From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing

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Editorial commentary

On the architecture of housing commons

Georgios Artopoulos

Housing is the contested terrain that stages the act of the negotiation of boundaries between competing ontologies, theoretical considerations, economic interests and political agendas, all of which are simultaneously pursued by individual incentives and result from the group dynamics of the participating actors. This book is the result of parallel conversations initiated during a series of conferences organised by the research organisation AMPS that were convened with the objective to rethink the transitive identity of the relationship between public-interlaced and private-singular spatial activities, in concert with the politics involved in housing. By staging this discussion in a global context, as well as by sourcing cases from widely different political, cultural and social landscapes, the book aspires to contribute to the contemporary discourse of social housing by means of an anthology of exemplary cases of policies and practices of self-organisation and activist initiatives.

This anthology provides a fresh socio-political view on the act of housing, a topical subject worldwide due to the economic and migration crises of recent years, as well as the relevant phenomenon of trans-regional movement more generally. This topic is approached with an interdisciplinary eye – by engaging in the conversation of not only sociologists and political scientists but also planners and architects. Most importantly, though, this book presents the views of stakeholders that are typically left unaccounted for in the process of housing development. The book introduces a conversation about various competing factors and actors of the ‘politics of the home’ by promoting the voice of the ‘other’ – the points of view of communities, residents and activists, for example. Also it proposes, through carefully selected case studies, a course of action and future directions with an intention to reposition the
current discourse about housing by bringing to the fore issues of poverty, resident solidarity, activism and social inclusion.

These cases are discussed in the context of their capacity for community generation and the economic parameters of spatial production, as well as the new opportunities of occupation that are created by novel methodologies of social housing. One such example is presented by May East in her ‘Integrated approaches and interventions for the regeneration of abandoned towns in southern Italy’, which makes the case for the reactivation of abandoned settlements, the so-called ghost towns in southern Europe, as an alternative housing solution that comes with embedded collective memory and offers ‘locally adaptable, culturally rooted’ opportunities for communities. However, is the locale of historical, and vernacular, architecture a prerequisite condition for the emergence of said opportunities, or are these opportunities actually being driven by socio-spatial capacities that transcend architectural styles and forms?

In the history of architecture, modernism has actively proclaimed social housing as one of its emblematic new models for living in our emerging urban societies and promoted a new physical infrastructure as one of the canonical types of our contemporary built environment. However, modernism has mostly approached space via abstract concepts, and this has arguably failed to produce sustainable social tectonics. Numerous modernist residential blocks and settlements contributed to this end as their design embraced the fallacy for strict control and the over-determinism of social activities, which was promoted by an urge to regulate variation in patterns of spatial occupation. This approach compromised the acclaimed quest of modernism for activation of social space, and sometimes produced contested spaces to live in.

Dehumanising, bland, characterless, depressing, mechanistic – all these characteristics are attributed today to modernist examples of social housing, from the Soviet Union and Germany, to France, the UK and the USA. Contemporary affordable housing is mostly abandoned to the hands of developers, who promise an antidote to what is misrepresented as the oppressive residential complexes of the recent past. The European post-war right to housing has now been replaced by the dream of a flat or house ownership, most frequently advertised in media depictions of illustrious lifestyle representations. But what is not apparent at first sight is what gets discarded from these new housing developments, namely the spaces that enable participation, promote social interaction and enhance accessibility and inclusion. These are the common spaces
in between the private and the public that were an indispensable characteristic of modernism and are now reduced to a circulatory minimum. In the context of modernist practices these spaces were perceived sometimes successfully, and other times unsuccessfully, as social condensers – that is, as spaces of social interaction, association and identification. In this framework, the veiled privatisation of common space that nowadays characterises most developments internationally challenges the potential of these places to host out-of-control social interactions due to their over-determination by design.

