

A Shared Services Cooperative for Childcare Workers: Building Civic Infrastructure for Mass Governance

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Executive Summary

The announcement by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and New York Governor Kathy Hochul that they would partner on delivering universal childcare for children under 5 in the nation's largest city presents an historic opportunity to improve the lives of children, parents, and childcare providers alike. Given the entrenched gaps and inequities marking the current childcare system, it also raises important questions concerning implementation. This brief considers how the development of civic infrastructure could advance inclusion and strengthen democratic accountability as new investments in New York City's publicly funded childcare system take shape.

Specifically, it proposes a shared services cooperative (SSC) as a vehicle to promote voice and provide critical services for childcare workers, helping to even a playing field that systematically disadvantages smaller community-based childcare providers. Such a structure could preserve the independence of providers while levelling up their capacities, serving as a key pillar for building a more inclusive and responsive childcare system across the city.

Introduction

The announcement by New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and New York Governor Kathy Hochul that they would partner on delivering universal childcare for children under 5 in the nation’s largest city presents an historic opportunity to improve the lives of children, parents, and childcare providers alike.¹ Given the entrenched gaps and inequities marking the current childcare system, it also raises important questions concerning implementation. This brief considers how the development of civic infrastructure could advance inclusion and strengthen democratic accountability as new investments in New York City’s publicly funded childcare system take shape. Specifically, it proposes a shared services cooperative (SSC) as a vehicle to promote voice and provide critical services for childcare workers, helping to even a playing field that systematically disadvantages smaller community-based childcare providers. Such a structure could preserve the independence providers while levelling up their capacities, serving as a key pillar for building a more inclusive and responsive childcare system across the city.

The Context

Reflecting long histories of structural racism and sexism, the childcare system in the U.S. is severely underfunded. As a result, the childcare workforce (serving children ages 0-5) is deeply devalued and underpaid even as childcare remains unaffordable for many families.² Small, independent providers—including those situated in childcare centers and family childcare homes—confront particular challenges.³ In New York City, most of

¹ See [announcement](#) from the NYC Mayor’s Office.

² Emily Beaver and Kristin Feierabend, “[Still Undervalued and Underfunded: The Invisible Child Care Workforce](#),” MDC, 2024; Kyle Ross and Kennedy Andara, “[Childcare Costs Push an Estimated 134,000 Families Into Poverty Each Year](#),” Center for American Progress, 2024.

³ The primary source of public funding for these CBCPs is Childcare and Development Block Grants (CCDBGs). For more on how racism and sexism yielded this inadequate and highly fragmented funding mechanism—and blocked passage of a more comprehensive childcare program during the Nixon era—see Sanjay Pinto, “[Raising Our Nation: Forging a More Robust and Equitable Childcare System in America](#),” Ms. Foundation for Women, 2016.

these community-based childcare providers (CBCPs) are women of color. Median pay for CBCPs is under 60% of the median for all occupations, usually with meager benefits, limited opportunities for career advancement, and demanding working conditions⁴—conditions that contribute to burnout, staffing shortages, and childcare deserts.⁵

For CBCPs, the fragmented nature of the publicly funded system and dispersed structure of the workforce pose significant barriers to organizing collectively. In New York City and other places, segments of the workforce have been able to unionize, enabling them to bargain for improved conditions.⁶ However, even for unionized CBCPs, the fragmented landscape often hampers workers from engaging with others in similar childcare settings, connecting with other kinds of providers, and mobilizing around shared interests. Against this backdrop, the most successful examples of base building and engagement among CBCPs often involve organizational innovations that facilitate new ways of reaching members, surfacing needs, and aggregating power.⁷

While building collective organization can help to enhance the bargaining power of CBCPs vis-à-vis the state, extractive private sector actors also impact the ability of CBCPs to improve working conditions in the industry. For example, private equity (PE) firms attracted by the lure of public dollars have been rapidly increasing their presence in the childcare market, which includes buying up existing community-based providers

⁴ Emmy Liss, "[Building a Stronger Child Care Workforce for New York City](#)," Day Care Council of New York, 2025

⁵ See Office of the New York State Comptroller [press release](#). For more on the structural factors leading to childcare deserts, see John Sipple, Lisa McCabe, and Hope Casto, "Child care deserts in New York State: Prekindergarten implementation and community factors related to the capacity to care for infants and toddlers," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 51 (2020): 167-177.

