



Special issue introduction On Activist*scholarship

Edited by

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In the last issue of the *Radical Housing Journal*, we presented some reflections on housing activism and urban research that emerged from a conference held at Harvard University in September 2019, aimed at joining forces to develop new tools for urban activism (Portelli & Tschoepe, 2020). The conference “Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City” gathered activists and engaged scholars from different parts of the world, with the aim to create a collective discourse on how critical urban research and urban political activism shall converge, bringing changes to the way we consider our involvement in academic institutions and social struggles alike. The article published following the event tied together the various contributions of the participants, suggesting that universities should take a decided role in the global movement for housing justice. We claimed that scholars should leave aside a scientifically untenable presumption of “objectivity,” and formalize enduring forms of support to local networks and collectives engaged in the defense of communities. We used the phrase “activist*scholarship”: the asterisk opens to multiple emphasis and interpretations of both terms, highlighting how both activism and scholarship do not fall into neat categories, and may take different forms. Activist*scholars are engaged within struggles and do not study them from outside or above; knowledge and experience complement each other, and both spaces are constantly in the making, unmaking and remaking.

In our reflection, we suggested three lines of action for activist*scholarship, from the simplest to the most utopian. As a starting point, university departments and professors can grow individual forms of engagement into permanent connections with collectives in defense of housing, providing training and service-learning opportunities for students to manifest enduring forms of work with organizations dedicated to urban justice. An example we

quoted was the cooperation between one of the collective participants in our conference, the organization City Life / Vida Urbana, with Harvard's Law Clinic service, which offered assistance to tenants suffering threat of eviction in Boston. As a second step, we proposed that universities engage in political pressures to make research on the social impact of projects a compulsory requirement for the independent monitoring of public policies. Forms of social impact assessment, similar to the Brazilian notion of *laudo antropológico*, would make it harder for investors to promote projects that entail displacement or other forms of social damage, thus stimulating communities to voice their analysis on the negative consequences of projects that affect them—either through quantitative data or narratives of displacement (see Pull et al., 2020). The third step we proposed was the envisaging of a broader redefinition of the relationships between communities and the state. The global demands to overcome the constraints of institutional orders designed in the 18th and the 19th centuries, now universally emmeshed to the private interests of local and global cliques, should materialize in the elaboration of a new social contract: a new pact between the different sectors of the population. This would no longer entail the subordination of local communities to a centralized—thus seizable—nation-state, but rather create forms of local power able to negotiate grassroot-driven ways of integration with other communities and with the environment. Activist*scholars are in the position of designing such a new global frame.

During the intense year of crisis and struggle that followed the 2019 Harvard conference, we remained in touch with the participants in the event. As the distancing measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 physically kept us apart, each in our corner of the world, news arriving informally from our new comrades in other continents helped us to more connectedly frame a paralyzing new global scenario. We invited them to contribute to this special issue, having in mind that a collective understanding and coordinated action is more than ever our only chance of overcoming the impasse of the present crisis.

The promises that came together with the global halt of mobility and of part of production and consumption faded everywhere into a reality of unprecedented impoverishment and retaliation of rights for the most vulnerable, and of unprecedented accumulation of wealth for the most privileged, with inequalities, intersectional differences and spatial injustice amplified. Covid-19 led to massive dispossessions of land and housing, the increasing commodification and financialization of housing, the subordination of public powers to corporate interests, and the almost universal legitimization of police and institutional violence. Measures of control imposed upon different communities and sectors of the population revealed how various forms of implicit bias and discrimination intersect in terms of class, citizenship, race, color, ethnicity, gender, ability, and age, while the invasion of emergency talk and alarming bodycounts in the public sphere made all these inequalities even more invisible. Increasing injustice fueled protests in many local contexts; these were made most visible in the USA, however, protests everywhere had to face the multiple physical and ideological constraints of the pandemic. While new or existing networks of solidarity contributed to preventing greater damage, the transformations of spaces, bodily practices, and infrastructures of sociality made evident that a return to the “old normalcy” was impossible. The collection of essays we present here are also a witness to the variety of

contexts and of coping strategies through which activist*scholars around the world try to come to terms with this global reality.

