



# Claiming the right to dignity: New organizations for housing justice in neoliberal Sweden

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## **Abstract**

The lack of affordable housing for people with low income, shrinking public resources, and new political conflicts threaten the availability of housing, at the same time as aggressive forms of urban renewal are causing displacement through ‘renoviction’, putting tenants in critical situations. In this article, we focus on the acts of resistance and new social organization trends that have emerged in relation to the praxis of renoviction used by landlords and other local authorities, and the frustration caused by this praxis. We claim that these new forms of organization are using the concept of renoviction in articulating current struggles for housing justice. Methodologically, we point out the necessity of urban research conducted in close collaboration with activism, as a way for mutual learning and support. Moreover, we suggest that these acts of resistance should be understood as happening within a broader context of economic and political changes affecting the housing market, and in relation to the increased racialization of poverty and territorial stigmatization in Swedish cities. To illustrate and then strive to understand the ongoing resistance and demands for housing justice, we focus on national activist networks emerging in response to the neoliberal housing crisis. We maintain that emerging resistance in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Uppsala represents a growing claim for housing justice. This resistance is based on people’s everyday lives and is a cry for dignity in neighborhoods neglected by housing companies.

## **Keywords**

activism, dignity, resistance, neoliberal housing policies

## **Introduction**

This article investigates emerging mobilizations against ‘renoviction’ (i.e., housing renovation and urban renewal leading to eviction) occurring in Swedish housing, analyzing strategies for resistance, creating new alliances, and strengthening a sense of dignity by refusing to be passive victims of neoliberal housing politics. The concept of ‘renoviction’ – combining ‘renovation’ and ‘eviction’ – refers to housing renovation after which the rent is raised to a level that the current tenant cannot afford, effectively rendering the tenant evicted (Baeten et al., 2016; Westin, 2011). Inspired by Canadian activists, the word renoviction was first introduced into the Swedish language (translated as *renovräkning* in Swedish) in 2012 (Westin, 2012), and is now widely used by tenants, activists, and academics in Sweden. In 2017, *renovräkning* was such a frequent phenomenon that it was included in the national ‘new word list’ encyclopedia.

Renoviction has emerged in Sweden in the aftermath of recent decades of neoliberal reforms of housing policy, which besides increasing segregation as well as spatial and social polarization, have exacerbated housing shortages, homelessness, overcrowding, forced displacement, and many people’s constant fear of losing their homes (Baeten et al., 2016; Westin, 2011). Many scholars have shown that ‘displacement pressure’ (Marcuse, 1985) often leads to anxiety, stress, and depression (Baeten et al., 2016; Desmond, 2016; Fullilove, 2016; Hern, 2016; Mauritz, 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019). While this is important and relevant research, in this article we focus on the resistance of tenants subjected to renoviction pressure. Their acts of resistance should be understood within the broader context of the economic and political changes impacting the current Swedish housing market, and in relation to the increased racialization of poverty and territorial stigmatization. Long-term neglect of poor and racialized metropolitan outskirts by housing companies has led to increased mobilization and organization for housing justice. We argue that such resistance, commonly spontaneous, is based on everyday life experiences and creates new alliances, particularly in poor and racially stigmatized neighborhoods, where it represents a cry for dignity.

This article both illustrates and strives to understand the role of dignity in relation to the demand for housing justice in Sweden. We focus on two activist networks that have emerged in response to the neoliberal housing crisis. The examples from Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Uppsala illustrate how resistance has developed over time. After an introduction to the rapidly changing Swedish housing market, the theoretical framework is presented, leading to a discussion of resistance and dignity in relation to the profiled activist networks.

Housing justice mobilization and organization are widely known and have a long and globe-spanning history (Lees et al., 2015). Housing activists have been able to engage political parties in their demands (Krijnen and De Beukelaer, 2015) or obtained housing through squatting (see for example Galleguillos & Molina, 2006). Spanish cases of housing justice activism studied by Peiteado Fernández (2020), Martínez (2018), and García-Lamarca (2016), among others, have been fostering hope in the power of mass mobilization to achieve social

justice through new forms of protest and activism, as Harvey (2000) has argued. Such movements are all examples of a cry for dignity in solidarity.

This article is based on empirical data collected between 2010 and 2019 examining resistance to, and growing social mobilization around, renovation in Sweden. Though most of the movements studied are based in major cities where the shortage of affordable housing is most severe, these movements are also working on a national level to establish coalitions for housing justice. The empirical and analytical work has been performed by activists and academics in close co-operation during several years of ongoing discussions alongside workshops involving tenants, activists, and academics. Driscoll Derickson and Routledge (2015) argue that scholar-activism should triangulate research questions, merging the agendas of activist organizations with those of researchers. Such 'scholar-activism' is significant for contemporary critical housing research in Sweden, in which the research agenda and strategic approaches are increasingly developed in collaboration between scholars and activists. This has been facilitated by the research environment of the Critical Urban Sustainability Hub (CRUSH), in which 14 researchers from four Swedish universities conducted critical housing and urban research in collaboration with social movements, tenants, and academics between 2014 and 2020. CRUSH has participated in activist meetings in all major cities in Sweden, publishing handbooks on housing-related topics. It has also invited activists to meetings, panels, and seminars held in traditionally academic environments, and has employed activists as research assistants at certain times. The aim of the CRUSH research community, and of the present authors, is to expand scholar-activist collaboration not only through dialogue but also by experimenting with co-writing. At the start of the fieldwork for this article, the third author was a housing activist employed by CRUSH as a co-researching and co-writing research assistant. Later, she was accepted into a PhD program at Uppsala University, which she is currently attending.

