Toward a new way of providing affordable housing?
The Hoche cooperative in Nanterre (France), a case study

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Abstract

The recomposition of the Welfare State in France leads to new tensions in the housing field: discussions on the role of social housing split between two patterns, social mix and housing for the poor, re-emergence of the housing crisis for the working classes, immigrants and in some territories the middle class. At the same time, new aspirations regarding lifestyle and ecology emerge. In this context, many experiences of so-called alternative housing have flourished in recent years offering new forms of production and management of the houses. All of them give importance to the participation of the inhabitants. These experiments come from citizen’s groups and associations, often related to the social entreprise, but also municipalities and social landlords. They are still at their beginning in France today - unlike some European countries where they are most common. But the period is rich for experimentations and exchanges. This paper will focus on the case of the Hoche cooperative engaged in the eco-district of Nanterre since June 2009 as it raises important institutional, economic and social issues regarding the actual debates about housing policies. It explores new ways to provide affordable homeownership for the people with low income and the middle class. Its dynamic does not come from civil society or from social organisations like cooperative societies, but it comes from the city of Nanterre, in the western suburbs of Paris, and from the public developer of La Defense’s extension area. They both worked together to form a voluntary group of 16 households seeking that the group will actively be involved in decisions about the future housing production. The paper will focus on the effects of the specific dynamic of this operation. What are its institutional, social, economic benefits and for whom? What reformulation of common good does it engage?

Introduction

In France, the recomposition of the Welfare State has led today to a series of tensions in the housing field. The role of social housing is now split into two contradictory patterns, social mixity and housing for the poor. Housing shortage has recently re-emerged for the working classes, immigrants and in some territories the middle class. These tensions are mainly due to increasing difficulties to access housing because of the general decrease of public investment in social housing and because of the recent rise of the private market prices. These elements happen in the broader framework of the globalization of the economy. All these factors have play a part in weakening the French welfare system which was based on a general policy to access housing. The social housing sector is now severely criticized for the lack of housing maintenance, difficulties for the dwellers to appropriate their home, the weakening of “social relations” as professionals name it and the rules for granting housing. These criticisms point to recurrent changing expectations on social housing, lack of involvement of
inhabitants of housing and even the criticism of the "traditional mentality of assistance" which some authors consider induced by the "welfare" (Sazama, 2000). The rise of the participatory theme and sustainable development due to the reconfiguration of public action support these criticisms.

At the same time, new aspirations related to lifestyle and ecology emerge. In this context, many experiences of so-called alternative housing have flourished in recent years offering new forms of housing production and management. All of them value the dwellers participation. These experiments come from citizen’s groups and associations, often related to the social entreprise, but also municipalities and social landlords.

Among them, we can see a new interest, in the public sphere and politics, for experiences called cooperatives (Birchall, 2003). The title "cooperative" refers today to a constellation of different experiences, some being carried by members of civil society, the others being due to cooperative institutions which are historically linked to the social housing sector. These cooperatives vary in the way they are organised. But they have principles in common, articulated and discussed different ways according to the experiments: first the social purpose of housing that is to say the housing affordability, stability and security of tenure, then collective and individual responsibility of inhabitants for their homes with high expectations for their participation (Guerrand, 1967; Chouinard, 1990, Sazama, 2000; Ganapati, 2010 etc.). These principles follow historical ambitions of the cooperative movement and the social economy founded in the late nineteenth century (Bullock, Read, 1985; Heskin, Leavitt, 1995). Social economy was structured around the idea of empowering people by affirming their responsibility, autonomy and equality (Castel, 1995; Donzelot, 1994). Although the cooperative societies share the same principal values, the ways of understanding these objectives and their practical implementation continue to be debated.

