

(Re-)Inventing self-build housing in Strasbourg

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In the world of alternative housing, Strasbourg is an important player. Here, Anne Debarre and H  l  ne Steinmetz describe the stimulating process that has given rise to a growing number of self-build housing developments in and around the city.

Among the nebulous body of alternative housing projects that have emerged since 2000, the initiatives in Strasbourg stand out from the crowd for a number of reasons. In a context where a growing array of vocabulary is used to designate such projects, it is in Strasbourg that the French term “*autopromotion*” (literally “self-managed property development” or “self-building”) has taken root, inspired by the German *Baugruppen*. It is also in Strasbourg that one of the first tangible realisations to result from this new wave of participative projects came into being, namely the   co-Logis building, which has received significant media coverage. Finally, self-build projects such as these have, since 2009, benefited from Strasbourg city council’s policy of setting aside land for innovative housing projects. In this way, the city council actively encourages initiatives of this kind and works to help standardise the processes involved.¹ The success of self-build projects locally is essentially down to the work of project developers, relatively isolated at first, who acted as “brokers” of ideas and experiments from Germany. At the end of a very long process, they have managed to mobilise support from public bodies and, together, make self-building a common cause, albeit one that is still evolving.

Self-build developments: from Freiburg to Strasbourg?

The term “*autopromotion*” first appeared in Strasbourg in around 2005 and 2006, before becoming more widely used throughout eastern France,² but the projects it designates predate this. Indeed, the term was adopted by “idea brokers” who, from the early 2000s, sought to make known the experiences of the *Baugruppen* (literally “construction groups”) in Germany, apartment blocks built by groups of private individuals that collectively become the client of the project: in particular, they underlined their role in the now famous “Vauban eco-neighbourhood” in Freiburg im Breisgau.³ The   co-Quartier association was created in

¹ Research financed by PUCA (the French interministerial Urban Development, Construction and Architecture Plan) and conducted between 2008 and 2010 by Anne Debarre and H  l  ne Steinmetz. The material collected comprises interviews with groups, urban planners, architects, elected representatives and municipal departments in and around Strasbourg; private archives made available by groups; observations of internal and public meetings; and a review of grey literature on the subject.

² The term is used, among others, by the   colline association in Saint-Di  -des-Vosges, created in September 2008, and by the Utipi collective, based in the *d  partement* of Meurthe-et-Moselle, which organised the “Premi  res rencontres de l’*autopromotion*” on the subject in Vand  uvre-l  s-Nancy on 19 September 2009.

³ Since the 1990s, the Vauban neighbourhood – a large former military base in Freiburg im Breisgau that was left vacant following the departure of the Forces Fran  aises d’Allemagne (French Forces in Germany) – has been the

Strasbourg in 2001 by supporters of the environmental cause who participate in a local exchange trading system (LETS) and/or who send their children to schools espousing alternative educational approaches. For the members of this group, the Vauban eco-neighbourhood is a key model, and they are campaigning for the creation of a similar neighbourhood in France.⁴

The founding members had neither any experience in urban planning, nor any contacts in local government, which made the realisation of their project a somewhat arduous process. Furthermore, their approach did not seem to chime with many politicians, especially since the UMP (right-wing) council elected in 2001 excluded the possibility of building an eco-neighbourhood. Nevertheless, they brought their combined experience as an association to bear in promoting the developments in Freiburg im Breisgau during conferences and public meetings. In 2005, following the arrival of a new chairman, Bruno Parasote (who assumed his role not only as a volunteer and future resident, but also as an urban planner⁵), the association decided to move towards a shorter-term project: the construction of an apartment building, dubbed *Éco-Logis*, that would be the equivalent of a *Baugruppe* operation.

