

Socializing practice

From small firms to cooperative models of organization

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Introduction

While the vast majority of practices in design-related fields, including architecture, have been historically organized as small and precarious, their sizes have presented inherent limitations to their ability to compete with increasingly larger and economically dominant practices within capitalist markets. This relative subordination is further accentuated by pressures on design practitioners that have long promoted competition, secrecy, and profit- and production-driven labour that discourages them from sharing resources, personnel, and working cooperatively across firms and industries. Rethinking the nature of practice in small firms is part of a broader need to reconsider the value of cooperation, cooperatives, and cooperativization in cities more broadly. By viewing small firms in tandem with the social, economic, and political potentials offered by cooperative models of organization, architects and spatial practitioners may begin to foreground care over profit, use-values over exchange values, and the sharing of knowledge over private appropriation in order to create more equitable, just, and livable neighbourhoods and cities.¹

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first examines the need for small firms to reconsider their business models, their approach to management, and their understandings of labour. By exposing their structure, their financial resources, and their means of distribution, small firms are argued to be inherently precarious. In contrast to such precarity, cooperation, cooperatives, and cooperativization begin to challenge the “everyone-go-it-alone” ethos that pervades many design fields. The second analyses the theories of cooperatives and the process of cooperativization by exploring thinkers who imagined structures of shared profits, cooperative approaches to production, and even further, a post-capitalist world based upon cooperativized cities. The last reveals how cooperative models of practice – in varying degrees – may be applied to spatial practices and small architecture firms in particular, including how these cooperativized firms can scale up beyond the production of architecture to influence and shape social relations at the city and neighbourhood scale.

By banding together with other architecture practices and those in other industries, small firms can help to ensure that capitalist development does not divide and conquer the various stakeholders of a community and instead model and promote democratic social institutions that foreground care, inclusion, and cooperation. They offer a particularly useful site of engagement with local politics that transcends siloed, profit-motivated, and production-driven work.

Small firms and their structures of practice

Historically, the definition of “small firm” has implied a range of meanings. Not only has it described a particular scale of practice and associated projects, but it also suggested a culture, ethos, and identity that carried with it an inherent mystique. While the myth of the so-called individual male creative genius, working alone in his

studio, is long dead, the labour and values that define small firms remains uneven and obscure. From so-called “idea firms” to designer boutiques to those without definition merely trying to survive, many design practitioners within them now find themselves competing for an increasingly small portion of revenue and often directly with firms that have a global span with thousands of employees.

Despite these challenges, small firms are by far the most frequent size of practice within the design fields. In the United States, for example, architecture firms comprised of fewer than 20 people make up 92 per cent of all firms – a percentage virtually unchanged since the 1970s – though in total they represent only 44 per cent of all architectural workers (US Department of Commerce, 2012, Economic Census, table 5). According to new definitions put forth by the American Institute of Architects, small firms are narrowly defined as those with fewer than three “architectural staff employees” or those that are legally organized as sole proprietorships (AIA, 2018). However, less than 12 per cent of all firms in the US are organized as sole proprietorships, compared to 80 per cent of firms that are organized as corporations (AIA, 2018). Thus, while small firms represent a vast majority of practices in number, they remain constrained and limited in their ability to distinguish themselves as structurally unique and able to compete with market demands. As a result, they often resort to strategies of diversification, branding, and corporate structures of practice that continue to fuel capitalist competition – but without the legal and financial advantages that come with large corporate firms and their economies of scale.

Beyond this, the average lifespan of small firms is far shorter than large firms, and thus their size renders them precarious. In general, design practices follow broader business trends, as 30 per cent of small firms fail in their first year; 50 per cent fail within the first five years, and 70 per cent fail within the first ten years (Roche, 2014, 70; Glenn, 2018). For architecture, in particular, sociologist Judith Blau’s classic study of the economic survival of architecture firms during the recessions of the 1970s revealed that small firms organized like large corporations and embracing an entrepreneurial spirit were more likely to survive during economic recessions than others (Blau, 1984, 131). While economic longevity is but one narrow metric of recognizing the “survival” of a practice, there are structural differences between large and small firms, as well. While large firms can include (or hire) administrative personnel – from accountants to lawyers to cost estimators to contract negotiators – who help to address the complex webs of finances, liability, labour guidelines, and management, small firms are often overburdened by time spent determining the rules of business and the economy. As outlined by Blau, small firms remain wedded to competition and uphold a view of practice that privileges supply-side economics.

