

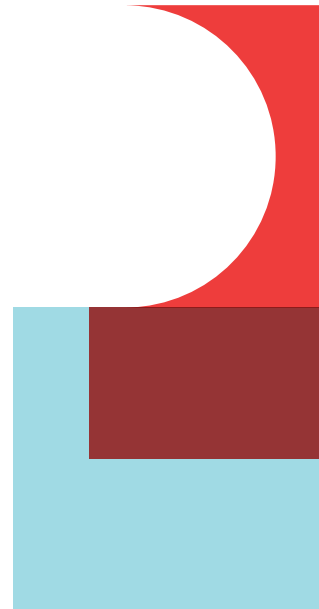
Evolution of the housing cooperative model in Brussels

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This paper focuses on the evolution of the housing cooperative model in Brussels to date through the stories of inhabitants of the garden city of 'Le Logis'.

Three dimensions are discussed in this chapter: organisational, spatial and social. The organisational dimension is defined by the modes of production, the legal framework in which they operate and the modes of governance. The spatial dimension corresponds to the criteria of establishment in the territory, the produced urban forms, the collective spaces and urban diversity. The social dimension is the analysis of the relations of inhabitants with each other, the neighbourhood, the city and the territory at large.

Finally, this history will be compared with the current situation in Brussels and existing alternatives for managing urban space and housing.



Context: a short history of Brussels housing cooperatives

In Belgium, the cooperative movement developed in the aftermath of the First World War. It contributed significantly to the reconstruction effort. Let us remember that at the end of the Great War, the housing shortage was estimated to be between 200,000 and 300,000 units, a figure that testifies not only to the particularly acute nature of the question of housing as it was posed at that time, but also the parallel that can be made with the situation that prevails today, a century later.

In 1918, under the pressure of the nascent socialist movement, the government took the initiative to create the National Housing Company, or SNHBM (law of October 11, 1919). Its goal was to lend low-rate (2.75%) long-term (66 years) funding to local construction companies, thus facilitating the emergence of associations working to fill the housing gap.¹ Many of these local societies were cooperatives, a form of association that appeared in London in 1888. The daily newspaper *Le Soir* of 29 April 1922, stated: 'These societies are founded thanks to the cooperative action of their effective members who, while proposing to occupy the dwellings built by them, participate, moreover, in the formation of their social capital. In other words, the tenants, members of these companies, are at the same time co-owners of the buildings built by them ... Tenant cooperative societies are usually formed among groups of people with certain professional, corporate or other affinities.' The fixing of the minimum social share at a very low rate favoured access of low-income cooperative applicants, while public authorities took part in the capital of the enterprise at the rate of 20% for the state and 20% for the province, as payment for war damage.

In April 1920, the Union of Cities organized a National Affordable Housing Conference, in which most architects and planners of the modernist movement participated. This conference would define the theoretical framework

1. Eggericx, L. and Hanosset, Y. (2003) *Les cités-jardins : le Logis et Floréal*, Bruxelles: Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Direction des monuments et des sites, p. 5.

for the national housing policy. Faced with problems of hygiene and proximity generated by collective housing, the National Society favoured the model of garden cities recommended by modernists.

Garden cities were for Brussels and the whole country a great adventure. The construction of 21 garden cities or districts was undertaken at the green edge of the dense city. Even more than Howard's theories, ideas propagated by Unwin influenced the post-war movement of garden cities in Belgium. He had a community-centred concept of space that was to express cooperation and participation as much as possible. It was not just about housing the poor; it was necessary, more fundamentally, to insert them into social life by providing neighbourhoods with a system of collective spaces and common facilities included in the construction programme from the very beginning of the project: a network of planted paths and collective spaces in the interior of a block, a civic centre, a multipurpose room, a school, a library, a sports infrastructure, or a centre for physical and moral education.²

This cooperative spirit was killed by politics. Starting in 1923, governments no longer approved new societies which, according to authorities of that time, socialist and liberal alike, promoted the emergence of revolutionary ideas. In 1925, the fear of a red belt around Brussels and the cessation of payment of war damages stopped the creation of new garden cities. Subsequently, the garden cities were blamed for urban sprawl and lack of investment in the city centre. Speaking of 'Le Logis' and 'Floréal', Van der Swaelmen said, 'Here, or anywhere, in Belgium, we do not create a garden city proper, but we make the extension of methodical city, organic urbanization, in the form of neighbourhood gardens'. The ideas of the modernists would evolve gradually, as they abandoned the garden city and the collective construction of an ecological balance between city and country and instead promoted construction in height and the 'existenzminimum' theory. Housing, which had become collective, should

².
Ibid., p. 17.



