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INTRODUCTION



Housing policy issues in contemporary South America: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

In the introduction to this special issue on Latin American housing policies, we address the common elements evident in this collection of papers with the aim of enabling a better knowledge exchange between the 'global North' and the 'global South' on potentially common issues. These include the changing relationship between state and capital, with special emphasis on the new role adopted by the State as a facilitator for financial private capital in an increasingly privatised housing sector; the need to address precarious housing conditions among vast sectors of the population, including international migrants; and the various innovative roles played by civil society in housing provision. Notwithstanding these similarities between world regions, our editorial introduction highlights a number of particularities in housing research in the Latin American region, underscoring the need to reflect critically on the applicability of concepts and models created in different geographical contexts with different historical, social and political realities. Within this editorial, we also introduce the main themes discussed in the specific articles and attempt to place them within the more general scope of earlier research on housing policies in the region. We conclude by acknowledging that a solution to long lasting housing inequality in Latin America remains an unfulfilled promise.

KEYWORDS Latin America; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; housing policy; housing inequality

Housing policy issues in contemporary South America

The rich and vast amount of literature on housing in Latin America and the Caribbean produced in the region, mostly in Spanish and Portuguese, rarely reaches a wider Anglophone audience unable to read those languages. Thus, one clear aim of this special issue is to provide an insight into

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research on recent developments in housing policies and practices in this region, in English. Central questions that have guided us through the process include: to what extent are we witnessing trends that relate to processes described and analysed in other contexts; and are processes and concepts which have been extensively discussed in the Anglophone literature on housing studies also present in the Latin American context? These could include the idea of proliferation of slum-cities (Davis, 2006), the visible ostentation of the rich and the super-rich (Atkinson, 2016; Lees, Bang Shin, & López-Morales, 2015), the increasing commodification of housing (Aalbers & Fernandez, 2016; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Smith 2015), or the advanced process of financialisation of the housing sector (Aalbers & Fernandez, 2016; Christophers, 2013; Rolnik, 2019). We could further ask, what role does the capacity for self-organisation and for collective mobilisation of the Latin American homeless and landless play, in shaping the political economy of urban land and housing in the region?

The literature available in English on housing in Latin America has focussed on the particular experiences of different countries of the region, as well as on debates covering the region over the last four to five decades. Self-production of housing as the prevalent mode providing the majority with access to a place to live has been one of the central issues present in the literature. In the 1970s, discussions posed those who considered this a sign of underdevelopment and marginality (Germani, 1973) against those who considered the process a creative housing solution capable of transforming itself over time (Turner, 1976). Since the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s the debate has advanced and become more complex.

On one hand, the idea of 'marginality' or 'archaism' has been challenged by studies that have demonstrated the specific role that so called informal settlements have in the political economy of capitalism in its periphery. This new trend has been reinforced by studies which have focussed the issues on legality versus illegality of housing and urban production, dealing with these also as a more complex, not binary opposition (Fernandes & Varley, 1998; Kowarick, 1977; Perlman, 1976; Ward, Jimenez, & de Virgilio, 2014). In the 1990s and early 2000s international cooperation institutions like the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and United Nations Habitat have created their own think tanks and have been very active in presenting housing assessments of the region and promoting policies such as land regularisation (Ward, 2003) and financial systems to increase new housing in residential markets (Bouillon, 2012). On the other hand, scholarly debates in English over the same period focused on housing policies and their impacts, rather than updating the actual modes of housing production and functioning of residential markets in the region as formulated in the 1980s. In each of these studies, the persistent socio-

spatial segregation of the urban poor, representing large numbers of people in Latin America's deeply unequal societies, has been a central, common trend.

Our experience with this special issue has motivated us, as guest editors, to reflect on the constraints for communication and exchange between Latin America and the English academic literature. Besides the language barrier, there are often other obstacles for academic collaboration between the regions, such as different academic publishing styles and traditions. Furthermore, housing research is intimately connected with the historical and political context within which it operates, something that scholars have referred to as 'path dependence' (Bengtsson, 2012). Nonetheless, it is our conviction that communication is not only possible, but that it is also urgent. The phenomena observed in this region are also witnessed in other parts of the world; the global nature of current 'housing crises' is discussed not only by academics, but is also the topic of important discussions across national and regional borders (Lees et al., 2015; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2019, among others) including also activists in different parts of the world. Evictions, displacements and banishment are nowadays situations experienced by renters in private or public housing, by squatters and also by homeowners undergoing foreclosures (Rolnik, 2019).

