

La Fábrica, Argentina

La Fábrica is a refurbished factory building converted into affordable cooperative housing in central Buenos Aires. It incorporates 50 duplex homes, two multipurpose rooms, and a commercial space. Adhering to MOI's collaborative production model, the complex was designed and produced between three groups: La Fábrica housing cooperative, the construction work cooperative 'Casa Base' and MOI's interdisciplinary professional team.



Submitting organisation: Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI)

Type of organisation: Civil Society Organisation

Key elements of the project:

- **Cooperative Spirit and History**

MOI has a strong history in the country, with several housing developments. It also has a well-established profile in pushing for regulatory change. Its efforts resulted in the introduction of a new law (Law 341), leading to cooperatives like La Fábrica being built.

- **Affordable Housing and Self-Management**

La Fabrica provides affordable homes for 150 people on low incomes, who are members of the cooperative. They manage the maintenance of the structure and common spaces.

- **Innovative Design Elements**

The design retained and reused materials from the existing building where possible. It maximises natural light and ventilation, has green spaces and other features that promote eco-friendly living and enhance residents' quality of life.

What inspires us ...

This holistic project combines improved architecture with community empowerment, specifically through training and leadership positions for women. The focus is on open-source knowledge and easily accessible materials to tackle the urgent issue of resilience against natural disasters, which will become more and more pressing in the future. The project builds on previously awarded initiatives, showing adaption, broadening scale and increased impact.

Introduction

La Fábrica is a housing cooperative project in Barracas, central Buenos Aires, providing 50 good quality, attractive, spacious and affordable homes for 150 people. 40% of residents live under the poverty line and suffer from welfare cuts and the consequences of high inflation. This project allows them to live centrally in the city and access secure, high-quality housing.

The project also focuses on building residents' capacity and fostering a sense of community and integration with the neighbourhood. La Fábrica would not have been possible without MOI's historical work on changing legal frameworks, which now ensure citizens' rights to housing and to the city.

Context

Today Barracas is a centre for urban renewal, with housing for those on middle- and high-incomes. The city's Self-Managed Housing Programme, launched in 2000 and implemented through Law 341, is a legal framework that provides loans for housing construction and renovation for people on low incomes. Its establishment fuelled a cooperative movement aimed at improving access to land and housing that has led to the creation of 45 housing cooperatives in the city to date.

The Programme has faced many difficulties over the past 24 years: social welfare cuts, inflation and devaluation have hit the most vulnerable households hardest thus creating more demand for affordable housing, whilst successive local and national governments have challenged funding for the Programme.

Project Description

La Fábrica was originally a textile manufacturing complex, and you can still see the old structure of the building on the outer perimeter. However, internally the building has an entirely new format. There are two shared recreational courtyards, one in the middle of the complex and the other leading to the street. A multipurpose room and commercial space also link La Fábrica to its surrounding neighbourhood. The construction of the homes themselves are duplex on duplex, with 50 units of 2, 3 or 4 bedrooms and each has a private patio and double height living space.

Construction started in 2007 and 150 residents moved in in 2017. The original group has not changed to date.

The project promotes self-management in habitat and the optimisation of public resources. The principles of La Fábrica include:

- daily **participatory involvement** of collectively organised residents in materialising their rights to the City, to Habitat and to Housing,
- non-profit **housing development**, considering it a public good, not a commodity,

- **collaboration** between the housing cooperative, work cooperative and MOI's interdisciplinary professional team,
- generation of **dignified paid labour** based on the values of solidarity and horizontality,
- **mutual aid**, a systematic contribution of future residents that builds responsibility and collective awareness, covering labour costs, building skills and enhancing income generation,
- **collective property** that creates security of tenure, as an alternative to traditional real estate focused on profit.
- promoting the **right to beauty** as an urban-architectural concept, antagonistic to traditional "small and ugly" social housing.

Organisation implementing the project

MOI (Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos) started its work in the 1980s, inspired by (among others) the experience of FUCVAM (Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Help Housing Cooperatives), one of the most iconic examples of Self-Managed Cooperatives in the world.

MOI works to promote self-management in habitat in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, in order to transform capitalist society. Its comprehensive approach, based on a cooperative model, includes access to decent housing but also education, health, professional interdisciplinary support and decent working conditions.

