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## Treball Fi de Màster

*Learning through housing activism in Barcelona: knowledge creation and exchange in neighbourhood-based housing groups*

*Mateus Lira Da Matta Machado*

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TECHNISCHE  
UNIVERSITÄT  
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International Cooperation  
in Urban Development

MASTER THESIS

# LEARNING THROUGH HOUSING ACTIVISM IN BARCELONA: Knowledge Creation and Exchange in Neighbourhood-based Housing Groups

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## **Abstract**

As a reaction to a severe housing crisis, Barcelona's civil society has been creatively reclaiming a radical right to housing. Previously centralized in one specific movement, housing activism in the city has now dissolved into an heterogeneous network, including several small neighborhood-based groups. Learning, understood as the ways in which knowledge is created and exchanged, is crucial for these groups and the network they form. Therefore, this master's thesis looks at one neighborhood housing group and its relations with other collectives, in order to understand the processes and effects of learning in housing movements. Collected through participant observation of several activities and semi-structured interviews with members, the research findings are explored through the lens of urban assemblages, combined with theories on learning in social movements. The description and classification of seven key moments of learning unveil the complex and multi-layered ways in which learning takes place. The analysis of the effects of learning for individuals and activism groups reinforces the importance of knowledge creation and exchange. Finally, a critical evaluation shows that learning happens in-between, through intersections or tensions of: human and material, legality and justice, individuality and collectiveness.

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# 1. Introduction

More than any other good, housing is an essential part of urban life, as it conditions citizen's everyday life and determines the possibility of accessing resources, job opportunities and services (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Although housing has been considered as a primordial right in several agreements and legislations (Thiele, 2002), it is being increasingly treated not as a place where someone should live, but as a mere investment, through its integration into financial markets (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2013). This is the case of Spain, where financial deregulation and facilitation of credit in housing have been used to attract international investment (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; García-Lamarca, 2017; Barbero, 2015). In addition, global cities such as Barcelona are becoming exclusive spaces for tourists and wealthy populations (Rolnik, 2013), resulting in gentrification, higher rents and fierce competition for housing.

This new paradigm directly affects the everyday life of urban citizens, as accessing housing becomes increasingly difficult (Rolnik, 2013). In cities like Barcelona, this phenomena becomes quite evident. After the 2008 crisis, unemployment in Spain increased and people were not able to pay their mortgages, rents kept going up despite frozen salaries and policies were aimed more at benefiting investors than securing fair access to housing by citizens (Barbero, 2015; Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Fominaya, 2015; García-Lamarca, 2017). As a consequence, accessing housing in Barcelona becomes a struggle, especially for the most marginalized, who have been increasingly dispossessed from their homes and constitute a new class of precarious population: the *desahuciados* (evicted) (Barbero, 2015).

Following a long tradition of resistance and mobilization, Barcelona's civil society has been reclaiming housing as a primordial right (Barbero, 2015; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Fominaya, 2015). Since 2009, the Plataforma de los Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH, or Platform for Mortgage-affected People) has been an important actor in this struggle and has been widely described in academic literature (Colau & Alemany, 2012; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huerga, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Mir Garcia et al., 2013). However, nowadays the PAH is not the only grassroots movement reclaiming housing in Barcelona. Over the last two years, housing activism has become decentralized, spread amongst a series of smaller neighborhood-based housing collectives, which act on a very local scale while being connected through a network of mutual support and exchange. Hence, this research tackles a gap in literature by looking at one of these neighborhood-based groups and its relation with other groups, which have not yet been given enough attention in academic investigation.

This thesis will have a special focus on learning. We argue that, for the housing groups of Barcelona and the network amongst them, learning is not incidental, but becomes essential for collective action. In that sense, another gap in the literature will be tackled, as although social movements have been studied in a wide range of disciplines, not enough focus has been given to learning while looking at them (Finger, 1989; Hall & Turray, 2006; Holford, 1995). In that sense, there is a need for more in-depth empirical research not only on the importance of learning but also on how it takes place within social movements (Hall & Turray, 2006; Holford, 1995; Kilgore, 2010; McFarlane, 2011a; Overwien, 2000; Welton, 1993).

The research is backed up by theories on housing and social movements. The analysis of results is based on scholarship on 'learning in social movements' and complemented by the framework of 'urban assemblages', which is used as a lens to describe the socio-material aspects of learning in cities. It is also where the definition of learning used in this thesis comes from: the processes through which knowledge is created and circulates. Knowledge is not something that one possesses, rather, it is placed in time and space and mediated by a series of factors. Since knowledge is not static, but rather fluid and in constant change, learning is defined as a process of creating, transforming, sharing and contesting knowledge (McFarlane, 2011a).

Therefore, the overall aim of the research is to understand processes and effects of learning in Barcelona's housing activism, trying to answer the following question: How does learning take place in housing movements and what effects does it have? Accordingly, the research objectives are to:

- Outline the emergence of housing activism groups as learning assemblages;
- Critically describe and classify moments of learning in housing activism;
- Analyze the effects of learning for individuals, groups and the network of housing collectives;
- Provide guidelines for how learning can be improved in housing activism.

The main case study of the research is the *Grup d'Habitatge de Sants* (GHAS - Sants Housing Group). The investigation is the result of participatory observation of several activities and semi-structured interviews with members. By classifying seven key moments of learning in terms of the structure, process and scope of learning, as well as the types of knowledge involved, we try to unveil the complex and multi-layered ways in which learning takes place. By analyzing the effects of learning, we show its importance for housing activism in multiple ways. The research points out that learning happens in-between, through intersections or tensions of: human and material, legality and justice, individuality and collectiveness. We argue that, despite such tensions, the creation and exchange of knowledge remains essential for claiming the right to housing in Barcelona.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Contesting Housing: From Commodification to Social Movements

More than any other good or commodity, housing defines people's everyday life and their access to resources such as job opportunities and services. However, housing has been increasingly treated and managed in terms of its exchange value, instead of its use value (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Housing and urbanization have been used as a strategy for reinvestment of the surplus value created in capitalism (Harvey, 2013). Additionally, since the value of housing usually does not depreciate, it becomes attractive for speculative investment. In that sense, housing is intrinsically connected to the political economy of capitalism, not just in relation to the production of new units, but also concerning exchange and circulation of capital (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014). With the dismantling of the welfare state in western countries, governments have been decreasing public and social housing policies while creating the conditions for global financial markets to enter the housing scheme, which results in increasing commodification of housing (Kadi and Ronald, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2013). Hence, housing 'has gone from being a simple commodity to being a complex financial technology' (Pattillo, 2013 p.512).

Accessing housing becomes increasingly difficult as it gets commodified and transformed into a mere investment (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2013). As it integrates into financial capital, the fact that housing is being used as home for someone or not becomes irrelevant, to the detriment of its use for capital accumulation. In a market controlled by big corporations, individual homeowners and ordinary citizens face an unfair competition for an ever more scarce access to affordable housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2013). In addition, 'the creation of world-class city enclaves for the wealthy and tourists' (Rolnik, 2013 p.1063) pushes low income populations to the outskirts of cities or to deprived living conditions. These processes lead to enhanced marginalization of already excluded populations, such as migrants and low-income groups, specially in so called 'global cities' (Kadi and Ronald, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2013). As a consequence, these groups face residential alienation, by living in constant anxiety, stress and instability, given the risk of eviction inherent in precarious living conditions. They are also victims of housing oppression, caused either by oppressively bad conditions of homes or by an oppressive city, used mainly for profit and speculation (Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

In face of this urgent challenge, there have been attempts to defend housing at different levels. For instance, concerns about housing have been mentioned in international agreements and national legislations in the form of a 'right to housing' (Thiele, 2002). Although these



mechanisms provide ‘legal systems that empower individuals and groups in ways that allow them to enforce their rights’ (Thiele, 2002 p.714), it is necessary to challenge the legal and formal conception of a right to housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). There is a big gap in the intention of providing housing for all and the means to reach it. Hence, it is urgent to open up to a broader understanding of housing as a right, or a radical right to housing as an activist conception, that will tackle commodification at its roots (Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

Social movements have been playing an important role in transferring the abstract ideas of a right to housing into practice and reality (Pattillo, 2013), since ‘addressing residential injustice and inequality will demand state action as well as large-scale popular mobilization’ (Madden & Marcuse, 2016 p.218). Indeed, a lot of the contestation of urban social movements has been around housing: from the 1915 Glasgow rent strike to the 1960s residential trade unions of the Grands Ensembles in Paris (Castells, 1983) and increasingly today in global cities and metropolitan areas such as São Paulo (Earle, 2019) and New York (Fields, 2015), including Barcelona, our case study. Housing movements may be articulated mostly around issues of collective consumption (Castells, 1983). Hence, they resist the ‘commodification of the material basis of everyday life’ and reclaim urban resources in terms of its use value, against the increasing logic of exchange value (Castells, 1983, p.69).

