

## Conference proceedings

# Towards a “third” sector housing in France: symptom of sustainable degrowth?

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## Abstract

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Since the beginning of 2000s, a series of initiatives launched by citizen groups, associations or local authorities aimed at building “alternative” accommodation appears in France. They can be considered as alternative both in terms of the mode of occupation and the design and management approaches used.

These projects are a response to numerous objectives: a wish expressed in other spheres of everyday life to control one’s choices and, in this case, one’s lifestyle; to share values such as sustainability and a quest for innovative solutions, the search for a dream house or apartment or a solution for growing old.

All of these cases stand apart from traditional forms of housing production management such as private market-driven or regulated public sector housing production models.

The search for an “alternative” housing production model is not new and is part of a long-standing debate in France and in Europe over public housing policies. However, these experiments were actually carried out in a different context that was imbued with social and ecological criticism.

Through an exploration of the French networks and in a perspective of diachronic analysis, we shall try to bring to light the impact of the current initiatives, their implanting in a wider history and their capacity to promote a movement and to introduce a third sector housing.)

## Keywords

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Alternative housing, co-operation, initiatives, innovation, participation, public housing policies, self-management, solidarity, sustainability, social criticism, solidarity-based economy, “third” sector housing.

## 1 Introduction

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Over the past few years in France, we have witnessed a scattered series of “alternative” housing initiatives launched by citizen groups and associations based around self-help and various forms of co-operation, coupled with attempts to restructure the forums and pressure groups concerned with these issues.

They stem from criticism of traditional forms of housing production and represent an attempt to move forward in line with concepts such as resource-pooling, solidarity and sustainability. They have drawn inspiration from experiments carried out in Northern Europe, such as eco-housing developments and co-housing, as well as the Quebec co-operative housing movement and call for a broad reflection on “alternative living”. By highlighting the increasing pressure on the housing market and the difficulties encountered by people wishing to buy or rent, the aforementioned approaches seek to open a debate and launch experiments around “new” forms of housing [Bacqué, Vermeersch, 2007], both in terms of the basis of ownership and management. Alternative housing initiatives claim kinship with sustainable development, ecology and the solidarity economy, and while they do draw on experiments conducted elsewhere, in France they are also the continuation of a long, wide-ranging debate - in both ideological and operational terms - that has persisted throughout the twentieth century, around the participation of local inhabitants in the production of housing and living spaces [Bacqué, Carriou, 2010]. Indeed the search for an “alternative” housing production model is not new and in France and Europe it is a challenge to traditional public housing policy.

While the 1970s and 80s witnessed a surge of innovation and experimentation [Bidou, 1984] in the wake

of the zeitgeist of 1968, contemporary initiatives are once again developing in a context of renegotiation of social housing policies, changing forms of commitment and in a tensed urban context imbued with social criticism [Castel, 2001] and ecological criticism.

Based on research into several such initiatives, we wish to tackle two series of questions:

Are these experiments part of the same movement or are they a response to various different imperatives ? To what extent have they remained marginal and do they point to the organization of a “third” sector housing rooted in the traditions and dynamics of a social, solidarity-based economy ? [Lipietz, 2001]

These various projects in progress claim to draw from both ecology and sustainability. And while such technical approaches in terms of energy or building materials are present in many projects, are we dealing with an opportunistic approach that seeks to make the most of specific certification labels or funding, or are we witnessing a very real transformation in design and management approaches and lifestyles? To what extent are other aspects - especially social sustainability - raised in reflections concerning the modus operandi of the group, its social make-up and means of reproduction? Are these coupled with values of solidarity, social justice or degrowth? Does the reflection concerning sustainability extend beyond the scale of the project or settlement to encompass the neighborhood or even the city?

## **2 Multiple approaches as means to what alternative?**

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The plethora of approaches currently emerging in France obliges us to focus on what is meant in each case by an alternative demand: an alternative between two solutions, as well as an alternative between different possibilities coming one after each other.