Contemporary strategies used by tenants to resist displacement individually, on the micro-scale, as well as through organized collective action merit scholarly study. The empirical material for this article is based on nine interviews with activists (two in 2017 and seven in 2011) and on participant observation of several meetings and conferences throughout the period as well as ongoing, dialogues between scholars and activists since 2010. Secondary sources, such as previous research reports and official documents, are also used. Three of the movements studied have mobilized in relation to the issue of renovation, specifically the national organization *Alla ska kunna bo kvar* (ASKBK; 'Everybody Should be Able to Stay Put') and a national network addressing housing issues more generally, *Bostadsvrålet* ('Housing Roar'). The article focuses on the motivations and reasons for resistance, how resistance is manifested (through different forms of organization and action), and who becomes involved. As a backdrop to the emerging housing movements, historical background is presented to clarify why these new organizations are mainly acting outside the strong national Union of Tenants, even though the Union has local representatives in all areas analyzed.

## **The Swedish housing crisis**

As post-war Social Democratic housing politics were abandoned and replaced with policies organized around free market principles beginning in the early 1990s, several researchers have made the case that the Swedish housing system has ‘gradually become one of the most liberal market-governed housing markets in the Western world’ (Hedin et al., 2012, p. 444; see also Clark & Johnson, 2009; Grundström & Molina, 2016; Listerborn, 2018). Under the previous Social Democratic government, provision of ‘good housing’ was characterized by regulated land and housing policies, subsidized construction, strong tenant protections, tenant organization, and high-quality housing standards (Dickens et al., 1985). Due to the elimination of subsidies and increase of property tax, too few dwellings have been built in recent decades, leading to a housing shortage and an increase in housing inequality in several cities (Listerborn, 2018). In addition, the 2008 financial crisis halted many planned projects, and economic uncertainties continue to dampen private initiatives in the rental market. The conversion of public housing to privately owned dwellings has reinforced the housing shortage. Overall, rental accommodations (both private and public) decreased from 58 percent of the market in 1945 to 37 percent in 2011 (Bengtsson, 2015). In 2016, the National Board of Housing declared that Sweden needed 710,000 new housing units in the coming ten years in order to mitigate the crisis. This would mean building 88,000 new housing units per year in a country with a population of ten million. The housing shortage is particularly acute in the rental sector, as rental housing has been regarded as too expensive to build and not profitable enough for housing companies. The lack of affordable rental housing has led to long waitlists for rental housing (in Stockholm eight years on average for less attractive neighborhoods, and up to 30 years for more central locations), the growth of subletting and crowded living, and increased homelessness. Low-income households end up on the insecure sublet market, with short-term rental contracts (Listerborn, 2018).

At the same time, many dwellings built in the late 1960s as part of the so-called Million Program (1965–1975) require structural renovation. The Million Program was an ambitious public housing program implemented by the Social Democratic Party to guarantee affordable housing for everyone. A million new dwellings were constructed over a ten-year period, mainly on the urban outskirts, in a nation with a population of eight million. At the same time, a large proportion of old inner-city housing was demolished, leading to major protests and preservation campaigns. The inner-city tenants were displaced from their former homes and relocated to the new housing areas, which also met the need for both domestic and European labor migration. Forty years later, this housing stock is in severe need of upgrading, as investments have not been made in many of these buildings for a long period.

A recent survey of 119 public and private landlords found that half of the existing Million Program housing units (about 471,000 units) need some degree of renovation; the National Board of Housing estimates a total cost of at least SEK 300–500 billion (Boverket, 2014; see also SABO, 2009). These renovations are usually financed by current tenants through sharp rent increases (Baeten et al., 2016; Jacobsson, 2013). Such renovation processes lead to increased risk of displacement (Baeten et al., 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019; Westin, 2011). The specific legislation previously protecting tenants from steep rent increases

is still in place, but overall deregulation of the housing market, years of neglected maintenance, and the need for structural renovation of Million Program dwellings have opened up loopholes for companies to increase their profits.