This special issue was originally intended to cover Latin American and the Caribbean and to tackle a range of topics. While the call attracted a very high number of abstracts, representing countries from the whole region, the rigorous peer review selection adhering to the journal standards and publishing style resulted in six accepted articles, which, coincidentally, concentrated the issue on three countries only, all in the Southern part of the continent – Brazil, Chile and Colombia – and with a focus on housing provision policies, their rationale and their impacts on territories. Two articles analyse the Brazilian social housing programme MCMV (*Minha Casa Minha Vida*, 'My House My Life'), and a third compares it with a Colombian case. Furthermore, two articles analyse Chilean cases and a third presents a comparative analysis of Santiago de Chile and London. Amongst some important country experiences that are absent from this special issue are, for example, the Uruguayan cooperativism; the Argentinian and Mexican cases of mass production of housing through credit; or discussion about the favelas, villas and other self-produced, highly stigmatised forms of housing, which are still prevalent in the region. Also not discussed in the papers is the omnipresence of violence in shaping not only the 'place' low income neighbourhoods occupy in cities, but also the role of the State in these settlements, involving increasing concentrations of military action.

The paper by Beswick, Imilan, and Olivera (2019) argues for the comparison of 'actually existing' neoliberal transformations of access to housing,

with both shared and different trends, and despite very different trajectories in the housing sector of Santiago and London. According to the authors, 'to bring myriad qualitatively and nationally disparate modes of housing privatisation, restriction, individualisation and marketisation under the umbrella of a single, monolithic "neoliberalism" risks limiting explanatory power, ignoring national particularity and privileging theory over actually existing neoliberalism' (p. 288). Drawing on Latin American and Global North literatures, the authors analyse the socio-spatial and political-institutional effects emerging from neoliberal transformations in access to housing. By exploring mutations in, variously, the role of the State; the origin/purpose of funding/financing; the class composition of policy beneficiaries; and the geography of public housing; and housing tenure, the paper produces a rich comparison of two significantly different housing systems. Written in the spirit of 'new comparativism', the paper contributes to the ongoing decentring of Western-dominated theories of neoliberalism. Two important and different city-trajectories emerge, and these particularities enable us to add depth to our understanding of current housing crises, while at the same time drawing cross-border comparisons and conclusions.

In their article, Stiphany and Ward (2019) apply a combined ethnographic and geospatial analysis and follow Henri Lefebvre's work (1968, 1996) on the right to the city. The authors present a critique of the use of *autogestão* – self management – in MCMVE (Minha Casa Minha Vida Entidades, 'Associations'), which is a variant of the broader MCMV. The programme was expected to be organised around an ethos of social transformation, attempting to reconcile mass housing with participatory aims. Instead, the specific model of housing provision defined by the programme rather harms the most vulnerable by causing displacement among residents from informal settlements from the communities they have built up and lived in over decades. The consequence, the authors argue, is the normalisation of spatial segregation in communities of self-builders who believe they are continuing a historical commitment to local modes of urbanism. The authors conclude that MCMV in general, including MCMVE, seems more likely to exacerbate social isolation, and embed spatial segregation and that it in fact ignores real housing demands; 'spatial decisions for informal settlements are currently based on census data, but lack the fine grained differences that result from decades of building processes that are incremental, user-based, evolve in highly experiential ways, and change on a block-by-block and even lot-by-lot basis', the authors state.

Lucia Shimbo's (2019) article analyses the programme Minha Casa Minha Vida (MCMV) as an unprecedented alignment between State, finance and construction in Brazil during the 2000s that enabled large contractors and developers to produce increasing volumes of housing for middle and

low-income families. This has been done by providing subsidies and releasing credit (through the State bank) and the economic and financial restructuring of the construction sector, which has promoted the emergence of a new segment in housing production: low middle class homeownership. The article describes empirically a capitalist structure of housing production focussed on the 'economic segment'. This commonly-used real estate market term refers to housing units with prices of up to USD 100,000. In analytic terms, this segment blurred the boundaries between the production of social housing (promoted by the State) and the housing market. From 2009, this production model was incorporated into the MCMV programme, which has since – following the example of other Latin American countries – dictated the direction of Brazilian housing policy towards large-scale production. The empirical data used in this research were collected through three strategies: (i) documentary research; (ii) analysis of primary and secondary databases; (iii) field research in construction companies. The results indicate that sophisticated real estate-financial mechanisms were tied to the housing production, while continuing an industrial production base with archaic elements and a dependence on public subsidies and housing policy. The author's main argument is summarised by a quote from an executive director of real estate for the Brazilian subsidiary of an international bank who made his thoughts clear: *'We've never had a combination of factors such as the current one. The stars have finally aligned'* (p. 337). This phrase illustrates eloquently the new role that the State, in collaboration with the private real estate actors and the financial sector, is playing in current housing production processes globally.

