

Co-building the city with participatory housing in Strasbourg (France)

The Eurometropole of Strasbourg has been a member of Energy Cities since 1996.

“If the inhabitants are ready to get involved in building a more sustainable city, why not take advantage of it?”

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The context: why do we hear so much about participatory housing today?

The term “participatory housing” may refer to a wide range of alternative and collective methods for designing, building and managing one’s own residence: housing cooperatives, self-development, cohousing, grouped housing, *baugruppen*... In France, the term “participatory housing” embraces all existing initiatives under the same banner, regardless of the method used, and may be defined as follows: **“the involvement of inhabitants in the production or co-production of their living environment and in the day-to-day, routine management of the property they occupy”**¹.

Participatory housing **experienced unprecedented development in France and in Europe in the early 2000s**². It has become a way of objecting to increased commodification and individualism in society and regaining control of one’s place of residence by integrating **economic, social and environmental aspects**.

Participatory housing is radically different from the standardised offer of conventional property developers in that it enables residents to integrate their own choices and values into their future residence. It is this freedom that makes participatory housing such an interesting energy transition tool.

Depending on the groups of residents behind the initiative, participatory housing projects may integrate **very different principles and values**, like solidarity, environmental-friendliness, equal housing rights, social and generational diversity and non-speculation. In all cases, participatory housing heralds a **new way of designing, building and managing both housing and the city**. Participatory housing is based on the principles of social, inclusive economics and integrates a **reflection on citizenship and living together**; it is defended by people driven by a common desire to participate in public urban planning and housing policies by making their own building and planning choices. Participatory housing usually involves **sharing space and costs**, but may also include other features such as the use of environmentally-friendly materials, kitchen gardens, the availability of social housing units or public space for neighbourhood activities. All these initiatives can be encouraged by local authorities.

¹ Anne D’Orazio, *L’habitat participatif à Montreuil. Une histoire, des initiatives collectives, une dynamique*. City of Montreuil, November 2011. URL: http://www.est-ensemble.fr/sites/default/files/l_habitat_participatif_a_montreuil.pdf

² Participatory housing first emerged in the 1960s in reaction against the lack of housing and continued in the 1970s-1980s, driven by the quest for a better living environment, away from conventional mass housing.

What is the role of local authorities in participatory housing?

Since participatory housing is still a **recent, experimental topic** for most stakeholders, it is relatively unfamiliar to local authorities, at least to French ones, except for the members of the national network of French local authorities in favour of participatory housing, which was created to share experience on the subject. The involvement of local authorities may, however, be a deciding factor in bringing projects to fruition.

Relations between the local authority and group of inhabitants

Krämer and Kuhn (2007) identified **three categories of relations between the local authority and the group of inhabitants at the origin of the project**³: (1) the local authority “*plays a central role in the project*”; (2) the “*tandem*” model establishes a genuine partnership between the authority and its citizens, notably through project assistance provided by the municipality”, and (3) the local authority is just a facilitator.

In Berlin, Hamburg, Amsterdam and Montreuil, the municipality played the role of a facilitator, for example by helping community groups find plots of land, but did not integrate this activity into its public urban policies. The strong development of participatory housing in the 2000s, however, once again questioned these links. **Participatory housing has become a co-building tool**: local authorities are taking a more active role and integrate these projects in their urban, environmental or social strategy.

In Montreuil, for example, participatory housing has never been the subject of a specific public policy: “*However, the fact that the authority supports participatory housing initiatives and associations is indicative of the interest it takes in the approach and is a way of recognising its social value*”⁴.

Local authority support

Support may take different, often complementary forms:

- **Communication** on the initiative;
- **Technical support** (land, urban planning, technical and legal advice);
- **Political support**: in Montreuil, projects like *Les Castors*, *Les Babayagas* and *l’Apaum* were able to rely on the local authority to “*receive political support, elected representatives perceiving the exemplarity of the operation, its ideological content and the attention it receives from the media as a benefit for themselves and will therefore, with their departments, facilitate the development of the project, notably by helping find a plot of land, a major stumbling block*”⁵

³ Sabrina Bresson and Lidewij Tummers, “L’habitat participatif en Europe”, *Métropoles* [online], 15 | 2014, put online on 15th December 2014, consulted on 4th September 2015. URL: <http://metropoles.revues.org/4960>

⁴ Anne D’Orazio, *L’habitat participatif à Montreuil. Une histoire, des initiatives collectives, une dynamique*. City of Montreuil, November 2011. URL: http://www.est-ensemble.fr/sites/default/files/l_habitat_participatif_a_montreuil.pdf

⁵ Ditto.

