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Housing Policy, Neighborhood Development, and Civic Participation in Cuba: The Social Microbrigade of Santa Clara

By Benedikt Brester

Abstract

This article introduces the reader to the Cuban situation concerning neighborhood development, civic participation, and housing policy. Its intention is to demonstrate a concept of government-introduced self-help housing in Cuba called *microbrigades*, using a case study analysis of Santa Clara, Cuba. A comparison of Cuban microbrigades with other self-help housing projects from different countries highlights the particularities of this extraordinary concept.

Introduction

A Cuban form of mutual self-help housing, called *microbrigades*, is relatively unknown, although it is an exceptional concept of social housing production that has been practiced in Cuba for several decades. Finding a general underrepresentation of microbrigades in scientific literature, the author travelled to the city of Santa Clara, Cuba in the fall of 2009 to conduct a case study of one microbrigade within it, "Chichi Padron." Three experts were interviewed for this analysis. The first interviewee was the chief architect of Chichi Padron, Mr. Antonio Rodríguez González. The second was the *promotor cultural* (cultural promoter) responsible for the organization of cultural activities and festivals in Santa Clara, Mr. Lázaro Abreu Molina. Both live in the case study neighborhood where Chichi Padron built its houses, and both own a house built by the microbrigade. The third expert interviewed was Mrs. Aleida Benabides González, an architect in the municipal urban planning department responsible for provincial and urban planning. This paper first describes the microbrigades concept and traces the Chichi Padron development in particular. It then compares this Cuban concept to other mutual self-help housing approaches from different countries to allow the reader to put it into a more global context.

Cuban Context

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the breakdown of the COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), Cuban exports decreased overnight by one billion US dollars. In 1990, former Cuban leader Fidel Castro declared the onset of the *Período especial en tiempos de paz*, the “special period in peacetime,” or simply Special Period. The Cuban architect and scientist Ronaldo Ramirez said about the aftermath of the Special Period: “It is not possible to describe the severity of the first stages of the Special Period without having lived it, when a single provider—the state—had nothing to provide to a population that had become used to being provided for” (Ramirez 2005, 149). The construction sector did not escape the effects of the economic problems. The production of concrete or cement and its transport was difficult or even impossible due to the lack of fuel and an unsteady power supply. The number of completed buildings was reduced by half within a year (Harms 2001; Mathéy 2001). Two decades after the start of the Special Period, this supply crisis is still ongoing. Food imports, mismanagement, and the U.S. economic embargo are further burdening the Cuban budget, and the habitation sector remains in deficit.

In the Cuban one-party state, which centrally governs politics, economy, and society, the only political party allowed is the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC) (Communist Party of Cuba). It influences all three political-administrative levels in Cuba: the national level, the 14 provinces, and the 169 municipalities. The *Consejo Popular* (popular council), one organizational level below the municipalities, represents the people at the local level, within district borders. However, the municipal, the provincial parliaments, nor the local *Consejo Popular*, have the power to influence national politics. A well-structured, efficient civil society able to oppose the consolidated power of the state, the administration, and the communist party’s mass organizations does not exist in Cuba.

Housing Policy in Cuba

Shortly after the revolution in 1959, the Castro regime laid down in the constitution the right of every Cuban citizen to live in an adequate home. Under socialistic principles, it is forbidden to get rich by calling upon constitutional rights. Hence, owning private housing as an investment, for the purpose of collecting rents, does not exist in Cuba. The logical consequence of this is that the state is in charge of providing adequate housing for its citizens (Mathéy 1993).

However, as in many other socialist countries, the Cuban government has focused its building construction activities on productive economic sectors

instead of fulfilling this responsibility, thus causing a continuing shortage of dwellings (Mathéy 2001). In 2010, the official shortage of private dwellings was more than 500,000 units (Republic of Cuba, INV, 2010), within a total private and state-owned housing stock of 3.12 million units in 2002, (Republic of Cuba, MICONS, 2010). Official estimates include the transformation of 350,000 degraded dwellings to habitable units through rehabilitation measures (Mathéy 2001). In fact, this idea has been only partially implemented since the mid-1990s, when different programs for urban rehabilitation were launched, mainly by social microbrigades. However, due to construction material shortage, these programs often drag on for years.