Kenneth Frampton described Peter and Alison Smithson’s Golden Lane Estate, London, as of high historical importance due to its functioning as an evolutionary step for modernism, given its role in expressing criticism of the modernist orthodoxy of high-rise apartment blocks and clearly divided functional zoning. Unlike their modernist counterparts who focused on visual aspects and framed views of the architecture and its environment to communicate spatial qualities of their designs, the Smithsons were interested in promoting human association and place-making. Taking this remark as a starting point, one could then argue that inverting what is typically approached as a ‘causal’ relationship between the architect’s motives when designing a space and the actual occupation patterns of that space after it was built might offer a fresh view of the everyday life of housing complexes.

Based on this hypothesis, From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing is different from architectural books that illustrate designers’ subjective narratives, and instead it pursues an analysis of the mechanisms involved in the emergence of social interaction in the development, construction or occupation of housing projects. Generating inclusive housing spaces is considered a creative action that is analysed through practices that inspire users to seek new opportunities for association and connection. Moving away from design practices that pursue optimisation of architectural space in order to fit with a simulacrum of how modern-era humans should live by relying on reductive descriptions of a quantified statistical mean – such as Existenzminimum (subsistence dwelling), or the Modulor (Le Corbusier’s approach to materialising a way of living in maximum existence) – architects today recognise the singularity of housing conditions and the plurality of needs for dwelling in socially enriched built environments.

It is evident that Peter and Alison Smithson’s concept for Golden Lane shared many aspects with Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation model: in particular, the central role played, in both examples, by the topology and operation of a main corridor that performs
multiple functions beyond that of merely serving as a circulation plateau. Historically this is a diagram of a spatially expressed function which already by that time had been evolving for a few decades. It was Eugène Hénard with his drawings of the ‘City of the Future’ (1910) who first raised pedestrian circulation above car roads and thus laid the grounds for untangled circulation infrastructure in the city, by the way he envisioned transferring the socially activated layer of the street from the ground level (pedestrian routes) to raised corridors. Michiel Brinkman’s Spangen Quarter in Rotterdam (1919–21) consisted of blocks that were also connected by pedestrian streets in the air. But most significantly it was the team of Ol, Ivanov and Lavinsky, who proposed an internal corridor which was symbolically transformed into a double-direction street in their submission for the OSA housing competition (1927), with alternatively interlocking maisonettes – a solution that was adopted in the Unité d’Habitation.

All these projects, amongst others, explored different architectonic solutions in order to pursue the introduction of the spatial qualities of urban environments, such as the capacity for street life, in the topological configuration of the housing complex, and subsequently of residential blocks. Some were more successful than others, but what is important for the conversation staged in this book is the reverberation of the hybridity of these interstitial spaces, which lie between the city (public) and the dwelling units (private), in the assemblage of correlated procedures of housing production, namely the social, economic and political aspects. This dialectic is exemplified in Jeroen Stevens’ ‘Occupied city: Hotel Cambridge and central São Paulo between urban decay and resurrection’, which presents the opportunities offered by another kind of urbanism wherein an occupied high-rise building is converted into a housing block and, through the self-organised reclaiming process, is transformed into a living city. Stevens’ chapter is an attempt to identify some of the terms and characteristics of this kind of localised urban reform and its associations with other aspects of social urban life in order to reflect on the factors of its generation and elaborate on the architectural impact of this bottom-up urban reform.

The first section of this book aims to illustrate through exemplary cases how agent-based co-creation practices and participatory design can be employed in the process of generating the right spatial conditions to extend beyond the production of dwelling units and most importantly focus on housing commons. This interest stems from the understanding that, even in canonical modernist housing projects that were built around the concept of Existenzminimum, the articulation of communal
spaces with the private spaces of the dwelling units has always been considered a significant factor of their success. The occupation of communal spaces, though, is a fundamental cultural activity and as such it requires that these spaces are articulated in consent with the occupational practices and cultural identities of their users; further, these spaces are ever-developing, with their users always being engaged in this continuous transformation (as the users' needs change). The creation of housing, though, has typically been approached through a static dichotomy: common space is produced as abstract and generic (in order to flexibly accommodate multiple occupations), while dwelling units are considered to be private spaces that need to be specialised and differentiated, in order to respond to the unique character of individual residents.

