate and design the buildings with focus on the design of the communal aspects rather than individual interests. The group was organized by the architects and prospective residents of mixed age, social and cultural backgrounds that participated extensively in various aspects of the planning process, considering the needs of the co-op members, the integration into the neighborhood and permeability towards the city.



Fig. 04 - Site Plan, (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

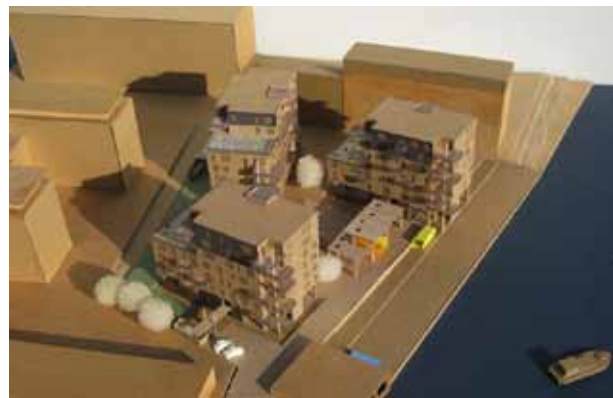


Fig. 05 - Model (Köhl, 2014)

The long-winded planning approach led to a compromise that all three architects should follow one common design principle, offering a wide-ranging program with various residential, communal and public spaces. The co-op association avoided unnecessary fragmentation into individual units, and enabled constellations such as apartment clusters with communal spaces

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<sup>1</sup> The KfW Passivhaus loan covers costs of consulting, planning, supervision and construction costs of new residential buildings, excluding the land cost. Starting at 0,75% annua interest rate for the whole project, max. 100.000Euro for each residential unit, max. 15.000 Euro repayment bonus up to 20 years fixed interest rate.

(Fig.06). The finishes of the apartments are fairly basic, presenting robustness that the architects call an "honest aesthetic". (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

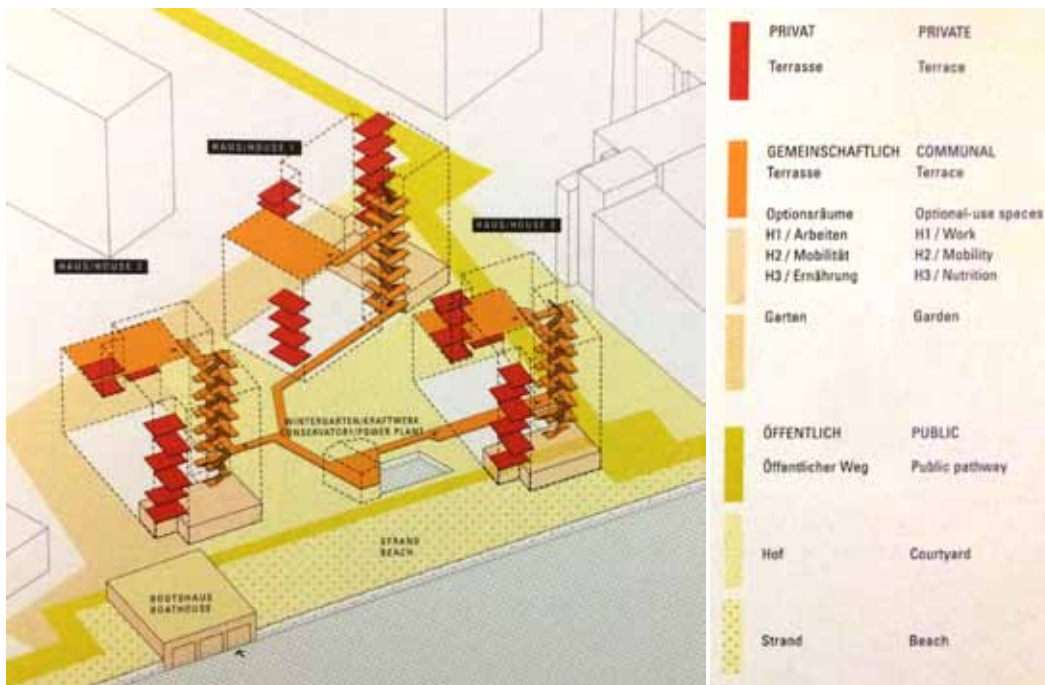


Fig. 06 - Distribution of public and private spaces, (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

