

'Post-2008' as a Field of Action and Inquiry in Uneven Housing Justice Struggles

*Original*

'Post-2008' as a Field of Action and Inquiry in Uneven Housing Justice Struggles / Vilenica, Ana; Mcelroy, Erin; Berryessa-Erich, Felicia; Wynne, Laura; Fernandez-Arrigoitia, Melissa; Lancione, Michele. - In: RADICAL HOUSING JOURNAL. - ISSN 2632-2870. - 1:1(2019), pp. 1-7. [10.54825/rjbw6624]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: 11583/2958693 since: 2022-05-10T11:09:25Z

*Publisher:*

RHJ

*Published*

DOI:10.54825/rjbw6624

*Terms of use:*

openAccess

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

*Publisher copyright*

(Article begins on next page)



## **Editorial: 'Post-2008' as a field of action and inquiry in uneven housing justice struggles**

Edited by

**Ana Vilenica**

**Erin McElroy**

**Felicia Berryessa-Erich**

**Laura Wynne**

**Melissa Fernandez-Arrigoitia**

**Michele Lancione**

The first issue of the Radical Housing Journal focuses on practices and theories of organizing as connected to post-2008 housing struggles. As 2008 was the dawn of the subprime mortgage and financial crisis, and as the RHJ coalesced ten years later in its aftermath, we found this framing apropos. The 2008 crisis was, after all, a global event, constitutive of new routes and formations of global capital that in turn impacted cities, suburbs, and rural spaces alike in highly uneven, though often detrimental, ways. Attentive to this, we hoped to think through its globality and translocality by foregrounding “post-2008” as field of inquiry. What new modes of knowledge pertinent to the task of housing justice organizing could be gained by thinking 2008 through an array of geographies, producing new geographies of theory?

The RHJ is, after all, a project conceived of and organized by an array of housing justice organizers, all committed to theorizing contemporary spatial struggles through a variety of grounded analytics and relationalities. For many of us, 2008 and its aftermaths impacted residents in the various sites in which we organize and theorize. While 2008 was catalyzed by an accumulation of prior histories of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, Western imperialism, and impossible debt (Chakravartty and Silva 2012), it exploded in novel ways across non-fungible terrains. From the heart of US empire and its Wall Street banks to the farthest frontiers of global capitalism’s reach--which include spaces within the Global South, North, East, and their countless interstices--effects varied and culminated in both expected and unexpected ways. Attentive to stark differences in these impacts across locales, we, as editors of this first RHJ issue, were curious as to how 2008 might differently emerge in other

radical housing justice movements in other translocal spaces. We thus decided to invite housing justice organizers, practitioners, and scholars alike to submit papers in which 2008 and its aftermaths could be theorized according to our four genres of journal writing: The long read, Retrospectives, Conversations, and Updates.

We were blown away by the range of impressive submissions we received after putting out the journal's first call for papers. With over 70 submissions to consider, all of which detailed important housing justice struggles and analytics from across the globe, we were hard-pressed to select what would become the RHJ's first array of articles. While we wanted to be sure to think 2008 through and with each piece, we also wanted to be sure to include pieces that trouble normative Western imaginaries that 2008 means the same thing in various terrains. What might it mean to think 2008 from a space of housing justice struggle in which it barely registered?

For instance, Maria Khristine Alvarez's "Benevolent evictions and cooperative housing models in post-*Ondoy* Manila" mobilizes the analytic of *benevolent evictions* in order to assess how benevolence is used as a technology of dispossession in Metro Manila's region of Pasig City. As she questions, why is public participation welcomed in the landscape of housing affairs, but excluded in the flood control planning? The contradictions that emerge in how public participation is managed points to particular political limitations in the arena of housing justice, one that organizers are in the process of contesting and transforming. This article takes up the temporality of post-crisis by looking at the effects not only of the 2008 global financial crisis, but also the aftermaths of the 2009 *Ondoy* flood disaster, which decimated the Philippines. In this way, Alvarez compels us to decenter 2008 from traditional geographies of economic imperialism. As she writes, while there have been concrete impacts of the subprime mortgage crisis in the Philippines, "there still remain other stories to tell."