Nowadays, with the advance of neoliberalism and the weakening of the role of the state in the provision of public goods, the issue of collective consumption becomes even more urgent for urban movements (Mayer, 2006). Dwellers of urban peripheries have been reacting to uneven distribution of services by forcing governments to look at them and proposing new spaces of citizenship (Holston, 2009). Such radical practices go against traditional prescriptions of urban planning, trying to ‘destabilize the order of things’ in the form of ‘insurgent planning’ (Miraftab, 2016). Although such processes are an evidence of class struggle for the material bases of the city, social movements should be also analyzed in terms of multiplicity of values embedded in them, such as gender equality, anti-racism and ethnicity (Escobar and Alvares, 2018; Peet and Watts, 1996). For instance, the role of women in housing social movements is a critical aspect of their practice (Castells, 1983).

Are urban social movements really able to bring change? Collective action should not necessarily be measured in terms of its achievements or victories (Castells, 1983). The practice of social movements may not always result in tangible outcomes, but they can propose new imaginaries and alternative forms of development (Escobar & Alvares, 2018) or guide government resolutions towards possibilities more desirable by local communities (Souza, 2006). Urban social movements are ‘locally based and territorially defined’ (Castells, 1983 p. 328), as they act on the materiality of urban space. By contesting existing values and demanding services, they propose new understandings of how space and society are related. Although the

activity of urban social movements may not result in structural societal transformations, they can bring 'urban social change' through the redefinition of urban meaning (Castells, 1983).

For Castells (1983), social movements operate in close contact with civil society, without institutional restrictions, becoming sources of social innovation. However, they still need political parties and an open political system in order to achieve institutional change (Castells, 1983). Recently, the state has been incorporating social movements into plans and strategies and sometimes instrumentalizing them (Mayer, 2006). Regardless of a risk of cooptation, civil society should not be limited to only criticizing or confronting the state. Instead, urban social movements may operate 'despite the state', putting it under pressure and acting with autonomy, while proposing and even implementing solutions in a form of 'grassroots urban planning' (Souza, 2006).

Despite its local field of contestation, housing movements should articulate with each other at a trans-local and transnational scale, in order to confront the global spectrum of housing commodification (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). With the advance of technology, social movements have adapted their strategies and fields of action. Hence, the internet and mobile technologies have allowed the emergence of 'networked social movements'. Technology allows for a 'continuing, expansive networking practice' (Castells, 2015 p.249) which suits the open and fluid character of such movements and allows the participation of a wide and diverse set of actors. In addition, the horizontality of this networking practices allows the emergence of a 'sense of togetherness', creating the conditions for practices of solidarity and trust (Castells, 2015). In the case of housing, for example, digital platforms can be useful for mobilizing marginal populations and making collective action more efficient, as movements increase their social capital to the extent that they share more hyperlinks (Kropczynski & Nah, 2010).

To summarize, the increasingly restricted access to housing has caused severe forms of oppression and marginalization, due to commodification and the dominance of exchange value over use value. However, urban social movements have been contesting housing not only through direct action, but also by creating, exchanging and contesting knowledge. By multiplying radical forms of knowledge, housing activism may enhance the redefinition of urban meaning, which is a catalyst of 'urban social change' (Castells, 1983). In that sense, learning becomes a crucial aspect of housing social movements. At the same time, despite the possibility of global connection being opened up by digital technologies, urban social movements still place most of their practice on the local material aspects of the city. Therefore, next we will present some ideas of urban assemblages, which will shed light on the very contextual socio-material processes of the city and how they are used as a means for knowledge creation, circulation and contestation.

## 2.2 Reassembling Housing: Urban Assemblages

In this sub-chapter, some ideas on urban assemblages will be presented. This approach is suitable for the analysis of heterogeneous networks, such as Barcelona's housing activism, as well as the socio-material processes of learning that take place within it. Urban assemblages allow for an ethnographic understanding of 'the very concrete practices through which the urban is continually produced, no matter how small or context-specific' (Ureta, 2012 p.244). It can be also used to look at 'spatialities of learning', regarding not only products and outcomes, but also events and processes (McFarlane, 2011a).

The notion of assemblage derives from post-structuralist philosophy. The specific term assemblage is an 'imprecise translation' to English of the French word *agencement*, which refers to an arrangement of multiple elements coming together and, at the same time, to the agency embedded in them (Fariás, 2010, 2011). Assemblages are heterogeneous and fluid aggregations, formed by interactions in constant transformation. In that sense, assemblage thinking is used to describe indeterminate processes, focusing attention on the relations between parts and how they interact (McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b). In addition, the components of an assemblage retain a certain autonomy from it, through 'relations of exteriority', so they cannot be analyzed in isolation, or only in relation to that specific assemblage (De Landa, 2006).

Urban assemblage theory has been recognized as a way to 'open up new questions and horizons', while looking at the complexity of cities (Brenner et.al, 2011). Therefore, assemblage thinking has been gaining space in recent debates within urban studies (Brenner et.al, 2011; Fariás, 2010, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b), pointing to an understanding of the city as formed by a multiplicity of becomings, which are in constant collision, discontinuity and contradiction (Fariás, 2011). It helps to overcome binary visions of the urban, such as global/local, rich/poor (Fariás, 2010), looking instead at its multiple processes and possibilities (McFarlane, 2011b).

Assemblage thinking frames the urban in terms of the actual and the possible, operating 'between urban life as it is experienced and urban life as it could be' (McFarlane, 2011b p.210). For instance, it looks at how urban inequality is experienced in reality while paying attention to alternative possibilities of inequality to be reassembled (McFarlane, 2011b). Assemblage refers to a coming together of heterogeneous elements and the agency within them, or the 'variety of forms of action these forces are capable of generating' (Fariás, 2011 p.370). Therefore, urban assemblages have been used to look at urban social movements: by analyzing in detail one specific phenomena, such as a social movement, it describes the processes in which the city is made, remade, reconstructed and reassembled, towards more socially just urbanism (Fariás, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b).

For assemblage thinking, agency is distributed amongst human and non-human elements. Hence, by looking at ‘mundane micro-materialities’, it sees materials not as mere objects, but as active processes (Farías, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b). In an urban context, these materials can be ‘glossy policy documents, housing and infrastructure materials, placards, banners and picket lines, new and old technologies, software codes, credit instruments, money, commodities, or of course the material conditions of urban poverty, dispossession and inequality’ (McFarlane, 2011b p.215). In that sense, the materialities of housing may, for example, configure urban poverty, through their agency in space, although they can also be reconfigured or reassembled, acting as ‘important agents in urban resistance’ (McFarlane, 2011b p.217).

Assemblage thinking focuses more on empirical understandings of the urban than on external factors that shape it, such as capitalism. Hence, assemblage looks at the city’s complexity through inquiries, with openness to the unexpected, without preconceived assumptions (Farías, 2011). In that sense, through a ‘commitment to the empirical’ (Farías, 2011), assemblage can be used for a ‘thick description’ of processes involving human and non-human elements (McFarlane, 2011b). However, these ‘sensitive depictions’ of the urban may lead to a seemingly broad and indeterminate analysis of cities (Storper & Scott, 2016). By focussing on the empirical analysis of socio-material relations, ontological uses of assemblage might fail to uncover broader contexts in which these relations are embedded. Therefore, some scholars suggest the use of assemblage theory should be narrow and precise, combining its empirical and methodological tools with existing concepts and vocabulary from critical urban theory (Brenner et.al, 2011).

