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To cite this article: Leonie Laug & Corinna Hölzl (18 Jun 2025): Growth for people, not for profit: the internal factors behind the expansion of housing cooperatives in Berlin, *Housing Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/02673037.2025.2517079](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2517079)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2517079>



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Published online: 18 Jun 2025.



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Growth for people, not for profit: the internal factors behind the expansion of housing cooperatives in Berlin

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ABSTRACT

While existing literature on housing cooperatives has predominantly examined institutional contexts of housing cooperatives, this paper focuses on the internal factors that explain the expansion of large cooperatives. The study is based on a qualitative comparative analysis and interviews with experts and board members of mature housing cooperatives in Berlin. The findings demonstrate that whether and to what extent cooperatives expand depends on four factors: 1) size and geographical dispersion, 2) commitment to material expansion, 3) cohesion of the boards, 4) previous paths of expansion. The results further reveal that powerful, committed boards push expansion projects while resident members are more concerned with the maintenance of their stock. Moreover, the findings suggest that expansion comes at the expense of affordability due to high costs for land, buildings, and construction. Thus, beyond confirming that upscaling limits the possibilities of self-organisation the paper argues that it is the weakened democratic structures that allow for external solidarity in the form of expansion.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 July 2024
Accepted 2 June 2025

KEYWORDS

housing cooperatives;
expansion logics;
solidarity; housing
commons; internal
governance; QCA

Introduction

Many people around the world are unable to find housing they can afford as housing has become a means for making profit, leading to a 'conflict between housing as home and as real estate' (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 7). A large number of scholars and policy makers present cooperative housing as a more democratic and affordable third way between the state and the private market and highlight its potential to contribute to the decommodification of housing (Barenstein et al., 2021; Baiges *et al.*, 2019; Gerber & Gerber, 2017; Hölzl *et al.*, 2025). Cooperative housing is

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widely understood as a tenant or user housing model¹ which builds on collective ownership and limited equity, and prevents residents from capitalising on the market value of their homes (Baiges *et al.*, 2019). Resident members collectively own and govern the real estate while simultaneously being tenants. Consequently, they are primarily concerned with maintaining and managing their housing stock according to their needs with little concern to extract profits from themselves (Balmer & Bernet, 2015).

Yet, apart from a trend in Europe towards the growth of young but small cooperatives, the expansion of large mature cooperatives – which would be most promising in quantitative terms – is moderate. To find out what it would take for these cooperatives to expand, that is to examine their potential, it is important to understand under which circumstances existing housing cooperatives expand through new developments, extensions of existing stock and purchases.

A great body of literature points out how cooperatives have emerged and grown in some contexts and remained a niche in others by comparing institutional frameworks and policies in different countries (Baiges *et al.*, 2019; Ganapati, 2010). Scholars thereby refer to the help of external donors, municipal cooperative self-help, public land lease regulations and state building loans (Aernouts & Ryckewaert 2019). They further highlight policies such as statutory requirements to state subsidy programs, national tenant laws or restrictions to convert tenant cooperatives into owner-occupied flats that keep cooperative housing affordable and de commodified in the long-term (Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020; Larsen & Lund Hansen 2015).

Yet, these studies fail to account for differences among housing cooperatives in how they self-organise and act within these structures. While there is a substantial body of knowledge at the institutional level, the factors at micro level that influence the expansion strategies of mature housing cooperatives have received little attention so far (cf. Bernt & Holm, 2023). We can only fully understand the expansion of housing cooperatives by examining their physical conditions (e.g. size, form, locations) and internal governance characteristics (e.g. self-understanding).

This study seeks to fill that research gap by answering the following question: Which internal factors explain the differences in the expansion of housing cooperatives? It compares the expansion of housing cooperatives in the same institutional context through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of large mature housing cooperatives in the city of Berlin. The QCA is complemented by expert interviews and interviews with the boards of housing cooperatives. Berlin provides an excellent case study as it comprises a cooperative housing sector that dates back to the nineteenth century and with a share of 11,3 per cent of the total rental housing stock it represents a substantial proportion of the city's long-term affordable housing (IBB, 2023, p.54); a potential that Berlin and other European cities with similar conditions could exploit further.

Factors that lead housing cooperatives to expand

Housing shapes the built environment as dwellings are bound to places and last long. The location and form of buildings influence their lifecycles and reflect historic developments and processes of urbanisation (Blackwell & Kohl, 2018). Similarly, the

trajectories of housing organisations are likely to be influenced by the physical conditions of their housing stock. Yet, no studies have examined the relationship between the expansion of housing organisations and the physical conditions of their housing stock. Instead, literature on the physical dimension of housing has either remained on the macro level of historic urban development (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2010; Blackwell & Kohl, 2018) or on the micro level of the social and environmental implications of housing design (Avilla-Royo *et al.*, 2021; Coimbra & Almeida, 2013).

Furthermore, scholars have examined the governance capacities of housing cooperatives as collective actors to understand how cooperatives relate to wider political and societal issues. Scholars highlight how institutional structures and policies root in social democratic ideologies and welfare systems (Kohl & Sørvoll, 2021; Lawson, 2010) and are tied to social movements (Barenstein *et al.*, 2021; Ruonavaara, 2005) as well as relationships between political, civic and private actors (Ahedo *et al.*, 2023; Balmer & Gerber, 2018; Lawson, 2010). These studies illustrate how institutional structures and relationships with the government have pushed cooperatives to become more than a niche phenomenon or hindered their development (Baiges *et al.*, 2019). They also point out how a strong embeddedness in the state can compromise the autonomy of cooperatives (Barenstein *et al.*, 2021; Ganapati, 2010; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020). In line with that, Hölzl *et al.* (2025) point out the cleavage of housing cooperatives in Germany between keeping autonomy and proving common good orientation.

