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Chapter Author(s): BRIAN DOUCET, PIERRE FILION and RIANNE VAN MELIK

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Book Editor(s): BRIAN DOUCET, PIERRE FILION, RIANNE VAN MELIK

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# ONE

## Introduction

Brian Doucet, Pierre Filion, and Rianne van Melik

“We’re all in this together” was one of the first rallying cries of the pandemic. It could be heard (and still can be heard) from politicians and businesses. In March 2020, it was also a key message from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). However, critical scholarship quickly dismissed this message as it did not reflect what was happening on the ground. As discussed in Volume 1, it is abundantly clear that the COVID-19 pandemic was not a great ‘equalizer’, but rather an event whose impact intersected with a myriad of pre-existing inequalities affecting different people, places, and geographic scales.

While the virus itself does not discriminate between rich and poor, Black and White, apartment or house, its impact has been highly uneven as it finds weak spots in society, amplifying pre-existing inequalities and creating new ones. In many instances, these pre-existing inequalities were amplified by the continued financialization and commodification of housing (Marcuse and Madden, 2016; August and Walks, 2018), and more than a decade of austerity imposed after the 2008–09 financial crisis. Nowhere is this more apparent than in housing. Cuts to housing that disproportionately affected those on low

incomes, women, racialized populations, and persons with disabilities were some of the major austerity measures in cities and countries around the world (Vilenica et al, 2020).

Despite these cuts and neoliberal approaches to planning and policy before the pandemic, housing has become a central pillar of governmental and public health approaches to fighting the virus. Housing is key to understanding how the virus spreads. ‘Staying at home’ has been one of the main public health messages and central to one’s ability to self-isolate and quarantine (Ren, 2020; Rogers and Power, 2020). However, for many, the home is not a place of safety. For those who lack safe, secure housing, particularly unsheltered, or homeless people, being without a house can both increase exposure to COVID-19, and create barriers in accessing health care and support (Rogers and Power, 2020; Tsai and Wilson, 2020). This is why one of the key housing responses to the pandemic has been to provide temporary shelter to these populations (Parsell et al, 2020). Instances of domestic violence have risen during the pandemic, and for many people, including LGBTQ young people, homes can be unwelcome, or unsafe spaces (Rogers and Power, 2020; Salerno et al, 2020; Vilenica et al, 2020).

Overcrowding has also been a major focus of attention, although there have been few instances of planning and policy measures to deal with it (van der Merwe and Doucet, 2021; Grant, 2020; Moos et al, 2020). Overcrowding occurs when people live in tight quarters designed for fewer inhabitants than currently reside there. Density (the number of people residing in a square kilometer) and overcrowding can be related, but they are not the same thing and there are many instances of overcrowding in communities that are not particularly dense. Density can play a role in making life during the pandemic more challenging, as Phil Hubbard (Chapter Four) describes with regard to micro-apartments in hyper-dense city centers. However, there is little evidence to suggest that population density, in and of itself, is a major contributor to spreading COVID-19 (Boterman, 2020; Hamidi et al, 2020; Moos

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et al, 2020). Instead, the conditions where the virus can thrive are what the Toronto-based author and placemaker Jay Pitter (2020) refers to as ‘forgotten densities’. In these economic, social, and spatially peripheral areas (Keil et al, 2020), overcrowded, or otherwise substandard housing conditions intersect with inadequate transportation, chronic unemployment, racism, and over-policing. These ‘forgotten densities’ can be found in the *favelas* of Brazil (Chapter Seven), peripheral estates in Dublin (Chapter Seventeen) or rooming houses in Kitchener (Chapter Sixteen).

While housing is central to these stories, these conditions intersect with issues of land use, racism, transportation, economic development, and inequality. This is why our volume on housing and inequality is less focused on bricks and mortar questions and more centered on how identities such as class, race, gender, ability, and age all intersect with housing to create uneven experiences and outcomes during the pandemic (see also Volume 1).<sup>1</sup> It has been demonstrated, for example, that those in the lowest income groups and households coming from minority, racialized backgrounds are most-likely to reside in overcrowded housing (Hall et al, 2020; McKee et al, 2020; Patel et al, 2020).

