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Broken Cities: Inside the Global Housing Crisis, Deborah Potts, Zed Books, London, 2020, xi – 319pp, Paperback Price £18.99, ISBN Paperback: 9781786990549

Broken Cities is an ambitious and devastating book. Potts weaves together contextualised histories, policies, and statistical trends evidencing a significant global housing crisis in cities and countries around the world. Her book overcomes a long-standing failing to view global north (GN) and south (GS) trends comparatively, and across historical divides, noting points of comparison are “often missed because of the difference in timing” (p77). The book is highly effective in achieving its ambitious aims, although this goal produces some challenges for depth and coverage. The implications and force of its argument underscore its devastating conclusions pertaining the global housing crisis. The dilemma around which the book’s arguments pivot is that markets are fundamentally unable to meet the housing demands of the urban poor, and increasingly the not-so-poor, the urban employed. The crisis for working adults is forcefully argued throughout. Potts insists the crisis is one of demand, not supply, emphasising the critical nexus between income and housing affordability: “people can only live in what they can afford” (p2), with “urban people ... caught between two sets of markets”: labour and housing (p30).

The political motivations and ideologies of multiple governance regimes are analysed alongside a searing critique of a rapidly evolving global capitalism with the rise of neoliberalism, structural adjustment programmes, and cost recovery mechanisms, and the 2008 global financial crisis a repeated reference point. The seeming insurmountable power of urban developers, alongside growing financialisation, backed by a global political elite, and unchallenged by weakened local governments, renders Pott’s conclusions, as more-than-dystopian. Indeed, the latter sections of the book (chapters 7, 8 and 9) deliver an unrelenting account of global greed producing marginalisation. Furthermore, the role of governance institutions, and politicians in (ab)using narratives of housing interventions for political gain, including justifying interventions benefitting the wealthy (p170), forms a critical foundation to this greed. And yet the book contains nuggets of possibility, including relatively underexplored urban activism; alongside the fundamentals: housing must be viewed as a public good, with governments at the forefront, providing decent homes. Potts evaluates an array of mechanisms through which this has been achieved in chapters 5 and 6, drawing attention to the variable impacts on both (potential and actual) homeowners and tenants, a critical distinction throughout her analysis. Referring to these processes as ‘squaring the circle’, employing multiple cases, she assesses these mechanisms including public housing; rent subsidisation, regulation or control; regularisation of informal and unplanned settlements; and (contentiously) programmes which transfer public housing to homeownership.

The urban, specifically global cities, with rising land values, takes centre stage, and relative location (central versus peripheral / areas with regeneration potential / areas of residence for colonial subjects / worker commuter belts) are core themes throughout. Migration (and not just rural to urban), a subject of considerable expertise for Potts, surfaces throughout, with Chapter 9 paying it particular attention. London dominates much of the analysis but often justifiably so, given its status as the “least affordable city” in western Europe (p246) illustrating many critical trends and policies covered in the book. Potts privileges contextual analyses, offering a staggering array of global cases, but with Southern Africa/London variously dominating. This spatial emphasis aligns her personal and intellectual expertise, locating herself within the book’s remit. However, the index reveals just how much distance the book covers, geographically. Urban geographical variability and implications for housing affordability, particularly for global cities (low incomes alongside high housing costs), are re-emphasised in the conclusions. A result is less room for analysing housing dilemmas within rapidly growing secondary cities, and detailed analysis of the rapidly transforming peripheries of cities

within the GS, particularly recent rapid changes within African cities peripheries, felt lacking. But one book can only do so much. The role of urban planning is central, although limited to the scale of the house or settlement. Critically reviewing housing standards, regulation and enforcement (Chapter 3), Potts places centre-stage the very human dimensions of her argument, deliberately articulating the term 'decent' as normative, implying "value judgements ... about what a society collectively feels is right" (p50), and 'home' not simply housing. She traces the welfare, health and liveability elements of housing, and standards, across varying GN and GS cases including a Texas/Mexico border comparison, and subtly employs this normative framing throughout to challenge (in)humane housing outcomes, especially size constraints and overcrowding. Drawing on sometimes extreme examples, inclusion of mundane practices undermining housing standards would have proved welcome. Nonetheless, this analysis culminates in chapter 9 where the tragic impacts on family life and demographic trends, focuses attention on the human-scale of this global housing/income crisis, as "an attack on ... families' rights to the city" (p223). Planning's role in facilitating (sub)urban accessibility, alongside other functions tied to the location of amenities and work, is a brief not a central feature of analysis.

Time, changes over time, and the significance of timing are critical cross-cutting themes. Potts makes clear throughout that "[t]he historical context is crucial" (p161), navigating numerous global cases, exploring in detail colonial imperatives, independence, the industrial revolution, the subprime mortgage crisis among others. Employing the framing "the cohort issue" (p156), Potts reveals the significance of the timing of policy interventions yielding benefits (despite the often-problematic motivations informing these), simply through "being a tenant [or indeed any other kind of beneficiary] in the right place at the right time" (p156). This productive device articulates generational differences across varied contexts, leading to the concluding warnings of the global current-day housing crisis for younger generations. Arguably other axes of differentiation could be more fully articulated, especially gender, but migrant status, race, age, tenant versus owner, and class are all fundamental to arguments made therein.

To conclude, this is critical text, without easy comparison, providing a highly readable and remarkably detailed insight into the global housing crisis. It is critical reading for scholars across urban, housing and 'development' studies, planning and geography, offering a rallying manifesto for housing activists the world over. We can only hope our political leadership engage with its provocation: "why do cities ... that can draw on workers produced by households elsewhere need to house families at all?" (p243).

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