

# COLLECTIVE PROCESSES TO ACTIVATE AND USE EMPTY HOUSES IN SPAIN

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## Abstract

This article is focused on the search for possible alternatives for the activation and putting into use of empty housing spaces. An urban problem of the magnitude of the number of vacant dwellings in Spanish territory, 3.4 million, and the significant lack of housing and social vulnerability of the Spanish population.

Faced with this reality, the research considers that these empty spaces are an opportunity to rethink the inhabited space and its adaptation to the needs and ways of life of people. It also has as a starting point the processes of social organization and collective management, which it considers are key to the necessary socio-urban regeneration. To this end, it is proposed to identify strategies to activate and put into use empty spaces that have been managed by processes of collective organization. A concrete contribution is made, by proposing Key Elements of collective intervention.

Key words: empty housing, collective processes, urban sustainability, spatial transformation, co - management.

## Introduction

Housing construction in Spain has been one of the main engines of the economy in the last twenty years, creating a huge “Real Estate bubble” that has been one of the reasons for the ensuing financial crisis. Besides, the housing market has not given the citizens the Right to decent and adequate housing.

We are talking of a country with a decreasing population: with an increase in the number of households and a drop in the number of members per household. With a large economic imbalance with large public and private debt, a high rate of unemployment, particularly long-term and youth unemployment, among other indicators. Spain has a level of urbanization where more than half of the population lives in urban areas, thus generating an abandonment of the countryside, where 79% of the Spanish population lives in urban areas. Therefore, with an urban model that polarises the space and the territory, of diffuse conurbation, that needs important infrastructures of transport to connect them. Another reality in Spain is the price of housing, where both the purchase and the rent are above the recommended percentage of the average salary; with a predominance of housing in property, even having tax deductions to purchase, thus benefiting the richer classes.

These realities have many economic, social and environmental consequences: one of these is the fact that there are 3.4 million of empty houses, which is 13.7% of the total family dwellings in Spain.

The research behind this paper is based on the PhD of the author and on the experience with the innovative process impulse in CAIS (Andalusian Consortium of Social Impulse) (<http://cais.coop/>), where the author is part of the initiating team.

## Aims

Faced with this reality, the research considers that these empty spaces are an opportunity to rethink the inhabited space and its adaptation to the needs and ways of life of people. And therefore, to reformulate the model of housing and city, a model at the service of citizenship and not of speculation.

Which should be one of the starting point of the processes of social organization and collective management, which it considers are the key to the necessary socio-urban regeneration. To this end, it is proposed to identify strategies to activate and put into use empty spaces that have been managed by processes of collective organization.

Where and how can we identify these collective strategies of activation and use of empty housing spaces? Different study cases have first been studied: with techniques coming from ethnography and qualitative research and those experiences that have been considered to be of interest are analysed. Social research techniques are presented as essential tools for working with these urban realities.

As a learned conclusion, the research arrives at some key elements of collective intervention, taking care of social, spatial and legal-economic components of application.

Finally, the author elaborates a methodological proposal of intervention that can be useful to anyone involved in collective processes of access to housing, citizen groups, technicians and public administrations, who in the future will be willing for these initiatives.

## **Case Studies**

What collective examples of putting into use empty housing spaces can be good references? It is important to learn from existing collective processes initiatives that activate and put into use housing and empty housing spaces. Some experiences of interest are identified on which a study and analysis is carried out with the objective of learning from them and extracting the key elements that make it possible.

The Study Cases analyzed are mainly in Spain and The Netherland:

*Las Corralas, Seville, Spain*

In response to the Spanish situation, a strong and organized citizen movement has emerged within the country, claiming the right to have adequate housing. For instance, in Seville, the occupation of a building which had been empty for two years occurred in May 2012. It was thus the first “corrala”, “Corrala Utopia”. There were 36 families with difficulties accessing housing, families that had been organized to make theirs what was their right, to live with dignity and to have a home.

This exposed the multitude of existing disused spaces in our cities, offering alternatives to match housing needs with existing resources underutilized. They had discovered by themselves a possible alternative to the public administration which had been unable to do so. Ultimately, self-organized citizenship had opened a possibility that, in some way, set a precedent.

Since then, there have been occupations of empty homes in Seville, occupying 15 buildings, providing a roof to 150 families and about 400 people with housing problems. All this was made possible by social movements and collective self-management of housing.

More info: <http://corralautopia.blogspot.com.es/>



Figure 01. Corrala Utopía.

