The fight of housing cooperatives against gentrification in the Historic Centre of San Salvador

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Abstract
The Historic Centre of San Salvador, in El Salvador’s capital city, hosts a history of disputes regarding access to land, housing, public spaces and basic services. In this article, the struggle of the centre’s inhabitants for more decent housing is an example of how people can change power relations embedded in cities as contested as those of Latin America. Through cooperative organization, precariously housed inhabitants reclaimed their right to be part of urban transformations despite gentrification and turistification pressures. Inhabitants proposed the collectivization of property and bottom-up decision-making through the establishment of housing cooperatives. Although the central government has faced challenges for assimilating and supporting their proposals, joint coordination is providing results. Allowing space for inhabitants’ participation at the policy-making level has enabled cooperatives to become firm opponents of informal rentiership and land underutilization. Results so far constitute an unprecedented attempt of developing adequate housing from a human right’s perspective, not as a commodity. The housing cooperatives in San Salvador’s Centro Histórico, to this end, provide some insightful lessons of resistance.

Keywords
housing cooperatives, informal rental markets, collective property, historic centres, Latin America

Introduction
This article recalls experiences of a housing cooperative movement that has evolved into an important stakeholder in the revitalization of San Salvador’s Centro Histórico (Historic Centre), advocating for better living conditions for the most impoverished. The centre’s
cultural assets and heritage value are being increasingly recognized by the government as tourist assets and gentrification processes have started to emerge, placing precariously housed residents, and their community, at risk.

The objective of this article is to discuss how the housing cooperatives of the Centro Histórico have emerged and how these bottom up movements have collectively come to influence urban transformation processes, reaching the policy-making level. The cooperatives propose an alternative model of housing and revitalizing the city, both notions conceptualized as human rights to be collectively produced and owned. As Harvey (2008) states, it is our common right to exert a collective power that transforms the existing urbanization processes under the people’s lead, not only to have access to urban resources (infrastructure, services, spaces) but to democratize the power dynamics that reproduce them. From its successes and challenges, some lessons can be drawn, and reflections can be made on the importance of supporting autonomous resistance efforts in aiming at higher institutional levels of action. On behalf of local inhabitants’ rightful claims for access to urban land, decent housing and the city, it is necessary to reflect on how they can take part in urban revitalization processes. Several alternatives, such as the one proposed by housing cooperatives, certainly exist and are gradually increasing in visibility. Within a deep-rooted institutional tradition of prioritizing private interests in the configuration of cities, can counterproposals of this kind have space?

With that purpose, the present article proceeds, firstly, with a contextualization of the existing housing conditions in the Centro Histórico. This is followed by a discussion of recent gentrification and touristification challenges, and how the formation and experiences of the housing cooperative movement in the area have the potential to overcome them. The last section presents lessons from these experiences, which can inform alternative housing movements in similarly contested urban spaces, and concludes with some reflections on the alternative paths that are claiming back a space in the state policy framework.

1. Housing informality and insecurity in the Historic Centre of San Salvador

As in many other cities in the Latin American region, despite being located at the very heart of the capital since its colonial genesis and Republican apogee, San Salvador’s Centro Histórico has faced decades of abandonment and degradation (Borsdorf, 2003; Carrión, 2000). After enduring the impact of the October 1986 earthquake and a 12 year-long civil war, high income families, governmental institutions and most commercial activities left the centre to decay. In addition, the absence of clear state policies for the centre’s recovery facilitated the reproduction of social and economic inequalities (Barba & Córdoba, 2001). To this day, a vibrant socioeconomic tissue of long-term inhabitants, transients, small and micro-entrepreneurs and street vendors inhabit the Centro Histórico.

The most impoverished population of the city centre lives in informal and highly precarious conditions, in part due to a housing backlog that relegates low-income households to reside in insecure and overcrowded dwellings with limited access to basic services. The dominant housing typology is commonly referred to as mesones. These buildings were built to
house upper-class families during the 19th and 20th centuries, and have not been properly maintained. No less than 75 per cent of mesones are made of deteriorating wood, metal, plastic and other reused items that constitute a high fire risk. Mesones are subdivided into rooms, called piezas, of around 40 m² each. Individual piezas are rented to family groups, while facilities for basic services such as water and restrooms are shared among all tenant families in common areas (see Figure 1). Despite these conditions, eight out of every ten inhabitants wish to remain in the city centre, due to how well connected it is and the strength of local social networks (FUNDASAL, 2005a).