The current debates that reemerge today among observers, policy makers and professionals about the housing cooperatives focus on the question of their relationship to the public institutions. How to articulate public intervention and participation? How to ensure that these bodies maintain decision-making autonomy while benefiting from public support often needed to ensure the accessibility of social housing? Another question linked to this one is: what should be the extent of dwellers participation, from self-management to the search for an alternative to the "traditional mentality of assistance" often induced by the "welfare" (Sazama, 2000)? The literature has pointed to several risks:

- on the one side, excessive presence of public actors lead to the institutionalization of the structure and disengagement of beneficiaries - in this case cooperative become structures of social housing production like others, even if they come from a different story. This is schematically the history of the French housing cooperatives during the war boom in France, which buildings have experienced the same social difficulties as those coming from the ordinary social sector (Attar and al., 1998).

- on the other side, too much distance towards public support does not guarantee the organisations survival nor the housing affordability and their social diversity – although it is their primary purpose. Typical in that sense is the cooperatives history in the U.S. (Sazama, 2000). A too great distance from public support can lead to the social homogenization of the inhabitants involved and the exclusion of the poorest. In France for example, the few private co-housing operations which are entirely driven by the dwellers themselves group only people with similar social and economic profiles (D'Orazio, 2010).

Contrary to popular belief, Ganapati’s recent research on the compared development of cooperatives in several countries shows that the housing cooperatives that were able to lean on government to some degree are the most active and powerful (Ganapati, 2010). Cooperatives are confronted to find this balance between the lack of support and institutionalization on the one hand, involvement of people (and the risks of confinement) and disengagement. How and with what conception of public interest can the public institutions support an operation driven by a small group of citizens? And from the dwellers point of view, how and with what project can they lean against public authorities? Are these two projects contradictory?
This paper focuses on the case of the cooperative “Le Grand Portail” in the Hoche eco-district in Nanterre since June 2009 as it raises important institutional, economic, and social issues regarding the actual debates about housing policies. It explores new ways to provide affordable homeownership for the people with low income and the middle class. Its initiative does not come from civil society or from social organizations like cooperative societies, but it comes from the city of Nanterre, in the western suburbs of Paris, and from the public developer of the extension area of La Defense business center. They both worked together to form a voluntary group of households (16) seeking that the group will actively be involved in decisions about the future housing production. In practice, these two institutions have pre-established the ideological and methodological frame of the experience (legally and financially speaking, land research) before proposing it to inhabitants. The future building is actually about to be constructed in September 2011. This experience is the subject of an observation and analysis followed since its launch in June 2009.

The interest of this experience lies precisely in its complex process as a top-down one but gradually relayed by the dwellers. The paper will focus on the effects of its specific dynamic. How negotiation and collaboration between public actors, professionals, and residents is organized until now? To what extent can an institutional dynamic supervised by professionals give a role to inhabitants in the process of decision-making? What are the benefits of institutional, social, economic, and for whom? And for that, what founded this group, what is the content of relations?

**Genesis: a participatory experience initiated by public actors (top down)**

*An innovative and political experiment*

Two institutional actors support the cooperative experience of the Hoche eco-district. The first one is Nanterre municipality, a small town west of Paris located right up against La Défense which is the first European business center. The second one is the La Defense public planning authority in charge with the development of its expansion territory in Nanterre. This authority is called EPADESA. The genesis of this cooperative is to understand as a compromise between several stories, with different challenges – sometimes contradictory:

- This experience is part of the planning’s program decided by both institutions since 2000 for the Terraces in Nanterre. The terraces is the name given to the planning project of La Defense’s extension. The Hoche eco-district is mainly a residential area and is located at the end of the planning area. It is the last of the 17 terraces provided on the axis linking the Seine to the Defence near the recently planted and landscaped Chemin de l’Ile ecological park. The cooperative is one of the highlights of this eco-district. Its genesis happened in a period of relative calm relations between the two institutions. Historical interactions between them are indeed marked by conflicts related to the control of territory. On the one side, EPADESA tends to consider Nanterre territories as a natural expansion area for the La Defense economic zone. On the other side the municipal team tries to defend the interests of local people. The terraces project and the Hoche eco-district, which promotes a mixed-use development, combining business office, development of public spaces and renovation of housing in relation with the locals, can be seen as an expression of a political compromise (Roncayolo, 2007). The cooperative project is the result of this collaboration.
- For EPADESA, the Hoche eco-district meets its efforts to promote quality development. It is seen as a showcase of urban planning, able of improving the area of La Defense business and keeping it in the competition among cities in the world. It responds to social and environmental ambitions. The cooperative project is one of its most famous and innovative parts as well as the realization of an apartment building in wood structure and the construction of a boiler-wood. For EPADESA, the cooperative project was inspired by the example of the German operations of recent self-sustainable neighborhoods like Vauban, but with the idea developed jointly with the municipality to transfer it in a more social way.

