



Soaita, A. M. (2013) Book Review: Social Housing across Europe HouardNoemie (Ed.), 2011 Paris: La Documentation Francaise 368 pp. €20 paperback ISBN 978 2 11 008849 9 paperback. Urban Studies, 50(10), pp. 2137-2140.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/147281/>

Deposited on: 22 September 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

This paper was first published in *Urban Studies*, Volume 50, Issue 10, Pages 2137-2140, August/2013 by Sage Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © Urban Studies Journal Limited, 2013. The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://usj.sagepub.com/content/50/10/2137>

To cite:

Soaita, A. M. (2013). "Book review: 'Social Housing across Europe' by Noémie Houard (Ed) " *Urban Studies*, 50(10), 2137-2140.

### **Social Housing across Europe**

Noemie Houard (ed), 2011

Paris: Imprimerie de la Direction legale et administrative

362 pp.; €20 paperback

ISBN 978-2-11-008849-9

Economic and demographic changes in the last two decades have brought an escalation of housing issues, which the current financial crisis has both deepened and brought into the public debate (Forrest and Yip 2011). Housing inequality and poverty within the EU have intensified between and within tenures, affecting homeowners, social and private tenants. Increasing economic inequality and growing housing costs have resulted in affordability problems not only for the most vulnerable but also for skilled workers, and particularly for working young adults. Fierce debates have again disputed the role of housing markets and ways to address market failures (Arestis et al. 2010, Jones et al. 2012). Regarding the latter, the reconfiguration of social housing within housing systems has attracted new scholarly attention (Glyn 2009, Hegedüs et al. 2012, Whitehead and Scanlon 2008). Inscribed within the 2010 European Year for Fighting Poverty and Social Exclusion, *Social Housing across Europe* adds to this debate, aiming 'to promote new approaches to the issue of exclusion in relation to housing, and to provide a fresh angle on France's social housing system' (pp 9). From a cross-national perspective, twenty-five contributing authors bring critical analyses of European social housing in the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and particularly, France.

The book reflects whether recent developments, notably the economic downturn, the issue of budgetary cuts and EU regulatory mechanisms, have triggered convergence across European social housing systems. In other words, it rhetorically questions whether there is a single 'European social housing model'. By systematically analysing in Part 1 the current reshaping of social housing across selected countries and by comparatively examining in Part 2 different national/local

responses to issues of allocation and financing, the book concludes in the spirit of path-dependency theory. The transformation of social housing systems is undoubtedly underway, but 'various countries have tackled it in various ways according to their own history and welfare schemes' (pp 10). Part 3 further substantiates this point by analysing the complex interplay between recent European trends and the enduring features of the 'French model'.

The focus on the changing dynamics within EU social housing systems runs throughout the book, however each part and section can be read independently. Part 1 presents national analyses of countries, which were selected according to classic debates regarding the nature of welfare regimes and housing systems. As only briefly argued in the Introduction, but not unquestionably as it surfaces within the book, Noemie Houard distinguishes between five major welfare regimes in which social housing plays a very different role. The 'social-democrat' regime – where social housing is still quantitatively significant, universally accessible and able to influence private markets – is epitomized by Finland (Section 3) and the Netherlands (Section 6). The UK exemplifies the 'liberal' regime (Section 1) whose long-standing policies of privatisation have resulted in the residualisation of social housing despite its still considerable size. The 'corporatist-statist' regime is epitomized by two very distinctive social housing systems, that of Germany's (Section 2) which has been fast shrinking and that of France's (Section 7) which has remarkably grown after 2000. Spain (Section 4) and very arguably the Czech Republic (Section 5) were selected as typical examples for the 'southern/Mediterranean' and 'post-communist' regimes, respectively, both characterized by marginal shares of social housing and widespread homeownership. These analyses show that similar economic and political factors have triggered major changes of European social housing systems, but responses have varied across and even within regime-clusters, mirroring enduring national/local institutional frameworks and social allegiances.