Since the beginning, MOI has worked closely with national universities. This collaboration grew from the occupation movement of the 1980s and 1990s, when universities helped squatters secure the right to the city and become regularised by forming cooperatives.

In the 1990s MOI created SELVIHP, the Latin American Secretariat for Housing and Popular Habitat. The Secretariat promotes, supports and builds capacity in other organisations to develop and replicate self-managed housing cooperatives throughout the continent.

MOI's advocacy and organising work over two decades paid off. It resulted in a constitutional and legal framework for the promotion of self-managed habitat policies in the city of Buenos Aires (Article 31 and Law 341), and the creation of the Housing Institute of the City which oversees its implementation. The historic Law 341 is the first legal recognition of self-managed processes in the country. Straight after the implementation of Law 341, 118 plots were acquired with government funding and the support of MOI. Of these, some have been developed (such as La Fábrica), others are currently in development, and others have not started.

Even though Law 341 made it possible to scale up dramatically, MOI was already involved in developing cooperatives, for example 'La Union' housing cooperative. MOI affiliates 10 cooperatives for 210 households in Buenos Aires and +500 across the country.

MOI has also been instrumental in creating legal frameworks in other provinces (Tierra del Fuego, Neuquén, Santa Fe).

Since 2016 they have pushed for national legislation on securing the right to housing, involving other actors and social organisations - creating a Collective for Popular Habitat.

Aims and Objectives

The project aims to offer an alternative to decent housing outside the profit-driven approach, which excludes people on middle and low incomes and denies their right to the city. The approach goes beyond housing and promotes access to employment, the right to beauty and collective organisation. Developed as a response to inequality and capitalism, it also offers an alternative to the inadequate, alienating features of traditional social housing – small, unattractive, remote, and with no participation of residents.

Residents of La Fábrica are from low-income households. A survey conducted in 2018 among residents showed that 40% were living under the poverty line, but this has likely increased since the COVID pandemic. Interestingly, La Fábrica collaborates with nearby *neuropsychiatric* hospitals, as part of a wider re-integration programme for patients. Three current residents come from that programme.

Although La Fábrica was completed in 2017, MOI continues to work with self-organised groups across the country to expand its activities, with the wider aim of creating policy and legislation that enable similar cooperatives.

Key Features

There are three main actors involved in MOI's collaborative production model: the Housing Cooperative, the Work Cooperative, and the Interdisciplinary Professional Team. These actors collaborate and reach agreements non-hierarchically. Linking skilled labour, the provision of machines and tools, professional work, and self-help work not only improves participants' skills, it also consolidates the collective process and optimizes public resources.

Housing Cooperative Model

Prospective residents get to know MOI through word of mouth, or via community-based organisations. There is no specific focus or criteria for participation, only housing need. Residents in MOI's projects are majority female but social mixing is preferred when forming groups.

Interested parties approach the organisation and begin an 'integration process'. This is structured in three steps: entry, training and pre-cooperative. Once completed, members access an existing cooperative, or a new one is formed. This process usually takes between nine months to a year.

The first task for a newly formed cooperative is to obtain access to land. For this, three committees are formed: 1) participation, 2) contributions and 3) mutual aid. Once land is secured, the cooperative enters the execution stage. At this point two more committees are incorporated: 4) purchase and 5)

construction. Members are both quantitatively and qualitatively evaluated during these processes, to measure attendance, involvement and commitment.

Collective Ownership

The issue of collective ownership is discussed from the outset, and its various aspects - economic, legal, security of tenure, cultural, psychosocial (fears) - are widely debated during training. When the time comes to form a constitution, each cooperative decides whether to follow an individual or collective ownership model. MOI encourages the latter where the cooperative remains the owner of the whole and each household constitutes a user.

The shift towards collective ownership is deeply challenging to dominant culture. Developed gradually through collaborative construction practices, it embodies indigenous reclamation of ancestral communal property and requires interaction and negotiation with the state, in a process of institutional transformation.

The cooperative, through its committees, defines the work plan for the maintenance of common spaces and the structure, deciding what can be dealt with by mutual aid and what needs to be outsourced and to whom, etc.

