



Editorial: Lived realities versus state rationalities: Mobilizing within and against housing injustices

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Abstract

The contributions in this issue of the *Radical Housing Journal* evidence the historical and contemporary evolution of struggles against structural pressures impacting housing and everyday precarity, as well as mobilizing efforts based on particular local, gained or ancestral knowledge. We outline four main themes emerging in the articles featured in this issue, all situated *both within and against* the lived realities of housing injustices. We hope this issue triggers analyses, questions, approaches and praxis for housing activists, researchers and practitioners everywhere to continue to imagine and co-produce transitions that move beyond our current realities to those founded on true security and justice.

Introduction

While the Covid pandemic and its aftermath have laid bare the way in which multiple crises coincide and get reproduced as ‘normality’ (see [Issue 4.1 editorial](#)), the current structural pressures impacting housing and everyday precarity have been decades, if not centuries, in the making. At times, opposition to these realities has been limited or even absent, but organizing and mobilizing efforts are increasingly emerging to underscore personal and collective struggles, to push back against the status quo and commodification processes and to reimagine inhabitation forms and futures. Since our first issue in 2019, the *Radical Housing Journal* has sought to feature these dissenting trends. Similarly, the contributions in this issue evidence some of the historical and contemporary evolution of these struggles, and raise important questions for housing activists and scholars to reflect upon in order to possibly reframe some of our work while continuing to challenge current

housing conditions. While previous issues have centered on global South experiences (see [Issue 3.1](#)), issue 4.2 draws more heavily—though not exclusively—from the global North and collective hardships that drive the housing struggles of various grassroots experiences. From Canada, the US and Colombia to Spain, India, the UK and Germany, the pieces in this issue all include instances of practices that aim to alleviate precarious housing and socioeconomic realities.

Across the global North and South, we see monotonous regularities in the way housing systems operate. Property relations are often negotiated, and dominated, by private and political elites benefiting from their dictates around ‘desirable’ housing and urban forms, as well as from the criminalization of any and all disruptions to the status quo. For instance, the privatization, marketization and financialization of social and low-income housing severely constrain efforts to uphold housing justice, access, rights and needs. State rationalities reproducing housing insecurity and displacement are also often contradictory and violent. They tend to draw on narratives and banners of urban order, legality, homogenization, discipline or conservation in order to shadow or even cover up the histories, lived realities and experiences of entire communities. There is, at the same time, a remaking and normalization of housing ‘crises’ that inevitably leads to our individual and collective exhaustion (see, for example, our [Issue 3.2 editorial](#)). Yet, despite these concerning trends, we have also witnessed over the past years continued contestations in the face of crises and alternative frameworks or conceptualizations of housing normativities.

Some of the authors of issue 4.2 focus on such reframings, as well as on mobilizing efforts based on particular local, gained or ancestral knowledge. These authors argue for different communal understandings of housing and home that elevate the voices of dispossessed and devalued lives. Their emphasis on lived housing realities is not only about making the invisible more visible, or generating more research, but also—crucially—about foregrounding different methodologies (e.g., cross-sector, collaborative) that can hopefully shift such realities in productive ways. By centering individual pathways, some of the pieces also do the important work of valorizing the personal in the/as political, reminding us of the dynamic links that always exist between unique life trajectories and collective struggles.

Another important analytical thread raised through some of the articles relates to how housing injustices are, of course, never independent of their wider socio-economic contexts and therefore connected to other, intersecting struggles for justice both in the present and the past, for example around labor, war or immigration. Recognizing these connections promotes solidarities, encounters and collaborations across different groups, projects, communities and urban dwellers. Coalitions that confront the typical siloed apparatus of government thinking are gaining momentum, addressing pressing issues despite significant roadblocks. Instead of promoting consensus or normative paradigms, these spaces of cross-sector interaction are encouraging dissent and counter-narratives, as well as alternative, autonomous and community-led housing initiatives.

The lines of inquiry above, highlighted to differing degrees by authors in this issue, reflect a growing attention in analysis and practice to the cleavages, fissures and connections that lie between what could be called (albeit reductively) institutional ‘top-down’ injustices

and grassroots ‘bottom-up’ responses in times of a global escalation of coinciding economic, health and social crises. It is our hope that these frameworks, situated *both within and against* the lived realities of housing injustices, may mobilize analyses, questions, approaches and praxis through a kind of productive liminality. The *Radical Housing Journal* will continue to foreground work that pays attention to the multiple ‘in between’ spaces triggering transformations in housing, allowing housing activists, researchers and practitioners everywhere to continue to imagine and co-produce transitions that move beyond our current realities to those founded on true security and justice.

