

# The socio-spatial production of non-market housing in urban regions under growth pressure: Thinking comparatively and relationally.

Constance Carr, Ph.D.

Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Luxembourg

[constance.carr@uni.lu](mailto:constance.carr@uni.lu)

[urbanunbound.blogspot.com](http://urbanunbound.blogspot.com)

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## Introduction

This paper explores non-market housing in urban regions under growth pressure, and aims to open up a conversation about how modes of housing and related policies might be conceptualized in urban geographical scholarship, in order to broaden the possible range of housing policy measures beyond the rather narrow imperative of market solutions, that prevail here and elsewhere. The project is extension of a larger project that I have been working on for many years together with Markus Hesse, where we first explored the governance of sustainable spatial development in Luxembourg, and then in Switzerland for comparison, and now one of the areas that we are moving towards is housing and housing in non-market contexts – a central component of sustainable urban development scholarship.

But how might one effectively conceptualize housing, given what we know from recent literature in urban studies? I argue that (1) there is much to be learned from constructivist urban comparison; (2) following the policy mobility literature, simply importing ready-made templates would be, at best, risky; and (3) Storper's (2014) application of *bricolage* is useful inspiration for understanding urban transformation processes that are forever changing and in flux.

## Growing out of SUSTAINLUX and SUSTAINGOV

The idea to dive deeper into the study of non-market housing arose out of two previous research projects (SUSTAINLUX and SUSTAINGOV). The aim of the first was to understand the governance processes behind spatial planning for sustainable development in Luxembourg. The second added a comparative dimension by examining the similar processes in a second urban region, the Glatt Valley located in the Canton of Zurich. Bolstered by conceptual approaches in urban studies, such as policy mobility, scale theory, enclave urbanity, integrative planning, and discourse theory, and armed with constructivist, qualitative, methodologies, these projects revealed the hidden dimensions of policy-making and challenges associated with urban growth pressure (see Affolderbach & Carr 2016; Carr 2014, 2018; Carr et al. 2015; Carr & McDonough 2016; Hesse 2014; Krueger et al. 2018). It was found that the pursuit of sustainable urban development was wrought with contradictions, in respect to planning styles and/or patterns of governance, and there were a number of discrepancies between the objectives of planning policies and the complexity of problems. Intense strains on land, infrastructural and human resources, the dominance of market actors, and the dilemmas these issues raised, left policy-makers in both the Grand Duchy and in Switzerland ineffective in steering urban development in sustainable ways. Not only were a number of problems generated, not few worsened. Some of these – the mobility issue for example – many of you probably experienced just getting to this conference. But immediate social necessities, such as the generation of liveable neighbourhoods, cohesive communities, or other typologies of housing that might provide healthy means of living to wider portions of the population, certainly fell by the wayside (Hesse & Becker 2010) or were limited in their capacity to provoke change beyond the micro-local scale (Carr & Affolderbach 2014; Carr & McDonough 2016; Doerr & Carr 2014).

So, our research so far contributed to the loudening chorus of scholars who recognize that sustainable urban development is wrought with problems, contradictions and paradoxes (Krueger & Gibbs 2007; Elgert & Krueger 2012; Curran & Hamilton 2018; Temenos & McCann 2014; Bunce 2018; Anguelovski 2014), and from this, the goal is to drill down on problems of housing in urban spaces under growth pressure, where development is market-led. Clearly in Luxembourg today, while the economic successes are repeatedly acknowledged, the negative consequences – especially with respect to housing – remain well known. Take these two examples:

“Luxembourg has become the victim of its own economic success affecting urban design, the development of housing and the programming of the built environment. It has led to the imbalanced ratio between work places and available dwellings, as well as to a dysfunctional housing market driven by speculation and unable to satisfy the needs of many people. [...] It is no longer given that people who live and work in Luxembourg are able to find affordable housing there. In reaction, people are increasingly moving to the adjacent regions of neighbouring countries in order to fulfil their needs and dreams of housing there,” (LUCA 2016: 8).

