

Editorial: Tenant organizing, scholar activism, and global south perspectives as alternative infrastructures of knowledge production

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## **Editorial: Tenant organizing, scholar activism, and global south perspectives as alternative infrastructures of knowledge production**

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This issue 3.1 of the *Radical Housing Journal* is very rich in content. Embedded within it, we present two special issues, one on tenant organizing and resistance, and a second on urban and scholar activism. Further, our Conversations section centers on COVID-19 and housing struggles in the Global South. Within such diversity of content, this editorial aims to discuss past and present housing struggles, as well as the alternative, multidimensional and foundational knowledge they produce. Along with our authors, as editors of this issue, we have grappled, both personally and collectively, with multiple questions related to collaborative knowledge production at a unique time in which a global pandemic has arguably placed housing struggles under a global microscope.

Thus, we are launching a pan-issue conversation with key scholars and activists based in Southern geographies and encompassing Southern onto-epistemologies. One of the scopes of our collective and journal in the years to come is to expand our geographical remit, to establish new connections and to render publication of radical housing content more accessible beyond Europe and North America. The ‘Southern Conversations’ that we initiate with this issue—and that we aim to continue in issues 3.2 and 4.1—are a first attempt at a

collective reflection across geographies around housing struggles exacerbated by COVID-19. We purposely framed each one of these conversations—on Lagos, Manila, Beirut, Jakarta, Curitiba, São Paulo, Buenos Aires—in an open-ended manner, allowing our colleagues to direct the tone and content of each piece towards what matters the most to them at this point in time and in each particular context.

Further, the special issue ‘Reflections on urban activism’ edited by Stefano Portelli and Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe, examines the junctions between critical urban research and political activism. This discussion began at a conference held at Harvard University in late 2019. Over a year of further reflection and collaboration is presented in six short reflections tackling issues and questions of knowledge production and urban activism in Brazil, Greece, the United Kingdom and the United States. The editors of this special issue bring attention to the fluid term ‘activist\*scholarship’, with an asterisk to theorize about different approaches to knowledge production around housing struggles. Their wish has been to outline their politics through this term, which is supportive of the struggles of local communities and the knowledge production embedded within them.

The special issue ‘Tenants organizing: precarization and resistance’ by Dominika V. Polanska, Hannes Rolf and Scott Springfeldt, is also a product of a conference organized in 2019 that aimed to cast a light on housing crises and organizing around such crises. The articles in this special issue present research on a mix of historical and contemporary tenants’ mobilizations in Argentina, Canada, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the US. Contributors condemn predatory landlord practices and provide insights about different types of struggle and resistance such as striking, squatting and facilitating militant education and services, among other strategies. While they have faced backlash from landlords and governments, these practices have also reshaped housing landscapes.

As a collective, the RHJ aims to push the boundaries of how we think about housing, understanding it as a practice in the making, a space of contestation, and as a politics in and of itself. Nevertheless, inequality is a structural characteristic of knowledge production around the world, and the consequences of this are far-reaching. The division of intellectual tasks, different theoretical agendas and methodologies, as well as race, gender, class, and language barriers and dynamics reinforce these hierarchical systems of knowledge-production. Breaking away from these patterns is not easy, but we are determined to continue to strive to do so. Hence, we open this issue by addressing difficult questions about how to take part in alternative and transformative forms of knowledge-production around housing struggles in a meaningful way. As we wrote in a recent statement for the *Ephemera - Theory and Politics in Organising* journal archive of alternative publishing practices, these ‘questions’ cannot be ‘answered’ in absolute terms. Rather we propose a continuous praxis centered on struggle, community and collective learning (ephemera collective et al., forthcoming). Under such a premise, the RHJ can contribute to alternative and transformative processes of knowledge production through the content that we feature, and by continually questioning our internal dynamics and the ways in which they inform our work and engagement with housing struggles.

