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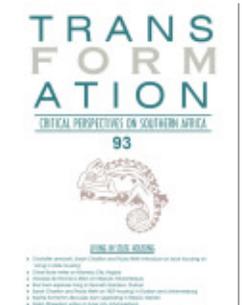
Living in state housing: expectations, contradictions and consequences

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Introduction

Living in state housing: expectations, contradictions and consequences

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Introducing the special issue

This special issue focuses on state housing in Africa as a space of living. This topic is prompted by two factors: firstly, an empirical recognition that increasing numbers of African citizens are living in state-supported housing, particularly in urban areas; and secondly, an academic awareness that there is insufficient scholarship addressing the everyday realities of living in (as opposed to legislating or delivering) state housing. The special issue has a history in a panel session convened by the authors at the 6th European Conference on African Studies held in Paris in July 2015, and we are grateful to the conference organisers for providing the physical and intellectual space for the ideas presented in this special issue to emerge.

A focus on state housing as a space of living is particularly timely in the current empirical context of urbanising Africa. It is of course by now well-known that the majority of the world's population live in urban areas, and that the African continent is experiencing rapid urbanisation, predicted to transition from 40 per cent of the population living in urban areas in 2014, to 56 per cent by 2050 (UN 2014).[1] At the same time, the rapid urbanisation that has been experienced in many countries since the 1960s has not been accompanied by adequate economic growth or improved economic prospects, in contrast to the urbanisation that accompanied industrialisation in the North (Jenkins et al 2007). Contemporary urbanisation is thus characterised by poverty, both at the level of households and governments unable to adequately support and service their populations. Consequently,

urbanisation, and the challenges associated with it, has become a dominant theme of popular and scholarly work on contemporary Africa, typically presented alongside dystopian slum imagery. As Rao (2006), echoing the work of Mike Davis (2006),[2] reminds us, the 'slum' has become a shorthand for the contemporary global South urban condition.[3] In view of this, housing has long been a key policy mechanism for responding to urbanisation and urban poverty, typically framed around alleviating slum conditions, as exemplified by the Millennium Development Goal 7/11 'to improve the lives of 100 million slum-dwellers'. More broadly, UN-Habitat's global urban agenda has prioritised a human settlement-centric focus on shelter for the urban poor. For example, while Habitat I (1976) set the stage by raising awareness of urbanisation and poverty, Habitat II (1996) built on this by prioritising policy action and promoting housing as a human right (Pugh 1997). Most recently, Habitat III (2016) is attempting to widen this agenda, from housing and services to a broader 'right to the city' (Parnell 2016). Within this UN-led context, several African governments have responded to burgeoning urbanisation alongside poverty and weak access to shelter and services through state housing delivery that takes various forms. Responses have by no means however been universal across the continent, with varied interventions evident, for example a reliance on slum demolitions and private-led informal housing provision dominating countries such as Nigeria, while South Africa has implemented a national programme of house-building.

State housing and housing policy for the urban poor

There are a multitude of ways in which the state invests in housing, from informal settlement upgrading, sites and services, social housing, land titling, and the mass construction of new houses. Indeed, the idea of 'state housing' exists only as a broad heterogeneous framework for these various forms of interventions aimed primarily at low-income groups (and sometimes middle-income groups). Within this special issue, the case studies focus on housing construction financed by the state that is both small- and large-scale (Charlton and Meth, Buire, Melo), different forms of social housing for tenants (Mosselson, Erwin), and slum upgrading (Schramm). In all cases the housing is directly facilitated by the state and widely identified as 'state housing' post-delivery, although the legal relationship to the state often shifts into private ownership. The diverse types of housing discussed by the articles in this issue represent the

dominant contemporary ways in which the state invests in housing for low-income groups in the global South.

A focus on housing for the urban poor is not new (eg Abrams 1964, Dwyer 1975). For the past 50 years, scholarship has explored housing built by low-income residents, often clustered in settlements with regionally specific labels such as *favelas, barrios, villa miserias* (Potter and Lloyd-Evans 1998). While the range of terms acknowledges the significant diversity between self-help housing settlements in different contexts, they often share common characteristics in terms of peripheral location, poor access to basic services, as well as vulnerability to poor governance, health risks and violence (UN-Habitat 2003). In the 1950s and 1960s self-help housing was viewed negatively, with dwellers blamed for their 'irregular' housing (eg Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty 1966), and a number of states focused on slum clearance and public housing programmes, subsequently criticised for the poor quality of units and lack of community participation (Potter and Lloyd-Evans 1998), or alternatively, for the emphasis placed on building standards over locational and other forms of support to people's lives (Turner 1972). In newly-independent African countries, efforts at public and formal housing delivery were expensive, accessed largely by better-off people rather than the poor, and soon overshadowed by the demands and stresses of rapid urbanisation in the 1970s (Stren 1990). By the 1980s, however, there was wide acknowledgment within Anglophone policy debates that demonising the urban poor for living in informal housing ignored their innovative housing practices (eg Turner 1982). Consequently, development agencies (most notably the World Bank) used loan conditionalities to support projects (and later policies) that supported self-help housing and residents rather than constructing new units (Potter and Lloyd-Evans 1998). However, while the shift away from demonising the poor for their living conditions is progressive, at the same time, the essential infrastructure within self-help settlements was recognised as inadequate. Consequently, Stren (1990) identifies a shift in emphasis towards provision, maintenance and management of infrastructure, marking another phase in the retreat, evident over the decades, from the delivery of housing itself to its associated services instead. However, it is worth noting that whilst housing policy in some contexts was changing, towards a focus on services rather than construction, in practice more traditional forms of mass housing construction have remained dominant, particularly in Asia, and indeed