Among the reflections that the pandemic called into question has been the way urban commons should be reconceptualized according to emergent discussions on density and distancing, as well as the centrality of home, housing and neighborhood during the pandemic (Hooper, 2020; Forsyth, 2020; Reyes et al., 2020). The global shift towards working at home (for members of upper and middle classes) has brought and legitimized urban transformations and new perceptions of the city; the “shelter in place” strategy brought a new general recognition of home as a guarantee of health, and, ultimately, of life itself. These challenges have needed attention: not all homes can accommodate work at home, for spatial constraints or care work. Not all work can be taken home, so the places of work need to be safe. Many who lost work during the pandemic have been concerned about losing their homes. And first and foremost, many who have required care and support have not had (safe) homes in the first place.

Neighborhoods also took on a crucial role during this time, particularly for people whose home situation is precarious or non-existent. The open spaces in the neighborhood, for many, have constituted the only breathing spaces in times of crisis in the proximity of homes that were inadequate to provide healthy, safe spaces. Local solidarity networks have been life savers for the most vulnerable, who often remain invisible from official discourse. The impact of the crisis requires critical reflection upon how spaces, bodies, artifacts are reconceptualized and produced in time of crisis, and upon how the experience of crisis will expand our socio-cultural repertoire and contribute to new forms of sociality. As such, one should not overlook the fact that the pandemic remains an intersectional issue, and take into consideration the lives and perspectives of those, for example, who remain invisible to official discourse while nevertheless being forced to expose their bodies to risks of contagion: for instance, workers who keep the cities clean and deal with the leftovers of contagion (Tschoepe, 2019).

In reaching out to the participants at the Harvard conference to prepare this special issue, we looked back to the shifting social and spatial realities of this first pandemic year, trying to grasp how it affected struggles on housing and the production of knowledge about the city in different contexts. Not all contributors chose to focus their texts on the effects of Covid-19; yet the pandemic situation seems to be one of the many constraints that activist*scholars are facing in these times. In order to stimulate dialogue among different contexts, we proposed to the participants to work in tandem; some accepted this proposal of collaborative writing, others preferred to write individual contributions - also reflecting the concerning decrease of time for collaborative work that many of us experienced, precisely as the intrusiveness of digital social media in our everyday life was perceived as overwhelming. Nevertheless, the contributions present an enlightening array of reflections on the difficulties and possibilities of activist*scholarship in times of struggle.

We open this issue with Welita Caetano's account of her transformation into an activist and popular educator for housing rights in São Paulo, Brazil. As the daughter of a Black peasant farmer who migrated to the city in the 1990s, she recalls the hardship of being a homeless living in shelters, and how squatting one of the 55 empty buildings of the city that were turned into housing for homeless families provided her access to a decent life, education, political consciousness, ultimately happiness. This transformation of impoverished people into housing activists keeps happening everywhere; the voices of these people must lead the direction of academic discourse on society.

The second article is a collaboration between the members of the two US anti-eviction organizations that were involved in the Harvard conference: City Life / Vida Urbana (CLVU) in the Boston area, and Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP) based in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York City, and Los Angeles. Members of the two groups reflect here on their different approach to knowledge production towards the common aim of creating housing justice in their local contexts. The AEMP formed shortly after the mortgage crisis of 2008 and amidst the Bay Area's second Dot Com Boom to produce web-based maps of evictions, oral history and video-based media, and other digital tools—such as collections of narratives of eviction—that help communities to understand the devastating effects of evictions, and to identify the real estate speculators and landlords behind them. City Life / Vida Urbana has been doing a similar job of empowering communities and individuals to recognize the extent and chain of responsibility of the evictions they suffer. They have been active since 1969, building a strong base of tenant organizing in Boston. The comparison between these two accounts is extremely interesting from various perspectives as it enriches our understanding of activist*scholarship as a practice.

