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INTRODUCTION



Towards a global housing studies: beyond dichotomy, normativity and common abstraction

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Introduction

That the human need for shelter is ubiquitous and universal makes housing and home particularly solid foundations from which to compare, connect and integrate the shifting dynamics of everyday life. More than ever, there seems a need for this endeavour to proceed in a truly global sense. Since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008 there has been a growing realization of the ways in which housing and home have become enmeshed within complex global interdependencies (see Shimbo, Bardet and Baravelli, this issue). More and more scholars from across disciplines are attracted to housing in seeking to understand the diverse reconfigurations of relations that drive polarizing dynamics across scales. And the concept and meaning of home is an increasingly key site of contestation and interplay between settlement and unsettlement, as well as conflicting imaginaries over social and environmental futures (Easthope *et al.*, 2020; Lenhard *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, environmental urgencies demand a radical reappraisal of how we “do” housing and a related need to embrace non-normative forms and practices.

Housing studies is well disposed to the ways in which major social and environmental transformations touch down unevenly along lines of class, race, gender and disability (Roy, 2017; Yip and Chen, 2021). Housing scholarship has contributed significantly to the grasp of underlying, globalized dynamics of housing complexity, differentiation and the financialized logics of accumulation and expulsion, especially since 2008 (Aalbers, 2016; Forrest and Yip, 2011; Kubo, 2020; Whitehead & Williams, 2011). It has also exposed the ways in which the material and spatial manifestations of the inequalities produced are oftentimes uniquely and specifically local (or national), with greater attention now afforded to relational understandings of housing and home (Coelho *et al.*, 2012; Easthope *et al.*, 2020). These advancements in housing scholarship and the nuancing of housing realities point to a continuous need to extend analyses and reconceptualise housing from a range of theoretical standpoints and geographies.

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In short, a need to attend to and take seriously the multiplicities of modes of inhabitation (beyond the normative) and the new and dynamic spatial formations they continually (re-)produce across the globe. This necessitates a widening of housing's purview and a renewed and open-minded dialogue across scales and positions.

This edited collection seeks to open up a new set of discussions in contributing toward a global orientation within the multidisciplinary field of housing studies (see Lawhon & Truelove [2020] on similar debates and shifts within urban studies). It arranges together 11 new papers from a diversity of scholars, locations and disciplines that collectively seek to critique and move beyond stubborn dichotomies, common abstractions and obfuscating normative orientations within housing knowledge. These new international perspectives also contribute, in some small way, to the diversification of voices and perspectives within the *Housing Studies* journal itself.

We put out an open call for papers for this special issue in January 2020. In it we drew attention to pervasive global processes and flows (of materials, money, people and ideas) prominent across both Global North and South (Goodfellow, 2017; Peck & Theodore, 2015; Rolnik, 2013, 2019; Sassen, 2014) as the GFC exposed the way in which national housing systems are increasingly interconnected. That crisis underscored both the centrality of housing and real estate to processes of capital accumulation, wealth creation, and dispossession, but also common housing policy challenges for North and South (Aalbers, 2016; Lees *et al.* 2016; Watt & Smets, 2017). The pandemic that followed soon after that call brought global interdependencies into even sharper relief. The need for an international dialogue on home, inhabitation and settlement is certainly no less important now than it was then. But some of the contours of these debates have shifted and some of the manifestations and consequences of a globalised housing system have been amplified over the course of this project. Where particularly salient, the contributions in this volume reflect on the impact of the pandemic and its illumination of housing inequalities.