In the same year, Bertrand Barrère (an urban planner who had just opened his own agency in Strasbourg), together with an architect specialised in bioclimatic construction, launched another association, Ippiddas,⁶ with the aim of building a “sustainable” apartment block with a group of private individuals: through this association-based activity, he sought to perfect a professional approach for supporting this kind of group in their projects, a method he named “Unanimm”,⁷ with the possible aim of developing his agency’s activity in this field. He was probably one of the first to use the term “*autopromotion*” to describe such participatory projects;⁸ indeed, it is under this label that he promoted his approach, along with projects in Freiburg im Breisgau and, above all, Tübingen, where municipal support for *Baugruppen* seemed exemplary in his view. He organised visits to both of these cities and spoke at conferences dedicated to “sustainable” housing, and successfully established contact with a social landlord that he hoped would become affiliated with Ippiddas.⁹ Articles along these lines

subject of a mobilisation against demolitions planned by the city council, led by a self-managed collective calling for the environmental rehabilitation of the site. Under the aegis of the Forum Vauban association, residents’ groups have formed to reserve plots of land and initiate, as future owners, the construction of environmentally friendly buildings. The whole neighbourhood is characterised by environmental innovation, and in particular the very limited role granted to car use, which is why it is often described as an eco-neighbourhood. Another neighbourhood of Freiburg im Breisgau has, to a lesser extent, also been the site of environmentally friendly developments, namely Rieselfeld, which is similarly characterised by significant activity on the part of *Baugruppen*, but with a less socially selective population than at Vauban (Rudolf 2007; Debarre 2008).

⁴ A visit of the Vauban neighbourhood was organised in 2001 by *Éco-Quartier*, which announced that it wanted to “establish, across the Strasbourg Urban Community area, an aspiration to live in an urban setting, in homes and neighbourhoods that are different from those which currently exist [...] like the Vauban neighbourhood in Freiburg im Breisgau” (*Rapport d’activité 2001*, dated 26 June 2002).

⁵ Bruno Parasote is both a civil engineer (a qualification he obtained in Germany) and an urban planner. He is head of technical services and urban planning at one of the larger local authorities in the Strasbourg Urban Community area.

⁶ Ippiddas: *Initiative pour un projet immobilier de développement durable dans l’agglomération strasbourgeoise* (“Initiative for a sustainable-development property project in the Strasbourg urban area”).

⁷ This approach was reported to a certain extent in the media – see, for example, “Autopromotion : la méthode Unanimm en rodage sur un site test”, *Le Monde*, 15 August 2008.

⁸ In Ippiddas’s internal documentation, the expression “*projets collectifs d’habitat en accession*” (“mutual home-ownership housing projects”) was initially used to translate the German “*Baugruppen*”. The term “*autopromotion*” appeared in the preliminary specifications of 23 January 2006 (produced by Agence REDD and Atelier Architecture et Soleil). In his dissertation, Alain Meyer points out that his knowledge of the term “*autopromotion*” came from contacts at Ippiddas (Meyer 2007).

⁹ Conference at the Foire Bio-Éco d’Alsace (“Alsace Organic & Ecological Fair”, 17–21 May 2007); conference at the CAUE (Architecture, Urban Planning and Environment Council) for the Meurthe-et-Moselle *département* on 22 November 2007. For more on the Tübingen model, see the interviews with Bertrand Barrère and two managers from the social landlord Nouveau Logis de l’Est conducted by Anne Debarre in 2009–10.

were published in the regional and national press, announcing (slightly prematurely) that “Alsace trials German-style *autopromotion*”.¹⁰

In 2007, a young architect attending an environmental training course and who was in contact with these groups wrote a dissertation on self-managed builds; this was the first detailed document in French to describe the approach adopted by the *Baugruppen* (Meyer 2007). This work attracted the attention of his employer, the leading developer in Strasbourg, which announced that it would earmark building land for this purpose.¹¹ This document, available online, was the basis for a “Practical guide to self-managed development” produced jointly by CAUE 67¹² and the Éco-Quartier association (2008). Éco-Quartier, which has also adopted the term “*autopromotion*”, distributes this document – initially typewritten and later published in an extended version – nationally.