### **2.3 Learning in Social Movements**

Assemblage urbanism understands learning as a process of exchanging, creating, transforming and contesting knowledge, assuming that knowledge is not static, but rather fluid and in constant change. Since urban assemblages looks at socio-material processes, it can be used as ‘grammar’ for learning, as 'it connotes the processual, generative and practice-based nature of urban learning’ (McFarlane, 2011a, p.1). Therefore, assemblage thinking helps to understand how learning is mediated through relations between humans, materials and environment. For McFarlane (2011a), learning the city is a constant, gradual and not necessarily conscious process, which is not only about perceiving the city, but also understanding urbanism and urban issues. Social movements are important actors in urban learning, since they give attention to marginalized knowledge and can foster ‘certain forms of knowledge to become central to the learning process’ (McFarlane, 2011, p.65).

In what follows we complement the approach of urban assemblages with other theories on learning in social movements. Apart from articulating institutional and political change, social

movements also promote learning outside formal education (Hall & Turray, 2006) not only by exchanging, but also by producing knowledge (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Holford, 1995; Walter, 2007). Movements contests traditional representations of knowledge by proposing alternative visions to dominant ideologies and structures of power. However, these forms of learning usually remain unseen, ignored or invisible (Arroyo, 2003; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Novelli, 2010). Therefore, although until now there has not been enough research to consolidate a field of ‘social movement learning’, such studies are of extreme relevance (Hall & Turray, 2006).

A rich contribution to this field comes from Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire (2005[1970]). Freire’s radical pedagogy assumes that by becoming critically aware of reality, one is capable of transforming it. Hence, anyone should be able to look at reality with critical eyes, understand its contradictions and act to change it. Marginalized groups of society, or the ‘oppressed’, are in a favorable position to understand and criticize oppression, since they feel the effects of such mechanisms in their everyday life. Therefore, there is a big emancipatory potential when the oppressed join libertarian or revolutionary spaces, as one is able to recognize and potentially overcome its condition of oppression (Freire, 2005[1970]). Popular educators believe that ‘in the site of struggle learning will always occur’ (Ollis, 2011 p.254). Therefore, social movements have an educational role not only by disseminating discourses, but from the way they mobilize around survival and basic human needs, especially in cities (Arroyo, 2003).

European scholars in the field of adult education have been looking at new social movements as promoters of a gradual process of societal change through learning (Finger, 1989; Holford, 1995; Walter, 2007; Welton, 1993). Instead of replacing the state through revolution, new social movements aim at creating an ‘autonomous and exuberant civil society’ (Welton, 1993 p.153). Therefore, they have learning as a central project, as personal transformation may bring further societal changes. In that sense, new social movements challenge traditional views on adult education (Finger, 1989) and become ‘particularly privileged places for emancipatory praxis’ (Welton, 1993 p.152).

Some attention has been given to the effects of learning in social movements. By participating in a social movement, people may gain skills that prepare them for employment (Overwien, 2000), learn about legislation and their rights in society (Arroyo, 2003), start to think analytically and gain critical perspectives about the world (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010) or be encouraged to become more active citizens (Kilgore, 2010; Welton, 1993). For the movement itself, learning can result in the construction of collective identity (Holford, 1995; Kilgore, 2010) or in the creation of new values and institutional arrangements (Welton, 1993). A lot of the action of new social movements is to ‘unblock’ channels of communication, by exchanging knowledge (Welton, 1993). Therefore, learning can serve to strengthen networks between

different groups, as a ‘catalyst for inter-movement collaboration’ (Prasant & Kapoor, 2010 p. 207). Learning can also transpose the borders of the social movement, reaching civil society in a broader sense (Hall & Turray, 2006) and creating meanings of social justice (Kilgore, 2010).

Debates around individual and collective learning have also been present in the literature. Perspectives of individual learning believe personal experiences become a driving force for transformation (Finger, 1989). However, some authors argue that social movements are not aimed at individual transformation, but rather at overcoming individualization, since ‘one cannot separate personal fulfillment from collective action’ (Welton, 1993 p.153). As a consequence of collective learning, a sense of solidarity may arise, helping to overcome the separations between leaders as thinkers and other participants as mere actors (Freire, 2005[1970]) and allowing the group to gain more confidence as an agent of collective action. (Kilgore, 2010). The fact that social movements usually involve a diversity of actors has been pointed to as a possible trigger for conflict in the learning process (Kilgore, 2010; Welton, 1993). Nonetheless, these tensions are not necessarily harmful to learning, as the collision of diverse interests is crucial for a group to ‘develop collective identity, consciousness, solidarity and organization’ (Kilgore, 2010 p. 198).

Adult educators have been looking at how learning happens in social movements concerning levels of formality. For some authors, learning in social movements is essentially informal (Finger, 1989; Overwien, 2000) although they may also organize more structured spaces of learning (Hall & Turray, 2006), as movements usually have a very specific mission (Holford, 1995). Foley (1999) proposes holistic understanding of levels of formality, as in social movements learning can happen through: non-formal education (ordered systematic instruction, although learners do not get an official certificate); informal learning (there is a conscious intention to learn, but no formal systematic instruction); or incidental learning (no intention to learn, but it happens in an implicit way) (Foley, 1999).

Complementing previously presented theories, urban assemblage provides tools to understand the socio-material processes of learning in cities, involving social movements. McFarlane (2011a) argues that urban learning can happen through translation, coordination or dwelling. Translation refers to how knowledge travels, is distributed and moves through human and non-human intermediaries. It understands knowledge is not centralized in one source, but circulates in a network of people and materials. Coordination concerns functional systems that combine different sources of knowledge and organize them, helping to cope with complexity. Such systems can comprise a leader of a social movement, a map or a statistical database, which facilitates learning by communicating ideas and systematizing information. Dwelling is related to people’s lived experience in the city. In everyday life, a series of engagements between

people and urban space result in learnings, which results in a change of perception in how people see and interpret the city (McFarlane, 2011a).

As we have shown, the processes and effects of learning in social movements can be looked from different perspectives. While Latin American popular educators shed light to issues of oppression and urgency in learning, European theories on adult education give attention to learning as a central project of social movements. Both perspectives reveal possible effects of learning and some debates around collective and individual learning. The framework of urban assemblages complements these theories by proposing a socio-material analysis of learning processes in cities. In that sense, learning in Barcelona's housing movements will be analyzed through a combination of all presented theories, in order to achieve a holistic and multi-layered interpretation of results.

### 3. Contextual Background: Housing Activism in Barcelona

Spain is a paradigmatic case when it comes to housing; a housing boom that became a housing crisis and led to the emergence of housing activism. Since the 1960s, the country has fostered production of new homes as a strategy to booster its local economy. The offer of homes increased significantly, however prices kept going up (Barbero, 2015; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016). Meanwhile, housing became increasingly commodified and integrated into global markets, through financial deregulation and facilitation of credit (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; García-Lamarca, 2017). The state played a crucial role in this scheme: a series of policies and tax regulation encouraged people to become homeowners, while real estate development was fostered (De Werdt & Garcia, 2016). Such policies, however, were aimed more at benefiting investors than securing fair access to housing by citizens (Colau & Alemany, 2012). As a result, Spain has become one of the countries with higher levels of home ownership in Europe and simultaneously created huge amounts of empty houses (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016).

This unsustainable model of growth, based on real estate speculation, contributed to the creation of a housing bubble, which was one of the causes of the economic crisis that hit Spain with the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016). The crisis also brought high levels of unemployment, so homeowners were unable to pay the mortgages they had purchased during the period of easy credits, at the same time that renters could not afford ever-rising rents (Barbero, 2015; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Fominaya, 2015; García-Lamarca, 2017). Controversially, a new legislation sped up the process of eviction in cases of non-payment of mortgage debts or rents, in order to protect property owners and financial institutions (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016). As a consequence, a new class of precarious population had emerged: the *desahuciados* (evicted), people who were dispossessed daily from their homes all over the country, as around 320,000 evictions happened in Spain between 2008 and 2013 (Barbero, 2015).

As a reaction to this urgent issue, a series of bottom up contestations emerged in the country, trying to reclaim the right to housing (Barbero, 2015; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Fominaya, 2015). The 2006 movement V de Vivienda in Barcelona led to the creation, in 2009, of the Plataformas de los Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH, or Platform for Mortgage-affected People). Through self-help, direct action and political mobilization, the PAH tries to solve individual problems and influence housing policy (Colau & Alemany, 2012; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huerga, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Mir Garcia et al., 2013). The uprising of the 15M Movement in



2011, in which demonstrations and public space occupations took place in Spanish cities, contributed to the growth of the PAH, as it gained more visibility, and allowed the development of new tactics of resistance (Barba, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huerga, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Mir Garcia et al., 2013; Suarez, 2017).