## **Histories of housing violence**

This issue of RHJ offers a range of perspectives, analyses and themes to understand the many challenges that dwellers face when confronting and struggling for access to housing. One of the approaches included in this issue focuses on the often devastatingly violent consequences of government policies (and/or their absence or poor management) before and during the pandemic. Before COVID, decades-long housing crises and austerity regimes had already dissolved what had been an important social housing buffer, resulting in increased housing precarity through debt, rent arrears, repossession and displacement. Since COVID, the housing crisis, as a global, general crisis whose effects are felt at multiple scales, all around the world has only been intensified.

As the papers in this issue note, housing violence has many faces and forms. In its most violent form, housing violence can lead to illness, injury and death to many. In most cases however, housing violence is a slow violence, a temporal process that takes its toll through the everyday worries of how to make ends meet and usually results in [intimate and invisibilized] forms of psychological stress and anxiety. Rob Nixon (2011) suggests that slow violence is a structural event, one that can be experienced over time and even across generations. Slow violence, he suggests, transpires ‘gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (ibid. 2). Rachel Pain (2019) has since mobilized the analytic of slow violence to think through urban trauma. For her, slow violence is hard-wired in place as a space of constant retraumatization, but also a space filled with the potentiality of healing and rebuilding. The pandemic has intensified these and other processes of slow housing violence, as home has increasingly become the central space of defense against the virus. More than ever, destroying homes means violently destroying lives.

Together with some of the articles included in this issue, several of our Global South Conversations introduce a diversity of historical contexts and social conditions with a common thread – histories of violence that lie beneath the failures of COVID-19 governance. Such histories inform the critical tropes of examining the ongoing public health challenges. The pandemic, for instance, has severely impacted vulnerable populations in Brazil that have historically faced various forms of violence, such as precarious living and working conditions, and hunger, among others. Similarly, Argentinians are facing an escalation of landlord violence, indebtedness, seizures and impoverishment, among other housing and social struggles. Further, land development and infrastructure projects often and actively expose vulnerable urban populations to multiple risks. In ‘Coping with Fears: Urban Struggles in the Greater Manila amid COVID-19 and Beyond’, Michael Beltran narrates how evictions have been fueled by transportation infrastructure projects that are intensifying public health, food insecurity, unemployment and political threats. Similarly, he argues that political ‘crackdowns’, violence, and oppression in the Philippines have been both selective and arbitrary, explicitly targeting political dissidents.

Other regimes have also displayed gendered and racialized practices that harm vulnerable populations in particular. Talibat Lawanson, Victoria Ibezim-Oheri and Deji Akinpelu, in ‘State Interventions, Inequalities and People as Infrastructure in Times of

COVID-19 in Lagos, Nigeria', expound about recent changes to land and housing protocols and the criminal justice system that have taken place during the lockdown and have most heavily impacted women, children and migrants. Histories of violence have also become evident under regimes that are heavily subordinated to global markets. In 'How the COVID Pandemic has shaped Housing struggles in Lebanon', Harb Fawaz and Salka Nammour note that rental contracts and loans are set in US dollars, while the earnings and savings of most Lebanese are in the Lebanese pound, which has experienced steep devaluation, exacerbating unemployment and debt.

In the face of such struggles, bottom-up alternatives have emerged. Within them, however, concerns over collective agency (process) and strategic efficacy (results) are shown in the Conversation, 'Staking out Territory: District Based Organizing in Toronto, Canada' with Parkdale Organize members Cole Webber and Ashley Doherty. Parkdale Organize is a nascent initiative of working-class activists and independent organizations coalescing around a variety of urban struggles in Toronto, Canada. Webber and Doherty argue that some leftist movements fall short in achieving social transformations as many campaigners engage in working-class struggles 'by proxy'. Similarly, the Long Read, 'Why don't you just kick out the Foreigners', centers on the experience of two neighborhoods going through processes of 'upgrading' and racial stigmatization in Leipzig, East Germany. Leon Rosa Reichle and Peter Bescherer highlight the importance of building alternative action strategies based on the nuanced understandings of communities' housing struggles.