This contradistinction raises typological considerations regarding the regulation of variation in spatial configurations, which can be identified in housing projects more than in any other form of dwelling spaces due to their scale, which imposes criteria of standardisation among the units. However, as the chapters of this section highlight, the impact that different approaches for exercising control on irregularity have on the ‘fitness’ of the produced spaces depends on the framework through which various opportunities are given to existing communities, stakeholders and future users for contributing to their production process, as well as on the timing of engaging these key players in this process. In particular, the first section focuses on participatory practices and the adoption of negotiation policies in housing production and management, and offers examples of sharing space, as well as of associating with a place. Analysing Aceh housing reconstructions as a case of producing unsatisfactory houses, ‘Aceh post-tsunami housing reconstruction: a critical analysis of approaches, designs and socio-cultural implications’ highlights the importance of following an appropriate method when engaging users in the participatory design process. Yenny Rahmayati’s chapter tacitly illustrates how, even in cases where the relevant authorities and actors facilitate users’ support during the production of housing, the process can practically fail to consider socio-cultural family practices and the relevant local users’ living values and norms, a shortcoming that leads to difficulties in fulfilling the users’ needs.

Motivated by an examination of the same cause, and being occupied with a similar interest in exploring alternative approaches to user engagement and participation in housing production, Jo Richardson in ‘Conflict sites in a time of crisis: negotiating a space and place for Gypsies and Travellers’ reflects on the introduction of new principles in existing policies that need to be followed in order to achieve lower
expenses for municipalities and establish better negotiation procedures. Richardson’s interest is in devising processes that facilitate the establishment of policies to recognise the needs of communities from the outside, and the ephemeral conditions of the relationship between a place and its inhabitants. One of the key considerations of this book is to reflect on the aspects of alternative methods that enable integrating and hybridising the agendas of the stakeholders of housing development projects, such as local and regional authorities, state agencies and architectural practices, with the narratives of users and local communities of tenants. This understanding is supported by the presentation of unsuccessful cases of top-down initiatives imposed by the authorities, and is tangibly illustrated in Matthew Thompson’s chapter, ‘Contesting “dilapidated dwelling”’, which studies Liverpool’s history of housing programmes in order to highlight the positive impact of community land trusts on the sustainability of the built environment, against the questionable results of large-scale state-led comprehensive redevelopment projects.

Equally, if not more important to user-led methods of housing projects for successful living and sustainable development is the use of conceptual tools that can offer a better understanding of the impact of the relevant actors’ conflicting agendas on the housing market. This reflective process has long been promoted by art practices in order to complement policy making for housing development. More specifically, Keely Macarow in ‘Art does matter: creating interventions in our thinking about housing’ argues for a holistic understanding that stems from the pursuit of well-being and integrates the residents’ individual, cultural, social, artistic and environmental potential. To reiterate, this integrated approach is adopted in this Editorial Commentary as the lens through which the reader should approach the contents of this book in order to contextualise the politics of user participation and activism in housing.

The discursive formation of shared spaces that become housing commons, and which are continuously appropriated throughout their life, is well exemplified by the community of elderly residents of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon’s Golden Lane Estate in London. Long-term tenants of the Crescent House block, which is considered among the canonical housing estates of the British Council Flats scheme of the 1950s, have appropriated most of the communal areas as their outdoor green spaces (Figure 0.1). Chamberlin, Powell and Bon won the competition for the design of the Golden Lane Estate over Peter and Alison Smithson, who went on to build their concept of the Golden Lane, cited above by Frampton, on other sites across the UK (e.g. the Robin Hood Gardens in Tower Hamlets and Park Hill Estate in Sheffield). The design
of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon was deemed successful and the City of London further commissioned the practice to build what was meant to become a symbol of British post-war architecture, the Barbican Estate (1976). The two estates lie next to each other and have clearly achieved the provision for equitable housing models that are adaptive to changing demographics described by Kane Pham in ‘Clearing stock of the

