

Cooperative urbanity. Institutionalization of a grassroots movement

The case of the Uruguayan cooperative housing movement

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Cooperative housing
Urban commons
Institutional design

Cooperative housing movement in Uruguay is one of the pioneer cooperatives experiences in the sector of housing worldwide. Growing at the end of the 60s from grassroots organizations and a group of architects with strong social and political concerns, it was rapidly institutionalized by an innovative legal framework that gave strong state support to the model. The concurring interest of civil organizations 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 state as a supporting agent, were the key elements that lay behind the origin, the rapid development, and the early success of the model. Nevertheless, recent projects appear to have difficulties to propose an updated set of strategies to face emerging challenges. This article argues that behind those difficulties lie the historic process of institutionalization of the model which operated as a two-fold mechanism, on one hand, it gave the financial support needed for its development, but at the same time it presented, and presents, the risk of co-opting the model from its social foundations. With this in mind, the article looks at the current debate around the Urban Commons as a conceptual framework to rethink the current performance of the model and to explore changes in its institutional framework that could allow the articulation of a wider variety of stakeholders by widening the current operation of existing actors and organizations in the Uruguayan context.