

Don't Romanticize the Process!

An Interview with Lacol on Housing and Cooperatives

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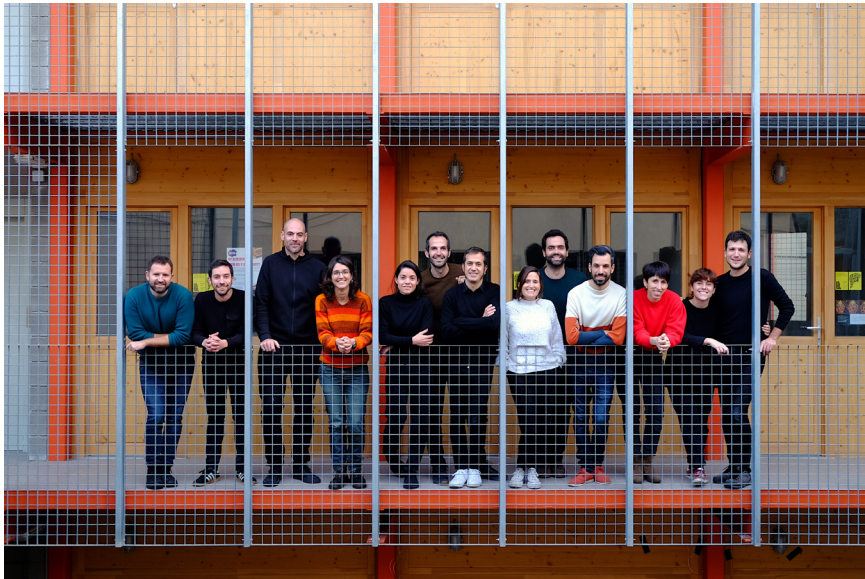
Daily life in *La Borda*'s common area. Photo by Alvaro Valdecantos.

Founded a decade ago in 2014, Barcelona-based practice Lacol defines itself as an 'architecture cooperative.' Comprising a team of fourteen multidisciplinary professionals, Lacol operates across five key axes: Construction, Cooperative Housing, Participation, Exhibitions and Stage Design, and Urbanism. Eschewing conventional hierarchies, Lacol not only embraces the cooperative model within its organizational framework, but also champions cooperative housing practices as a radical solution within Catalonia's architectural landscape. Among their recent projects, further discussed below, are the *La Borda* housing cooperative (2018) and La Balma collective housing (2021).

Our interview with Lacol members Cristina Gamboa and Eliseu Arrufat delves deep into their perspectives on cooperativism within the context of their organizational structure and the urban context of Barcelona. Expounding upon their insights into domesticity and their recent housing schemes, the interview sheds light on Lacol's intricate and often delicate relationships with inhabitants, municipalities, and other stakeholders involved in its projects. Through this thoughtful exchange, Lacol shares its aspirations for the future of housing and the enduring legacy of cooperativism in architectural practice.

Interviewers: Constantinos Marcou, Theodora Giovanazzi, Jolanda Devalle (BF).

Interviewees: Cristina Gamboa (CG), Eliseu Arrufat (EA).



Lacol's team portrait. Image courtesy of Lacol.

BF: Let's start with a question that many have asked. How did you come together as a group?

CG: We first came together as a group in 2009 and co-founded Lacol in 2014. This year will be our fifteenth as a group and our tenth as a cooperative. It has been quite a long journey of working together and developing a space where we can trust one another. We all met when we were students at the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona (ETSAB), studying during the peak of the economic crisis. We already knew, back then, that we wanted to be engaged and active in the practice of architecture. In 2009 we rented a space to work together. The school lacked such infrastructure, so we took the initiative and found a space to share our time, questions, and even resources such as a printer. Even as students we were challenging the school to incorporate experimental and alternative approaches to architecture. Our work departed, somehow, from each of our own interests while in university, to a collective space that challenged established frameworks. Lacol evolved organically as we transitioned from students to professionals. This briefly describes how we arrived here at this moment.



Unions and neighborhood associations demonstrating for the right to housing in *Can Batlló*, Barcelona. Image courtesy of Lacol.

BF: Quite a journey. What prompted the choice of the current neighborhood to locate your office?

