Participation and housing policies: a century-old phenomenon

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The recent renewed interest in participatory housing experiments is, in fact, linked to a much longer history that can be traced back to the late 19th century, when the first public policies in France to encourage the construction of low-cost housing were introduced. Metropolitics *looks at how this multifaceted history has laid the foundations for today's projects.*

In France, since the late 1980s and the last realisations in a set of participatory housing projects, enthusiasm for participatory experiments in the field of housing seemed to have waned. What has become of the ideas born of the events of 1968? Operations such as the Petit Séminaire estate in Marseille and the Alma-Gare neighbourhood in Roubaix (near Lille), once the subject of much discussion and comment, and now in the process of a new rehabilitation, increasingly tended to be filed away among the curiosities of French urban-planning history, while the movement for self-managed cohousing entered a phase of decline. And yet, after several years' or even decades' absence, the issue of resident participation in the housing sector seems to have made a comeback on the public and political stage. It has been adopted by different players, ranging from residents' groups and independent networks developing forms of "alternative" housing – cohousing, cooperatives, self-managed housing, eco-housing – to institutional stakeholders. A number of local authorities (such as Lyon, Nanterre (to the west of Paris) and Montreuil (to the east of Paris), to name but three) have also shown a keen interest in these experiments. Some social landlords are also finally beginning to get to grips with the idea, seeing it as an opportunity for a possible renaissance of social-housing cooperatives – the successors of the institutional cooperative movement that has been dying a slow death since the early 1970s, after a law limiting its remit came into force in 1971 (Maury 2009; *Territoires* 2010).

The search for alternative proposals

In response to new tensions in the field of housing, institutional and political leaders and citizens alike are now looking for alternatives to conventional housing production practices. The two key groups – private developers and social landlords – that have traditionally structured the housing sector since the post-war boom in France[1] are today struggling to meet demand in a context characterised by a reorganisation of the way central government operates and a weakening of social protection. Consequently, a new housing crisis is emerging for the working classes and certain parts of the middle classes as a result to rising property prices in the private sector. As for the social sector, it is in the midst of a heated debate on the role that social housing should play. It is thus caught between two imperatives – housing for the poorest on the one hand, and social diversity on the other – at a time when public funds are being cut significantly. Interest in the theme of participation, buoyed by various issues – managerial, social and political – has, moreover, grown significantly to the point of being both an essential element of public policy and a key demand of

[1] Known in French as "*les Trente Glorieuses*", the "30 glorious years" between 1945 and 1975.

social movements. This enthusiasm for participation is helping to change the way public action is implemented.

In this context, how can we measure the content and scope of this renewed interest in participatory action with regard to housing? Are we seeing ideas straight out of the 1970s and 1980s come back to the fore – and, if so, why? Or, on the contrary, are we seeing a new housing production movement come into being? To try to answer these questions, we need to situate these experiences within the context of a longer history. A genealogical survey of participation in the housing sector – taking care to trace the history of the concept using the approach proposed by Robert Castel (1995) – shows that the issue of participation, expressed in different ways at different periods, goes hand in hand with debate on housing policy. We can thus date its beginnings to the late 19th century, and not the 1960s or 1970s as we often tend to assume. It forms part of a long discussion that took place throughout the 20th century, concerning the types of relationship to be established between housing beneficiaries and the powers that be, and which started when the issue of working-class housing reform was taken up by public and political bodies. The term "participation" was seldom used before the 1970s; nevertheless, in these earlier times, there were processes and dynamics in place whose socio-political aspects were similar to that of current approaches, or even laid the foundations for them: cooperation, eliminating intermediaries, involving and mobilising residents, self-building, etc. (Bacqué and Carriou 2011).

The three historical forms of participatory housing

Three key moments in the history of participatory housing can be identified. The first period is the early 20th century, when the first policy promoting the construction of housing for the working classes (the *Loi Siegfried*, or "Siegfried Law", of 1894 on low-cost housing – *habitations à bon marché* or *HBM* in French) was designed to support private initiatives. The legal and financial framework adopted is intended not only for private investors, industrialists and philanthropists, but also for the workers themselves through the creation of cooperative building companies. Political ideas regarding the "association" and "cooperation" of workers, at the heart of the "social economy" project supported by a section of the reformist elite in power, generated clear interest at this time. These ideas were in evidence during the foundation of the republican compromise that was established between the government and the labour movement, and ensured the construction of a still-fragile French Republic.

The second period begins in the interwar period and continues through to the end of France's postwar boom. Spanning two world wars, this period was marked by growing government intervention and an increasingly strong presence of the state in the production of housing on the one hand, and, as a result, by a decline in the number of cooperative approaches initiated by workers on the other. Protest movements such as squatting and self-building emerged in response to delays or misunderstandings generated by state action, but they remained marginal. Neo-corporatism,[2] on the other hand, was based on the participation of employees, particularly in the housing sector through the "*1% logement*"[3] housing-loan scheme.

The final – and doubtless the most well-known – period was the 1970s, which were marked by a dual criticism: political and social criticism of the public interventionism of previous years, reaffirming the theme of participation; and cultural criticism of the principles of architecture and modern urban planning. In parallel with urban social movements, alternative housing projects began to be developed in reaction against previous modes of housing production.

[2] In France, neo-corporatism takes the form of the joint management of a social sector by central government and professional organisations.

[3] In France, "*1% logement*" is a housing-loan scheme whereby employers are required to pay a sum equivalent to a certain percentage of their payroll (originally 1%; now approximately 0.45%) to support access to housing for its employees.

Participation: an issue enshrined in policy

In light of this history, the issue of participation appears to be very much intertwined with that of the welfare state, of which housing policy is one of the key aspects in France. The theme of participation is present throughout the development of housing policy (Draperi 2007): as a building block of social reform in the early 20th century, as an alternative or complement to the state apparatus with "*1% logement*" housing loans after World War II, or as a challenge in the 1970s. Each time, it has reactivated issues relating to the demarcation between the private and public spheres, and the definition of matters of public interest. From this point of view, current alternative housing experiments seem to be initiating a reconfiguration of the relationship between citizens and government. For example, new partnerships, particularly with local authorities, are starting to take effect as part of efforts to find land and funding. Does these new trends presage wider-ranging reorganisations of the French social protection system and in terms of conceptions of what constitutes society? The question remains open.

This historical perspective also highlights the diversity of projects, practices and political positions that are today described as "participatory". These participatory approaches concern various audiences: employees, citizens, residents, users, tenants, homeowners. They involve a range of stakeholders (residents, designers, landlords, politicians) who are also pursuing a range of goals (better housing, better design, better management, creating new social and economic relations). Current experiences of alternative housing are enriched by these different legacies. Some prefer the alternative tradition arising from the events of 1968, valuing experimentation and the development of new collective relationships. Others raise the question of creating a new kind of real-estate product, midway between the public sector and the free market. In addition to these perspectives, there is the newer theme of sustainable development (or even degrowth). The convergence of these three ideological references leads to a more general reassessment of affairs, calling into question housing policy, lifestyles and the environmental quality of housing. The result is more a collection of actions than a movement, led by various actors involved in networks with multiple influences and intentions, and accompanied by a certain conceptual vagueness – but there is perhaps also the prospect of being able to create a genuine third housing sector based on values of solidarity and ecology.

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