To alleviate the population's critical housing shortage, the Cuban state attempted to compensate for shortages and slowdowns by resorting to the methods of standardized modern mass housing. The share of state-constructed units in Cuba's overall construction volume varies between one third and one half (Hamberg 1990). Flats were assigned by the state according to the socialist principle of need, which means that the most indigent people should be considered first (Mathéy 1993).

The rent charged for state-constructed housing is designed to eventually pay for the housing, under a leasing contract that runs out after a period of twenty to thirty years. After this time, production costs are considered amortized, and ownership is transferred to the resident (Mathéy 2001). Yet proprietary rights cannot be compared to those common in Europe or North America. For instance, owners are not allowed to sell their dwellings, so Cuban households show a very low residential mobility. The only possibility for relocation to another city or a bigger, more modern house is through the so-called *permuta* (exchange of flats), which requires that those who wish to move find a partner willing to switch with them.

The distribution of state-controlled resources for housing is coordinated and the assignment of finished houses or flats is organized through the provincial branches of the *Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda* (INV), the Cuban National Institute for Housing. INV and its provincial branches are the coordinating authority between the many stakeholders in housing, including ministries, the army, the police, private builders, and others. INV's functions include a reasonable distribution of building materials and monitoring building quality (Mathéy 2001).

Cuban Microbrigades

First introduced in 1970, "the microbrigade concept is a real 'Cuban Invention'," (Mathéy 1994, 133). At that time three main factors influenced innovation in housing production in Cuba. First, there was an extreme

housing shortage caused by too few housing units for the growing population. Second, although it was a period of nominal full employment, there was a lack of manpower in the construction industry. Third, many factories and institutions were overstaffed and declining in productivity because of extensive dismissal protection (Hamberg 1990).

The idea arose to send redundant workers from factories and institutions to construction sites and use their manpower there, while they were paid their usual salary from the original employer. They were organized into construction groups with about thirty participants each, the so-called microbrigades. The remaining 30, who had to keep up the same level of production with fewer workers, were also entitled to benefit from the houses constructed by their colleagues. Within a microbrigade, 60 percent of new flats were allocated among the workers, according to need and work performance, while 40 percent went to the national housing stock. The state distributed these other units to people who were not allowed to participate in microbrigades due to their societal indispensability (e.g. doctors, teachers, soldiers) (Hamberg 1990).

Shortly after the first experiment and a subsequent official evaluation attesting to their effectiveness, microbrigades were formed throughout Cuba. By 1976, about 30,000 people were working in 1,150 microbrigades and had already built 82,000 housing units. Even though building quality was often inferior compared to those produced by professional state construction brigades, the new housing units were in high demand. Further expansion was only limited by the capacity of the industry to produce construction materials (Mathéy 1994).

Despite their popularity and the measurable success in reducing the gap between demand and availability in Cuba's housing sector, microbrigades gradually fell out of favor and by the mid-1970s were no longer supported by governmental institutions. The reasons for this are manifold. When Cuba took part in the COMECON in 1972, its economy grew, which employed many of the formerly redundant workers. Because of the high absolute share of buildings constructed by microbrigades, workers in enterprises without microbrigades did not have the same opportunity to obtain a flat, in spite of the 60-40 rule, and this was considered unfair to them. The construction process of the microbrigades was slow and needed a lot of manpower, and so was considered less economically efficient than industrialized methods of building standardized, modern mass housing. Also, housing microbrigades were often diverted from building housing to constructing other economically or politically prioritized projects such as infrastructure or factories (Hamberg 1990; Mathéy 1994).

Revival of the Concept

At the beginning of the 1980s, an extreme housing shortage had returned. The housing supply crisis led to social tensions and increasing discontent among large parts of the population. After support for the microbrigades dwindled in the mid-1970s, housing construction had been greatly reduced. At the same time, the generation of baby boomers born shortly after the Cuban revolution had reached marriageable age, but many were unable to find appropriate houses or flats to live in (Mathéy 1994).