Éco-Logis: an emblem

However, the concrete results did not materialise straight away. Despite Bertrand Barrère’s tireless work as “ideas broker”, there were internal divergences within Ippiddas regarding the choice of plot for their building and the group distanced itself from the professionals that initiated the project; today the group is dormant. As for the Éco-Logis building, it was finally completed in 2010 at the end of a long and laborious process. The group took several years to obtain a definitive sale agreement from the city council for the land. The legal uncertainties surrounding the status of self-build projects complicated negotiations between their solicitors and the banks. The architectural project had to be readjusted many times in order to accommodate, and ensure the compatibility of, the various requirements of the 10 clients, their environmental performance objectives and their budgetary constraints. Finally, the long duration and the rising cost of the development caused a number of families to abandon the project, forcing the group to recruit new members. Some of the new recruits, through their professional activity, had contacts with local authorities and in urban planning which proved essential to the completion of the project.

Once out of the ground, the Éco-Logis project became the emblem of “Strasbourg-style” self-building. As the first development of its kind, it benefited from the group’s intensive efforts to promote their cause: their approach and the specificities of the building (wooden structure, energy performance, etc.) were the subject of numerous articles in the press – regional and national, specialist and mainstream – between 2005 and 2010, as well as reports on national television.¹³ These reports were an opportunity to highlight their architectural and technical choices, clearly establishing the link with the German experiments and reinforcing the legitimacy of their approach: they hired the architect Michael Gies from Freiburg im Breisgau, known for two *Baugruppen* buildings in Vauban, and commissioned one of the best environmental engineering outfits, the local subsidiary of a renowned German firm (Solares Bauen).

The specificities of the Éco-Logis project helped to trace a local path for participatory housing: its members supported and advised new self-build groups that formed within the

¹⁰ “L’Alsace expérimente l’autopromotion à l’allemande”, *Le Moniteur*, 11 April 2006; Xavier Thiery, “Plans particuliers pour un habitat durable”, *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, 29 December 2005.

¹¹ “Frémissements autour d’une nouvelle manière d’habiter”, *Le Moniteur*, 15 August 2008.

¹² CAUE 67: Conseil d’Architecture, d’Urbanisme et de l’Environnement (Architecture, Urban Planning and Environment Council) for the Bas-Rhin *département* (covering Strasbourg and the northern half of Alsace).

¹³ For example: Philippe Dossmann, “Petits immeubles entre amis”, *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, 14 April 2007; Cécile Daumas, “Maisons partagées. Plus belle la vie”, *Libération Next*, no. 16, 4 April 2009, pp. 68–73; TV news report entitled “Essayez l’autopromotion”, *Journal de 20 heures de TF1* (TF1’s 8 o’clock news programme), 11 October 2009; “La douce utopie d’Éco-Logis”, *Le JDD*, 25 October 2009; Adrien Pouthier and Laurent Miguët, “Éco-Logis, le premier immeuble construit en autopromotion”, *Le Moniteur*, 10 November 2010.

parent association, Éco-Quartier. Certain particularly dedicated members became regular participants of meetings on the subject of participatory housing all over France, while the group's president recently published a book on the subject (Parasote 2011). Certain characteristics of Éco-Logis seem to have left their mark on projects currently under way in Strasbourg – in particular, the insistence on the environmental dimension (“eco-friendly” materials, energy performance, etc.) and housing that is “made to measure” and includes shared spaces. The desire for an anti-speculation occupancy status midway between home-ownership and tenancy is not present among the groups in Strasbourg – quite the opposite of the trends observed in Lyon among the “cooperative” housing movement.¹⁴ From its beginnings as a small group of alternative and green activists unknown to politicians and professionals alike, the association has become an invaluable resource for local authorities. As part of the Forum Européen des Éco-Quartiers (“European Eco-Neighbourhoods Forum”) hosted by the Strasbourg Urban Community in November 2010, it also organised the Rencontres Nationales de l’Habitat Participatif (“National Participatory Housing Conference”),¹⁵ which brought together all the main federations and networks of groups that coexist in this field today.

Standardising the self-build process?