Next is a contribution from Dominic Timothy Moulden, a former organizer for Washington DC's ONE - Organizing Neighborhood Equity, who brought to the Harvard conference a powerful description of how knowledge production was considered an integral part of activism for housing and neighborhood rights in his former organization. In the article included here, Moulden describes something that goes very much in the direction of our second proposal: the idea of submitting urban policies to social impact assessment. Seen from the grassroots, he says, "gentrification is a crime," whether it takes place in the District of Columbia, where 40,000 Black residents were forced out of the city over the last twenty years, or in Brazil or South Africa, as accounted by other participants at the Harvard conference. Given the evidence of these "acts of conscious violence that cause the loss of homes for people living in neglected public and subsidized housing, underfunded neighborhoods that then become ripe for demolition and redevelopment" (Moulden, this volume), it is surprising that academic literature still flourishes with examples negating gentrification. The acknowledgment of the criminal and racist nature of these urban policies will not be surfaced through scholarship unless embedded into a global campaign of housing justice led by community researchers. Moulden proposes two fundamental tools of neighborhood organization: the establishment of "eviction free zones," and the creation of community research centers.

Moulden's position is the logical consequence of the powerful description of the human impact of gentrification and urban displacement as a disruptive "root shock" for individuals and communities, employing an analytic developed by Mindy Fullilove (2004), a medical doctor and professor of Urban Policy and Health at The New School in NYC, also a participant in the Harvard conference. In the final discussion that she chaired there, Fullilove explained how community and the protection from displacement ultimately are a defense for public and individual health and wellbeing—something that proves even more crucial with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Her contribution follows Moulden's text as she builds on the story of her father, Ernest Thompson, an African American labor rights organizer in the 1960s. Through this, she reflects on the role of working-class intellectuals—a term she prefers over "scholar-activist." Working-class intellectuals help to locate people in the struggle and provide tools to build large coalitions, the only ways towards establishing socially transformative projects. 'Though Fullilove prefers to take a distance from 'scholar-activism' in its university-centric form, thus far from the tradition her father was a part of, we consider that the experiences described in her text resonate with the practices and political approaches we include in the term 'activist*scholarship'. The broad, fluid set of practices we are trying to define here includes a variety of identities engaged in research and action, through closeness or belonging to communities and struggles; the definitions employed, however, may vary according to the context.

The fifth contribution in our special issue is a conversation between Loretta Lees, urban geographer and Professor at the University of Leicester, and Michael Herzfeld, anthropologist and Professor at Harvard University (among other affiliations): two scholars of gentrification and spatial transformations, who discuss here their different perspectives on engaged research and activist*scholarship. They share a strong critique of "objectivity" as an added value in research, and defend this position in different forms of "theoretical practice" (Herzfeld, 2001). The two authors provide examples of how to hold an academic stance and maintain institutional privilege while actively contributing to struggles for housing and against displacement, and how to turn their political commitment with the communities they worked with into productive contributions to the understanding of society and of political action.

The closing text is an interview we held with Stavros Stavrides, architect, activist and scholar of the urban commons (see Stavrides, 2020), and Professor at the National Technical University of Athens. Stavrides reflects on how the pandemic influenced the use and perception of space, both in the private spaces of confinement, and in the public spaces which people are gradually reclaiming. Among the outcomes of the pandemic is certainly an increased awareness of the importance of spaces such as streets and squares, and of non-capitalist forms of approach to a spatial "threshold," spaces that are neither private nor public, gateways to forms of sociability that transcend the usual order of production and consumption. These considerations offer a positive counterpoint to the many elaborations that prove how Covid-19 has incremented pre-existing inequalities in the access to space, especially along racial, gendered, and class lines (e.g. Marcús et al., 2021; Mansilla, 2020),

opening thought-provoking perspectives on the transformative power of the pandemic situation.