The articles presented here draw on research from scholars at various career stages, as well as from countries and regions relatively under-represented within the pages of *Housing Studies* to date. The collective includes researchers based in Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, India, Italy, Portugal, South Africa, Switzerland, the UK and Uruguay. The empirical focus further extends to Bangladesh, Greece, Mozambique and the USA, while the approaches include new theoretical syntheses, ethnography, historiography, comparative frameworks, and policy, institutional, statistical and textual analyses. The collective project has four key aims:

1. To place housing and home at the centre of our understanding of the contemporary drivers of urban and rural inequality in offering new theorizations and concepts
2. To develop new spatial imaginaries and lines of articulation that move beyond North/South distinctions, so as to connect interdisciplinary housing scholarship in the Global North with that from the Global South. While we recognise the pragmatic usefulness of such distinctions and the contexts in which they remain salient (not least to academic Editorial Boards striving for equality, diversity and inclusion), the aspiration here is to encourage conceptualisations that seek to extend beyond them explicitly from a housing perspective.

3. To further expand the reach of Housing Studies beyond its Anglophone origins and solicit contributions from scholars from (and of) the Global South.
4. To encourage collaboration and co-authorship between housing scholars across Global North and Global South. Here we recognise that in seeking to exceed a North/South orientation we require perspectives from both (and anywhere else [Müller, 2020]) and need to foster collaborative and comparative work that problematizes these distinctions, or reframes them in more heterogeneous fashion. Contributions from Barenstein et al., Shimbo et al., and Williams et al., are the product of such international collaborations.

Within what follows we seek not to frame and tease out the commonalities across the 11 original articles, as that seems an impossible task to us given the richness of empirical and conceptual inquiry. Rather, with reference to these varied approaches and the contributions they make, we set out the origins of the special issue and the questions it sought to address, spotlight some key pivots on which the authors build and critique, and highlight lines of inquiry that they open up.

This leads us to reflect on the possibilities of a global housing studies and the potential of a more open-minded, comparative and multidisciplinary dialogue. A more connected orientation (Bhambra, 2014) where Global North and South (and anywhere else) may be rearticulated *together*, both historically and contemporarily, in better (i) acknowledging and responding to the shared, universal goal of human shelter, and (ii) grasping the interdependent nature of the challenges of everyday inhabitation on the one hand, and a financialized global housing system on the other.

Three reflections on the possibilities of a global housing studies

The articles presented here may be read alone or together. Here we reflect on what they offer collectively in terms of a potential move towards a global housing studies and how, for many of the authors, that requires a reorientation in how we deal with, make use of, and go beyond dichotomy, common abstraction and normativity.

Beyond dichotomy

Dichotomies are useful to a degree. Yet with growing housing complexity, segmentation and proliferation of new forms and modes of inhabitation, salient divisions and dichotomies can quickly become conceptual constraints. It is important to note the importance and contribution of specific dichotomies and the new lines of inquiry and investigation they have opened up. Housing debates centred around in/formality or home/homelessness for example have problematized, blurred and in many cases exceeded those distinctions, often developing them in tandem with the empirical tracing of new emergent modes and practices (see Chiodelli, 2019; Ferreri and Sanyal in this issue on “digital informalisation”). So while we may sometimes *start* with North/South we may often end up somewhere else altogether.

Following these disruptions, and drawing on ideas in the contributions in this collection, we would suggest that both urban and rural spaces are increasingly characterised by the **intensive and pervasive interplay of settlement and unse-ttlement**. If the diverse contributions collected here share one discernible feature it is a sensitivity to this constant interplay and its shaping of housing orientations, aspirations and assumptions. There is an appreciation of the significance of settlement and unse-ttlement that extends well beyond the experiences of refugees and forced displacements (Bailkin, 2018).

Whereas the provision of housing was largely conceived as an instrument to domesticate populations - to settle fundamental questions of rights, access and futurity - the massive growth of temporary and provisional accommodation across geographies dislodges long-term confluences between housing and inhabitation as larger numbers of residents circulate across different (“irregular”, “informal” etc.) modes of accommodation and spaces (see Bathla; Shafique; Williams *et al.* in this issue). At the same time, these fluid circulations, this unse-ttling of positions also reasserts desires for clearly delineated property and demands of property regimes. That is, the desire for a place of one’s own, often to the exclusion of certain types of inhabitants, is itself a product of one’s own sense of unse-ttlement and unease. The concomitant conversion of housing into an asset, where the value of property may often relate to the distance from the excluded other, further divides populations into those who have assets and those who do not. Settlement for some means unse-ttlement for others (Bhandar, 2018; Gibbons, 2018).