Because of this, home has been central to our variegated experiences of the pandemic and, despite the uniform messaging of the ‘stay at home’ guidelines, life during lockdown was neither uniform nor equal (Munro, 2020). The experiences of housing and ‘home’ during the first wave of the pandemic therefore offer key insights into the uneven social, spatial, and racial impacts of the pandemic. Alexis Corbière, a French MP from Saint-Denis, a poor *banlieue* outside Paris stated succinctly: ‘We are locked down in our inequality’ (see Willsher and Harrap, 2020). Furthermore, if we understand that for many marginalized groups, activities normally performed inside one’s home are often done in public, semi-public, or semi-private spaces, the past year has also seen increased security, surveillance, and restrictions (Furiasse and Tareen,

Chapter Fourteen; Turman et al, Chapter Sixteen; see also Volume 3).

In extreme cases, the home has been a place of death. Analysis by Martine August, using data compiled by Nora Loretto showed that in some long-term care homes in Canada, more than 40 percent of residents died because of COVID-19, trends which were worse in private, for-profit facilities, rather than in public ones (August, 2020). Lukas Stevens (Chapter Eight) provides more insight into this by focusing on the precarious working and living conditions of employees at long-term care facilities. But even in less extreme instances, the concept of home – both the physical dwelling and the private spaces associated with one's home – are anything but secure, and the experience of the pandemic has been one of fear, insecurity, and deteriorating physical and mental health. This combination of factors has led Rebecca Tunstall (Chapter Two) to describe COVID-19 as a housing disease.

It is clear that the pandemic has increased social, spatial, and economic inequalities. For critical researchers, policy makers, advocates, and civic leaders, the question now facing us is how can housing play a role in reducing, rather than exacerbating these inequalities? The challenge is how to ensure the planning, political, and policy responses to the pandemic do not work to further amplify these inequalities. These are the central issues addressed in this volume.

As Rogers and Power (2020) note, some housing policy has evolved extremely rapidly since the onset of the pandemic, while in other instances, it has remained static. There is a danger that responses to the pandemic will end up focusing on the new challenges facing many middle-class households (such as more space requirements to work from home), at the expense of the urgent needs of marginalized communities that long predate this pandemic. Vilenica et al (2020) ask the important question of who and what are the emergency measures enacted thus far actually protecting? Is it vulnerable residents and communities? Or is it dominant racial and

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class interests? Parsell et al (2020) look critically at temporary measures to address homelessness in Australia. Temporary is the key word. Measures such as providing emergency accommodation to unsheltered populations do not address the structural causes of homelessness. Rather than doing this out of concern for the health and well-being of homeless populations, these measures are framed from the perspective of a public health emergency where unsheltered populations are seen as a threat to the health of the wider population.

Because of the impact of COVID-19, Buckle (2021) argues that housing researchers and scholars should consider themselves to be conducting 'disaster research'. Research into recent natural disasters offer insights into how 'shock doctrines' produce policies that increase inequalities through the privatization of public assets, austerity measures, increased surveillance, and other measures (Klein, 2007). Like Parsell et al (2020), Vilenica et al (2020) suggest that the central policy goal in these cases is to preserve the status quo through temporary policies that do not address the structural conditions that produce unequal cities. Hyra and Lees (Chapter Three) posit that the foundations for the next wave of gentrification are being laid during this pandemic, citing past experiences of Hurricane Katrina and the Great Recession of 2007–09 as examples of 'disaster capitalism' that fuel further commodification of housing and gentrification. Although as Mendes (2020) notes, the last financial crisis also created the framework for networks of social movements to develop that would actively resist and challenge these further waves of gentrification. Their actions exerted pressure on governments to create rapid, if temporary responses to immediate challenges of the pandemic that 'anchor[ed] the urban struggle in housing as a human right, essential to life' (Mendes, 2020: 327).

