



Introduction

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Over the next decade, the erosion of state support for social welfare in the West, and the continued global fallout in the wake of 2008's sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US, will enact huge changes on both the *idea* and *fact* of social housing. Not only has the financial crisis been produced through the overt and irresponsible capitalization of the basic building block of social life—the house—but current political responses to the situation have served to undermine the concept of social housing itself, a concept that contains, within its very constitution, the democratic premise that living together in equality and security is a right to be afforded by all members of a society.

This book examines ongoing transformations in social housing and asks how these changes are reflected in the aspirations and practices of artists. Housing not only provides essential shelter but also gives form to the social. It represents and embodies the materiality of civic politics and thus demonstrates the uneven nature of spatial justice at both local and global scale. For many years, artists have contributed to the design and organization of structures of living together, often with ambivalent effect. Whilst many have imagined—and attempted to implement—radical new forms of social housing as alternatives to both privatization and state provision, they have also ushered in waves of gentrification, thus contributing significantly to a story of capitalization now dominant within urban infrastructures. Here we want to question the politics of urban practice from a variety of geopolitical and disciplinary viewpoints, from liberal private initiatives to the Occupy movement, from Almere to Ramallah, mixing artistic and architectural contributions with those of sociologists, urban historians, philosophers, and activists.

Actors, Agents and Attendants

Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice builds on the symposium, *Social Housing—Housing the Social*, organized by SKOR | Foundation for Art and the Public Domain, held in Amsterdam in 2011, part of the ongoing research platform *Actors, Agents and Attendants* that we curate. Many of the contributors to this volume gave papers and presentations at the symposium, and have been involved in an extended dialogue with us about what it means to think about housing, and its relation to artistic practice, in a contemporary context.



The suppositions of artistic and curatorial interventions into social life need to be examined closely. The *AAA* platform, through which we have produced a previous book on art and care, has been set up to investigate the ways in which an organization such as SKOR, historically understood as a facilitator of public art commissions, now functions as a producer of public discourse within a shifting political terrain.¹ It seems to us that the structure of ideological commitments needed to support the concept of “public art” have now either eroded or been destroyed. On one level, this signals the increasing maturity of a sector of practice in understanding its role within a world wherein to declare a thing—a group of people, an artwork—“public” is a troubled and often contradictory assertion. On another level, social democratic governmental structures that have supported the concept of “public art,” largely linked to a welfare state ethos and based upon a premise (however uneven) of equality, have been dismantled. Our research title, *Actors, Agents and Attendants*, intends to signify the malleability of these terms and roles in both positive and negative senses, as we all both play and are played by the neo-liberal machine. This is the contemporary political context of any understanding of “public” art. Who now can point with any clarity to “a” clear public? Further, who would wish to do so?

What is a house?

A house is a place where people and ideas gather and find shelter. In this sense it is a social enclosure, not without its repressions, competitions, and eradications, but a place where sociability is rehearsed and produced. Social housing, housing built on a multiple scale, is the replication of this model in villages, towns, and cities on political grounds: a spatial commitment on the part of governments and states of differing ideologies to building on the basis of broad social needs and ideals.

A house is also an engine of display and acculturation, a capital commodity, a private desire. Models of social housing are changing from ones entirely state sponsored to ones capitalized through mixed economies and mixed use, developed through

1 Andrea Phillips and Markus Miessen, eds. *Caring Culture: Art, Architecture and the Politics of Public Health* (Amsterdam/Berlin: SKOR/Sternberg Press, 2011).

public-private partnerships and by global franchises as well as local philanthropy. The changing funding landscape affects the mechanisms through which housing is commissioned and built, but is it sustainable and what are the alternatives?

What models of urban dwelling (collectivized, individuated, open, enclosed, planned, unplanned, market-driven, rent-controlled, etc.) are available as viable ways of imaginative living? Are alternative models for organizing, funding, and sustaining social housing (by which we mean both housing that is affordable to everyone and at the same time housing that affords forms of sociability, collectivity, equality) currently being built through new mixed economic models or is a new wave of homelessness and destitution visible on the close horizon of urban spatial politics?