And finally, while small firms traditionally enter into the same design–bid–build contracts as large firms, they come to the table with different clout. The contracts upon which many depend, for instance, include inherent flaws: they assume that both signers to the contract come as equals when they often do not; they are based on a fear of litigation; and they disengage the architect from the contractor. The inherent antagonism that this creates between all parties, but especially the architect and the contractor, leads to both a psychologically defensive approach to work and barely budgeted-for legal expertise that is practised at all levels of the profession. But for small firms that have neither the in-house legal expertise nor the financial security to absorb badly negotiated contracts nor the range of experiences to reliably identify the scope of work to be negotiated, these inherent power flaws set up by standard contracts are exaggerated, and the negative financial precarity are rendered more extreme. Integrated Project Delivery (IPD) contracts – in which the owner, architect, and contractor equally share risk and reward, mediate their disparate goals cooperatively, and agree to not sue one another – go a long way to upend the irrational antagonism that comes with standard contracts, but they do not solve the larger problem of firms competing against each other for the

rare job that comes with an enlightened and willing client and contractor or the inability of small firms in particular to attract those kinds of projects.

By sharing expertise and resources through cooperative structures, small firms may be able to spend a greater amount of time on their particular areas of expertise and creativity, displacing competition between workers in order to avoid what Marx referred to as “alienation” – the overwhelming lack of individual fulfillment in one’s work, competition with co-workers, and the appropriation of the surplus value produced by workers by the owners of the means of production. Cooperative models may come in various forms and degrees of engagement for design practitioners – each with a range of implications for the institutionalized divisions, boundaries, and values of their labour. Whether one engages with cooperative forms of practice merely by sharing administrative personnel or by banding together across firms and with other industries in an effort to bring issues of sustainability, care, and inclusion to the fore of the community, each model redefines the boundaries of labour and thus challenges siloed professional work.

Cooperatives in history and theory

Architects, especially in the US after World War II, espoused an ethos of “collaboration” and sought not only to work with other architects in order to tackle larger projects and higher revenues, but also to broaden the scope of architectural practice by absorbing and merging with related professions. In this, however, collaboration and coordination were mere functions of a new, post-war corporatism in which the single firm remained intact. Many small firms embracing such rhetoric mushroomed into some of the largest practices during the second half of the twentieth century, including The Architects Collaborative, Caudill Rowlett Scott, and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. In contrast to these collaboratives, cooperatives represent an alternative historiography – one tied to capitalist critique, democratic means of ownership, self-management, mutual support among and between workers, and socio-economic equity.

Cooperatives emerged primarily in nineteenth-century Europe immediately following the Industrial Revolution – especially in Britain and France – when skilled labourers and property owners joined together in order to protect their own labour as well as the value and quality of their goods, crops, and other offerings. As owners of large industries turned to unfair labour practices in order to maximize volumes of production demanded by industrialization – offering little pay to their workers, demanding long hours, and failing to maintain healthy work environments – workers and communities began to join together to co-own property and tools in order to maintain decent work, pay, care, and food and move toward distinctly utopian cooperative communities. While unions also grew quickly after the 1840s, especially in countries such as the United States, cooperatives were still part of larger strategies of worker protections when worker strikes failed. Workers pooled their resources and skills in order to challenge and be independent from large, increasingly incorporated businesses and factories.

Marx’s early work is critical of utopian attempts to localize and exceptionalize alternatives to the totalizing nature of capitalism. His later works, however, offer more nuanced positions on cooperative and communal experiments, such as the Paris Commune of 1871. Robert Owen, the Welsh textile manufacturer who drew praise from Friedrich Engels for his efforts to improve the working and living conditions of his workers by distributing revenue equitably, was one of the most influential figures in the effort to establish alternative models of social organization along cooperative lines. In his utopian commune, the residents would not only follow the principles of cooperativization – shared profit, joint decision-making, and worker management – but be both the producers and consumers of its products. While other utopianists, such as Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon, influenced social modes of production and cohabitation, Owen was singular in specifying the basic tenets of cooperativization (Mazzarol, Limnios, and Reboud, 2011). Indeed, the