- For Nanterre municipality, this experience is part of its policy program developed for several years to foster access to social property in a context of increasing prices. This broader context is aggravated locally by the proximity of La Defense employment center, which has led many executives and employees to settle in Nanterre. Nanterre is indeed located just nearby La Defense and is less expensive. But this arrival of new population had side effects for the local because this old working area became unaffordable for them. Nanterre municipality decided then to develop social measures to foster them to homeownership access. This experience differs, however, from conventional operations, insofar as the purpose is here to form a responsible group of dwellers. Nanterre initial idea, which had to be abandoned for legal and financial reasons, was empower them so that they could become their own property developer. The municipal team was especially interested in the idea of self-promotion, drawn from the experiences of South American solidarity housing construction and participatory economics. This financial plan had of course financial advantages: scale economies, cost control, suppression of communication costs and sales etc.

For the municipal team, the benefits expected from this operation also concerns social and political levels. For several years also, the current communist-dominated city council encourages initiatives described as participation: FALP organization, participation in different international networks (the mayor of Porto Alegre is a regular at Nanterre!), Assisi citizens, creation of the Agora, citizens'
initiatives house, etc. multiple consultations. At the political level, Nanterre displays a certain proximity to international anti-globalization networks which are influenced by ideas from South America related to participatory democracy and solidarity economy. Like many other communist municipalities, Nanterre tends to redevelop its traditional political positions in decline. Participation is seen as a way to reconfigure the local political administration, to better understand people expectations and to renew a dialogue with it (Nez, Talpin, 2010) or to mobilize.

**Participation of the people framed**

In practice, the dwellers participation is tightly controlled. Even before the inhabitants were invited to participate to this experience in June 2009, the project has been defined by a pre-established methodological and ideological framework. Different references inspired this framework: those coming from the city and EPADESA which do not overlap completely each other, those made by a team of professionals who was charged by the institutions to help them in taking decision (CUADD) and, from 2010, the architects. The operation dynamic was also plural: one that is ranged by the political power (city and EPADESA), one that is ranged by professionals in charge of helping the dwellers and one that comes from the future residents themselves.

How does this framework appear? At the beginning of the project, it has become in many forms:
- Forming the group. Institutions decided to form the group by their own, because they didn’t want to have a social homogenous group – what is often the case in co-housing operations. So they did it the way it is done in the social sector (allocation logic). The idea was to keep this process in hands to ensure both the social and local dimension of the project. Two types of criteria have been defined: financial criteria and geographic criteria. According to the first criteria, the beneficiaries of this cooperative household must be first-time buyers (no singles) and must come from the social housing sector or receive income that match with the public housing income limits. According to the second one, future residents have to be linked with Nanterre wether they live or work there. This condition responds to the wishes of the town hall to ensure local people an opportunity to have an easier access to homeownership.

- Financing of the operation. The two institutional partners have defined the financial plan: choice and price of land (the land belongs to EPADESA), construction price and legal arrangements.

- Timing of the operation: the project was presented to cooperators as a classical building project with a defined planning of construction.

- Organizing the residents participation: at the beginning at least, the institutions have set the meeting dates for the dwellers, their frequency, location etc. Cooperators were associated with a team of professionals responsible for giving them a "training" in the field of architecture and urbanism. The way in which residents could intervene in the decision making process was also defined in advance, as it was for example for the choice of the developer or the architect.