We understand this debate to be strongly contradictory when seen in a global perspective; that the West's diminishing reliance on, and support of, the provision of state welfare is at dramatic and dynamic contrast with other geopolitical situations where housing is an alternatively franchised political and social tool. In this context contributors to this publication write from very different practices and global contexts, often providing narratives that contradict and question the suppositions of both state and private housing. Contributors that support the idea of new forms of privatization are set against those with a collective socialist vision. Concepts of spatial justice and the difficulty of providing this on a mass scale, the ambivalences people feel about the welfare state and its reification of spaces of the public, sit alongside assertions of the individuality and freedom that forms of neo-liberalism espouse, as well as those that express a deep distrust in the very idea of any state system that proposes welfare in the first place, including housing, for "its" people.

Our book begins with a set of chapters that set the scene for the more specific examples that follow. Neil Smith writes on transnational spaces of securitization and the contradictions that are thus thrown up in the defense of *social* security. Doreen Massey recollects growing up in council housing in the UK in terms of what she calls the "geometries of power" at work in the distribution and dismissal of British social housing that has occurred over her lifetime. Miguel Robles-Durán, drawing on Lefebvre and Harvey, calls for a new urbanism to be developed as a common project in his critique of disciplinary divisions within the field.



The focus then moves to concepts of self-organization, a term that is mobilized across many points of the political spectrum. Joana Conill, Amalia Cardenas and Manuel Castells offer examples of alternative, non-capitalized models of economic and spatial organization; Jeanne van Heeswijk argues that an engaged artistic practice is able to provide a platform for viable and productive exchange between artists and non-artists. Floor Tinga, writing on the work of Sabrina Lindemann, notes the often complicated and controversial role of the artist bringing creative ideas to housing developers, whilst members of Partizan Publik, writing on their part in Open Coop Amsterdam, express the freedom to create within a contemporary network economy. Adri Duivesteijn, with a long experience of developing new models of housing, asserts the relaxation of building regulations in the Dutch city of Almere as a chance to incubate creative freedom and self-determination.

The book then moves on to examine further the role of artists in the development of the practice of implementing spatial justice, however temporarily. Martha Rosler, whose artworks have consistently returned to the site of the home, exposing its contradictions, here interviewed by Markus Miessen, discusses her longstanding involvement in debates about art's role within the symbolic economy. Marjetica Potrč suggests that the processes of art and architecture produce what she terms "relational objects" that act as collective conduits for the establishment of new structures of social organization, often at micro-level; Roman Vasseur, in a text which describes his role as a "lead artist" in the redevelopment plans of Harlow, UK, asserts the power of representation—rather than over-determined participation—as a political tool. Taking a different approach, the collective Fallen Fruit discuss their work gathering the "public fruit" of Los Angeles and elsewhere—fruit that stands for and upholds the values of collective ownership.

Moving the debate into what might be called macro-curatorial territory, Andrea Phillips looks closely at the relationship between art objects and "house-objects," both of which she sees as privatized entities with paradoxical political implications, and Fulya Erdemci writes on the contradictions of contemporary art institutions' attempts to "house the social."

Across the period that we have been developing ideas for the *Social Housing* symposium and book, we have been in ongoing discussion with two organizations, the radical sound

collective Ultra-red and the Russian activist art collective Chto Delat?, whose different methods of developing their work have been key to our thinking; they represent either end of a spectrum of approaches to responding to political questions using artistic tools. For the symposium we invited the groups to collaborate and produce, within an extremely short time period and working with a large group of participants, a performance, which is documented here, along with narratives of its social and intellectual process.