To soothe the unrest, Fidel Castro again promoted the formerly effective microbrigade concept, but it was revised to take into account lessons learned. Two different types of microbrigades were implemented: state microbrigades and social microbrigades. The share of housing units dedicated to the national housing stock built by state microbrigades, which were designed like the former company microbrigades, was increased from 40 to 50 percent. In dense urban areas where standardized modern mass housing was impossible, only social microbrigades were deployed. Also, in addition to housing, the microbrigades now built technical and social infrastructure as well. For instance, in Havana they built 100 kindergartens with room for 20,000 children, 12 schools, four clinics, and 600 medical offices within two years (Hamberg 1990). By 1990, shortly before the Special Period, microbrigades employed nearly 40,000 workers. But as soon as the economic crisis began, construction activity declined significantly and microbrigades simply did not have sufficient material to do their work. Construction sites were abandoned and many microbrigades shut down. The limited available material was given to microbrigades judged to be promising or advanced, rather than indiscriminately as had been done before; this more focused distribution has become the common policy (Mathéy 1994).

Legal Differences Between State and Social Microbrigades

The task of a state microbrigade includes the construction of flats, houses, and other buildings of economic or social relevance. Any employee can volunteer to participate in a state-organized microbrigade, subject to approval by a union meeting and the consent of the employer to release that person from work. State microbrigade members are usually assigned to a microbrigade in their region for a period of two years to participate in new building construction according to INV plans, supported by the *Consejo Popular* with materials and experts.

A social microbrigade, by contrast, is not a government-organized enterprise, but one organized by a community for work on a local level. It is usually founded on the initiative of residents who wish to improve

their living conditions. Like the state-organized ones, social microbrigades are supported by the local *Consejo Popular* with construction materials, salaries, and expert consultancy. The Cuban housing law (LGV 1988) adds to their scope of duties the maintenance, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of existing buildings. Members of a social microbrigade can be workers who seek a leave of absence from their employer on their own initiative, retirees, unemployed people, homemakers, or adolescents waiting for the university semester to begin (Republic of Cuba, Department of Housing 2009). Hence social microbrigades are a job creation program that improves living conditions on the local level using local people, raising residential satisfaction and forging a local identity.

For participants, the most important difference between state and social microbrigades is that only one percent of buildings constructed by social microbrigades go to the national housing stock. Instead, most of the buildings are distributed to participants by means of a performance-based system, offering participating workers the chance to gain a new house or flat, or to upgrade their existing one by their own effort. Another significant incentive to become part of a social microbrigade is the difference in the financing of building costs. The work performance within the microbrigade, especially working overtime voluntarily, is calculated as a discount on rent, allowing construction costs to be amortized earlier—usually after 15, rather than 20 to 30 years (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.).

Neighborhood Development and Civic Participation

Under the same circumstances of crisis at the beginning of the 1980s, the general negligence of Havana's building inventory became an officially acknowledged problem to solve. Havana's historic center, Habana Vieja, was awarded UNESCO world heritage status at this time. In this context, the government formed a task force called *Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital* (GDIC, or Group for the Integrated Development of the Capital). Its objective was to connect the often poorly coordinated and sector-oriented methods of the various ministries in charge of managing the building inventory. In a sense, GDIC was organized as a comprehensive urban think tank (Harms 2001). GDIC's mission is to solve problems caused by economic crisis, and to alleviate the segregation of poor people within city borders (Núñez Fernández and Oliveras Gómez 2005). In districts with substandard living conditions, neighborhood development teams were installed, called *Talleres de Transformación Integral del Barrio* (Workshops for Comprehensive Neighborhood Upgrading), known as *Talleres* or a *Taller*. The *Taller* is an interdisciplinary team of three to five experts in the fields of architecture, engineering, and social work. Its long-term goal is to connect and integrate local stakeholders (e.g. residents or their representatives

from the local *Consejo Popular*) in three fields of action: improvement of housing conditions and local infrastructure, construction and maintenance of public buildings, and strengthening of the local economy (Núñez Fernández and Oliveras Gómez 2005; Ramirez 2005).