The question of housing production in France is largely dominated by the policies and role of the public authorities. By opting to develop a massive public or quasi-public sector in the Post War period, France committed to a social housing program that currently accounts for 17% of total housing, alongside a private housing sector largely dominated by professional real estate developers.

The new forms of citizen activism are based around criticism of current policy and highlighting the dearth of diversity and lack of innovation in the French “bi-polar” housing production model. One of the key demands of residents groups involves creating their own living spaces through controlled development in which they would become the main actors. This willingness to become stakeholders in the production of their own living spaces is a clear wish to forge more symmetrical links between the different partners (inhabitants, local authorities, project owners, financial backers, etc.) by affirming the key role of inhabitants in the project management process [Mollet,1981. And such initiatives in the housing sector can be compared to sustainable consumption-type initiatives whereby consumers are no longer content to play a passive, silent role, but wish to become proper actors and stakeholders in the whole process. They are also rooted in participative democracy and a challenge to the political and scientific establishment and focus on harnessing knowledge, especially citizen knowledge [Bacqué, Sintomer 2010].

This activism is now present in two forms: groups of inhabitants who attempt to develop self-promotion projects and the establishment of groups to promote forms of cooperative housing. We feel it is important to distinguish between these two forms of activism which propose different projects based on similar-type reflections. Self-promotion seeks an alternative to traditional private development and attempts to

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breathe fresh life into co-ownership approaches. As such, it shares a common lineage with the operations promoted by the Mouvement pour l'Habitat Groupé Autogéré<sup>1</sup> (movement to promote self-managed housing), the main French association for promoting such initiatives during the 1970s and 80s [Bonnin, 1983]. Cooperative housing initiatives wish to overhaul existing legislation to challenge market-based ownership principles and speculation and use inhabitants' cooperatives as an alternative form of home ownership. So, according to Habicoop<sup>2</sup>, the main advocate of this approach, the purpose is to renegotiate a legal framework that gives full recognition to collective ownership. It believes that this is the most effective means of counteracting speculation and establishing a "third way" between private promotion and social housing.

We feel that our distinction between types of inhabitant mobilization is fundamental as it allows us to understand both the diversity of involvement and the variety of approaches that require an analysis of alternatives in the plural form. As such, all types of housing development (i.e., both public and private) are being challenged by these still scattered initiatives. They seek a coherent structure and to present a common front to national and local political actors that transcends their different points of view. Thence the almost systematic use of participative associations that drives a common agenda and similar-type operational frameworks. Moreover, their involvement in the broader social economy and social solidarity movement would appear to constitute a deliberate ideological platform from which to challenge public authorities.

### **3 Ecology: between opportunity and commitment, but for which sustainability ?**

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To examine the role of ecology, we believe it necessary to draw on an analysis of the various arguments and references used by inhabitant mobilization networks and associations. We will use a diachronic perspective and attempt to identify both continuity and innovation between initiatives dating back to the 1970s and those of the 2000s.

One theme that we consider to be of key importance revolves around everyday gestures as badge of commitment.

In the 1970s, this devotion to everyday gestures underpinned a commitment to a certain "lifestyle" and self-management whereas today it has been adopted as part of an approach to "living together" or sustainable, day-to-day ecology.

If we contend, based on an initial analysis, that this harnessing of everyday gestures is part of the same approach and continuity and recycling process that moves from "lifestyle", to "living together", or from "self management" to "ecology", we must then go on to analyze what exactly gets mobilized in "workaday ecology". Indeed, there now appears to be something that was not present in the 1970s-80s that is based on the link between the individual's interest (oneself and one's action) and the greater good (the world, or the planet). In our opinion, this dual register helps to transcend the everyday and give enhanced

