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Housing Front Line: the Self-Production of Habitat

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This article tries to summarize a research on international case studies of habitat self-production, referred to different periods of the “hidden history of housing”, as Colin Ward defines the long and neglected story of housing based on local and popular initiative, self-help and mutual aid. Sometimes this approach is part of long standing traditions of solidarity and cooperation in local communities all over the world, sometimes is the result of necessity, sometimes of an emerging idea of transformation of the society, as in the case of the so called “intentional communities”, in some other cases is a process activated by NGOs and public policies, more or less other-directed. The evaluation of these processes is very difficult due to differences of contest, individual conditions, traditions and values of the community, top-down or bottom-up interactions. In the last years self-help has been the mainstream approach of many international policies of United Nations, World Bank and other organizations, starting from the fact that the majority of the population lives in informal settlements produced outside the market or state driven housing production, but a comparative work of evaluation of these policies is yet to come and was not in the possibilities of the research. Anyway, also from an heterogeneous collection of case studies we can draw some conclusion on self-help, perhaps the most relevant issue for urban research and action in the next years, in developing countries as well as in western ones.

A definition of the field of investigation

Mapping the international practices of “self-production of habitat”¹ is not easy to do, since even the field of investigation is hard to define. Also the term ‘self-help housing’, commonly used in international literature, includes many different phenomena assuming different meanings in time and space. The use of an international standard language doesn’t help to understand hundreds of local practices we can find all over the world. Self-help housing implies different forms of involvement of the end-user in the production of habitat and can be referred to new or existing buildings. In the first case we speak of ‘self-building’, usually practiced by the owner and his family. When the building process is collectively shared, different local names are in use: mutual self-help, *ayuda mutua*, *mutirão*, community self build etc. Actually the direct involvement of inhabitants in the production of their living environments has many aspects to be considered: it reflects in different ways global and local political and economic trends, can take place as consequence of different long standing traditions or under pressure of extreme poverty, people can be involved in different phases of the building process and with different roles, individually or as a community, in any case in a totally different way from the market or state driven housing production, whose role and dynamics are at the base of the current housing question.

This ‘third way’ to produce houses for people, according to some authors, gives better response to the complexity of needs and values that stay behind the term housing, in terms of quantity (more people housed), but especially in terms of quality: more people housed in better houses, at a lower price, using appropriate technologies, local materials or recycled ones, giving them identity, sense of belonging, security, self-expression, capacity building, possibility to put in place survival strategies, to establish positive social networks.

One of the major advocates of this approach, John Turner, wrote in 1972:

«In English, the word ‘housing’ can be used as a noun or as a verb. When used as a noun, housing describes a commodity or product. The verb ‘to house’ describes the process or activity of housing... Housing problems are defined by material standards, and housing values are judged by the material quantity of related products, such as profit or equity. From the viewpoint of a central planner or an official designer or administrator, these are self-evident truths... According to those for whom housing is an activity, these conclusions are absurd. They fail to distinguish between what things are, materially speaking, and what they do in people’s lives. This blindness, which pervades all institutions of modern society explains the stupidity of tearing down ‘sub-standard’ houses or ‘slums’ when their occupants have no other place to go but the remaining slums, unless, of course, they are forced to create new slums from previously ‘standard’ homes. This blindness also explains the monstrous ‘low-cost’ projects (which almost always turn out to have very high costs for the public as well as for the unfortunate ‘beneficiaries’)» (Turner J. F. C., Fichter R., 1972).

To participate to a self-help process is a fundamental experience for people involved, not only in terms of a wider access to housing, but also as an effective way of empowerment for individuals through self-organization and grass-roots participation in community-oriented forms of social development. This approach is shared also by the so called ‘intentional communities’, an inclusive term for some growing experiences of alternative living: [ecovillages](#), [cohousing communities](#), residential land trusts, [communes](#), student co-ops, urban housing [cooperatives](#), intentional living, alternative communities, cooperative living, and other projects where people are united by a common vision.