have re-emerged elsewhere in the contemporary era with private-sector delivery (Croese et al 2016).

Housing policy in the 1990s strongly promoted the *in situ* upgrading of informal settlements, as some governments (particularly in Latin America) came to acknowledge that it was cheaper and more effective to improve services on site rather than demolish self-help housing and relocate residents. At the same time, the titling arguments of Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto (2000) were taking hold, convincing governments across the globe that by giving low-income citizens legal ownership of the land on which they reside, they would be empowered to function in the capitalist economy as homeowners. Despite widespread studies indicating that legal homeownership does not enable the urban poor to invest in upgrading their homes or use the house as collateral to secure a loan (eg Fernandes 2002, Gilbert 2002, Royston 2006, Rust 2006, Van Gelder 2009), titling continues to dominate state housing programmes, although in recent years this has been accompanied by a recognition that tenure security is more important than titles. In addition to upgrading, the last decade has witnessed a return to state-driven programmes of mass housing construction in the global South, including in some African countries (Croese et al 2016), but with reliance on private-sector delivery (in contrast to 1960s public housing programmes). Buckley et al (2016) chart this by analysing 16 so-called developing and emerging economies' current programmes for large-scale public housing construction (within Africa this includes South Africa, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Rwanda). Their analysis is pessimistic, with contemporary mass housing delivery mirroring the errors of the past in terms of: poor housing quality, weak integration into the existing city fabric, and an absence of innovative financing. Croese et al (2016) explain the emergence of mass housing delivery initiatives partly by pointing to the inability of support-style policies to tackle growing shortages or backlogs in housing, and partly by highlighting the context of new forms of external investment into African countries. In addition, homeownership models dominate these mass housing programmes, rooted in the global neoliberal belief that homeownership is a means for wealth creation. The third form of state housing covered by this special issue, social housing for tenants, has been the least popular form of state housing in recent years, with governments typically reluctant to invest in rental stock (see UN-Habitat 2003), in part due to the significant ongoing financial and administrative support it

requires and in part due to the neoliberal paradigm promoting homeownership. However, in some contexts this hesitancy is starting to change as the neoliberal framework has encouraged the state to use public-private agencies in the role of state landlord (Gilbert 2014). Such partnerships typify forms of management identified in some of the articles below, where social housing is regulated by private companies controlling applications for housing, and daily access into housing including the passage and presence of visitors. Partnership-management can prove effective for residents, but can also suffer rigidity, at odds with residents' lives (see Mosselson's article), or can fail to adopt coherent partnerships, and effect controversial decisions about delivery logistics, allocation, and affordability which result in detrimental outcomes for residents (Buire's article). Critically, the management practices of non-partnership municipal institutions evidence the challenges of maintaining social housing in contexts where regular cost recovery mechanisms fail and evictions are politically unpalatable (Erwin's article).

Within scholarship on all forms of state supported housing, it is widely recognised that an exclusive focus on the provision of housing, as the solution to urban poverty, is problematic. As John Turner (1968) recognised nearly 50 years ago, the provision of physical shelter does not alleviate poverty by itself, and indeed can exacerbate poverty where a household is unable to meet the additional costs of renting or ownership. Turner's findings and famous description of 'housing as a verb' (1972) are echoed across the globe, with reports from state housing programmes situated in diverse locations, from Colombia (Gilbert 2002), to South Africa (Lemanski 2011), and Argentina (Van Gelder 2009) revealing the limitations of a narrow focus on housing delivery as a means to alleviate poverty. Turner's approach was revolutionary in arguing that the experts on housing for the poor were the poor themselves, giving rich empirical accounts of how households were successfully and innovatively meeting their own needs through self-help housing strategies, juxtaposing these against state-led programmes that were unable to accommodate the diversity and changing nature of human need. In this context, it is hardly surprising that ten years later Otto Koenigsberger (1979) vehemently argued against state housing construction. However, state-supported low-cost housing is a significant policy and electoral tool across African cities, drawing on notions of urban formality, social decency, housing rights, material integrity, welfare, and citizenship to underpin its aims.