CG: We moved into the Sants neighborhood for logistic and pragmatic reasons. We selected this particular location as it was affordable and close to the main train station, making it convenient for our classmates who came from different areas in and around of Barcelona. It is a worker's neighborhood. It has a long tradition of cooperativism both on an industrial and social level. Our first aim was to establish meaningful relationships and become familiar with our neighbors and our surroundings. As time went by we became more engaged. It was important for us to learn about the strikes that took place, the different structures, principles of management, as well as the history of cooperativism. It is worthy to note that cooperativism is not a recent discovery. Cooperativism is rooted in the territory's history, it has been a major influence for us and brought us closer to the local people.

EA: We found many answers to the questions we were posing as students during this time, such as: how to better understand the management of space and people; how to articulate these relationships and tensions; how to be useful as architects; and how to interact and listen. The people here had answers. And we needed a job. We were aware that the system was broken, we didn't want to follow the same tendencies that contributed to the current condition.



A few Lacol founding members presenting their final year project at the Barcelona School of Architecture (ETSAB). Image courtesy of Lacol.

BF: In the beginning, when you were students or recent graduates, what challenges did you face in funding your practice, working together and with the community?

CG: I feel that it wasn't planned; things unfolded one after another. But we did receive support from the school we came from, as well as alliances. We were supported by our former professors, specifically by three extraordinary women with a strong voice in our profession: Anna Ramos, Sandra Bestraten, and Zaida Muixí. This was important. I believe that they were also exploring alternative approaches to architecture, and they were promoting synergies to investigate these. They supported and encouraged us to work on real needs and conflicts in our surroundings as our final project. This was our starting point to become engaged in the neighborhood. It

would have been difficult to plan what came next. We are still searching, all of us, for answers to questions that cross our daily needs. From the school to the neighborhood where we are currently based, from student proposals to realized projects. Knowing more and more about the neighborhood, its networks and people, their narratives, and the genealogy of cooperativism, made us look seriously at cooperativism from a legal standpoint; one we could also follow. At a certain moment, we asked ourselves whether this structure could also be applied to housing. Trial and error, learning by doing, incorporating a participatory process. It was a moment of uncertainty; we were guided through the economic crisis by the idea that we were stronger as a group than as individuals.

EA: We adopted this 'peculiar' cooperative model due to the crisis, and without it, we might have pursued different paths, working as individuals or for larger firms. During that time, if you wanted a job, you had to migrate with the hope of practicing architecture. Our choice was influenced by our desire for a better, more equal, and horizontal society, combined with the need for employment in a context where everything was failing. The thing we are most proud of is that we managed to establish and maintain a system that continues to become more settled and consolidated with growth overtime. This allows us to think longer and larger. To make things last is difficult. It goes against the nature of capitalism and consumerism. But the fact that it lasted, says a lot about the values of cooperativism. Informally, we have been together as a team since 2009. We were still teenagers! But we took this decision thinking not about the world we already had but about the world we would like to have. It's not merely about having a job; it's a place to nurture individual vocations and aspirations. This organizational structure empowers us to pursue our goals without seeking permission—each member contributes to the collective, fostering a reciprocal care dynamic.



Lacol's workshops to define the typology and the habitation conditions for *La Borda* Cooperative.
Image courtesy of Lacol.

CG: By definition a 'cooperative' is a group of people that join forces for a common need. This common need was related, in our case, to labor. In the center of the cooperative, one can only find its people. The idea of sharing interests and values, within a safe space of operating, is the strength of the cooperative. We view it as an umbrella where people with different skills and personal desires always find a space of synergy. Architects have always been interested in sociology, policymaking, or methods of construction. Through this structure, we were able to expand our interests, as it incorporates a plurality of voices. The values of cooperativism are directly linked to the territory, being part of a network. But, of course, sustainable, and feminist approaches are also integral, where care for life, any life, is at the center.

BF: Cooperativism is regarded as an ambitious project, historically often failing to meet its expectations. How does your idea of cooperativism differ from models and examples of the past?