So, we would argue that there is a constant interplay of what constitutes salient divisions within housing studies, with at this conjuncture “North/South” divides assuming lesser importance than other relational, dynamic and comparative ones. However, it is important to point out that the North/South designation has become increasingly *mobile*, fungible even, as it is applied to a broad range of more local situations as a way of describing segmentations that cannot easily be summarized in other more conventional terms. Niamey has its “Norths” and Chicago very much its “Souths” (see Tulumello, this issue).

Beyond common abstraction

Some concepts have resonated loudly within housing studies and travelled globally. Notions like housing informality, gentrification, and financialization for example have been put to work in a multitude of geographical and temporal contexts and have shed much light on processes and relations therein (on housing informality for example, see Boudreau and Davis, 2017; Durst & Wegmann, 2017; Pasquetti and Picker, 2017). In contrast, Anglophone notions such as “affordability” appear increasingly inadequate when applied to the UK or US, never mind the more neglected spaces and geographies of housing scholarship. Yet there is also a tendency to remain within the realm of abstractions, relying on the apparent self-evidence of some prevalent concepts and, thus a related need to better situate these urbanisation processes empirically (Arabindoo, 2011). This entails refining, developing and critiquing them further from explicit and diverse contexts in which relations of settlement and unse-ttlement are ubiquitously negotiated (see Bathla; Shafique, this

issue). Common abstractions attach themselves to diverse phenomena that under closer inspection, and in historical context, may actually be better understood as an interplay of heterogeneous dynamics, something that eludes precise characterization (Simone, 2019). In that respect common abstraction can potentially deter the theoretical imagination in the framing and interpretation of housing research – a danger of emphasizing generalization and convergence to the neglect of simultaneously examining how modes of inhabitation can take many different forms (see Aalbers, this issue). Increasingly it is important to engage concepts that travel and resonate not necessarily as definitive representations for what is going on (Christophers, 2015), but as heuristic instruments—ways of exploring increasingly complicated dispositions. This acknowledges and realizes the points where the concepts reach their limits and compel further inventive (re-)conceptualizations that do not so much cancel the salience of these existing concepts out, but continuously reposition them across changing assemblages of inhabitation (see Barenstein *et al.*; Ferreri and Sanyal; Lemanski, this issue). Consequently, we have no interest in disproving particular formulations. Rather we are interested in a **process of interweaving** – thinking about how disparate built environments, financial mobilizations, and practices of settlement “speak” to each other and enfold particular organizational aspects of each other into their own peculiar functioning (see Bathla, Dimitrakou, Nielsen, Shafique this issue).

Beyond normativity

By seeking to move beyond normativity we do not dismiss the role of the state as a predominant curator of housing policy. We suggest the need for a much **fuller register of the multiple modes of dwelling and inhabiting**, which exposes the contradictions, complexities and ambivalences at the intersection of policy, housing processes and everyday life. This invariably highlights the classed, gendered, racialized, ableist and environmentally deleterious consequences of state simplifications (Scott, 1988) that fail to acknowledge different modes of inhabitation and their relational making; and therefore ignores potential solutions (see Barenstein *et al.* on de-commodification, this issue).