The ongoing Swedish housing crisis illustrates how neoliberal policies reshape cities, seeking to improve the economic ‘effectiveness’ of urban spaces by looking to market solutions for all economic and social problems (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Neoliberalism is here understood as changes in urban development and housing policy in relation to ‘the economization of the state and of social policy’, where economic growth is supposed to solve social and housing crises and thus ‘economic growth *is* the state’s social policy’ (Brown, 2015, pp. 63–64). The state thus becomes organized more like a private company, in theory responsible for carrying out projects that were traditionally (in a welfare state) the responsibility of the public sector/state. Brown’s (2015) thesis is that economic growth has become the overarching logic in organizing both the public sector and people’s private spheres, integrating democracy into capitalism in a way that has deprived democracy of its critical potential. Measures that lead to increased marketization and competition alter social hierarchies of gender, race, and class, and even alter how we understand who we are and how we live our lives. It affects opportunities for housing, education, and employment. Neoliberalism has in various ways re-inscribed, intensified, and created injustice and inequality. Neoliberalism simultaneously exists as an ideology promoting market solutions, as a policy that increases the power of private actors, and as governmentality—i.e., rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques. Neoliberalism does not constitute a clear break from previous housing regimes, but rather is a hybrid of existing regimes and neoliberal transformations (Baeten, 2018; Christophers, 2013; Thörn & Larsson, 2012). Altogether, individualization, privatization, and cuts in welfare systems have affected people’s everyday life experiences and struggles in the city (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Peake & Rieker, 2013), acting as a backdrop to everyday experiences of housing injustice. Locally, where affected people live their everyday lives, in neighborhoods where the overarching political changes are manifested as change and dispossession (Pull & Richard, 2019), resistance to the overarching neoliberal turn and the deregulation of housing policy is emerging.

Housing deprivation is here understood as an accumulation of insufficiencies in basic housing conditions. Besides the commonly mentioned dimensions of inadequate construction, inadequate amenities, and insufficient space relative to the number of inhabitants, it can also include spatial and economic dimensions, such as neighborhood security and the household’s housing cost burden (Borg, 2015). In this article, we add aspects such as deficient maintenance, territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 2008), and threat of displacement due to increased rent. The stigmatization is strongly racialized (Andersson & Molina, 2003; Bråmås, 2006; Kings, 2011; Molina, 1997; Pred, 2000). Since 2000, the media have increasingly reported violent incidents on the outskirts of major Swedish cities, representing the suburbs as places of violence. Male youth of migrant background in conflict with the police generally form the main storyline of such coverage (Brune, 1998; Ericsson et al., 2000). Violent confrontations between police and youth, for example, at Rosengård in

Malmö in 2008 (see Hallin et al., 2010) and at Husby in Stockholm in 2013 (see Sernhede et al., 2016; de los Reyes & Hörnqvist, 2017), have attracted international media attention. While these incidents were not ‘movement protests’ or part of organized mobilizations, Sernhede et al. (2016) maintained that in the case of Husby, the unrest occurred in a context of social movement mobilization to address structural discrimination against the suburb and its population, and that it was later understood as a ‘movement event’. Various political articulations are emerging in the poor suburbs of the major cities, which should be situated within a context of neoliberal urbanism that generates continuous systemic violence (de los Reyes, 2017; Listerborn et al., 2011; Žizek, 2008), social injustice, and corresponding protests and resistance against these forces (Dikeç, 2007; Sernhede et al., 2016). The residents of stigmatized areas, especially young adults of non-European background, have experienced stigmatization and discrimination for several generations. They play important roles in the mobilization, demanding better living conditions and particularly housing justice.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, the conceptualization of dignity will be presented. Next a context of the Swedish housing system and its current status will be introduced. In the third and fourth section the examples of two major movements in Sweden the “Housing Roar” and “Everybody Should be Able to Stay Put” will be analyzed through the lens of dignity. In these sections we illustrate how solidarity and the claim for housing justice has been expressed. In conclusion, we reflect on how housing activists counteract housing insecurity and stress and articulate and fight for dignity in housing and social justice struggles. We will write about homeplaces and solidarity in housing struggles, as a source of dignity, agency and resistance.

### **Resisting housing deprivation as a cry for dignity**

Claiming the right to dignity means resisting the territorial and bodily stigmatization people experience in stigmatized neighborhoods. Dignity, referring to self-respect or appreciation, concerns issues of ethics and justice, here related to places created, claimed, defended, and used (strategically or tactically) in an inclusive manner. As Davidson (2009) stated within the context of the gentrification debate, displacement is often understood as the purely spatial re/dislocation of individuals, while the equally important meaning of place and the social relations enacted are excluded. It is important to recall the physical, social, and emotional aspects of displacement (Baeten et al., 2016; Fullilove, 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019). For example, Feldman and Stell (2004) illustrated how women in a Chicago neighborhood mobilized resistance because of a real need for a ‘homeplace’ and belonging, but also for the sake of dignity. The threat of housing demolition, due to long-term disinvestment in public housing and social services as well as growing poverty in the community, triggered the resistance. From a feminist theoretical perspective, bell hooks (1991) has pinpointed the importance of understanding the *sites* of resistance, seeing ‘homeplaces’ as sources of dignity, agency, and solidarity from which resistance can be conceptualized and organized. According to hooks, private spheres transgress public ones. Through private coordination and communication, resistance movements are formed. The concept of homeplace refers to a site of comfort, safety, and grounding, but also of dignity. The homeplace, in the case of

housing, is the meaningful site of resistance and space appropriation, whose claims aim to transgress neighborhood territories: ‘As power reveals itself it creates the possibility of resistance’ (Manzo & Wolfe, 1990, p. 4, quoted by Feldman & Stall, 2004, p. 10).