### *La Mula, Barcelone, Spain*

A contract was made for the rental of a empty house without the imposition of a monetary rent, but an agreement for the improvement of the building by the tenants.

The experience of La M.U.L.A. (Masovería Urbana per la Llar Alternative) is a small housing cession experience that shows us the potential that this type of agreements can have: modes of organization and management between empty homeowners and citizens with few resources and important housing needs.



Figure 02. La Mula. <https://masoveriaurbana.wordpress.com>

### *Zoho, Rotterdam*

ZoHo (Zomerhofkwartier) is the name given to an area of the city of Rotterdam, located in the vicinity of the Central Station, with a multitude of empty office buildings, where a process of regeneration is being developed as an urban laboratory. This process is being carried out in collaboration by several agents: an urban development company, Stipo, a housing corporation (Housing Association) that owns most of the buildings, Havensteder, and the Municipality of Rotterdam.



Figure 03. Zoho area.

### *Wallisblock, Rotterdam. The Netherland*

Housing buildings in poor condition ceded by the city of Rotterdam for zero euros to an initiative led by architects and social managers to put the building into use with the involvement of users in the process of design and partial self-construction.



Figure 04. Wallisblock

### *Kleiburg, Amsterdam. The Netherland*

Kleiburg was the last building of 500 houses that was waiting to be demolished, but twenty years later it was still empty and in poor condition. In 2011 the housing corporation, Rochdale, decided to put an ad in the newspaper making public that it would be sold for € 1. They would give the building to those with the best strategy to renovate it in a viable manner. For this, they held a public contest and finally the building was given to a consortium of companies and entrepreneurs who put into practice the idea 'Klus Huis' (do it yourself) called De Flat. The Project won the 2016 Van der Rohe Mies Award.



Figure 05. Kleiburg

## **Public programs**

Some Public Programs and Initiatives should also be mentioned, that gives us the opportunity to see the relevance of the administration role in the activation of empty spaces,

### *Bizigune, Vasc Land, Spain*

Alarmed by the excessive under-utilisation of the housing stock, the Public Company of the Basque Country, VISESA, has focused its work since 2003 on issues of urban regeneration, and in that context it has also addressed the problem of empty housing, facilitating the use of these to people whose economic resources are not enough to access a free market home. The empty housing program,

Bizigune, aims to capture vacant apartments for sale in the market through protected rent. Its purpose is to give a social use to uninhabited homes, facilitating access to decent housing at affordable prices. More info: <http://www.alokabide.euskadi.eus/propietario/opciones-alquiler/>

*Fundación Habitat 3, Barcelona, Spain*

Barcelona City Council has commissioned the Hàbitat 3 Foundation to launch an emergency social housing program, which serves to meet the housing requests of the Emergency Table of the city of Barcelona, composed of families in situations of exclusion and who cannot be taken care of by the City Council due to the lack of a stock of social housing. For this, Hàbitat 3 is committed to mobilize a minimum of 200 homes of private owners that are closed and uninhabited, to rehabilitate those homes if necessary and make them available to the Emergency Bureau with employment insertion companies that have the same collectives as workers.

More info: <https://www.habitat3.cat/>

## Municipal Intervention Strategies

In the context of a municipality in the metropolitan area of the city of Seville, different intervention strategies are proposed, extracted from what has been learned in the study cases, and derived from its diagnosis and the analysis of possibilities adapted to the different typologies of housing vacancies, are proposed as a guide for future interventions.



Figure 06. Empty Homes local typologies.

Some of them are:

The municipality transfers an affordable rent for his property to housing cooperatives

Urban situation: Case 02. Social housing building almost empty and in good condition.

Property type: Public.

Management: Public

Agents involved: City council, organized citizenship in cooperative or association of tenants

The City Council CPO skeleton-buildings and transfers them to civic initiatives of a collective nature that have technical and social support

Urban situation: Case 01. Skeleton buildings in an area of new expansion of the municipality.

Type of property: Private.

Management: Public.

Agents involved: City council, organized citizenship, team of multidisciplinary technicians

A housing cooperative gets an agreement with the bank, the owner of the empty building.

Urban situation:

Case 3. Multi-family residential building. Centre of the municipality.

Property: Private-Financial entity.

Management: Self-management & Co-management.

Agents involved: Citizens organized in cooperative, banking entities.

The property transfer of the building to a collective demand.

The landlord of the building decides to lease its use for many years, to an initiative that guarantees economic, social and architectonic viability.

Urban situation:

Case 01. Skeleton buildings in an area of new expansion of the municipality.

Property: Private. Financial entities.