In recognising the arguments of Turner, in the context of ongoing provision of state housing, it seems axiomatic to shift the focus away from analysing state policy, to instead focus primary attention on low-income residents themselves, seeking to understand how those living in state housing understand and relate to their housing at the everyday scale. Whilst much has been written about state housing policies, particularly in terms of political conception, practical implementation and logistical hurdles, far less is known about the everyday realities of living in state housing. The existing literature on state housing is dominated by quantitative assessments of housing delivery focusing on output and costs, and policy-based critiques focusing on a specific country or city, alongside settlement-based analyses of housing policy-in-practice. This work tends to examine the processes informing housing policy, finance mechanisms, allocation and delivery but results in a lack of knowledge on the post-allocation experiences of those who live in state-supported housing.

This special issue draws together articles that critically examine the lived experiences of state housing in African cities from the perspective of residents (and to a lesser degree, state actors). Frustrated by the absence of attention in scholarly debates around the realities of living in state housing, we have brought together perspectives and scholars to illuminate state housing from the perspective of residents. With reference to other contexts such as the public housing estates of Europe and the UK, scholars have argued for attention to be paid to practices of everyday life, to shed light on the relational worlds that shape peoples' experiences and related prospects for social cohesion or social exclusion, particularly in built environments which came to be associated with social problems (Healey 1998). In this collection we argue that a focus on people and communities is needed as a counter to the dominance of studies addressing housing policy, where reference to those affected by housing policies addresses 'beneficiaries' rather than 'people'. This humanistic approach is also a means to uncover the messy ways in which state housing investment functions 'on the ground', consequently illuminating the complex and often contradictory realities of this form of housing policy in practice. While Turner (1963) described the innovative strategies of households in self-help housing in order to persuade policymakers to support rather than destroy self-help settlements, our focus reveals the importance of context-specific ethnographic studies to better understand

the multiple and diverse impacts of state housing investment on people. This approach reveals a critical layer of information and analysis that is needed to inform the ways in which ongoing and future housing policy, and in particular state housing initiatives, can serve to meet the actual (rather than perceived) needs of people and communities.

Introducing the articles

The six articles in this special edition cover a range of empirical locations, from Luanda, to Nairobi, Maputo, Johannesburg, and Durban, and draw on a diverse mixture of methods to produce differing housing ethnographies facilitating different ways of exploring 'lived experiences'. All six articles use their specific empirical context to examine residents' and state actors' expectations and subsequent experiences of state housing programmes. The articles all use interviewing (albeit in different ways, including oral histories) to underpin and facilitate rich understandings of these expectations and experiences. Accounts are enhanced through the use of other qualitative methods such as diaries, observations (including participant), media and policy analysis, as well as spatial and visual techniques of plan analysis and mapping. This spectrum of qualitative methods yields multiple layers of data, at different scales, across varying time-frames and from contrasting perspectives. It works to open up analyses of state housing, rather than pin down or pre-empt interpretations. Thus within and through these methods and perspectives, the contradictions of housing the urban poor in cities where affordable and well-located space is highly restricted, where social inequalities and tensions are rife, and where unemployment persists in shaping residents daily lives are considered. Finally, the articles in this collection reflect on the consequences of diverse experiences of state housing in terms of their social insights into residents' lives, their mobility patterns, livelihoods and citizenship practices. Taken collectively, these articles reveal the importance of housing ethnographies to complement housing policy studies in order better to understand the relationship between policy and its application and reception by those it is intended to benefit in contemporary urban society. This focus illuminates a key dimension relevant to housing policy assessment but one which can be overlooked or under-scrutinised.

Sarah Charlton and Paula Meth's article demonstrates how a national housing policy affects human lives. Focusing on South Africa's National

Housing Subsidy Programme, the authors provide a rich empirical account of the ways in which beneficiaries relate to their state-subsidised housing based on qualitative data from two cities, Durban and Johannesburg. While South Africa's housing policy has been broadly critiqued in the past (eg quality of housing and peripheral location), this article shifts the focus of analysis away from the technical language and scale of 'policy' or 'beneficiary', to instead focus on people and communities, their lives, perceptions and experiences. Using the words of residents themselves to demonstrate the relationships between people and housing, the article reveals the complex, multiple and often contradictory ways in which policy and people intersect.

Chloé Buire uses the example of Kilamba City, constructed to the south of Luanda in 2009-10 using Chinese 'oil-for-infrastructure' investment funds, to highlight the inherent contradictions of large-scale state-supported housing. While Kilamba City's 'rent-to-buy' model scheme is innovative and progressive in producing Angola's first affordable public housing scheme aimed at the middle class, this success exists alongside concerns regarding the origins of the funds, as well as the absence of social infrastructure (eg access to health, education services) to accompany physical infrastructure. Buire uses Lefebvre's production of space to frame the analysis of the ways in which the materiality of Kilamba City contributes to the emergence of citizenship for residents. This citizenship is complex and contradictory, framed around both pride and dissatisfaction related to a physical development that is perceived as simultaneously frail and sturdy.