Essed (2009, 2013) sees humiliation, racism, and discrimination as violating the right to live with dignity. Reinforced by structural economic, social, and political inequalities and power relations, people are exploited, marginalized, and denied dignity and respect by the dominant culture. Drawing on international conflict resolution, Hicks (2011) claimed that the desire for dignity is universal and powerful, and that when dignity is violated, the response likely involves aggression. Jacobson et al. (2009) argued that a geography of dignity can be mapped onto every urban geography, citing health research demonstrating that marginalized populations experiencing a cumulative lack of dignity suffer from poorer health. Dignity is used in the Swedish context to understand the connection between neoliberal urban development and the private spheres of home and housing. Focusing on resistance in relation to the violation of dignity in the housing market exposes not only people’s everyday struggles and resistance, but also their hopes and dreams.

Resistance, in a Foucauldian understanding, refers to what Foucault called ‘counter-conducts’ (Death, 2010), described as ‘the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 75, quoted by Death, 2010, p. 236). Although Foucault himself focussed on the principle of governmentality, he was, according to Death, very clear that ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (Foucault, 1998, p. 95, quoted by Death, 2010, p. 238), and that ‘there is no power without potential refusal or revolt’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 324, quoted by Death, 2010, p. 238). These new forms of resistance act outside the established organizations that have traditionally addressed tenants’ rights, such as the well-established Swedish Union of Tenants (Hyresgästföreningen). The kind of resistance we consider emerges in relation to, and in the context of, a neoliberal housing regime. Resistance commonly refers to an articulation of social conflicts and collective identities, with identified ‘enemies’ and constituted by various practices and public actions (Sernhede et al., 2016). In the case of housing, resistance is very much grounded in the micro-level, the everyday, sometimes giving rise to spontaneous reactions to neoliberal housing practices.

Resistance cannot be separated from practices of domination, so new forms of resistance must be investigated in relation to power, government, and domination (Keith and Pile, 1997). Regarding questions of dignity and housing deprivation, this also entails understanding gendered, racialized, and other forms of systemic power relations acted out on an everyday basis. The relationship between social polarization, resistance, and dignity has also been confirmed in history, for example, by the birth of the Swedish Union of Tenants.

### **Housing activism in Sweden**

Swedish housing activism was revived in the 2000s but has a history that stretches much further back. The national Swedish Union of Tenants was established in 1923 with the slogan

'Hälsobostäder åt alla!' (Healthy housing for all!), and grew in strength through the 1920s and 1930s. The Union gradually became more organized, gaining support from the first ever Social Democratic government, not the least from the famous political couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, who laid the groundwork for the housing provision model implemented in the 1940s. In the 1940s, rents were regulated and the Union of Tenants became the part of rent setting control. For the Union, tenants' lack of dignity and health risks were major concerns, while for the government, controlling and disciplining the working-class population had become part of the emerging housing agenda. By the late 1950s, rent regulations were abolished, first for public housing and later for private landlords. Instead, a system of rent negotiation between public housing companies and the Union of Tenants was developed based on the use value of the dwellings, a system still prevailing for both municipal and private landlords (Hultén, 1973; Listerborn, 2018; Rolf, 2017; Wallengren, 1994). Currently in Sweden, almost all housing rents are determined through annual collective bargaining between the landlord and the Tenant Association. This system has since been highly contested by landlords.

Through close collaboration between the Social Democrats, the Union of Tenants, and private companies, large-scale industrialized housing projects were developed. By the completion of the Million Program in the late 1970s, there existed almost no housing shortage in the country. Only five per cent of the population lived in over-crowded flats, and legal support for tenants was strong. The Union became institutionalized and gained political and economic power. However, as the political climate changed through the 1990s and housing increasingly became organized via free-market principles, the Union of Tenants was portrayed as hindering market growth. Private landlords threatened to take the case to the EU (Kjellström, 2015), questioning the Union's right to influence rent levels. As a compromise, legislation was adopted in 2011 giving more power to private landlords, though the Union still participated in rent negotiations. With less state support to build rental housing and the transformation of rental housing into privately owned housing, particularly strong in the 1990s, the production of new housing declined. From the beginning of the 21st century, poor housing standards, lack of building maintenance, the need for structural renovation and insufficient rental housing construction have led to a situation reminiscent of the precarious housing situation of the 1920s. Young people, migrants, single parents, elderly people—many groups often already marginalized in various ways—find it difficult to enter the housing market in contemporary Sweden (Listerborn, 2018). Unsurprisingly, resistance is again growing, but this time outside the Union of Tenants. Moreover, according to the activists interviewed in this study, mobilizations occur despite the passive attitude of local representatives of the Union.

