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## EDITORIAL

# Housing Crisis and Social Mobilization in times of COVID-19

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## 1. Introduction

The ‘housing crisis’ has become common sense. While we stand with the likes of Engels in reminding that, for some classes and social groups, housing crises are the historical normal, it would be hard denying that the housing crisis is particularly intense in the present conjuncture. The long wave of neoliberalization, the becoming central of real estate and housing for financialization writ large, the socio-economic impacts of the global financial and economic crisis of the late 2000s and following austerity policies, and, finally, the role of tourism, construction and real estate in the following economic rebound have implied the deepening of housing hardships virtually worldwide (see, e.g., Madden, Marcuse 2016; Rolnik 2019[2016]; Blakeley 2020). Global has also been the return of housing politics, a new generation of struggles and activism focused on housing and the right to housing.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in short, has hit over a complex backdrop made of increasing housing hardships – and gentrification, touristification, financialization, homelessness – and developing housing conflicts. A true moment of “crisis” – a moment that calls for a decision, according to the original Greek meaning of the term –, the pandemic has made the unsustainability of the global and national models of housing even more evident: as the need for adequate and comfortable housing was becoming paramount, not only were housing problems made immediately more visible, but the unequal impacts of the health crisis (and of the health policies put in place) also exacerbated housing hardships, especially for tenants and indebted homeowners (Furceri et al. 2020). It has also highlighted the further inability of governments to provide not only for certain fundamental rights such as housing or health, but also for the economic, social and emotional consequences that this precariousness generated – and that become individual and collective health problems amid the pandemic conjuncture.

On 28 April 2020, Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, called on governments worldwide to suspend evictions in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, measures were adopted in several, if not most, countries (Rede H 2020): “the most widely adopted measures were the temporary suspension of rental evictions and repossessions, as well as emergency supports to compensate for loss of income due to the pandemic and limiting the cutting off of energy supplies” (FEANTSA, Fondation Abbé Pierre 2022, ch. 2). Many countries have been granting moratoria for people facing eviction from their homes during the acute phases of the pandemic. However, as the articles of this special issue show, moratoria did not halt completely evictions, even during lockdowns.

Against this backdrop, immediately after the declarations of the states of emergency and lockdowns, housing movements have been organizing rent strikes and calling for bold state action for protecting the right to housing (see, e.g., Accornero et al. 2020), at the same time as organizing bottom-up responses and local organizations of mutual-aid (Springer 2020).

Three years into the pandemic, this special issue explores, analyses and conceptualizes the link between social mobilization and housing crisis management in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to understand more systematically the changes in strategies and organization undergone by mobilized groups to develop new and more effective forms of resistance to the broadening and deepening of housing crises and social polarizations. More broadly, this issue questions the evolution of power relations – including those among institutional and conflictual actors – in this context. This means, above all, critically analysing successes and failures of activism and movements in the production of new proposals and discourses, and comparing them in time and space. As we are interested in offering both academic and engaged perspectives, we were happy to collect, among the articles, a number of cases in which researchers were active (activists) in the process. By comparing cases in different city contexts, this issue intends to analyse the intersection of the political potential of social mobilization in times of COVID-19 crisis with the institutional realm of policies and spatial planning. Particular consideration was given to techniques of resistance (successful or unsuccessful), radical practices (e.g. actual or alleged occupation, stop evictions actions, etc.) and various mechanisms intended to push state action (e.g. demonstrations, referendum, local petitions, round tables), or a mix of them. This allowed us to orientate the discussion on the effectiveness of these experiments by critically addressing and contesting local/global strategies and catalysing public attention in a way that empowers citizens and inhabitants to propose alternative models in times of crisis.

The five full articles and three short stories that compose the special issue offer a truly global perspective on the matter, presenting and discussing cases of mobilization in Myanmar, Argentina, Portugal, Spain, Italy and the USA – and, in particular, the cities of Yangon, Buenos Aires, Lisbon, Barcelona, Rome and Philadelphia. In what follows, we summarize the contributions to the special issue, thereby offering a global sketch of housing mobilizations amid the pandemic; and then move to reflect on the implications for housing politics more broadly.

## **2. Housing mobilizations amid the pandemic**

Grassroots groups connected to social justice and housing rights have been implementing, experimenting and proposing different forms of resistance in many cities around the world before, during and after COVID-19 crisis. The six cities analysed in this special issue exemplify the broad range of global mobilizations, showing how local groups used differently a vast repertoire of actions, with a variety of approaches to relating and conflicting with state institutions: from local practices of care (see Farías, Sternberg in this issue; Kouri et al. in this issue) to the use of legal practices to halt evictions (see Davoli, Portelli in this issue; Gori in this issue); from direct action with homeless persons (see Johnson this issue) to neighbourhood organization and solidarity networks (see Rossini et al. in this issue; Allegra, Carbone in this issue; Grazioli in this issue).