Similarly, Salma Ismail investigates the history of poor, homeless African women fighting for their right to housing and the city in Post-apartheid South Africa. While 2008 registers in some ways in her narrative, it is far from the only tale to tell. As such, her article retraces the making of the grassroots Victoria Mxenge Project (VM), an affiliate of the South African Homeless People's Federation linked to International social movements such as Indian Slum dwellers International. The women, through a process of learning, acquired the skills to save, secure land, build more than 5,000 houses and become leaders of a housing social movement, which later became a service provider to the state. The story of what these women were able to do is a powerful reminder of the complexity and fragility of housing struggles. As Ismail illuminates, in struggling for housing, the VM brought to the fore an alternative vision of what a radical challenging of homeless might look like.

Learning from the work of Alvarez and Ismail, we ask, how might 2008 matter for those outside of more rehearsed geographies of the subprime? The articles, retrospectives, conversations, and updates that we chose for this first issue help narrate the unevenness of this temporal event. But also, they speak from the space of housing justice organizing, aligned with the call emergent from the Housing Justice in Unequal Cities network to theorize housing justice as a field of inquiry (HJUC 2019).

The articles in this issue range from the theoretical to the empirical. They are situated within various local contexts across the world, in countries that include Brazil, the United States (including, though often in contested ways, Puerto Rico), Poland, the Philippines, England, Canada, Portugal, Australia, France, South Africa, and Scotland, as well as regional struggles and networks. As these authors seek to address, what did that crisis bring to the fore, and how have activists worldwide responded to it? How do contemporary responses to 2008 relate to older mobilizations, and what has emerged as different? How can resistance be theorized today, and what can theory do for the future of housing justice struggles?

While these articles in no way can possibly tell the entire story of 2008, they do offer an important analysis, when read together. We are aware that many integral geographies from which to think 2008 are elided in this compilation, and that there are concentrations within particular spaces as well. For instance, we have two pieces about Detroit, two about Toronto, and two about Metro Manila. Of course these cities were all wrecked in unique ways by 2008, but also, the work and activism coming out of them is non-fungible and important for us to think through in their differences. The ways in which US empire and financialization function in these spaces in the wake of 2008 converge with older histories of coloniality and racial capitalism.

For instance, situated within the heart of US empire, Detroit surfaces as a key node from which to theorize 2008. As financially antipodal to Wall Street, Detroit has been historically exploited and extracted in order for Wall Street financial formations to accumulate capital. For instance, in “Liquid tenancy: ‘Post-crisis’ economies of displacement, community organizing, and new forms of resistance,” co-written by Joshua Akers, Eric Seymour, Diné Butler, and Wade Rathke, we learn about the production of race, space, divestment, and financialization in Detroit. These authors advance the notion of “liquid tenancy” as a conceptual framework for understanding how tenancy has become destabilized in the wake of 2008. Land contract and lease agreements have become technologies of tenant displacement, they show us. While learning of the horrors of housing financialization and liquid tenancy in Detroit, we also learn about struggles for the right to remain housed being led by the ACORN Home Savers Campaign and Detroit Eviction Defense--groups that the authors are part of. Like many of the articles featured in our first issue, this piece speaks to the need of producing analysis grounded within spaces of struggle.

Detroit surfaces again in Rachael Baker’s “Toward a politics of accountability: feminist ethics of care and whiteness in Detroit’s foreclosure crisis” examines the charitable interventions of The Tricycle Collective, a feminist and women-led housing advocacy group, in Detroit’s ongoing housing crisis between 2014 and 2018. Through a critical framework drawing from a feminist ethics of care, critical race studies and urban political ecology, Baker weighs the contradictions presented by the Collective’s work in, on the one hand, achieving short-term material gains for households at risk of foreclosure by charitable means, and on the other hand, furthering historic cycles of dispossession by failing to recognize and directly challenge the racialized nature of the US property system.

