



## **EDITORS' NOTES THE HOUSING QUESTION OF TOMORROW, 2021-3**

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## **EDITORS' NOTES** **THE HOUSING QUESTION OF** **TOMORROW**

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This theme issue on housing in architecture and urban design is made up of four scientific articles and three reviews: two reviews of dissertations and one book review. The contributions present several, complementing research perspectives on the theme.

The housing question seems to be a recurring topic within the architectural debate. Indeed, the social consequences of the global pandemic we are living in have placed housing architecture in the centre of it. However, the decision to focus on this theme was made well before the collapse of the boundaries between living and (waged) working that has shaken the Western home. An unceasing process of commodification of housing had already expanded over decades to become the official line amongst public authorities, large architectural firms and the circuits of investment (Self, 2014). In an economic cycle in which deregulation, financialization and globalization of Western housing systems have increasingly removed the restrictions that granted the social function of housing as an infrastructure for living, the notion of housing as a public good seems nowadays as forgotten as it is overlooked (Marcuse & Madden, 2016). The consequences of the transformation of the home into a commodity raise some urgent and critical questions: How is this new situation affecting design standards in housing architecture? How is it impacting on housing shortages, rental and property prices and tenant harassment? What are the effects on expulsions from the urban cores, the fracturing of neighbourhoods and the weakening of the social fabric?

This theme issue of NJAR seeks to address these fundamental queries within the longstanding frame of the housing question. The development of the theme started with a call for abstracts to relevant research communities. A selection of promising proposals was then conducted by the invited theme editors, Dr. Daniel Movilla Vega and Dr. Ola Nylander, in cooperation with Dr. Magnus Rönn, chief editor, and Dr. Elin Børrud, representing the board of NAAR (the Nordic Association of Architectural Research). Two PhD reviews and a book review have been added to the peer-reviewed articles in order to present a deeper understanding of the housing question. The editors (Movilla Vega, Nylander and Rönn) be-

lieve that the housing question must not be taken as a given, nor as the answer to economic or social pressures. As a matter of fact, the housing question that is important for us is understood as a highly controversial topic for architectural research, and one that exposes the spatial, technological, social, environmental and juridical aspects of living.

Despite the centrality of the housing question in the contemporary agenda, the rise in the political interest of housing as a question for architecture dates back to the beginning of the industrial revolution during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Forty, 1986). The connection between housing and production started to be explicitly tackled as waged, working activities moved out of the house into specialised built spaces. The design and construction of rental houses for workers boomed as private spheres, radically separate from the sphere of labour. Their objective was to provide accommodation, acting as places for biological survival, reproduction and perpetuation, thus enabling the economic machine to continue functioning (Aureli & Giudici, 2016). Within the global expansion of the industrial production system, housing perpetuated its strategic placing within the capitalist apparatus of production. In *Zur Wohnungsfrage* (The Housing Question), Friedrich Engels (1872-73) analysed the concepts conceived as an intent of designing better homes — addressing poor/bad design and unhealthy conditions, shortages, overcrowding, high rents — and lucidly reframed them within more complex social, political and cultural dimensions (Engels, 1988).

As an infrastructure for the capitalistic society, housing has continued to perform a key role in the standardization and privatization of the social reproduction of labour up to the present day. This condition, or rather pre-condition for the capitalistic machinery to continue working, was particularly legible during the post-war period, where good housing provided in Western societies was intrinsic to the achievement and development of the so-called welfare society. Nation-states in liberal democracies went beyond their role as regulators, and took an active role in the provision of affordable and good quality dwellings (Alexander, 2009; Biagi, 2001; Cupers, 2014). Housing, which was framed as a right for workers, acquired a moderately de-commodified character. The commitment of the state to grant good housing during the welfare period does not only have to be understood as a public commitment by producer-consumer society to achieve desirable standards for living, but also as a commitment to achieve those standards for living that were needed to keep the desired producer-consumer society working. Particularly true for the Nordic welfare model, in comparison with other welfare states, was the promotion of egalitarianism at multiple levels other than income redistribution — such as gender equality, social cohesion and protection for vulnerable individuals and groups (Movilla Vega, 2017; Nylander, 2018). This common thread had an impact in the regulations and standards that were granted by the state in order to ensure their citizens' right to housing.

