

Self-help and self-organisation through residents in a housing cooperative

The presentation is structured into seven parts. First, I will shortly explain the theory of housing cooperatives to provide the ground for this presentation. Then I will go on to outline the principles and aims of the SelbstBau including those features that we think make the SelbstBau very special. Afterwards I will tell you more about the history of the SelbstBau in Berlin. To understand our work I will explain the structure of the SelbstBau. Next, I will give an overview of the current situation of the cooperative work. And last but not least I will talk about one of our projects – the mixed-generation project – and other important activities planned for the future.

What is a housing cooperative?

A cooperative is a socially-oriented business that is run by people who invest time and money for their mutual benefit. These people aim to achieve common economic, social and cultural goals.

The main idea is based on the principles of the member's promotion, self-help, self-responsibility and self-administration.

In a cooperative, the aid of members is the main point of work. For a housing cooperative, it means that it provides its members with suitable accommodation. The members do not own a particular flat, but a virtual share of the cooperative.

The principles and aims of the housing cooperative SelbstBau

The SelbstBau is a housing cooperative, whose main objective is the provision of accommodation at moderate rent levels for its members. We work as a non-profit organisation, and, in a way, we stand outside the main stream of the housing market. In addition, our cooperative promotes high ecological standards with regards to, for example, the construction of buildings, energy supply and consumption and the sustainable management of the houses.

The special features of the SelbstBau

- we don't look actively for new houses on the property market, people come up with ideas of new projects and ask the SelbstBau for support,
- we regard ourselves as a grass-roots democracy initiative, our residents play an active role,

- each house project itself of the cooperative is a financial unit,
- we have socially-oriented and mixed-generation projects,
- we care for all tenants – even those who are not members of the SelbstBau,
- we aim to provide sustainable housing with regards to maintenance, refurbishment and the use of energy,
- we offer our members rents at low levels and aim for low operating costs.

History of the SelbstBau.

The cooperative had its beginnings in the German Democratic Republic named East Germany – in 1988. At this time, Germany was divided into two states and so was Berlin. In the eastern and socialist part of Berlin, the government planned to knock down many historical buildings.

The government's plan was to build new housing stock in form of precast concrete slabs in inner city areas, replacing housing that was built in the late 19th century.

In the district of Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg, there was one of the first successful citizen initiatives where the local people managed to avoid the demolition of their houses they lived in. The government eventually gave up the demolition plans; instead, it planned to provide funds and to engage in the maintenance and refurbishment of the houses.

However, the process of refurbishment fell in the time of the break-up of the socialist government in East Germany in 1989 and the process of unification of the two German states.

In the course of unification, the common law and value system of East Germany was replaced with the political and economic system of the Federal Republic of Germany named West Germany as it is known today. This included changes in ownership structures and the institutional regulation of the housing sector. After 1989, there was the possibility to buy or rent houses in the former socialist part of Berlin.

At this time, housing and living conditions in East Berlin's inner city areas were poor, notably the technical and energy standards of the housing stock.

The SelbstBau was established in 1990 because the legal construct of a housing cooperative allowed the residents of the houses at Rykestraße number 13/14 in the district of Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg to buy and refurbish their houses as well as to apply for government fundings. You see the house in the picture like it was near by. By doing so, they managed to improve living conditions and to keep the property under control.

In the next two years, other initiatives got in contact with the SelbstBau, like the initiative from the Oderberger Straße. This started a discussion process within the SelbstBau whether or not to expand the cooperative and to buy and include more houses. Eventually, the decision was taken to buy the house at the Oderberger Straße in spring 1993 and, by doing so, enabling the SelbstBau to grow. With that decision the SelbstBau gave other citizen initiatives the opportunity to acquire and refurbish houses with the support of SelbstBau. By now our cooperative had bought, or rented, 17 houses.

The SelbstBau only invests in projects where they can be sure that the prospective residents are interested in contributing actively to the development of the project, for example by using their manpower and other resources. The SelbstBau itself is to be understood as an umbrella association for the different resident initiatives.

Structure of the SelbstBau

The regular framework for a cooperative is always made up of a board of directors, an executive board and an assembly of members.

Today, we have 380 individual members. Most of them are residents in one of the 17 houses from the SelbstBau; these people form the assembly of members.

The assembly of members elects the board of directors. The board of directors consists of one member of each house. The board of directors' task is, among other things, to appoint the executive board from the SelbstBau. At the moment, the executive board has two members: my colleague Mr Peter Weber and me.

We are responsible for the management of finances, property and members as well as for the representation of the SelbstBau.

The executive board is accountable to the board of directors, and the board of directors is accountable to the assembly of members.

Under the SelbstBau structure, every house project has certain autonomy.

That means that every initiative of people who wish to buy and refurbish a house under the umbrella of the SelbstBau can, as far as possible, take their own decisions, for example concerning the look and standard of the house or its common rooms.

In financial aspects, the implementation has to be verified in each house. Other houses don't pay for it.

What is the current situation of the SelbstBau in 2010?

Here are some facts about us:

We have 17 houses, 380 members.

In these 17 houses are 316 flats and 34 commercial premises in total.

There live about 1.000 residents.

The government gave us 13.000.000€ and so we invested 30.000.000€.

