From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing

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From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing: Interaction of Communities, Residents and Activists is the result of the ongoing work of a consortium of international scholars collaborating in various ways with the research programme Housing – Critical Futures. Organised by the UK-based non-profit research group AMPS (Architecture, Media, Politics, Society), this programme gives its name to the book series that this publication launches.

As such, both the book and its underlying research programme confront a critical issue at a critical time. In London, a leading capital of global finance, there is a chronic shortage of affordable housing for those that service ‘the service’ sector. The crisis is at levels not seen since the Second World War. In Beijing, capital of the twenty-first century’s political powerhouse, the displacement of long-standing communities is a daily occurrence. In Mumbai, the biggest health risk faced by the city today has been identified as overcrowded housing, while in São Paulo, football’s 2014 World Cup took place against a backdrop of community unrest and the chronic living conditions of the poor. The private sector, the state and residents themselves are searching for solutions. Whether housing refugees in conflict areas, providing safe water to the households in the developing world or ensuring key workers can live in the cities they support in the West, the question of housing is not only global, but critical.

Reflecting the diversity of issues outlined in this scenario, this book offers multiple perspectives on its principal issue of examination, the role of communities in project developments. Taking this as its starting point, the book offers a provocative analysis of the socio-political debates, community struggles, direct actions, governmental policies, managerial initiatives and resident resistances to ‘the politics of the home’. Drawing on an eclectic range of theory and an equally diverse
range of practice models and ongoing struggles, it examines real cases of community action and resident participation in both successful and failed housing initiatives from several countries. It examines how communities, professionals and politicians have variously engaged, developed, supported and/or resisted the multiple and contradictory forces that shape the homes we live in – whether these forces be government policy, military action, religious division, community segregation or ‘architectural visions’. It thus offers critique, analysis and, in some significant instances, proposals for ways forward.

Organised in three broad sections, it brings together scholars in categories defined as ‘Socially engaged practices of housing and contested environments’, looking primarily at issues of participatory practice and policies of negotiation and sharing in relation to place; the ‘Spatial politics of housing’, looking at issues of affordable housing, self-build and the economics of housing; and finally ‘Non-standard practices of housing’ which bring together authors documenting and exploring art practice and alternative forms of user engagement with housing policy and practice.

In Section 1, ‘Socially engaged practices of housing and contested environments’, we find essays by academics and practitioners from several countries documenting issues of relevance locally and globally. Jeroen Stevens’ ‘Occupied city: Hotel Cambridge and central São Paulo between urban decay and resurrection’ opens the book with a fascinating documentation and consideration of community resistance in São Paulo, Brazil. Pinpointing the events of 23 November 2012 and the occupation of the abandoned Hotel Cambridge in central São Paulo, he documents the occasional ‘power’ of direct action in forcing affordable housing onto the political agenda with very real results. Moving to the UK context Jo Richardson shifts attention to a quite different section of contemporary society, Traveller communities. Outlining a historical development of the conflict surrounding accommodation for Travellers in the UK context, she seeks to explore the origins of the ‘conflict’ around their mode of living and more ‘standard’ readings of home in Western cultures. More specifically she outlines a theoretical framework which she claims can offer different perspectives on land use and notions of home and place. Concluding this short section of the book Yenny Rahmayati looks at the housing implications of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, tsunami and subsequent rebuilding programme for the community of Banda Aceh, Indonesia in ‘Aceh post-tsunami housing reconstruction: a critical analysis of approaches, designs and sociocultural implications’. Critiquing the modus operandi of the rebuilding
programme for its focus on material necessity over longer-term concerns of community, she argues for more attention on the intangible aspects of socio-cultural phenomena informing people’s sense of well-being and happiness in the housing context to sit alongside the tangible parameters of location, environmental configuration, and forms and sizes of housing, and the immediate need to rebuild in post-disaster contexts.

In Section 2 of the book, ‘Spatial politics of housing’, Sandra Löschke and Hazel Easthope in ‘Postproduced: how adaptive redesign and participatory approaches can transform ageing housing’ shift attention to issues of design directly related to the long-term maintenance of communities. Suggesting a need to adapt current housing whilst still in use, they open up not only a design-related discourse, but one that potentially contributes to keeping communities together, increasingly threatened by developments that see existing housing stock in purely material terms. This shift towards design and policy is repeated in May East’s ‘Integrated approaches and interventions for the regeneration of abandoned towns in southern Italy’, which focuses its attention on villages and communities in the south of Italy. Looking at the consequences of depopulation of rural villages, she identifies that it is necessary, and possible, to redevelop the material infrastructure of these villages in ways that highlight the importance and role of the community-led initiatives opening up debates about lifestyle choices, new ownership structures and livelihood strategies – an interrelated set of arguments made more complex by the recent migrations of refugees entering Europe through southern Italy.