Perspectives on whether housing cooperatives have an intrinsic motivation to contribute to broader societal issues, such as tackling the housing crisis, vary substantially. While both policymakers and activists often tend to portray housing cooperatives as non-profit oriented and affordable *per se*, critical scholars emphasise the regulations which are in place to ensure that cooperative stock remains decommodified and non-profit-oriented in the long-term (Baiges *et al.*, 2019; Balmer & Bernet, 2015). Metzger (2021) relates this controversy to three different approaches to cooperative housing: First, the idea of entrepreneurial self-help which has been most prominent when housing cooperatives emerged in the late nineteenth century and in post-fordism, and still reflects today in the guiding principle of mixed neighbourhoods. Second, state regulation which aimed at affordable housing through social housing programs under fordism. Third, cooperative housing as self-help by those who seek housing and wish to overcome capitalist logics and create a solidarity-based economy instead which has been advocated particularly in controversial phases in Germany and elsewhere in Europe in the 1920s, 1980s and to a lesser extent in the 2010s after the global financial crisis. Consequently, Metzger (2021) argues that these different approaches have shaped the role of housing cooperatives. In his analysis of mature housing cooperatives in Hamburg, he finds that board members tend to support the first approach by highlighting cooperative housing as a good option between the private market rental and the ideal of private homeownership. This, he argues, allows for decommodification on a material level resulting in comparatively affordable housing, but not on a symbolic level in the sense of solidarity based economy.

In line with that, critics argue that they lack 'external or political solidarity' which can manifest in promoting their cause in public debates and policymaking, addressing

wider issues such as environmental or economic justice, protecting their housing from speculation and high rent increases to ensure low costs for residents or expanding their stock for potential new members in spite of related expenditures and costs (Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020, p. 396; Hölzl, 2022). Instead, they tend to look inwards focusing on the needs of their members and encouraging collaboration among them with little concern for broader issues (Czischke *et al.*, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Other authors argue that the external solidarity of housing cooperatives does not only depend on public policies and the conditions of the market but also on the ‘sense of collective social solidarity and civic morality’ among their members (Ahedo *et al.*, 2023, p. 19).

Some studies suggest that the external solidarity of mature cooperatives has decreased drastically over the past decades. While many cooperatives were historically tied to social democratic movements, recent studies show that they have become less involved in policymaking over time (Barenstein *et al.*, 2021; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018). Their focus shifted inwards on their members only rather than engaging in new housing projects or including new members. In Nordic countries and Germany, these changes were triggered by a changing political economy with rising costs for land and construction on the one hand, and declining regulation and subsidies of the housing sector on the other. That made it almost impossible to provide affordable housing through expansion (Metzger, 2021; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018). Overall, there is a controversial debate to what extent and for what reasons housing cooperatives do or do not have a symbolic interest in broader societal issues such as transforming the current housing system.

As cooperatives are governed by their members and in the interest of their members, the internal solidarity among members is less questioned (Czischke *et al.*, 2020). Members share an interest in keeping their houses well-maintained and rents affordable. Their solidarity amongst each other is rooted in ‘mutual self-interest’ for example by sharing maintenance and gardening costs or by participating in democratic decision-making processes (Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020, p. 396). Findings from a study on German cooperatives suggest that cooperatives perceive large expansion projects as a potential threat to the secure and affordable tenure of their residents. Thus, cooperatives prioritised to manage their existing housing stock sustainably over making potentially risky investments which could attract new members or groups. Some still decided to expand but new complexes needed to be financially self-sufficient and not cross-subsidised resulting in a ‘strategy of limited expansion’ (Brandesen & Helderma, 2012, p. 1151). The argument that cooperatives show solidarity among members carries the implicit assumption that members are simultaneously residents. Yet, in practice, many cooperatives face a rising number of nonresident members. Due to the increasing unaffordability of housing in cities, many people try to become a member of a cooperative even if the cooperative cannot yet offer them a dwelling. Similarly, family members such as children of residents, often become new members and search for housing on their own once they want to move out. Depending on the regulations of cooperatives on the acceptance of new members, waiting lists of non-resident members can become very long. This shows the smooth transition between external and internal solidarity and raises the question of how non-resident members ‘identify and act as a group with

common interest' (Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018, p. 137) and how their interests are represented in cooperative decision-making processes. Overall, these studies illustrate the varying understanding and implementation of the core principles of housing cooperatives.

From this literature study, we can extract the following three dimensions which influence whether housing cooperatives expand: (1) external factors such as the institutional and policy context, (2) internal governance including elements of governance culture such as their sense of solidarity, their approach to cooperative housing, and other principles and values as well as the manners of implementation (González & Healey 2005), and (3) the physical conditions of the housing stock, i.e. size, geographical distribution, age and quality of buildings. These dimensions are interdependent and influence each other. For example, some studies indicate that the expansion of single cooperatives goes along with a decline in their member participation and a reduction of democratic self-organisation (Balmer & Bernet, 2015; Lang & Novy, 2014). These tendencies relate to different governance structures in large cooperatives where member representatives are elected instead of having open assemblies where all members jointly make decisions (Brandsen & Helderma, 2012; Hansen & Langergaard, 2017). In Germany, the statutes of the cooperative define the rights and duties of the three central bodies. The general meeting (a) decides on the fundamental direction of the cooperative, votes on amendments to the statutes and elects the supervisory board. Every member has one vote, regardless of whether they live in the cooperative or not. The executive board (b) is also elected by the general meeting. However, in large cooperatives – as those analysed in this paper – it is mostly appointed by the supervisory board (c) and the general meeting is a representatives' meeting. Vice versa, member compositions and partly long-established democratic practices vary also among larger cooperatives and potentially influence their decisions to grow. Cooperative buildings do not just appear, but are based on members' decisions on when, where and in what form they are constructed or bought.