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<sup>1</sup> The Movement MHGA is established in 1978 and works in the promotion of the self-managed housing in France until the middle of the 1980s. After twenty years of sleep, it boosts its activities in 2008 and melts again under the naming of Eco Habitat Groupé ([www.ecohabitatgroupe.fr](http://www.ecohabitatgroupe.fr))

<sup>2</sup> The Habicoop association (association of accompaniment of inhabitants' cooperatives) is created in 2005, in Lyon, by two architects and persons close to environmentalist organizations with the support of the NEF, the co-operative of united finances, and the Regional Union of the Co-operatives of Production (URSCOP) of Rhône-Alpes. Today, its project is supported by the Interministerial Delegation in the Innovation, in the social experiment and in the social economy (DIIESES), the Region Rhône-Alpes, the European Social Fund and Fondation de France.

recognition to the collective through sustainability-based arguments: “act local, think global”. Couching individual projects in terms of the collective interest is used to persuade the public authorities and there is therefore a certain instrumentalization of ecological arguments by the actors involved.

A second shared characteristic with earlier initiatives relates to the use of the technical registers of building ecology through the deployment of performance research based around the principles of bioclimatism, passive buildings and the production of renewable energies, etc.

This harnessing of technology reflects the commitments of local authorities which strive to develop exemplary projects by any means possible and to renew their operational approaches. Here again, innovators get a favorable hearing from the local political representatives with whom they negotiate and from whom they request help to find a plot of land that is essential for launching their operations. New experimental arrangements and forms of cooperation are emerging from these new partnerships (between civil society and public authorities).

And although they do provide a forum for activist and institutional networks, this needs to be qualified. While 1970s movements were forged through contacts with professionals working in government institutions [Amiot, 1986] who were of similar ideological persuasion and age, this is no longer the case for contemporary networks which have emerged in a very different context and adopted a very different stance. They have no links initially with government institutions and most have had confrontational relations with public authorities, whereby they have sought to highlight their shortcomings and disengagement. As such, contemporary networks are part of a broader protest movement calling for “rights to” something (right to housing, right to decent living conditions, right to a certain quality of life, etc.). Aside from protest-related objectives, contemporary initiatives deploy experimental frameworks in which they try to involve local authorities and actors. They develop a new type of intelligence in such partnerships where they invite public actors to renew the means of involving citizens and getting them to participate. This type of mobilization is most frequently encountered around eco-neighborhood and urban renewal-type projects. The arguments brandished by the associations – inter alia social mix, inter-generational mix, sustainable development, the social and solidarity-based economy, etc. – are used as a platform for getting public authorities and local institutions on board, as well as their funding and their presence in the initiative at a time when the trend is actually one of withdrawal of the state and its institutions.

## 4 Conclusion

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In adopting a “mirror” stance, the associations are demanding a place at the discussion table and looking to be recognized as a legitimate actor in the debate over living spaces. And this demand to be a party to neighborhood decision-making and management also leads on to a broader debate about the involvement of citizens in the public debate of the city [Blondiaux, 2008]. This grassroots mobilization provide a means of reconsidering territorial involvement at a more micro level, where the implications for neighborhood relations or solidarity are reconsidered as capital out of which such commitments are forged as part of a wish to control processes and decisions at the grassroots level. In this sense, we may draw an analogy with the notion of “short circuits” in consumption. The emergence of AMAPs<sup>3</sup> (associations to promote traditional farming) in France at the present time would appear to be one of the most complete forms of these. As such, the question of proximity between the places in which decisions get made and those in which the action takes place is key and results in a reduction in the number of intermediaries. So the assumption of the emergence of a “third” sector housing in France has to be analyzed in this renewed

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<sup>3</sup> AMAPs are associations for the preservation of the farming peasant. The principle is to create a direct link between farmers and consumers who make a commitment to buy the production of these first ones from a fair price, by paying in advance. This network is established in France since 2000, on Daniel Vuillon's initiative.

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context where the demand for an alternative is bound up with a user that is more actor than consumer.

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