As we move forward in this task and present our eighth issue, we want to acknowledge that as a collective, the *Radical Housing Journal* has faced challenges in the past year due to the heart-breaking rhythms of the academic demands of early- and mid-career scholars to ‘succeed’, draining the energies poured into our project, the housing struggles many of us are engaged in, not to mention caring tasks and life. Collective reflection pointed to the urgent need for more minds and bodies to share our tasks, in order to provide more support and care among us, and to work with more space for reflection and joy. In this light we are very happy to welcome four new collective members—Derick, Judith, Aysegul and Melora—who have already jumped in to support copy editing this issue, alongside many other members of the RHJ collective. We are excited to continue our work together.

Historical framings to understand contemporary housing struggles

Imagining alternatives to the bleak housing inequalities of today demands that we revisit the past practices and struggles of inhabitation. Historicizing housing forces and relations allows for a more discerning reading of the current fluctuations and repetitions of particular social inequalities, relationalities, hierarchies and ideologies, as they variously inflect upon the shape of dwelling. Historical analysis also encourages practicality by helping us to see where we may be, unnecessarily, reinventing the wheel. The 4.2 issue includes two articles that employ historical framings to further contextualize and understand contemporary and ongoing struggles to housing access and urban inequality (see also Noorani et al.’s conversation and Chatterjee’s long read below).

Jaime Jover’s update titled ‘The Housing Question a Century and a Half Later: Notes from New York City’, employs this emblematic city as a case study to briefly revisit “the housing question”, 150 years after Engles’ classic piece. Jover starkly outlines the city’s housing emergency, and the material and narrative war underway about how to address the housing emergency and who is responsible. At the same time, he argues for the need to imagine ‘new futures that decommodify dwellings, challenge classic tenures, and overall reshape human-land relationships.’ Similarly, in one of two book reviews in this issue, **Joe Rees** discusses Brett Christopher’s book (2018, Verso) *The New Enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain*, which highlights the historical and current impacts of land privatization in the United Kingdom. Aligned with his other publications (before and since), Christopher challenges the purported benefits of privatization of land and housing in the UK by providing a detailed, archival account of how it has done so over the past four

decades. Rees considers how the chapter on council housing sell-offs in particular provides an important account of the way in which such policies have benefited the political elite of the country, who are also landlords. Important questions are also raised about the (lack of) opposition that has resulted from these historical moves in the UK.

State structures and precarious lived housing realities

At their core, the texts touching on these themes uncover the interactions between top-down state processes and a range of housing manifestations that either do not fit into the status quo or are often dismissed by planners and policy makers. In her long read titled ‘Tent encampments in Toronto, Canada: Excavating northern housing informalities’, **Allison Evans** explores the ambiguity of government regulations, policies, actions and protocols around unhoused populations and tent encampments, and illustrates how limited housing access and rehousing efforts in global North cities like Toronto reproduce cyclical patterns of informality. She argues that local actors, in particular, mediate and negotiate private and public property relations as well as other kinds of desirable formalities or forms of urban and housing informality. Evans’ work calls for the need to better understand housing and urban informalities in the global North, and to advocate for strategies that move away from criminalization. Like Evan’s work, **Sophia Ilyniak**’s long read, ‘Make-work methodology: Canadian homelessness research and its role in austerity,’ also focuses on the housing crisis in Toronto, Canada. Ilyniak examines the contradictions and limitations of research on housing and homelessness and argues that research on homelessness works within logics of state austerity, largely disregarding the deeper structural causes and role of the state in the production of homelessness. Using the concept of ‘make-work’, Ilyniak contends that these research practices and methods create a framework that leads to the reproduction of work for these same researchers rather than advancing any real solutions or change. Drawing on personal observations from the frontlines, the author illustrates some of the ways in which methodological decisions reinforce conditions, and argues instead for a commitment by researchers to use their work to challenge the many structural forces that limit housing access and produce homelessness.

In ‘No city for Khori Gaon residents: Forced eviction during a pandemic in the name of forest conservation’, architect, scholar and activist **Ishita Chatterjee** also examines the contentious relationship between the state and access to housing by historically marginalized communities. The author analyzes the use of conservation-led narratives by that state that are used to justify the displacement of residents. Chatterjee moves through the Supreme Court ordered displacement process to highlight the contradictions and falsehoods that ultimately lead to the destruction of the neighborhood of Khori Gaon. She illustrates that, despite the conservationist narrative which identifies residents as land-grabbers and encroachers, Khori Gaon is a 50 year old settlement with over 100,000 residents that was originally built on a post-quarry landscape. By situating forced eviction within the complex historical context of the forest, Chatterjee illustrates how the current legal discourse around informal settlements and bourgeois environmentalism is part of a broader strategy across India driving the displacement of the urban poor.