↑
Simone's first dwelling at Le Logis
(source: author)

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Simone's second dwelling at Le Logis
(source: author)



only be used for basic functions because the new ways of life and the techniques developed should allow families to leave their homes as much as possible to spend time outdoors and in nature. This type of provision, however, deprived the inhabitants of the direct contact of the street and by the same token of community living.

At the legal level, the overhaul of the social rental system led to no longer allowing heirs to access the estates of coop-owners, which profoundly changed the living project cooperatives made possible. This was compounded by an evolution of company law which saw cooperatives as commercial companies and as having a market function, and which only very indirectly conveyed the idea of cooperation in law. This not only led to the proliferation of cooperative societies whose functioning was in no way related to cooperative entrepreneurship, but also, and more important, resulted in many experiences of grouped or supportive housing based on principles and values of cooperation that did not adopt legal status because it was considered too unfavourable.

Meeting with five inhabitants of 'Le Logis'

'Le Logis' and 'Floréal' in Watermael-Boitsfort were the largest group of affordable housing units built between the two wars. The cooperative 'Le Logis' was founded on 3 October 1921. It was initiated by banking sector employees mostly from the 'Caisse d'Epargne', with 225 cooperators. 'Floréal' was founded by typographers of the newspaper *Le Peuple*. The two cooperatives made the decision to design the two sets as a whole. The landscaping plan was designed by landscape architect Louis Van der Swaelem and the architectural design was made by architect Jean-Jules Eggericx.

This article examines the model of cooperatives and the evolution of 'Le Logis'. The research was conducted in an exploratory framework and is based on a small sample of five inhabitants' testimonies. This paper describes experiences reported in the course of three interviews. Simone was the first to be interviewed, born in Watermael-Boitsfort in 1946. At the time, the cooperative societies themselves took steps to find new cooperators



↑↑
Simone's third dwelling at Le Logis
(source: author)

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Simone's last dwelling at Le Logis
(source: author)

and her family was awarded housing at the garden city 'Le Logis' in 1952. Her mother was a housewife and her father worked as a bookkeeper in Anderlecht. Their house was in the triangle of the Avenue des Sylphes.

Arriving at 'Le Logis', Simone's family included two children and added another a year later. At 18, Simone left 'Le Logis' to study in the centre of Brussels. At the end of her studies, after getting married, she registered with her husband and daughter to obtain housing in 'Le Logis' cooperative. Their apartment was in the building on Avenue Van der Swaelmen built in 1969.

In 1971, when their second child was born, they got a house on Rue des Courlis. Today, Simone lives in an apartment in the 'Les Trois Tilleuls' building. When her children left, she found herself alone and returned to an apartment because the workload of maintaining a house was too heavy and she did not see the utility of occupying an empty house. Her youngest daughter had gotten an apartment and had just had a baby. Hence, they could simply exchange homes.

The second interview was with Marc. He became a cooperator in 1976. Since then, he has been a tenant of a house on Avenue des Sylphes where he raised his three children. Marc has been a member of the Logis Board of Directors for 25 years and has chaired it for the past five years.

The third interview was with three Logis residents, the sisters Marie and Suzanne and their friend Michèle. Marie and Suzanne have lived in Le Logis since they were born, in 1947 and 1950 respectively. Marie lived from 1972 to 1980 in an apartment, then moved to her current home. Suzanne lived for 44 years in her parents' house and currently lives in an apartment. Michèle was born on Rue du Pinson in 1952. After a few years in Africa, her family moved to Le Logis on Rue du Friquet. She got married to her neighbour and they moved in together on Rue d'Ortolan. After two years and the birth of their first son, they moved to an apartment above a bookstore. Upon their second son's birth, they got the house in which they still live today, on Avenue des Tritons.