Santoro (2019) compares two case studies, one in São-Paulo and one in Bogotá. She argues that housing needs among the poor have been subordinated to market-adapted economic agendas, and that the production of dwellings in the so-called affordable housing programmes results in a paradox that justifies and mobilises support for urban regulations, which ultimately results in the production of economically exclusive urban developments that reproduce social inequality. Santoro's argument offers a relevant critique to the very concept of affordability, which is applicable to many other national contexts, pointing out that the private market appears to dictate the vocabulary used in these policies. In both Colombia and Brazil there has been a growing debate over the use of new urban instruments such as 'inclusionary housing policies'. Nevertheless, a policy based solely on new construction within an ownership model for housing cannot be the only solution. The author alleges that such a singular approach does not engage with the particular vulnerabilities that poor families can face, and ignores structural inequalities along the axes of socio-economic status, gender and race in these two formerly colonised countries. Similarly, in her

critique of the term *affordable housing*, Santoro asserts that this approach completely ignores the dimension of the housing problems, as well as the degree of poverty, and the complexity and diversity of the housing needs, which are all combined with overlapping social vulnerabilities. This calls into question the singular solution of providing new housing units combined with a private ownership model. Moreover, the policy of giving subsidies and increasing the financing capacity for affordable housing beneficiaries has contributed to the inflation of land prices, deepening socio-spatial inequalities, and is a factor in the continuity of producing large scale housing projects on the peripheries of cities, which are devoid of the benefits of city living.

In the article by Vergara, Gruis, and van der Flyer (2019), the authors look at the intermediary role of third sector organisations in the context of low-income homeownership and condominium management practices in Chile, where social condominiums are a significant part of housing for low income households. However, after decades of occupancy, this housing stock shows signs of rapid deterioration and devaluation due to neglected maintenance. Given the weak governmental support in management practices, third sector organisations are positioning themselves as alternatives to providing technical solutions and contributing to enhance opportunities and capacities among communities that live in deprived areas.

The novelty of the topic required the authors to draw on a mix of sources (both from Europe and from Latin America) to build a suitable conceptual framework to be able to analyse this phenomenon. In this regard, the paper contributes towards theory development in understanding the role of third sector organisations in housing management in Chile, in particular, which can possibly be applied to other Latin American contexts. Amongst the most noteworthy findings of the paper is the fact that government is transferring social responsibilities to these third sector organisations without proper resources; in this sense, the former are filling (welfare) gaps in current housing policies. The paper also finds that third sector organisations are contributing to building trust with local communities as well as playing a 'catalyst' role in recognising the capacities of the community and their leaders. While the Chilean government has been widely acknowledged for its generous housing subsidies for low-income homeownership expansion for the last decades, issues of quality, location, maintenance and management have also been widely criticised. However, so far criticism has been focussed mainly on the poor building quality of the homes, and on socio-spatial segregation aspects of the peripheral location of these housing complexes, to the detriment of post-occupancy maintenance and management. This topic represents an innovative contribution to the field, given that so far, the discussion on housing in the region has tended to focus on three

types of actors, namely the State, commercial actors and residents. The appearance of a new type of actor in the field of housing, namely third sector organisations (Czischke, Gruis, & Mullins, 2012) requires the development of new concepts and theoretical frameworks that allow us to make sense of different logics and types of relationships. In this sense, the paper by Vergara, Gruis and van der Flyer represents a valuable contribution towards building theoretical and methodological frameworks suitable for studying the housing management challenges in Latin American countries, opening to opportunities for cross-learning between theoretical approaches from the North and emerging developments in the South.