difference between cooperativization and other revolutionary modes of struggle has resulted in the obscuring of cooperative thinking as a particular mode of addressing social equity, although cooperative ideology ran through the more known socialist movement. The soviets of the Soviet Union had cooperative-run and state-run collectives, and while cooperatives were initially disparaged by Lenin for their lack of class politics and their possible coexistence with private land ownership, he later saw them as essential tools for educating Russian peasants on trading power and as an essential dialectical link to socialism. Likewise, the French-initiated syndicalist movement – while much more anarchistic in its advocacy of the “general strike,” rejection of electoral politics, and workers’ organizations rejection of rule by the state – anticipated that, economically, wage slavery would be replaced by cooperatives, and, as Mikhail Bakunin said, would “flourish and reach its full potential only in a society where the land, the instruments of production, and hereditary property will be owned and operated by the workers themselves: by their freely organised federations of industrial and agricultural workers” (Anarcho, 2008).

Cooperatives in the practice of architecture were rare but not unheard of. In Sweden, Kooperativa Förbundets Arkitektkontor (Swedish Cooperative Union and Wholesale Society’s Architect’s Office) was founded in 1925 to design “new norms for the whole of Swedish society”; by the 1930s it was the largest architectural office in Sweden, attracting young architects to work anonymously on mundane building types – supermarkets, factories, and social housing. In the UK, the Design Research Unit, founded in the 1940s, insisted that design should be cooperative, should be for everyone, and be applied to unexceptional programme types at the same time that they brought together architecture, graphics, and industrial design to “recondition and redesign public utility services” (Williams, 2017). As one of the agency’s founding documents claims: “Like every aspect of modern industry, design should be a co-operative activity” (McGuirk, 2010).

After the massive upheaval of World War II, the negotiation between labour unions and large corporations helped systematize the new social-democratic welfare states. While securing relatively higher standards of living for workers, this system came under attack in the 1960s and 1970s for leaving untouched capitalist aims, and new attention was paid to cooperatives. At the same time, the conceptual, political, and spatial context embraced by cooperativization expanded. In Italy, the workerism/autonomia movements insisted that capitalist exploitation now exceeded the space of the factory to encompass the whole capitalist metropolis and the definition of “worker” outstripped that of the factory “proletariat” to include middle-class, familial, and governmental systems. In European countries in general, the search for alternative political forms that cut between US capitalism and USSR communism made cooperatives a large social enterprise.

Central to this expansion was a new emphasis on reproduction. Silvia Federici, coming out of the autonomist movement, challenged the patriarchal and capitalist boundary between “productive” and “unproductive” labour, as well as reproductive labour’s historical confinement to the household (Federici, 2004). [In the 1980s, Diane Elson pointed out that cooperatives have been central actors in shifting focus from the critique of capitalist production to forms of economic cooperation based on the reproduction of labour and that “the guiding thread of a socialist economy” meant reappraising the work of households and fostering mechanisms of cooperative information exchange to meet social demands (Elson, 1988, 4).] Andre Gorz proposed that “cooperative circles,” encompassing both the labours of reproduction and those of production, could, if coordinated adequately, radically reduce the sphere of necessity while enlarging the sphere of autonomy to that of the city. He suggests we move beyond static definitions of agency based on the working class because technological developments mean that classic conditions of alienation, environmental devastation, and (gendered) division of labour can materially be overcome (Gorz, 1982). The economic historian of the Soviet regime, Alec Nove, citing Gorz, proposed five basic scales of activities (and corresponding social

forms) necessary to run an advanced socialist society: centralized state corporations; socialized enterprises; cooperative enterprises; small-scale private enterprise; and individuals (e.g. freelance journalists, plumbers, artists) (Nove, 1983, 396).²

For these thinkers, cooperatives provide two interlocking types of use-value: the fundamental labour of reproduction that allows society to maintain and transform itself – including labours of care and cultural transmission – and the work of producing a surplus that can be distributed equitably as leisure or investment in socially desired activities. But they also open up the territory, both social and spatial, in which cooperatives operate. For small architecture firms, this expanded territory, and the variety of scales within this territory, can and should be embraced.