The first two full articles engage with practices of care implemented in the Global South, contrasting experiences in a case paradigmatic of authoritarian rule (Myanmar) and another paradigmatic of neoliberal restructuring and social conflict (Argentina). We start in Yangon, where Marina Kolovou Kouri, Shoko Sakuma and Catalina Ortiz describe the trajectory of community-led housing facilitated by local NGOs and

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR\\_housing\\_COVID-19\\_guidance\\_evictions.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_evictions.pdf).

grassroots women's networks. Centred on gender equality practices, community-led housing had been able, before the pandemic, to expand from "a low-profile activist practice" and to navigate the authoritarian context until the "doorstep" of institutionalization. Conceptualizing community-led housing has a form of "non-confrontational resistance," Kouri and colleagues show, in the context of the pandemic and after the 2021 military coup, the emergence of new forms of mutual care and how organized communities were in a relatively better position vis-à-vis the pandemic challenges.

Mónica Farías and Carolina Sternberg bring us to Buenos Aires, in a city deeply affected by almost two decades of neoliberal governance and welfare retrenchment. With the onset of the pandemic, the conflict between the welfarist national government and local neoliberal administration implied especially tough challenges for people living in informal settlements and for the unhoused populations. Farías and Sternberg show how grassroots organizations and community organizing in slums reacted to the absence of the state by producing sanitary protocols, creating mutual kitchens and forcing the local government to support their action: "these practices urged immediate responses from the local government, which ultimately, triggered the [governmental organizations] to enact politically charged care practices," the authors explain.

We then move to Europe and the Iberian peninsula, where the following two articles provide us with cases of neighbourhood organization and mobilization. In Lisbon, a new housing movement emerged in the austerity years and consolidated in the years of growth that preceded the pandemic. Marco Allegra and Claudio Carbone zooms in the area of Arroios, analysing the collaborations and mutual support of a series of self-managed local spaces. The emergence of a network of mobilized communities has been capable of including cross-sectional subjects affected by housing issues. The latter range from families living in informal neighbourhoods to historical inhabitants of former working-class neighbourhoods that undergone gentrification and touristification processes, to Portuguese and new foreign inhabitants of precarious middle classes, suffering increasing difficulties to access the housing market. The article takes steps from a historical analysis of the emergence of these new housing movements and the conditions that triggered their emergence, focusing on the relations between urban change, socio-demographic transformation and political organization. This allows Allegra and Carbone to reflect on the implications of the pandemic context for local organization, showing the importance of collective *spaces*.

Luisa Rossini, Miguel Martínez and Ángela García Bernardos provide another account of neighbourhood organization from Barcelona, a city paradigmatic of the growth of the housing struggle after the 2008 crisis, with the birth of the PAH (Plataforma de Afectados para la Hipoteca – Platform of the Affected by Mortgages) and the following articulation with tenants' unions and neighbourhood unions. Rossini and colleagues analyse and define the characteristics and relations among these groups, tracing similarities and differences, with a specific focus on the emergence of the neighbourhood unions. The articulation among various groups allowed a more capillary resistance on the territory of the city through the organization of a mutual support between groups and subjects involved, as well as the deployment of different, and often complementary, repertoires of action.

In the last full article, Chiara Davoli and Stefano Portelli, depict, in Rome, a city historically characterized by powerful housing movements, the recent emergence of anti-eviction practices. During the pandemic, facing the difficulty with traditional pickets, anti-eviction activists have invested more time and energy in appealing cases of evictions without an alternative housing solution to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, managing to halt several evictions. Davoli and Portelli trace the institutional reaction to this innovative strategy and the shifting of the public debate from the protection of the right to private property, imposed through the practice of eviction, toward the request for recognition of the "right to housing". At the same time, the authors show the controversies generated, among activists, in the debate over the implications of adopting a strategy based on rights for more radical approaches.

The successful implementation of petitions to the UN in Italy is the result, Davoli and Portelli explain, also of transnational learning, as the practice was first implemented by PAH activists in Barcelona. The first short story of this issue further extends these transnational relations, as Antonio Gori relates the use of the same practice in Lisbon, inspired by the successes obtained in Rome. For Gori, the use of the petitions exemplifies the capacity of the movement to act on a plurality of scales and to broaden their skills and knowledge.

Back to Rome, in the second short story, Margherita Grazioli provides us with a narrative on how a large housing squat adapted to the pandemic context, by consolidating the autonomous practices and building solidarity networks in response to the threat of eviction, while, similarly to the case of Buenos Aires, grassroots

organizations reacted to the absence of the state by producing sanitary protocols. At the same time, Grazioli also shows the health implications of the national regulation that prohibits squatters to have a registered residency in the pandemic context.