Materials and methods: studying mature housing cooperatives in Berlin

To explain differences in the expansion of housing cooperatives in the same urban context, we compared the expansion of 37 large, mature housing cooperatives in Berlin through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), conducted four expert interviews and interviewed board members of six different cooperatives.

Case selection: mature housing cooperatives in Berlin

Housing in Berlin has become unaffordable for many as the average asking rent almost doubled within ten years (Empirica, 2023). At the same time, most inhabitants are renters with 84 per cent rental housing (IBB, 2023). Due to the city's long tradition of tenant housing cooperatives, in 2022, they owned about 11,3 per cent of the rental housing stock which equals almost 190 000 housing units (Verband Berlin-Brandenburgischer Wohnungsunternehmen (BBU), 2022a; IBB, 2023). In 2021,

their average rent was nine per cent below the city's average (Verband Berlin-Brandenburgischer Wohnungsunternehmen (BBU), 2022b).

Nowadays, the ten largest housing cooperatives in Berlin own more than one third of the city's cooperative housing, thus managing over up to 10 000 units each (Redaktionsgruppe die Genossenschaftler*innen, 2021). Due to the relatively high equity ratios and housing stocks, mature cooperatives in Berlin and other major German cities dispose over potential for expansion (Metzger, 2021). Yet, they are frequently criticised by younger cooperatives that have been emerging since the 1980s to contribute very little to new housing developments despite their capital and to have few active members who fulfil the cooperative ideal of democratic self-organisation in practice (Balmer & Bernet, 2015; Brandsen & Helderma, 2012; Redaktionsgruppe die Genossenschaftler*innen, 2021). With approx. 5 000 units, the segment of young cooperatives is hardly significant in quantitative terms, but their different governance strategies often illustrate the potential to provide housing sustainably (Hölzl *et al.*, 2025).

This study only encompasses mature housing cooperatives which manage at least 1 000 housing units as we assume that these cooperatives have the necessary resources or access to resources for potential expansion. This includes two types of mature housing cooperatives which emerged from different historical and political contexts. The first category comprises cooperatives that were founded between the 1880s and the 1920s, the so-called Gründerzeit. They emerged as a response to bad housing conditions of the working class in the context of vast industrialisation and urbanisation. Initially, they were spearheaded by social reformers, and later, during the Weimar Republic, they were led by the workers' movement. After the two World Wars, in West Berlin the Gründerzeit cooperatives were also popular to rebuild the damaged housing stock (Barenstein *et al.*, 2021; Crome & Metzmacher, 2007).² The second type are cooperatives which were founded in East Berlin, as part of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), mainly in the 1950s and 60s.³ Large shares of their housing typologies today are buildings made from prefabricated slabs (*Plattenbauten*). Currently, 16 cooperatives founded during the Gründerzeit era and 28 cooperatives established during the GDR period still exist in Berlin (cf. Table 1).

Method and data collection: a) qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)

In a first step, we conducted a QCA to encompass the internal factors for the expansion of housing cooperatives. This method introduced by Ragin (1989) combines the advantages of both, qualitative and quantitative, approaches by building

Table 1. Overview and sample of mature housing cooperatives in Berlin.

Size	Founded in the former		Total
	Gründerzeit	GDR	
1000–1999	3 (2)*	5 (0)	8 (2)
2000–2999	2	5	7
3000–5000	4	14	18
>5000	7 (6)	4	11 (10)
	16 (14)	28 (23)	44 (37)

*In brackets: cooperatives included in the QCA.

on in-depth case insights in a systematic comparison of a larger number of cases. The biggest advantage of the QCA compared to simple quantitative analysis is that it analyses combinations of characteristics of cooperatives and their relationship with expansion. Further, QCA allows for different, mutually non-exclusive combinations of characteristics leading to expansion.

The characteristics we looked at are conceptually based on literature and the assessments of four experts we interviewed between December 2022 and March 2023: a former city administrator of the housing department, a representative of a lobby organisation for housing companies, a representative of a cooperative network organisation, and one member representative of three housing cooperatives. As a result, we assumed that the characteristics 1) large size, 2) wide geographic spread of the housing stock and 3) a high member-unit-ratio positively contribute to expansion. Large cooperatives are likely to have more resources to search for or manage new projects. The four experts pointed out that cooperatives care about the proximity of new units to their existing stock, so that a spatially dispersed housing stock might contribute to expansion. A high member-unit-ratio indicates a higher share of members who do not yet live in the cooperative housing stock but are waiting for a dwelling which could work as an incentive to expand. Due to the former division of the city, housing cooperatives stem from different historical contexts which is still reflected in their housing forms. Whether and how characteristic 4) type – cooperatives founded in the Gründerzeit and cooperatives established in the GDR – matters for expansion remains to be explored. As the governance structures of Berlin's large cooperatives are very similar, it was not possible to include governance aspects into the QCA analysis.

Expansion was examined for the period of ten years between 2011 and 2021 for two reasons. First, it was only in the beginning of the 2010s that the Senate of Berlin expected the city to grow and housing companies started to build housing again (Verband Berlin-Brandenburgischer Wohnungsunternehmen (BBU), 2022b). Second, by then, the cooperatives founded in the GDR had mostly recovered from high old debts after the reunification.⁴ Data was obtained through desk research including annual reports of the cooperatives published online by the German Ministry of Justice (*Bundesanzeiger*) and website content of cooperatives. We reviewed the annual reports of all cooperatives in 2011 and 2021 to see if and to what extent they had expanded. By reviewing 92 annual reports, we were able to obtain sufficient data on the number of housing units in 2011 and 2021 for 37 out of 44 housing cooperatives which we used for the analysis (see [Table 1](#)).⁵

Fuzzy set memberships

QCA is based on set memberships, i.e. the original data is transformed to reflect the extent to which each cooperative is member of a set (e.g. a set of cooperatives that have a geographically dispersed housing stock). While type can be expressed in binary form (with Gründerzeit foundings as 0 and GDR foundations as 1), all other variables and the outcome are calibrated into fuzzy set membership scores, ranging from 0 (full non-membership) to 1 (full membership). The data was first calibrated in Excel and then imported into the software fs/QCA 4.0 for analysis.