The action of the PAH is an attempt to put into practice the right to housing, which is actually part of the Spanish constitution (Barbero, 2015; Fominaya, 2015), through different strategies. In the direct action *Stop Desahucios* (Stop Evictions), a group of people use their bodies for nonviolent civil disobedience and block the entrance of a flat to prevent the eviction of inhabitants (Barbero, 2015; Fominaya, 2015; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huerga, 2015; Mir Garcia et al., 2013). In the assemblies of collective counseling, people with housing issues collectivize their individual problems and are empowered through exchange of knowledge with other members, creating a sense of solidarity (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Mir Garcia et al., 2013). By appropriating and occupying empty bank-owned housing for families in need, the social function of housing is recovered and pressure is exerted over government, banks and investment funds (Barbero, 2015; García-Lamarca, 2017; Huerga, 2015). Due to the successful achievements of the movement, it gained high visibility in the media and academia. The PAH also spread all over Catalunya and Spain and had one of its leaders elected as mayor of Barcelona in 2015 (Colau & Alemany, 2012; De Werdt & Garcia, 2016; Martinez, 2018).

Over time, the circumstances of the housing crisis and the forms of organizing activism in Barcelona have changed. On the one hand, non-payment of mortgages became a secondary problem. Factors such as increasing financialization of housing, unjust rent legislation and urban gentrification enhanced precarization and oppression related to housing. Hence, the already marginalized, such as migrants, have been unable to pay rents or even to access housing. On the other hand, activists of the PAH started having a series of disagreements on how to deal with these new issues, for example on how to conduct the occupation of empty buildings. Additionally, some activists believed housing activism should be carried on in a more decentralized way, with a stronger connection to the local scale of neighbourhoods. Therefore, in 2016 there was a split within the PAH, which led dozens of activists to leave the group.

As soon as they left the PAH, dissident activists started organizing smaller housing groups in the neighborhoods where they were based. They believed the neighborhood scale could be more practical and effective, as it creates better connections with other local initiatives, it makes commuting easier and creates closer relationships amongst participants. Small housing collectives were created in neighborhoods such as Sants, Poble Sec and Gracia. Over time other collectives have been founded with the support of these first groups in other neighborhoods of Barcelona. The groups operate in a similar way to the PAH, helping individuals to solve

different sorts of problems regarding housing and, at the same time, trying to foster institutional change through campaigns. They form a strong network to support each other, which gives more strength to their local action and conforms a web of mutual support. Many of the activists had known each other from the 15M and other protest movements, so these personal connections has facilitated the formation of the network. New connections are constantly made, through organizing collective campaigns, going to other groups' stop of evictions and coordinating communal activities. This network is crucial for the learning between groups, as they constantly share knowledge with each other. Within each group, learning is also a significant aspect, as it transforms individuals and dissolves responsibility. This research will have as a main case study the *Grup d'Habitatge de Sants* (GHAS - Sants Housing Group) which is one of the mentioned housing collectives, founded in 2017 by ex-members of the PAH. We will look at events internal to the group as well as some activities held in partnership and conducted by other groups.

## 4. Research Methodology

As this research aims at understanding processes and effects of learning, it applies qualitative methods of data collection, through a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The ethnographic character of participant observation is in accordance to an urban assemblages approach, which proposes a ‘thick description’ of socio-material processes (McFarlane, 2011b) and openness to the unexpected through inquiries (Fariás, 2011). Participant observation is also suitable for studying social movements, as it helps grasping explicit and implicit meanings, group tensions and everyday life experiences (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014). It is also a useful way to access and create trust, as researchers build on political sympathies with social movements members (Lichterman, 1998).

Participant observation can be classified as overt or covert; as insider or outsider (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014). In the beginning of the process, we approached the *Grup d’Habitatge de Sants* (GHAS - Sants Housing Group) as a covert researcher, without clear exposition of research intentions. Through a process of inquiry, we grasped that learning was a crucial aspect of activism, which helped frame the research focus. From that point, the research became overt, as we made explicit to members of GHAS that research was being conducted on the topic of learning. We chose to be an insider in order to actively participate in the activities and reach personal contact with participants.

Between December 2018 and April 2019, 13 weekly meetings, 3 workshops, 3 debates, 6 direct actions and 4 social events were attended. Activity of social media was also followed, specially through WhatsApp and Twitter.<sup>1</sup> This allowed us to perceive how learning takes place in different moments, paying special attention to types of knowledge, personal interactions, materials and tools used in exchange and creation of knowledge. It also allowed the collection of fragments of speeches that represent the discourses embedded in housing activism.

Secondly, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted in March and April 2019 with different participants of GHAS, in order to get information on the origins of the group, to further understand how learning takes place in different moments, to comprehend the effects of learning for individuals and groups and to collect general impressions and personal criticisms. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling: after observation of meetings and events, we chose the participants more suitable to the aim of the research, trying to have a variety of levels of experience and diversity of motivations in joining activism (See Annex 01).

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<sup>1</sup> We have followed the main WhatsApp group of GHAS and the internal group for the commission of communication. We have followed the Twitter profiles of GHAS, PAH Barcelona, Sindicat de Llogaters, La Burxa (Local newspaper of Sants), 1r Congress d’Habitatge de Catalunya (1st Housing Congress of Catalunya), Sindicat d’Habitatge de Vallcarca, Sindicat de Barri de Poble Sec and Obra Social BCN.

All interviewees were asked the same questions, with a few extra questions for participants considered leaders or founders (See Annex 02). Different participants had specific relevance in the collection of data. Founders of the group informed about its origins and how it has been transforming over time. Activists with connections with other groups provided information on how learning takes place between different housing groups, which was not easily grasped through participant observation. Members who are relatively new and have high engagement provided insights on how learning changes individuals over time.

Fragments from the interview transcriptions and observation reports were clustered in different categories: seven moments of learning, eight effects of learning and three perceived tensions. In that sense, we were able to understand recurrent and diverging narratives and overlap them with personal observations. Processes, impressions and tensions were analyzed using the lenses of urban assemblages and literature on learning and social movements, backed up by general ideas on housing and social movements.

The research methods and scope have some limitations. On the one hand, participant observation of social movements offers dangers in making research results biased. Close involvement might lead participants to neglect they are being studied or cause the researcher to eventually forget he/she is doing research (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014). In addition, during interviews, there is a risk that participants could be adapting their answers because the researcher was also a member of the group. In that sense, we tried to remain as critical as possible and avoid essentially positive analysis of results, although some kind of bias might inevitably be present in the findings.

## 5. Results and Findings

### 5.1 The Assemblage of Housing Activism

Through the framework of urban assemblages, we trace the formation of our case study: Sants Housing Group (GHAS). Housing problems can affect any kind of person; as assemblages, groups such as GHAS are heterogeneous aggregations (McFarlane, 2011b), formed by actors from diverse nationalities, identities, ages and cultural backgrounds. Assemblages are formed by elements in collision (Fariás, 2011), so participants may have diverging interests, which can result in internal conflicts. Apart from bringing diversity, housing also creates unity within the assemblage, since all participants are mobilized around a very concrete issue. As an assemblage, the group is not stable, but in constant transformation (McFarlane, 2011b): members come and go constantly, new participants arrive, old participants leave. The group is also defined by relations of exteriority (De Landa, 2006), as many participants are connected to other networks of activism, which impacts the functioning of the group.

The group is defined by the mediation between the actual and the possible (Fariás, 2010; McFarlane, 2011b). It operates within an actual context of marginalization and oppression caused by housing. Yet, the possibility of reassembling this reality and potentially reaching a radical right to housing is a driver for collective action. This mediation consists of a multiplicity of becomings (Fariás, 2010), which manifests in diverse individual experiences and motivations. Some participants join the group looking for security and solutions to personal problems involving housing, such as risk of eviction, threat, incapability to pay rent, residential racism or domestic violence. Others are motivated by political beliefs, for instance the urgency of the housing crisis or the possibility of expropriating private property through occupations. Participants with previous experiences in housing movements may assume leadership and a sense of responsibility in perpetuating activism.