**The future inhabitants in front of the institutions and professionals, a hybrid position**

Thus there are many actors around the table. Besides the dwellers and institutions, we can find a team of professionals responsible for their support, the architectural firm and the developer, each being driven by their own interests or conceptions which might influence the dwellers choice or even supplant it. One of the big challenge of this experience is to observe whether an initiative ranged by the institutions can empower a group of residents in decision-making capacity in the medium and long term. How can they contribute to decisions? How do they behave and see themselves when they face institutional and professionals? Are they actors or consumers of their home production? After two years now, it is necessary to reconsider the binary opposition participation / disengagement or passivity to characterize their position.

**Influences of the way in which the group was composed**
The dwellers group becomes more and more present in the decision making process. The way in which the group was finally composed is a good example of their complex posture. Although the municipality and EPADESA strongly framed the selection of initial candidates, the composition process of the current group has not completely escaped the future inhabitants. The group was formed in three stages in Nanterre, which are from different logics. Thus this process can hardly be reduced to the allocation logic inspired by the social sector:

- The first is the allocation logic orchestrated by Nanterre municipality and EPADESA according to financial criteria and geographical.
- The second concerns affinity criteria. Many households have left the project in the first weeks following the launch of the project and during the following months. Until recently, a family has to abandon the project. Households felt too distant with the target underpinned by the operation or felt too different from the present candidates, especially as regards their socio-economic and cultural profiles or the values they held. Affinity criteria have therefore largely played in the current group formation, but by the departure.
- The third is a social network logic. The council has contacted potential candidates to replace the first family who left. It has also especially asked the cooperators to mobilize new candidates. These new recruits, known from the first candidates, have contributed to gradually emerge a residents group and the dominant values within it.

So the group composition has not completely escaped the future inhabitants. We are dealing here with an hybrid process that proceeds certainly from a top-down dynamic but is corrected by cooperators, and especially by a small core of them who has joined around values and convergent objectives.

At the end of this process, the social-economic profiles of the future inhabitants differ substantially from those who initiated the German or French co-housing operations: these one are mostly composed with people from middle class to upper-classe. In Nanterre however there are mostly small employees, including public servants, and craftsmen who enjoy an income stable enough to enable them "to escape social housing" where most live and to consolidate a small social mobility course. We can find also some young households with higher responsibility and households engaged in intellectual professions who have difficulty finding a place to live in the current real estate market. The group is composed of households from very different geographical origins: in addition to French-born households, there are also Sri Lankan and Portuguese households, a family of African origin and many households of North African origin.

_Future dwellers gradually involved in the decision making process_

Two years after launching the project, the future inhabitants posture regarding the institutionalists and professionals has greatly evolved. At the beginning, they had difficulties to assert themselves in face of these actors. In the early months indeed, people have heavily relied on those who were professionally recognized with knowledge and experience. The risk was then for them not to contribute to certain choices. The group made a clear distinction between what was for him expertise knowledge and what wasn’t. He made also a clear distinction among those he regarded as knowledgeable and the other. Thus, with the exception of one of them, a craftsman in the building, cooperators have remained largely at a distance of professional knowledge. Not because they weren’t interested, but they didn’t think themselves as able or relevant to contribute to reflexions.

Then the group of people has emerged as a second step, driven by several factors:
- expressing interests, expectations or personal needs about the building. Discussing the concrete housing program was an important step in making trust.
- expressing collective expectations, progressively embodied by leaders in the group. These leaders have won their position by claiming the group's interests and expressing dominant values around which cooperators gradually gathered.
- confronting different positions. The choice of the property developer, for example, was an opportunity for the residents to learn about the visions of each, to test the dialogue modalities within the group, to assess the commitment level of the group members. The experience of conflict and post conflict constituted as such important tests for the dwellers.

- learning to manage by their own. The gradual withdrawal of institutional and professionals who accompanied them from the beginning, including the professional team charged in helping them, helped them to take responsibility.

- confronting with the architectural project: personal homes and communal spaces. Facing the concrete architectural project (and not like in other operations expressing a philosophical and societal project) helped the dwellers to establish as a collective group with common interests. In this case exchanges about the future common good (the housing) formed the basis of their cooperation as a group. Aware of sharing common interests about the building to come, they could express initial assumptions on the way in which they would coexist in this place. Actually the first discussions on their relationships in the future building (which neighborhood, what level of intimacy etc.) arose from the time when they asked themselves if they wanted to build any common spaces and which one. The constitution of the legal and symbolic frame of their action through the association “Le Grand Portail” was also important. But the process of group formation is mostly related to the very pragmatic project of building the future housing.