Talleres worked closely with microbrigades and/or promoted their formation within the neighborhood. This strategic approach to improving living conditions and environmental and social aspects of housing aims to prevent the isolation and exclusion of citizens in disadvantaged districts, and thus avoid segregation and its consequences (Núñez Fernández and Oliveras Gómez 2005 and Benabides González 2009). In order to assure a localized working approach in harmony with the residents' interests and needs, each *Taller* is administratively assigned to a *Consejo Popular*. Today, there are twenty *Talleres* in Havana (Núñez Fernández and Oliveras Gómez 2005).

Talleres were established in response to widespread discontent among large parts of the population in the early 1980s. The endurance and achievements of this uniquely Cuban form of neighborhood development are remarkable, especially with regard to the manifold restrictions imposed by the central government. As early as 1988, before the Special Period, modern grassroots participation techniques of an almost democratic character were established. Although limited to Havana at first, experiences from these *Talleres* had some influence on how social microbrigades in other cities were conducted, as will be illustrated by the case of the *Chichi Padron* microbrigade in Santa Clara (Benabides González, pers. comm.).

Case Study: The Social Microbrigade “Chichi Padron” of Santa Clara

The city of Santa Clara is capital of the province Villa Clara in Cuba's geographic center, hosting all governmental provincial administration departments (see Figure 1). About 210,000 people live in 32 neighborhoods within Santa Clara. The social microbrigade Chichi Padron, in the Nuevo Condado neighborhood, was selected as a case study due to its successful work; it is considered a “best practice” case. It was further analyzed by means of eight examination criteria: (1) initial situation, (2) founding year, runtime, and initiative, (3) civil stakeholders, (4) governmental stakeholders and financing of the project, (5) project's goals, (6) success/failure, (7) effects on other districts, and (8) current situation.



Figure 1: Map of Cuba. Credit: Benedikt Brester.

The Neighborhood *Nuevo Condado*

Since the 1950s, Cuba's urban population has been increasing due to migration from the countryside. Up until the 1980s, spontaneous settlements appeared, populated with buildings "made from the most primitive materials" (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.). The neighborhood being studied, *Nuevo Condado* (New Condado), also called *Condado Sur* (South Condado), has 19,596 inhabitants and a population density of nearly 18,100 people per square mile (Molina 2005) (see Figure 2). It is part of the district *El Condado* (*The Condado*, literally *The Shire*), situated in the southwestern part of the city, had separated into two administrative units, *Condado Norte* (North Condado) and *Condado Sur*, because it was expanding as a result of migration from the countryside. *Condado Sur* was neglected by planning institutions, but continued to grow as an informal settlement. From the 1950s to the 1980s, there were almost no governmental housing activities in the neighborhood, due on one hand to the political agendas of the time, and on the other to the district's difficult and complex mix of residents. Many people who settled in *Condado Sur* were unemployed, poor, illiterate, or former criminals, living in homes lacking family structure. As a result, people from other districts developed a persistent negative image of *Condado Sur* (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.).



Figure 2: Map of Santa Clara. Credit: Benedikt Brester.

The Social Microbrigade “Chichi Padron”

Facing a new phase of development, the Condado Sur neighborhood was renamed Nuevo Condado in 1990 (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.). The social microbrigade Chichi Padron active in Nuevo Condado developed from on a neighborhood club founded in 1989, which began as a residents’ institution to organize social activities in the neighborhood. It was based upon the idea of the *Talleres* in Havana, but focused on social themes, and without support from the government. The club became a symbol for the residents’ solidarity—finding themselves caught in similar difficult circumstances, Nuevo Condado’s struggling inhabitants helped each other, although not entirely without social tensions (Molina, pers. comm.). Consequences of the poor housing conditions in Nuevo Condado were severe, so 30 active people from the neighborhood club took initiative to target the housing problem by applying for the right to form a social microbrigade with the provincial government.