Figure 0.1  The communal space of the corridor is transformed into a green belt punctuated by sunlit clearings that are appropriated by each tenant at Crescent House residential block, Golden Lane Estate, Barbican, London, UK.
invisible: effects of cosmopolitan power on the supply of affordable housing’. Since their construction, Golden Lane and the Barbican Estate have managed to attract diverse groups of tenants always avoiding gentrification of the neighbourhood despite their different identity and branding – the former was built as council flats, the latter was envisioned as an iconic development in the centre of the City. The success of the communal areas of the Crescent House block is best illustrated in the degree of their appropriation by the tenants and can be attributed to a balancing act between individuals’ initiatives and the sharing of interests and identities, such as aesthetics, hobbies and leisure time (Figure 0.2). However, these intangible factors are enabled and accelerated by the architectonic characteristics of the space itself: its size, scale, proximity to flats (offering intimacy), its material construction and its optical connection with the city life of central London. Another important aspect of the space is its organisation in clusters and pockets of activity that are allocated around open-air multi-storey atria that facilitate privacy and take advantage of natural lighting and ventilation at all levels of the block (Figure 0.3).

Figure 0.2  Appropriating the left-overs: Crescent House can serve as exemplary case of converting the generic space of the staircase landing and the transitional areas of the corridors into personal ‘gardens’ that are nursed by the tenants, and intimate niches for social interaction.
Contributions in this book, such as ‘Postproduced: how adaptive redesign and participatory approaches can transform ageing housing’, are motivated by the extension of this need for regulating variation. It is a need that has arguably shifted today towards the privatised areas.
of housing complexes which ostentatiously ignore the importance of the spatial complexity of communal spaces (in the form of correlated occupation patterns) needed for social interaction and association with the place—activities that promote a sense of belonging. In their essay, Sandra Karina Löschke and Hazel Easthope stress the positive impact of adaptive redesign in sustainable communities and the significant occupation opportunities these strategies can offer to their residents, as well as the economic benefits of this approach for the built environment.

However, there is a historical line of flight that was created by experimental—some would say utopian—architectures in their pursuit of an alternative approach to the management of variation and irregularity in architectonic configurations of housing and the respective social patterns of dwelling. This can be traced in the work of visionaries such as Yona Friedman and Takis Zenetos. In his renowned projects the Architecture Mobile manifesto and studies for La Ville Spatiale (1956–60), Friedman, who worked against the established mechanisms of control in urban assemblages, was motivated by an abstract notion of ecology. His work envisioned a new malleable relationship between public and private space, and natural and man-made artifice, via mechanisms of symbiosis. Focusing on a process of micro-community formation, Friedman developed his technique of three-dimensional urban planning which allowed the juxtaposition of different neighbourhoods or their superimposition over the existing palimpsest of historic/dense city centres. This transformational process of addition (superimposition) of public and private space, of natural and man-made artifice, puts primacy on the interstitial space that performs as urban commons and contributes to the shared resources of the place. User participation and agent-based co-creation in Friedman’s bottom-up concept of urban form differentiated it from his contemporaries’ work, like Constant Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon, and instead brings it into dialogue with the work of the Greek architect Takis Zenetos.

Moving one step closer to the real-world constraints of construction, and by using technology (e.g. the world-wide web, ICT, working from home) as the starting point of his quest, Zenetos proposed his concept of Electronic Urbanism (first published in 1956), wherein the free will of individuals to form communities and neighbourhoods defines the relative location and position of spaces built and occupied. Truthful to a logic-based idea of bottom-up space formation intrinsically linked with the ephemeral emergence of spatially distributed situational activities, Zenetos envisions a housing platform that is populated by ‘special public spaces of the residential units’ which will enable inhabitants to become
purely creative in their everyday lives. Zenetos’ utopian vision of urban cohabitation raises topical and still pressing issues not only of aesthetics but also of ethical concern: how could an architectural model of dwelling integrate both technological innovation and ever-active socio-political transformations of communities of inhabitants? In addition, we have to reconsider the struggle of housing practices for enabling the co-habitation and co-existence of individuals in nested symmetries of dwelling within larger assemblages (e.g. home, street, neighbourhood, district, city, region and the world-wide web). This has to be done in a context in which the integration of the technological means Zenetos envisioned back in the 1960s have become ubiquitous in everyday activities (e.g. smartphones, the internet of things).