A posture as actors, partners, customers and / or assisted?

And today, how to characterize their relations to institutions and professionals? There are many possibilities, given the multiple dimensions of the project. This experience is both an economic one - which may involve a custom relationship but also a relation of partnership, and a social one carried out by public institutions. How do the inhabitants behave: as plain actors of this social construction project or as “assisted” people in a social program?

The posture of the inhabitants is split into several trends. It appears also linked to the posture adopted by the institutional and professionals themselves.

- The households tend to act more and more like plain actors of this operation, considering themselves as legitimate to intervene in decisions. As such, their relationship with institutions can not be reduce to that of assistance in a charitable program or to that of claiming social rights to institutions. But it differs also from that of partners in a collaborative relationship when the different parties regard themselves as equal – as it seem to be mostly the case in the social economy (Draperi, 2007). The dwellers emancipation here can not be separate from the assurance they have to be supported, protected or covered by public authorities. For these households, this protection relationship is even claimed. Public authorities support is thus seen as a sign of trust that give credibility to this experience in their eyes and allowed them to engage in this experience. Public intervention is not perceived as an obstacle to their empowerment. It appears quite the contrary as a support and as the determinant condition of their participation in this project.

- With the developers and architects however, the inhabitants tend to adopt a somewhat different posture closer to customers. Their expectations and references, their way of acting are close to those in a conventional homeownership project where buyers are in a position to require things from the developers and architects. So they complain about delays, errors, etc. without really taking into consideration the collaborative and experimental dimension of the operation. This posture has to do with that of professionals, developers and architects, who lead the operation. They hardly allow the residents to have a look and participate in their design and budgeting work. Certain choices remain also non discussed with the inhabitants. This situation has led to tensions.
A pragmatic group: towards a new form of solidarity?

Because the inhabitants didn’t choose themselves, another question arises related to the content of the relationships that found the group, in another words the nature of the collective. What do they share in common, what place do they give to the group they form? Several dimensions appear clearly: the opportunity to access low cost ownership and empower themselves, the idea of securing the home.

Access to homeownership and empower together

For all households, low cost access to homeownership constitutes the principal ground of their group membership, no matter the different perspectives of their housing careers. "If there was no construction project, we would not be together," says the association president “Le Grand Portail”. For some, this project is the one of their end of life, but for the younger, it is sometimes considered as an intermediate step. This homeownership opportunity takes particular significance, since most of the dwellers come from the social sector and could not until now access to property due to the rising price of real estate. Thus the cooperative represents a major occasion to realize this project in the Paris region and in Nanterre where many have family and would like to settle. It is symbolic to note that their first common action concerned the decision to keep the big gate that surrounds the land-style mansion dated from the late nineteenth century. This bourgeois styled gate can be interpreted as a marker par excellence of the property and as the way to a new status. It symbolizes also the limits from the private to public space. Aware of the unifying power of this gate, one of the cooperators even proposed to name their association "cooperative of the big portal" - this proposal was ultimately adopted.

Homeownership is also the foundation of the shared values that shape the group today. The future residents recognize an identity of interests in the defense of the common good which leads them to work together. Moreover it is relatively clear for them that they can access to property only because they work together and that they couldn’t do it alone. This awareness seems to be reinforced by the fact that they share a close vision of the ownership benefits. Homeownership means for them a material security and a certain social success. But it also appears, for most of them, as the way to be "autonomous" and "responsible" for their housing, expenses and more broadly for themselves. In this perspective, it is seen as a way to regain control of part of everyday gestures, to become involved and active in managing their life. Social housing, where many of them live, represents as such a negative model: "we manage our home, while in social housing, the opposite, it is passive" says a cooperator. Control of expenses related to individual or common housing costs appears at the heart of these concerns, as it is indicated by the motto of the association’s president, "one euro spent, one euro useful" for "a project based on the minimum condominium fees". The idea, shared by all, is both to individualize these expenses in order to empower each household over its energy costs - "the more individualized, the more responsible” but also to find common solutions to reduce costs.

