Housing knowledge/s

future.lab Magazin #18

The global housing crisis demands the exchange and inclusion of diverse forms of knowledge in housing studies and design. What do we need to consider?

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„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.“

Powell & Simone 2022, 841

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Cooperative housing project in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Photo: Judith M. Lehner, 2014)

A global housing crisis cannot be denied. It has been diagnosed and acknowledged by the World Economic Forum[1] as well as the United Nations Habitat *New Urban Agenda*[2], and is once again on political agendas at all levels. Responses to the housing crisis are manifold and often local, while its drivers are complex and globally interconnected. Homeownership through mortgages, 'right-to-buy' policies or micro-financing are globally spreading financialisation mechanisms that convert housing into a commodity − producing displacement for many and accumulation for some. Across the world, housing markets are being shaken by unaffordability at unprecedented speed, and a toxic 'twin boom' in real estate and credit markets, followed by skyrocketing energy prices and construction costs, along with an overwhelming sense of insecurity in the sector. In October 2022, the UBS Global Real Estate Bubble Index[3] bluntly concluded, 'game over'. In November, the Financial Times[4] titled an article 'The global housing market is heading for a brutal downturn' and linked the current turmoil to a global and deepening cost-of-living crisis looming in the background.

Against such overwhelming dynamic, housing research that aims at profoundly informing local responses requires a transdisciplinary understanding of both global and local trends and forces. Especially in regard to the specificity and uniqueness of all 'ordinary cities'[5], bringing together histories, methodologies, and geographical contexts in housing research is one step towards a more globalised dialogue.[6] As a complex research topic, *housing* includes the design of buildings, housing as a form of practice, and housing regimes and policies but, also, an ideological and epistemological component (Madden, in this issue) − especially when it comes to social housing. In this sense, housing research itself needs to be thought of as something contested owing to the multiplicity of housing knowledges (ibid.).

This issue of the future.lab magazine opens up a debate on housing knowledge/s by connecting local cases − such as the City of Vienna (with its well-known Vienna Housing Model), Swiss and Uruguayan housing cooperatives, and the Los Angeles housing and homelessness crisis − with the international debate within housing studies on financialisation, affordability, displacement, distributive justice, and social housing regimes. Rather than a complete account of the current global housing crisis, we would like to ask: what are the forms of knowledge about policy, housing design, and everyday life that need to be considered in housing research and how can we create translations across these specific forms of knowledge? 'Rather than knowledge in the singular, planning is replete with multiple knowledges representing multiple realities. (...) [O]ne needs to ask why is some knowledge privileged over others and who decides what counts as knowledge?'[7] Responding to these questions from the point of view of housing studies, we can observe an ongoing tension between provision and use that has to do with 'top-down, colonial modes of governance and, in bold terms,

An Introduction by Judith M. Lehner

Translating Social Housing for California

Helmi Hisserich

The origin story of social housing in Vienna is particularly translatable for Californians from a historical point of view. When you tell a Californian that in 1917 Vienna had 30,000 people living in makeshift shelters, we can visualise it. There are over 160,000 homeless individuals in California. In the City of Los Angeles alone, there are an estimated 41,980 individuals with no place to call home, more than half of whom are living in makeshift shelters on the streets. We experience the stark contrast between extreme wealth and debilitating poverty on a daily basis, and we recognise ourselves in Vienna's past.

California is pushing for change in housing and the sense of urgency is palpable. So it should be no surprise that we are looking towards Vienna for new ideas. Americans are drawn to success stories, and Vienna's transformation − from the site of the worst housing in Europe to the most liveable city in the world − is the kind of story that makes us want to know more. We want to know how Vienna reversed course. We want to believe that change is possible. We are looking for the path that will lead us into a new, more equitable, and more stable future. Social housing is currently gaining recognition as a possible solution to the urban housing crisis in the United States, but most Americans − even housing experts − know little about social housing.

The International Building Exhibition in Vienna (IBA_Vienna) gave international audiences an opportunity to learn about Vienna's unique social housing system. Through its seven-year long process of preparing the exhibition on social housing, IBA_Vienna purposefully invited outsiders to peek inside the housing system. Our firm, the Global Policy Leadership Academy, took this opportunity to bring a delegation of housing leaders from California to Vienna to learn. We are educators and we are affordable housing experts, so we set ourselves the task of translating Vienna's social housing policies and programmes into a language that Californians could understand.

At first, we translated technical information, converting Euros into US Dollars, square meters into square feet. We then made sense of the organisations and institutions in Vienna, converting department names and manager's titles from German into their American English equivalents. But as the process of translating Vienna's history, policies, and programmes progressed, we began to see that the language of housing in Vienna is different from our own. Hence the lessons we take home to California will never be direct translations; rather, they will be interpretations of ideas that help us create meaning out of Vienna's experience.