Or, from the Prime Minister himself:

“The major challenges faced not only by Luxembourg, but by most European countries [is] to detect and decry the shortage of living space, [...] to show new concepts [...] paving the way to both socially and economically sustainable solutions,” (LUCA 2016, 4).

In fact, housing is clearly a major challenge in many urban regions across Europe and North America where local policy-makers and inhabitants are confronted with growth pressure (Porter & Shaw 2009; Hulchanski 2010; Hesse & Becker 2010; Christmann 2018; August & Walks 2018, Moos 2016; Krueger et al. 2018;). For decades in the post-war years, non-market forms of housing – that is, housing kept off the market and controlled by the state (Walks & August 2008) – was understood as a key protection against displacement and other negative effects of market-led land use, and indeed were largely successful in making housing available to lower income households. However, the onset of new socio political economic values (i.e. neoliberalization) across Anglo-American cities and many European cities changed all this. In some instances, central or federal governments downloaded responsibilities of finance, provision, management and maintenance of housing to finance-strapped municipalities. In other instances, the state simply sold publicly owned properties or demolished them (Bernt 2017). Recent work also exposes how housing has morphed into a major investment asset in globalized financial markets (Rolnik 2013; Walks & Clifford 2015). The net effect of these changes has been the formation of a market-oriented, commercialized, and competitive form of housing provision. Where welfare states have abdicated responsibility of housing provision to private property markets, they are today either no longer willing or able to intervene (Czischke 2009; Porter & Shaw 2009, Rolnik 2013). Housing shortages and limited options outside of the private ownership or landlord-tenant models are nowadays the norm. Alternatives to the for-profit approach to housing and structures of provision that meet current needs and are in short supply to say the least.

### **How might housing be conceptualized differently?**

Because such housing problems are not unique to the urban areas that were the focus of our previous research, I argue that (i) it is essential (and essentially instructive) to learn from cases abroad, while ii) helpful in avoiding the trap of the copy-and-paste beliefs that are so common in urban policy circles. More broadly, there are good reasons to view urban spaces in comparison (see Robinson 2011; Ward 2009). One of these reasons is that there is an interest in learning more about how challenges are addressed in different places, by different sets of actors, and different institutional constraints/possibilities. This is clearly possible with housing – and it has been done before (!). Because housing is understood to be a central component of sustainable urban development – or even the “secret life of cities” (Jarvis et al. 2001) and important spaces of, “sharing, environmental awareness, and citizen participation,” (Bresson & Denèfle 2015, 14) – a range of housing forms have been studied and documented that offer insights into new modes of housing, such as eco-urbanism, housing co-operatives, eco-villages, or cohousing. Holden (2018), for example, has compiled an impressive catalogue at *Ecourbanism Worldwide*. These offer insights into possible alternatives to home ownership or classical landlord-tenant arrangements, which might also ameliorate problems associated with existing patterns and structures of market-led land use. There is a lot to explore. However, as Schmid et al. (2018: 21) state, “the urban world has fundamentally changed in the last few decades [with] a wide range of urbanisation processes ... generating a multitude of urban outcomes, resulting in differentiated, complex and often surprising urban landscapes.” This challenges conventional understandings of urban space, and so, as the authors argue, comparative studies can facilitate further common understandings. In a similar vein, it is a call to understand housing challenges in their urban context. The policy mobilities literature (Ward 2017) iterates a similar message: Urban comparison cannot simply be about finding solutions/recipes because policies cannot simply be transferred from one place to another. Context matters.