In the context of the housing sector's increasing neoliberalization, the Union of Tenants—born out of contestations, rent strikes, and political actions—paradoxically came to be perceived as part of the establishment. This perception was reinforced by several interviewees, who felt that the Union was being steered by white-collar folks who had lost contact with the grassroots. According to interviewees who described their renoviction experiences, Union officials would get involved in negotiations too late in the renoviction

process to have an impact and did not defend renters' interests. Between 1997 and 2011, Union membership decreased from 620,000 to 528,000 (Hem & Hyra, 21 January 2011). The Union's tradition of compromise has proven problematic and relatively ineffective in the current neoliberal policy landscape. In some cities, the Union has begun to redefine its organization strategies, repoliticizing its activities in response to housing market challenges exposed by new tenant movements. Emerging resistance and critique from below formulated by anti-renoviction activists challenge the compromises with landlord representatives that the Union has accepted as part of the process of housing market neoliberalization despite how they set aside tenant dignity in housing.

### **'Housing Roar'**

Bostadsvrålet—'Housing Roar'—started in 2014 as an organization comprising housing activists from both more traditional organizations such as Kvinnors Byggforum (Women's Building Forum) and the workers temperance organization Verdandi, as well as new organizations such as jagvillhabostad.nu (I-want-to-have-a-dwelling.now), an organization of tenants and young adults demanding affordable housing. The goal of Housing Roar was initially to create a forum for people hit by the dysfunctional housing situation to exchange experiences, create new alliances, mobilize public opinion, and make politicians aware of the situation of those excluded from the housing market. This idea of forming a national network to exert pressure on authorities and politicians and make affected groups in society aware of the political changes affecting the housing situation is similar to the idea that originally gave birth to the Union of Tenants in the early 1920s. It is essential for Housing Roar activists that grassroots organizations take the lead in current housing struggles. This position has led to the marginalization, but not total exclusion, of Union officials from planning the working strategies and mobilizations of Housing Roar conferences. Similarly, politicians are not invited to give speeches or organize sessions at Housing Roar conferences, but are welcome to attend and listen to activists' presentations. Interviewees considered the first conference, held in the Million Program area of Tensta in Stockholm in summer 2014, to be successful. The attendance of several hundred people, participant engagement, and perspectives on future gatherings and organizing exceeded organizers' expectations.

The success of the Tensta conference, attended by private persons, academics, and representatives of relevant civil society organizations, paved the way for a second conference in Gothenburg only a few months later. Here, renoviction experiences in the Pennygången neighborhood brought the issues of gentrification and fear of displacement to the fore. Pennygången inhabitants started their mobilization immediately after the landlord Stena Fastigheter announced a programmed process of renewal. The announcement—a letter in the mailbox from the landlord—made the tenants worried and insecure about rent increases, and many affected tenants participated in the mobilizations. Together with their early start, this participation seems to have been crucial in the success of the protest movement in hindering a large rent increase. Moreover, this community's mobilization was multifaceted, including protest actions, documentation in written pamphlets, music videos, debate articles, and various media appearances. The various resistance strategies demonstrated tenants did not

regard themselves as victims. Instead tenants took the lead in debates and set the agenda by gathering knowledge of their rights. The minimal information provided by the landlord created insecurity, but tenants formulated their own demands rather than just waiting for more information. The experience from this mobilization and from other renoviction cases was later documented in a handbook opposing renoviction and gentrification ([www.rattattbokvar.se](http://www.rattattbokvar.se)),<sup>1</sup> exemplifying scholar-activism through collaboration of activists and scholars as co-authors.

Humor was also used as a weapon. When the real estate company Stena Fastigheter offered six temporary toilets and bathrooms for 30 households during two months of renovation, an anonymous activist posted notes in the hallways signed *Satans Fastigheter* [Satan's Real Estate]. The notes told tenants to 'be happy and shut up', 'move', or 'we are doing these renovations so we can rent out your flat to people who are not poor and don't complain'. The real estate company filed a police complaint, but the local tenant organization argued that this complaint was inappropriate as the notes were clearly meant as a joke: 'When you file a complaint to the housing company it takes time to get a response, but in this case the notes were gone within an hour' (SVT, 2016). The 'ill will' of the company, exemplified by their response to the notes, spread by word of mouth and was mocked. From the resistance at Pennygängen and similar local struggles in other cities, tenant activists initiated the national initiative Alla-ska-kunna-bo-kvar (ASKBK, i.e., Everybody Should be Able to Stay Put), aiming to connect current and future local struggles for the right to stay put throughout a renovation process.

These two parallel mobilizations, Housing Roar and ASKBK—one primarily a struggle for affordable housing, the other comprising widespread but uncoordinated resistance actions against gentrification and renoviction in Stockholm, Uppsala, and Gothenburg—began at approximately the same time and merged into what we call an incipient movement for housing justice. Unlike Housing Roar, ASKBK has been explicit in its strategy of not only acting as a network, but also constituting a formally registered organization for both practical and strategic purposes. They have preferred a formal organizational structure because it implies more stable and formal engagement and means better conditions for formal negotiations—one of many tools in struggling for fair housing policy both locally and nationally. In contrast, Housing Roar seeks to create new alliances and work as an umbrella network. Its different meetings attract different groups depending on the housing injustice in question, but maintains a stable core of activists. Notably, despite their enthusiasm and bold engagement, a number of participants did not regard themselves as activists, but simply tenants whose tenure was under threat, usually by renovation programs.