EA: We are afraid of being over-ambitious. We want to make this last. Our 'enemies' are stronger and bigger than us. We would like to think that we hold on to the same aims, to be sustainable, to empower people and to promote democracy. We are not writing a lot nor spreading the word on cooperativism. We feel that we are a small group of people, but we are fighting with our own set of values. In the mid-nineteenth century, the world was changing more rapidly than now, in terms of ideologies, with the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution. We are trying to be connected and engaged in our territory. And be loyal to these ideas.

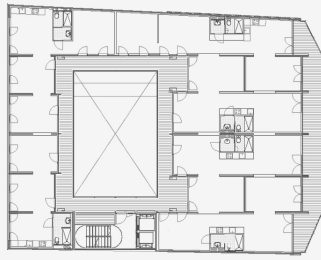
CG: At certain historical moments, the world was presented with these big ideas of social and political change in an idealistic way. Conflicts and contradictions are inevitable. For us, it was about taking it step-by-step. Small-scale practices often lead to a series of questions. A question that we also had in the past was the difference between being a collective versus a cooperative. What is our contribution? When we discussed with other teams or collectives, we realized that they lacked the legal structure as a productive apparatus. The time we spent discussing what is a cooperative, how we could share resources, and responsibilities, as well as how we could distribute our incomes equally, were important questions for us to answer. And this is what makes us different from other teams. Architecture has always been practiced collectively. Working together implies collective ownership but also a set of protocols. The important thing for us is how to take care of all these relationships, negotiating without romanticizing the process.

EA: We are not the same, as we were in the past. We evolve and adapt. We are not afraid of changing ourselves and our thoughts. It is in our nature to respond to every challenge.

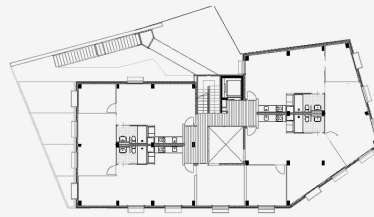
BF: This takes us to our next section. As architects what is your role within the project and practice? Can you describe the process? How do you engage in the development of the project?

CG: In some of the first projects we were involved as activists or neighbors, fighting for both the city we lived in and for our own needs. We are affected by the labor conditions and the real estate market within a city that forces us to live outside. *Can Batlló* was the first place where we learned about the city of Barcelona, its transformation, its policies, the role of the municipality, as well as that of the real estate companies. Our projects often emerge from a direct involvement in the process, rather than waiting for opportunities to arrive. Our connection with the territory has limits, but we continually seek or find opportunities and spaces of operation. Our role has been redefined over time, with an explosive attitude, adapting to changing circumstances and political moments in Barcelona. We've learned to navigate the complexities of the city and its stakeholders to find spaces of opportunity.

In the case of *La Borda*, the first cooperative housing project we designed, it all started from discussions on how to collectively solve the housing needs we were facing in the general assembly of *Can Batlló*, a paradigmatic experience of a bottom-up transformation in the city. Many of us were involved in these discussions. We not only lead the process but were involved from the beginning. In the case of *La Borda*, we were part of the neighborhood and so we were involved in all levels of development. This experience allowed us to understand each step and be able to systematize and replicate them.