**Figure 1**

Families living in Mesón Palacios, at the core of the Historic Centre of San Salvador, collaborate with household chores. Mesón Palacios currently houses over 19 families organized in a housing cooperative, one that will benefit from an upcoming State revitalization programme. **Source: Amal Achaibou**

Mesones are the only affordable choice for most impoverished households to remain in the area, with the monthly rent for a room being approximately 15 per cent of their monthly income. In consequence, mesones shelter up to 95 per cent of the city centre’s lowest income families, which are almost a third of the total population (FUNDASAL, 2005a; UNDP & FUNDASAL, 2009). Still, the owners and managers of mesones can extract profit, mainly by taking advantage of informal tenure arrangements. They have thrived on the basis of oral agreements instead of formal rental contracts, silent evictions (and threats thereof), harassment from ‘property managers’ and defining arbitrarily the rental fees tenants have to pay (FUNDASAL, 2005a; Herrera & Martín-Baró, 1978). Mesones constitute a small-scale, specific rental market whose functioning depends on keeping formal (legal) options out of reach for the poorest population. In El Salvador, only 33 per cent of the total population have access to the formal land and housing market and 82 per cent of families with an income level lower than the average are in housing deficit (Guevara & Arce, 2016; UN-HABITAT, 2013).

The Historic Centre’s situation mirrors that at the national scale, where private sector agents, rather than inhabitants, are the main actors defining where and how housing is produced and who has access to it. Private sector actors include property or landowners, construction and real estate companies and banks, for example. The mesones rental market mainly benefits a group of property owners who have profited from them for decades.
Obtained as safe investments, the personal profit extracted by *mesones* owners increases with the expenditure of public money on urban redevelopment (González et al., 2013). The impact of a strong speculative market based on land and built-up assets in the city centre should not be disregarded either. It has been estimated that as much as 45 per cent of the total land area of the *Centro Histórico* is currently idle, abandoned or underutilized (Lungo, 1999; as cited in Araujo, 2003). In a country with no land taxation instruments, speculation on vacant land, particularly where urbanization is favoured and projected to expand, serves the purpose of maximising profits for a few.

In this context, the state can hardly compete with the private sector as a supply agent in the housing market. It lacks the necessary financial and institutional capacities and the few solutions it provides have not ensured real access to adequate living conditions for the population in need. Also, despite the efforts made on creating policies and legislation that reorganize how territorial development governance is structured, competent institutions remain dispersed and/or lack resources to operate effectively (UN-HABITAT, 2013: 95).

These structural conditions have prevailed thanks to a neoliberal policy framework that has allowed cities to become territories where most of its components are subjected to commodification, through market deregulation, privatization and the liberalization of capital mobility (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2009 cited in Janoschka & Hidalgo, 2014). Said context has reduced the role of the state in order to increase the private sector’s prosperity. In El Salvador, this translated into urban land and housing turning into commodities transacted in a liberalized market-driven economy (Ferrufino, 2014). Families living in *mesones*, due to their limited debt capacity, are often excluded from social housing programmes and acquiring subsidized loans with public financial institutions. To change this, alternative solutions require discussing three key aspects: 1) the prioritization of the interests and needs of inhabitants in policy-making; 2) the role played by the state and 3) the influence of private property owners on the politics behind access to land, housing and the city as a whole.

2. Setting the path to gentrification: contextual elements and concepts for analysis

The Historic Centre of San Salvador is also disputed due to the different values its built-up environment holds. Apart from residential buildings, the centre hosts many public spaces and buildings valued as heritage sites, surrounded by commercial activities and services. The area now recognized as the *Centro Histórico* was officially declared a ‘heritage zone’ in 2008, a milestone in terms of policy making for the area (Decree nº 680, 2008). Since then, local government authorities have paid more attention to the city centre because of its potential for attracting commercial and tourism-related investments.

With this aim, recent interventions made by the Municipality of San Salvador include: projects of façade restoration and renovation of buildings categorized as tangible heritage assets; refurbishment of public plazas and conversion of streets into pedestrian-only zones (see Figure 2); and the installation of video surveillance systems. Since 2012, the Municipality has invested more than USD$4 million for these projects, according to public declarations
made by the former mayor (see Table 1). Cultural revitalization projects have also taken place, attempting to highlight the centre’s ‘intangible heritage’ while increasing the visibility of the renewal projects.