⁶ Alex Blutman, "[Childcare Organizing—Meeting Unique Challenges with Innovative Strategy](#)," [Onlabor.org](#), 2021.

⁷ In New Jersey, for example, the Communications Workers of America local representing many of the state's family childcare providers helped to set up an organization called New Jersey Communities United that does base building work among that segment of the union's membership, with "community shop stewards" serving as point persons for their peers in specific geographic zones. See Sanjay Pinto, "[Family Childcare and Community: The Partnership Between New Jersey Communities United and CWA Local 1037](#)," Labor Innovations for the 21st Century Fund, 2023.

with promises that consolidation will promote efficiency and economies of scale.⁸ More research is needed to determine the overall effects of PE in the childcare arena.⁹ However, a recent Congressional Research Service report notes that 15 of the 16 largest for-profit childcare chains have PE financing and draws on the available evidence (including what is known about PE's impacts in other sectors) to raise concerns that increased PE ownership in childcare may erode staffing, compromise childcare quality, and undermine childcare access, particularly in underserved communities.¹⁰ Others have argued that PE's business model is at cross purposes with accountability to local communities and efforts to constitute childcare as a public good.¹¹

The new investment in New York City's childcare system is welcome news, but many questions remain concerning implementation. The universal pre-K program established during the De Blasio mayoral administration brought important gains, but serious equity and access issues also emerged. The business model for CBCPs rests on a delicate balance of margins and staffing across different age groups. Given the higher caregiver-to-child ratios required for children 0-2, margins are lower than—and often “cross-subsidized” by—higher margins on care for children over three. By initially excluding family providers from the pre-K program and placing children 3 and over in other childcare settings, the program effectively made the business model of many CBCPs unsustainable, forcing a significant number of closures.¹² Families needing childcare were affected, too, with one analysis showing that the availability of childcare for children under 2 actually decreased following the implementation of the universal

⁸ [“Two-Pager: Understanding Private Equity in Child Care,”](#) National Women's Law Center and Open Market Institute, 2024.

⁹ Diane Schilder, Laura Betancur, and Wesley Jenkins. [“What We Do and Don't Know About Private Equity Investment in Early Childhood Education,”](#) Urban Institute, 2026.

¹⁰ Karen Lynch and Eva Su, [“Private Equity Investments in Large For-Profit Childcare Organizations: In Brief,”](#) Congressional Research Service, 2024.

¹¹ Stienon, Audrey, and Melissa Boteach, “Children Before Profits: Constraining Private Equity Profiteering to Advance Child Care as a Public Good,” SSRN, 2024.

¹² Abigail Kramer, [“Hochul Plans to Fund First 2 years of Universal Child Care for NYC 2-Year-Olds,”](#) Chalkbeat New York, 2026.

pre-K program—a decline that was driven by reduced supply within low-income communities.¹³

There are indications that Mayor Mamdani and other leaders are taking heed of past missteps, looking to configure new investments in ways that expand childcare access equitably across neighborhoods and demographics while promoting inclusion of a range of different kinds of CBCPs.¹⁴ But how to achieve such outcomes is not just a question of government policy; particularly with extractive private sector actors looking to expand their footprint in the childcare sector, it also demands consideration of new forms of civic infrastructure.

The Proposal: A Shared Services Cooperative

To empower CBCPs, help them reduce operating costs through economies of scale, and help counter the incursion of extractive private sector actors, we propose setting up a process to explore the development of a citywide shared services cooperative (SSC). Group purchasing organizations (GPOs) exist across different sectors and together comprise a multi-billion dollar industry in the U.S.¹⁵ By furnishing goods and services at discounted prices, they help members to improve operational efficiencies and tap into the benefits of scale.¹⁶ When such organizations are cooperatively owned and controlled by their members, this helps to ensure democratic accountability.¹⁷ There is ample precedent for GPOs to be structured as cooperatives in the U.S. economy, including producer cooperatives such as Land O' Lakes in the agricultural sector and SSCs such as Ace Hardware. Often, SCCs help their members to compete more effectively against large, deep-pocketed corporations.