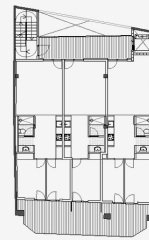
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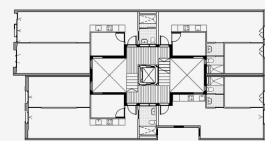
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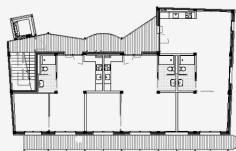
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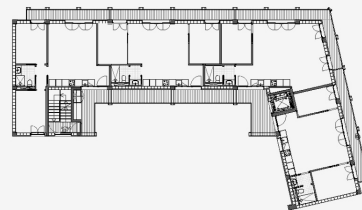
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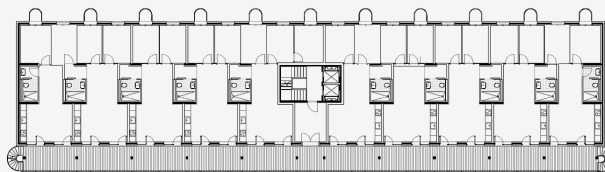
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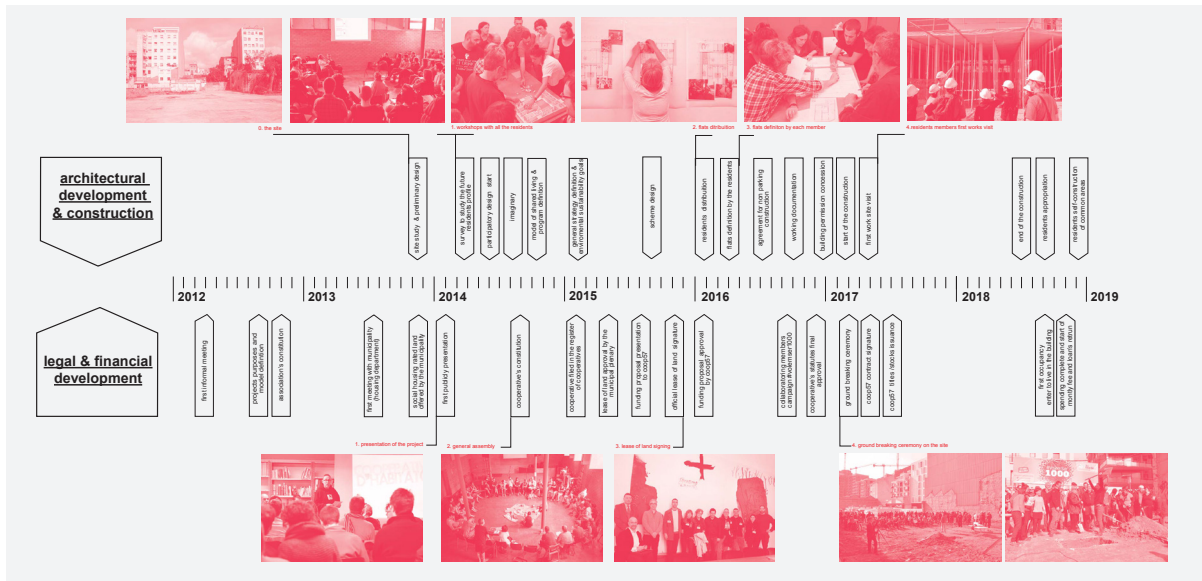
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1. *La Borda's* plan view. 2. *La Raval's* plan view.
3. *Sotrac's* plan view. 4. *La Bombeta's* plan view. 5. *La Balma's* plan view. 6. *La Domestika's* plan view. 7. *La Morada's* plan view. 8. *Abril's* plan view. 9. *Empriu's* plan view. Image courtesy of Lacol.

EA: I think we are used to the art of switching ‘hats.’ This is of course difficult. We often try and find solutions to our generation’s problems. We need a job and a house. We respond to these, of course, holding onto our ideals. We realized that it is important for an architect to know when to switch hats. We often tackle problems that are not architectural. It’s a continuous and dynamic process of navigating through different roles and responding to challenges. I think everything crosses and intersects, sometimes we don’t exactly know what we are doing. Then we discuss it with a colleague, a partner, or a friend and everything makes sense.



The timeline of *La Borda*’s architectural, legal, and financial development. Image courtesy of Lacol.

BF: What are the limits of your involvement? Do you involve the inhabitants or other actors in the design process as well? You mentioned issues of ownership in systems of living, but does that also extend to the design process?

CG: Regarding housing, we were confronted with the question of affordability, we saw affordability as an opportunity to understand the instrumental role of property ownership. This way of thinking allowed us to reframe housing as a right rather than an asset. There’s an implicit need to understand the means of production. As architects, we reflect upon these ideas by investigating alternative historical models and historical precedents. We engage in the process of imagining new models collectively and challenge conventional frameworks. While architects play a role in materializing spatial conditions, the theoretical frameworks and legal models are outcomes of cooperative efforts involving multiple stakeholders. It is important to emphasize that architects are part of a larger process, the ‘trojan horse’ is the community itself. The community is a driving force in these processes.