This is increasingly evident when we examine relations of contiguity and adjacency across urban terrain for example (see Bathla; Williams *et al.*, this issue). The compositions of such terrain are often intensely heterogeneous in terms of the temporal trajectories—the rise and fall of particular projects, modes of construction and financing. Disparate built environments often end up standing right next to each other without any readily discernible articulations, even in terms of genealogy. Measures of efficacy become increasingly uncertain as different housing “projects” situate themselves across different temporal aspirations—some seeking immediate gains or usefulness and others indifferent to this over the longer term, waiting to see what happens eventually (Harris *et al.*, 2019). Obsolescent structures are repurposed or retrofitted, while on other occasions obsolescence is engaged as a resource in and of itself (Harris, 2020). What might often appear to be large swathes of generic housing, reflecting intensive standardization of norms, development operations, and governance may generate countless singularities. The generic simply

becomes a veneer, a dissimulated appearance providing “cover” for variegated types of inhabitation, financial mobilization, and value conversion (see Dimitrakou; Nielsen, this issue).

This does not mean that vast housing “problems” are any less obdurate or that rights to housing are suddenly anachronistic. Rather, a more extensive canvassing of considerations is necessary. This can aid the grasp of how whatever passes for standardization or normalcy does not so much displace older processes of autoconstruction or state provided social housing, but what we see is a situation where multiple forms come to accompany each other in often strange collective configurations.

Liberalization of mortgage structures, tax rebates and land subsidies, predatory land seizures and evictions, massive outlays of purportedly affordable housing, the shift of majority populations to urban peripheries, speculative investment, and pyramid type development processes that are constantly impelled to “cover the spread”, may indeed inscribe specific trajectories of housing production and territorial re-composition. But if one looks in some detail at the complexions of many urban and rural areas, it is the simultaneity of supposedly disparate logics of development being materialized in relations of intensive contiguity that stands out.

Overview of the special issue

The issue begins in Brazil with **Lucia Shimbo, Fabrice Bardet and José Baravelli’s** insightful articulation of the gradual transformation of the structure of housing provision there in recent years. Through an analysis of the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* [My House, My Life] programme launched by the Lulist government in 2009 they show how the GFC triggered a repositioning of developers. They expose how the entanglements of relations around the increasing ‘circulation of financialized values’ carries huge risks in its ultimate prioritization of profits over housing needs.

Morten Nielsen introduces the concept of “spectacular speculation” in capturing the context of excessive consumption and high-end property development in Maputo, Mozambique and attending to the way in which it seeps into everyday lives. His ethnography documents how this involves differentiating and contradicting values discernible at the micro-sociological scale of the everyday: ‘it is through housing practices that it becomes possible to establish a sense of order and belonging by activating often contradictory moral orientations and hierarchies of value’ (p. 890).

We then move to Greece and post-crisis Athens where **Ifigenia Dimitrakou** offers a fascinating relational understanding of vacancy in the context of a “declining neighbourhood”. Through uncovering and analysing interdependencies and relationalities that are often unknown and invisible, Dimitrakou argues that the presumed “inactive spaces” of vacancy are actually continuously embroiled in conflicts and tussles over urban space. She offers an original approach to vacancy as absence that might be profitably utilised in other global contexts.

Mara Ferreri and Romola Sanyal focus attention on the effects of platform real estate, which increasingly extends beyond the US and Europe with networks and

global investment circuits in South America and sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing inspiration from the burgeoning literature on informality across North and South they introduce the concept of “digital informalisation” in articulating the effects of platforms on everyday activities as they are increasingly utilized to mitigate risk in the rental sector. Ferreri and Sanyal argue that these disruptions reproduce and perpetuate housing informalities but also engender new ones.

Based on in-depth ethnographic research in Delhi, and building on Marie Huchzermeyer’s work on tenement cities, **Nitin Bathla** puts forward the notion of tenements *towns* as a relational settlement category that helps to de-naturalize the North-South divide within housing scholarship. Deploying concepts of extended urbanisation, planned illegality and strategic philanthropy in application to the Delhi Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), Bathla offers a fascinating account of the externalisation of workers housing linked to low-cost global manufacturing. He suggests that tenement towns can be fruitfully utilized in helping locate housing and labour struggles under extended urbanisation within other contexts.