As Housing Roar expanded to Malmö in 2015 for its third meeting, a new topic emerged in addition to housing shortages, housing prices, and renovictions. This was the issue of migrant settlement, motivated by the arrival of thousands of migrants, including asylum seekers from Syria and elsewhere and thousands of EU migrants, many of them Roma from

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<sup>1</sup> *Rätt att bo kvar – en handbok i organisering mot hyreshöjningar och gentrifiering*, by Catharina Thörn, Mathias Krusell & Malin Widehammar (Eds.) [The Right to Stay Put – a handbook in organization against rental increases and gentrification].

Romania. Given its location on the southern border, Malmö saw activism promoting the humane reception of asylum seekers during the year of what Swedish authorities, reluctant to generously receive asylum seekers, called the ‘refugee crisis’. This made the 2015 Housing Roar gathering notable. With neoliberal forces dominating mainstream politics and nationalism and far-right racist populism on the rise throughout Europe, both used the migration situation to mobilize racist sentiments among politicians and the general public. This led to the closing of the borders in autumn 2015 to take a breath as Prime Minister Stefan Löfven put it, despite extensive activist mobilization to receive the newcomers with dignity (Swedish Government, 2015). The mobilization for housing and shelter began to include struggles against racism and right-wing populism, as well as the issue of sheltering EU migrants and refugees. In the aftermath of this, several municipalities declined housing refugees or people seeking asylum. People ended up sleeping in cars, caravans, unhealthy shelters, or simply on the streets, being deprived of housing dignity in the process (Hansson, 2019; Hansson & Mitchell, 2019; Persdotter, 2019; Teodorescu & Molina Forth, 2020).

The fourth Housing Roar conference occurred in Uppsala in October 2016. Again, another new topic entered the agenda, namely, the privatization of public space and its relationship to lack of housing and reduced access to the public space in the city which is every resident’s right. Participating activists from southern Stockholm made important connections between neoliberal market forces, public space privatization, gentrification processes, and rights to the city and shelter. The broader issue of social justice was introduced during the Uppsala meeting more clearly than before, when the claims were more purely concerned with the political response to the housing crisis. This initiated a new political phase of housing activism, as housing justice merged with more general claims for social justice. Furthermore, strategies broadened from an initial focus on political demands for housing as a social right. Without abandoning the demand that the state assume its responsibility for housing provision, activists started to seriously discuss assuming the lead role in bringing about the desired changes. These included creating a platform for self-production, co-housing, and mass demonstration initiatives, as well as laying the foundation for a new union of tenants more openly grounded in the grassroots tenant experience of issues such as renoviction and gentrification.

In 2018, the Housing Roar conference was held in northern Sweden for the first time, hosted by organizations in the city of Umea. It featured resistance to the privatization of public rental properties and gentrification alongside organization to protect welfare services such as schools and transport and to stop the demolishing of rental housing needing renovation. At the time, tenants feared that the ‘selling out’ of public housing would result in increased rents and less affordable housing. Even in less strained housing markets neoliberal housing market strategies were found to be emerging, but also greater awareness among tenants allowing them to act early in the renoviction process. This highlighted the importance of documenting struggle, in handbooks or social media, to share experience. In 2019 a second handbook was published, this time stressing strategies for coping with the power games of landlords (Polanska et al., 2019), but also listing organizations to contact for help. The 2018 Housing Roar agenda included ideas from Uppsala about actually building

spaces as a way to realize desired changes, and both small-scale construction coops as well people who had developed spaces for non-commercial culture were represented at the event.

In 2019, Housing Roar returned to Stockholm, co-arranged by a wide range of organizations alongside tenants and homeless people fighting for social justice. The theme was ‘local organizing, knowledge and analysis, positive change’, following directions initiated in previous Housing Roar meetings to start from local experience and expertise, building alliances to put pressure on politicians and demand justice, and to make suggestions and initiatives to pave the way for change. In cooperation with the Tenants Organizing conference, held in Stockholm earlier the same week, housing activists from Canada, Chile, and Spain helped place local housing justice struggles in an international perspective. The meeting lasted a weekend and was held in two parts of the city to stress the connection between several ongoing local struggles. For the first time, the president of the Union of Tenants participated; her speech, and the displeasure it elicited in many participants, exposed the wide gap in analysis and methods between the new movement and the older ‘white collar’ organization. According to the Union of Tenants, the cure for the identified housing problems seemed to be ‘more reports, more lobbying and better recruitment of members’. Housing Roar participants questioned this, proposing a more confrontational approach: raising the importance of lifting local struggles to the national level; politicizing the housing crisis from a tenant perspective; and ‘taking to the streets’. Participants also discussed rent strikes, a method used a hundred years ago by the Union of Tenants, as well as using media attention to create ‘ill will’ toward landlords using dirty renoeviction tactics (for a description of these tactics, see Polanska et al., 2019, and Westin, 2011). Scholar-activism was described as a way to fit words and contexts to tenant experiences and to share practices between different places.