In ‘The role of community-driven finance in bridging formal and informal practices in housing: insights from Vinh, Vietnam’, Johanna Brugman develops a different strand from these policy- and design-focused chapters with a consideration of perceptions and associated policies of housing in the global south, with particular emphasis on Vietnam. Arguing that informal practices play an important role in land provision, shelter and finance for the urban poor, she suggests that ‘informal’ modalities of developing housing have the potential to inform more mainstream practices, particularly in terms of funding models. Kane Pham picks up on the finance issues related to housing affordability but in a very different context, the continued development of Sydney, Australia. Ending this second section and its focus on planning, design and policy, he frames his arguments in the terminology of ‘the right to the city’ in the chapter entitled ‘Clearing stock of the invisible: effects of cosmopolitan power on the supply of affordable housing. More specifically, he argues that Sydney’s transformation is typical of the changes
occurring to post-industrial cities worldwide and is resulting not only in affordability issues for local residents but in the homogenisation of people, lifestyles and design templates in the new post-industrial landscape.

Section 3, ‘Non-standard practices of housing’, takes the issues of community activism, policy and design approaches discussed previously and examines them through a quite different mode of critique, art practice. Keely Macarow in ‘Art does matter: creating interventions in our thinking about housing’ – operating in a similar geographical context to Kane Pham, Australia – opens this section, looking at the issue of housing and affordability through the prism of art practice. Specifically outlining ideas underlying the installation Open for Inspection, she parallels approaches in Australia and Sweden to discern how socially engaged art, political and housing activism, and urban and participatory design can facilitate innovative housing initiatives. Lee Azus in ‘Uncanny home: considering race and American housing policy in Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead’ expands this art-led critique of housing policy, provision and accompanying social perceptions through a consideration a very particular lens, that of Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead, a 2013 sculptural artwork located in Detroit, Michigan, through which he is able to critique and nuance our understanding of the current situation in Detroit. Setting the artwork in the context of the depopulation of Detroit as the model of post-industrial decline par excellence in the West, Azus also opens up an alternative consideration of racial issues around housing in the context of the United States through the setting of Kelly’s work in the phenomenon of white flight and the broader issue of suburbanisation.

Returning to Australia, Michael Darcy and Dallas Rogers’ “The real “housos”: reclaiming identity and place” looks at residents’ use of film and video to challenge stereotypes and stigmatisation, suggesting that in both the popular imagination and in policy discourse, recognisable features of the built form of public housing are commonly conflated with negative press and thus perception. Their chapter highlights work done during a four-year residency programme, ‘Residents’ Voices – Advantage, Disadvantage, Community and Place’, and offers commentary on digital storytelling disseminated through a website, tenant-driven media analysis of the popular Australian television parody Housos, and a short dramatic fictional film written and directed by tenants in a highly stigmatised estate.

Jonathan Orlek’s chapter ‘Sharing the domestic through “residential performance”’ is also concerned with issues of media performance and documentation, but in this case is centred in Sheffield, England, and
is artist initiated. He discusses the work of Studio Polplo and specifically the project OPERA in a chapter that investigates how performance art practice can reimagine and reconfigure domestic space by offering new insights into shared domestic living. Done through a form of art occupation of abandoned spaces, the project he discusses leads to a proposal for ‘autoethnography’ as an appropriate research method for residential performance projects, and in the process reimagines uses for derelict buildings and more sociable and affordable modes of living.

Ending this section, and thus the book itself, Matthew Thompson’s ‘Contesting “dilapidated dwelling”’ picks up on the work of Patrick Keiller, specifically his film *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, to discuss social and economic issues related to housing provision in the UK, with particular emphasis on Liverpool. Using Keiller as a springboard from which to explore the issues raised by art-led housing projects in Liverpool such as Homebaked, and less directly, the award-winning projects of Assemble at the Granby Four Streets, he weaves into the art discourse on housing the political underpinnings and conflicts that have existed for decades in this particular city. Referencing the writing of Henri Lefebvre in this artistic–political conceptualisation of housing, his chapter integrates many of the issues raised across the book, from the politics of housing to questions of finance, community and resident activism in conditions of contestation. As such, it is an ideal chapter with which to bring the volume to a close and through which to encourage continued cross-disciplinary engagements with the often conflictive issue of affordable housing provision and its community and social importance in the UK and internationally.