¹³ Jessica H. Brown, "Does Public Pre-K Have Unintended Consequences on the Child Care Market for Infants and Toddlers?," Working Paper 626, Princeton University, Department of Economics, Industrial Relations Section, 2019.

¹⁴ Elliot Haspel, "[Small Children: Big Looming Policy Questions](#)," *Vital City*, 2026.

¹⁵ See <https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/industry/group-purchasing-organizations/5963/>.

¹⁶ WO Cleverley and Paul Nutt, "The effectiveness of group-purchasing organizations," *Health Services Research* 19.1 (1984): 65.

¹⁷ Christina Clamp, Eklou R. Amendah, and Carol Coren. "Shared-services cooperatives: strengthening local economies through collaboration," CIRIEC International, Université de Liège, 2019.

For community-based childcare providers in New York City, SSCs could provide, or facilitate affordable access to, a range of key services. These include:

- administration and accounting services (often a significant cost burden for providers)
- assistance meeting licensing requirements
- opportunities for continuing education and professional development
- marketing
- support for matching providers with families in need of childcare
- insurance
- technical assistance for business development
- access to capital

Together, such a menu of services could ease many of the barriers CBCPs confront in successfully navigating the publicly funded childcare system and help enhance their capacities for meeting different kinds of childcare needs, complementing the role played by existing childcare provider “networks” in New York City.¹⁸ A unified entity could also reduce the administrative burden for government agencies to contract with smaller CBCPs and ensure legal compliance, addressing another factor that can disadvantage CBCPs looking to access public dollars.¹⁹

In addition to offering valuable services, an SSC could serve as a platform for CBCPs to exercise voice in shaping the evolution of New York City’s childcare delivery system. A veteran of the De Blasio administration involved in managing the rollout of the city’s universal pre-K program notes that, despite structures for democratic planning and stakeholder engagement being in place, their actual use was somewhat limited.²⁰

Building on the role of unions and other grassroots organizations of CBCPs, creation of

¹⁸ See

<https://www.uft.org/chapters/private-and-nonprofit-chapters/uft-providers/member-support/provider-net-works>.

¹⁹ Public funding for childcare in New York City comes from a mix of federal, state, and local sources (see this recent [overview](#) from the NYC Comptroller’ Office). The new childcare expansion in New York City would build on this combined approach.

²⁰ Among the factors limiting use of these channels were pressure for rapid results and a lack of familiarity among staff with democratic planning processes. See Josh Wallack, “[Childcare as Industrial Policy Blueprint: Lessons from New York City’s Pre-K for All Implementation](#),” Roosevelt Institute, 2023.

an SSC and clear and regular touch points with relevant city agencies could channel input from CBCPs concerning system design and administration on an ongoing basis. As discussed below, an SSC could also deepen the engagement of CBCPs in their unions and help build a more robust grassroots foundation for co-governance.

The New York City government, potentially in collaboration with the state, could play a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for an SSC of CBCPs to form. This role could include helping to convene relevant parties—including grassroots CBCP organizations, unions, parent groups, and other community and advocacy organizations—to consider how such a structure could function most effectively within the city’s childcare landscape. The City could also build on its record of funding cooperative development to facilitate the launch of the SCC.²¹ This could entail developing a request for proposals (RFP) process—open to both individual organizations and collaboratives—to support CBCPs in building a sustainable SCC. To ensure mission alignment, the RFP could require bidding entities to demonstrate their commitment to maintaining minimum labor standards and expanding access to quality childcare, and include clear parameters related to worker ownership and control. The primary deliverables would be (1) to develop a launch plan in collaboration with CBCP members and (2) to facilitate the implementation of that plan with CBCP members. The plan would address financial management, business model development, administration and operations, governance and organizational culture, stakeholder engagement, and how the work of the SSC fits into a larger sectoral governance strategy.