The issue then shifts its focus from Delhi to Dhaka, Bangladesh where **Tanzil Shafique** seeks to bypass familiar binaries in describing how housing is produced and maintained there. He focuses in on the vast settlement of Karail in presenting a new vernacular of housing relationalities built on rethinking housing through assemblage. These relationalities are reframed threefold as “tendencies of entanglements”, “mechanisms of production”, and “landscapes of desires”. Shafique outlines how this critique of informality and an alternative, dynamic reading of informal settlements can potentially help shape alternative urban futures.

Glyn Williams, Sarah Charlton, Karen Coelho, Darshini Mahadevia and Paula Meth focus on resettlement experiences within the urban periphery through a comparative framework that takes in Ahmedabad and Chennai in India and Johannesburg in South Africa. They convincingly evidence the way in which housing policies can involve regressive elements tied to the constraints on mobility produced through resettlement. In some cases marginality then becomes “locked in” within complex urban peripheries, exposing a gulf between lofty policy aspirations on the one hand, and everyday realities in the urban periphery on the other.

Manuel B. Aalbers argues for a relational and comparative global housing studies in moving beyond a contrastive housing scholarship which has tended to predominate. Aalbers utilizes the notion of “common trajectories” in seeking to escape the shackles of divergence and convergence. He shows how difference is both complex and multifaceted and therefore requires us to step outside neat and cosy categorizations of North-South, East-West etc. Aalbers argues that postcolonial theory has tended to work against a comparative housing studies and shows how a relational housing studies centred on transnational actors, markets and regulation might provide one way out of the contrastive *cul-de-sac*.

In a novel approach that brings very different contexts together **Jennifer Duyn Barenstein, Philippe Koch, Daniela Sanjines, Carla Assandri, Cecilia Matonte, Daniela Osorio and Gerardo Sarachu** explore co-operative trajectories in Switzerland and Uruguay capturing the persistent and pervasive ‘struggles to live and dwell.’ They point to the potential of housing co-operatives in terms of a renewed collective urban life. The detailed cases also showcase co-operatives as viable alternatives to

the status quo that can potentially contribute to the de-commodification of housing, and also beyond Switzerland and Uruguay.

Charlotte Lemanski argues for the need to embrace postcolonial perspectives in ensuring the global relevance and legitimacy of housing theory. Lemanski imaginatively brings together Cape Town in South Africa with Stoke-on-Trent in England in conceiving public housing as infrastructure. This juxtaposition represents a contribution and disruption toward orientations in itself. Pivoting off the concept of infrastructural citizenship, Lemanski explores how public housing mediates citizenship within the two very different contexts. Public housing is used to cultivate the normative citizen and both cases throw up instances of conformity and contestation.

Last but by no means least, **Simone Tulumello** critiques dichotomous thinking within housing studies drawing upon southern critique to challenge the homogenising tendencies of a Global North-Global South binary. Southern Europe and the southern USA are impressively brought under a single analytical frame and explored with reference to housing crises. Tulumello advocates for a 'relational, multi-scalar and comparative approach' through which southern critique can also expose relations *within* "the West".

We hope that the diverse contributions arranged together here can help support and provoke housing scholars in the challenging quest toward a global housing orientation. Through arranging housing research derived from diverse histories, methodologies and geographical contexts alongside each other, we have sought to contribute to a more globalised and open-minded dialogue. This may also help us to uncover the potential for broader, transnational coalitions and allegiances in the aspiration toward a more human-centred and sustainable approach to the provision of housing (see Lancione, 2019). One based on a fuller register of international experiences and cognisant of the shared realities and pervasive flux of settlement and unsettlement across geographies and temporalities. A move towards a more global housing orientation offers opportunities for connecting and integrating housing studies and scholars. But also for responding to key global urgencies by way of the possibility of a shared understanding and enhanced awareness of our increasingly interdependent modes of inhabitation.

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