The interest shown by most of cooperators for sustainable development can be understood in this perspective – we have also to remember that the cooperative is located in a future eco-district. The future inhabitants often confuse ecological and economic interest. Better insulation of housing, development of flat glass thickened, quality materials requiring minimum maintenance are seen as ways to reduce energy costs with the idea of energy self-sufficiency. But most of them are more concerned with the environmental dimension of the future building that with the ecological dimension of materials and/or choices. So tensions erupt sometimes between the majority of the co-operators and the few households who are committed in more radical choices in a green lifestyle: for example on the issue of food compost or on the question of dry toilets. Indeed the commitment of most of them in favor of sustainability and energy costs does go not beyond a certain threshold, corresponding to respect a certain living standard.
**Self and neighborhood protection**

A majority of candidates is highly interested in "knowing his future neighbors." This point is very important to them because most of them come from the social sector, where neighborhood relations can be complex and are at least not chosen. These neighborhood relations are sometimes painfully experienced, especially in cases of coexistence with households whom socio-economic profiles and social perspectives are totally different. At the contrary, knowing the neighbors is considered as a way to be sure that the people next door will live approximately the same way of life and share close values. Thus it is important for the cooperators to know that each candidate is financially solvent and match with the selection criteria imposed by the municipality and EPADESA. This mutual recognition by the institutions accounts for the future inhabitants: it is both a guarantee of respectability of households and a guarantee of the group strength. From this point of view, the logic allocation that prevailed in the group formation inspired by the practices of social housing sector is seen as a gesture of protection for each other and for the other.

Most of the future dwellers have also the idea of creating a space of sociability at a local scale. It would be a social and territorial space seen as a protected and intermediate one between family unit and the big city. It is important for them to manage a good and safe social environment to facilitate children’s education: either to benefit from childcare by the others or to enjoy a large enclosed garden where to play safely (without having to play in the street) and a common game room that would allow them to meet the "rainy days" or to celebrate birthdays. However, alternative education projects or more free education advocated in the 1970’s and 1980’s don’t appear as inspiring references for the cooperators (Hatzfeld, 2005). The relations to the neighbors seem contradictory: the neighbor secures as it appears as a "similar" but he appears also as a source of potential danger or disruption of its intimacy. Discussions on the procedure rules including the use of the common room and gardens reveal the ambivalence between desire to build things together and concerns about the misuses of the place. The risk of vandalism and noise are very present.

Then their references do not borrow those of community groups formed in the 1970’s and 1980’s. These one are about transforming a society perceived as inflexible and closed. Most households references in favor of a different neighborhood are closer to the search for past and authenticity or references related to the village from their origin culture. They do not break with traditional values. The main project is that of an enclosed and protected area beyond the sphere of intimacy, but that does supplants the latter. The attention given to the private area remains a priority. So there is no communautary references, but simply the idea of a social and spatial proximity and the idea of a protected place for the family facing the big city. The prospect of opening this place to the outside is also very far from their concerns. These households are affected by their housing careers in social housing sector and focus primarily on a safe space, protected and protector.

These values are not shared with the same degree by all. From this common pool of values, the cursor moves across households, according to polarities that could be quickly identified by the binomial usability / value accorded to the traditional family. These differencies are the subjects of much debate within the cooperative.

- A first pole of values is structured around the traditional values of family (maternal and paternal functions clearly separate, distincated gender rules in the public and private spheres, respect for hierarchies and the order), the privacy security and a "good" neighborhood. Added to this is an ethic of good spending and sobriety. These approaches are particularly well represented among co-workers and especially Muslim households.

- A second pole of values is more directly linked to the values of togetherness, sharing, social innovation or solidarity as expressed by the groups of the 1970s and 1980s. However, these households are more discrete in the discussions. The recent departure of a household that was strongly convinced of this way of thinking will probably contribute to minor these ideas.
Towards a Democracy of owners?