### **Tenant organizing as alternative infrastructures**

Drawing on some of the international literature on housing struggles, we would like to highlight three broad perspectives. First, there are contributions that have traditionally sought to investigate and highlight the structural conditions by which housing is appropriated by capital and its agents to become a means for value extraction and profiteering. Second, there are interventions that focus on the means used to unite, strategize, organize and sustain short and long-term direct action against housing displacement, as well as continuous struggles against dispossession that closely intersect with issues of home, race, gender and historical and current structural inequalities and violence. Third, other contributors focus on the ways in which differential housing futures emerge out of struggles for housing justice, and out of the means and strategies that prefigure practices and structures of 'housing yet to come', and related questions of home, belonging and affirmative politics. Intricately related, these three perspectives or approaches provide distinct analytical frameworks to the struggle for housing. Combining these three approaches in ways that highlight how knowledge is produced, controlled, and made available can lead to very robust theoretical arguments. Yet, given the structural limitations of publishing in the format of papers and journal interventions, authors most often than not are inclined to stress one framework over another.

Nevertheless, these three perspectives highlight the relational complexities and power structures that mark the management and meanings of housing and home for multiple different actors and interest groups. They also highlight the dynamic, social and political

aspects of housing and home, marking its significance not simply as an object or a space, but as an ‘infrastructure’ of complex relationalities and constitutive connections prone to become part of numerous, concomitant, and contested assemblages of power (Baker, 2020; Larkin, 2013; Power and Mee, 2020; Simone, 2004; Zamfirescu and Chelcea, 2020). This view is reinforced by nuanced accounts and research that highlight how housing is simultaneously a crucial access point of capital, a gateway of organized liberation, and a means to configure what that liberation should look like (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Rolnik, 2019; Roy et al., 2020).

We thus aim to take a critical look at the ‘geometries of power’, to use Doreen Massey’s words, that make up ‘the place we call home’ (Massey, 1994, p. 168). The formation of such a place begs the question of how housing is possessed through dispossession. This becomes legible only if attention is directed towards how one might genuinely move beyond this kind of violence. In other words—as many radical housing movements around the world show—it is by educating oneself through the exercise of critically thinking about or engaging in alternative forms of (doing) infrastructures of housing and home, that new meanings, practices, and strategies can come to the fore, not only conceptually, but also pragmatically. This is arguably most evident in movements and contributions that align with the anarchist or autonomist traditions, but it can also be found in other forms of intersectional housing, thinking and organizing.

We are thrilled to host on this issue several contributions from critical and radical researchers and activists who address the global housing crisis and its uneven impacts on communities through approaches that focus on the emergence of alternatives practices and structures. Many of the articles in this issue illustrate how activists and academics are increasingly recentering what is ‘alternative’ and focusing more prominently on historical and everyday modes of collective struggle and survival, rather than simply on the injustices created and maintained by neoliberal capitalism and other structures that promote inequality and exclusion. A number of contributors are also working on current alternative housing infrastructures, based on careful analysis and praxis around both the makings of housing injustice and the means of organizing to fight it. This focus is quite prominent in our new ‘Southern Conversations’ series, which includes reflections on feminist organizing and housing in Argentina in ‘Housing Struggles and domestic territories in Argentina during the pandemic’, with Lucía Cavallero, Florencia Presta and Verónica Gago; the discussion ‘Intensification of, and responses to, housing struggles in Brazil under the COVID-19 Pandemic’ on the Zero Evictions Campaign in Brazil with Maria Carolina Maziveiro; and the Conversation with Elisa Sutanudjaja and Abdoumalig Simone titled, “‘Pluralizing Lockdowns’: Grassroots Responses to Housing in Jakarta amid COVID-19 and Beyond’, which focuses on the emergence of a ‘plurality of modes of inhabitation’ in Indonesia, in response to the states’ passive response to the pandemic.