In a section on the global contexts and contradictions of the idea of social housing, Don Mitchell recounts the history of “tent cities” in the US, prefiguring physically and politically the Occupy movement; Pelin Tan gives a detailed account of property law in Istanbul and the way it shapes the radically unequal distribution of space and money in the city; Yazid Anani discusses distrust of the concept of public space in Ramallah; and Zoran Eric recounts the process of segregation and cleansing in New Belgrade, suggesting that a return to socialist organizations of the city might be a viable solution to contemporary inequalities. Edesio Fernandes describes changes to planning statutes in Brazil and the legislative difficulty of destabilizing Brazil’s long history of private land ownership. Jiang Jun recounts a history of Chinese housing as it moves in and out of collective ethos and towards public-private partnership, and Arnold Reijndorp describes modes of what he terms “transnational” urbanity in the Netherlands, suggesting that mixtures of cultures and fluid relations to local space represent a viable future scenario for concepts of the social in the Netherlands.

In a final section on direct action, Christoph Schäfer and Martin Reiter describe the Right to the City movement in Hamburg whilst Ernst van den Hemel examines the depoliticization of squatting—how it moves coercively between ideological commitment and individualized need. The collective of artists who continue their collaboration following the closure of Occupy Beursplein, Amsterdam, at which they lived, develop a series of responses to their time there, concluding with some thought-provoking questions about the inclusivity of the Occupy movement and its forms of government. Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka, curators of the collaboratively-developed TV sitcom *Our Autonomous Life?* (produced by Casco in partnership with SKOR) relate the ways in which they worked collaboratively to devise a series of episodes set in a squat. They describe the underlying

social and political tensions of communal living with humour while at the same time exposing the very real crisis in housing availability—and the compromises made in order to secure a roof over one’s head. To end, SKOR curator Nils van Beek describes an action organized by a group of Amsterdam-based volunteers in collaboration with the Yes Men, to directly intervene in the process of a housing regulation change, and how this resulted in questions being asked in parliament. A direct form of politics, concludes van Beek, but was it necessary to call it art?

Thanks:

Many people have collaborated on the making of this book, and many voices have pushed our narrative forward, argued with us, pointed out the possibilities and contradictions in our project; for this we remain completely indebted. In particular we thank Vesna Madzosi, Coordinator and Associate Curator for the symposium upon which the book is partially based; Michelle Franke, Publication Manager, picture researcher, and Curatorial Assistant for the symposium; and Laura Pardo, Curatorial Assistant for the symposium.

We thank Tati Freeke-Suwarganda, Business Director of SKOR; and Astrid Schumacher, Personal Assistant to Fulya Erdemci, for their ongoing practical and intellectual support. Justin O’Shaughnessy for assiduous copy-editing and constant support; architectural advisor Markus Miessen (Studio Miessen) for his spatial design for the symposium; Huib Haye van der Werf (Curator at SKOR) for symposium moderation and contributor interviews; Yael Messer and Gilad Reich for curating our film program; and Fleur van Muiswinkel for coordinating the Chto Delat?/Ultra-red collaboration, *How Can You be at Home in an Alien World?* The research is also made possible through the ongoing and generous support of the Art Department, Goldsmiths, University of London.

We would also like to thank the *Social Housing—Housing the Social* Research Group and the people who made our Research Platforms possible: Arno van Roosmalen (Director, Stroom Den Haag), Bregtje van der Haak (documentary filmmaker), Chris Keulemans (Artistic Director, Tolhuistuin Amsterdam), Ernst van den Hemel (philosopher and activist, University of Amsterdam), Huib Haye van der Werf (Curator, SKOR), Nils van Beek (Curator, SKOR), Partizan Publik (design and action collective,

Amsterdam), and Theo Tegelaers (Curator, SKOR). Also the Lloyd Hotel and Open Coop for hosting our Expert Meetings.

Furthermore we would like to thank: Douwe Schmidt (video), Jamain Brigitha (Senior Communication Advisor, SKOR), Bureau van Beers (Nienke van Beers and Tessa Verheul), for their support in communications, and Tatjana Günthner and Caroline Schneider from Sternberg Press.

We thank all the contributors to this volume along with those that contributed to the original symposium, as well as Teddy Cruz for his trenchant foreword. Our final thanks go to Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden of Metahaven for their collaboration on the design for *Actors, Agents and Attendants*, who through discussion of the project always expand our ideas.