This wide range of reasons to choose a self-help approach needs to be considered when evaluating the phenomenon: it is very different to build a shelter with recycled materials if they are the only available or if you live in an ecovillage in a developed country. Anyway all these experiences probably meet the same ancestral human need to build their own house, also in the context of contemporary society, where people have been dispossessed of any ability to interact with the modification of their living environment.

1 This is was the focus of a research I carried out in the frame of the Housing front line research project financed by Regione Toscana and conducted by a work group of the Dipartimento di urbanistica e Pianificazione del territorio, Università degli studi di Firenze with the Fondazione Michelucci di Fiesole, on self-help housing as an instrument of social inclusion for people in conditions of marginality.



Another central aspect of the discourse on self-help housing is the tension between legality and illegality. When access to housing is denied - and this is the case not only of megalopolis of the global south but also of an increasing number of urban areas within the western society - self-help is the only way to have a roof over the head and to fight against speculation and gentrification as one of the causes of this lack of housing. Very often this happens in spite of private property, as in the case of the practice of 'squatting'. Many of the so called 'informal settlements' (or slums, favelas, bidonvilles, baraccopoli, villas miserias and other local names...) are poor shack self-built on illegally occupied lands or in squatted empty buildings. In The challenge of slums, to quote only one among many UN-Habitat annual reports, we read that in 2020 this will be the condition of 1.477.291 people living on the planet, half of the whole population in 2030. Informal settlements are considered:

«[...] the only large-scale solution to providing housing for low-income people. It is the only type of housing that is affordable and accessible to the poor in cities where the competition for land and profits is intense, and the places where they must live if they have little income or no other options»(UN-Habitat, 2003).

But the role of informality is a global issue², not confined to developing countries. We are assisting to the formation of slums and to the spread of the practice of squatting in many western cities, both by the alternative movements and by old and new forms of poverty: homelesses, temporary workers, nomads, migrants and refugees in search of better living conditions. The increase of these forms of settlements and the complex questions raised, does not correspond to an equal interest of urban research and to the development of appropriate public policies. In an article Ananya Roy points that:

«In particular, informality, once associated with poor squatter settlements, is now seen as a generalized mode of metropolitan urbanization. The focus on urban informality highlight the challenges of dealing with the 'unplannable' - exceptions to the order of formal urbanization. It argues that planners must learn to work with this state of exception. [...] Dealing with informality requires recognizing the 'right to the city' - claims and appropriations that do not fit neatly into the ownership model of property and such issues are of relevance not only in Third World contexts but also more generally for urban planning concerned with distributive justice» (Roy A., 2005).

The controversial path of the self-help approach

The first theorization of self-building and self-management of housing and neighborhood by people as the better way to answer to housing needs improving quality of life, social cohesion and community empowerment, was made during the seventies by a group of critical intellectuals such as Illich, Turner, Ward and others, convinced of the inadequacy of the state and its institutions to fully respond to human needs (Illich I., 1973; Turner J.F.C., Fichter R., 1972; Ward C., 1976 e 1983).

To support this theory Colin Wards reconstructed what he called the 'hidden history of housing' (Ward C., 2002) in Europe, that is the long and neglected story of housing based on local and popular initiative, self-help and mutual aid. He was the first to bring out the traces of the ancient tradition of the 'house built in a night' widespread less or more everywhere, in a Roman 'borgata' as well as in a Turkish 'gecekodu', which says that if you built a house in 24 hours you can claim the right to live in, also if the land is squatted. Ward interprets this as the proof of the persistence of ancient customs and natural rights recognized by different local societies. The story continues with several other examples, from the Diggers movement of the XVIII century to the Plotlanders of the Second World War ending with the contemporary neocomunita-