In another Chilean case, Contreras, Neville, and González (2019) address an urgent topic, rarely discussed in the literature on housing policy in Latin America, though recurrent in the European context: namely housing for migrant populations. The authors analyse the housing situation of national and international migrant workers in the city of Antofagasta in the north of Chile. By using a survey and in depth-interviews, the authors find that this population often lives in precarious conditions, and that they also confront racialised and sexualised abusive practices connected to their housing conditions. This is a matter that the UN is engaged in, having denounced it in one of their most recent reports on housing inequality: *Violations of the right to housing of migrants cannot be justified as measures to discourage irregular migration* (United Nations General Assembly, 2019). This is exactly what is happening in Chile and elsewhere, where the rhetoric on closing borders utilises the failure of the governments to provide housing to the migrant poor to justify exclusionary migration policies. The research shows that self-built housing is a strategy for these workers for getting access to housing. Nevertheless, since squatting has been criminalised in the Chilean context since 1975, the residents are permanently risking eviction and this undermines efforts put into self building. Due to the lack of housing opportunities, and the increasing racist attitudes against the new waves of migration to the country, migrant dwellers are in urgent need of a State housing policy that is sensitive to their particular needs and their vulnerable situation. The alternative of buying a dwelling is, for this sector of the population, practically impossible. The authors propose the development of a rental public housing sector, challenging dominant ideas on home ownership as an ideal form of dwelling, as an alternative solution to provide the migrant population with decent housing.

In sum, this collection of articles points to the changing role of the State in housing, from taking some responsibility for the finance, production and distribution of social housing into an active promoter of the private developers, warranting profit for the investors involved in the production of what is discursively promoted as 'affordable housing'. This model resonates

with other parts of the world, notably the social democratic reformist models observed in the past for example in Sweden and in the UK. In these models the private sector and the local and central State often collaborate, assuring real estate companies certain levels of profit (Grundström & Molina, 2016). Nevertheless these models made a dramatic turn in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, expanding the space for private sector speculation (Barlow & Duncan, 1994; Grundström & Molina, 2016; Hedin, Clark, Lundholm, & Malmberg, 2012) and paving the way for the processes of commodification and financialisation of housing. Nevertheless, there are two main differences between the contexts: one is that in the case of the global North, the issue is the dismantling of pre-existing welfare systems in housing and its impacts; and in the case of Latin America, welfare systems barely exist. Another significant difference is the level of segregation and deprivation in the European context, which is hardly comparable to the social gaps found in the Latin American region.

Another issue relates to a problem observed by several authors in their respective articles: that concepts generated in European contexts or 'in the North' such as the quantitative 'housing deficit' and the use of 'affordable housing' policies must be challenged. These are concepts far removed from the context of each particular national scenario that actually reflect diverse housing needs. Some of these simplistic conceptual transfers neither echo the complexity of the processes and forces leading to observed phenomena in the Latin American region, nor reveal diversity in the actors involved in the process, such as real estate promoters on the one hand, or dwellers and subjects of displacement, on the other. We need to bear in mind that dwellers may lose their homes and become increasingly deprived as a result of transformations in housing policy (Baeten, Westin, Pull, & Molina, 2017; Davidson, 2009; Lees et al., 2015; Rolnik, 2019). What is really at stake globally is the move into financialisation and commodification of (social) housing and public space, which is having devastating consequences for the populations in cities worldwide, and is turning into what we should label a geography of low income housing that leads increasingly to social and racial polarisation (Thapar-Björkert, Molina, & Raña, 2019). The effects of financialisation and commodification of housing are not only expressed in social deprivation and housing discrimination. In fact, those features have always existed where there is social inequality, or as Madden and Marcuse (2016, p. 10) put it, 'for the oppressed, housing is always in crisis'. Moreover, the social unrest caused by social inequality and urban segregation is getting policed rather than policy-ised, enhancing a spiral of violence led by a militarised police (Gillmore, 2007; Graham, 2011; Thapar-Björkert et al., 2019). Structural and institutional violence converge in the residual spaces occupied by the poor. This is an extreme expression of the changing

role of State policy regarding housing and urban space in the era of financialisation.

Finally, the editors want to thank the journal and in particular the former editor-in-chief Richard Ronald for his dedication during the production of this volume. Thanks also to the authors for their valuable contributions and to the anonymous referees for their constructive comments. This special issue is an important entry point for those interested in housing policies in Latin America, and more particularly in the possibilities of comparison with other contexts. We hope that the articles in this collection will contribute to a continued dialogue between the global South and the global North in the field of housing and urban realities and changes. Although not presenting a broad picture of the debates and the range of topics which are focusing scholarly work in the region, it is instead a timely sample of the research done on new trends of housing provision and its impact on the right of access to adequate housing for all. This is a goal that has illuminated struggles and policy making in the region in the 20th century and continues into the 21st as an unfulfilled promise.

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