

Social Housing and ‘roll-with-it’ Neoliberalism in South America and Australia

Authors: Hayley Henderson¹, Matthew Caulkins², Victor Bunster³ and Raul Marino Zamudio⁴

1. PhD Candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning and the Southern Cities Research Centre, The University of Melbourne.

2. PhD Candidate, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

3. PhD Candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne.

4. PhD Candidate, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne and CSIRO

Abstract: This paper responds to calls for comparative urban research (Dear, 2005; McFarlane, 2010; McFarlane & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2004, 2006) that bridges traditional divides between regions, political spectrums and wealth profiles (Robinson 2011). It draws comparisons from cities in South America and Australia to analyse the planning concept of social housing and its varied policy responses. The authors’ combined research and collaboration offer a unique perspective on the evolution of social housing policy as well as contemporary issues and innovations in accessing housing for disadvantaged populations. The paper examines approaches to social housing, forms of delivery or acquisition and the political context and discourses used to support social housing. The main case studies are Santiago, Bogota and Melbourne, though evidence from research conducted in Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Sydney and Medellin is also drawn upon in this paper.

Keil’s concept of ‘roll-with-it’ neoliberalism is the defining thread that knits together the cases studied. Urban politics has significantly shifted over the past three decades of neoliberalisation in each context: Following the parallel roll-back of State-led social housing programs and the roll-out of neoliberal adjustments over the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal forms of social housing policy and delivery have become normalised to different extents in all case contexts studied. In particular, evidence suggests a prevalence of enterprise models and competition as a central tenet of contemporary social housing policy and delivery. Research also highlights innovative alternatives, often ‘nonliberal modes’ (Keil, 2009), from interrelated movements “together with the state, despite the state and against the state” (de Souza, 2006), from progressive taxation and inclusionary zoning to direct occupation and resistance movements.

This paper critically describes the evolution of social housing policy in each context with a focus on alignment with neoliberalisation. Then, it examines to what extent contemporary social housing policy and delivery are informed and bounded by ‘roll-with-it’ neoliberalism. It provides an account of some progress made in addressing social housing need within roll-with-it neoliberal contexts. It also explores possibilities of change that may transcend the roll-with-it dynamic to address the needs for disadvantaged groups to access appropriate housing. Evidence is drawn from policy and document analysis conducted by the authors, as well as interview responses relating to governance and social housing. Each author is conducting separate doctoral research on related topics and through the *RMIT-University of Melbourne Latin American Urban Studies PhD group* parallel themes have been identified. Overall, this paper examines social housing under ‘roll-with-it’ neoliberalism and compares its associated urban politics, both neoliberal normalisations and counter-processes.

In all cases studies, social housing was predominantly introduced in the post-war period from the late 1940s and into the 1950s as a response to mass rural-to-urban migration and/or as part of economic stimulus packages alongside ‘sanitation’ or ‘urban renewal’ efforts. Some

local particularities contributed to social housing need in this era, for example in Colombia with internally displaced groups from the conflict between guerrilla groups and the Colombian army. All cases then experienced a significant shift towards market-led housing policies in the 1980s that was deepened in the 1990s. Policymakers have sought to address part of the persistent social housing deficit through increased subsidisation into the 2000s, reflecting the predominance of 'roll-with-it' neoliberalisation.

A common phenomenon has been the shift in focus in housing responses toward middle income households given increasing demand from this sector and their higher capacity to leverage or directly fund part of their housing solution, such as 'affordable housing' programs in Australia (e.g. National Rental Affordability Scheme), Brazil (e.g. 'My House My Life' program, Krause, Balbim, & Neto, 2013) and Chile (e.g. 'Subsidy for Families of the Middle Sectors' and the 'Rental Subsidy') or the land purchase loan programs in Argentina (e.g. PROCREAR). Distinct trends are emerging with these programs. For example, the quantitative deficit has been more comprehensively addressed in Santiago and some Argentine cities, while in other contexts, like Sao Paulo or Melbourne, more inroads have been made in improving the quality and diversity of social housing responses, though demand continues to greatly outstrip supply in these cities.

Today, there are multiple variants of social housing programs, from retrofitting and assisted self-build housing models (Chile) and large public and private financed social housing projects (Colombia) to the incipient incorporation of progressive taxation and inclusionary zoning (Sao Paulo and Melbourne), which aim to increase social housing supply and deliver quality of life improvements for disadvantaged groups. Within a neoliberal context the actors involved in social housing have multiplied, for example with a greater reliance on NGOs to deliver community housing, networks of community groups or the private sector in delivering cost-effective housing. Struggles have also been led directly by marginalised groups to gain access to dignified housing, from indigenous peoples negotiating the construction of collective spaces in social housing developments in metropolitan Santiago (M. Fontana, pers. comm., 23 Oct. 2015) to a movement that demands central housing by occupying abandoned buildings in Sao Paulo (Earle 2012) or through land appropriation and occupation in Bogota. Nevertheless, lack of social mix and segregation have been persistent problems, largely due to concentrations of social housing in peripheral locations driven by marketised social housing.

Studying social housing across Australia and South America emphasises that while planning concepts do travel, there is a process of adaptation to local planning culture and practices. Understanding and explaining planning practice and cultural influences helps to elucidate more clearly the way theory becomes manifest in practice and the similarities and variations that can exist. As planning and urbanisation trends become increasingly interrelated in the roll-with-it neoliberal era, it's important to strengthen analytical frames by understanding unique local practices. Furthermore, as access to appropriate housing becomes increasingly difficult, there is an urgent need to uncover lessons about social housing experiences that can help inform a debate on social housing policy direction. Innovations from Australia and South America offer a rich ground for this study.

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