Other articles examine how the pandemic and lockdown have promoted a shift to different strategies around solidarity, mutual aid, and anti-eviction. In their article titled, ‘Occupation for Expropriation in Berlin’, River Honer and the organization *Leerstand Hab Ich Sath* describe how tenants in Berlin’s *Haabersaathstrasse* 40-48 were able to unite to

expropriate a building and to demand homes for all during the pandemic. Similarly, in the update on *The Roof*, ‘Solidarity as a Temporary Social Infrastructure: Anti-Eviction Struggles in Serbia during the Pandemic’, the Serbian anti-eviction action collective discusses how during the pandemic they have shifted their focus to address some of the urgent demands and needs of tenants by employing mutual aid and solidarity-based strategies. In parallel, they argue that the state also used this period to further criminalize solidarity and anti-eviction work, a dangerous precedent.

Some papers in this issue provide further examples of the many collective practices and strategies that tenant unions and collectives are employing to resist privatization and/or gentrification, eviction and displacement even before the pandemic. The article on and written by the Autonomous Tenants Union Network/*Red de Sindicatos de Inquilinos Autónomos* (ATUN) conceptualizes their activism as resistance to neoliberal capitalism, operating at the local, regional, and national scales through a network of unions across the US. They argue that while this moment is characterized by the financialization and expansion of global real estate, it is also characterized by a surge in tenant movements fighting for a right to housing. Dominika Polanska and Åse Richard’s article ‘Resisting renoviction: tenants organizing against housing companies’ renewal practices in Sweden’ identifies and discusses multiple forms of resistance in which tenants commonly engage when facing renovictions. In ‘Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as a Strategy to Promote Affordable Housing in California’, Lucero Garcia Mondragon writes about Oakland and Santa Ana, California, two of the most expensive housing markets in the United States and the world. He explains how low-income communities have found ways to build community wealth through community land trusts, in order to resist increasing rent prices, promote community stewardship of the land and facilitate access to permanent affordable housing.

Finally, three papers focus on the historical roots of tenant organizing and their implications. In ‘A tale of two cities: The Tenants’ Strikes of 1907-1908 in Buenos Aires and New York. Exploring the Global Historical Roots of Tenants’ Organization’, Lucas Poy engages in a comparative and historical analysis of the general trends that shaped working class resistance during the 1907-1908 tenant strikes in New York City and Buenos Aires. Similarly, Hannes Rolf explores tenant militancy in Sweden prior to the Rent Control Act established in 1942 in his article titled, ‘A Union for Tenants: Tenant Militancy in Gothenburg as a Historical Example’. Lastly, Monica Quirico’s piece, ‘Lotta Continua and the Italian housing movement in the 1970s: Ancient History or Present Challenges’, discusses the formation of the revolutionary group Lotta Continua, established in Turin, Italy in 1969. Quirico explains that Lotta Continua’s housing occupation strategies also meant to educate and unify the proletariat and lumpenproletariat. These articles, although historical in their approaches, contribute to a broader examination of the diverse forms of resistance on which tenants and housing collectives continue to rely. Such focus on local strategies helps us to fully grasp the elements that distinguish them. Yet they also provide us with a broad overview of the multiple ways in which tenants around the world coalesce as part of a shared and timeless struggle for housing.

## **Scholar activisms as alternative infrastructures of knowledge production**

Scholar activism is far from a new concept. Over a decade ago, Laura Pulido wrote a letter to the ‘Potential Scholar Activist’ answering a series of illuminating ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ about how to simultaneously navigate seemingly disparate organizing and academic worlds, particularly when political organizing is central to one’s own identity (Pulido, 2008). Drawing from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (1993) work, Pulido describes ‘organic praxis’ as that in which ‘the scholar is somehow connected to oppositional action beyond that of writing for academic audiences’ (Pulido, 2008, p. 342). Around the same time, Eve Tuck wrote an open letter to researchers conducting community-based research, raising the issue of increasingly prominent damage-centered research that portrays groups, and Indigenous communities in particular, as broken and damaged. Tuck argues that this damage-centered research, ‘operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation’ (Tuck, 2009, p. 413). We read Pulido, Gilmore, and Tuck’s work in relation to present-day discussions about scholar activism and knowledge production as a reminder that these conversations are not new and as a warning of the historical and ongoing harm and damage that research and academic spaces can perpetuate. So, what are the pathways forward? How can we engage our ‘deep emotional responses to the world’ while sitting with the contradictions and power that are always embedded within scholar activism and knowledge production, underscored by the neoliberalization of the university (Derickson and Routledge, 2013, p. 3)? What is (not) scholar activism? What should (could) it be?