Cooperative models of practice for architecture

The advantages and general principles of cooperative business models specify that membership in a cooperative is voluntary and nondiscriminatory; each member receives one vote (this in contrast to other corporations where the number of shares owned determines voting power); members contribute to, and democratically control, the financial resources of their cooperative; they offer autonomy and independence since they are member-led, bottom-up structures; they provide education on the principles and practices of cooperative business so that members will be good decision makers and so the general public will better understand cooperatives; they work together at the local, regional, national, and international levels to further economic democracy; and they work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members. In the transactional world, there are four standard business types of cooperatives:

1. *Consumer coops*, which are owned by the people who buy the goods or use the services of the cooperative; these generally apply to housing, electricity and telecommunications, credit unions, health care, childcare, among other sectors;
2. *Producer coops*, which are owned by people who produce similar types of products and collectively market them to improve their incomes; these generally apply to farmers, craftsmen, and artisans;
3. *Worker coops*, which are owned and governed by the employees of the business; these generally apply to restaurants, taxicab companies, timber processors and light and heavy industry; and
4. *Purchasing and shared services cooperatives*, which are owned and governed by independent business owners, small municipalities and state government agencies that band together to enhance their purchasing power.

These four coop types – consumer, producer, worker, and municipal – map onto four proposed types of architectural cooperatives that scale up step by step and recognize varying degrees of engagement: shared administration, shared resources, shared profit, and shared social construction. These can be seen as steps to the full, social and municipal potential of coops that take advantage of these business types but look beyond their production advantages to become an infrastructure for the workers who share the means of production and the social/civic structures in which they operate. At the same time, the particular demands that architecture and smallness put on these models begin to further radicalize them, just as they, implicitly or otherwise, radicalize the architecture profession. Just as Nove argues for the various scales at which cooperation works, these different degrees of cooperation, from the smallest, of sharing administration, to the largest, of sharing (and constructing) the commons, may also connect and scale up. The ultimate goal is to transcend privatized monetary reward altogether.

As a legally defined business structure, cooperatives are rare – a fact that testifies to their outlier status in capitalism. Indeed, as historian John Curl has argued, cooperatives have historically served as explicit models of organizing work that

ran counter to capitalist norms; capitalism has “always worked hard to weaken, discredit, and destroy [cooperatives] through waging price wars, enacting legislation that undercuts their viability, labeling them in the media as subversive and a failure, and using several other stratagems” (Scholz, 2016, 12). In the UK, for instance, there are no formal laws structuring cooperatives (Alternative Models, 2017);³ in the US, only five states – California, Texas, Colorado, North Carolina, and Massachusetts – identify cooperatives as a business model, the majority of which recognize producer or consumer cooperatives though some have recently expanded to include worker coops. Moreover, where they do exist, architecture as a profession is effectively excluded from using the cooperative business model.⁴ Thus the most common way to form a cooperative – for architects and other businesses – is the Limited Liability Company (LLC), which is the most flexible of business models. But here, too, the difficulties in hashing out a “non-cooperative cooperative” are notoriously difficult, and pro-coop organizations spend a good deal of their time advising new coop-ers how to navigate their implementation.⁵

Small firms organizing as coops are therefore entering into a process that runs counter to the logic of capitalism – whether they are politically minded or not. While we argue for the ultimate advantage of the most extreme form of an architectural cooperative – one that moves beyond worker cooperativization to embrace Gorz’s larger urban agenda – we also recognize that the small firms that choose cooperativization for the most practical of reasons (saving time and money) are making the initial foray into combating capitalism’s enforced competition.

1. *Architects sharing administrative duties.*

Small firms (if not large firms as well) suffer from the need to individually establish their administrative apparatus: bookkeeping, accounting, benefits, payroll, insurance, legal advice. Not only are architects not trained in these business practices, but the administering of each takes time away from what the architect wants to do and is good at. Moreover, individual firms, when contracting for outside services or products, often pay a premium that is disproportionate to their income and purchasing power. To move beyond this, small architecture firms can adopt the consumer cooperative model in order to jointly “consume” administrative expertise and products. Multiple firms would share an accountant, a lawyer, and benefits specialist that understands the particularities of architecture; while so sharing, they would be using their increased purchasing power.

Beyond the obvious practicality of the above, this step into cooperativism also begins to undo stereotypes of architectural work. Given that the firms paying in will need to share information about their ability to pay and their level of liability and/or generosity, transparency displaces secrecy; given that oversight of the combined administrative team will be decided jointly and responsibilities rotated, joint agreements displace competition; given that money will be collected and banked jointly, trust displaces parsimony.