The design needed to accommodate the bipolar orientation of the site, with sun to the south but a better panoramic view of the river Spree to the north. This was achieved by sacrificing use of the whole site in favor of creating permeability and vies through the site. Therefore, the buildings occupy only two thirds of the total area. (Annette Becker et al. 2015)

### Mixed functions and spaces

The program of Spreefeld, contains a variation of uses: standard apartments (red), cluster apartments (yellow) and commercial spaces (blue), which are community oriented and not profit oriented (Fig. 07).

Starting 2014 the residents of Spreefeld starts to move into their new spaces according to their needs. As mentioned before, the Spreefeld program of spaces and units was set by the architects and the prospective residents in an participatory approach reveals diverse uses of

spaces as agreed by the members in their committee meetings which could be detailed as following:

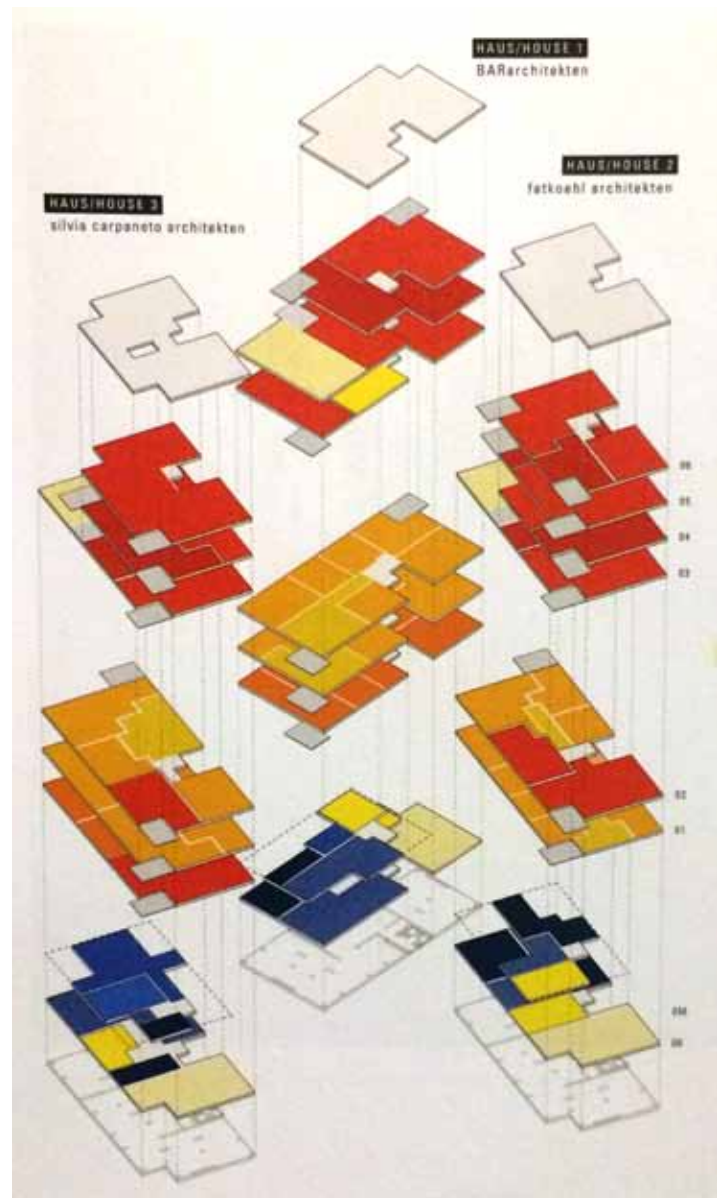
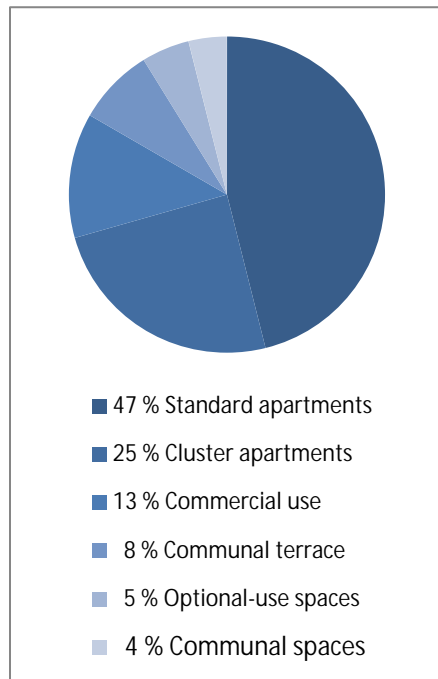