Three-dimensional analysis

Combining the story of the inhabitants with theoretical research serves the three dimensions of my research.

The first dimension is the organisational dimension. Le Logis is similar to tenant cooperatives in Brussels. They were formed in the 1920s by members who wanted to become stakeholders in a housing construction company. This mechanism offered the possibility to outsiders such as private investors or public operators to participate in the development of the project. Legally, cooperatives were thus akin to traditional societies in which shareholders could participate more actively in the management of the company. All cooperators had the right to vote at general meetings and appoint the directors, who were mainly tenants. Since the regionalization and implementation of the housing code, cooperatives, under the supervision of Belgian regional governments, have been subject to the same rules of allocation of social housing. This has undoubtedly influenced the decrease in tenants' commitment to cooperative values. When a set of houses was constructed, the future inhabitants could choose in which house they would live. Homes were reserved for families with children, to create a fulfilling environment for families. To become a cooperator, one had to buy 150 shares of 100 'francs belges' per share regardless of the surface area of the house. With the changeover to the euro, the conversion was 150 shares of €2.48. Rent was calculated according to income: a standard rent was established, which could be reduced or increased depending on the family's financial situation. At the time, the profits of the cooperative made it possible to create places of education, culture and sports activities in the neighbourhood. The first school Simone attended was the cooperative's Les Aigrettes nursery school. Marie, Suzanne and Michèle went to the Institut de l'Assomption St Thérèse.

Before the creation of the Brussels region in 1989, cooperators of the second generation still had the privilege of priority access to housing provided that their incomes were below a certain level. Today, Le Logis is subject to the rules of allocation of social housing and its members



'Venelles', alleys
(source: author)

La Ferme du Chant des Cailles
(source: author)



therefore no longer have the freedom to perform this kind of procedure. In mentioning this, Simone observed, 'I could never have lived in Watermael-Boitsfort if I had not been at Le Logis. I have wonderful childhood memories in this neighbourhood. I raised my children in Le Logis. I thought it was great to have a house, a small garden and all the infrastructure of Watermael-Boitsfort. Subsequently, I did not find it logical to occupy a three-bedroom house while families were waiting'.

The second dimension is the spatial dimension. Like other garden cities in Brussels, Le Logis respected the star-shaped plan advocated by Verwilghen and lay on the outskirts of the city (until it got absorbed by urban development). Garden cities were connected to the city by rail, tram or bus. Van der Swaelmen's development plan exploited the resources of the highly irregular terrain and fragmented it into a series of differentiated units whose landscaping was based on an extremely complex hierarchy of public and private spaces. The private gardens were arranged around a common area where sometimes sandboxes or playgrounds were installed. The garden city's central space, where all collective activities the retail spaces were organized, was Le Fer à Cheval building.

According to Simone, the street of Rue des Trois Tilleuls was also famous for its many shops and Le Studio Logis. This is where the locals went to run their errands and for festivities – it was the meeting point of the neighbourhood. These spaces belonged to the cooperative and were rented to shopkeepers. In her childhood, Simone knew the cooperative shop where inhabitants could use food stamps. There were also street vendors, such as L'Union économique, which passed in a horse-drawn carriage. Simone recalled, 'When the horse was passing, everyone went out to pick up these droppings and put them in their rose gardens'. Today, most businesses have disappeared, but the building themselves still have some functions, including the neighbourhood house of the garden cities and the Social Cohesion Project.