| Type of intervention                        | Site(s) intervened       | Cost (in USD$) | Funding sources (when available)                              | Year (of inauguration) |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Installation of video surveillance system   | Various points            | 94,000 (approx.) | Municipality of San Salvador                                  | 2012                   |
| Conversion to pedestrian-only area          | Arce Street               | 470,000 (approx.) | Andalucian Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AACID) | 2013                   |
| Renovation                                  | Gerardo Barrios Plaza     | 1.5 million     | Municipality of San Salvador                                  | 2017                   |
| Refurbishment and exterior lighting         | National Palace and Theater | 90,000 (approx.) | Municipality of San Salvador (44 %) and Sherwin Williams (56 %) | 2017                   |
| Renovation                                  | Libertad Plaza            | 1.5 million     | Municipality of San Salvador                                  | 2018                   |
| Renovation                                  | Morazán Plaza             | 895,000         | Municipality of San Salvador                                  | 2018                   |

**Total estimated cost of all projects: 4.49 million (approx.)**

Table 1

Revitalization interventions developed by public authorities in the Historic Centre of San Salvador since 2012. **Sources:** based on various newspaper articles from *Diario El Mundo* (2017, 2018) *Diario La Página* (2018), *El Diario de Hoy* (2013, 2017) and *InformaTVX* (2017).

The Municipality had previously tried to invest in the improvement of the centre’s conditions. The local and central governments had been elaborating plans for the recovery of the centre since 1995, primarily understood as the relocation of informal commerce from the streets and public spaces into new marketplaces. These interventions have been shown to have yielded more drawbacks than concrete results (Barba & Córdoba, 2001; Espinoza, 2015). In 2019, the Municipality revealed a rather ambitious programme of action, the *Corredor Urbano* project. It seeks to transform streets and renovate parks, plazas, marketplaces and museums, to connect them with another soon to be inaugurated green space project, the *Cuscatlán* Park. The whole project could cost up to USD$180 million, with a contribution of USD$11 million by the Municipality. The remaining funding is to be sought from USAID and private investors (US Embassy, 2019; *Diario El Mundo*, 2019; *La Prensa Gráfica*, 2019). How will this growing interest on renovating the Historic Centre of San Salvador affect the living conditions of the poor?

The Municipality’s attempts to make the centre an attractive urbanscape for middle class visitors and investors have already been contested by street vendors and inhabitants. This type of conflict arises when cities with relevant heritage value enter processes of ‘touristification’ (*turistificación*), processes Delgadillo (2015) has described in his studies on Latin American cities. Gentrification trends are strengthened by the commodification of a city centre’s heritage assets, promoted to incentivize services, commerce and cultural activities related to the tourism industry. Urban cultural tourism has the potential to generate
important revenues for the conservation of heritage and the benefit of hosting communities. Nevertheless, it is usually promoted for maximizing the profitability investors can obtain by changing land use and developing an exclusively tourism-oriented economy (idem: 130).

Touristification in developing nations turns historic centres into spaces of fraught coexistence between the consumers of the commodified city and the low-income population confined within degraded spaces and services. This form of gentrification may not set out to attract wealthier newcomers as residents, but nonetheless, tends to increase the inequality gaps and oppression exerted by local authorities over the urban poor, as they seek to attract more potential consumers (Hiernaux, 2003, as cited in Delgadillo, 2015). The socioeconomically powerless have to endure higher costs of living, which in the long term denies them access to the city services. Moreover, if their livelihoods are permeated by the economics of informality, they face more risk of being excluded from renewed areas and experiencing increased pressure to migrate (Janoschka, 2002; López Morales, 2013, as cited in Delgadillo, 2015). The informality of the housing market leaves inhabitants of mesones defenceless in the face of landlords’ abusive practices and the dangers of eviction (Gunter & Massey, 2017).

As land and property changes hands on the speculative market, current inhabitants are financially excluded from participating in the regeneration of their neighbourhood. The capital and land that is required to enter this market is already under the control of a few (Rodríguez et al., 2018; Soares, 2011). Also, low-income populations with limited financial capacity to afford a house or access credit are not particularly interesting to big real estate agents. Instead, they look for opportunities that different gentrification dynamics can pose for maximizing profits and capturing value. This process implies local demographic recompositions linked to the segregation, exclusion or displacement of low-income city dwellers (Delgadillo, 2015; López-Morales et al., 2014). Gentrification stems from capital influencing the production of space; from capital identifying and settling where private appropriation of urban rent can be intensified to the maximum extent (López-Morales et al., 2014; Harvey, 2003, as cited in Rodríguez et al., 2018).
To include existing inhabitants in the future of the historic centre of San Salvador, balancing the needs of conflicting market dynamics, the state needs to play a role of mediator and facilitator. To invest and create regulations and policies to minimize the negative effects of the private expropriation of value that is collectively produced. In the absence of such mediation and facilitation, the wealth generated by the proposed urban development will inevitably be kept hostage in a few areas and even fewer hands, to benefit those who can afford access to it, while the marginalized majorities sink in poverty (Janoschka, 2002; Imilal et al., 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2018).