The raw data was calibrated into fuzzy set values to account for the qualitative differences and the difference-in-degree in the characteristics and the outcome (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

As Tables 2 and 3 show, we opted for a four-value fuzzy scale for three characteristics and a five-value fuzzy scale for the outcome to account for differences in expansion with greater detail and allow for partial set memberships. The calibration and related thresholds base on field knowledge and are related to the data itself. While the latter is usually considered bad practice (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010), it makes sense for this study as it compares housing cooperatives in the same urban context with a similar policy environment and is interested in their expansion relative to each other. Yet, testing for different calibration strategies is especially recommended in studies with limited theoretical expectations and conceptual criteria (Thomann & Maggetti 2020). Therefore, to check robustness, two analyses were run with different outcome calibration, one with expansion measured in absolute units and one with expansion measured in percentage relative to the cooperative's size. The calibration of expansion in absolute numbers is based on a median expansion of 98 units, so cooperatives slightly below or above the median (50-149 units) are considered partially expanding (0.67). Given a maximum expansion of 1 095 units within 10 years, only those with 500 or more expanded units have full membership in expansion (1) (see Table 2).

Membership thresholds for size reflect the assumption that differences in size matter more among smaller cooperatives than among larger ones regarding expansion. For the member-unit-ratio, cooperatives which have at least twice as many members as units receive partial membership in that set (0.67). This threshold reflects that most cooperatives in Berlin that were founded until the 1920s do not have a large share of three or more-bedroom flats which would result in a higher

Table 2. Calibration of the outcome 'expansion of large housing cooperatives in Berlin' (2011 to 2021).

QCA value expansion	0	0.2	0.6	0.8	1
Expansion in units (absolute outcome)	No expansion	1–49 units	50–149 units	150–499 units	>500 units
Expansion in percentage (relative outcome)	No expansion	<1%	1–4.9%	5–10%	>15%

Table 3. Calibration of the characteristics of large housing cooperatives in Berlin.

QCA value characteristics	0	0.33	0.67	1
Size	1000–1999	2000–2999	3000–5000	>5000
Type	Founded during the Gründerzeit	/	/	Founded in the GDR
Member-unit-ratio	1.0–1.4	1.5–1.9	2.0–2.4	2.5 or higher
Geographical dispersion	Spatially connected location(s) in one district	2–4 spatially nonconnected locations in one district	5 or more different locations in one or two districts	More than five locations in more than two districts

number of people living in one unit on average. The geographical dispersion of the housing stock is calibrated based on the number of districts, number of locations and their spatial connection (see Table 3). In a second robustness check, size and member-unit-ratio were calibrated in quartiles.

Consistent combinations of characteristics and logical reduction

In a next step, a truth table was produced which lists all possible combinations of characteristics that could produce expansion. Based on the set membership scores, each observed combination gets assigned to one configuration in the truth table by applying Boolean algebra rules. Subsequently, a minimum level of consistency is defined which classifies the configurations as either sufficient or insufficient for expansion. For example, if all cooperatives with the same membership scores in each characteristic have the same membership score of expansion, that configuration would be 1. However, the assessment of consistency with fuzzy sets is more complex as cooperatives can have partial memberships in the sets of characteristics. That results in a consistency measure that should exceed a minimum threshold but still allows for a few inconsistent cases. The lowest acceptable score for this analysis is 0.8. This is higher than the suggested score of 0.75 in literature to ensure that contradictory but consistent cases are excluded. That refers to four out of five cases of expanding cooperatives with all characteristics absent. As the absence of all characteristics are unlikely to explain their expansion, these cases are neither covered nor explained by the results of the QCA (Schneider & Wagemann 2012). The degree of consistency reflects the extent to which the configuration explains the outcome. Consistent truth table rows with at least two empirical cases are included in the analysis.

The last step of the QCA eliminates redundant elements in the sufficient configurations. This procedure further involves the treatment of *remainders*, configurations that are not covered by the empirical data but could theoretically occur. In this study, 7 out of 16 possible configurations lack empirical data. Due to the relatively high number, this QCA includes remainders to deal with limited diversity and reduce complexity (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012; Glaesser, 2023). Results of the parsimonious and intermediate solution are identical suggesting a high level of robustness as theoretical assumptions on how to treat the remainders do not change the solution (for more information, see Glaesser, 2023).

Methods and data collection: b) qualitative interviews

In a second step, the QCA was complemented by problem-centred, semi-structured interviews with executive board members of six different cooperatives to include the perspectives of housing cooperatives themselves and further insights of the four earlier conducted expert interviews (cf. Table 4). While the QCA shows what combinations of characteristics explain expansion, the ten interviews provide insights on why these combinations of characteristics influence expansion. They further allow to capture the dimension of internal governance of housing cooperatives reflected in their democratic practices, their concerns for their members and for broader

Table 4. Interview sample (conducted 11/2022-03/2023)*.