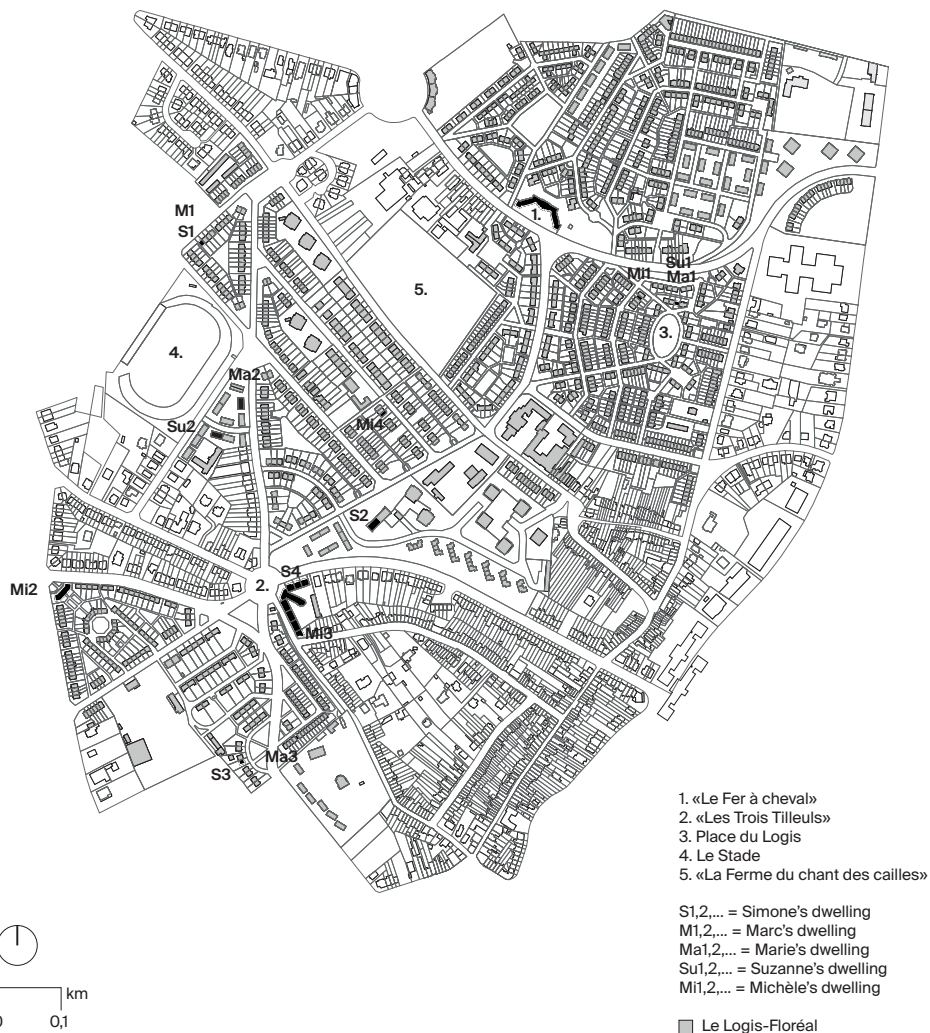
For Marie, Suzanne and Michèle, the Place du Logis was also one of the main meeting places for their part of the garden city. They used to play in the tunnels

that had been dug under the square during the war. The stadium and the music academy are also mentioned in the testimonies as meeting places. Over the years, local commerce has gradually disappeared as well as most activities organized by the cooperative.

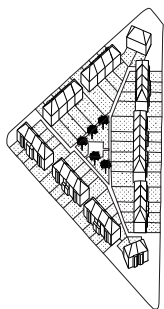
Finally, the last dimension is the social dimension. During her childhood Simone's relationship to the city was minor. Later, she worked in different municipalities of Brussels and made daily trips to the city by tram or bike. According to her, owing to urban expansion, such connections have intensified and inhabitants do more of their shopping in the city. This urban sprawl is perceived as partly responsible for the partial loss of the community spirit that prevailed in the city during her childhood. An interesting element is that residents, throughout their lives in the cooperative, could obtain housing adapted to different family situations. This puts into question the current conditions to which cooperatives are subjected for the allocation of housing. Having their own workers is yet another social benefit for cooperatives. Many gardeners, painters, plumbers and other craftsmen work daily for the cooperatives. Today, Simone, Marie and Marc find the cooperative spirit in the project La Ferme du Chant des Cailles, which they joined at its inception. La Ferme du Chant des Cailles is a sustainable food and urban ecological and participatory farming project born in 2012 in the heart of Le Logis. Since the beginning, it has been managed jointly by residents and professional farmers whose various activities are grouped together as a non-profit association under the name La Ferme du Chant des Cailles. Its future, however, is threatened by the city's densification. This situation echoes the way my research questions the place of commons in the city. It raises the question of the management of these commons, of the balance between city and countryside, and alternatives to current market dynamics.