As an assemblage, GHAS and the broader network of housing activism in which it is situated are formed by socio-material interactions between human and non-human elements (Fariás, 2011; McFarlane, 2011b). Several material infrastructures make activism possible: a public square where the group initially held its meetings; the ground floor of an occupied building, where activities now take place; spaces of partner collectives in the neighborhood, such as occupied cultural centers and urban gardens, where occasional events happen; and the well-developed transport system in Barcelona, which allows fast access to support other housing groups in stopping evictions. The materiality of the city is also reassembled in other ways, by occupying empty buildings owned by banks or investment funds. This allows ordinary citizens to reclaim housing while physically intersecting with financial capital, which is usually unreachable and immaterial. Finally, a series of non-human elements allow for knowledge to

travel amongst spaces and actors, from campaign posters attached to city walls, to documents with contracts or letters of eviction, and smartphones used to access social media.

## 5.2 Process of Learning

### 5.2.1 Types of Knowledge

If learning, as defined by McFarlane (2011a), consists of the processes in which knowledge is created, exchanged and contested, it is important to define what types of knowledge circulate within GHAS and other housing groups. From participant observation of different activities and the analysis of semi-structured interviews, five types of knowledge have been depicted: technical, tactical, organizational, critical and identity-related knowledge, as summarized in Table 01.

Type of knowledge	Definition	Examples
<b>Technical knowledge</b>	Specific information regarding housing legislations and functioning of governmental institutions in general.	Laws that regulate contracts, rents and evictions; existing services provided by the municipality for supporting residents in need; specific protocols to be followed, related to bureaucracies.
<b>Tactical knowledge</b>	Ways of reaching a certain goal through collective action, be it a solution for an individual problem or trying to foster institutional change.	Arguments one should use to negotiate with a landlord; how to prepare direct action to put pressure on a real estate agent; how to mobilize with other groups for a political campaign.
<b>Organizational knowledge</b>	Ways in which the group organizes and manages its activities.	The division of roles between participants; the existence of specific commissions; the way meetings are conducted; how to manage social media.
<b>Critical knowledge</b>	Discourses and beliefs that are usually shared amongst participants, or might be incorporated by new participants and unites the group around a common goal.	The idea that everyone has the right to decent housing; the belief that solidarity amongst members is crucial for reaching this right; the broader recognition of who the group is fighting against, such as investment banks.
<b>Identity-related knowledge</b>	Subjects beyond housing itself, specially regarding feminism and anti-racism.	Discussions about domestic violence; discussion of specific struggles faced by migrants; acknowledgment of the enhanced exclusion faced by migrants and women.

*Table 01: Types of knowledge in Barcelona's neighborhood-based housing activism. Source: Elaborated by author.*

Technical knowledge on legislations and bureaucracies is what many participants are looking for when they enter the group. As one member points, “what I like in the housing group is all the legal aspects I have learned, which are not as complicated as they seem and show the options that we have” (Interview#5). Tactical knowledge is also necessary to plan and execute direct action, protests, occupations and campaigns. As noted by one of the leaders, “they can change because it is about error and success, so if it does not work in some way, so we try in another one” (Interview#3).

Organizational knowledge is crucial for the functioning and management of the group. As one activist recognizes, “I have learned a lot about how to organize a group and I pay attention to the way people work and manage things” (Interview#6). Critical knowledge about broader issues such as commodification and the potentials of collective action create a common discourse that unites the group. As one member stands, “the most important learning is that together we are stronger” (Interview#3). Finally, from the remarkable presence of migrants and women, identity-related knowledge intersects with housing in many moments. For instance, as one member acknowledges, “we end up sharing spaces with people who are diverse and with different interests. So we also tackle topics of feminism and anti-racism” (Interview#10).

### 5.2.2 Moments of Learning

In housing activism of Barcelona, learning takes place in a complex and multi-layered way. In order to unveil this process, we use a ‘thick description’ of seven moments of learning: assembly, direct action, stop of eviction, negotiation, workshop, join campaign and debate, as shown in Table 02. Throughout the description, each moment is qualitatively classified according to four categories: the *process* of learning can happen through translation, coordination and/or dwelling<sup>2</sup> (McFarlane, 2011a); in terms of its *structure*, learning can be supported by non-formal education, informal learning or incidental learning<sup>3</sup> (Foley, 1999); in terms of *scope*, learning can have its limits within the housing group, it can happen through exchanges between different housing groups and/or it can reach citizens beyond activism; finally, the *types of knowledge* presented (organizational, technical, tactical, critical and identity-related) circulate with different intensities in each moment.

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<sup>2</sup> Through translation, knowledge travels, is distributed and moves with support of materials or human intermediaries; through coordination, functional systems combine different sources of knowledge and organize them, helping to cope with complexity; through dwelling, people engage with everyday life events and have a shift in perception. (McFarlane, 2011a)

<sup>3</sup> Non-formal education refers to ordered systematic instruction, although learners do not get an official certificate; in informal learning there is a conscious intention to learn, but no formal systematic instruction; in incidental learning there is no intention to learn, but it happens in an implicit way. (Foley, 1999)

Every week, the group holds an assembly in an occupied residential building in the neighborhood of Sants. The assembly is structured as informal learning and divided into two parts: strategies and cases. In the strategies part, participants translate to the rest of the group information about past and future campaigns, activities and workshops organized by GHAS or other housing groups. A white board is used as a calendar to coordinate future activities and encourage participants to join them. Critical and tactical knowledge appears when participants collectively reflect on what has been done and try to learn from mistakes or achievements. In the cases part, participants try to collectively solve individual problems of different sorts: threat of evictions, dealing with bureaucracies, problems with landlords and so on. The mediator of the meeting coordinates the discussion, with the material support of formularies and papers with instructions given to new members. Participants translate their problems by speaking and through documents such as contracts and eviction mandates. By collectively investigating each case, bringing about past experiences, participants share technical and tactical knowledge, specially regarding legislation and bureaucracies. Throughout the discussion, issues of identity regarding the conditions of women and migrants come about. Critical knowledge appears when cases are used to understand broader aspects that affect residents, such as the financialization of housing.



*Figure 01: Direct action in a bank branch in the neighborhood of Sants, Barcelona.  
Source: Author's archive.*

If residents cannot manage complex problems, the group organizes direct action. For instance, gathering in a bank or real estate agency and pressuring the staff until they contact unreachable decision makers or landlords. Joint events with other housing groups allows to sum forces when there are similar cases, for example involving the same investment fund. Tactical knowledge comes originally from the PAH, but is constantly reshaped, according to specific contexts. Direct action is usually planned in advance: tactics are coordinated by experienced and newer



participants, so the latter also learn: what we want to get, how is the space, how will people behave, who will have which role. By dwelling the event, participants incidentally acquire critical knowledge, as they experience the possibility of reaching higher levels of decision making through collective action. Direct action requires a lot of experimentation, resulting in creation of new knowledge. Through occasional failure, participants rethink ways of operating, which is used for following tactics. During direct action, activists gather hitherto unknown information, such as connections between investment funds or the contact of a manager, which is shared with other housing groups. By interacting with ordinary citizens on the streets, the group is able to cause some influence beyond activism.



*Figure 02: Stopping an eviction in the neighborhood of Sants, Barcelona.  
Source: Author's archive.*

One important activity of housing groups is to stop evictions. When the police come to evict a resident, dozens of people are already standing on the sidewalk and block the entrance door, preventing the police officers from entering the house. With this event, the eviction is postponed and residents gain time to keep negotiating or find another alternative. Tactical knowledge originates from the PAH and rarely changes. Through dwelling, new participants incidentally learn about procedures and tactics and gain critical knowledge, as they experience the strength of collective action. Evictions are previously notified in social media, attracting members of other housing groups to come and sum forces. Hence, members of different groups engage in occasional chats and share technical and tactical knowledge coming from each neighbourhood. These events also reach passers-by, beyond activism, giving visibility to the movement and even catching the attention of future members.

During negotiations with landlords, policemen, governmental or private staff, informal learning occurs, usually within members of the housing group. Newcomers learn through dwelling about

technical legal aspects with the support of more experienced participants. Negotiations take place when one participant is accompanied by others in a municipal office or the real estate agency. They also happen during events of direct action and stopping eviction, in which less experienced participants observe and assist in the tactics of dialoguing with policemen and authorities.