During the 1980s, most countries, including the Nordic ones, followed the privatization wave that had recently begun in the UK (through deregulation). Over the following 40 years, the shift of the economic

cycle towards a hegemonic, market-oriented order has increasingly placed the surplus value of housing, that is, its economic benefit, at the core of its production. As a consequence of this privatizing logic, housing as one of the key pieces for the production/consumption mechanism to continue working, has been swallowed by the dynamic of the mechanism itself (Martin, Schindler & Moore, 2015). This paradoxical process of commodification has increasingly turned housing into a by-product of the neoliberal economic order. This trend, which can be considered as characteristic of (if not intrinsic to) the neoliberal period, should not be underestimated, for it is the quality and the conditions of our most basic space for dwelling that is under dispute. As one might expect from such a logic, hyper-commodification is having an impact in domestic standards that vary from unhealthy living conditions to poor/bad design, shortage, overcrowding or high rents (Baeten, Westin & Pull, 2016). Reminiscent of the past, our contemporary housing question is intrinsically connected with more complex social, political, environmental and cultural dimensions of our time.

Nowadays, after so many years looking at a distorted picture, the distorted picture might have turned into the norm, and the notion of housing as a social good seems marginalized, if not relegated to a period in history that is now gone. For this reason, in the *Nordic Journal for Architectural Research*, we want to reframe the housing question in its social and spatial, contemporary and future dimensions, and as a design challenge for architectural practices. The aim is to provide new knowledge that helps in overcoming resignation, and allows us to look towards the future with optimism. From our expertise as researchers on housing architecture, the editors of this issue believe that we have in front of us an opportunity to reinvent what we perceive as the most central architectural project — the design of the dwelling. And we are not alone (Fezer, Hiller, Hirsch, Kuehn & Peleg, 2015; Mota, 2019). In an official housing narrative with apparently no alternatives to hyper-commodification, more and more innovative residential projects are gaining momentum as strategic sites for local communities to achieve social change. Experimentation in terms of architectural design, constructing and managing housing is showing the potential of the architecture of dwelling to confront power, structural violence and social inequalities in the city. Cases channelling more democratic methods of provision are also precursors of innovations in residential architecture, and are once again framing the housing question in its spatial, social, political, environmental and cultural dimensions (Karakusevic & Batchelor, 2017; Kries, Müller, Niggli, Rugby & Rugby, 2017).

This theme issue of NJAR examines contemporary housing practices that outline a new social relevance of housing in the 21st century. We have selected articles that provide opportunities, solutions and interesting reflections on this important challenge. These contributions bring together real-life case studies, from contexts as diverse as the Swedish, Finnish and Japanese, that reflect on alternative routes of delivery, organization and design ideas, as well as reflections upon the main inquiry: What are the housing questions for the cities of tomorrow?

One common theme in the scientific articles is the ability of architecture to broaden the possibilities of the lives that take place in the dwelling: the opportunities to support, meet and socialize with other fellow human beings. These opportunities to broaden the framework by design are inspiring. Two of the contributions describe the importance of housing and architecture as a positive force in extreme situations.

Dr. Cathelijne Nuijsink, ETH Zürich, describes in the article: *An Architect's Response to Natural Disasters: Shared Living and Bottom-Up Community Building in Japan*, the architecture and architect's responsibility in the aftermath of the disaster that took place in 2011, and the earthquake, with subsequent tsunami wave, which devastated large parts of Japan's coastline around the Tokyo area. Nuijsink presents a couple of interesting cases where architects have taken initiatives and made suggestions. This was confirmed at the 15th Venice Biennale where young Japanese architects showed models, drawings and photos of a new approach to architecture as a way to create relationships between people and between people and space.

This new approach was also manifested in the journal *The Japan Architect*, where in 2011 editor-in-chief Jun Hashimoto asked 50 groups of young Japanese architects to come up with proposals for urban solutions to upgrade the earthquake-destroyed areas. It was clear that new structural solutions and working methods were needed to solve the new problems and, among other things, planning efforts involving citizens. The two architects Yuri Naruse and Jun Inokuma have, for example, developed the idea of sharing as a social concept in large, open spaces. Despite the tragedy, the disaster of 2011 thus also created a positive development. Nuijsink describes Japan as a society where loneliness is a big problem. The new architecture involves ethical consumption, shared living and community building through renovation routines. Architectural design became the answer to recreate stronger human bonds again: renovation with durability as its hallmark.