As Rogers and Power (2020) have noted, the pandemic has brought about rapid policy change. Previously unprecedented or unthinkable housing measures have been implemented in cities and countries around the world to deal with both

the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. These include temporary mortgage relief, bans on evictions, using empty hotels as shelters, and allowing encampments to remain in place. Many neighborhoods have also seen measures to improve quality of life through limiting spaces for cars and creating new public spaces (Camerin and Fabris, [Chapter Six](#); see also Volume 3). Yet very few of these initiatives have addressed structural issues of housing that have contributed to divided cities for decades and most are designed to be temporary. Rent payments have not been cancelled, just deferred; some banks even charged interest during mortgage holidays (see Tunstall, [Chapter Two](#)). Therefore, what we have seen thus far can be interpreted as attempts to maintain the status quo of ‘the exchange value of housing to be a pivotal axis of capitalist circulations’ (Vilenica et al, [2020](#): 12) in the face of unprecedented challenges to both individual human health, households, *and* to a capitalist system that derives wealth through commodifying the basic human need for shelter (housing markets would collapse if large sections of the population could no longer afford to pay their mortgages or rents).

Housing in the age of COVID-19 is therefore an extension and amplification of a pre-existing crisis. Because of this, we take the starting point that much of what is needed does not require new solutions. As Buckle ([2021](#)), Maalsen et al ([2020](#)), Rowley et al ([2020](#)), van der Merwe and Doucet ([2021](#)), and others note, investments in new social housing and emergency shelters, banning unjust evictions, curbing property speculation, and permanent rent controls are solutions that have been called for by critical housing scholars for many years. And Roman-Alcalá ([2020](#)) reminds us, the groups that have suffered the most because of the pandemic – low-income, racialized, and marginalized communities – also struggle to find safe, secure, and affordable housing under capitalism.

Returning to the challenge of how to create more equitable housing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the chapters

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assembled in this volume provide key insights and perspectives. They do this by reflecting on how what is happening during the pandemic (particularly in its early phases) is connected to longer-term trends and trajectories. Included within them are important voices and knowledge that rarely feature prominently in mainstream planning, policy, and political debates. As discussed in Volume 1, vulnerable and marginalized communities rarely play a leading role in shaping responses to crises. This makes the challenge of creating a more equitable city more difficult because those who are most impacted by policy and planning are largely absent from the decision-making that profoundly shapes their lives. With that in mind, chapters in this volume draw on the experiences and knowledge of marginalized people and communities in order to amplify these perspectives within wider planning and policy debates. This is necessary in order to create equitable responses to the pandemic that address the root causes of housing challenges. This volume, and the other three in this series, attempt to amplify these perspectives to shift debates about how to respond to the pandemic, and, ultimately, shift power-relations about who decides how to address this current crisis, and move forward from it. Centering these perspectives within planning and policy debates is necessary if we are to move beyond Band-Aid solutions and progress towards creating more equitable cities.

### **Outline of this book**

The book is divided into two parts. The first part looks at housing systems more broadly, including inter-related processes of design, finance, and policy. The section starts with Rebecca Tunstall's ([Chapter Two](#)) examination of whether COVID-19 is a housing disease. She points towards poor housing conditions, specifically overcrowding and its relationship with poor health, as being key to understanding the ongoing harms caused by the pandemic, as well as factors that inhibit abilities to contain it. With much of the population staying at home



during lockdowns, issues such as a shortage of space, not enough bedrooms, and poor-quality housing take on greater importance, particularly for mental health. In addition to this, as her chapter explains, COVID-19 is a disease which exposes vulnerabilities in the UK housing system, in both the public sector and the private-market.