Occasionally, workshops are organized among participants of one group or between members of different groups. Usually held in the spaces of local partners, such as occupied cultural centres, these are moments of non-formal education. The space is organized as a traditional classroom, with straightforward translation of knowledge, using a whiteboard, powerpoint or just the voice of the ‘teacher’. Content can include technical knowledge of new legislations for housing. It can also comprise both legal and illegal instructions for the occupation of buildings regarding tactics to be used and legal rights of squatters. Some workshops include organizational knowledge, translated from existing housing groups to people who want to start new groups in their neighbourhoods.

Inspired by recurrent problems in all neighborhoods, members of different housing groups coordinate to launch joint political campaigns and reclaim changes in legislation. For example, as many residents had been receiving orders of evictions without a fixed date, which makes them impossible to be stopped, a campaign against this type of eviction was launched. These campaigns reach citizens beyond activism, through posters fixed on city walls that translate critical knowledge. When the campaigns are over, the networks formed remain active through WhatsApp or Telegram groups that were used for coordination. These groups continue being used informally to share technical and tactical knowledge between activists of different groups.



*Figure 03: Debate in a public square in the neighborhood of Sants, Barcelona.  
Source: Author's archive.*

Housing groups also organize debates between members of different collectives. These moments of informal learning are coordinated by a moderator or a piece of paper with the main topics to be discussed. A movie screening can support the translation of trans-local knowledge from other contexts of housing activism, allowing for the comparison of tactics. Debates usually take place in spaces of local partners, such as occupied cultural centres. They also happen in public spaces, which are temporarily reassembled into a forum of discussion by forming a circle with chairs. These events expand learning beyond activism, by inviting other citizens to acquire critical knowledge on housing and become aware of what social movements have been doing. Throughout discussions, activists share tactics and cross-cutting issues of identity, such as feminism and anti-racism. Many of these debates have been articulated under the umbrella of the First Congress of Housing of Catalunya, which will happen in October 2019 and aims at coordinating the informal networks that already exist between housing groups. It will create opportunities for mutual learning, by tracing a panorama of what is happening on the ground and trying to find common tactics and ways of uniting forces between different groups.

<b>Moment of Learning</b>	<b>Process of Learning</b>	<b>Scope of Learning</b>	<b>Structure of Learning</b>	<b>Type of Knowledge</b>
<b>Assembly</b>	Translation; Coordination	Within Group	Informal learning	Tactical; Identity; Critical; Technical; Organizational
<b>Direct Action</b>	Coordination; Dwelling	Within Group; Between Groups; Beyond Activism	Incidental learning	Tactical; Critical
<b>Stopping Eviction</b>	Dwelling	Within Group; Between Groups; Beyond Activism	Incidental learning	Critical
<b>Negotiation</b>	Dwelling	Within Group	Informal learning	Tactical; Technical
<b>Workshop</b>	Translation	Within Group; Between Groups	Non-formal education	Organizational; Technical
<b>Joint Campaign</b>	Translation; Coordination	Between Groups; Beyond Activism	Incidental learning	Tactical; Technical; Critical
<b>Debate</b>	Translation; Coordination	Between Groups; Beyond Activism	Informal learning	Identity; Tactical; Critical

*Table 02: Moments of learning in Barcelona's neighborhood-based housing activism.*

*Source: Elaborated by author*

By overlapping this classification of moments of learning with insights from semi-structured interviews, it is possible to highlight some drawbacks of the learning process. First, the weekly assembly is the only moment where all five types of knowledge circulate, which makes it overly dense. As a consequence, one frequent complain from participants is that “the assemblies take too long and it is difficult to stay until the end” (Interview#1). Another member recognizes the challenge that “it’s a pity that the cases are in the end of the assembly, when I am so tired that I cannot listen anymore” (Interview#8).

Workshops are seen as an alternative to deepen into topics which are overlooked in the assembly, since “the attention is more concentrated and one can learn other things, and better” (Interview#3). Nonetheless, since in workshops learning happens only through translation, they are not always effective. Hence, one activist believes that “one of the problems of the workshops is that they are like a classroom, a teacher is just giving the class and speaking all the time. Although there is a lot of knowledge, you do not interiorize it so much because you do no practical activity” (Interview#8).

Debates and joint campaigns are important for coordinating critical knowledge and promoting political discussions, but many participants do not attend them because, as one member admits “all of these activities overwhelm me, and I have many other things to do. If you get involved in everything you never do anything else” (Interview#7). In that sense, there is a concern that the most attended moments stay limited to technical knowledge and have no space for critical discussions. In the understanding of one leader, “in the assembly, it is difficult to find a balance between simply explaining what will happen or entering a deeper debate. I wish in the group we could discuss more about politics” (Interview#9).

Although in some of the moments learning happens beyond activism, such as debates and to some extent the events of direct action, some members recognize existing limitations. For example, one leader believes that “we have to get out of the ghetto. All these activities surround us. We do not go to other spaces to explain to people who do not have housing problems or are not aware that they have it and would never come to us” (Interview#2).

### 5.3 Effects of learning

The previously presented complex and multi-layered process of learning results in different effects for individuals, for the housing group and for the network between different housing groups. As shown in Table 03, each effect of learning is a consequence of one type or a combination of types of knowledge.

Scale	Type of knowledge involved	Effect of Learning
Individual	Critical; Tactical	New reading of the city
	Technical	Autonomy and empowerment
	Critical; Technical	Overcome fear
	Identity	Deal with difference
Housing Group	Organizational; Tactical; Technical	Distribute Responsibility
Network of Groups	Organizational	Expand and multiply action
	Tactical	Adaptation
	Critical; Tactical; Technical	Strength and Cohesion

*Table 03: Effects of learning in Barcelona’s neighborhood-based housing activism.*

*Source: Elaborated by author*

Individuals start reading the city in new ways when they acquire critical knowledge about the potential of collective action and tactical knowledge of how to occupy buildings or resist evictions. Houses start being seen not as just buildings, but as part of complex financial arrangements and mechanisms of exclusion, which can be reclaimed or reassembled. As one activist acknowledges, “now I look at closed blinds and start to think if this flat is empty, who the property belongs to, if it is empty for a long time, if it is being speculated” (Interview#6).

Technical knowledge about legislation and bureaucracies empowers individuals and gives them autonomy to deal with hitherto over-complicated problems. Before joining the group, participants might be alienated and oppressed, since “the administration, the banks and the investment funds act on their own interest and hide a lot of things from us so that we continue in poverty and have no strength to move forward” (Interview#7). As a response, one leader points out that “it is basic that everyone has this kind of technical information so they can decide which steps to take” (Interview#3). Therefore, participants become empowered as they have confidence and know how to solve problems.

Such technical legal knowledge, combined with critical knowledge about solidarity and the power of collective action, allows individuals to overcome fear, for example when stopping an eviction or negotiating with the police. As one participant recognizes, “having information removes fears and makes you realize there is no other option, that you have to reclaim decent housing for yourself” (Interview#4). This personal change is remarkable for members who live in occupied buildings and face stigma and threat. Hence, one of these members acknowledges that “it gives me strength because I see we are many, so we support each other and I do not feel like a criminal” (Interview#7).

Many participants report they have learned to deal with differences and became more tolerant after joining the group, since identity-related knowledge on anti-racism and feminism frequently appears. In the case of migrants, for example, one Spanish participant understands that “when you are not in a group like this and see someone on the street who is not from your country, you look at this person in a certain way. But when you are in the group and see this migrant has the same problems that you have, and thinks and feels like you, this helps you to become closer with him” (Interview#1).

One challenge faced by the group is the asymmetry of knowledge between members. Therefore, by sharing organizational, tactical and technical knowledge there is a constant effort that new participants assume leadership and responsibilities are distributed, since according to one participant “learning and exchange of information are very important to avoid everything from falling into the same people” (Interview#10). At the same time, as one leader acknowledges, there is a concern that “we need to be as open as possible, so that not just four people have the information, so that these people are not in a position of power” (Interview#2). By sharing responsibilities, the group guarantees its sustainability and perpetuation. For example, one participant believes that “we have to rise. If one generation gets tired and leaves, then we, the new generations, have to advance and be part of it” (Interview#4).