The special issue is closed by Sterling Johnson, whose short story takes place in Philadelphia, where the local government refused to use federal funds for the emergency, rather continuing to eradicate homeless encampments. Sterling recollects the occupation of empty public lands and houses, and the campaign the forced the municipality to acknowledge the squats and work toward the creation of a land trust.

### 3. New housing politics?

Bottom-up groups of active citizens, housing movements, social movements and radical movements (such as squatting movements) have kept active their resistance and mobilization in different cities in the world, before and after COVID-19 crisis, thanks to and/or despite of the complex conditions of the most recent events generating overlapping crisis. The contributions to this special issue interrogate the achievements and limitations of social mobilization related to housing rights in a global context of increasing housing crisis.

At a first level, the experiences collected here provide a glimpse of the capacity (or incapacity) of activism and political organization during the pandemic to contribute to shifts in the problematization of housing – by contributing to the generalized perception of housing as a “problem” and pushing policy measures in response.<sup>2</sup> The cases of Philadelphia (Johnson in this issue), Buenos Aires (see Farías and Sternberg in this issue) and the squat in Rome presented by Grazioli (in this issue) are examples of success at the local level. The experiences of appeals to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to stop evictions in Italy (Davoli and Portelli in this issue) and Portugal (Gori in this issue) show the potential of directly addressing supranational institutions and of international mutual learning. What is not addressed in this special issue are examples of the role of social mobilization in pushing national eviction moratoria (see, for the case of Portugal, Tulumello, Mendes 2022). While demonstrating direct, causal links at the national scale is a hard task, that the trajectories of mobilization have been crucial in creating the political climate for the plethora of responses put in place by national governments (see Rede H) is hard to deny. We would even suggest that problematizations pushed from the bottom-up amid the pandemic are necessary to understand significant changes at the EU level: consider, for instance, the reference to social and housing assistance in art. 34 of the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union published in December 2020; or, more concretely, the unprecedented possibility of using EU funds for direct housing investment introduced with the Next Generation EU.

The question remains open, however, on whether the changing policy framework at the national (and, in Europe, supra-national) level has the capacity to structurally address the widening housing crisis. It seems to us that, while indeed addressing some of the most acute problems, the kind of approach proposed by institutions is overall not capable of changing the main problems at stake: on the one hand, those structural factors at the roots of commodification and financialization of housing during the last few decades; and, on the other, the gap between landlords’ power and tenants’ rights, which is widening both because of the changing landscape of landlords (with the increasing presence of large investors) and rental practices (with the liberalization of rental market and the growing role of short- and mid-term rental). A socially oriented discourse may ultimately hide policies that are oriented above all to relaunch economic growth in the context of yet another international economic recession and evictions crisis.

Another point of contention is whether the renewed centrality of the debate on public housing policies is capable of remaining in place after the end of the most acute health crisis and the related restriction measures.

All in all, beyond analytically capturing recent dynamics, we were interested in understanding the extent to which the recent conjuncture, and the social pressure generated by an extraordinary event like the pandemic, could open up toward more strategic claims (see Martinez 2019 on strategic vs. tactic claim-making). In other words, is this new context capable to legitimise certain claims building on the new discourse on “housing as a human right” and, in doing so, overcome hegemonic frameworks used by institutions to define and to manage bottom-up proposals connected to radical practices (cf. Rossini 2018, 2019)? It seems to us that

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<sup>2</sup> We refer to Foucault’s problematization analysis, which focuses on the way a social issue is acknowledged as a problem and solutions proposed (see Foucault 2001, 171-173; Tulumello forthcoming).

the pandemic context and worldwide mobilizations exemplified in this issue have contributed to put – for a short time - the “housing issue” and the need to address the shortage of affordable decent housing back in the political agenda at the national and supra-national levels. The historical conflict between the understanding and regulation of housing as a basic right or commodity has, for some time, seemed to move (again?) toward the “right” side of the spectrum – and social movements were particularly successful in pushing the discursive agenda toward the latter (see, e.g., Davoli, Portelli in this issue; Johnson in this issue).

However, as the most acute stage of the pandemic seems to be overcome, the overall sensation is that the fading off a certain sense of urgency is also implying the decline of the “right to housing” agenda in the global and national discourses. A macro-economic scenario centred on the fight to inflation and the spectre of global war haunting Europe from Ukraine have radically changed the political debate. Against this backdrop, rather than complaining for a lost opportunity, we believe it is worth investigating in the detail, and learning from the way, how social mobilization has operated on the terrain in an exceptional moment like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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