The personal contribution of the members is about 15 to 20% of the construction costs. Here you can see that even people with low income have the opportunity to join the projects. The members can choose between manpower or a financial contribution.

The rent levels are from 2,5 € to 6,5 € per squaremetre. The average rent in the level in the area is between 10 € to 15 € per square mete. Our rent levels depend on the purchase price of the building, the construction costs of the fund and the height of personal contribution.

The rent levels for commercial spaces are 7,5 € per square metre. The average rent level for commercial spaces is around 35 € per square metre. On these picture you see a restaurant which prepare meals for people with lower income and the people who work there are not possible to work in our first job market.

Beyond the numbers and facts above, the main focus of our work is orientated towards the residents.

In general the tenant of a house initiated the purchase of a house. This means that up to 40% of the tenants have already lived in that house. It is a work against the mainstream which means that usually residents are forced to move in cheaper districts of Berlin after their houses have been refurbished.

In our case people of the neighbourhood - or even from other parts of Berlin or Germany - were invited to join the project and become a cooperative member. Some people didn't want to join the projects because of several reasons such as age or because they were not convinced. But even these people were offered to stay in their flats.

We have a certain social mix, in our projects. Social mix means that a construction worker, a professor, a pensioner, a student, an unemployed person and a craftsman are next-door neighbours.

Our aim is to enable self-determined living in different forms like:

- in separate flats
- in apartments sharing communities
- service flats for disabled people
- and mixed generation projects

We rent out our commercial properties for example to non-profit organisations and private business that work in the fields of education child care.

One of our 17 projects, the mixed generation project

What does it mean - a mixed generation project?

Because of the transformation of society, the importance of the family, and family life as it was known in the Western World in the recent past, continues to erode. Instead, new forms of living emerge: more and more people live in towns as singles, in patchwork families, as single mothers or fathers with kids as well as in many other social configurations. Older people live isolated in special care homes.

In Germany, the government is aware of that social kind of change. In order to foster the emergence of new and long-lasting family or family like structures, it runs a range of policy initiatives. One of which is a scheme that provides financial support for the development of so-called mixed generation housing projects.

Among other things, the idea of a mixed generation house is presented at the Expo in Shanghai in the German pavilion.

The main objective of such mixed generation house projects is that young and old people live together under the same roof and in a community of their choice.

The SelbstBau initiated a mixed generation project in 2005 with the financial support of the government of Berlin. We did so, because the idea matches with our overall social aims and objectives.

We provided 21 individually designed flats in a building, which was unused for 10 years. Therefore we created housing space for families, singles and elderly persons as well as handicapped people. So, the house project was socially mixed in several senses. Tenants also included an association that works in the field of education child care that offered space for a group of 10 children and teenagers in need.

The advantage of such a project is that there is the possibility that different groups of the society meet each other, stay together and even support each other.

We regard this SelbstBau project as a very successful one, not least because it was lauded by the German government. You see in the picture.

The important activities planned for the future

First, we plan to become more independent, particularly with regards to mortgages or other loans from banks. Second, we are going to produce our own energy. In the future, members will be provided with energy from its own solar energy plants and communal heating power stations. These projects are already in realisation.

Third, care for elderly people will be improved. Since the inclusion of elderly people is constitutive for a mixed generation house, we are planning to set up an organisation, which cares for the elderly members of the SelbstBau who need special support.

Conclusion

Today I spoke to you at first about what a housing cooperative is. In general, the members do not own the flat, but a virtual share of the cooperative. Also our members need to work in self-help, self-responsibility and self-administration in order to be part of our cooperative.

Summarised our cooperative has the following main aim and principle. Our central objective is to give our members flats at moderate rent levels with low operating costs in long term. Our main principle is to work as a non-profit and grassroots organisation.

During my presentation about the history of our cooperative you heard that it took a long time to come up with our first project and that we decided to extend the amount of our houses in order to give other projects the opportunity to improve their living conditions, too.

Concerning the structure of the SelbstBau it is important that every house and member can influence the work of our cooperative through the assembly of members and the board of directors. The executive board is accountable to the board of directors and so there is a constant feedback between this institution and the members.

When I talked about the achievements I wanted to show you that we work against the mainstream housing market and to contribute to the stabilisation of the local community in the urban district we work in. Up to 40% of the former residents were able to stay in their flats; this percentage is high above average in these areas where our houses are located. We achieved a certain generation and social mix.

Also we gave other housing initiatives similar to our cooperative the opportunity to work under our umbrella. We provided commercial properties for non-profit organisations and private socially oriented business.

I explained the details from one of our projects, the mixed generation project. This has the main advantage that different groups of society and age stay together and even support each other in their daily lives.

Last but not least I talked about the future activities from our cooperative. To us, it is important that we are independent from banks and the local energy suppliers and we will find a solution for the care of our elderly members.

At the end I would like to share with you the thesis that cooperatives like ours have a significant socio-political and environmental impact in the urban development, especially in facing the demographic challenge.

Therefore I hope, that the results from this workshop spread out because they clearly show to society and policy-makers that cooperatives are valuable and flexible models for a sustainable urban development.

Jeannette Albrecht

board of executive at the housing cooperative SelbstBau e.G., Berlin, Germany