For the current investigation, the four cities of focus are Luxembourg, Zurich, Freiburg, and Toronto. All urban regions under growth pressure, experiencing both heightened economic activity, increased immigration of businesses and labour, and in each case market-led development is yet to provide any solutions to the housing challenges. At the same time, all have different shifting socio-political geographies of alternative non-market housing. I argue that it is necessary to seek out these different experiences, the different lessons learned, and aim to understand them contrasted dialectically with one another, while engaging with Schmid et al.'s (2018) ever-renewing urban imaginaries. So far, what we observe from preliminary tours of the areas and a couple of interviews is that it is still not clear if the alternative developments are in fact alternative. While many practices such as shared financing or living environments are a stark departure from the model of single-owner occupancy, many – especially recent ones – are in the form of posh urban renewal projects that serve upper and middle classes. Modes of non-market housing that can secure affordability for lower income or precarious groups are still relatively seldom. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to explore the relationship between these innovative housing projects and wider socio-political economic urban transformation processes. A conceptual approach is thus needed that will move beyond a straight forward compendium of innovative and sexy projects, and enables us to understand what is under the hood where clues to some of the unanswered critical questions might be found (Sørvoll & Bengtsson 2016; Scheller & Thörn 2018). For example, to what degree are existing so called alternative projects part and parcel of wider for-profit systems of land use? Or, how do alternative projects deepen social polarities more than they ameliorate?

I would like to argue that Storper's (2014) concepts of *bricolage* in urban governance are of use here. It is well known that *bricolage* refers to the kinds of practices that unfold when *not* following a recipe, or a prescribed routine. Rather, *bricolage* is, "the putting together of multiple cultural forms in order to innovate and create something new or more fit for purpose," Phillimore et al. (2016: 7). Storper extended this concept to consider how metropolitan urban spaces are managed, and argued that *bricolage* is a means of conceptualizing how actors mobilize resources, sometimes in spontaneous and unexpected ways to generate an end result. He argued that even if "tinkering is far from perfect, [if] there is little or no tinkering, it is probably a sign of a paralyzed political system." *Bricolage*, he argued, is a very useful lens because urban regions are necessarily fragmented and forever in flux, politics and actor constellations are shifting, needs are continually changing, and the mysterious workings of the invisible hand is forever at work (ibid.).

Drawing inspiration from this, the *de facto* *bricolage* of non-market housing can be examined – i.e. the assortment of actors and institutions and their disparate and unexpected sets of resources of non-market housing approaches – in order to understand their institutional contexts, their socio-spatial modes of production, and respective socioeconomic and political implications. *Bricolage* can be harnessed to do this from a variety of angles. First, it allows for an investigation of socioeconomic systems that structure non-market housing, while also looking at the role of actors and institutions in the production of those systems. Second, the gap between different belief systems/traditions/intentions and processes/outcomes/consequences can be scrutinized. This has methodological ramifications as well, as it resembles Krueger et al.'s (2018) 'interpretive institutionalist' approach, where the beliefs and traditions of actors and associated institutional arrangements in regions under growth pressure were examined. Third, *bricolage* enables an examination of the pressure points in existing networks of *bricoleurs*, exposing moments of risk or frailty. This approach can thus offer insight into the grounded context – i.e. the specific processes that structure the political economy of, housing – that simultaneously expose inhibiting factors of successful policy implementation. As an example, Walks and Clifford (2015) invoked the concept of *bricolage* to demonstrate how neoliberalization and state-led financialization of the housing market went hand in hand, where "the federal state and key state institutions as core '*bricoleurs*' in this system" (pg. 1625). So, in contrast to popular myths about the spectre of globalization, the *bricolage* approach demonstrates the role of the state policy in production of housing problems.

The need to investigate non-market modes of housing is more than obvious, given that the orthodoxy of market-driven development is demonstrably flawed: Supply is always lagging demand (which means that we need a politic about the building stock). It delivers to the highest bidder and thus cannot provide a social need to less competitive or precarious portions of the population. And, its main beneficiaries are land owners and developers. These trends have been observed over and over again in many cities that are floundering under their own growth pressure. This alone is reason enough for comparative study, but so is a nuanced study of the *bricolage* of institutions and actors that structure the systems of non-market housing that require attention.

As for the real-world search for ways to ameliorate the housing crisis, exposing a *bricolage* of practices may also elucidate some inspiration for local problems that are locally specific – solutions that might

promise alternative options precisely because they are i) *not* the big-bang, sexy, and fashionable planning products that politics and the media are always waiting for but that never come to fruition, and ii) they are not ready-for-wear recipes transferred from elsewhere. Rather, they would be solutions that reflect actual local processes, dilemmas, and contradictions, involving the necessary set of local actors and institutions that are in the position to endorse relevant change.

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