At the same time, identifying the need for this work and articulating it as a speciality undoes stereotypes of architectural administration. Those taking on these duties are no longer mere accountants, bookkeepers, etc.; they are versed in the particularities of architectural practice and, as such, move from uninformed number crunchers to knowledgeable management experts. This is a change in how they are perceived by those doing the “creative” work as well as in that team’s self-identification. Especially as architecture is increasingly defined by nontraditional contracts and interdisciplinary relationships, these workers, too, transform into team-playing generalists while capitalizing on their specialist skills.

2. *Architects sharing resources (and employees).*

Small firms have many advantages, including adapting to the needs of specific communities, unusual client programmes, and variable, flexible modes of

procurement. At the same time, this ability to be light-on-the-feet comes with limited in-house resources. The model of producer coops, originally associated with farmers who needed to band together to get access to the market, is applicable to architects who need similar clout in the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) industry and access to clients who are normally out of their reach. Sharing expertise in IT, material, financial, building performance, and procurement experience means that small firms can act like large ones.

This mode of cooperation is, again, a profound undoing of architects' immersion in capitalist competition and the particular identities that this immersion has forged. Gone is the sense that knowledge needs to be guarded to maintain an edge over the competition; gone is the idea that the pie is a zero-sum game; gone is the idea that the things shared are proprietary; and subliminally, gone is the idea that design is about form, not knowledge. Yet with this letting go of guarded knowledge may come a fundamental challenge to the idea of professional work and to the structure or role of a profession altogether – both of which are predicated on institutionalizing esoteric knowledge and gatekeeping.

The articulation of needs and the offering of help subverts characteristics that go beyond the profession of architecture. But in architecture particularly, where talents range over so many different areas, the notion of “productivity” embedded in a producer cooperative itself expands. For the staff, the network of individuals to which one has access expands the office “team” which in turn pulls in expertise that does not merely solve a designer’s specific problem but can reframe the question entirely; the expanded pool of architectural workers pushes beyond mere task completion. For the firm owners, there is a change in how firms identify their “individuality.” It is ironic but significant that small firms market themselves in a completely homogeneous fashion: “We care for quality design; we are interested in all aspects of the project; we are good listeners and prioritize our clients’ needs; etc. etc.” With shared information, a small firm can capture a specific set of proficiencies – the intersection of which may make a firm look different than other firms – and the firm’s personal and organizational identity is enriched, not diffused.

3. *Architects fully cooperativizing: worker-owned within and across firms.*

If consumer and production cooperatives are steps toward breaking the marginalization of architecture in general and small firms in particular – a marginalization caused by capitalist-imposed ideologies of competition – neither achieve the more powerful goal of moving from capital hiring labour to labour hiring capital; from maximizing the capitalist’s profit to maximizing income per worker. In the worker cooperative, that is achieved. Regardless of how sharing is controlled, every worker-owner participates in decision-making in a democratic fashion, management is elected by every worker-owner, or managers are treated as workers of the firm. All shares are held by the workforce with no outside owners, each member has one voting share and workers own the means of production. A worker-owned architectural firm, like other worker-owned businesses, has many distinct business advantages: if everyone buys into the mission of the office and knows why one goes after or rejects certain work, each member works harder; if one’s attention is focused on the work at hand and not on the aggravations of uneven distribution of profits, focus is better; if one is spared the division between management and labour and trusted to both organize and perform one’s work, you want to give your best.⁶

But the full advantage of a worker-owned firm comes with cooperativizing across a number of firms. Again, the business advantages of this are obvious: firms that share their profits, their production expertise, and the purchasing power have the combined financial advantages of all these three types: group discounts; access to markets and anti-monopoly forces; better information and technology; shared risk and reward; innovation; access to goods and services;

better production and procurement information; joint services; and the possibility of common facilities. The numerous tech and light industry cooperatives in the US and the UK offer examples of these advantages and the strong rejection they give to neoliberalism's call to entrepreneurially compete.⁷ At a larger scale still, the remarkably successful international Mondragon Corporation, which originated in the Basque region of Spain, previews how a concerted effort to thwart the forces of capitalization moves across and past disciplinary silos. Beginning in 1956 with the production of paraffin heaters in the town of Mondragon, the worker-owned cooperative saw quickly that cooperatives in banking, retail, knowledge and related industries were essential to its larger social vision. Today, they employ over 80,000 people in over 250 companies in 100 countries (Mondragon, 2017).