Housing Roar has become an arena where tenants and academics from different cities can connect to share experiences and develop strategies. New ways of organizing housing, reacting to landlord attempts to increase rents, and fighting racism and gentrification more broadly are topics discussed during Housing Roar meetings.

### **‘Everybody Should be Able to Stay Put’**

According to one of its founders and as the organization’s name suggests, Alla-ska-kunna-bo-kvar (ASKBK, i.e., Everybody Should be Able to Stay Put) focuses on threats of renoeviction. The organization was founded at the end of the renoeviction actions in the Pennygängen housing estate in Gothenburg. Although the Pennygängen struggles succeeded in considerably lowering the rent increases from those announced by the landlord at the beginning of the renovation process (from 70 per cent to 14 per cent), some activists, frustrated by the difficulties experienced during the negotiations, decided to start a national organization to continue empowering tenants. The scope also became much broader, as ASKBK comprised people from various cities and neighborhoods subjected to urban renewal. The organization’s goal is now to achieve renovation without eviction: Everybody should be able to stay put!

Everyone should be able to stay means that every renovation of rental housing must include a basic option with a 0 SEK rent increase. The basic option will mean that the apartment is maintained and renovated to a workable standard without a rent increase. This is how we can ensure that everyone can stay put (ASKBK website).

In their actions, the activists from this organization emphasize working toward the goal that nobody need undergo anger, uncertainty, and humiliation in connection with housing. Their experiences of being denied housing dignity were used to form resistance. Many activists in the organization (in fact both of the representatives interviewed in 2017) are no longer fighting for ‘their own’ interests, since the renovation processes in their neighborhoods are finished. One experienced quite a successful outcome while the other ended in ‘total failure’, as they put it. Yet both continue to fight, they explained, for the right of potential new renoviction victims elsewhere to be treated with dignity. Sharing their knowledge and strategies is at the heart of the organization.

Among the notable activities arranged by this organization are seminars at both national and local levels, attempting to mobilize against renoviction and improve the ability of tenants to more effectively pressure politicians and landlords to ensure renovations without evictions. They also undertake outreach through social media, including a series of radio podcasts. Although ASKBK’s specific demands concern housing justice, there is increasing awareness of how this relates to broader engagement with issues impacting the future of residential areas and cities. Literature on dignity and health has stressed that when people feel neglected, ignored, and insecure about their housing, it can affect their health and well-being. (Baeten et al., 2016; Desmond, 2016; Fullilove, 2016; Hern, 2016; Mauritz, 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019). When experienced, this lack of dignity does not just affect individual households. This was clarified in a recent ASKBK national meeting in Uppsala in January 2017 via the slogan ‘Their buildings, our homes’, the power relations underlying the concepts of homeownership and private property are being revealed. Dignity in housing concerns the role of tenure on the neoliberal housing market, as renters are subjected to the arbitrariness of the land owner. A similar problematization of the ideological normalization of homeownership as opposed to rental housing has recently attracted the interest of geographers (Ronald, 2008; Smith, 2015).

Key themes in the Uppsala conference reflected the shift toward social justice understood more broadly, including not only ‘renoviction’ but also, as in Housing Roar’s last meeting, the privatization of the commons, i.e., rental housing and public spaces. To further illustrate, a representative of the residential area of Husby, a Million Program housing area in northwest Stockholm, criticized the venture capital real estate company Blackstone’s acquisition of some dwellings in Husby. Originally built in 1972-1977, mainly by the public housing company Svenska Bostäder, Stockholm had already sold parts of the Husby residential area by the 1990s to various private real estate companies. Blackstone was the eighth private owner since the initial sale, having acquired 1500 dwellings in Husby in 2016 from the former owner Carnegie (now known as Hembla in Sweden), another global real estate company. Currently one of the major real estate venture capital company, Blackstone rapidly expanded its Swedish assets after this 2016 entry into the Swedish market. Then in

September 2019, Blackstone suddenly sold their properties, amounting to 21,400 apartments in big as well as mid-sized city regions, to the German-based company Vonovia. This sale occurred quickly without previous notice to the tenants, earning SEK 6 billion in profits for Blackstone.