2 It is no coincidence that this year the award for the Best Project embodying the theme of Common Ground of the 13th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, went to Torre David/Gran Horizonte by Urban-Think Tank (Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner), Justin McGuirk and **Iwan Baan** and to the people of Caracas and their families who created a new community and a home out of an abandoned and unfinished building - a 45-storey skyscraper erected in the financial district of Caracas occupied by more than 750 families - with the motivation that "this initiative can be seen as an inspirational model acknowledging the strength of informal societies"

www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/news/29-08.html?back=true

rian movements and youth countercultures. In the same period, Turner carries out his research assuming that neighborhoods designed with inhabitants (in the tradition of spontaneous architecture) work better because people are the only experts on their own living environment. He claims for them the ‘freedom to build’ or to access to housing recovering empty buildings in a process that enhances experience and local know-how over technocratic and professionalized forms of knowledge. After the first projects in the Third World, Turner led some pioneering experiments in the USA of ‘urban homesteading’, as he called the recovering of abandoned buildings by people in housing need in poor districts slated for demolition, through ‘sweet equity’ i.e. people with no or low income could access to a house, usually in shared ownership forming a limited equity cooperative, without paying money but by means of their work in the rehabilitation of the building. This approach has been taken as a reference in many later cases, as the famous one of Alphabet city in New York, where during the 80’ a big community of artists squatted several buildings in a deprived neighborhood, abandoned by the property. After a long battle against evictions the remaining squatters legalized their presence through the mediation of UHAB (the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board), an NGO who bought the buildings for a symbolic amount of money from the NY Municipality and promoted the creation of a cooperative among the former squatters to self-manage the rehabilitation of the buildings. The word ‘homesteading’ has a particular significance in USA because is referred to an episode of the American history. During XIX century hundreds of families of pioneer leaved for the territories of the Far West, owned by the state and by some big private companies. They usually occupied pieces of land illegally but the State promulgate in 1862 the Homesteading Act, a law that recognized the right of the squatters to make a better use of these properties and, if successful in make the land productive, to become owners. The self help approach underlies many other experiences in North and South of the world. In Europe one of the most interesting was the community self build approach developed in UK, based on the wooden construction system devised by Walter Segal³ to facilitate the involvement in the building-site of people without skills (Figure 1).

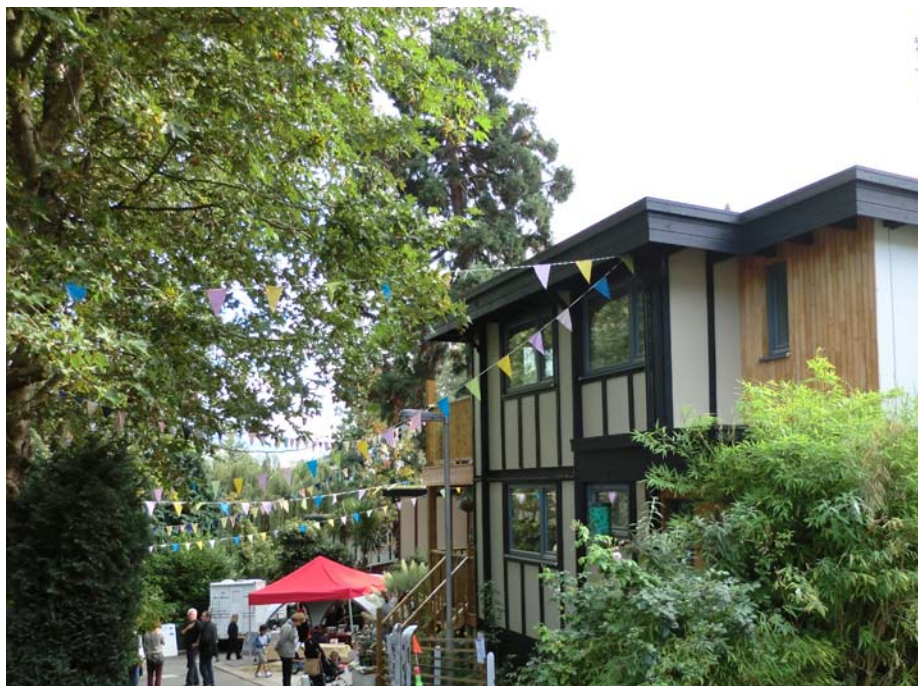


Figure 1 | London, Open day in Walter’s Way and Segal Close houses, self-built with the Segal’s wooden construction system (ph. Anna Lisa Pecoriello).