Due to their participation in the building phase, and the construction, organisational and community skills they have acquired, members have ownership of the space and are familiar with its structure and materials.

Innovation

- **Access to central land.** The land, in a central and sought-after area of Buenos Aires, was acquired in the year 2,000 when land prices were at a historic low. La Fábrica was just one amongst many other buildings abandoned due the challenging soio-political environment. The recently created Law 341 meant that financing was suddenly available for these kinds of initiatives in Buenos Aires. Having already established a cooperative next to La Fábrica, MOI was able to make direct contact with the owners who were enthusiastic about the proposal.
- **Renovation of existing property.** The original character of the building promoted an innovative design that not only enabled the original essence and materials to be retained and reused, but also encouraged the mixing of old and new, private and shared spaces. The cooperative developed techniques to reuse materials, and replicate traditional ones, techniques that MOI has used in other projects. Other renovation projects with similar characteristics (but supported by other organisations) exist, including [Complejo Monteaquedo](#), previously recognised by the World Habitat Awards.

- **Collaboration between different stakeholders.** Residents are involved from inception and collaborate with the work cooperative who provide qualified labour, machines and tools when works begin. The Interdisciplinary Professional Team provide support throughout the process, assisting in social, architectural, legal and accounting areas.

Funding

The total cost of the project was \$1.5 million USD, spread over 10 years. The majority was covered by a loan provided by the City of Buenos Aires, following Law 341.

The law determines that the City must transfer financial resources to community-based organisations, for three purposes:

- 1- Land acquisition: the City Housing Institute requires that once the land is found, a proposal is presented to be verified and approved for its viability according to the urban code.
- 2- Execution: the complete architectural project is sent to the City Housing Institute along with documentation, calculations and a budget for financial approval. Once approved, the cooperative receives 15% of the total budget to begin work, and the remaining resources are disbursed as work progresses.
- 3- Interdisciplinary professional support. In this case it was provided by MOI's own team. The City Housing Institute has a list of approved technical teams for this role, which includes MOI.

The loan term for the project was 30 years with a 0% interest rate. Residents only pay the capital of the loan, plus any maintenance costs as agreed by the cooperative, which is currently \$5 USD per month. The law allows these funds to be paid individually or to be pooled, according to the number of members that make up a cooperative and their preference.

Impact

Financial

The production cost for each unit was the equivalent of \$30,000 USD covered by the loan, plus \$2,000 USD of savings provided by residents, plus the mutual aid labour (with an estimated value of 8 to 12% of total costs). This means a cost of \$358 USD per square meter, compared to \$1,500 to \$2,000 USD per square metre for equivalent properties in the area. The loan amounts were set in local currency and are not updated with the changes in currency value in relation to USD.

The self-management approach impacts multiple dimensions of residents' daily lives. In addition to having access to an adequate and beautiful home with security of tenure, the production model develops skills through mutual aid and job creation. The Casa Base work cooperative employs around 80 workers, mostly residents from MOI's cooperatives.

Casa Base was formed by MOI in 2003 to promote the self-help model. It covers different areas, with construction and education being the most developed. The construction department includes vocational workers and architects and promotes the cooperative self-help model, although it has also developed projects in the private sector.

For La Fábrica, having its own dedicated construction cooperative has provided greater flexibility to address the needs and challenges of the development where needed.

Social

The organisational processes in the La Fábrica development have contributed to the creation of:

- a nursery, which since 2005 has provided early years education for the neighbourhood, with more than 500 children passing through its classrooms,
- a community baccalaureate for young people and adults (over 100 women and young people completed their secondary studies),
- a community integration programme (over 10 neuropsychiatric hospital outpatients joined MOI cooperatives)
- a transitional housing programme, where households gain first-hand experience of cooperative coexistence in a non-profit rental.

Environmental

- The project reused the building's original structure, incorporating the new construction into the existing one. The metal structure was moved to avoid the purchase of new materials.
- New slabs were replicas of the original brick vault slabs.
- Homes have been built with double walls and an air chamber to provide good insulation. This allows houses to stay naturally cool in summer without the need for air conditioning and reduces heat loss in winter, minimising the use of heating with an estimated 30 to 60% energy saving in the home.
- Skylights in each home maximise natural light during most of the day and throughout the year.

