

Participatory design as a method to support the community forms of urban life in the contemporary city: Palo Alto cooperative

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ABSTRACT

UPDATED—6 April 2020. In this article we want to introduce to the public the work we have realized with the Palo Alto cooperative (Mexico City) through a participatory process since 2015, with many moments of participatory design. The goal of our work is to support and strengthen this cooperative, as a community form of urban life in the contemporary city, as a few examples of this kind in this place. We want to share the methods we used in the process, the potential and challenges that we found and receive feedback from the experts at the conference.

Author Keywords

Architecture; Participatory Design; Social Production of Habitat; Housing Cooperative.

INTRODUCTION

The Palo Alto cooperative was organized in 1972 when a group of settlers, formerly from the rural areas, joined together to obtain the rights of the land they had occupied for more than 30 years. In 1969, the landowner decided to sell, in order to add his land onto a neighbouring estate of predominantly luxury housing: ‘Bosques de las Lomas’ (Wood of the Hills). Threatened with eviction, and rejecting the idea of being relocated, the inhabitants of Palo Alto united and formed the ‘Union de Vecinos de Palo Alto’ (Palo Alto Neighbourhood Union). They received the support of a catholic priest, father Escamilla, who, together with a few social workers, was already striving to achieve some minimum facilities (a clinic in particular) in the area.

In 1972 they organized themselves into a cooperative and contract technical assistance. In 1973, after two years of negotiations with the authorities and with the landowner, who made attempts to break up the cooperative, the members took possession of the land. Official recognition of their land tenure had become a reality.



Figure 1. In 2016 we realized our first participatory diagnostic of the public space.

Technical advisory for the communities

We began to explore the possibilities for methods of participatory design on Palo Alto cooperative in 2015. Our primary goal is to support the efforts for the continuity of the housing cooperative

We, as an organization, arrived at the Palo Alto Cooperative in mid-2015, by the hand of the architect Enrique Ortiz (1937), “wisdom keeper” of HIC (Habitat International Coalition) and leader of COPEVI A.C. on the 70’s and 80’s and one of the protagonist of the construction of policies and projects for the popular housing on Mexico. He has a very deep relation with this community, of friendship and support, but he has been looking for new people to keep a technical advisory for the cooperative on a long term and support the continuity process.

Participatory design with the community

In effect we invite the reader to share our journey with the Palo Alto Cooperative. The initial questions were:

1. What's the best way to identify the main troubles for the community?
2. What's the best way to finance this process and maximize the resources for our work with the community? and,
3. The participatory design was good enough to work with community.

The participatory design for the renovation of the cooperative hall

Our initial experience with this moment starts with the study of two options for the application of a budget for the renovation of community spaces of the cooperative. The options were:

Option A. Concentrate the budget on the renovation of two buildings of the cooperative.

Option B. Distribute the budget in more public spaces.

We follow a method of participatory design called "Generación de opciones" literally options generation, development In the early 1970s, within the multiple initiatives and searches that different professional and academic groups carried out in the field of design, there was a conjunction peculiar to processes in different parts of States United and Mexico. But the practice in real community projects (beyond academy examples) was barely exist. Has been used to explain design process of buildings or projects already finished, not to conduct a process on course.

The axis of this method is creating an explicit process of design for a deliberation with the participants, the difficulty lies in defining which are the most important criteria to discuss and what is the best order to follow.



Figure 2. New Cooperative Hall building under construction.

CONCLUSION

Our work with the Palo Alto cooperative wants to strengthen this way of housing production so that it can be extended to other social and cultural groups in the country. It is already linked to the regional cooperative process and we are looking to get closer to other international allies. The help and experience of the world is welcome. The legal structure of a housing cooperative unified and strengthened the group by making it possible to hold the land and housing in the collective tenure. Permanence on the site was secured. Collective tenure avoided the pitfalls inherent in private ownership of land: speculation, rising prices, changes of occupants and tenancy, which could have weakened the community spirit and eventually caused their organization to collapse.

Community control of land and buildings has protected the interests of the cooperative members. 48 years later the cooperative still controls the property and the original population continues to benefit, a rare case in a luxury residential suburb of Mexico City.

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