From the previous elaborations, to fight for the city as a human right in neoliberal cities seems unthinkable. Shifts in multiple structures and scales are necessary to revert cities’ instrumentalization for reproducing social, economic and political inequalities. The non-exploitative reproduction of goods and services that satisfy basic needs should be prioritized in the politics of urban development. Yet, those who do not represent the interests of real estate and financial capital are rarely considered decisive actors: they can be consulted, even participate in negotiations and discussion spaces, but almost never have the final decision on the actions of the state.

3. The emergence and evolution of housing cooperatives in El Salvador

The precarious housing of current inhabitants of the Historic Centre of San Salvador and the expanding gentrification effects of touristification, leave the people with only a few—but still transitable—paths to regain the grounds of the urban politics. Given that neoliberal cityscapes are not all the same across the world, social movements will also resort to different strategies, tactics and modes of political activism to claim back cities and housing as a human right. Among this wide myriad of rebellious unconfinements, the organizational and political experience of the housing cooperative movement from the Historic Centre of San Salvador is an interesting one to look at; it is an experience of ‘social production of habitat’ (Ortiz, 2012) that has been able to scale up.

The concept of social production of habitat refers to organized learning processes through which people become capable of managing resources, building and giving maintenance of their own habitat, as a practise of ‘endogenous development’ (idem: 73). This translates, in essence, into people producing housing and their surrounding territories to be protected and defended as human rights, because they contribute to the reproduction of individual and collective lives. Under this premise, I turn to analyse how housing cooperatives in San Salvador have managed to set a precedent in housing policy making and governance in a city threatened by touristification trends.

3.1 The birth of housing cooperatives in El Salvador

Mutual aid housing cooperatives (cooperativas de vivienda por ayuda mutua) emerged during the 1960s in Uruguay, from social movements enduring the repression of a military dictatorship. They transformed working-class families into agents of a new urban
configuration, capable of constructing their own houses and communities. Since then, the 
Ley Nacional de Vivienda (National Housing Act) has enabled them access to state funding and 
legal support. As a result, housing cooperatives turned into ‘a sort of floating device for social 
segments that, up to that moment, had only been capable of building themselves a house 
with their economic means, “individually”’ (Solanas, 2016: 478). After consolidating as a 
strong social movement in Uruguay, housing cooperatives exported their model to other 
Latin American countries with the support of international cooperation agencies. By the mid-
2000s, it reached Central America, arriving to El Salvador in 2004 (FUNDASAL, 2017).

With the technical assessment of FUNDASAL, an NGO that works with people from 
precarious settlements in the Central American region, cooperative organization has been 
promoted as an instrument of learning, resistance and advocacy. The model rests in the 
implementation of the following principles (FUNDASAL, 2017: 19):

(1) autonomous decision-making and management of resources through direct 
democracy;
(2) self-help systems that generate peer-to-peer learning and strengthen social cohesion;
(3) collective property as a mechanism for protecting tenure of land, housing and 
common spaces from commodifying interests; and
(4) technical assessment teams that share their knowledge and enhance the 
cooperatives’ constructive, organizational and administrative skills.

In February 2005, the first housing cooperative in the Historic Centre of San Salvador 
was born. It was not the first to be constituted in the country, but it was the first to face 
institutional opposition for positioning collective property as its tenancy regime 
(FUNDASAL, 2005b). Now, there are 21 housing cooperatives in El Salvador: four have 
already built their housing complexes, two of these being in the San Salvador’s Centro Histórico 
(see Figure 3). Their existence testifies to the model’s capability to solve housing 
precariousness with inhabitants leading the process.

From the construction of solidarity networks and a collectively defined agenda of claims 
and proposals, housing cooperatives have become a social movement of more than 700 
families nationwide, represented by their federative association, FESCOVAM. Constituted 
in July 2010, FESCOVAM advocates for state support and recognition of housing 
cooperatives as organizations that produce affordable and decent housing for their members.
Even so, the participation of housing cooperatives in the political discussion regarding the 
city centre’s revitalization has been disputed and was hard-earned.

