

BOOK REVIEW

Renewing Europe's Housing

Richard Turkington and Christopher Watson (Eds.)
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The edited volume *Renewing Europe's Housing* is a comprehensive account of housing renewal policy in nine European countries. Specifically, the book offers a detailed historical overview of housing renewal in Denmark, England, France, the Netherlands, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Spain, and Turkey, while also highlighting some of the problems and successes of renewal efforts in each country and reflecting on possible ways forward. The editors open and close the volume with chapters in which they draw connections between the distinct housing histories of each country. They note that it is difficult to define housing renewal across distinct national contexts. As such, they do not provide any strict definition, but rather describe housing renewal as a process of materially improving dwellings that in some contexts includes housing demolition, the provision of community services, infrastructural improvements, and business development. Despite engaging in different understandings of housing renewal, the chapters are remarkably cohesive and the authors collectively allude to a host of provocative and relevant topics, including post-socialist changes to housing, the housing rights of squatters, the relationship between rent control and disinvestment, and the difficulties of eco-friendly housing design. What is perhaps most impressive is the way in which the volume compiles and organizes a vast range of historical information on housing conditions and policy histories in each country. As such, this text is invaluable to anyone interested in European housing or housing renewal generally.

Despite this depth of information, the conclusions presented are often theoretically uncritical and lacking in nuanced ethnographic detail. The book's primary contribution is to argue for the importance of housing renewal as a policy intervention. Yet in its focus on policy solutions, it often glosses over the various devastating critiques of gentrification and top-down policy solutions that have emerged from critical urban theory. This is not to say that the book does not discuss gentrification or the limitations of policy – indeed the authors are grappling with the central question of how to deal with crumbling houses while responding to residents' needs – but that it fails to incorporate any in-depth account of capitalist inequality or grassroots housing struggles.

With regard to the question of social inequality, some authors seem to be more concerned with areas experiencing poverty than with the people who live there. In an openly pro-gentrification stance, Wassenberg writes about the Netherlands:

While criticism can be directed at gentrification which results in the displacement of low-income households, the influx of higher income people is a way of getting residents to invest in their own environments (2015, 118).

This language places greater value on the integrity of the built environment than the needs and demands of communities who reside there. Further, it implies that the solution to poverty and poor quality housing is to remove the poor and to attract wealthy residents in their place, which simply relocates the problems of urban poverty and poor housing conditions to another setting. A more critical stance to housing renewal would examine urban inequality in the city as a whole, rather than focusing on the ways in which it manifests in certain neighbourhoods. Critical theorists have long recognized that as long as poverty persists, gentrification simply moves the problems of poverty and poor quality housing from place to place. In other words, fixing housing does not always fix poverty: often, it simply moves it. Yet policy reforms tend to adopt narrow political horizons and propose geographically specific and temporary "solutions" instead of addressing head-on the deeper contradictions of capitalism. This, in turn, prevents the possibility for radical collective change. In this way, *Renewing Europe's Housing* confuses the wider problem of housing inequality with the specific and localized problem of housing renewal.

Despite these uncritical tendencies, many authors identify the central tension between policies focused on housing only and policies that seek to engage in a more holistic effort at addressing poverty. The editors describe this as the difference between people-focused and property-focused interventions, and write that this difference poses an important political question - "should policy be directed to improving housing conditions, or to wider problems of poverty and social exclusion?" (p.249). Yet even though they remain sensitive to the limits of a housing-only approach, none of the authors address the larger question of the relationship between housing and the ongoing reproduction of inequality under capitalism. Indeed, Friedrichs, Müller and Strubelt, in their chapter on Germany, advocate a policy framework that characterizes "advice on cooking and nutrition" as part of a holistic approach to poverty (2015, 151). This plays into a related tendency of some of the authors to attribute deteriorating buildings to cultural factors, which stigmatizes the poor as having failed to maintain their houses and ignores the fundamentally economic character of poor quality housing.

Related to the need for holistic economic change, another major theme of the book is the tension between market and state-based approaches. The editors argue that the state's reluctance to invest in maintenance of deteriorating housing can lead to the market-based solution of gentrification. Although the retreat of the state is important to the politics of housing inequality, the editors overlook the deep connections between the state and the market and the ways in which city governments often revitalize a neighbourhood in the interest of economic improvement rather than social welfare. They acknowledge the trend towards neo-liberalisation and public-private partnerships, but do not engage in a critique of it. Instead, they write "renewal can benefit from a public-private partnership approach" (2015, 268). This again reinforces the focus on improved dwellings and services in isolation from a larger struggle against exploitation and inequality in housing markets.

This is not to say that all policy interventions are equally problematic. The authors collectively recount violent histories of demolition and advocate for more community-

centred approaches to housing renewal. In particular, some authors point to empowering moments in legislation around renewal and housing rights, for example when landlords in the UK were forced to undertake housing maintenance; and when Turkey established a legal right to housing. Yet by and large, the chapters reflect that in the wake of large scale demolition projects, European cities have been turning to more neo-liberal tactics of bolstering private development. Most chapters cite examples of recent housing renewal programs that involve public-private partnerships and subsidies to landlords. As Gunay, Koramaz and Ozuekren write about contemporary housing policy in Turkey:

In most cases, the main objective is economic, based on the idea that making areas more appealing through a change of function and of image will attract both investment in property and higher income residents. This so-called neoliberal approach aims to transform urban space through property-led renewal. Property-led renewal excludes, evicts and/or displaces the low-income groups, regardless of whether they are the owners or the tenants of demolished housing. (p.241)

This current trend in which states subsidize capitalists reproduces the problem of inequality and poverty. Thus, the same authors urge, "local people have to be more fully involved if bottom-up neighbourhood regeneration is to flourish" (p.243).

Although most authors emphasize the need for community involvement, they do not engage in the question of how governments can work to the benefit of grassroots housing movements rather than against them. The chapters offer many examples of cities completely reconstructing poor urban neighbourhoods, with limited attempts at actually responding to residents' demands. Most chapters reference efforts at community inclusion, but do not describe how these processes unfolded, or grapple with the inevitable power imbalances between government agencies and residents. For example, the book leaves several questions unanswered: How did officials encourage resident participation or collaborate with existing movements? Were certain people excluded from this process? How did authorities respond to resident demands and resolve conflicting visions for change? The lack of attention to these questions is symptomatic of a larger trend of the book to ignore on-the-ground empirics in favour of exploring policy intentions and shifts using technical language. The valorisation of expert knowledge and quantitative data in particular highlights a need for deeper qualitative and ethnographic analysis of housing renewal, which could ground the book's findings in real world relations and give voice to marginalized communities.

Despite the problems outlined here, this book serves as an important reminder that critics of housing renewal cannot ignore the bare fact that many people live in deteriorating structures with little access to sanitation or heating. As the authors crucially urge, the extremely low structural quality of some homes is a real and pressing issue, and in some cases is so extreme that demolition is the only answer. Thus, this book calls on leftist critics – for whom 'renewal' is often a bad word – to confront the material reality of poor quality housing head on in ways that are both egalitarian and collaborative.

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