Here Baker’s honesty and reflections point to the importance of constructing housing justice scholarship from the space of movements. Many of the pieces here offer deep

reflections not only upon the political, economic, and racial contexts from which their respective struggles emerge, but also upon the challenges face within housing justice collectives. Historically, there has been too little space in which just reflexivity can transpire in the written form across locales, and thus we hope that the contributions and conversations offered here can offer important insight into the ongoing and uneven work of housing justice. For instance, the conversation piece, “Imploding activism: challenges and possibilities of housing scholar-activism” by Pratchi Chatterjee, Jenna Condie, Alistair Sisson, and Laura Wynne provides an inside in the conflictual process of scholar-activist work with tenants group in Sydney, Australia. The authors have applied auto-ethnographic method in order to collectively reflect experience that they gained as researchers and allies in tenants struggles. In the article, they have acknowledged challenges that they have encountered as a consequence of carefulness that has grown in them induced by the difficulty to manage the power distribution between researchers and researched as academics working within housing activism.

This generous form of reflexivity surfaces again in the conversation piece, “The ‘Caravana pelo Direito à Habitação’: towards a new movement for housing in Portugal?” by Roberto Falanga and colleagues. Their contribution provides an intimate portrait of the role of seven academic-activists in a caravan that traveled across Portugal in 2017, to increase the visibility of housing struggles, collect information, promote the creation of resident networks and influence the national agenda during an important political moment for this country. In the context of the contemporary housing crisis in Portugal and the rise of grassroots resident organizations in recent years, the authors share through their experiences the kinds of challenges that can arise, the achievements that can be fought for and won, and the lessons that can be learned from academic-activist-resident co-participation in direct action and community organizing for housing rights.

While much of the housing justice organizing that surfaces in this special issue are new in formation, responding to the contemporary post-2008 moment, it is important to recognize that in all of the cases and geographies studied here, movements rest upon prior organizing histories rooted in anti-capitalist, anticolonial, feminist, and antiracist struggle. Several pieces in this special issue, for instance, focus on squatting, houseless organizing, and renewed struggles for public and social housing, as well as land trusts and cooperatives--some of many means of refusing the authority of private property and financialization in the wake of 2008. Yet of course, the formation of private property is far from new, and has long been constitutive of racial and colonial dispossession.

For instance, in Hazel Dizon’s piece, “Philippine Housing Takeover: How the Urban Poor Claimed their Right to Shelter,” we learn about contemporary acts of reclaiming of several thousand social housing dwellings by a collective of the urban poor in Bulacan, north of Manila, in the Philippines. Dizon describes the urban poor collective’s use of an “arouse, organise, mobilise” strategy, outlining how this contributed to the successful takeover of unoccupied social housing that had previously been designated for military and police and their families. Situating her piece in the context of ongoing urban marginalization of poor

households in the Philippines, Dizon provides a compelling account of the takeover and the particular strategies that contributed to its success.

Former histories of organizing surface in “The struggles for the right to the city across spatial scale: Experiences of Grand Belleville in Paris” by Quentin Ramond and Claudio Pulger as well. Together, they examine spatial dimension of the diffusion process in social movements drawing on the examples of anti-austerity mobilisation *Nuit Debout* and local urban collective *Droit à la Belle-Ville* in Grand Belleville. This piece shows that the diffusion has been a context-dependent process, influenced by place-based political history, existing activist networks, and individual characteristics of particular groups on the local level. In the context of contemporary anti-austerity and anti-gentrification movements, the authors point to how does diffusion transpires from the global to the local arena by means of direct translation, leading to the creation of new resistance strategies.

As Dizon, as well as Ramond and Pulger reveal, in neoliberalizing contexts, it is up to organizers to create contexts of housing justice. We see this play out differently in all of the pieces of this first RHJ issue. Often, organizers point to the inadequacies of the state in providing social and public housing. In “When ‘Just Right’ is Not Right: Pushing Back Against Austerity in Toronto,” for instance, Mehedi Khan and Douglas Young bring us to Toronto, Canada in order to see this. They draw on three contemporary case studies of urban social housing revitalisation (at different scales) to highlight the socially erosive nature as well as the sometimes promising possibilities, particularly around community involvement, that these programmes entail. Firmly grounded in the context of Toronto’s growing housing affordability crisis, its neoliberal(ising) political governance and hegemonic austerity regimes, they call on the city’s activists to draw lessons from their examples in order to counteract an immediate, and continuing, decrease in essential public services like housing.