In the implementation phase, the successful bidder would be responsible for ensuring that the SCC had the capacity needed to successfully launch and thrive. That could include marshalling other sources of patient, mission-aligned capital that would place the SSC on a solid financial footing, and recruiting team members who could help

²¹ See

<https://nyc-business.nyc.gov/nycbusiness/business-services/initiatives/worker-cooperative-business-development-initiative>. See also Stacey Sutton, “Cooperative Cities: Municipal Support for Worker Cooperatives in the United States,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 41.8 (2019): 1081-1102. Also worth noting is the fact that the NYC government has supported group purchasing for non-profits. See <https://www.nyc.gov/site/nonprofits/resources/cost-savings.page>.

operate the SCC alongside its members. Once up and running, the SSC could be funded through member fees (which would be significantly lower than member savings from group purchasing/services) as well as other revenue streams defined in the launch plan.

Addressing Possible Objections

Despite the substantial prospective benefits of SSC for CBCPs, there are potential objections that warrant consideration. One concern is that an SSC might inject a privatizing logic into what should be configured as a public system. Italy, where some social services cooperatives have served as a velvet glove for privatization and a basis for exploiting economic migrants, serves as a cautionary tale in this regard.²² Still, it is important to be clear-eyed about our point of departure in the U.S., where a significant proportion of publicly funded childcare has long been outsourced to for-profit and not-for-profit providers. With extractive private sector actors moving aggressively to grab a share of the public dollars on offer, an SSC could serve as a mission-driven vehicle enhancing the competitiveness of CBCPs, offering the benefits of scale while reinforcing a robust set of high-road standards instead.²³ And the existence of such a structure would not have to be at odds with constituting childcare as a public good; indeed, over time, it could be configured to promote accountability to childcare providers and other stakeholders within a more fully public system.²⁴

Another potential concern has to do with the viability of an SSC from a business standpoint. As noted above, group purchasing organizations are well-established in the U.S. economy, and there are numerous examples of successful GPOs that are

²² Luca Fazzi, Jole Decorte, Mirella Maturo, and Giacomo Pisani, “Increasing Market Orientation of Social Cooperatives in Italy,” EURICSE Research Report 43(25), 2025.

²³ See <https://www.corise.coop/> for an existing example of a SSC of childcare providers, developed in Illinois in collaboration with SEIU HCII and the ICA group.

²⁴ In a context where hardened bureaucratic hierarchies often hinder the responsiveness of government agencies to key stakeholders, cooperative structures have the potential to strengthen accountability. For more on this point, see James Mandiberg Seon Mi Kim. “A Matrix Form of Multi-Organizational Hybridity in a Cooperative-Union Venture,” in *Organizational Imaginaries: Tempering Capitalism and Tending to Communities through Cooperatives and Collectivist Democracy*, edited by Katherine T. Chen and Victor Tan Chen (Sage Publications, 2021).

structured as cooperatives. More broadly, the available evidence suggests that cooperatives do not fail at higher rates than other businesses—so being a cooperative as such would not be a disadvantage.²⁵ Of particular relevance for the current discussion, there are also thriving models of SSCs with a more mission-driven bent—for example, National Co-op Grocers, an SSC of food co-ops around the country.²⁶ There are no guarantees, of course. However, there is also little reason to believe that an SSC of CBCPs would not have the potential to succeed, particularly if it had the backing of the government and other non-profit, mission-aligned funders.

This brings us to a third potential set of concerns. Even if an SSC could succeed in theory, is a collective, democratically owned and controlled structure something that CBCPs actually want? It bears mentioning that this proposal flows from conversations happening among CBCPs around the country who are observing parallel challenges and imagining structures that could support them collectively and amplify their power. In New York and elsewhere, an important next step will be to take a broader temperature check among CBCPs through surveys and other means, testing whether the business proposition resonates more widely. If it does, then not everyone needs to be as invested in the movement case for building an SSC as the groups driving these initial discussions. Indeed, a well-functioning SSC could engage large numbers of CBCPs while also accommodating varying levels of participation, with key business functions delegated to hired managers and professional staff, oversight by an elected board of directors, and vision and organizing momentum furnished by an activist core of worker leaders.²⁷

²⁵ Erik Olsen. “The Relative Survival of Worker Cooperatives and Barriers to Their Creation,” in *Sharing Ownership, Profits, and Decision-Making in the 21st Century*, edited by Doug Kruse (Emerald, 2013).

²⁶ See <https://www.ncg.coop/>. Another example is SourceWell, a group purchasing cooperative for municipalities: <https://www.ncg.coop/>.