The histories of scholar activism are discussed in our second special issue, which centers on what editors Stefano Portelli and Aylin Y. Tschoepe term activist\*scholarship. This, they define, is a fluid term opening multiple and at times messy interpretations of knowledge production from spaces of struggle. Activist\*scholarship, they mark, does not take place from outside or above, but rather encompasses intersectional analysis from spaces ‘that are constantly in the making, unmaking and remaking.’ They also interrogate the so-called objectivity of the academy. We see their move thus aligning activist\*scholarship as a feminist praxis, one committed to reflexivity and to grounded approaches to spatial knowledge production (i.e., Byrd et al., 2018; Haraway, 1988). Activist\*scholarship thus means interrogating our own positionalities and onto-epistemologies, as well as their entanglement with the worlds we occupy and steward. As Karen Barad writes, ‘Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming’ (2007, p. 185). In this way, if one is part of a movement for housing justice, our scholarship informs, and is informed by, that world.

Activist\*scholarship is thus positioned in relation to the broader history of scholar activism aiming to encompass work that is grounded in collective struggle or that interrogates academic structures. Yet not all work that does this identifies with the term. In her piece ‘Thoughts on “Scholar\*Activist,”’ Mindy Fullilove reflects upon what she learned growing up from her father about the meaning of being a ‘working class intellectual,’ and how that term is more generative for her than that of ‘scholar activist.’ Is scholar activism, or

activist\*scholarship for that matter, still too university centric? Is the term relevant to those unattached to university structures who are nonetheless actively producing knowledge, or to those straddling academic and non-academic spaces in pursuit of decentering the academy?

Further, is it the task of the working-class intellectual or the activist\*scholar to challenge the increased neoliberalization of the university and the knowledge produced within it about the urban? This is something that Karina Villacura explores in her book review of Francisco Vergara-Perucich's *Urban Design Under Neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago* (2019), a manuscript that explores how urban design has been shaped and dominated by profit chasing. Similarly, the book argues that the academy is far from a neutral place, even when it feigns notions of empiric objectivity. Thus, the author advocates for a Marxist approach to the study of urban design under neoliberalism to facilitate reflection on the ethical, theoretical, and practical elements involved in designing.

In 'Responsibility and Commitment in Urban Scholar-Activism: Perspectives from an Anthropologist and a Geographer,' Loretta Lees and Michael Herzfeld also articulate the complexities of their dual positionalities, noting the privilege that they maintain as established academics doing work about community struggles. Is this scholar activism as opposed to working-class intellectualism?

While focusing on grounded practices of knowledge production in this issue, we are particularly interested in centering activist and community-based knowledge produced in through and with Southern frameworks – even when such spaces are geographically situated in the North (Roy and Bhan, 2013). As contributors and editors of this 3.1 issue, we are interested in promoting ground-up knowledge production based on personal experiences of housing injustice, housing justice organizing, international solidarity, and anti-capitalist, antiracist, anti-colonial, and feminist frameworks. We are also particularly interested in the production of spatial knowledge *by* housing organizers, such as Welita Caetano's autobiographical piece, 'The Homeless and the Struggle to Exist,' on which she frames her own organizing efforts with the Front for Struggle for Housing (FLM) in São Paulo, Brazil. She begins by writing about her experiences as a homeless person and the discrimination that she and her family faced in the city. She then writes about her empowerment as a housing movement organizer of squats and occupations, a popular educator, and a municipal housing counselor. She envisions occupations as small revolutions for housing justice and means of building relationships, knowledge, and community.