No.	Function	Institution	Details	Date
1	Member representative	Housing cooperatives	Representative in three mature, large cooperatives	November 2022
2	Representative	Lobby organisation for housing companies		February 2023
3	Former city administrator	State of Berlin, Department for urban development and housing		January 2023
4	Representative	Cooperative network organisation		January 2023
5	Board member 1	Housing cooperative	• 5000–6000 units • 150–499 units in expansion	December 2022
6	Board member 2	Housing cooperative	• 3000–4000 units • 50–149 units in expansion	December 2022
7	Board member 3	Housing cooperative	• 1000–1999 units • 50–149 units in expansion	January 2023
8	Board member 4	Housing cooperative	• >7000 units • >500 units in expansion	February 2023
9	Board member 5	Housing cooperative	• 4000–5000 units • <50 units in expansion	March 2023
10	Board member 6	Housing cooperative	• 6000–7000 units • 150–499 units in expansion	February 2019*

*One interview comes from a prior study conducted by one of the authors with a similar objective and was therefore incorporated into the empirical material of this study.

societal issues, and their relationships to public actors. Through adding qualitative interviews to the QCA, the study covers a broad range of potentially relevant factors while it does not intend to represent and explain the distribution of housing cooperatives based on their quantity of expansion (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The sampling strategy for the interviews with board members results in cooperatives that differ in their scope and way of expansion (through new developments, extensions of existing stock and purchases), their size, their geographical dispersion, their member-unit-ratio, and they include cooperatives founded in the Gründerzeit-era and in the GDR. Based on these criteria most fitting board members were contacted through e-mail. The interviews with board members were conducted in a semi-structured manner (three in-person interviews, two phone interviews and one written response). Following the idea of problem-centred interviews, the interviews focused on the cooperative's expansion (including related goals, influencing factors and decision-making processes) and sought to reveal the role of networks with other cooperatives, politics and administration. The earlier conducted expert interviews completed the interview sample (Meuser & Nagel, 2005). All interviews were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis along the rationales for and against different ways to expand, statements on the policy environment, their self-understanding and their networks (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Results: the internal factors explaining expansion

The physical conditions facilitating expansion

This study indicates that there are four factors which explain the expansion of large housing cooperatives in Berlin. First, the QCA revealed that a physical factor, the combination of large size and a dispersed stock, facilitates expansion and compensates for restraints in the three other factors. The other three factors relate to the internal governance, namely their commitment to material expansion, the cohesion of their boards and their expansion path. The latter results mainly build on the interviews with experts and boards.

The results show three sufficient combinations of characteristics that produce expansion (cf. Table 5): When redundant elements are reduced, the results reveal that cooperatives which own at least 3 000 housing units and have a geographically dispersed housing stock expanded by more than 50 units each from 2011 to 2021. This combination of large size and great dispersion shows a high consistency of 0.88 which means that almost all cooperatives which are large and have a dispersed stock expand (15 out of 16) (cf. Table 5).

This combination does not only lead to expansion but also influences the degree to which cooperatives expand. Except one, cooperatives with a large or very large expansion (cf. Figure 1) own more than 3 000 units and have a dispersed stock. The three cooperatives with the largest expansion (500–1 100 units) own more than 4 000 units and have their housing complexes spread out throughout the city in more than five districts.

There are three reasons why the specific combination of characteristics facilitates expansion. First, reports show that larger size usually translates into more staff and higher total assets including property. Due to similar average rents, more units increase the income from rents even if running costs, investment choices and other management decisions influence the available capital. More property further helps to access loans for expansion projects. Second, cooperatives have a strong preference to expand close to their existing stock as interviews with experts and boards showed. With changing needs, members want to move but only within their neighbourhoods. People also choose to become a member based on the location(s) of a cooperative. The interviewed executive boards further argue that the management of new units requires maintenance efforts that are not viable if staff such as caretakers are not close by. For example, one board member explained that opening a new location with 25 units through a new development or purchase requires staff but does not suffice for a full-time position (interview 5). Third, many cooperatives prefer to use their own land and buildings for expansion. Interviews with experts and board members confirmed that opportunities outside

Table 5. Sufficient empirically-present combinations of characteristics that produce expansion.

Size	Member-unit-ratio	Geographic dispersion	Type	Number of empirical cases	Degree of consistency
1	1	1	1	5	0.98
1	0	1	0	6	0.94
1	0	1	1	5	0.87

Accumulated number of mature housing cooperatives in Berlin based on their expansion in housing units

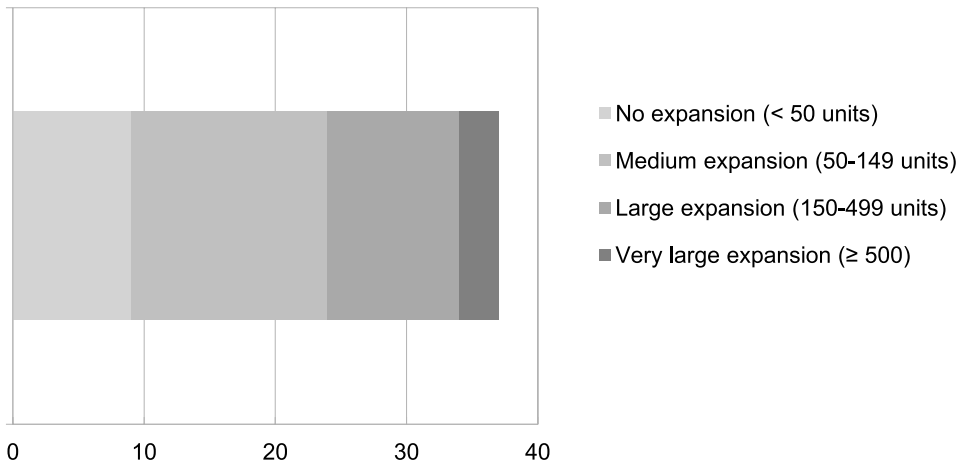


Figure 1. Accumulated number of housing cooperatives based on their expansion in housing units, 2011-2021.

of their own property have become rare as undeveloped, affordable land has become very scarce and prices have drastically increased in Berlin. The more property they own and the more spread out it is geographically, the more possibilities they have to densify existing housing complexes or purchase housing which is nearby their existing stock.