EA: In terms of design involvement, it’s challenging to gauge the dynamics of a group and understand their preferences. We’ve learned that different groups have different priorities—some may focus on design, while others prioritize the financial aspect. It requires careful tailoring of our approach to suit the needs and dynamics of each group. It’s a process of constant learning and adaptation. Long-term projects, especially cooperatives, span around six- and a half-years on average, requiring a serious

commitment. Managing a group's mindset becomes crucial, understanding that each group has its unique trajectory and challenges. We navigate this complexity by deploying tools that fit the specific needs of the group and being adaptable to their evolving dynamics.

CG: The involvement of the community in housing cooperatives is integral because they are self-promoted initiatives. The community leads them, they take control of the process, during which a relationship with architecture is found. Here is where participation plays a very important role. We establish different layers of participation, recognizing that the control of development is the highest level of involvement. Defining collectively the values, architectural vision, environmental goals, and communal program of the building allows us to unfold the strong relationship between architecture and culture. The collective decisions made during the process contribute to the sense of belonging and the community-building aspect of the project.



Left: *La Borda's* exterior view. Image courtesy of Lacol.
Right: *La Borda's* common area. Image courtesy of Lacol.



Left: *La Balma's* exterior view. Image courtesy of Lacol.
 Right: *La Balma's* common area. Image courtesy of Lacol.

BF: What is the role of local authorities in selecting sites? What other agents are involved in this process, apart from the community?

CG: In the case of our first project, *La Borda*, we presented the idea to the municipality, having no previous experience. The municipality offered a public lot to the group which, on the premises of Can Batlló, was a 75-year direct leasehold, as a mechanism to provide land. So, *La Borda* became a pioneer or an experimental project at the time. Since then, the process was institutionalized as part of an official policy, the “Barcelona Right to Housing Plan 2016–2025.” This marked the first moment when cooperative housing was introduced and written into the city’s housing plan. The policy aim is to increase affordable housing from 2 to 15%. Mechanisms and tools were established, such as a designated board involving the municipality, architects, technicians, and those pushing the initiative. Through several competitions, the municipality facilitated land for communities or cooperative groups, with well-articulated economic, social, and architectural plans. Importantly, the leasehold of the land ensures the municipality doesn’t lose ownership, acting as a safeguard. The ownership of the plot always belongs to the city, the cooperative is the owner of the building. We have been researching and implementing cooperative housing systems, and one of the main fears we had, learning from international case studies in Denmark and Germany, is that if the cooperative does not have all the power to control both building and plot, it can radically change the structure, dismantle the cooperative. But public land is limited. And so, our efforts are also directed toward private land projects, such as in the case of our project *La Morada*, which is currently under development. The project was initiated by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Our main concern was whether or not the cooperative ecosystem can be autonomous or strong enough to pressure the municipality when there’s a certain political and policy changes.



La Balma's common area. Photo by Milena Villalba.

BF: You mentioned that a building designed to be a cooperative could be privatized in the future. Do you employ precise typological approaches to domestic space to prevent this from happening?

CG: We took time to look at references and understand which questions were linked to the housing model. You don't own a flat, you use it. And if the needs are changing, then the unit can even change. Of course, the transition from the public to the private, the idea of decreasing a unit and increasing it when needed, demanded a legal approach. We were discussing with a housing agency about flexibility, they proposed an alternative contract model. Instead of registering inhabitants to a fixed property, they define a minimum unit (40 m² by law in Barcelona) and the possibility of adding rooms (until reaching the maximum of 90 m² for social housing). Then, the different rooms that one adds are defined as common areas for private use. This law allowed the cooperative to decide who will be using what spaces during the lifespan of the building. Probably, this is a mechanism that will create problems in the case of dismantling the cooperative structure. Several common areas do not belong to anyone. Time will tell if the strategies that we proposed are being used.

EA: We always try to confront issues that the market doesn't care about. We design homes after getting to know the group. We get the community involved. The common areas are regarded as weapons against the market. If each community has the design adapted to them, then this spatial specificity makes it much harder for the building to be sold or rejected. Sometimes we deliver projects unfinished, and the community is responsible for their final delivery. We lose control and we are aware of it. It is fun and interesting. Things are better lived when they are incomplete. The common areas must be as flexible as possible but at the same time, you need to listen to the community's needs.