²⁷ Some of these worker leaders could serve as elected representatives on the co-op’s board of directors, and others might take up positions within the management/administrative team.

Expanding Democratic Horizons

Building structures such as the SSC proposed here could carry important implications for expanding and deepening mass governance in New York City. As argued in another brief in this series, it is worth considering ways to structure mass governance not just along geographic lines but sectoral ones as well.²⁸ While sectoral governance strategies too often remain disconnected from efforts to build grassroots worker power,²⁹ an SSC for CBCPs could help to foster a more inclusive mode of sectoral governance. It could serve as a key partner for convening mass assemblies of childcare workers.³⁰ In segments of the CBCP workforce where unions have a presence, it could help bring to light issues for union representatives to take up in bargaining and policy advocacy, and partnerships to expand services and benefits offered jointly by unions and the SSC could be a boon for efforts to unionize unorganized segments of the CBCP workforce. An SSC could also work with relevant city and state agencies around priorities such as recruitment, retention, and expanding career pathways.³¹ And, building on organized labor's long legacy of forming trusts supporting worker education,³² unions could partner with the SSC and city government to develop a more worker-centered workforce development system,³³ helping to raise the floor on job quality standards and advance career ladders in the childcare field.³⁴ In addition to improving conditions for providers,

²⁸ Nantina Vgontzas and Sanjay Pinto, "Mass Worker Education: Governing from the Shopfloor," NYU Urban Democracy Lab Working Paper, 2026.

²⁹ Veena Dubal, "Sectoral Bargaining Reforms: Proceed with Caution," *New Labor Forum* 31.1 (2021): 11-40.

³⁰ Sumathy Kumar and Gianpaolo Baiocchi, "Building 'Mass Governance' in Zohran Mamdani's New York," *Jacobin*, 2026.

³¹ For a comprehensive articulation of many of these priorities, see Emmy Liss, "[Building a Stronger Child Care Workforce for New York City](#)," Day Care Council of New York, 2025.

³² Such trusts have also helped to address other needs such as housing in order to promote economic security for working families. See, for example, <https://www.afcio-hit.com/>.

³³ For more on the idea of worker-centered workforce development, see Alí Bustamante, "Workforce Policy for a Just Transition," Roosevelt Institute, 2022.

³⁴ See, for instance, [1199SEIU's Training & Employment Funds](#) and the [SEIU-UHW & Joint Employer Education Fund](#). These multi-employer benefit trusts have a long history of expanding opportunities for career advancement and developing diverse talent pipelines that reflect the needs of local communities. Also notable is organized labor's more recent interest in setting up non-incumbent workforce and training funds, such as [Futuro Health](#), which was created through collective bargaining between SEIU-UHW and Kaiser Permanente. The collaboration raised \$130 million to launch Futuro Health as an education non-profit that trains workers outside of Kaiser, helping to address workforce shortages in key allied

such forms of co-governance could help to expand and stabilize the available supply of quality childcare across the city.

An SSC could serve the needs of providers and parents/guardians in a variety of ways—for example, by helping to optimize childcare matches based on geography, language and cultural competency, and specific childcare needs.³⁵ This could form a basis for building multistakeholder structures akin to those seen in some of Quebec’s social economy co-ops.³⁶ Regardless, it would be important for the SSC to engage existing organizations with a track record of addressing childcare affordability challenges, supporting CBCPs, and helping ensure that supply links up with demand, particularly in underserved communities.³⁷ An SSC could be part of a larger ecosystem connecting the dots between the interests and concerns of childcare workers and families with young children, including the disproportionate challenges that BIPOC women confront both as paid care providers and parents/guardians balancing the demands of work and family.³⁸

Over time, an SSC could potentially help bridge the divide between the publicly funded part of the childcare market and the private-pay segment, much of which is highly informal. Spurred by movement organizing, New York State and New York City have

healthcare classifications. SEIU-UHW and Futuro Health help healthcare employers train workers for impending or persistent vacancies, especially in geographies with severe shortages. Once students complete programs and receive their credentials, Futuro Health channels them to AlliedUP Cooperative, a unionized worker-owned staffing cooperative, to help them transition into high-demand allied healthcare jobs. The privileged relationship between Futuro Health and AlliedUP Co-op is in part an attempt to design a built-in labor supply of highly-trained allied healthcare workers who have good-quality jobs waiting for them upon completion of their training. Futuro Health graduates who elect to transition into the co-op for employment gain access to desirable job placements and AlliedUP Co-op becomes the employer of record for the graduates.