These principles and values are rarely discussed explicitly among the future residents. They seek to stay on the level of pragmatic discussions and not to drag into the ideal or dream registry. Thus they only speak by implication about the nature of the relationships that unite them generally when they have to take practical decisions (on the rules of life, materials). Their ideas have therefore nor political purpose because the future dwellers don’t want to extend it outside the building nor express it in a theoretical way. But if reconstitute by an observer from the outside, what would be this theoretical project?

It would remind the historical cooperative project expressed in the Cooperative Republic due to the French politic thinker Charles Gide in the early twentieth century (Gide, 1903). As in this project, the cooperators aim would be to highlight individual responsibility and autonomy articulated to collective cooperation in a framework that doesn’t challenge the foundations of the capitalist economy. This collective purpose can be seen in their awareness that only collaboration with others makes the success of their personal project. It reactsives and brings back to their individual conscience the solidarity principles that guarantees social rights for the individual but also involves duties to society (Ewald, 1986; Esping Anderson, 1990; Donzelot, 1994; Castel, 1995). The union president is used to present the cooperative this way: "a life plan around ownership with rights and duties." But it is important to clarify the sense of the notion of solidarity that they use. It is not about solidarity by helping the others, but pooling of interests, mutual support of each one by his own effort. It is neither the civic solidarity as promoted in Charles Gide’s political system of social protection extended to the nation. Here the solidarity is restricted to the operation scale in a private area lived by “similar” people where public authorities appear only as a guarantee.

Moreover, among residents we find latent criticisms against the social protection system set up by the welfare state especially regarding its public charity spirit, the passive state in which it maintains and its difficulty to solve inequalities. As such, the collective values they defend are far from those carried by the Welfare system. For the president of the association, "Le Grand Portail is the passage to another world: from the pain where construction is imposed to freedom." Social housing sector represents the imposed construction and the ownership the freedom. On this point, their approaches borrow some features of the Democray of owners expressed by John Rawls in his Theory of Justice (Rawls, 2005), although in a more neo-liberal. His propositions of joining around common interests and rediscover the enjoyment, mastery and autonomy of the everyday gestures and work through a fairer and easier access to property are close to those of the cooperators. Ownership appears as a reliable and safe way for self-empowerment by providing the solution to organize his life by his own. It ensures protection of privacy, but also against the social and economic vulnerability which is felt more strongly by those households in the context of current weakening of the Welfare system. But here too, Rawls reference is restricted, as the inhabitants ideas exclude any political dimension to generalizing their approach. Thus it excludes the question of the poorest, for example those who are not like them and who wouldn’t have had have access to this program. In that sense, does this experience presents a certain risk to withdrawal and confinement - what is sometimes called localism?

Conclusion

These remarks constitute the earliest reflexions of a study that needs to be continued over time so as to grasp the meaning and long-term impact of this experience. These first comments should therefore be read with great caution. In the current context of housing policies reforms, it nevertheless opens up many issues to discuss. This unusual combination between public intervention and involvement of people succeeds until now to renew founding principles of the cooperative movement: housing affordability, stability and security of tenure, then collective and individual responsibility of the home. As such, this operation seems to offer fruitful ways to develop a third sector in the housing area,
avoiding both the risk of institutionalization and the difficulties of experiences based only on the private initiative. But it also poses a series of questions concerning:
- the evolution of this experience. How will change the group of residents, what will be its relations to the neighborhood outside the building, for example? What about the risks of identity withdrawal?
- its reproducibility: monitoring the operation requires an outstanding investment (of time especially) by public authorities. How to reproduce it? With the help of which institutional relays and/or association? What are the risks of distorting the experience and break the fragile balance between public intervention and involvement of local residents? How to consider the collaborations which tend to be emerging in France with institutionnal cooperatives?
- and finally the common good aimed by this operation. This issue is related to the previous one: to what extent the objectives pursued by the institutions agree with those given by the cooperators? In another words, to what extent public institutions are able to accept the values defended by the cooperators and support them? Do they validate, for example, their conceptions about solidarity or sustainability? How can the institutions justify the common good of such an operation for the citizens community?
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