Regarding the network between different groups, activism is multiplied and expanded when organizational knowledge is shared. This happens for example when experienced activists support the creation of new housing collectives through mentoring and workshops. By exchanging tactical knowledge, housing groups can more effectively adapt their modes of action. As one activist explains, “you learn from other people and other experiences. For example, if something happened in one occupation it can help you later in other occupations with similar situations” (Interview#10).

The constant exchange of critical, tactical and technical knowledge also creates cohesion amongst the different groups. One leader admits that “we sometimes have the idea that we are all the same, even though each collective has a different name, we are all the

same” (Interview#9). As a consequence, the network of activism becomes stronger and more effective, since, as another leader points, “we show we are coordinated and organized, and with the big monster we are facing this is the best we can do, because the enemy is the same” (Interview#3).

## **5.4 Discussion: Learning in-between**

Next, we provide a critical evaluation of learning in housing activism of Barcelona, arguing that learning happens in-between. In other words, learning is embedded by indeterminacy, ambiguity, contradictions, tensions, fluidity and adaptability. Hence, we provide a three-fold argumentation based on the conflict or intersection of: human and material, legality and justice, individuality and collectiveness. The intention is not to reinforce dualism, but show that learning is mediated within these notions, operating in-between.

### ***5.4.1 Human and Material***

The framework of urban assemblages sheds light on both human and non-human agents in urban learning (McFarlane, 2011a). From the description and analysis of learning in Barcelona’s housing activism, we conclude that learning indeed happens through both human and material actors. Knowledge exchange between humans happens in most moments, for instance discussions at the weekly assembly and informal gatherings when stopping evictions. However, a lot of knowledge also circulates through both physical and digital platforms.

Physical platforms support and give strength to learning. In the occupation of bank-owned buildings, re-appropriating and reassembling housing promotes learning through dwelling and allows to materially interfere in housing financialization. In political campaigns, activists use posters, flyers, information leaflets and newspapers to reach a wider public. Documents, personal notebooks and forms coordinate complexity in assemblies, workshops and debates. Many interviewees recognize the relevance of these physical platforms and express the need to use them more, especially in the assembly and in workshops.

Digital platforms complement and facilitate learning. The virtual network between different groups creates a 'sense of togetherness' (Castells, 2015), but is used more to share simple information than to host discussions. Within the group, WhatsApp is used to complement the weekly assembly when there are urgent cases and to notify activities from both GHAS and other collectives. Between groups, Twitter is used to call for stopping evictions and exert pressure in banks and investment funds. Telegram groups created in previous campaigns help to disseminate technical and tactical knowledge amongst groups. The PAH webpage provides consultation of technical information. Social media also allows learning beyond activism,

helping the movement to gain visibility. However, some interviewees warn that housing activism cannot be limited to the internet, as street action is the most important thing.

#### *5.4.2 Legality and Justice*

Urban social movements need the support of an open political system in order to operate (Castells, 1983). Housing movements in Barcelona are supported by the right to housing mentioned in the Spanish constitution and some favorable legal conditions implemented by a progressive municipality. However, these movements claim for the right to housing in a radical (Madden & Marcuse, 2016) and not always legal way. In one workshop about legislation, a participant states that “One thing is the laws, the other thing is what is just”. This form of critical knowledge legitimates a way of acting that contest the status quo and conforms an approach ‘despite the state’ (Souza, 2006), trying to make use of institutional opportunities while proposing alternatives and operating on the margins of legality.

Although GHAS and other groups provide a lot of technical knowledge on legislation to participants, not every case can be solved through legal apparatuses, specially for migrants without documents. Some participants believe “occupying is a right, because we have the right to housing and as the state does not provide it we have to reach this right ourselves” (Interview#1). By acquiring technical knowledge on the legal aspects of squatting and tactical knowledge on how to do it, occupying bank-owned homes emerges as a possibility for reclaiming housing. Meanwhile, campaigns for the decriminalization of occupations are launched as an attempt of institutional change. Hence, knowledge regarding both legal and illegal aspects become a means for reaching a radical right to housing and more justice in face of an unfair housing system.

#### *5.4.3 Collectiveness and Individuality*

While some authors believe learning in social movements is a way of reaching individual transformations (Finger, 1989), others defend learning in social movements is always a collective process (Kilgore, 2010; Welton, 1993). We argue here that in Barcelona’s housing activism groups learning is neither strictly individual nor fully collective, but happens within tensions of individuality and collectiveness.

Due to a condition of residential oppression and alienation (Madden & Marcuse, 2016), many participants join GHAS with the urgency of finding a solution to their individual problems, which can be a motivation for learning (Arroyo, 2003). Especially in the discussion of cases, there is an effort for individual problems to become collectivized. In that sense, participants may enter a process of emancipation and there is the creation of a sense of solidarity, which is a path



to overcome oppression. (Freire, 2005[1970]). As one member acknowledges, “since I joined the group I changed my way of seeing things. I do not see from my point of view anymore, but from that of the collective” (Interview#1).

However, this ideal process of collectivization is not always harmonious. Although internal conflicts can foster collective identity (Kilgore, 2010), the analysis of the case study points that tensions between collectiveness and individuality can sometimes distress learning. Although learning is used to distribute responsibility and power amongst members, the group still has hierarchies of knowledge, which sometimes create a division between leaders as thinkers and the others as executors (Freire, 2005[1970]). For example, some interviewees admit not feeling comfortable expressing their opinion in the assembly or negotiating during direct action if there is a more experienced member. Additionally, when none of the more experienced members are in the assembly, other participants tend to speak more.

As one activist notices, “many people join the group not because they like activism or because they are interested in organizing in a collective way, but for an absolute need.” (Interview#8). Hence, in direct opposition to individuality, collectiveness sometimes becomes a dogma that not everyone is willing to embrace, which can result in mistrust between participants. Hence, one member complains that “some people come to the assembly just to solve their case and are not interested in anything else, so when they solve their case they just leave.” (Interview#1) The fact that the group is in constant change also disrupts the ideal of a harmonious collectiveness. Although new participants bring new ideas, they also shift the modus operandi of the the group and former members might resist to adapt. Moreover, it can be difficult to perceive the collective as a unit, since the number of participants and levels of responsibility are always changing.

## 6. Conclusions

This thesis looked at the processes and effects of learning in Barcelona's housing social movements. In general terms, the presented results demonstrate that learning is not just circumstantial, but actually essential for the practice of Barcelona's housing collectives. We concur with Madden & Marcuse (2016) in observing that the production, exchange and contestation of knowledge can trace a path towards a radical right to housing. The research also points that, as suggested by Freire (2005[1970]) learning processes within social movements may lead to critical consciousness, which is a catalyst for collective action and overcoming oppression, in this case the oppression caused by housing. In addition, learning within and beyond housing social movements may contribute to the creation of new urban meaning and bring urban social change, as suggested by Castells (1983).

This research contributes to existing literature on Barcelona's housing social movements, as it describes a new form of neighbourhood-based housing activism, formed by several groups interconnected in a network of mutual help. In addition, it contributes to both 'learning in social movements' and 'urban assemblages' fields, by combining these two theories in the description and analysis of how learning takes place. On the one hand, it contributes to 'learning in social movements' by using assemblage thinking for a 'thick description' of the socio-material process of learning. On the other hand, it contributes to urban assemblages by showing that this approach gains more strength when it is combined with other theories, especially when looking at existing tensions of collectiveness and individuality or of legality and justice.

By creating a system of classification that uses categories from both urban assemblages and learning, we were able to unveil the complex and multi-layered process of learning in different moments. This tool of classification demonstrates that learning can have multiple processes, structures, scopes or types of knowledge, depending on the moment that is being examined. This system of classification allows for the understanding of limitations and potentials within learning in housing activism, by overlapping the analysis of the different moments. By exposing the effects of learning on individuals, the group and the networks between groups, the research reinforces the relevance of learning and points to the need to pay attention to it. Such descriptive approaches are complemented by a critical analysis, which shows that learning happens in-between, looking at: human and material actors, legality and justice, collectiveness and individuality. This analysis helps to overcome strict perspectives on learning, showing that may it be not only collective or only individual, that it may not happen only within the law and that it may not involve just human interactions.