The results of the QCA further show that no other combinations of characteristics can explain expansion since they were not consistent enough. The combination of large size and geographical dispersion explains 59 per cent of the expansion of the observed cooperatives. The remaining 41 per cent indicate that there are cooperatives which do not show this combination but still expand. The results also reveal that the reverse combination of small size and concentrated housing stock does not lead to non-expansion. Instead, there is no logical combination of characteristics that explains non-expansion. There are, for example, eleven large cooperatives founded in the GDR with a concentrated housing stock that have a low member-unit-ratio. Interestingly, despite their shared characteristics, some of them expand and others do not. Similarly, there are four small cooperatives with a concentrated housing stock and a low member-unit ratio which still expand. For these cooperatives, their physical conditions and share of non-resident members are neither facilitating nor hindering enough to explain (non-)expansion. They have the opportunity to expand but whether they do, depends on other factors relating to their internal governance as outlined in the next sections.

Commitment to material expansion

It is not self-evident that cooperatives seek to expand. Some cooperatives simply decide to use their resources for the maintenance and qualification of their housing

stock. In these cooperatives, neither the management nor most members see a need to expand. What these cooperatives share is a low member-unit-ratio. The fact that most of their members are residents makes it easier for them to prioritise the needs of their member residents. Often, they decided early on to not accept any new members to keep it that way. They might still convert an attic or extend existing complexes by a few new units. But overall, they see no need to expand on a larger scale or have other priorities. As one board member put it:

I have much, much more pressure to act on the technical side, i.e. in the area of maintenance and modernisation. [...] It's just... I think there is still a crux or let's say a misunderstanding now. A cooperative with its stock is not oriented in the same way as a commercial enterprise [...] They have to grow and expand. And we don't have to. And I think there's a big mistake in thinking... That's also the case with Berlin's society. What do you get out of it if you build housing on a large scale and the stock rots away on the other side in a double order of magnitude? (interview 9)

Yet, most other cooperatives generally aim to expand. The most prevalent arguments are to accommodate non-resident members or to diversify their housing stock. According to interviewed experts and board members (interview 2 and 6), some of the cooperatives founded in the GDR regard their homogeneous housing stock as an economic risk which they seek to minimise by new developments or purchase of other housing typologies.⁶ Interviewed experts and board members emphasise the changing needs of resident members, for example, old members who need more accessible housing or families who need larger flats. If cooperatives cannot accommodate those needs within their existing stock, many seek to do so through new developments or purchases. These reasons for diversification in terms of building typologies, dwelling size or accessibility relate to the overarching objectives of meeting resident members' needs and limiting risks that could jeopardise tenure security in the long-term. At the same time, such arguments illustrate a blurry line between member orientation (i.e. securing long-term housing) and following market-oriented economic logics (i.e. to remain competitive by diversifying the stock).

Many, especially cooperatives founded during *Gründerzeit*, already have a diverse housing stock but aim to expand to provide their non-resident members with housing. A few interviewees also mentioned aspects which go beyond their cooperatives such as contributing to more affordable housing in light of the housing crisis or buying a house where residents would otherwise be displaced in case of a private buyer. Notwithstanding, these were framed as additional positive effects of their expansion and not as their drivers of expansion. All interviewees agreed that the cooperatives' main objective 'is simply to provide our members with affordable and secure housing in the way that they want it from the cooperative [...]. We are not obliged to the state of Berlin [...], and we surely don't do politics.' (interview 6). Besides, statements like this point to severe struggles between cooperatives and the former leftist Berlin government (2016-2023) on housing strategies.

The interviews reveal that cooperatives also differ in the rent levels that they accept. Some cooperatives accept rents in new developments which are twice as high as their average rent as they are still below the rent level in many privately developed projects. These units are unaffordable for low-income households including

many cooperative members. Yet, rent levels in new developments do not reflect profit interests of cooperatives but result from high costs for construction.

Cooperatives further differ in their degree of risk averseness as all interviewed experts agree. Interviews with board members confirmed that purchases are considered riskier investments than new developments due to a high uncertainty with regards to future maintenance and renovation costs. Consequently, some cooperatives generally refrain from purchases while others make expansion a higher priority and are willing to accept these risks.

But even when the will to expand is there, cooperatives still need to overcome two main hurdles in realising expansion projects. One hurdle is the scarcity of affordable, undeveloped land and apartment buildings for sale. That makes them very reliant on their own or public land if they seek to realise a new development, or on socially oriented owners who are willing to sell their property below market value. A second hurdle are permitting processes as administrative processes can prolong projects by a great deal and have hindered the realisation of large and small cooperative expansion projects in the past as costs have risen in the meantime. Yet, all interviewed board members agree that political will and good relations with committed individuals in local administration can be of great help to overcome these hurdles and realise projects.

How cooperatives deal with these circumstances depends on their priorities and the related trade-offs which they are willing to accept. For example, many cooperatives are reluctant to increase their dependency on the state through land leases and funding and are unwilling to accept strict regulations that go along with them. They refer to bad experiences they have had with public lease contracts and (suddenly discontinued) funding schemes in the past that made them feel 'left out in the rain' as board member 2 put it (interview 6). Overall, cooperatives need to be highly committed to expansion and willing to accept trade-offs and risks that come with high market prices, dependency on public support, long permitting processes, or the uncertainty of future investments in purchased buildings.