*Sharing Communities for Resilient Cities: An Alternative Post-pandemic Residential Logic for Sweden* is a contribution by Dr. Ivette Arroyo, PhD candidate Laura Liuke and Dr. Erik Johansson, all affiliated to Lund University. In the article, the authors describe how collective houses managed the pandemic disaster. The article is based in the Swedish context, where a number of advantages have been discovered during the pandemic to the collective house's common premises and its opportunities for the emergence of sharing societies. The article highlights how residents of collective houses have been able to overcome experienced loneliness and social distancing, and were able to easily adapt their everyday lives to the rules of the pandemic. The authors also highlight the fact that many housing developers do not take this into account. The authorities do not understand the possibilities that the collective house has in a crisis situation. The fact that National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket) in Sweden provides support to construction and housing communities is positive in this perspective.

The authors describe organizations that work to develop and increase interest in living in a community, collective housing and living

communities. New examples of collective houses are also presented, such as 'Under Samma Tak' (Under the Same Roof), from 2020 in Gothenburg, and 'Sofielund kollektivhus' (Sofielund collective housing), in Malmö, with support from the public utility EIA, in 2014. In the article, Arroyo, Luike and Johnsson highlight Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to provide the conceptual framework not only for discussing inherited representations of collaborative housing but also for analysing how representations of collaborative housing as 'spaces for social connection' have influenced residents' lived experience during the pandemic. Although one might expect collaborative housing to be problematic during a pandemic such as COVID-19, since this housing type promotes social interaction, it was found that residents self-organized themselves. This may be seen as a renegotiated practice in produced social space to cope with the crisis.

The collective house is also the subject in the article *Sharing is Caring? Discourses and practices of sharing housing* by Dr. Karin Grundström, Malmö University. The author describes a historical background through an international context in which Charles Fourier's Phalanstère, or 'Social Palaces', elaborated in 1808, and the US singletons and residential hotels are parts. Singletons, or single households, are a growing demographic group, also in Sweden. Grundström explains the Swedish context where the Markelius collective house from the 1930s is a start. In many cases, radical architects with new residential architecture wanted to change everyday life for the better for the residents. One example is Le Corbusier's 'Unité d'Habitation house', built in Marseille, France from 1947 to 1952, which included shops, restaurants, childcare and health facilities combined with indoor streets. A later example shown by Grundström is Victoria Park, a relatively exclusive housing concept of a Residential hotel. A place where you live permanently, or for retreats to enjoy leisure and lounging. Other and more exclusive examples are Svea Fanfar and Botium, where staff take care of some of the housework. Another example is Bovieran, a concept that is steadily growing, but that requires a substantial effort and often through a previously owned property.

The important issues and positive effects of co-living that Grundström highlights in the article include the possibilities to live and share different things and thus increase sustainability. The question that the article wants to point out and discuss is how the vulnerable, those without large capital and other groups, can become part of and be able to live in a building or housing community. Grundström merges the questions – is sharing housing about caring? The answer is of course both yes and no.

In sharp contrast to the discussion on collective houses and their possibilities is an article called *"Avoiding Macro Mistakes: Analysis of Micro homes in Finland today"* by Dr. Sofie Pelsmakers, Tampere University, PhD student Sini Saarimaa, Tampere University, and Professor Mari Vaattovaara, University of Helsinki. The authors initially describe the Finnish housing situation where many homes are built every year, 40,000 in 2019, compared to Sweden with twice as many inhabitants, which is building just over 50,000 apartments.

Pelsmakers, Saarimaa and Vaattovaara analyse the architecture of the Finnish micro-dwelling, usually a single-sided, one-bedroom apartment of around 25 sqm. They are apartments with poor lighting conditions, difficult to furnish and lack all flexibility. The authors argue that these are bad apartments that no-one really wants to live in. Many of the residents in the Finnish cases see the micro apartments as temporary accommodation. The authors find support in other studies that show that residents of small apartments consider them cramped. Only with areas of around 50 sqm do residents begin to think that these are acceptable areas. The authors claim that the fact that so many micro apartments are being built could be an upcoming problem. Loneliness is an issue that is raised. Even in relation to sharing, living together and dealing with crisis situations, the micro-apartment is problematic.