3.2 The struggle against gentrification begins: housing cooperatives in the city centre

As Delgadillo (2015) indicates, the ethics of urban cultural heritage conservation relies 
on valuing heritage because it contributes to build collective identities and preserve a social 
memory that guides the future of communities or societies. However, the Historic Centre of 
San Salvador has seen political priority afforded to economic development over cultural 
conservation. In consequence, local authorities contribute to setting the conditions for
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gentrification to take place. At the same time, over 13 housing cooperatives have been constituted, gathering as of 2017 nearly 350 members from low-income households. A great majority of them are self-employed as either small commercial entrepreneurs or informal street vendors. Most have been inhabiting mesones for one or more generations and 70 per cent of the households are headed by women.

But how can people with no construction skills or professional training manage projects as complex as building houses? Two cooperatives now living in their self-built complexes were the first to prove it was possible. To get there, the cooperatives had to fight for their right to access urban land in the centre. One plot was purchased at a subsidized price after long negotiations with the Municipality, and the other was transferred through ‘acquisitive prescription’, while enduring eviction threats and harassment (Martínez, 2006). Acquisitive prescription is a legal action for transferring ownership rights for the ‘social purpose of property.’ It is one of the few legal mechanisms in El Salvador for reducing inequalities rooted in private property. Other strategies housing cooperatives used to influence municipalities include public demonstrations and peaceful occupation of public plots of idle land.

In 2008, the first five housing cooperatives from the centre created a platform for coordinating advocacy actions. One of its most important accomplishments was the creation of a census of underused public land within the centre. Cooperatives turned this instrument

Figure 3

Pictures of the two housing complexes built by housing cooperatives in the Historic Centre of San Salvador. They together house 61 low-income households who previously lived in mesones. Source: FUNDASAL
into a concrete proposal, presented to the State as a draft bill of land transfer in favour of housing cooperatives (FUNDASAL, 2005). It served to support future political discussions and even though the project was sidelined by Congress, the debate on how to scale up the housing cooperatives proposals to the level of public policy had already begun.

3.3 The revitalization programme of the city centre's housing through cooperative organization: a step forward

After years of campaigning, mobilizing against and lobbying central government institutions and other influential stakeholders, the housing cooperative movement had its first milestone victory in the policy-making field. In 2012, the city centre's housing cooperatives were placed at the core of a 12 million euro loan programme from Italian Cooperation Funds. The non-refundable loan was made to the Salvadoran State for the integral revitalization of San Salvador’s Centro Histórico, to be managed by the Vice Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (VMVDU, 2012). Initially, they were assigned a sum of nine million euros to develop housing cooperative complexes for 325 families (VMVDU, 2013), which was ratified in Congress in July 2013. But for the loan to proceed, additional legislative steps had to be taken. In April 2014, the Social, Economic and Cultural Requalification of the Historic Centre and its Housing Purpose programme reached the Special Treasury and Budget Commission and was approved for Plenary discussion (Verdict nº 271, 2014).

The gradual assimilation of the housing cooperative model by the state requires the implementation of two parallel challenging processes: (1) supporting the autonomy of FESCOVAM’s proposals as a social movement and (2) guaranteeing the implementation of the programme. Until today, the VMVDU and the National Fund for People’s Housing (FONAVIPO), a public financial institution, are still searching for mechanisms to support the cooperative model. For instance, the programme’s financial scheme would not be affordable for all families if subsidies were not guaranteed with state resources. Without subsidized loans at the disposal of housing cooperatives, several families would have to abandon the project.

Despite the VMVDU continuously requesting changes to many aspects of FESCOVAM’s initial programme proposal, the movement has been able to defend each one of its principles. Amidst the challenging circumstances, the movement and its alliances have advocated for alternative proposals that defend the model without allowing exceptions. The struggle to get the state’s commitment to transfer public land in favour of cooperatives evolved in a similar way: the original proposal of the movement was to consider the 2008 land census. However, from all listed plots, very few could be transferred before the beginning of the project due to the time-consuming procedures legally required for the transfer of property owned by public institutions. This identified and made evident the need to improve inter-institutional coordination to create a public land portfolio.

As a solution, a part of the programme’s funds were reoriented towards the acquisition of private land in the centre. For these properties to be transferred to housing cooperatives,
once again, a special act had to be passed by Congress in July 2018. The legislation for public land transfer and the stratified subsidy structure in favour of housing cooperatives was approved, by virtue of the relentless advocacy and lobbying of FESCOVAM and the people it represents (see Figure 4). The experience described above has been accomplished due to the strength of the housing cooperative movement at publicly demonstrating on behalf of their rightful claims for state support. Finally, the time for the state to promote social production of habitat has come – and housing cooperatives are ready to take the lead.