Cohesion of boards

To move and change something in the cooperative, you actually need the will of the executive board to do it, they have to do it first. [...] against the board or without its initiative, it is actually... nothing happens. (interview 4)

This statement of a cooperative network representative emphasises the central role of the executive board of mature housing cooperatives. The board must show commitment to expand. The executive board involves two persons who are suggested and elected by the supervisory board. The two members of the executive board are the main managers of the cooperatives. Most statutes grant the executive board decision power on new developments or purchases. These decisions need to be approved by the supervisory board. In most cooperatives, member representatives formally do not need to be involved in such decisions.

That becomes very crucial as members are not the driving force behind expansion. No interviewee mentioned a case where most members had pushed for expansion

themselves, but several referred to instances of resistance. Expansion can be a great controversy relating to conflicting interests between different member groups, especially between non-resident and resident members. While the latter are mainly concerned with the maintenance and modernisation of the existing stock and its surrounding, non-resident members share a greater interest in expansion. Based on the interviews with board members and one representative, member representatives are mainly (long-term) residents, so that non-resident members tend to be under-represented and, according to board member 3, their representatives also less involved than residents. Consequently, it is the boards who push or do not push for expansion. Especially in densification projects such as adding a new building or storey to an existing complex, a not-in-my-backyard attitude prevails. Boards must face these conflicts but can overrule protesting members as this quote of one board member illustrates:

There was a big, big discussion, [residents complained that] we would take their livelihood and take away their beautiful view on the riverside, and so on. We explained everything, we realised the project [...] and now that everything is done, the residents also say yes, yes, it is good. (interview 5)

That creates difficult circumstances for boards even if they are committed to expand, especially with projects in existing housing complexes. Moreover, opportunities outside their own property to buy and develop land or purchase buildings with affordable rents have become very difficult. Not all board members agree to expand in these circumstances. For example, one of the interviewed executive board members acted like an advocate for non-resident members constantly searching for opportunities to expand. Yet, the person was thwarted by resident members and the supervisory board. The board member explained that this is ‘very typical behaviour’ (interview 7) which he had observed in other cooperatives, too. Nevertheless, the example illustrates the key role of single board members who bring in different capacities and convictions. Interviews with different boards confirmed that in cooperatives where both members of the executive board are not aligned or the executive and supervisory boards disagree, expansion is very unlikely.

Path of expansion

The trajectories of housing cooperatives are tied to their property including the age and form of their housing stock, their available land and related investment decisions of their boards over time. Decisions on expansion projects can be regarded as decisions that can be made at any point in time, but such perspective would neglect the path-dependent nature of management decisions over time. Decisions to purchase land or to invest into the housing stock at certain times influence future possibilities. For example, one cooperative bought land very cheaply more than 15 years ago which is now worth 25 times more compared to what the cooperative initially paid. The only reason it can now develop affordable housing with almost 100 units in a central location is that they bought the land long time ago.

A second example is a small (< 2 000 units) cooperative with a concentrated housing stock which had been trying to buy a specific plot of public land in their neighbourhood for 90 years. In that period, the land was sold several times to private

investors while the cooperative came away empty-handed. In 2014, the latest investor owner went bankrupt and had to return the land to the city government. Through a long process of negotiation, the cooperative could eventually buy the land and develop 60 units. While the supervisory board and member representatives are usually opposed to expansion projects, the board member explained that the project was undisputed by everyone involved, even by the member representatives, as the cooperative had been engaged for 90 years (interview 7).

Differences can also be observed for cooperatives founded in the GDR with a relatively homogeneous housing stock which was redeveloped in the 1990s and 2000s. In some cooperatives, after the redevelopment boards decided to continuously invest in their stock, for example to set up fibre glass connection or simply to keep the stock in good condition. In other cooperatives with similar typologies boards decided to focus on necessary investments only, so to repair and maintain only. Due to the similar age of most of their buildings, they are now requiring large investments all at once that bind a lot of financial and human resources. In such a context, expansion projects become unlikely even if the current board shows commitment to expand.

Management decisions over time further influence the attitude and related expectations of members. When resident members feel like their needs have been neglected by the board, they are more likely to rally against any expansion plan. From their perspective, it should be the management's priority to fulfil their needs. That entails, for example, making existing units more accessible, improving the standards of bathrooms, or building a playground in the backyard. In cooperatives which continuously expand, boards have shown that they are able to maintain the stock, care for their housed members' needs and expand at the same time. In many expansion projects, boards strategically combine both, for example by converting an attic when the roof needs to be renewed or by adding bicycle racks in the backyard where a new house is constructed.

The sum of management decisions over time can result in a 'culture' (interview 4) or 'tradition' (interview 2) of expansion as two experts explained. Cooperatives which have continuously expanded experience a greater level of acceptance by their members as boards have gained their trust. Members are more likely to agree to suggested projects based on their previous experiences. Vice versa, in cooperatives with little projects of expansion, resident members are more critical towards expansion projects, or they question them more as this is not something that they are used to in their cooperative. In turn, that can make boards with the will to expand more hesitant or boost them in pursuing their projects. Thus, boards and members mutually influence the attitude and trust towards the other regarding expansion projects.

Overall, the physical conditions and the internal governance need to be considered when examining the expansion of housing cooperatives. By including physical conditions of housing, the paper has shown how the size and dispersion of housing stock facilitate expansion, thereby specifying a promising target group for policymakers. Moreover, the results reveal that both dimensions are interwoven which contributes to a more integrated understanding of the expansion of democratic, non-profit oriented housing organisations. The combination of large size and a dispersed stock does not produce expansion on its own as boards still need to make

decisions. The fact that 15 out of 16 large, dispersed cooperatives expanded could indicate that all of them have united and committed boards and that these physical conditions allow their commitment to translate into practice. While this is probably true for some of these cooperatives, it is unlikely that all of them have such committed and united boards. Rather, the findings suggest that the combination of large size and geographical dispersion facilitates expansion to such a degree that it compensates for less favourable internal governance capacities.