The discussion turned rapidly to the injustice of having profit-oriented companies in charge of rental housing and urban renewal, and to the problems of the neoliberal housing regime more generally. Participant testimonies and the debates they generated exemplified a phenomenon observed earlier in Stockholm and Uppsala regarding the self-training and skill development of tenants resisting renoviction. Despite generally being amateurs, tenants in these areas had become experts in a wide variety of topics such as law and regulations, negotiation, and political economy, as well as researchers into the real estate companies they were (and are) negotiating with (Westin, 2011). The range of both broad and specialised expertise that local anti-renoviction groups needed in order to be effective could theoretically be provided by Union of Tenants officials. Unfortunately, distrust of the Union had developed and its degree of commitment to the real challenges of tenants disputed. ASKBK has not attempted to attract the attention of the mass media, but rather disseminates news and ideas on its own through reports, pamphlets, Facebook groups, alliances with other organizations, and a self-produced radio program called Pennypodden, featuring interviews with researchers, politicians, civil servants, and activists. A main focus of the organization is exchanging experience, creating awareness, spreading information about tenants' rights, and arranging meetings and workshops to support local organization in neighborhoods threatened by renoviction. Some of these actions are taken in connection with Housing Roar events, but ASKBK also organizes its own meetings. In panels, people share experiences and worries, and through such meetings individuals' fears of being unable to pay increased rent become a collective struggle for justice and dignity in housing.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have presented examples of how new grassroots movements addressing housing, in particular renoviction, can be conceptualized as claiming dignity for people facing housing precarity. People involved in these movements are of all ages, frequently elderly, and of various backgrounds. Several people we met at the observed meetings did not identify as 'activists', but when their housing was threatened—often where they had lived for decades—they did not want to be passive. These movements have created awareness of how the housing market works in the contemporary neoliberal global economy. The movements coalesced around tenants' experiences of articulating tactics to resist rent increases. Scholars act as partners in contextualizing, reporting, and documenting such processes, as housing markets in general are rather difficult to grasp. Here, critical housing research can be useful in conceptualizing and framing both strategies and experiences and in forming alternatives.

As in the case of tenant movements of the early 20th century, housing issues today are embedded in societal issues broader than just having a place in which to dwell. Just as housing

cannot be understood in isolation from the (global) economy, social relations, access to public spaces, and other structural factors (Smith, 2015), those resisting housing shortage and displacement processes tend to understand their struggle as concerning more than just access to dwellings. Housing activists are also fighting racism, anti-migration politics, stigmatization, neoliberal politics, and the increased privatization of public space. By focusing on resistance and dignity, this article shows how housing activists, through their organization and strategies, elaborate not only on housing justice, but also on social justice and the creation of dignity in housing to counteract housing insecurity and stress. Furthermore, the housing resistance movement encompasses people of diverse ages and origins, and extends beyond specific neighborhoods or cities, thereby building a potential basis for broader societal change. It continues to unite mostly urban suburbs across cities, as did the housing movement of the early 20th century. The inclusion of civic rights for refugees and EU migrants and of anti-racist causes in the housing movement's struggle further illustrates how even national borders are transgressed by the solidarity arising from the fight for affordable housing. This reminds us of the words of Madden and Marcuse reflecting on what is needed to get out of the current housing crisis:

The way forward is to acknowledge the limits of formal right to housing under the current legal and political system while at the same time pressing for a sufficiently broad, activist conception of those rights. Only with such an approach can a right to housing be used to challenge to [sic] residential commodification, alienation, oppression, and inequality today. (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 194)

More specifically, struggles against the neoliberal order in cities around the world are increasingly adopting anti-racist and anti-colonialist struggles, and researchers are becoming more sensitive to merging the struggles for housing justice and societal change through diverse forms of collaboration with activism (Masuda et al., 2019; Roy, 2017). Many of today's urban social movements are contributing to the decolonization of this field of academic studies. Moreover, Swedish housing activists are beginning to think of new and more independent affordable housing alternatives than those offered by the current marketized system of housing provision. Such alternatives include cooperative or collective housing and self-built production.

Another important aspect of current housing struggles in Sweden is that all observed struggles are connecting and supporting one another. It could well be that merging these initiatives could build a bigger and stronger national movement for housing justice in coming years. The neglected maintenance, reinforced territorial stigmatization, and threats of displacement due to increased rents have all contributed to this growing local resistance among residents. Authorities often assume that people living in poor areas are incapable of forming and participating in active and productive communities (Listerborn, 2013), despite numerous examples to the contrary (de los Reyes & Hörnqvist, 2017; Sernhede et al., 2019).

By focusing on resistance and claims and cries for dignity, we have illustrated how processes of displacement and housing shortage affect everyday experiences and understandings of neoliberalism and social injustice. The consequences of neoliberal housing policies have severely impacted people's housing options and sense of dignity. 'Homeplaces'

(hooks, 1991) as a source of dignity, agency, and solidarity are places where resistance can be organized and conceptualized. The private sphere has also transgressed into the public, as private investors have increasingly claimed shared common spaces. The organizations presented here have mobilized and involved groups that were previously inactive. When homes are subjected to pressure or threats, new resistance emerges. Dignity, referring to self-respect or appreciation, concerns issues of ethics, justice, and health, and in this article is related to places created, claimed, defended, and used (strategically or tactically) in an inclusive manner. Dignity is an important counterpoint to neoliberal urban development and its encroachment on our private spheres. With a focus on resistance in relation to the housing market, people's everyday struggles as well as their hopes, dreams, and suggestions for a new and just housing system are revealed.

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