CG: Sometimes the common areas are instrumental and linked to the previous question. When certain areas are collectivized, such as the guest room, they become an important part of the building management. While the configuration of the housing units is important, we found that the circulation is also crucial. Instead of following the minimum requirements for these spaces, we propose generous corridors, staircases, courtyards, terraces, and balconies because, by expanding the common areas, we generate a further level of interaction between the inhabitants.



La Borda's common area. Photo by Milena Villalba.

BF: How do you get to know a community?

EA: We don't know how we do it. We always start by asking the communities to look at themselves outside of their comfort zone. It is about discussing, listening, and questioning. Quite often you get frustrated. But you need to understand the dynamics of the group. Sometimes the group asks for things they don't need. In my personal experience, I need the group to also know me, aside from the architect I am. If they only know you as a professional, they won't open themselves up to the process.

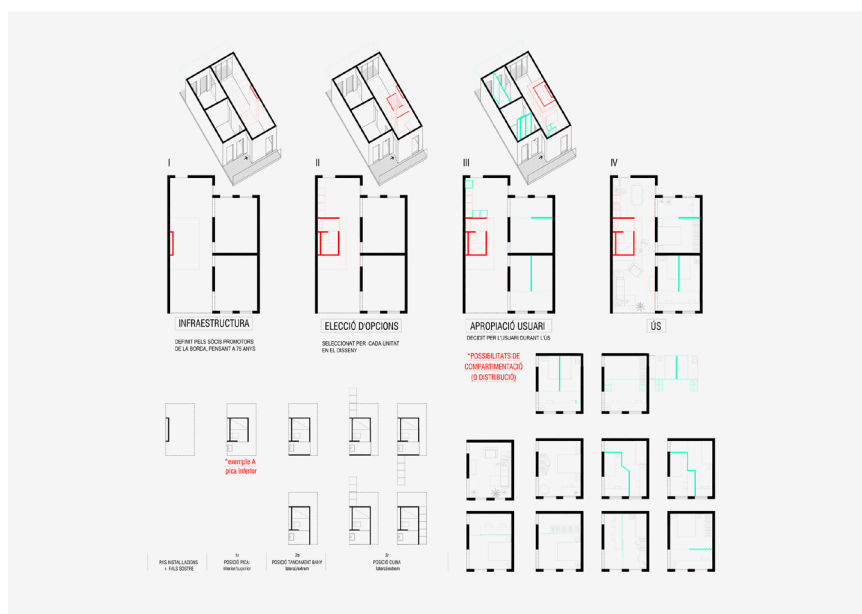
CG: It is a matter of building trust. Transferring knowledge and understanding how important community is. We have a responsibility to confront the meaning of domestic space, from the regulations to the existing standards and question what housing currently is. Some cooperatives know each other well, while others don't. As Eliseu said, the first thing we do is to figure out the relationships within a community. The process involves confronting oneself as a user, differentiating desires from needs, and transitioning from individual expectations to collective goals. This process generates frustration and conflicts, but managing and negotiating through them is how we build trust and strengthen community. The construction of oneself evolves through these collective processes. It involves a shared image of the community that sets the stage for potential interactions and forms of care. Each community approaches the self differently, and it's important not to normalize or neutralize these diverse communities. There are norms set by the legal framework and policies. We need to be very critical of how we understand these.

EA: The size of the group also plays a significant role. Smaller groups function as close families, while larger groups mimic a microcosm of society. Larger groups tend to find a balance in themselves, but smaller groups with six to ten members struggle, requiring a more demanding approach.

CG: Cooperative housing aims to provide a cross-sectional approach model, recognizing diverse ways of living and the balance between the individual and the community.

BF: One could argue that the cooperative model is an ad-hoc small scale response that only works when people know each other and are willing to commit to a certain collective lifestyle. But then there are many others, who don't fit into this profile, who also need affordable housing. Do you think that the cooperative model is a solution to the housing crisis? How do you feel more broadly about this issue?