Learning, evaluation, and recognition

The project has been evaluated in diverse ways:

Internally, MOI carried out systematic and regular evaluations with their interdisciplinary team starting with the formation of the cooperative and during construction. The data gathered looked at participation of members, management of finance, mutual aid provision, work progression, assemblies, etc. It aims to strengthen the ability for self-management and produces simple indicators of family situations, the main economic aspects of cooperative life, and progress of work.

Externally, La Fábrica has been evaluated with other MOI projects, not on its own.

In 2013, MISEREOR (one of MOI's funders) evaluated MOI's cooperatives, including La Fábrica, looking at the self-help cooperative model's social, personal and group skills aspects.

In 2018, Johns Hopkins University carried out a survey to look at living conditions in cooperatives in receipt of funding from Law 341, which included La Fábrica. It analysed various aspects of residents' daily life, their organisational capacity for administration, management and maintenance of the buildings, their relationship with the neighbourhood and development as citizens. It developed indicators of costs, quality and access to urban infrastructure.

During the pandemic, the University of Buenos Aires conducted interviews as part of a project looking at how care and support among families benefitted from organisational skills development acquired. The results were shared with policymakers and MOI uses them in their workshops and strategies.

Conclusions from the evaluations and lessons learned

- Resistance and lack of knowledge of the public bodies involved have proven to be significant obstacles. For example, the regulating body for cooperatives ignores or hinders the exercise of free choice for collective property. As a result, cooperatives face bureaucratic obstacles before they can obtain registration. Although regulation exists, this tends to be ignored. In the same way, it took the local body responsible for Law 341 years to obtain the permissions that enable collective property to be an option.
- Another challenge is that collective property requires strong institutional support in order to provide trust and security to residents, promote a conscious and responsible (non-speculative) use of resources, and to present the city and property through its social function and as common good.
- By giving organisations and residents a central role, providing technical support and avoiding intermediaries and profit, La Fábrica has achieved homes that are bigger, better quality, more attractive and cheaper than conventional construction of social housing.

- Other benefits of the model include innovative design and high-quality architecture, the creation of decent work opportunities, the development of construction and administration skills, as well as other positive social effects, including integration into the wider neighbourhood.
- The central location of La Fábrica enables low-income households to benefit from urban renewal processes, in co-existence with higher income groups.
- La Fábrica strongly demonstrates how Law 341 has the capacity to maximize State resources with efficiency in public expenditure, whilst at the same time promoting ownership in residents and the community.

Recognition

The project was included in the Open House Buenos Aires International exhibition in 2022 and 2023. It has not been broadcast in mainstream media.

Transfer and future plans

The La Fábrica development was helped by the change of legislation (in which MOI played a key role). The legal framework of Law 341 allowed for replication of the model by a wide range of actors in Buenos Aires.

Public policy development and securing local government commitment are essential to the viability of new self-help cooperative projects, especially those concerning the most vulnerable groups. MOI's ambition for the future is for Law 341 to be recognised on a national level, and to build upon discussions that have already taken place in congress. In the meantime, they are focussing on building relationships and advocating at the local and provincial level.

Currently MOI has similar developments underway and is in discussions about new projects in Rosario and Santa Fe. It is working on pilot projects, building relationships with key actors, and creating new work cooperatives. In Rosario the land has been secured and discussions are ongoing for securing financing from the City Housing Institute for construction work.

At the regional level, the Latin American Secretariat for Housing and Popular Habitat (SELVIHP) has been a vehicle for sharing knowledge and practice and promoting initiatives and conducive policy in countries such as Chile, Brazil, Venezuela and Panama.

World Habitat Reflections

La Fábrica is an inspiring example of the wider work of MOI and its decades-long struggle to ensure the right to the city and to adequate housing for people on low incomes. The project was conceived during the crisis of 2,000, a scenario which is all too familiar in the current climate. La Fábrica demonstrates that collective efforts can overcome challenging environments and change reality, and winning an Award could be instrumental in helping others 'dare to dream' about applying this to their own context.