The history of housing in the US has been fundamentally shaped by racism, and the exclusion of people of colour from homeownership and prosperous neighbourhoods.

The century-old story of Vienna's 'Siedlerbewegung' or settler's movement feels familiar in Los Angeles, where a large grassroots movement called 'United to House LA' has grown into a powerful political force in the city. This past year, hundreds of coalitions of homeless residents, immigrants, working people, and trade unions joined forces to push for a tax on the sale of real estate valued at more than $5 million. The 'mansion tax', as it is sometimes called, was voted on in the November 2022 municipal election, winning 58% of the vote. It is estimated that this tax will generate $850 million per year for affordable housing, which is a 500% increase in funding. It is a game changer for Los Angeles.

About 20% of the funds raised by the ULA tax were set aside for mixed-income housing on public land with resident participation in governance. A native of Vienna would instantly recognise this as social housing, but in Los Angeles the plan was called 'alternative models of housing'. The term 'social housing' was thought to be too divisive. Nonetheless, housing advocates are working hard to design a housing model in Los Angeles that will remain permanently outside of market forces.

Vienna's policy of 'social mixing' generates an interesting conversation for Americans. We have an equivalent term embedded in federal law called 'Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing', which establishes a legal framework rather similar to the social mixing policies in Vienna. The American law is often referred to by the acronym 'AFFH', which obscures the meaning for almost anyone who is not involved in the housing field. Asking 'how is the AFFH plan doing?' sounds a lot more cryptic than 'how is the social mixing plan doing?' The term 'social mixing' is much clearer and more direct than the language we use.

Perhaps the reason for our confusing choice of words is because the conversation about social mixing in Vienna translates into a conversation about race in America. Americans often use coded language when discussing conflicts that stem from racial exclusion and white privilege. The history of housing in the US has been fundamentally shaped by racism, and the exclusion of people of colour from homeownership and prosperous neighbourhoods. We have a legacy of racial division that separates our communities both economically and spatially, and it makes us sceptical about Vienna's idea that 'everyone lives together'. Racial equity is one of the most pressing and important issues in the American public discourse and, to us, Vienna's policy of social mixing sounds like a dream, not reality. Yet the fundamental framework of community-building embedded in Vienna's social mixing policy is one we will be talking about for a long time.

Some Viennese ideas translate easily into a Californian context and seem very achievable in the near future: 'land banking' and Vienna's four pillar developer competitions fall into this category. We are already seeing these ideas taken up by members of the delegation that travelled to Vienna last year. One member of our delegation − the mayor of Fresno, a medium-sized city in California − told us that he put in place a developer competition for urban land following the Vienna model. A state legislator from our delegation drafted a bill to enable existing regional housing finance agencies to buy, hold, and dispose of land. On the flight home, two local government administrators rewrote a grant programme making $8 million dollars available for 'Housing Innovation for Public and Private Land'.

The Limited Profit Housing Association financing approach captured the imagination of several of our delegates because the cost-based financing model creates an avenue for scaling affordable housing development that our own, complicated low-income housing tax credit system does not. But the LPHA approach probably will not easily be applied in our system, because limiting profit in a hyper-capitalist economy is a complicated thing to do.

We are glad to see the ripple effects emanating from our delegation in Vienna. It gives us confidence that our translations and interpretations are helping to advance new and important ideas.

For now, though, we will be content with our process of translating ideas between cultures.

It seems that, with the growing awareness of social housing in the US and around the world, a more common language for social housing could emerge. For now, though, we will be content with our process of translating ideas between cultures. Experiencing Vienna's social housing for the first time, almost all the Californians in our delegation − people who are fighting a hard fight to solve the housing and homelessness crisis − consistently said one thing: 'Vienna gives us hope', and that needs no translation.

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Old and New Municipal Housing in Vienna, Handelskai (1976 / 2022). (Photo: Judith Lehner, 2022)

What is the future.lab?

The future.lab is a platform for experimental and inter- as well as transdisciplinary research and teaching in urban and spatial development at the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Planning of the TU Wien. The platform is intended to create opportunities and promote initiatives that encourage research, teaching and practice to engage in an open exchange and strengthen their profile. In this way, the platform challenges teachers, students and colleagues from planning practice to develop concrete projects and initiatives and to translate the claim of a transdisciplinary scientific practice into concrete action.

NETWORKING AND BUNDLING OF CONTENT

The platform builds on the research fields and funding priorities of the TU Wien and the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Planning. The program supports the discussion on concepts relevant to space and development, on strategies and projects from the fields of architecture, urban development, spatial planning, urban management and urban governance. Furthermore, it aims to promote the dialogue between spatial sciences and planning practice.

With the magazine, the future.lab is pursuing its goal of bringing established research focuses at the faculty to to public attention and making them visible.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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