Technical support is extremely useful when it comes to setting up and consolidating groups, or to reducing the gap between the group's expectations and reality, especially from a financial point of view. But political support legitimates the project and facilitates proceedings with banks, solicitors, etc.

The city of Strasbourg decided to make participatory housing a central component of its public policies, in the 4th Eurometropole Local Housing Programme (2009) and in its “eco-neighbourhood” approach in favour of sustainable planning and housing. The fact that the same elected representative is in charge of both the city's energy strategy and participatory housing also contributes to reinforcing the links between the two.

Strasbourg: a lightning development

In Strasbourg, the local authority's commitment started with the Ecoquartier association and its eco-neighbourhood project. To address the lack of political response and reaction, the association decided to launch a high environmental quality participatory housing project, which became its hobbyhorse. The association bought a plot of land from the municipality and once the project was completed, it organised meetings to spread the initiative to other groups of citizens interested in the idea. This new strategy, by showing that it was possible to get reference projects built, contributed to raising the local authority's awareness of the issue. The city of Strasbourg, now interested, decided to launch a **call for projects entirely dedicated to participatory housing, a first in France**. Throughout the process, the municipality used the neighbouring examples of Tübingen and Freiburg as a source of inspiration (cf. Tübingen example page **Erreur ! Signet non défini.**).



Strasbourg, the Eco-logis project

Participatory housing consultations in Strasbourg

Consultations	1 st “Participatory housing or self-development” consultation May 2009	2 nd “Participatory housing or self-development” consultation Nov. 2011	SERS consultations 2012	4 th “Participatory housing or self-development” consultation May 2015	5 th consultation reserved for social landlords Upcoming
Project holder	City of Strasbourg	City of Strasbourg	SERS (Local public company in charge of the Danube eco-district)	City of Strasbourg	City of Strasbourg
Main features	Reduced land prices according to an environmental scale	Reduced land prices according to an environmental scale	Contract with the municipality. Participatory housing helps the residents take ownership of the district	No reduction in land prices	Identification of suitable plots of land for future developments
Results	10 plots 5 groups selected out of 17 2 projects delivered and inhabited; one is being finalised completion time: 5 to 6 years (for the longest projects)	7 plots 4 groups selected out of 14 completion time: 3 to 4 years	10% of homes are participatory housing units 6 or 7 groups completed or in the process of completion	5 plots	Upcoming

An environmental scale to ensure high environmental performance

The **first consultation** was initiated by the city of Strasbourg. Although the **specifications** gave much leeway to the applicants in terms of project design, they also encouraged compliance with sustainability principles:

- **Environmental and ecological performance:** the emphasis was laid on energy by encouraging “high building efficiency (Low Energy Building minimum standard), renewable energy sources, healthy and environmentally-friendly materials”⁶; other criteria like mobility and water management were also given much attention.
- **Social dimension:** functional mix, social diversity;
- **Economic dimension:** improved building environmental performance, architectural and constructive innovation aimed at controlling construction costs (limited/controlled investment, maintenance and repair costs)⁷.

⁶ 10 terrains pour 10 immeubles durables en autopromotion. Plaquette de la première consultation. Ville et Communauté urbaine de Strasbourg, November 2010. URL: www.strasbourg.eu/developpement-rayonnement/urbanisme-logement-amenagement/projets-urbains/autopromotion-habitat-participatif

⁷ Autopromotion - Habitat participatif. Consultation n° 2. Cahier des charges de la deuxième consultation, Ville et Communauté urbaine de Strasbourg, November 2011.

URL: www.strasbourg.eu/developpement-rayonnement/urbanisme-logement-amenagement/projets-urbains/autopromotion-habitat-participatif

The proposals came up to expectations: all the projects met low energy building or passive standards. Most of the applicants also opted for local renewable energy production solutions like thermal solar, wood-pellet boilers, heat pumps or PV panels.

The **use of a specific environmental scale** organised in three themes: “integration and functionality of the project in its surrounding area”, “energy needs and technical facilities”, and “materials used” has much to do with the results obtained. Each group defined its own environmental and social targets, thus obtaining points that could be used to benefit from a “reduced GFA/m² cost on the price of land as set by France Domaine”⁸.

Comparing the first and second consultations

Common elements	Novelties introduced by the 2 nd consultation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Optimised, personalised projects; - A richer community life; - Main homes only; - Non-speculative investment (except in the case of an accident, owners are not free to sell their property as they like); - Environmental and social performance is a selection criterion; - Unrestricted design; - Reduced land costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No costs incurred before winning the consultation; - The obligation to set up an association facilitates communication between the group and the local authority; - Mandatory professional assistance with project management (co-funded by the authority) ensures that projects are financially viable; - Flexible schedule with extended timeframes allowing fast-moving groups to move their projects forward more rapidly.