This book responds to these inquiries by studying the role of the interplay between the concepts of control and irregularity, and the informal on the everyday operation of community places that need to accommodate ever changing pluralities, and at the same time be adaptable to a dynamic process of identity transformation. It does so by questioning the politics of the symmetry between the abstract (Cartesian) understanding of space and the designing of spaces based on over-determined occupation patterns, and by reconsidering the impact of this politics on the capacity of said places to accommodate future possibilities in use, change, accident and chance. French architect Bernard Cache suggests that ‘there is progress in thought when we invent ever more abstract invariants that encompass ever wider varieties’. Thus framed in contemporary architectural thinking, it can be argued that one should expect these places of dwelling to emerge not from a creative process that merely privileges the point of view of the users that still relies on the motivation and the agenda of the creator-individual, but rather through alternative approaches that are creatively practised within space.

An interesting take on site-specific housing practices of user engagement is the work of R&Sie(n), who materialised Friedman’s concept of Architecture Mobile, in particular the way the latter envisioned a continuously re-forming urban fabric for his aerial city, which would be fluid and transformable. True to this vision, today R&Sie(n)’s I’ve heard about project (2005) exemplifies a materially ephemeral architecture by means of the synthesis of computational logic, digital fabrication and new material technologies.

The public sphere is everywhere, like a pulsating organism driven by postulates that are mutually contradictory and nonetheless true. The rumours and scenarios that carry the seeds of its future
mutations negotiate with the vibratory time of new territories. … The cells [dwelling units] were no longer enclosures to protect from the outside. ‘When you say interior–exterior you are creating a prison without even knowing it.’ Now there were ‘habitable networks, woven space,’ an exfoliation of constantly reconfigured habitable organisms whose elasticity was not psychological but physiological.¹⁷

The non-standard methods of robotic construction, the politics of authorship and co-creation, and the economy of sharing and individualisation of R&Sie(n)’s anarchist proposal might be novel in their procedural formation and materialisation, but its motives, population thinking¹⁸ and user-driven perspective are akin to less exuberant proposals and projects, such as that of the Huu Nghi community presented in Chapter 6 of this volume. Johanna Brugman’s chapter highlights the ‘conflicting rationalities’ that are exercised in housing development processes due to the competition between the various stakeholders and actors involved, and their different agendas. There is significant literature concerning projects that respond to the need for co-creation or contribute alternative strategies and funding schemes, but the example presented in ‘The role of community-driven finance in bridging formal and informal practices in housing: insights from Vinh, Vietnam’ adds new holistic methodologies to the relevant discourse as it hybridises a self-funding scheme in housing development with a community-driven design process. Similarly in R&Sie(n)’s experiment users curate the on-site, robotically (and therefore self-driven) construction of their dwelling units for as long as they remain tenants of the block; when the user moves elsewhere, the unit is disassembled in order to be rebuilt on a new location. This thinking relates to ethics of co-creation and economy, which (although approached with a different agenda in R&Sie(n)’s work) still underlie the contents of this book.

The last section of this book hosts a discussion about the everyday activities of inhabitation, performances and emerging narratives that are at stake in historical and contemporary housing projects approached from multiple points of entry – in other words, from various disciplines. In doing so it considers the production of inclusive housing spaces as an activist practice of enabling the socially interwoven formalisation of non-preprogrammed spaces. This practice calls us to rethink the need for control in the conception, development and operation of housing spaces that now become ‘unstable’ – that is, of a transitive identity – in order to accommodate the distinct needs of different occupants. In this
context, ‘Sharing the domestic through “residential performance”’ discusses how autoethnography can be employed as a research method for the expression, documentation and communication of residential performance projects. In his chapter Jonathan Orlek builds on Latourian postphenomenological concepts of socially mediated space to explore in practice how art can be used to enable social and material actants engaging with said generative processes of control (i.e. architectural scenarios). Orlek argues for the necessity of introducing new methods that will complement housing processes with collaborative ethnographic approaches, and use empirical tools sourced from the performing arts in order to reveal hidden political and spatial geographies.