The tensions and conflicts produced through distinct narratives and forms of knowledge production employed by state actors over traditionally marginalized communities is also addressed in **Cheyenne Greyeyes** and **Celina M. Vipond's** article, 'What is home: Wisdom from *nêhiyawêwin*'. In this article, the authors challenge the traditional, colonizing notions of home and family propagated by the Canadian government through its assimilationist policies and agencies through an approach that prioritizes indigenous ways of knowing. They draw on *nêhiyawêwin* (Y-dialect Cree) lexicons, and women's central position within it, to develop a critical understanding of indigenous worldviews of fluid family structures, matriarchy, home and kinship systems. Finally, **Gillian Prater-Lee's** paper, titled, 'Beyond efficiency in low-income housing provision: Everyday negotiations of nonprofit staff and the limits to caring through marketized housing in Buffalo, New York, also addresses the constraints on housing access by state produced and supported market structures that restrict the role and advocacy work of housing NGOs. Prater-Lee argues that the marketization of low-income housing severely constrains NGOs' ability to both enact a politics of housing and to advocate for clients through an understanding of housing as a right or as a form of care. Despite these constraints, Prater-Lee draws on the literature that promotes a feminist care ethics to argue for a different, more just housing system that promotes communal and embodied understandings of housing provision.

Emergence and development of oppositional housing movements

A third set of articles in this issue expand on the dynamics between the role of the neoliberal state and those communities and organizations advocating for housing and rights, through research and case studies that provide different paradigms and frameworks to the current state-led capitalist structures in place. In their long read titled, 'Organizing for expropriation: How a tenants campaign convinced Berliners to vote for expropriating big landlords', authors **Lisa Vollmer** and **Daniel Gutiérrez** take a deep dive into the campaign Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co. They argue that impacts that social movements and organizing can have were exemplified last year when close to 60 percent of Berliners voted to expropriate big landlords and to socialize around 250,000 homes. Despite their celebratory tone, the authors are cautious to underline how such wins are contingent on multiple factors, such as the socioeconomic conditions driving mobilizations, the organizational structure and processes of social movements and sociopolitical conditions and debates. The complex interplay of these factors and their implications on political processes is exemplified through a thick description that revisits the campaign to Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co.

Moving between historical moments and across sectors and movements including labor struggles, the conversation between **Setareh Noorani**, **Katja Truijten** and **René Boer**—the organizers of a gathering in Rotterdam, Netherlands called 'Housing Futures: spatial strategies for alternative forms of living' in April 2022—invites us to think about how solidarities are not just bound to one city when it comes to housing. Instead, they discuss how events like 'Housing Futures', with roots in relation to growing global housing struggles, can also foster connection, discussion and mutual aid, as well as promoting relationships of trust. They specifically discuss squatting groups, existing communal living projects and new

experiments in the fields of cooperative housing as spaces and opportunities from which to ‘rekindle forms of solidarity with each other's struggles’. Much of their discussion centers around the value of archiving for housing movements, and asks us to imagine future events that build on particular historical momentum—whether this can happen in association with institutions and communities, or autonomously—and how resources continue to be a basic obstacle for further organizing work.

The conversation with organizers of the conference, you promised me a city, which took place in Hannover, Germany in June 2022 is another example of the possibilities for rethinking the ways in which we experience urban spaces and the socio-spatial solidarities that come from lived experiences and debate. The organizers, **Ivana Rohr** and **Robin Höning**, share their motivation and goals for a conference that was ‘designed to take place outside the standard convention center’ and instead be more of a ‘creative intervention throughout the city’. As such, the organizers worked alongside artists, urban planners and other urban dwellers to create a conference that moved through different urban spaces. The authors of the piece, **Judith Keller** and **Anne Morlock**, both participated in the conference and discussed the origins and objectives of the conference with its organizers. As the latter explain, ‘[W]e wanted to create dissonance instead of consensus’, proposing that it is through disagreement that we can move beyond the current status quo.