After gaining permission from the provincial government, the microbrigade was founded in April 1990. Its headquarters office was located in the neighborhood, and all activities of the microbrigade participants were coordinated from there. The state deputized some experts because nobody in the neighborhood had the qualifications to plan or lead the group. A chief architect served as team leader, supported by two other architects, a civil engineer, and a city planner. Social scientists and psychologists from Santa Clara’s university were intrigued by Chichi Padron because the initiative came from a neighborhood with such a bad reputation. They conducted research about the initial situation and living conditions of the neighborhood’s residents; the resulting study, titled *Psychology of Living*, became a standard reference nationally for social surveys in Cuban neighborhoods.

In cooperation with residents of Nuevo Condado and the university researchers, the chief architect and his team created a neighborhood development concept based on the model of Havana’s *Talleres*. The concept’s participatory approach respected the residents’ concerns for social infrastructure and collectively owned land (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.). The project’s goals and tasks as to neighborhood development were assigned to two components: construction and social concerns. The primary objectives of the construction-oriented component were to upgrade buildings worthy of preservation and replace substandard buildings, to construct social infrastructure open to everyone, and to install technical infrastructure that was lacking (electricity, water, and sanitation). The goals of the socially-oriented component were decided and implemented by a participatory approach, in collaboration with all stakeholders showing commitment to local development. Objectives included promoting cultural

traditions, remaining focused on the community's needs, and supporting civil initiative and autonomous local problem solving by preventing top-down regulations (Republic of Cuba, DPPFVC 2005).

Social activities in Nuevo Condado and the intensive involvement of the population in the process of neighborhood development have significantly increased the acceptance of planning measures as well as interest in the microbrigade. Shortly after the Chichi Padron microbrigade took up work, it numbered 90 workers in three groups of 30 persons each. About 50 percent of the participants were women. The 30 Nuevo Condado district became "a large open work center, a large construction company" (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.) with the microbrigade serving as a major employer. For most of the employed construction workers, it was the first time they had a regular job. Given the chance to earn not only money, but to own a solid house by their own labor, the motivation to participate in the microbrigade was high. Nuevo Condado "provided the human resource and the state all other required resources, such as cement, sand, wood" (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.).

In accordance with the 1988 housing law (Republic of Cuba, Department of Housing), 99 percent of the houses were distributed to the microbrigades members according to a system based on individual performance. Thus, in principle, the laborer who had worked most hours would get the first house. In addition to the regular daily work schedule of eight hours, a voluntary overtime of two hours a day was expected by each worker. Each hour of extra work scored points for the performance-based distribution system. So in reality, longer hours were mandatory and not voluntary if one wished to earn a home. Bonus points were added for social engagement, for example acceptance of responsibility for social projects, thus forming an incentive to speed up home ownership by increasing social commitment (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.).

Once a building was finished, a meeting was held with all the participating workers to discuss who would be allowed to move in based on accumulated performance points. Decisions had to be made by a two-thirds majority. Some very fiery debates resulted, but in the end a solution was always found (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.). This way of distribution was considered fair in general, but also difficult (Molina, pers. comm.). In many discussions, personal differences played an important role. There were even a few situations which resulted in fisticuffs, such that a few people were separated from the group and even quit the microbrigade. A more general problem was that the performance-based system did not consider the number of years one had already worked in the microbrigade. That was the main reason why people felt aggrieved. On average, workers had to work two to six years in the microbrigade before receiving their own house (Rodríguez Gonzáles, pers. comm.).

Since the establishment of the Chichi Padron microbrigade, many small groups focusing on social commitment have emerged in the district, and concerts and other recreational activities regularly take place there. So many social activities were taking place in Nuevo Condado that it became necessary to build a *casa comunitaria* (community building) open to all residents and all social activities (see Figure 3), completed in 1995. Adjacent to it is a sports field, a kindergarten, and a library, a police station and a medical practice. Other major projects of the microbrigade included repairing the primary school in the district and adding a canteen, as well as the establishment of a farmers' market (Molina, pers. comm.).