The politics of these design-enabled practices are discussed in other chapters of this book from various viewpoints, including self-organisation, art, community engagement and participatory design, and cost-effective self-building construction methods, as well as housing economics, governmental policies and the role of private initiatives in housing solutions. These viewpoints complement each other in an attempt to offer a new, dynamic overview of user participation and empowerment topics. It is envisioned that mapping such a diverse set of creative activities will exemplify the significance of these good practices to our urbanised form of dwelling for a socially sustainable future. For example, Michael Darcy and Dallas Rogers, in ‘The real “housos”: reclaiming identity and place’, theorise about a user-driven experimentation with new media-orientated methodologies for reclaiming and intensifying specific identities, and strengthening rootedness. The objective of the projects presented in the chapter was to offer tenants a stage to express and discuss their feelings about the places they live in. In this way the creation of this stage is presented as an alternative methodology that enables users to participate in research that enquires for the challenges of disadvantaged people and places, and to contribute their personal views in the process. Pursuing the same cause from another point of view, Lee Azus ‘Uncanny home: considering race and American housing policy in Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead’ offers a critical view of site-specific art practices in the context of the activist discourse about the current neoliberal housing market that disconnects communities from the place. Azus reflects on the implications of Mike Kelley’s Mobile Homestead in his effort to identify the socio-political consequences of this neoliberal agenda – segregation policies, for example – for the historic development of public housing projects.

The purpose of this Editorial Commentary was to anchor the connecting thread that permeates the contents of this book. It traced the
tension between the architectural creation of housing spaces and the occupation patterns of their inhabitants, arguably a relationship that is dynamic and should be understood as holistic and inclusive rather than as one that generates dichotomies and competition between the actors of the process. The chapters of this book examine the causes and results of the production, occupation and adaptation of housing estates and residential blocks from the users’ point of view by means of a select number of housing projects. These are studied as large-scale laboratories for creative experiments with the multiple ways that architecture shapes living, and also as artefacts of investigating modes of habitation rather than a clearly defined end-product of design. The book contextualises these topics in the broader issues of gentrification, immigration and natural disaster relief. Issues such as equality and accessibility to housing, biopolitics of dwelling and its associated activism, planning initiatives for social sustainability and the cohabitation of the urban terrain are timely and essential in architectural education and academic discourse.

In the history of architecture the project of the housing complex has been mostly occupied with the exercise of control as a design tool for delimiting variation, and this book discusses how typical architectural approaches have been slowly replaced during the last few decades by non-standard creative practices for regulating the uncertainties associated with the production of housing. This book tries to capture an ecosystem of theoretical explorations, art practices, participatory policies and critical views on the logistics of housing production. In doing so, it contributes creative methodologies for staging dialogues on the accessibility of common resources in favour of social inclusion. It recognises that practices capable of generating shared identities based on co-creation and occupation of common spaces can serve as a good example for the contemporary architectural discourse about equal opportunities and sustainable interaction of multicultural societies in the metropolis.

Thus the contribution of this book to the contemporary discourse about housing futures is the widening scope of hybridity that characterises the presented multifaceted non-standard practices that introduce new models of co-operation and integration between the many factors, aspects and variables constituting housing production’s ill-defined design problem. In support of that argument the book performs a balancing act amongst multiple stakeholders’ views in order to offer the reader well-defined cases of good practices from the international scene. Housing is still a pressing need of humanity today – even more so due to intensified waves of population movements stemming from natural-disaster phenomena and war – despite the countless efforts of
architects, authorities and key stakeholders over the past century to overcome housing shortages. Responding to the pressing needs of contemporary societies for social inclusion and sustainable multicultural urban environments, this book highlights the potential of informal practices of social resilience in the context of the formal housing policies pursued by government authorities and market-driven industry.