



*Among Shared Walls: Field Notes on Collective
Living in Catalonia*

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This research trip examined cooperative and collective housing models in Catalonia, with a focus on how built form, governance structures, and everyday practices operate in relation to spatial and political alternatives to commodified housing systems. Positioned in Barcelona, this work studies cooperative developments and traditional housing that reframe land and dwelling as shared resources rather than private assets, challenging speculation-driven urban logics and advancing a contemporary urban commons.

Grant-of-use cooperatives provide legal and organizational foundations for decommodified housing, where land is held collectively and residents pay stable, non-extractive monthly fees. Architecturally, these projects take shape as compact, resource-efficient residential buildings with shared programs, cooperative maintenance strategies, and collective decision-making processes built into circulation and communal space. Material sensibility often aligns with low-carbon construction (particularly timber) and emphasizes durability, flexibility, and shared access to amenities.

Rather than offering universal prescriptions, these developments illustrate an emerging architectural language of collective dwelling. They demonstrate that decommodified housing requires both spatial frameworks and cultural agreements—design decisions aligned with long-term affordability, mutual reliance, and shared responsibility.

Outside of the cooperative housing models explored, the standard Barcelona type was extensively explored. I was consistently awed and fascinated with the “Catalonian Balcony”, and documented them rigourously. The cooperative structure is partially successful in Barcelona because of this existing density and typological success.

Within a global housing crisis marked by speculation, precarity, and privatization, Catalonia’s cooperatives offer a built precedent: housing organized around access, stability, and shared stewardship. These field notes document the spaces, systems, and spatial cultures that enable this model, as well as the more traditional structure of the city, prefacing their relevance for cities like Toronto where new forms of housing and governance are urgently needed.



Arriving at the Josep Tarradellas Barcelona–El Prat Airport.
European Union, Spain, & Catalanian flags.



A typical Barcelona Cafe, with standard red tables (almost always red, reason unknown). Space is available inside but seemed to be seldom used. The food is standard accross all of these establishments, with variation in quality, beer available. I noticed that most of these cafes were owned and run by Chinese immigrants. Always below a residential building, this one is also adjacent to a small outdoor market. My typical order was a cafe con leche and bocadillo tortilla francesa (morning) or a bottle of Estrella in the afternoon/evening. People smoke freely on these patios, many with covered ashtrays.



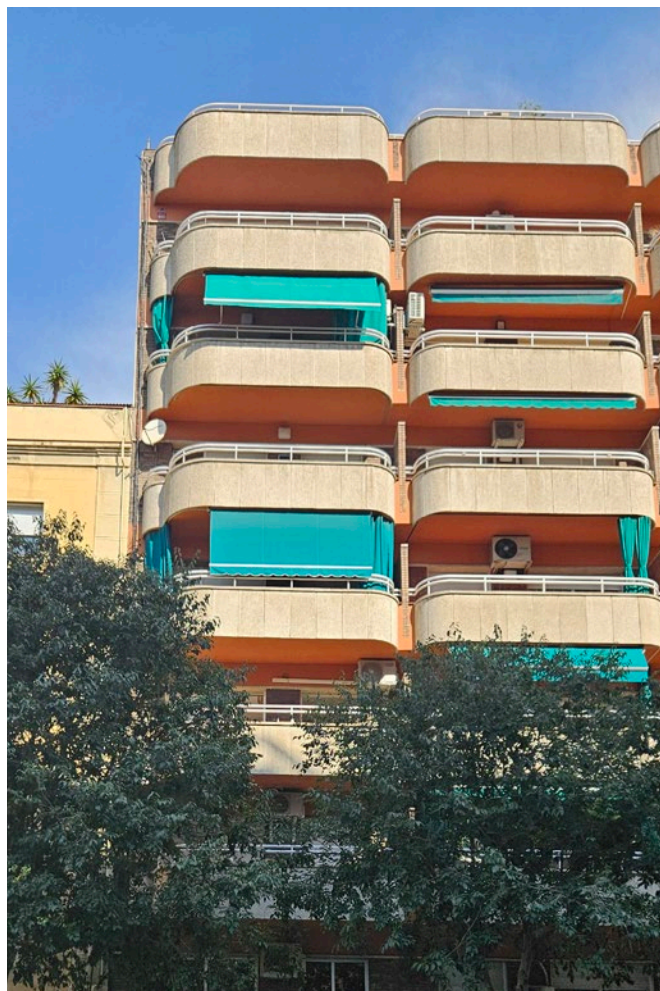
This image is representative of the density of the city, showing the older part of the grid (lower right) with the newer build. Density developing temporally.