A few months before the Harvard conference, another conference took place in the other hemisphere where a group of researchers called by the Catalan geography journal *Scripta Nova* gathered at the University of Santiago de Chile to reflected upon how the “Real Estate Financial Complex” was taking hold of urban properties in Latin America (see Aalbers, 2011; López Morales & Gasic, 2021; Rolnik, 2015). Their analysis, developed before the pandemic but published after it began, helps to frame the frantic year of 2020 not only as a time of global health crisis, but also as a moment of exceptional accumulation of assets for transnational corporations through the worldwide dispossession of land and housing. The staggering rise in unemployment caused by the pandemic drew millions of people into housing precariousness and debt, while preparing the injection of massive new amounts of funds into the financial markets. The combination of the two factors paves the way for a new wave of dispossession, which entails evictions or threats of eviction in every corner of the world. Covid-19 seems to be globalizing the effects of the crisis of 2008, extending and making visible the same process of financialisation that fueled the housing catastrophe in the US, now quickly spreading to cities of all continents.

The example of Latin America has been echoed in Europe, as corporate real estate giants are acquiring enormous amounts of properties and placing their representatives in key institutional positions to direct new public funds. The most blatant example is probably the appointment as prime minister of Italy of MIT-trained Professor Mario Draghi, a former vice chairman of the private equity fund Goldman Sachs (who fostered the quasi-complete privatization of Italian national industry in the 1990s, and who played a major role in the Greek debt crisis of the 2000s, in both cases granting remarkable profit for the equity fund (Tooze, 2021). Calls from European institutions for local governments to enforce housing rights (for instance the 2187 EU Initiative Report on Access to Decent and Affordable Housing for All, approved on 11 March, 2021) conceal the intentional promotion of real estate accumulation by private investors through public resources. An example is the EU-funded “bad bank” SAREB in Spain and Catalonia, for instance, probably one of the most financialized housing markets in Southern Europe (Gabarre, 2018). Yet the dispossession of housing promoted by hedge funds was not stopped by the pandemic, and an average of forty eviction attempts took place each day between October 2020 and the spring of 2021. Many of these have been blocked by Tenant Unions (*Sindicat de Llogateres, Sindicatos de Inquilinas*).

From the grassroots, in fact, the Covid-19 crisis has also impacted transnational struggles. No previous event produced such a generalized awareness of the interconnection among very different parts of the world and the mutual embeddedness of what we are used to consider different domains of action—environment, health, mobility, urban density, racial segregation. The 2020 “sheltering in place” measures and the widespread mistrust of the institutional management of the pandemic almost everywhere produced a global longing for independent information and new networks of research and action. An example is what happened at the beginning of spring 2021 in Europe, when the European Housing Coalition called for a “Housing Action Day,” which galvanized organizations of at least sixty cities all

over the continent.¹ Protesters belonged to well established and recently formed organizations for urban justice alike,² as well as migrant solidarity movements, anarchist or students' organizations, networks of squatters, political parties such as Varoufakis's Diem25.³ Many of these grassroots collectives focus on research and production of knowledge as an axis of political action. For example, the Italian Rent Strike movement promoted a conference on housing in Rome, Spanish and Catalan Tenant Unions study the market penetration of private equity funds who evict residents (see Janoschka et al., 2020), and the new RentVolutionEU network set up a "data group" to gather informations on the concentration of housing across Europe.

This endeavor for independent production of knowledge and grassroots coalitions is perfectly in line with the proposals that emerged from our Harvard conference in 2019. As a global crisis forces us to take sides along a polarization more evident than ever, between a market/state complex increasingly entrenched in defense of the interests of few thousands ultra-rich, and a gigantic world network of community-driven organizations reclaiming housing, land, labor and the environment as key means of reproduction, production and survival for all, we see the present moment also as an opportunity for awareness and necessary change. Among other urgent items on the collective agenda, this is a crucial time to redefine how we want to produce scientific knowledge in/about society. Individual researchers, scholars and academic groups join protests for housing, often studying and describing them in collaboration with communities and activists, thus creating invaluable trans-disciplinary knowledge on both the strategies of dispossession and on the reconstruction of communities after evictions. Academic institutions, however, are rarely present here.