Financial support for the acquisition of plots of land was provided as part of the first consultations to facilitate the emergence of such projects and encourage innovation and experimentation. The experiment now being well under way, the on-going 4th consultation (2015) no longer uses this environmental scale but continues to assess and select groups based on their environmental and social commitments.

So far, **20 projects have been developed in Strasbourg:** about one third are completed and are inhabited, another third is under construction and 8 are in the pipeline. A **5th consultation reserved for social landlords** is being considered and would be consistent with the idea of encouraging a diversified representation of stakeholders and frameworks.

What is the dialogue between stakeholders?

Since participatory housing is an **experimental object** and unknown to most stakeholders, difficulties may arise during discussions. The city of Strasbourg has put a lot of effort into communication, not only **internally**, with its **technical departments**, but also with **notaries, banks, urban planners, property developers, architects and groups of citizens**. The idea was first and foremost to reassure and obtain the involvement of citizens by proposing and explaining the **operational frameworks designed to facilitate project realisation**.

⁸ Grille d'évaluation en 3 thèmes et 43 cibles, Autopromotion - Habitat participatif. Consultation n° 2. Cahier des charges de la deuxième consultation, Ville et Communauté urbaine de Strasbourg, November 2011.

URL: www.strasbourg.eu/developpement-rayonnement/urbanisme-logement-amenagement/projets-urbains/autopromotion-habitat-participatif

Most **conventional developers**, for example, perceived participatory housing as a form of **competition, a challenge to their traditional role**. For them, this new approach could only be a source of technical and legal difficulties for project holders. It was therefore necessary to **reassure them, explain the processes, and engage discussions**... Over time, relations have become less tense and some promoters now propose shared terraces or the co-finalisation of projects to groups of families, concepts that clearly evoke some of the features or benefits of participatory housing.

Social landlords and urban planners also viewed participatory housing as a new, “risky” approach. **Community groups were new players and conventional stakeholders did not know how to work with them** for a number of reasons: obstacles linked to the introduction of new practices, incompatible operating methods, lack of know-how. Again, **assistance with communication** and collaborative work to create a common culture were necessary. Since then, pioneer players have come forward and are now overseeing a number of projects.

Many bankers also considered the financial arrangements to be too risky (this was just after 2008). The approach of the city of Strasbourg thus created a more reassuring framework which indirectly facilitated the interactions between the banks and groups of citizens, by giving them greater credibility even though it could not underwrite them. The assisted approach showed that the local authority was developing programmes to support the projects (*mandatory assistance with project management ensuring the technical and financial viability of the project, soil surveys (structure, pollution), archaeological surveys, etc.*), thus making the financial arrangements more secure. Follow-up meetings and regular advice were also provided as additional support.

During the second consultation, **meetings with the French Architects’ Association proved necessary** to explain the obligation imposed on community groups to seek professional assistance with project management by hiring a project consultant who could not be the general contractor (or architect). Far from depriving architects of this “support” function, which is indeed part of their role, the local authority’s intention was to give community groups the possibility to check the financial feasibility of their projects at an early stage and to benefit from further assistance. This cooperative work led to the **signing of an agreement** with the architects.

Assistance and time are two key factors when it comes to increasing the chances of seeing the approach result in actual construction projects. Significant support is also provided to applicant groups and then to consultation winners: assistance in making sure that the financial reality has been taken into account, obligation to seek professional project management assistance, etc. During the consultation process, **the city of Strasbourg makes sure that the various groups involved do communicate** (applicant groups, interested citizens, Ecodistrict association, architects, project consultants, consultancy firms, general contractors, etc.). It also provides **advice on the financial arrangements of the project**.

Every two months, the main local stakeholders attend a **steering committee meeting**: SERS, the social landlord involved (Habitat d’Ill), *Conseil d’architecture d’urbanisme et de l’environnement* (non-profit consulting organisation in architecture, urbanism and environment), elected representatives, practitioners, the Ecodistrict association... The main challenge is to **create a common culture and to continue to reinforce the partnership momentum**. More generally speaking, financially viable projects completed within the allowed timeframe generate consensus on the benefits of participatory

housing and contribute to the dissemination of similar initiatives and consultation processes in Strasbourg and in other cities⁹.

Participatory housing encourages environmentally- and energy-aware citizens to go beyond the legal requirements in terms of energy sources and materials, promotes a more demanding governance and awareness model than traditional methods and demonstrates the energy and financial performance of these projects. It is therefore an energy transition tool that has a role to play in the development of green urban planning and participative cities.

For further information

Contacts

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Useful links and resources

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⁹ A national local authority network promoting participatory housing exists in France, but no institutional network at European level has been created yet.

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