What future for housing cooperatives?

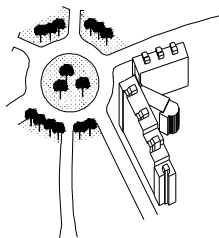
Today, as in the past, Brussels faces significant demographic pressure throughout the metropolitan area. How can the quality of its environment be either maintained or improved for everyone in spite of this



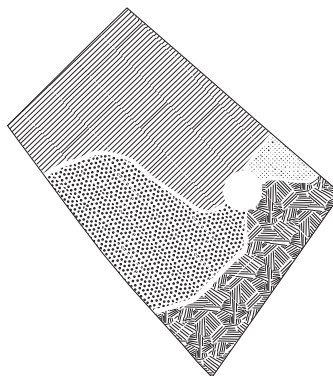
A. Common spaces in garden centres



B. The square of «Les Trois Tilleuls»



C. La Ferme du Chant des Cailles



inevitable densification? At the metropolitan scale, this implies producing urban development capable of including social and cultural diversity and giving the population access to a city both dense and open. This also implies defining density differently by testing new formulas of common spaces within collective housing projects in order to break with the classic definition of individualized square metres/unit of surface.

The production of collective housing in Brussels is the initiative of two main public organs. The first is the Housing Corporation of the Brussels Capital Region (SLRB). It is a regional institution in charge of social housing that recognizes and controls the different public service real estate companies (SISP). SISPs are public limited companies or cooperatives whose capital is predominantly owned by public authorities. Their mission is to provide people who meet the conditions of admission with social housing and to care for the housing's daily management (purchase, remodelling, renovation). They manage over 39,000 social housing units in the Brussels Capital Region. Before the sixth state reform, the region had 33 SISPs, including the 11 cooperatives described in this paper. Today, they have merged into 18 companies.

The second public organ is the Development Corporation for the Brussels Capital Region (Citydev). Its mission is to produce new housing for middle-income residents in neighbourhoods characterized by a deficit in residential construction with the aim of maintaining or bringing back residents to the region. These different housing projects are realized through a partnership between the public and the private sectors.

In addition to these two main organisations, the housing offer also includes the housing services of each municipality, 'Le Fonds du Logement' and Social Housing Agencies (AIS). The Housing Fund of the Brussels Capital Region is a cooperative society created in 1989 by the family movement, namely 'La Ligue des Familles' and the 'Gezinsbond' following the regionalization of housing policy. The fund pursues missions of public utility and thus offers households with medium or modest incomes mortgages, construction/renovation-sale operations,

rental aid, or regional loans to provide a rental guarantee. AIS act as intermediaries between owners and tenants. It is aimed at households in a precarious situation or with low income.

However, the growing demand is difficult to meet. If only the documented demand is considered, about 65,000 households are on one (or more) waiting list(s) to rent or buy public housing. In addition, it becomes difficult for regional operators of homes to acquire land at a reasonable price in Brussels.³ That is why, for several years, in order to cope with the housing crisis or as an alternative to living in an individualistic society, many initiatives have promoted a form of cooperation or community.

One form of initiative is group housing, which exists in different forms. Brussels examples include the '123' building occupied by some 60 people thanks to a precarious occupation agreement; 'La Poudrière', a self-managed community formed in 1958; and 'Brutopia', a cohousing project inaugurated in 2013 by 84 inhabitants. Another form is the community land trust, a home ownership model for low-income households founded in the United States in the 1960s. The CLT model considers land a common good that must be preserved, protected against speculation, and managed by the community for the community's well-being. The Community Land Trust Brussels (CLTB) is currently fully subsidized by the region, meaning its flexibility is severely restricted.

The following map shows the 11 Brussels cooperatives created at two specific moments in history; the first ones after the First World War, between September 1921 and August 1922, and the remaining ones after the Second World War, between April 1949 and September 1950. They are located on the outskirts of the Brussels Capital Region.