4. Conclusions and lessons: can alternatives have a space in the state policy framework?

The cultural heritage in the Historic Centre of San Salvador has been transformed into a commodity by governmental institutions, international cooperation agencies and private tourist-oriented enterprises. In this process, cultural consumption, vitality, urban marketing and economic competitiveness, among other aspects, have become important. That is why the centre has a strong potential of turning into a gentrified (touristified) battleground, where newcomers middle class consumers (international and domestic) arrive often but do not want to inhabit revalorized places, a similar story to what has happened in Mexico City.
(Delgadillo, 2015). In the Historic Centre of San Salvador, the conditions for this are being met, to the detriment of the low-income inhabitants living in deteriorating conditions.

In this context, the experience of housing cooperatives based in the Centro Histórico can be considered a landmark of resistance against neoliberal precarization of housing conditions for the lower classes. It has emerged from the people's refusing mesones as the only housing solution at their reach. In sum, they are positioning grassroots organizing, collective property and state policy support as elemental to the fight against one of neoliberalism’s dynamics of influencing the urban development: gentrification in favour of tourism (touristification). Allowing space for inhabitants’ participation in policy-making has enabled cooperatives to become firm opponents of informal rentiership and land underutilization. Results so far constitute an unprecedented attempt of developing adequate housing from a human right’s perspective, not as a commodity.

From the San Salvadoran cooperatives’ experiences to date, three key lessons are drawn which can inform alternative housing movements in other locations. First, the fact that the housing cooperative movement defines autonomously its own political agenda is revealed as a key strategy that strengthens the social cohesion of the movement from the inside. Nevertheless, as Htun Lat et al. (2016: 18) highlight, ‘participation [that] has been included in policy-making processes by the state often ignores issues of power or the tensions between collective and individual roles in processes of participation that are crucial to social movements.’ This means that, in coordinating with the state, the housing cooperative movement is at risk of disrespecting their internal mechanisms of horizontal democracy. That is a key aspect connecting leaders with their bases; thus, they should not neglect its importance. When overlooked, a sense of disbelief on the work done by the organization and its leaders might discourage participation or even fragment the movement.

Secondly, under neoliberal control of production and access to housing, opposing the hegemony of private property and defending the collectivization of tenure as an alternative is not an easy challenge to take up. It requires the legal and institutional systems to enable a firmer recognition of collective or cooperative property. This protects housing from being commodified, safeguarding its value as a human right due to the role it plays in providing shelter, as a secure environment for families, and as a means of reproducing life in community. Here, gentrification dynamics find no fertile opportunities for development. As it is pointed out by Imilan et al. (2016: 185) from the uprooting of the individual dream of owning a house, other property alternatives can take place and protect people from eviction risks. In the case of San Salvador’s Centro Histórico particularly, collective property also becomes an instrument of preventing peripheralization or relocation of inhabitants in further segregated places. Where housing cooperatives decide to locate matters, as location plays an important role in either increasing or reducing inequality of access to the city centre’s services.

Third, if territorial policy and regulatory frameworks are effective in controlling exclusion processes triggered by gentrification (and other processes derived from neoliberal urban dynamics), alternative counter proposals should certainly have plenty of space. Anyhow, to rethink why the private sector is able to capture value generated by urban
Interventions, from a policy perspective that sees over public investments, should be discussed. In that sense, the revitalization programme for the Historic Centre represents a very important and transformative step in terms of housing policy in El Salvador. It is a product of policy experimentation, discussion and design that defends a concept of housing as human right. It also implies the social and institutional redistribution of roles, co-responsibilities and benefits of a housing production that does not align with neoliberal developmental visions. This includes the recognition of housing cooperatives as an important agent in local/territorial development processes. Its existence sets a precedent for Central America on how to support housing production systems that do not benefit the interests of real estate and financial capitals.

Whilst the neoliberal paradigm of individualism and private property prevails, building community and practising solidarity might be difficult for the movement when times of urban precarization and insecurity are critical. All in all, the programme is still suffering from continuous delays in its implementation. Ideological clarity, solidarity and political autonomy must be cultivated so that the housing cooperative movement transforms, step by step, San Salvador’s Centro Histórico into a territory developed by and for its inhabitants. The cooperatives’ creativity for campaigning, lobbying and displaying resistance has been demonstrated, as much as their ability to far exceed the expectations.

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