³⁵ [Carina](#) provides an example of what such a matching platform could look like. While the platform focuses on matching home care workers and clients, it has also supported pilot projects matching family childcare providers and clients. See Sanjay Pinto and Beth Gutelius, “Platform Power to the People,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2021.

³⁶ Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning real utopias*, Verso, 2020.

³⁷ See, for example, <https://unitedforbrownsville.org/vouchers/>.

³⁸ During the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the central role Black and Latinx women played in providing paid care for others, they were far likelier than other groups to have to take unpaid time off from work to address their own family caregiving needs. See Sanjay Pinto, Patricia Campos-Medina, Rakeen Mabud, and KC Wagner, “Seizing the moment to make our care systems more equitable,” *Gender Policy Report*, 2021.

been on the leading edge of enacting laws that strengthen the rights of domestic workers.³⁹ Simultaneously, recent years have seen the development of worker cooperatives providing childcare, home care, and cleaning services.⁴⁰ Still, raising standards and building durable organization in the private-pay market for direct care services remains an uphill climb. As part of a larger sectoral strategy, perhaps the SSC for CBCPs sketched above could also support workers looking to build power and meet their needs in the private-pay market, or a parallel structure could be developed. New investments in New York City's childcare system could also be designed so legally exempt family childcare providers and domestic workers receive public funding support for addressing specific kinds of childcare needs—e.g., for parents and guardians working the night shift.

The current moment is a significant one for efforts to bolster New York City's care economy, potentially modeling approaches that could be replicated and scaled elsewhere. As universal childcare and other initiatives move from concept to practice, civic infrastructure has a crucial role to play in fashioning systems that are nimble, equitable, and accountable to different stakeholders. Building on an existing ecosystem of neighborhood organizations, unions, and parent groups, how could such an infrastructure help to meet the needs of local CBCPs and parents/guardians across the city? How could it augment their power in shaping a childcare and early learning system that expands access to high quality, affordable childcare while improving job quality and extending career pipelines for providers? With the support of actors in city and state government, how could this infrastructure also help enlarge the city's "reproductive commons" as an arena of community care and collective nourishment, countering the neoliberal logic that has long eroded and colonized our public spaces?⁴¹

³⁹ In 2012, New York became the first state in the country to pass a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. See <https://dol.ny.gov/domestic-workers-bill-rights>. For more on other protections passed at the state level and in New York City, see <https://www.domesticworkers.org/membership/chapters/we-dream-in-black-new-york-chapter>

⁴⁰ Rebecca Matthew and Vanessa Bransburg, "Democratizing caring labor: The promise of community-based, worker-owned childcare cooperatives," *Affilia* 32:1 (2017): 10-23; Sanjay Pinto, "Golden Steps," Rutgers Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing, 2022.

⁴¹ Community gardens are an example of such common spaces. See Efrat Eizenberg, "Actually existing commons: Three moments of space of community gardens in New York City," *Antipode* 44:3 (2012):

Even with robustly progressive policy frameworks being advanced, established modes of top-down governance have staying power. And extractive, low-road actors—including large private equity-backed operators—are poised and ready to seize opportunities for strengthening their foothold in the publicly funded childcare system. We have a precious opportunity to nurture meaningful mass governance and expand our democratic horizons instead.

764-782. Some envision reproductive commons as zones of autonomy outside state and market that can serve as staging grounds for alternative modes of subsistence, mutual care, and social connection. See Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2018. In our conception, such strategies can complement efforts to harness state power toward better supporting paid and unpaid reproductive labor. See Sanjay Pinto and Mary Jirmanus Saba. "Puntos en Común: Vinculando las Luchas del Trabajo de Reproducción Social," in *Comunes Reproductivos: Cercamientos y Descercamientos Contemporáneos en los Cuidados y la Agroecología*, edited by Sandra Ezquerro Samper, Marina Di Masso Tarditti, Marta G. Rivera Ferré, Los Libros de la Catarata, 2022.