Finally, we have three reviews in this theme issue.

Housing as a question on architecture and urban form is described in Gordan Zurovacs dissertation: *When planning and design meet: Transformation or urban tissue under densification policy*. The thesis is reviewed by Senior lecturer Karl Kropf, Oxford Brookes University, and Dr. Rolf Johansson, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Zurovac has done a morphological analysis of new apartment buildings in Oslo, built between 2004-2014. Kopf and Johansson emphasize that the thesis is a very well structured, well written record of very thorough research. It is a significant PhD thesis that provides very incisive and productive insights into the results of implementing a trio of urban policies: densification to prevent urban sprawl, increasing the provision of housing to meet population growth and improving environmental quality in the central areas of the city. The thesis is also a solid contribution to the study of urban form in Norway, and thus a contribution to the international network of urban morphological research.

*Urban Compact Living: Making Home in the City*, by Anne Hedegaard Winther is the second dissertation reviewed in this theme issue. Reviewers are Senior researcher Helle Nørgaard, Aalborg University, Dr. Sten Gromark, Chalmers University, and Dr. Tina Gudrun Jensen, Malmö University. The thesis sheds light on the international trend of downsizing physical belongings. Underlying, driving forces may be found in the market as a mix of strong developers and contractors looking for profits, through deregulation of building standards, as well as opposite ideas of anti-consumption, voluntary simplicity and the need for a more sustainable lifestyle among citizens. Hedegaard Winter refers to compact living as a phenomenon of middle-class households, living within high-density urban environments. The aim of the dissertation is to explore why these households choose to live compactly in the city, and the thesis provides a significant cross-disciplinary contribution to the housing question. Two of the cases are in Copenhagen and Aarhus respectively. One case has a rural setting. The urban households reveal and underline a general attraction to the city and the residents' strong sense and desire to be part of urban life as a driver for compact city living. According to Hedegaard Winter, middle-class residents prioritize area-related qualities over home-related qualities to such an extent that they accept the

physical inconveniences in micro-housing and overcrowded domestic compactness. The reviewers note that the PhD project and its results have received considerable interest from professional developers. This, in turn, raises questions about whether the thesis will be used to legitimize the selling of low-quality housing in relation to acknowledged standards of proper housing welfare in the Nordic Countries.

As a good complement to the articles on all the advantages of the collective house is the book: *Contemporary Co-Housing in Europe*, edited by Pernilla Hagbert, Henrik Gutzon Larsen, Håkan Thörn and Cathrin Wasshede. The review is conducted by Esperanza Campaña, Lecturer at Umeå University. The book presents new collective houses in Europe, with examples from Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Spain. The Danish development is described, where many progressive collective houses were built in the 1960s, often as high-rise apartment buildings. This was changed in the 1970s by young architects who incorporated the collective house idea into dense, low-rise housing. Part of the book describes the connection between collective housing and sustainability, and how the collective house's opportunities to live together create psychological and symbolic urban activism.

In summary, from our contributions, the reader of this theme issue will learn about alternative logics to speculative systems of residential provision, the role in the collective agenda that housing can play, the impact that residents can have in the creation of desirable and integrated residential neighbourhoods in times of pandemic, or how current housing's spatial and material practices are tailored to local circumstances (e.g. social, cultural and ecological structures; local production methods; and the hopes, wishes and economic possibilities of residents). Also, the reader will be able to find some reflections that are common to all contributions. First, that the architecture and urban design of housing can be rethought, not as a mere container of social processes, but as the social process itself. Next, that a growing spatial awareness, that is, the ability of the residents to actively recognize and manipulate the spatial order of housing architecture, is pushing housing architecture towards an architecture of the collective. Finally, that the architecture of domestic space is designed, it is materialized and it is politically constructed. This assumption is instrumental for it assumes that the space where we dwell is always (intrinsically) political. We spend our lives in spaces that are deeply political, from the bedroom to the living-room. The political does not need to be searched for outside of our daily life experience; it does not need to be made exotic by identifying it with sophisticated terms or with fancy headlines. Yet, it is within domestic space that housing architecture and urban design are made a political clearly legible issue.



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