By 2005, Chichi Padron had built more than 160 apartments and houses, the entire neighborhood was connected to electricity, water, and sewage, and the main streets were paved and equipped with streetlights (Republic



Figure 3: Community building with sports field. Photo: Benedikt Brester.

of Cuba, DPPFVC 2005). Today, Nuevo Condado gives a solid impression; there are no visible traces of self-made wooden huts (see Figure 4). As shown in Figure 5, the number of flats in “good” condition rose from 25% in 1990 to almost 75% in 2005, and the percentage of units with drinking water supply rose from 40% to nearly 100%. In view of these physical changes, the district’s development can be classified as successful.

The success of the Chichi Padron social microbrigade can also be measured according to its social contributions. A more neighborly coexistence has evolved in the neighborhood. Nuevo Condado now has the highest number



Figure 4: Typical microbrigade houses in Nuevo Condado. Photo: Benedikt Brester.

of social activity groups in Santa Clara (Molina, pers. comm.). Another important achievement is the creation of vegetable gardens serving the local food supply. A plethora of small projects are accomplished by groups that organize themselves according to their interests. All these activities have resulted in better nutrition and hygiene, fewer young people dropping out of school early, less unemployment, and fewer criminal offenses, as shown in Figure 5.

This high level of local autonomy has been attributed to the project's orientation toward integrating people and encouraging them to act independently. Governmental stakeholders often have only peripheral tasks, and cooperation with them is often limited to financial or administrative support, such as for approvals (Molina, pers. comm.).

In Cuba, the social microbrigade Chichi Padron is now seen as a best practice example. Most Cuban ministers have visited the district, and a visit to Nuevo Condado is a must for sociologists (Molina, pers. comm.). The neighborhood wasn't formally recognized as substandard, and there was no *Taller* which promoted a microbrigade. It was a totally bottom-up approach that succeeded despite the centralized structure of district governance, and largely independent of governmental support. This project has generated an impulse for participatory district development projects in Cuba in general.

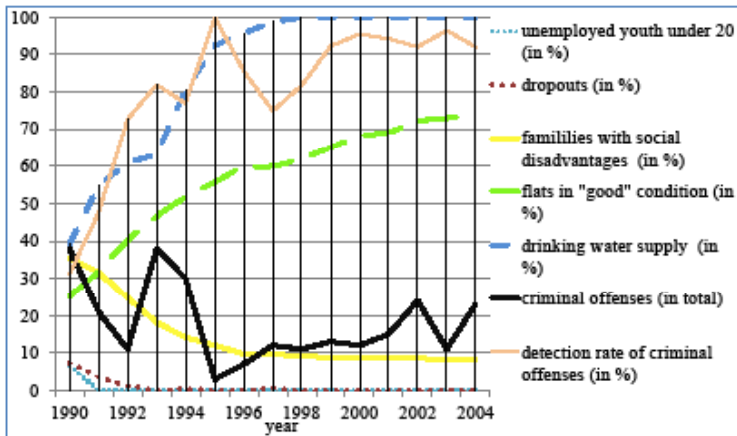


Figure 5: Changing socio-spatial characteristics in Nuevo Condado. Data was collected by the cultural promoter of the city with the help of social scientists of Santa Clara's university for the municipal government in 2005.

Uniqueness of the Microbrigade Concept

Much literature exists on the topic of self-help housing, especially in developing countries. It is often seen as a solution for governments that are either overstrained by an exploding population or just do not address the needs of the urban poor for whatever reasons. Unfavorable side effects include among other things urban sprawl, substandard living conditions, health problems, and unsettled land tenure regimes. For example the uncontrolled rapid development of the informal "Gecekondu" settlements in Turkey has led to great infrastructural problems in Turkish cities. In Istanbul 65 to 75 percent of all settlements are still of an illegal status today (Benson et al 2008).