Cross-country comparative analyses in Part 2 give additional grounds to observe the path-dependent transformation of social housing systems across the EU. Comparing the Netherlands' and Sweden's responses, Section 8 demonstrates that strong socio-political commitments have challenged European Commission's requirement to allocate social housing exclusively to the most vulnerable, having found nationally specific ways to retain their historic universal concept. Similarly, Section 9 and 10 show that the relationship of social housing with housing markets varies considerably across EU despite many convergent trends, such as a shift to market funding, pluralistic governance and a preference for demand-side subsidies. Conversely, Section 11 emphasizes profound similarities in the history of European social housing distinguishing between its pre-WWII, early post-WWII and late 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-spatial features. The author deplores the paradigmatic shift which has taken place from the initial socio-political values and networks of solidarity which

have inspired the provision of social housing (though for the working classes rather than 'the poor') and the recent values of privatism and individualism which have triggered the residualisation and quantitative implosion of the sector within EU. Together with Section 12, which argues pro *Housing First* policies for homelessness, Part 2 makes an ardent case for the continuing importance of new social housing provision, whether in order to address market volatility and failures, boost economic growth, construct spatial policies or tackle social exclusion.

Organized in seven sections, Part 3 provides a well documented overview of French social housing regarding financing and allocation procedures; socio-spatial composition; eligibility and pathways of getting access; the effects of the new 'enforceable right to housing'; and its complex relationship to ethnicity, particularly within policies of urban renewal. A dominant theme running throughout these sections is the quandary of policy making in order that social housing maintains its traditional universalistic goal – that is 'regulating the overall housing system not only from a social perspective, but also from an economic and urban perspective (pp 246)' – while increasingly accommodating the most vulnerable. This remains difficult to achieve given the actual scale of supply (19% of total housing) and its spatial concentration in large peripheral urban estates where it is particularly challenging to balance the contrasting policy goals of 'social mix' and 'the very social'.

Contributing authors emphasize the strengths and the weaknesses of the 'French model', characterized by negotiated power between central and local governments and a long tradition of consensual public-private partnership which creates institutional 'flexibility and versatility' (pp 244) but also a lack of transparency and a (welcomed) resistance to fundamental change. The moral and political dilemma of increasing the status of social housing through the relative exclusion of the poorest or conversely, to opt for decisive residualisation by housing preponderantly the most vulnerable remains a question to be fought by the mobilization of various housing stakeholders and perhaps tackled through the whole, not just the social housing system. Noemie Houard concludes that French social housing will resist residualisation as well as significant downsizing while necessarily restructuring its financing, eligibility and allocation mechanisms in order to achieve its social mission while avoiding concentration of poverty.

For the housing scholar with an interest in comparative housing systems, Part 3 of this book is especially informative. Unfortunately, it remains up to the reader to connect more explicitly the three parts of the book and reflect on the relevance of the 'French model' within the EU and in relation to other housing models, among which the 'southern/Mediterranean' and 'post-communist' are clearly underrepresented. Consequently, what I missed most were some concluding remarks – on the book as a whole and its constitutive parts –in order to sharpen its findings and bring to a close the argument running through the book; this would have also distinguished *Social Housing*

*across Europe* from a collection of interesting papers. Apart from some obvious flaws of English translation, the book contributes to a growing multi-linguistic as well as a multi-national and multi-disciplinary dialogue across European housing scholars. Finally, a well-deserved compliment should go to the elegant graphics of this book.

Adriana Mihaela Soaita

*Centre for Housing Research, University of St Andrews*

Arestis P, Mooslechner P and Wagner K (Eds) (2010) *Housing Market Challenges in Europe and the United States* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Forrest R, and Ngai-Ming Y, (Eds) (2011) *Housing Markets and the Global Financial Crisis: The Uneven Impact on Households* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Glyn, S (Ed) (2009) *Where the Other Half Lives: Lower Income Housing in a Neoliberal World* London: Pluto Press.

Hegedüs J, Lux M, and Teller N, (Eds) (2012) *Social Housing in Transition Countries* London: Routledge.

Jones C, White M, and Dunse N, (Eds) (2012) *Challenges of the Housing Economy: An International Perspective* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Whitehead C, and Scanlon K (Eds) (2008) *Social Housing in Europe II: A Review of Policies and Outcomes* London: LSE.