Beyond the business advantages, the conceptual shift in architecture is away from not only competition but disciplinary disempowerment. The banding together of numerous worker-owned firms creates a base of cooperating forces that can stand up to the developers that currently shape our cities with projects that hold no regard for either sustainable communities or a sustainable environment.

4. *Architects and municipal cooperatives.*

The vision of worker-owned architecture firms cooperating and sharing profits builds a network with the necessary knowledge to address the urgent needs of the built environment. But one can also imagine architecture firms that operate as catalysts for entire municipalities. In this case, the cooperative model expands on the framework of purchasing and shared services cooperatives, examples of which include groups of employers that form alliances to buy health care insurance or to purchase health care services directly from hospitals and physicians; school districts that organize cooperatives to provide special education programmes as well as purchase products for member districts; hardware stores, restaurants, independent pharmacies, rural electric cooperatives, local food retailers, and natural food stores that operate as wholesalers. Architecture and design firms, too, can band together with other industries in their municipalities to ensure that capitalist development does not divide and conquer the various stakeholders of a community, and they can do so by identifying the multiple common interests that go beyond joint purchasing power. In this scenario, architects, which are generally minor players in a municipality's economy, can help to marshal the broad set of issues leading to a stable and sustainable community.

One can map an architectural narrative on top of inspiring examples, such as that of Emilia Romagna in Italy. In this region, producer, consumer, and worker cooperatives coexist with social cooperatives to ensure that the region provides for its needs without a reliance on either the capitalist global market or a corrupt state. There is less a scaling up of various coops as it is an expansion of networks both horizontally and vertically, supported by complementary financial networks and strategic umbrella organizations, whose job is to ensure the cooperation among cooperatives is smooth and efficient. As the organizers of the Emilia Romagna regional coops describe it, "Cooperatives do their best in services that have a high content of relations, or in sectors of production that rely heavily on traditions and differentiation, or in sectors where ownership is fragmented and the processing of the products must be joint (typically agriculture), or in utilities" (Zamagni, 2016). While intended as a description for agriculture, this in fact describes the work of architects – including their scope of knowledge and its fragmentation. It is not unreasonable to think that the knowledge of building sustainable communities would generate the web of this network.

The diagram of sovereignty that emerges with these proposals is very different to that of the modern nation-state. This type of organization, as per

Elson's argument reviewed above, need not be a large-scale state bureaucracy, but itself can be a coordinated set of self-managed institutions: public centralization of information with common decentralization of production (Elson, 1988).⁸ When considered spatially, this suggests something more like Murray Bookchin's "confederal municipalism," whereby local assemblies become the seats of sovereignty, while confederal institutions coordinate the cooperation between cities (Bookchin, 1992). Such a system might appear abstract or utopian, yet many examples already exist across the world.⁹ Architecture should make use of these already-existing models of cooperativization that would each, in its own way, allow the discipline to shift from a purely competitive and alienating mode of practice, to one that foregrounds care, cooperation, and social reproduction.

Conclusion

Since at least the orthodox Marxist theory of Rosa Luxemburg, cooperatives have been viewed as contradictory and ineffective revolutionary vehicles that tend to disintegrate under the pressure of competitive markets (Luxemburg, 1986). As described throughout this chapter, however, Marxist feminists have convincingly argued that foregrounding and supporting the social reproduction of labour through cooperative organizing is an important revolutionary project for protecting non-market spaces and social relations. Analysing how cooperative models of work can be fought for and defended in the present is thus not a utopian fetish, but a concrete mode of struggle.

More recently, cooperatives have formed worldwide and have become effective as anti-capitalist means of organizing that have combated critical urban issues – from labour exploitation to housing shortages and inequalities to climate change. In Europe alone, there are presently over 250,000 worker cooperatives, which include 5.4 million people, and there are nearly 800 million people across the world who are part of cooperatives (European Commission, 2018). While architects have been limited by law and professional structures that, in some cases, prevent complete cooperativization, small firms seeking to form cooperatives may reframe the architecture profession as a whole by challenging its very definition and role. They may better connect architecture to other industries, to structures of municipality, and to the forms of social reproduction that the capitalist ordering of the profession has historically hindered.