Numbers which allow one to make conclusions regarding the importance of self-help housing in different socialist countries vary. For instance, in 1980, of the total amount of new residential construction, self-help housing represented 50 percent in Slovenia, 37 percent in Hungary, 25 percent in Poland, 25 percent in Bulgaria and 8 percent in the USSR (Mandic 2009). In contrast, self-help housing provision played a major role in Cuba, comprising 78 percent from 1980 to 1983 (Hamberg 1990). This significant difference is likely the result of Cuba's specific support during the revival of the microbrigades.

Other mutual-help housing approaches can be found in São Paulo, Brazil (USINA 2007), the state of Tamil Nadu, India (PWDS 2010), Guinea-Bissau (Acioly Jr. 1992), and Idaho Falls in Idaho, USA (EICAP 2010). While the Bissau approach is only a local small-scale one, with 50 houses constructed between 1989 and 1992, the other three examples are still ongoing. In Idaho

Falls a small-scale community project has built 150 homes since 1998. Participants make no down payment, and mortgage payments are tied to income. Homes are constructed in groups with every homeowner in the group expected to complete all of the homes before moving in, to improve solidarity among the future neighbors (EICAP, March 6, 2012). This kind of mutual self-help housing is similar to the concept of future homeowners forming a microbrigade.

On a larger scale, the Palmyrah Workers Development Society (PWDS) is working: in Tamil Nadu, India as a nongovernmental organization implementing community development projects. Founded in 1977, PWDS seeks to improve the socio-economic condition of low-income communities. Families are enabled to build their homes through an innovative funding scheme that involves a combination of community contributions, micro-credit and government subsidy. PWDS established a community-based finance institution to act as an intermediary to make funds more easily accessible. Community involvement and capacity building are central elements of the program. Community centers are funded and built by local communities as a focus for community mobilization and solidarity. Since 1990 more than 11,000 homes have been built and financed with the help of PWDS and its 47 partner organizations (PWDS 2010). As in the microbrigade concept, working hours are used to discount the payment of micro-credits. However, there is no collaborative aspect in the construction activities so the approach cannot be defined as mutual-help housing.

In São Paulo, particularly after the collapse of the military regime in the 1980s, the quality of services provided by the government was poor due to high population growth rates and increasing levels of poverty and unemployment, combined with up to 15 percent of the city's population living in slums (USINA 2007). People's organizations originating from neighborhood associations sought improvements in housing and infrastructure, and applied pressure on the local government that resulted in the first self-managed housing programs for São Paulo's central region. One of the most prominent organizations is USINA (Centre of Projects for the Built Environment), whose mutual self-help project, called *mutirão* (mutual), is funded entirely through resources raised by residents and supportive organizations, quite similar to the PWDS working method. Residents contribute with their labor at a rate of sixteen hours per week and per household. Locally adapted technologies have been developed for the residents to construct multistory buildings by themselves through a self-managed process. In addition to housing, the project involves the development of community facilities and income-generating activities, including community bakeries, childcare facilities, and professional training courses (USINA 2007). Participating in USINA allows low-income families to gain access to adequate housing and secure land

tenure using affordable financial mechanisms. The participatory process strengthens local social networks, and the wider community benefits from cultural and economical activities. These benefits are reminiscent of social microbrigades' side effects: "The work of USINA has played a key role in the development of a city- and statewide process of mutual-help housing construction with self-management of resources, involving approximately 25,000 families in the metropolitan area of São Paulo since 1989" (USINA 2007, 7).

Conclusion

The Cuban microbrigade concept is unique in terms of being a mainstream self-help housing approach that was introduced and financed completely by the government and regulated by law. Despite a total dependency on the state, Cubans were able to solve some of their housing problems by creating a system of self-organized social microbrigades. Even considering the good results, a critical perspective must be taken. The only way to improve one's prospects for housing was a ten-hour-shift of hard physical labor, although the right of every Cuban citizen to live in an adequate home is written into the constitution. Yet as was seen in a brief comparison with other approaches, most self-help housing approaches depend on people being prepared to work on the construction of their own home, as well as the homes of others, if they want to improve their living conditions. In this context, microbrigades deserve a closer look, before the effects of globalization reach this isolated island nation, and these unique social structures disappear.

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