3 More informations on: www.segalselfbuild.co.uk

In the UK the cooperative movement had a leading role in the promotion of new organizative and financial models of self self-help housing integrated with the official housing policies. A sector that had a wide development was addressed to the reuse of the existing building stock, based on the so called short life housing: homeless and young people (usually jobless) recover empty building according with the property for short term living and in the meantime they do training courses in the building sector to find a job and a home after the end of the contract with the property, supported by organizations of the third sector.

On the side of illegal squatting there have been some interesting attempts to deal with the problem not only through eviction, but often these innovative projects are the result of battles of the squatting movement and not of intentional housing policies. However, there are interesting examples, especially in cities where the presence of the squatting movement was stronger, like Amsterdam and Berlin, of new forms of housing born from squatting experiences (Hausprojekt, Wohngemeinschaft, Wagenburg etc.). Nowadays the phenomenon of squatting and substandard housing is widespread due to different reasons, not least the presence of migrants and refugees without any possibility to find a job and a shelter, and the economic crisis with its consequences on housing. In many American cities people, no more able to pay mortgages, have lost their homes in favor of the banks. Here we assist to the growth of tent cities of homeless, like in the big crack of 1929. Some economists in USA, ask for a new extended homesteading program to cope with the crisis:

«Cities should therefore resist the temptation to respond to an increase in squatting by simply ratcheting up enforcement. Instead, governments should attack the problem on both the supply and the demand side. On the supply side, local governments should penalize owners who stockpile vacant housing, perhaps by imposing increased property tax rates on properties left vacant, and by moving aggressively to seize vacant properties when the owners fall behind on paying those taxes. On the demand side, governments should expand homesteading programs that permit and help low-income people to take over vacant housing - but only after it finds its way into city hands» (Peñalver E. M., 2009).

But the place where the self-help approach has been more successfully practiced is perhaps Latin America. It can be considered a laboratory for self-help, not only for the international other-directed housing policies, but especially for the bottom-up ones, based on self-reliance. Also in the research field many Latin American Universities have developed original studies, analyzing urban informality, experimenting facilitative building techniques, designing and planning in different ways considering self-building as an opportunity to deal with the problem of low cost housing. Many people movements have emerged to claim the rights to land, housing etc.

One of the strongest movement in Latina America is the FUCVAM (Federacion Uruguayana Cooperativas de Ayuda Mudua), a federation of mutual aid housing cooperatives, involving over 500 housing cooperatives, representing more than 25,000 families in Uruguay (i.e. approximately 90,000 people).



Figure 2 | Federacion Uruguayana Cooperativas de Ayuda Mudua, Jornada solidaria in Barrio 26 de octubre (ph. Gustavo Castagnello, courtesy of FUCVAM).

FUCVAM approach, which follows the key principles of solidarity, democratic participation, self-management, mutual aid and collective ownership of property, thanks to a South-South Cooperation project has been recently transferred to 15 countries across Latin America, adapting the model to local conditions in different contexts, setting up national federations and networks and supporting local efforts to influence government policy.⁴ Other interesting experiences are the ones conducted in Chile by Elemental on the *Vivienda Progresiva*, an incremental and participative approach to the construction of low cost housing of good quality integrating the work and creativity of people (that develops over time depending on the needs and possibilities of households) with the use of state subsidies.

Lessons from experiences

The self-help approach, at the beginning confined in some circles of anarchic and radical planners, became quickly, in the following years, a mainstream in the ‘aided self-help’ policies of the UN and the World Bank in developing countries. This occurred not always according with the basic principles of Turner’s proposal: a control of the community over the whole process. Self-help as seemed to some critics only an opportunity for neoliberal politics to release the cost of social housing among many different actors and to abdicate to the redistributive role of the state or, from a Marxist point of view, a practice that doesn’t address the causes of exploitation and inequality within capitalist society (Burgess R., 1978). But Turner’s vision, far more radical as the World Bank’s one, is still the only possibility for the future of millions of people of the urbanized world. Also if a comparative work of evaluation of these policies is yet to come and was not in the possibilities of the research I carried out, even from the heterogeneous collection of case studies presented in *Housing front line* (Marcetti C., Paba G., Pecoriello A.L., Solimano N., ed., 2011), we can draw some conclusion on self-help, perhaps the most relevant issue for urban research and action in next years, in developing countries as well as in western ones.