We learn about the failures of the state in providing social housing in downtown São Paulo, Brazil, in Jeroen Stevens account of urban occupation movements. Stevens undertakes a genealogy of urban occupations in the city, demonstrating the role that these movements had in reshaping the city. In “Occupy, Resist, Construct, Dwell!: A Genealogy of Urban Occupation Movements in Central São Paulo,” Stevens focuses in particular on the role of the *downtown* in struggles for decent housing, describing how housing on the urban fringe—granted by the government—failed to meet the needs of families who depended on the city centre for income and services. Stevens shows how the notion of *mutirão*, or mutual aid, was critical to the success of these social movements, making occupied space habitable through communal mutual support.

In addition to struggles for new forms of social and decent shelter, housing cooperatives emerge as vital tools with which to fight dispossession and gentrification. Hamish Kallin and Mike Shaw’s update provides a very insightful overview of a student-led co-operative housing project in Edinburgh, Scotland. The authors are careful in depicting the role of students in replicating and challenging housing injustice in the contemporary UK city and their student-led housing market. They show how housing co-ops might provide ways to break through the machine of urban studentification.

Housing cooperatives depend upon communal organizing and mutual support, as does squatting. Squatting emerges as key means of resisting dispossession in several pieces of our first issue. Like struggles for new forms of public and social housing, squatting is one of many means of fighting for equitable shelter. In Sam Burgum's, "Squatting, trespass, and direct housing action: a report on 'Making Space.'" The article summarises the historical trajectory and archival memory-space of a 2018 exhibition which took place in Sheffield, England, in 2018. More than a recounting of an event, this piece offers a critical intervention into the way we should imagine the links between the past and present of direct housing actions, as well as their connections to myriad solidarity social movements over time. Similarly, the update in this special issue from the Squatting Everywhere Kollektive (SqEK) highlights the ongoing work of a collective of activists, scholars, and hybrids of the two that formed in 2009 in order to advance knowledge within squatting communities. Largely based within Western, Northern, and Southern Europe, the network also maintains members in several other countries worldwide. In their piece, they describe how they organize, and what it means for them to merge activist and critically engaged, transdisciplinary academic work. They also provide a resource list for readers interested in engaging with more of their material. Meanwhile, the update piece, "What makes a good tenant? Squatters and migrants resisting housing discrimination in Warsaw," by Kamil Kuhr focuses on the possible alliances between dispossessed migrant tenants and squatters in pursuit of housing justice in Warsaw. This piece constructs an important lens into understanding the interconnected production of immigrant justice and housing justice solidarities in neoliberalizing Eastern Europe.

Squatting and occupations are important techniques of fighting 2008-induced housing injustice. But so are community land trusts. In "The Land is Ours," Line Algoed and María E. Hernández Torrales provide a powerful contribution. Through a number of well-informed critiques and on the basis of a very detailed empirical investigation, the article discusses how residents of the informal settlement Caño Martín Peña, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, established a community land trust to regularize land tenure and protect the historically marginalized barrios against the threat of displacement. Crucially, the latter was related to the unintended consequences of the ecological restoration of the channel, providing therefore for a complex political ground that the authors explore at length. This article brings to the fore a solid political-ecological perspective to show how the fight for the right to housing is always more than just a matter of "shelter," but intersects with wider racial, ecological and political concerns.

While all of the pieces in this first issue of the *Radical Housing Journal* speak for themselves, when compiled together, they create an important and interconnected conversation--one that points to the need for more spaces of housing justice entanglement across various scales and locales. These contributions also speak to the need for more interdisciplinary and transnational work, rooted in local housing justice organizing. How can we continue to build new solidarities and connections in the name of housing justice within the various spaces that we situate ourselves? But also, how can we create new forms of international solidarity and interconnected critique? These questions have animated the

compilation of this first issue, and continue to animate the forthcoming issues emergent from our own entangled, translocal RHJ collective.

## **References**

- Chakravartty, P., & Da Silva, D. F. (2012). Accumulation, dispossession, and debt: The racial logic of global capitalism—an introduction. *American Quarterly*, 64(3), 361-385.
- Housing Justice in Unequal Cities. (2019). Housing justice in #unequalcities. Available at: <http://unequalcities.org> (Accessed 4 April 2019).