While sociological studies of the architecture profession, and professions in general, have long revealed the ways that specific codes of conduct, licensure, examinations, education standards, and exclusive member societies attempt to establish a monopoly over a sector of work to specific groups, cooperative structures of practice – especially those that demand full cooperativization at the scale of municipalities – challenge the siloed nature of professions and demand reconsideration. As an example, Magali Sarfatti Larson's (1979) analysis of architecture practice informed the jurisdictional model of professions that she and Andrew Abbott (1988) described in the 1980s. In this model, professions such as architecture, like the practices they organize, compete for control of a scope of work or a segment of an industry (e.g. the building industry), even though it has never been entirely possible in architecture. Mary Woods's (1999) history of the architecture profession in the US similarly accounts for the ways in which architects and their firms vied for market control in a capitalistic relationship between work, clients, and profession. The state's control of architecture's licensure builds on its commitment to public safety, yet the process for licensure has evolved in a way that not only marginalizes the profession's ranks along gendered, racial, and class lines, but also supports a culture of competition among architects, secrecy, elitism, and classism.

Through cooperativization, the control points of professional work are able to be more carefully manipulated, since cooperatives require different institutional frameworks of legitimation and intellectual property – such as foregrounding care

over profits, use-values over exchange values, and the sharing of technical knowledge rather than its private appropriation. Cooperativization thus implies a rethinking of the institution of licensure and the legitimation of expertise; if not through de-professionalization, then at least through a radical reexamination of what a profession of architecture – and other professional design fields – might look like. Ultimately, this means reconfiguring not only the modes of sovereignty (institutionally, politically) over architectural work, but also their very meaning and scale of operation – from what counts as “productive” work, to what constituency gets to decide it. Such a reorientation of the profession, and of architectural expertise and knowledge, would therefore position architects to participate in the cooperative reproduction of space and social relations that includes not only the design and construction of cities, but their maintenance, as well.

Notes

- 1 This text has benefited greatly from the efforts of many, especially those within a working group focused on cooperativizing small firms within The Architecture Lobby, including: Karina Andreeva, Michael Abrahamson, Michael Cohen, Gabriel Cira, Palmyra Geraki, Ashton Hamm, James Heard, David Hecht, A.L. Hu, Daniel Jacobs, Brandt Knapp, Austin Kronig, Ivan Kostic, Will Martin, Ben Prager, Shawn Protz, Priyanka Shah, and Brittany Utting.
- 2 Nove’s work was criticized by Elson (op. cit.) as relying on a productivist and male celebration of the market. In contrast, she advocated the “socialization of markets,” seeking to elevate household and community concerns to the level of productive industries.
- 3 Much contemporary work is being done, however, to redress this.
- 4 In California, for example, architecture corporations must be registered as professional corporations that are organized under the General Corporation Law, in contrast to cooperatives, which are organized under the Corporations for Specific Purposes Law. Thus, while there is no formal law preventing architecture corporations from cooperativizing, there are legal barriers to doing so. The authors wish to thank Ashton Hamm and James Heard for this detailed example. See Section 7 of the Architects Practice Act and Section 13401 the California Corporation Code.
- 5 See, for instance: <https://democracycollaborative.org/sector/worker-cooperatives>; <https://institute.coop>; and <https://usworker.coop>
- 6 In many large architecture and engineering firms, from Arup to Gensler, employee-ownership is practised. But the degree to which the distribution of shares and decision-making abides by the kind of democratic principles central to cooperatives is less clear.
- 7 For tech, see for example GitHub, Plausible Lab cooperatives, and The Network of American Tech Workers Cooperatives. For other industries, see Co-operatives of UK, the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, and the Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives (NoBAWC, pronounced No Boss). For general business/legal advice on setting up a cooperative, see Peggy Fogarty-Harnish’s “How Cooperatives Work: Creative Models to Increase Profits,” <https://usworker.coop/home-3/>
- 8 For Elson (1988, 23), “A fully open information system between enterprises is, however, a key feature of socialized markets; and so are long-term links between buyers and sellers, which help to stabilize an enterprise’s environment. Socialized markets, then, would be much more compatible with industrial democracy than are markets organized by enterprises.”
- 9 In Spain, for example, municipalist forces currently run the country’s largest cities, including Barcelona and Madrid. See: www.ciudadesdelcambio.org; <https://guanyembarcelona.cat/lets-win-barcelona/>; <http://municipalrecipes.cc/>; *Municipalist Manifesto*, from the meeting for “Municipalism, Self-Government and Counterpower,” held in Málaga from 1–3 July 2016.

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