Which side are universities on? We believe it is time to open a debate about this. Scholarship can either play into the hands and be appropriated by oppressive forces, or work to develop new emancipatory tools as a means of support to the struggles of the oppressed. Energies and resources, inside the academia, should be devoted to forms of scholarship, action and research whose proponents already made the choice of standing on the side of

¹ Two thousand people marched in Lisbon, Marseille, and Berlin, three hundred homeless people occupied empty buildings in Paris, large demonstrations took place in Brussels and Lyon, an eviction was blocked in Rome, tear gas was used against demonstrators in Nantes, a protest against auctions took place in Athens, a building was squatted in Köln; banners were dropped in Budapest and Venice, flash mobs and protests took place in Hamburg, Potsdam, Beograd, Amsterdam, Toulouse, Stuttgart, Nicosia, Palma de Mallorca, Luxemburg, while online events for housing were streamed from Scotland, Romania, Sweden. Other demonstrations that same day are reported in Aachen, Bochum, Bordeaux, Cannes, Darmstadt, Den Haag, Dunkerque, Dusseldorf, Esslingen, Frankfurt, Freiburg, Grenoble, Hannover, Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Lille, Limoges, Löbtau, Milan, Marburg, Mulhouse, Munchen, Nancy, Nantes, Nimes, Nice, Nuremberg, Parma, Poitiers, Poznan, Prague, Regensburg, Rennes, Rouen, Sète, Tübingen, Winthertur, Witten. A complete list is found on <https://housingnotprofit.org/>.

² Such as the French "Droit au logement", the German "Recht auf Stadt" and "Mietenwahnsinn", the Spanish "Plataforma Afectados por las Hipotecas", the Italian "Associazione Inquilini e Assegnatari" (ASIA-USB), but also movements such as the Yellow Vests and the Extinction Rebellion radical ecology network

³ Some of the groups that integrate the coalition: "Droit au logement" (DAL) in France and Belgium, "Just Space" and the "Radical Housing Network" in England, "Living Rent" in Scotland, "Habita" in Lisbon, and other organizations in Germany, Romania, Cyprus, Ireland, Serbia, Poland, Czech Republic, Spain, Sweden, and Croatia.

the evicted, the homeless, the squatters, the favelados, those discriminated against, those who risk to lose or already lost their land, their house, their job, people, or their health: producing what we called activist*scholarship. It is equally crucial to take a stance, as Moulden does in this issue, against research that can contribute to global injustices that border on, or cross to, criminality—such as housing dispossession, gentrification, and displacement.

We hope that the contributions included in this issue can offer inspiration and further arguments for those involved and/or supporting the struggles for urban justice, and also offer insights to help to make a critical reflective decision for those who are in doubt.

About the Editors

Stefano Portelli is a cultural anthropologist who has developed field research in the cities of Managua, Barcelona, Rome and Casablanca, focusing on the social effects of development-driven displacement and planned demolitions. He is an editor for the Italian website Napoli Monitor (<https://napolimonitor.it>) and for the independent journal *Lo stato delle città*. He coordinated the initiative Repensar Bonpastor, aimed at providing alternatives to the demolition of a working-class neighborhood in Barcelona, and wrote the book *La ciudad horizontal* on the social impact of the demolition. He recently completed a Marie-Curie fellowship at the University of Leicester's Department of Geography, working on the effects of gentrification and displacement on folk religion in the city of Casablanca.

Aylin Y. Tschoepe is an anthropologist, urbanist, and architect. Aylin's transdisciplinary work is centered around inclusionary urban practices, entanglements of human and non-human actors and their body-spatial relations, and communities that negotiate belonging to the city over collaboratively produced artifacts. Committed to feminist pedagogy, Aylin takes a situated and inquiry-based approach, and strives to deconstruct hierarchies when it comes to knowledge in the study and practice of the urban.

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