On the map, the black dots represent cohousing projects and the white squares represent planned or actual CLTs. It is interesting to note that both are located in the urban revitalization area ('ZRU'). Most of these projects were

3. PRDD, Plan Régional de Développement Durable, version approuvée par le gouvernement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale en date du 12 juillet 2018.



made possible by grants from the region. Indeed, within this area, Brussels supports municipalities that acquire real estate and make it suitable for housing, promote green spaces, grant a premium for the beautification of facades, etc. This raises the possibility of developing a larger cooperative project in other parts of the region.

Given these initiatives and its history, the cooperative model seems to have the potential to produce new structures for collective living. Yet in Brussels, because of new restrictions such as no longer allowing heirs to access the states of coop-owners and the legal framework surrounding them, the model is no longer chosen as an innovative alternative. In Switzerland, on the other hand, there has been a renewed interest in the cooperative model over the past 20 years, and today 20% of the Swiss population lives in a cooperative. The model is also widely developed in Canada and Italy, whose housing cooperatives are based on the same model but are nonetheless diverse and have experienced a growing eclecticism over time. In Brussels, we find them today either in the form of tenant cooperatives or building/renovation cooperatives, but in both cases, they are investor and not user cooperatives.⁴

Autonomy as a condition for an alternative

The cooperative is seen here as a 'third way' of housing production, between the private market and the public market, between the acquisitive market and the rental housing market, and – as the research suggests – it could meet the needs of the metropolitan territory of Brussels, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The historical and ethnographic analysis carried out in this paper raises several elements relating to the three dimensions of research.

First, concerning the organisational dimension, the research hypothesis is that cooperatives allow for access to and regulation of the real estate market. Cooperatives have the capacity, as the third way between the public market and the private market,

4. Bernard, N., De Pauw, G. and Géronnez, L. (2010) 'Coopératives de logement et Community Land Trusts', *courriers hebdomadaires du CRISP*, 28 (2073), 5-52, p. 21.

to overcome current market laws. The cooperatives' benefits for common needs can be reinvested in spaces other than housing. The difficulty for tenants of current cooperatives in Brussels is that they are constrained by the rules of the Housing Code in terms of social housing. The future inhabitants do not choose to become cooperators, which can impact their future investment in their management. Another element that seems to play a role in the cooperators' investment is the fact that their heirs no longer have any advantage. Finally, in the current system, the tenant of a cooperative no longer has a very different status from that of a typical tenant. This difference is mainly at the level of governance: the system of one person one vote allows all inhabitants to invest in decision-making and the election of administrators. Here, too, the research reveals a lack of investment by the cooperators. The question that arises is therefore whether to give cooperatives more flexibility even if they are partially subsidized by the region.

Second, concerning the spatial dimension, the research hypothesis is that cooperatives require that city spaces be redefined as common spaces. The inhabitants' relationship to the neighbourhood, city and territory is modified. At issue is finding spaces that could accommodate new cooperatives in light of the land pressure affecting Brussels territory. Especially, this model becomes interesting as soon as the number of inhabitants is sufficiently important. Provision of subsidies by the region to entities outside the urban revitalization area ('ZRU') should perhaps be considered in this case.

Third, concerning the social dimension, research supports the hypothesis that cooperation allows for inclusion of a greater range of social groups. This is because members are shareholders, which awakens a sense of involvement and responsibility in relation to the environment, and, compared to the acquisitive system, cooperatives offer the possibility of shifting the distribution of housing as families evolve. This inclusion is also achieved through the mix of functions cooperatives offer. Eventually, through its common management the cooperative makes it possible to create jobs that meet the community's needs. The difficulty, which seems to affect Brussels cooperatives,

is to maintain the cooperative spirit after several generations. It seems that only first or second generation inhabitants maintained it.

Finally, this analysis highlights three main elements of research. The first relates to the management autonomy and flexibility that cooperatives can obtain in the Brussels context. The second relates to the land space available to accommodate projects of this magnitude. The third concerns the maintenance of the cooperative spirit over time.

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