In his photographic ethnography, 'Is Gentrification A Municipal Crime?' Reflections and Strategies on "Urban Activism: Staking Claims in the 21st Century City", Moulden reflects upon his own organizing experiences with ONE D.C. in Washington D.C. He photographs homes after evictions and scenes of gentrification, while offering the proposition that 'gentrification is a crime,' a framework worth further exploration by scholar activists and community organizers. Moulden also proposes organizing strategies to address some of the issues faced by poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and all working-class peoples, and to assert their claim and right to the city within the US and beyond. Such international solidarity, he finds, is particularly fitting in COVID-19 contexts. He also maintains that research and organizing must be bold enough to create zones of contestation and liberation

to collectively promote ‘No Displacement Zones’ and challenge the neoliberal politics of gentrification. Similarly, Stavros Stavrides advocates for the urban politics of *commoning* in his ‘Commoning as Collective Reflex: Emerging Creative Practices, Reinhabiting Public Spaces, Resisting Carceral Societies’. Stavrides writes about his observations and experience in the current pandemic in Athens and beyond. He finds hope in collective acts of solidarity and mutual aid that promote the decommodification of urban space and the decarceration of public space.

Aligned with both perspectives and continuing the thread of abolitionist housing organizing, Laura Barrio and Tom Youngman describe a movement-based research project by and for the *Coordinadora de Vivienda de Madrid* in ‘Housing is Not a Crime: Madrid’s Post-Crisis Squatters Tell Their Story Through Research by Social Movements’. This assembly brings together roughly thirty neighborhood and housing mutual aid groups in Madrid organizing around the struggle for the right to housing and spatial justice. Their article discusses the outcomes of the collective project aiming to promote dialogue and reflection around speculation, poverty, criminalization and legalization. This movement-based approach to research aligns with that offered by members of the Boston-based organization, City Life / Vida Urbana (CLVU), as well as that of the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (AEMP), based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York City. ‘Reflections on Doing the Work: City Life Vida Urbana and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project’ brings together written organizing materials from CLVU, and commentary about recent AEMP work by members Manissa M. Maharawal and Erin McElroy. This collectively written piece highlights both groups’ commitments to antiracist organizing and community-based research in the US. Finally, this issue includes also an update by the feminist research collective ETICity, based in Rome, writing about the late research-activist Sandra Annunziata. Annunziata, who co-founded ETICity, was a source of inspiration for many housing scholars and activists across Southern Europe and beyond. The update is a way to reflect on her approach to research and direct action, from the point of view of her closest comrades.

### **Concluding notes from the editors**

The above contributions illustrate the myriad of approaches to thinking about the relationships between housing justice, scholarship, organizing, and activism. The RHJ Collective appreciates the long histories and debates surrounding what scholarship activism is and is not. Our own adherence to ‘scholar-activism’ is far from uniform. Yet perhaps the messiness around scholar-activism provides an opening through which to have the necessary, complicated, uncomfortable, and contradicting conversations about alternative infrastructures of knowledge production. Thus, at the core of our deliberations is the reimagining of ways through which research can serve housing organizing work, ways for scholar activism to redistribute resources out of universities that occupy colonized and stolen land or profit from wealth extraction, and ways to build relationships across geographies and scales in the name of spatial and housing justice. Despite the profound and exacerbated histories of housing violence, such pursuit arguably embodies a degree of political optimism. We have been inspired by the heightened grassroots organizing around housing struggles in

this last and painful year. As the pandemic continues to disproportionately impact comrades from the Global South, we wish to maintain and expand our solidarity by providing a platform on which their struggles may be read, understood, and supported.

The RHJ will thus continue in the direction opened by our ‘Southern’ conversations with two further initiatives: a special issue on the lexicons of housing struggles currently being prepared for issue 3.2, and a broader ‘Housing Justice Spotlight’ program of video-conversations with activists worldwide, organized with the Unequal Cities Network at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

### **Note from Issue 3.1 editors:**

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