Fig. 07 - Program of space functions, (Salma Khamis after Annette Becker et al. 2015)

Hence, the entire outdoor area of the project as well as the ground floors of the three residential buildings were planned to serve the public and compensating Spreefeld residents by providing them spacious communal terraces on top of the apartment balconies.

A more detailed view on Spreefeld uses and spaces could be stated as following: 65 different residential unit, between single, family and cluster apartments, the communal facilities on the ground floor are designated for changing temporary uses such as guests apartments; fitness room, salon, music room (350m<sup>2</sup>); different optional-use rooms (384m<sup>2</sup>); communal terrace (420m<sup>2</sup>) and courtyard; and business units (980m<sup>2</sup>).

**Areas:**

Total plot area	7.414 m <sup>2</sup>
Total usable floor area	10.000 m <sup>2</sup>
Living area	5.485 m <sup>2</sup>
Communal area incl. terrace	1.154 m <sup>2</sup>

**Project costs (gross):**

Land cost	2.500.000 Euro
Construction cost	14.200.000 Euro
Total cost/ m <sup>2</sup> living area	2.100 Euro



Fig. 08 - Residential buildings (Salma Khamis, 2016)



Fig. 09 - Communal terrace (Salma Khamis, 2016)



Fig.10 - Apartment with balcony (Annette Becker et al. 2015)



Fig.11 - Communal space (Khamis, 2016)

## CONCLUSION

The demographic change in Germany due to the influx of young people from rural areas to cities, led to a growing importance of community-oriented housing concepts. The increasing need for support and services due to the rising percentage of an older population burdens the public sector as well as the social insurance funds and of course the people themselves, who have less resource to finance their essential requirement of housing and services due to the decreasing provision of state retirement funds. Accordingly, directing the economic resources towards such investments are more efficient in community-oriented housing projects, which are build on mutual support for the dwellers.

In short, to conclude that community-orientated housing can have socially and economically relevant positive effects and therefore plead for an increasing public funding for those housing projects to exploit their potentials. Since the first implementation of independent co-op housing in the 1970s there is a growing number of cooperative housing projects in Germany which differ in organization, actions, aims etc. because of different situations which it has to adapt to. Although there is a big variety in these co-op project initiative but some similarities and basic recurring strategies can be identified. Hence, back to Rochdale and the cooperative principles of the mid 19th century.

The principles of modern cooperative housing in Berlin could be summarized and stated as following:

The *cooperation* of all stakeholders in the whole process, rich and *varied functions* and residential spaces that gives more flexibility to cover different needs, *community-oriented* project components reflecting the needs, active *integration* into the neighborhood, specific *identity* with common objectives, *cost-effective and non-profit*, therefore *safe-alternative* model of shared ownership, *self-organization and self-responsibility* that gives space for needs to unfold and finally the *democratic* elections of the advisory board for a *self-managed community*.

Generally, the study observed that community-oriented housing can help residents to realize living preferences in an affordable way while sharing spaces and avoiding individual planning efforts and at the same time saving costs. Consequently it leads to social cohesion and stabilization due to interaction and integration in the local community.

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