EA: We don't see it as an ideal solution. We propose a way of living cooperatively on public or private land with contracts that allow flexibility. However, in comparison to countries with more implemented and tested cooperative housing systems, we acknowledge the cultural gap of around 80 years in our context, making it a challenge to implement the model widely. Cooperatives need to evolve and find ways to be part of the solution. We believe that people are the owners of everything, whether a company or a building. If cooperativism can come face-to-face with individuals, it could be a more effective solution. Currently, we are asking people who are very convinced and committed, creating a culture shift. While cooperative housing may not be the cheapest way of building, it brings the idea of ownership and collective responsibility into the forefront. Looking into the future, when cooperatives are more established and can create financial relations without relying on banks, it might contribute to affordability on a larger scale. The cooperative housing model challenges the mindset of ownership and introduces a cultural framework. While it's not inclusive and affordable for everyone right now, there is potential for the model to evolve, address challenges, and contribute to a housing stock that is less influenced by speculation. The cooperative housing movement can impact the private market and even operate independently from the state, though there are still challenges to overcome, making it accessible to a broader range of people. At the moment each negotiation is a big fight. We as Lacol are mostly invested in social housing. Our clients and the broader community are aware of it. However, we consistently encounter a challenge when individuals are trying to imagine their own homes. Many times, people invest in housing with the aspiration to upgrade their social class. So, how do we move past this? We need our construction to be cost-effective and sustainable. Balancing these aspects is complex. It's a significant struggle. This is just an example illustrating what it means to gauge a group and integrate it into architectural production. Beyond merely creating an object, it's about considering the subject.



La Borda's dwelling units. The axonometric views and plans illustrate possible interior arrangements. Image courtesy of Lacol.

CG: Now it is not so inclusive nor affordable. Maybe the contribution that this model is providing has to do with challenging existing ownership conditions and even regulations. I believe the movement has many more challenges to face on a cultural, economic, and social level.

BF: Our last question is how do you envision the future of Lacol and what are your next projects? In light of your experience, how will these be different and adapt to new challenges?

CG: We have been changing our structure and way of operating, it's closely linked to our interests. Currently, we have four areas of focus in Lacol. One pertains to construction but with a significant focus on environmental or sustainable construction methods. Another has to do with housing systems. The third has to do with energy management. The fourth concerns the management of construction and the means of production. This last one has been developed as a tool for cooperative housing projects to have control over construction. However, this implies the capacity to reflect on who builds and how it's built.

EA: I particularly like what's happening in Valencia, where I recently discovered the largest cooperatives originated from the housing cooperative movement. In Valencia, there's no housing cooperative movement, but we have a huge credit cooperative. Cooperatives are now involved in housing. My friends in Valencia are intensely focused on housing because it opens doors to money, energy, food, transport, and more. Valencia is the region in Spain with the most cooperatives in energy, transport, and agriculture. Still, there's not any movement. It's apolitical now. As Cristina mentioned, we specialize in housing, but what about all the tools needed to reach housing? Housing is the final result of this crossing, where individuals can work and sustain a society. So, what about working from the other side, until the production system?

CG: Through each of our projects, we've seen the reality, the conflicts, and the potential for broader impact. In *La Borda*, during construction or development, it was challenging to self-manage the construction and reduce the construction company's costs. This is something we have tried to improve in later projects. Once the buildings are in the face of conviviality, we realize that during the life span, the management of the infrastructure and utility consumption, which makes us think eventually, the gradual management of the city itself, We can identify and share resources which may be waste for some yet valuable for others. All these exchanges can be established through new infrastructures. This is something that we are interested in.

AUTHOR(s)

Lacol is a Barcelona-based non-profit cooperative of architects founded in 2014. Their work aims to generate community infrastructures for sustainable living as key tools for the eco-social transition. *Lacol's* activity is based on a horizontal system of labor, blurring the boundaries of different disciplines through their cross-sectional approach. Their work has been widely recognized and exhibited, including among others: the Mies van der Rohe Award (Emergent Category, 2022); Moira Gemmill Prize (Women in Architecture Award by the Architectural Review, 2021); and the Venice Biennale of Architecture *How will we live together?* (2021).

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