Management: Co-management

Agents involved: Property, City council, organized citizenship, multidisciplinary team of technicians

The owners of empty houses in bad condition organize an Owners Association to establish agreements/affordable rents with different users.

Urban with users with housing needs

Urban situation: Case 06. Empty houses scattered in poor condition.

Property: Private.

Management: Co-management.

Agents involved: Property, citizens.

Intermediate entity rents or buys empty buildings and those in bad condition and arranges them in a program of temporary lease of houses with the collaboration of the users in the improvements and spatial adequacy.

Urban situation:

Case 4. Buildings of collective housing in poor condition. Urban centre. Case 6. Empty housing scattered in poor condition

Property: Private property. (Small-medium holders).

Management: Co-management.

Intervening agents: Intermediate entity, owners, users.

	CASE 01 SKELETON-BUILDINGS 100% vacant under construction near growing zone	CASE 02 ALMOST EMPTY BUILDINGS 70% vacant good condition	CASE 03 COLLECTIVE HOUSING BUILDINGS 100% vacant good condition downtown	CASE 04 COLLECTIVE HOUSING BUILDINGS 100% vacant bad condition downtown	CASO E5 SCATTERED HOUSING 50% vacant good condition near growing zone	CASO E6 SCATTERED HOUSING 30% vacant bad condition popular neighborhood
<b>Public Initiative Strategies</b>						
PROPOSAL 01.01 The City Council expropriates skeleton-buildings	■					
PROPOSAL 02.01 The municipality cedes the property to cooperatives of social rent		■				
PROGRAM 01 Empty housing mobilization program Rental promotion program		■	■	■	■	■
PROGRAM 02 Public intermediation program between owners and citizens for the rental of empty houses		■	■		■	■
PROGRAM 03 Plan of mediation and negotiation to legal entities or banks for the transfer of empty houses		■	■		■	
PROGRAM 04 Public program of technical and financial support for the preferential rehabilitation of empty housing				■		
PROGRAM 05 Public program of financial and technical support to the regeneration of obsolete slums						■
<b>Citizen Initiative Strategies</b>						
PROPOSAL 02.02 Collective organization for the squatting of the building as a measure of pressure to get social rentals		■				
PROPOSAL 03.02 Organization in a housing cooperative that can reach an agreement with the bank that has the property in exchange for a stable rental			■			
PROPOSAL 04.01 Organization in housing cooperative for the purchase and collective reform of the property				■		
PROPOSAL 06.02 Intermediate collective organization that agglutinates owners with poor housing						■

Figure 07. Municipal Intervention Strategies related to Empty Homes local typologies.

## General Conclusions

Finally, the compendium of the learning is concretised in:

- Verifying the potential of the organization citizenship;
- The possibilities of opening the public administration, which is possible if one has the will;
- The need for interaction and co-management among the agents involved, which is possible if the parties want to;
- How the process changes substantially depending on who is the initiator of the initiative;
- The importance of taking an active role as citizens for the transformation of our environment and in their direct (self) construction of it, which seems somewhat distant and utopian but is increasingly being realized and achieving more and better results;
- The opportunity that these empty spaces have their own adaptability and transforming of the urban space where they are inserted,
- The opportunity that they have to return to weave the consolidated city.

In short, all these elements, which could be understood as isolated and marginal, are increasingly being experimented with more, in more contexts, and integrated in the face of the need to search for other ways of making the city work, which, it can be said, is the necessary paradigm shift of housing and city.

## What comes next?

### *Housing ecosystem for people with situations of vulnerability*

Learning from the research and case studies, the urban office Cotidiana ([www.cotidiana.coop](http://www.cotidiana.coop)) with other partners belonging to CAIS, Andalusian Consortium of Social Impulse, (<http://cais.coop/>), are developing an innovative project in the south of Spain, a cooperative housing neighbourhood and housing for the vulnerable sector. With this Project a housing ecosystem for people with situations of vulnerability is going to be created and thus achieve:

- Changing the housing model for people in situations of vulnerability, moving from the current model of institutionalization to a model of proximity housing, freely chosen, which allows them to maintain established relationships.
- Putting into use empty or underutilized homes to be used by vulnerable sectors, generating cities and healthy and accessible neighbourhoods.
- An increase in social cohesion and reduction of unwanted loneliness, individualism and community conflict, promoting an active and supportive community.
- Innovation, offering fairer and more sustainable creative solutions for people.

The process is still at an initial stage, looking for funding and implementing a first prototype in Almería: *Habitational ecosystem for persons with intellectual disabilities in Almería. CAIS.*