4 This project, supported by the Swedish Cooperative Centre, government agencies and grassroots organizations, that won the 2012 World Habitat Awards at the sixth World Urban Forum in Naples (<http://goo.gl/3S8kv>)



Here a list of some issues for further investigations:

- Urban informality seems to be a global phenomenon that needs to be interpreted, not eradicated through evictions. North and South of the world are categories that are changing in the new globalized world, we have common lessons to learn. Social movements, universities and institutions all over the world need to exchange their practices and know how.
- The right to housing is one of the challenges of the millennium. The possibility for each individual to respond directly to his own basic needs (to have a shelter, to feed and wash himself etc.) is a fundamental human right. Squatting to respond to denied rights should not be considered a crime. Many organizations from North to South of the world are fighting for the rights of access to land, decent housing, against gentrification and evictions, in defense of common goods (e.g. water etc...)⁵. When the right to housing is recognized in the Constitution, and not only in some international documents, and popular movements are strong, repressive actions are less practicable.
- This leads to the necessity of a reinterpretation of the property right that cannot be the only right recognized above all the others. There is the necessity to experiment policies for the legalization and upgrading of squatting and informal settlements when they respond to housing crisis and take care of abandoned properties (e.g. urban homesteading and sweat equity).
- Housing is not only a problem of economical sustainability (low cost housing) but also social and environmental. There is the necessity to experiment together sustainable building and new forms of living. Everywhere there is a tendency to the differentiation of the forms of housing (collective, temporary, nomadic, non-standard, based on intentional choices). Planning and housing policies should recognize these forms and give them freedom to experiment and right to exist.
- Many interesting projects of the last years on low cost housing follow an incremental approach both in the rehabilitation of informal settlements and in new buildings. This is the case of the *vivienda progresiva*, one of the most successful design experiments in low cost housing in Latin America, that requires a high grade of innovation in planning regulations and building practices, to avoid speculative forms.
- Urban planning should experiment self-regulating mechanisms following the many examples of spontaneous architecture and autonomous production of habitat we can find in the hidden history of housing⁵ who gave origin to inclusive settlements in contrast to current tendencies of customization of planning that give origin to gated communities.
- Self-help should not be seen as a consequence of the disappearance of the welfare state and an abdication to his distributive role but as an opportunity for the creation of new commons, for the empowerment of new sustainable communities.
- There is no self-help housing and self-building without popular movements: this is a characteristic of many good examples, they have been possible thanks to the force of movements of the civil society and NGOs, with a central role of the cooperative movement, that has to refer back to its founding principles. The political will inside institutions is still very weak but dialogue with these movements is fundamental to find new ways for a fair and sustainable urban development.

5 At international level: International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), Habitat For Humanity International (HFHI), the coalitions for housing of the International Social Forums, and to a more local level: Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa, Take back the land in USA, The land is ours in UK, the Sem Terra and Sem Teto Movements in Brasil, The Fight for housing movements and Squatter Movement in Europe.

- Self-help housing in urban areas should be mainly addressed to the recovery of existing buildings to prevent land consumption also through temporary forms, e.g. short life housing for homeless, unemployed, young people etc., as long as they are accompanied by a project of emancipation.
- The success of self-help housing as an inclusive and emancipatory strategy for the poor is linked to security of permanence, access to credit, integration with social, health and labor policies.
- It's important to experiment different forms of property tenure, alternative to private ownership (e.g. shared ownership in limited equity cooperatives), referring also to oldest form present in different context.
- A crucial problem in next year, in every country, will be the access to land. Planners should provide areas for self-building in every city and keep as much as possible in the hands of the public possession of the soil, as a common good.

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