The key issue for local politicians wishing to seize upon these pioneering experiments and for professionals who specialise in this field is nonetheless to ensure that these projects can be reproduced on a larger scale. The recent interest shown by Strasbourg city council is no coincidence: the Socialist–Green coalition that has controlled the council since 2008 sees a means of giving substance to its participatory democracy projects and to nine eco-neighbourhood projects that it is launching. The first of these will be completed in 2013 at best: the processes involved are slow from the standpoint of the electoral calendar, but they hope that the construction of apartment blocks according to a self-managed “*autopromotion*” model will yield visible results in the more immediate future in terms of environmental innovation or “participation”. It is, however, a delicate matter for local councillors to be seen supporting developments whose social dimension is not obvious, as all the residents involved – without exception – come from middle-class or affluent backgrounds. The assistant mayor responsible for urban planning, a Green councillor sympathetic to German projects, envisages supporting 10 developments of this type, the idea being to produce tangible results within the current electoral term and standardise the support provided by the city council for “*autopromotion*” projects. The means of intervention chosen is partly based on the model invented in Tübingen – a city that supports *Baugruppen* by earmarking part of its land reserves for their projects.

In May 2009, Strasbourg city council launched a consultation exercise entitled “*10 terrains/10 immeubles durables*” (“10 plots/10 sustainable buildings”). Potential self-builders were given five months to form a group, put their plans (in terms of way of life, etc.) down on paper and join forces with a team of contractors (architect and thermal engineering specialist), who would then produce a draft plan for an eco-friendly apartment building on one of the 10 sites proposed by the city council. The amount of financial assistance on offer from the council, in the form of land price reductions, is linked to the energy and environmental performance of the planned buildings and presented as an incentive for environmentally friendly housing. Although the groups are advised by the Éco-Quartier association or by

¹⁴ The legal workshop that took place at the first “Forum de l’*autopromotion*” event in Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy on 19 September 2009 provided the opportunity for a discussion between representatives from Habicoop (Lyon) and Éco-Quartier (Strasbourg) on the issue of anti-speculation measures, highlighting this divide.

¹⁵ *L’Habitat participatif. Actes des Rencontres de novembre 2010*, published in November 2011, available for download from: <http://www.forum-ecoquartiers.strasbourg.eu>.

professional project management assistants, it is Strasbourg city council that decides on the consultation conditions. The operation, currently under way, nevertheless shows that the tight schedule imposed by the council is poorly suited to the formation and stabilisation of groups, as well as to unforeseen circumstances in terms of defining the architectural project with multiple non-professional clients. Strasbourg-style self-managed property development is currently only partially standardised and remains highly experimental. Furthermore, following the Rencontres Nationales de l'Habitat Participatif in November 2010, the city council's recommendations were modified in time for the second consultation exercise, launched in November 2011: although groups still decide upon the "founding values" of their project (non-speculation, intergenerational, environmentally friendly, socially mixed, etc.), they are now obliged to call upon the professional services of a project management assistant, in order to ensure stability earlier on in the process. However, this potential professionalisation, also observed in other fields associated with "participation" (Nonjon 2005), is not yet complete.

In the space of a decade – the time necessary for the long and difficult incubation of the first development in Strasbourg, finally completed in 2010 – self-build housing has gained in recognition locally and nationally. The city council now earmarks land on brownfield infill sites and in future eco-neighbourhoods for such projects, provides financial support, and is working to professionalise, and standardise the duration of, the process involved. In November 2011, it signed a charter that aims to promote the development of participatory housing, together with 14 other French local authorities that are also pioneers in the field. The Éco-Quartier association continues its work not just locally, supervising new projects, but also nationally, by announcing the production of a "white paper" on participatory housing within the recently created umbrella group called the "Coordination Nationale des Associations de l'Habitat Participatif" ("National Coordination of Participatory Housing Associations").¹⁶ As a result of its member bodies' activities, it has been possible to make self-build development something of a common cause at local level and even further afield. However, other projects of this nature will nevertheless have to come to fruition and become more widespread before it can be seen as a true alternative path for housing production – even in Strasbourg, often cited as a pioneer in the field, alternative housing is still more of a potentiality than a reality.

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¹⁶ "Coordination nationale des associations de l'habitat participatif", article available on the Éco-Quartier association's website (www.ecoquartier-strasbourg.net), dated 24 October 2011.

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