This research also has implications beyond academia, as it can contribute to the concrete practice of housing movements. Through the interpretation of the findings, we recommend that

housing collectives of Barcelona should use more material interfaces to enhance learning through coordination and translation (McFarlane, 2011a). These systems can be physical or digital interfaces, such as board games, maps and toolkits, which could be used to better coordinate the exchange of knowledge between participants and translate information in an autonomous way within the group, between groups and beyond activism. The research shows that learning already happens through both human and material actors, however in some moments human interactions prevail, making learning inefficient. Hence, the use of more material tools could make some learning processes less conflictive and more effective.

The analysis of moments of learning and interviews showed that the weekly assembly is overloaded with knowledge, so interfaces could be used to make the exchange of information more practical. A set of cards with basic instructions, for example, could be used to facilitate the guidance of cases that constantly repeat. A board with a timeline of each case could help participants to understand clearly what is happening in the cases and avoid repetitions every week. The analysis of the moments of learning also shows that the only moments of non-formal education are the workshops. However, they do not happen so frequently and fail to incorporate practical activities. In that sense, the use of educative board games, for example, could allow for pedagogical processes which are independent from mediators and make the learning process more engaging. The use of toolkits could also make the access to technical information more easy and autonomous for members of the group and other citizens beyond activism.

These material interfaces could also help to mitigate the tensions of collective and individual learning, which happens specially through human interactions. By coordinating knowledge in material platforms, which should be adaptable and easily updated, these interfaces might decentralize the knowledge which is concentrated in some participants and help to dissolve hierarchies and responsibilities. They should also be able to raise critical knowledge and allow participants to have broader understanding of the struggle of which they take part. For example, a map of the neighborhood pointing where residents are having problems and who are the landlords could create discussions of how the neighborhood is changing and even lead to new tactics of action. These material interfaces could also make knowledge more transparent and not bounded to individuals, since specially illegal information cannot be widely shared in unprotected or public spaces.

Apart from the recommendations for housing activism itself, this research also points to further investigation to be done in academia. On the one hand, the research was bounded by some limitations of time and scope, so it was not able to cover broadly the network of housing collectives of Barcelona. In that sense, further research should be done in order to compare the internal learning of different groups and also to better understand how groups exchange and co-produce knowledge between each other. In addition, more concise theories of urban learning

could be formed by comparing the contexts of different cities. For example, the tool of classification of moments of learning could be applied to housing social movements of other cities and compared with Barcelona. This form of comparative urbanism could shed light to more general theories of learning and help understand how it is influenced by specific territorial or political contexts. It could also be used to understand to which extent housing social movements of different cities create a trans-local networks of learning and what the effects of such networks are.

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## Annex 1: List of Interviews

Reference	Gender	Age	Description
Interview #1	Male	40 - 50	Member of the group with housing problems
Interview #2	Female	30 - 40	Leader and founder of the group
Interview #3	Female	40 - 50	Leader and founder of the group
Interview #4	Female	20 - 30	Member of the group who lives in an occupied flat
Interview #5	Female	30 - 40	Member of the group with housing problems
Interview #6	Male	20 - 30	Young activist
Interview #7	Female	40 - 50	Member of the group who lives in an occupied flat
Interview #8	Female	20 -30	Young activist
Interview #9	Female	20 -30	Activist and leader, strong connection with other groups
Interview #10	Female	20 -30	Activist, strong connection with other groups

## **Annex 2: Interview Questions**

### **Questions for Participants**

#### **1. Initial questions**

Since when are you in GHAS?

Why did you decide to join the group?

What has changed for you since you joined the group?

#### **2. Personal learning experiences**

What were your previous experiences with housing issues? What did you learn from these experiences?

When you joined the group, was there something you wanted to know more about?

Do you believe you have gained new knowledge since you started participating in GHAS?

How did you acquire this knowledge? Where does this knowledge come from?

Why is it important to know about these things?

Do you think this learnings are crucial in regards to how you face your problems with housing?

Do you believe you have changed your perspective over housing and the city in general since you joined the group?

Is there any key moment that made you shift your perspective over housing issues?

Are there other topics you have learned in GHAS, apart from housing?

#### **3. Networks with other groups**

Which other housing groups apart from GHAS do you have more contact with?

What is the importance of the connection of GHAS with other groups?

How does the exchange of knowledge between different housing groups take place? In which moments and which spaces?

#### **4. Moments of learning**

In which activities of GHAS do you participate?

In which activities do you learn more? Why?

#### 4.1 Assembly

For you, is the assembly a space for learning?

After coming many times to the assembly, what has changed for you?

What benefits do you get from listening to other cases?

Do you believe it is easy to follow the discussions?

What could be done so that the discussion of cases would be more easy to comprehend?

#### 4.2 Direct Actions and Stop of Evictions

Which actions seem to you as the most important ones?

For you, are the actions a moment of learning?

Have you participated in the planning of any action?

Are the strategies always the same or can they change? Why?

Do you remember any day in which a new strategy had to be formulated?

#### 4.3 Workshops

Why are the workshops important?

Have you participated in any workshop?

Have you organized any workshop? How was it?

What could be done for workshops to function better?

#### 4.4 Debates

Have you participated in debates and movie screenings?

Have they changed your way of thinking issues of housing?

### **5. Social Media**

Which social media of GHAS do you follow? Are you responsible for managing any social media platform (Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp) ?

What kind of information circulates in these platforms or groups?

Does social media have a fundamental or complementary role in relation to the assembly and other activities?

## **6. Looking at the future**

What are the strengths and weaknesses of housing activism in Barcelona, and more specifically of GHAS?

Do you believe there is a lack of coordination in the creation and exchange of knowledge about housing? How could this be better organized?

How does the knowledge you have change your way of acting in the present and in the future?

## **Questions for Leaders**

### **1. Initial questions**

Since when are you in GHAS?

Why did you decide to join the group?

What has changed for you since you joined the group?

### **2. How the group was formed**

How did GHAS start?

What knowledge was important to start the group? Who had this knowledge?

Throughout the development of the group, were new forms of knowledge incorporated?

### **3. Personal learning experiences**

What were your previous experiences with housing issues? What did you learn from these experiences?

Do you believe you have gained new knowledge since you started participating in GHAS?

How did you acquire this knowledge? Where does this knowledge come from?

Why is it important to know about these things?

How did you get to know about the laws and support which are given to the families with housing problems?

Do you believe you have changed your perspective over housing and the city in general since you joined the group?

Is there any key moment that made you shift your perspective over housing issues?

#### **4. Evaluation of learning within the group**

Why is learning and exchange of knowledge important within the group?

What things are more important to learn?

Do you believe it is necessary to make any kind of effort for new members to learn about housing issues?

Apart from housing, do you believe people learn about other subjects in the group? Which ones?

#### **5. Networks with other groups**

Which other housing groups apart from GHAS do you have more contact with?

What is the importance of the connection of GHAS with other groups?

How does the exchange of knowledge between different housing groups take place? In which moments and which spaces?

#### **6. Moments of learning**

In which moments and spaces people learn new things?

##### 6.1 Assembly

For you, is the assembly a space for learning?

After coming many times to the assembly, what has changed for you?

Where does the way of organizing the assembly come from? Has this changed in some way?

Do you believe all participants can follow the discussions?

What could be done so that the discussion of cases would be more easy to comprehend?

##### 6.2 Direct Actions and Stop of Evictions

Which actions seem to you as the most important ones?

For you, are the actions a moment of learning?

How did you learn about the strategies of action that are done in the group?

Are the strategies always the same or can they change? Why?

Do you remember any day in which a new strategy had to be formulated?

### 6.3 Workshops

Why are the workshops important?

Have you participated in any workshop?

Have you organized any workshop? How was it?

What could be done for workshops to function better?

### 6.4 Debates

Have you participated in debates and movie screenings?

Have they changed your way of thinking issues of housing?

## **7. Social Media**

Which social media of GHAS do you follow? Are you responsible for managing any social media platform (Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp) ?

What kind of information circulates in these platforms or groups?

Does social media have a fundamental or complementary role in relation to the assembly and other activities?

## **8. Looking at the future**

What are the strengths and weaknesses of housing activism in Barcelona, and more specifically of GHAS?

Do you believe there is a lack of coordination in the creation and exchange of knowledge about housing? How could this be better organized?

How does the knowledge you have change your way of acting in the present and in the future?