Aidan Mosselson's study of regeneration in inner-city Johannesburg illuminates the diverse stories of urban life for social housing tenants residing in centrally-located buildings. This article highlights the often contradictory ways in which residents relate to their housing, simultaneously as a space of urban inclusion and exclusion. While well-located housing in particular has a transformative effect in enabling residents to participate in urban social and economic life, the regulation of social housing is exclusionary, for example, preventing tenants from actively participating in governing the buildings in which they live. Mosselson explores tenants' ways of inhabiting the inner-city often as a place of temporality and necessity, with notions of permanence and 'home' ascribed elsewhere.

Kira Erwin's article is, like Mosselson's, focused on tenants rather than home-owners, and offers an empirically rich and in-depth analysis of a single state-subsidised rental estate in Durban. The article is particularly unique in this collection in focusing on state accommodation that, in being inherited from the apartheid regime, is affected by its historical trajectory. Using empirical data from three years of fieldwork, Erwin employs a theoretical framework of place identity to explore the relational connections between state housing and the development of people's sense of self, community and social belonging. In this Durban case study, a place identity perspective illuminates the relational ways in which residents hierarchically position themselves within the city, both individually and as a community, as inferior and superior in relation to other people and places. In this perspective housing (its status and location) becomes the lens through which to understand broader forms of social change (rather than the traditional focus on housing itself as the social change).

Vanessa Melo uses the empirical example of Maputo, Mozambique to highlight the tensions between state-led top-down housing programmes and the citizen-led bottom-up responses that consequently emerge. The rationale for Melo's article resonates with Charlton and Meth's, focusing on the mismatch between state housing policy and the ways in which citizens use their housing. Using Lefebvre's right to the city as her conceptual framework, Melo highlights the contradictions between the explicit goals of a state-driven low-income housing programme, modest in scale but nevertheless intended to help alleviate socio-spatial inequality in the context of rapid urbanisation, and the ways in which long-term human-centric implementation functions on the ground. Based on the Maputo case study, Melo reveals how low-income housing programmes do alleviate socio-spatial disparities through the provision of shelter, but also exacerbate inequalities through bottom-up citizen-led processes whereby housing recipients' use of their housing (eg territorial occupation and physical upgrading) results in exclusionary forms of gentrification. Consequently Melo reveals the contradictions of state housing: between state intentions and recipient use, as well as conflicts around different urban residents' needs at different times.

Sophie Schramm's article shifts away from southern Africa, to address the ways in which the state is limited in its implementation of the Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme in Kibera. The case study reveals the impossibility of a national policy meeting the heterogeneous needs of a

highly diverse community. For while Kibera hosts landlords and tenants, alongside various scales of state actors, all acting in the quasi spaces of legality, the implementation of a national upgrading programme ultimately creates a power vacuum that facilitates exploitation. Schramm uses this case study to demonstrate the tensions and disruptions between the state's modernist housing idyll, and the realities and practices of life 'on the ground' as a snapshot of state-society relations in urban Africa.

The six articles are both diverse and similar, drawing on accounts from a wide range of contexts to reveal parallel stories that illuminate the divergent ways in which urban residents relate to state housing. Indeed, it is remarkable that despite addressing tenants and home-owners found in five cities across three countries, from the inner-city to the urban periphery, a clear unifying theme related to the contradictions of state housing emerges. By shifting focus away from a technical perspective on housing policy, to instead embrace the lived experiences and perceptions of people and communities (rather than beneficiaries and projects per se), all six articles in this collection reveal the ways in which relationships between state housing, people and communities are framed by contradictory experiences and perceptions such as pride and discontent, gratitude and anger, exclusion and inclusion, permanence and temporality, inferiority and superiority. Consequently, a focus on the everyday lived experience illuminates the inherent tensions between the expectations of state housing policy – for example to create order and bring modernisation, to confer recognition and foster inclusion, to offer opportunity and provide stability – and the actual ways in which citizens use, live and perceive state housing, often in multiple, diverse and contradictory ways.

Notes

1. While we recognise the limitations of these kinds of UN data (as demonstrated for example by Satterthwaite 2007), they nonetheless provide useful indicators for predicted changes, and do provide the basis for national and global housing policies.

2. Although Davis' work is heavily-criticised, particularly for hyperbolic inaccuracies, his book has been influential in raising the profile of 'slums'.

3. The popularity of the 'slum' term in the 1990s-2000s, particularly by aid agencies, is widely critiqued (eg Gilbert 2007), and use of the term has declined.

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