Concluding discussion: expansion vs. democratic organisation and affordability

Rather than following external political objectives to tackle the housing crisis or committing to the idea of a solidarity based economy on a symbolic level, cooperatives expand based on their members' needs without challenging prevalent economic logics. These findings confirm the common critique that housing cooperatives focus on themselves and a professional economic logic of action rather than on a societal transformation of housing (Czischke *et al.*, 2020; Metzger, 2021; Thompson, 2020). The two main reasons for expansion are to diversify their housing stock or to provide non-resident members with housing. Even if boards argue that they expand to accommodate their members' needs, members are not the driving force behind expansion. This tension relates to a conflict between different member groups, a factor which has been indicated in an earlier study (Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018). While the interests of non-resident members are in line with political objectives to increase the share of cooperative housing, resident members have less incentive to focus on expansion. At the same time, non-resident members are often underrepresented in general assemblies or discussions with the board to advocate for their interests as several interviewees mentioned. In line with that, the QCA confirmed that a high share of non-resident members does not necessarily translate into expansion. These tensions, however, also reflect the political conditions in Berlin, that do not allow cooperatives to enhance committing to broader societal issues.

Given these circumstances, it seems puzzling that cooperatives still expand, the majority moderately but some even to a greater degree with more than 500 units in ten years. The powerful role of boards in large German housing cooperatives allows them to make decisions on expansion without a formal obligation to include other members. In practice, boards can bypass members, for example to purchase small buildings, or to push projects through against the protest of resident members in the neighbourhood. This finding suggests that expansion comes at the expense of the democratic organisation of cooperatives. Due to their formal decision-making power, boards can avoid long processes of deliberation if they are confident that expansion projects do not risk the secure and affordable housing of resident-members and benefits them in the long-term. As long as their houses are well-maintained and their rent levels remain the same, resident-members are likely to accept their boards' choices or at least not rally against them.

Over time, committed executive and supervisory boards can establish a 'culture of expansion' and reduce the resistance of resident members. These insights confirm previous studies that the upscaling of cooperatives limits their self-organisation in

practice (Balmer & Bernet, 2015; Lang & Novy, 2014). However, instead of affirming the implicit critique on the lack of democratic practice, this study suggests that it is precisely this lack of democratic practice which increases solidarity towards non-resident members and the contribution of housing cooperatives to the decommodification of housing, which largely lacks transformative purposes though (Metzger, 2021). This trade-off provides an unsustainable foundation for the expansion of cooperatives relying on the commitment and pressure of powerful individuals.

This study further reveals another trade-off between the decommodification of housing through expansion and its affordability. Interviews showed that boards differ in their assessment of what rent levels are acceptable. If expansion projects are targeted towards middle- to high-income members, cooperatives compromise on their principle of affordable housing and widen the gap between rent levels in old and new complexes. One response to high costs for new developments could be to cross-subsidise expansion projects by members who can afford it as part of the internal solidarity among members. Considering that conflicting interests of resident and non-resident members already hamper expansion without affecting rent levels of resident-members, this possibility seems unlikely. Ten years ago, cooperatives' focus on member residents kept them from cross-subsidising new projects *via* moderate rent increases elsewhere and they made sure that new projects were financially self-sufficient (Brandsen & Helderma, 2012). That has not changed in the meantime. It marks the limits of solidarity among resident and non-resident members and might be opposed to dominant attitudes of boards of mature cooperatives.

Overall, these findings show that a commitment to overcome private market logics and approach cooperative housing on a symbolic level (Metzger, 2021) is not part of their self-understanding as member organisations and rather confirms their inward-focus (Czischke *et al.*, 2020; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018). Without following the idea of a solidarity based economy (Metzger 2021) allowing for riskier investments and cross-subsidies, expansion is likely to remain on a low to moderate level.

These trade-offs contribute to theoretical debates on the core principle of housing cooperatives as democratic and civic housing organisations on the one hand, and to the practical implication of the decommodification of housing on the other hand. Future research should examine more closely how conflicting member interests, especially among resident members and non-resident members, are reflected and negotiated in the democratic practices in large housing cooperatives. Such research could also investigate the dynamics underlying organisational change, for example when new boards are elected. Given the scarcity of affordable land and high costs for purchases and construction, without public support cooperatives are increasingly unable to realise affordable rents in new projects. A historically grown lack of trust prevents housing cooperatives in Berlin to rely on public support. This finding encourages future policy-oriented research to examine relationships between public and cooperative actors more closely in the analysis of cooperative expansion and their struggle for autonomy.

Notes

1. This study is restricted to tenant cooperatives which are most prevalent in German-speaking countries. In contrast to ownership cooperatives (common in Sweden, Norway and

- USA) the residents cannot capitalise on increases in property values individually and have thus little incentive to sell housing units on the free market (Brandsen & Helderman, 2012; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020).
2. Until 1990, cooperatives in West Germany were obliged to build new, small flats and received tax exemptions and other privileges in return (Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeit).
 3. In West Germany hardly any new large cooperatives established in these decades.
 4. Their relief was linked to extensive privatisations and transformations of Berlin's cooperatives; see Schipper, 2024 for more information on this early housing financialisation phase.
 5. Seven cooperatives did not include the number of housing units in 2011 in their annual reports or on their website and were excluded from analysis. Most of them were small cooperatives with less than 2 000 units but varied on most other variables, so that their exclusion was not expected to change the results of the QCA.
 6. This is also valid for some West-Berlin cooperatives that encompass large housing estates. Several cooperatives made use of urban renewal programmes in the 1990/2000s and gained a higher variety of apartment types.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was supported by the German Research Foundation.

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