The final two pieces in this issue speaking to the emergence and development of oppositional housing movements come from experiences in Barcelona and connected beyond. In ‘Housing justice, mobilization, and financialization: A conversation from the Antipode Institute for Geographies of Justice’, authors **Rae Baker**, **Emanuele Belotti**, **Aysegul Can** and **Elsa Noterman** discuss the state and direction of housing justice movements in Glasgow, Berlin, New York and Barcelona with movement activists in Barcelona in June 2022. After the authors contextualize housing financialization and organizing housing justice, **Sonja Coquelin** from Scotland’s Living Rent, **Joanna Kusiak** from Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co and the University of Cambridge, **Jaime Palomera** from the Barcelona Tenants Union, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and La Hidra and **Samuel Stein** from the Community Service Society of New York share insights from their activism and organizing work. Catalonia, more specifically the Barcelona metropolitan area, is also the site of our second book review by **Maka Suárez**, on Melissa García Lamarca’s recently published book (2022, University of Georgia Press) entitled *Non-Performing Loans, Non-Performing People: Life and Struggle with Mortgage Debt in Spain*. As an anthropologist, Maka engages closely with García-Lamarca’s ethnographic approach to the political mobilization and everyday life of members/activists of La PAH, a grassroots movement for the right to housing in Spain. Against the context of financialized housing and normative housing ideologies, she emphasizes García Lamarca’s significant contribution to conceptualizations of mortgage debt as a disciplining force from a critical intersectional perspective. Suárez also emphasizes the book’s powerful account of housing organization and collective struggles against injustices.

Understanding collective inhabitation through personal trajectories

The articles falling under this last theme also build on earlier ones, but with greater emphasis on the microscale or personal trajectories of collective inhabitation. In the update by **Daniela Sanjinés** and **Natalia Quiñónez**, the question of alternative, autonomous housing initiatives is raised in the under-explored context of peace-building and reconciliation. Focusing on the establishment and maintenance of a mutual-aid housing cooperative by ex-combatants, the authors look at how reincorporation strategies of former guerilla fighters in post-conflict Colombia deal with the question of housing. Their emerging findings, part of their ongoing joint research endeavor in Colombia and El Salvador, suggest important mismatches between the micro (group) and macro (government) levels of action in negotiating ways forward, at the same time that the arena of housing cooperatives is gaining ground and political valence in a country where private homeownership is the norm.

In **Claude Hendrickson's** account of the development of community-led housing in the UK (part of a conversation for **Melissa Fernandez's** [MICOLL](#) project), we clearly see how dominant, colonizing perspectives on housing operate in ways that have hastily erased and devalued local immigrant knowledge and skills. We learn about how Caribbean migrants' working lives *before* coming to the UK—and the skills and knowledge they brought in relation to housebuilding—were sidelined by government policies that instead pigeonholed them into inadequate work, or rendered them jobless. Claude emphasizes the ways in which migrant trajectories and experiences in housing *and* employment are fundamental to non-siloed thinking about the future of community-led homes. He speaks to the experiences of discrimination and racism faced by migrants and UK citizens, and which were directly associated to the emergence of Black Housing Associations in the early 1980s. While Claude is wary of the renewed hostile environment towards immigrants in contemporary UK, and its likeness to past historical trends, he also expresses hope for the Community-Led Housing sector as a space that can address social issues, with and beyond housing.

The importance of understanding personal trajectories and local lived realities is once again underlined in the long read by **Brian Doucet, Faryal Diwan, William Turman, Neelu Mehta** and **Aleksandra Petrovic** titled 'Mapping displacement through lived experiences: Countermapping transit-induced gentrification in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario'. As Canada's Kitchener-Waterloo region is undergoing rapid tech- and infrastructure-led growth, Doucet and authors make visible the lived experiences of precarious residents affected by displacement and gentrification and the destruction of already existing affordable housing. Written by academic and non-academic researchers collaborating on a larger counter mapping and oral history project, the counter-narrative they produce amplifies the knowledge and lived experiences of those living through these processes and seeks to center their perspectives within planning, policy and political debates.

Moving from Colombia, the UK and Canada, the last text we highlight here is an update from Europe about the Ukrainian refugee crisis, almost a year since the start of the war and the humanitarian crisis it triggered. 'Refugee migration from Ukraine to other parts of Europe: Challenges to the housing-integration intersection at the city level' provides some insights from the housing experiences of receiving cities in Austria, Latvia, Sweden and

Germany. The team of eleven authors, all **researchers from the ongoing HOUSE-IN project**, share initial reflections from a series of international exchanges in May and September 2022. They discuss the challenge of the housing-integration nexus, defined as ‘the complex interdependencies between access to housing, the residential environment, the process of settling and belonging as well as forms of social encounters and support enabling people to settle’. They highlight the experiences of refugees from Ukraine through this framing, with particular focus on the strong roles of non-state actors within a context of broad societal support, as well as the downside of persisting patterns of discrimination and racism in the studied cities.

We hope you enjoy—and are inspired by—this eighth issue of the *Radical Housing Journal*.

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