View from the first apartment I was staying in. A tiny balcony looking down on one of the many lovely parks that are very well used in the city due to the density of population and buildings.



New infill amongst older units. Increased height and balcony size, always with retail or restaurant on the ground floor. Also, starting to notice the tapered shape of the newer balconies. Note the barred cutaway in the concrete of the balcony, which I interpret as being for plant growing.



Newer builds, three different type of balconies (rounded edge, corner taper, full taper) across a plaza from older buildings. Note the shading devices (green on the right, beige curtains on the left).



Robust balcony usage. Bikes, plants, laundry. People are forced to connect and interact with their neighbours. This is from a interior courtyard balcony on a larger block building.

The next several pages are images of balconies and the different shading devices that are employed on them, a requisite system for the summer sun in Catalonia. Ranging from simple shutters and draped wood blinds to mechanical aluminum tracks, all serve the purpose of blocking the sun from the interior of the unit while allowing for use of the balcony and ventilation.













































Cooperatives to Social and Affordable housing in Barcelona.



La Borda by Lacol is a landmark project in Barcelona's cooperative housing movement and the first grant-of-use housing development built on public land in the city. Emerging from grassroots organizing in the Sants neighbourhood and the long-term reclamation of the ex-industrial Can Batilló site, the project demonstrates a viable alternative to speculative housing: land held in common, long-term stability, and housing structured around use-value rather than investment logic. Built on a 75-year public land lease, it positions cooperative tenure as a tool for affordable, decommodified living in an urban context under pressure from market forces. Architecturally, *La Borda* operates as a prototype that redefines collective housing in both spatial and environmental terms. The building contains 28 units of varying sizes supported by a robust framework of shared programs: kitchen and dining space, laundry, multipurpose rooms, guest accommodation, care space, greenhouses, and outdoor terraces and organized around a central courtyard that recalls historic working-class housing typologies in Spain.¹

¹ *La Borda*, Lacol Architecture Cooperative 2017. <https://lacol.coop/en/projectes/la-borda/>





This is 140 Social Housing units by Peris + Toral in Barcelona's 22@ district. The eight-storey building completes an existing party wall and holds the streetline and chamfer corner. Program is stacked by need and scale: temporary accommodations at grade, four floors of two-bedroom subsidized apartments, and one-bedroom units for seniors at the top. Vertical organization allows wider upper patios and better daylighting where the smallest homes are located. Each level organizes twenty dwellings around a central circulation spine, an interior street that threads across five patios and landings. Small clusters of four homes share a landing marked by timber lattice vestibules that balance privacy, ventilation, and soft daylight. Overhead, a glazed roof wraps the patios to form an atrium acting as a solar collector in winter and a thermal chimney in summer.²

² 40 Social Housing units, Peris + Toral 2024. <https://peristoral.com/proyectos/greenhuse-140-social-housing-22-bcn>



image from the architects.





La Balma by Lacol is a transfer-of-use housing cooperative developed by Sostre Cívic on a municipally-owned site in Poblenou, awarded through a public tender dedicated to collective housing. The cooperative sits along a green corridor, opening its shared spaces to the neighbourhood and framing the building as part of a civic network rather than an isolated residential block. Community space is distributed vertically: a public-facing ground floor with a shared kitchen, bike and workshop areas, and small commercial spaces; small-scale communal programs like guest rooms, care areas, laundry, and reading rooms on the residential levels; and a generous rooftop for food production, energy infrastructure, and collective leisure. The 20 units follow a flexible grid of 15 m² modules, beginning from a compact 50 m² base and expandable through cooperative-managed rooms, enabling adaptability as household needs change.³

³ *La Balma* by Lacol Architecture Cooperative 2021. <https://lacol.coop/en/projectes/la-balma/>





Thank you so much for this opportunity to engage with this research. It has meant the world to me to be able to travel in service of my profession and research. This work has helped to build a stronger thesis and I know it will carry into my career. Doing a Master of Architecture degree is a very long and arduous task, but when I am able to do things like this it helps make it make sense. Salut !