Derek Hyra and Loretta Lees ([Chapter Three](#)) explore two possible futures of gentrification in the post-COVID-19 city: de-gentrification, which suggests that the forces driving gentrification will cause the process to reverse, and disaster gentrification, where capital exploits the situation caused by the pandemic and gentrification continues, or even grows. As noted earlier, they argue that the health and financial disasters of the COVID-19 pandemic create new opportunities for capitalism to exploit the situation, likely producing new rounds of disaster gentrification in the years ahead.

In [Chapter Four](#), Phil Hubbard takes a critical look at the tremendous growth in ‘micro-apartments’ in London and other global cities over the past decade. These small flats are not suited to a prolonged period of working from home, or the need to self-isolate. While this density has been seen as an antidote to unsustainable suburban sprawl, Hubbard argues the response to build hyper-dense developments of micro-apartments in city centers can be equally damaging for health and well-being in the age of COVID-19, and the chapter explores these challenges with respect to the inter-related concepts of privacy and intimacy. He notes that these developments fit squarely with government policies, yet actually cost far more per square meter than larger-sized units. Like Tunstall, he notes that COVID-19 has exposed a housing system in the UK that was essentially broken; Hubbard suggests that privacy should be a priority for post-COVID-19 housing policy, especially in dense developments.

The role of design is further explored by Zeynep Atas and Yuvacan Atmaca in [Chapter Five](#). They examine the degree to which two very different parts of Mardin, Turkey, are able

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to deal with the consequences of the pandemic and provide a 'tolerant' living environment for their inhabitants. The modern, centrally planned parts of the city (which had long been favored by middle- and upper-class households) were less able to provide the basic necessities of life, and were less conducive to self-sufficiency than the old city, which grew organically over centuries and feature an economic context where mutual aid, connection to the local, and solidarity are defining characteristics. Urban design, health, and housing systems are also explored in Federico Camerin and Luca Fabris's [Chapter Six](#) on the 'Superblock' concept in Barcelona. The Superblock groups nine blocks of the city's 19th-century Eixample (Extension) neighborhoods into a tight-knit community with shared facilities that can be resilient against threats of climate change, social vulnerability, and, in today's context, the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to a Superblock is a reallocation of road space as parks, public facilities, and community spaces. This has led to a sharp decline in traffic within Superblocks, and an increase in air quality, something that is important to mitigating the spread, and effects of COVID-19.

Wesley Xavier's intersectional [Chapter Seven](#) examines how the social conditions of Black and/or poor populations in Brazilian cities has resulted in both economic and health consequences being far harsher for these groups in one of the world's most unequal countries. Housing plays a major role in this, because low-income residents can often only find housing in *favelas* on the periphery. These neighborhoods are not only far away from jobs, but also have been largely abandoned by the state and consist of substandard and overcrowded housing. This section concludes with [Chapter Eight](#) by Lukas Stevens that examines how home and work intersect at long-term care facilities in Montreal, spaces that function as both places of residence and employment. Like Xavier, Stevens highlights the relationship between poor housing conditions and precarious employment. Many workers at long-term care facilities in and around Montreal have few housing options and therefore tend

to live far from the facilities they work in, and Stevens notes the ways in which the virus moves between facilities scattered throughout the region and the low-income neighborhoods where many care workers reside. He also articulates that residents of these care homes constituted 70 percent of Quebec's COVID-19-related deaths during the first wave of the pandemic.

The second part of this volume explores the experiences of housing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes not only stories of life during lockdown, but how the pandemic has reshaped many experiences of the home, both in terms of one's private dwelling but also other public-, semi-public- and private-spaces that perform functions associated with the 'home'.

This section begins, fittingly, with an examination of life in the first city to experience lockdown, Wuhan, China. Liangni Sally Liu, Guanyu Jason Ran, and Yu Wang ([Chapter Nine](#)) analyze the diaries of the writer Fang Fang, which provided the first account of life under lockdown and were a vital source of information about the pandemic for many Chinese citizens. However, after the diaries were published in English, public sentiment turned against Fang Fang, though her accounts remain one of the most vivid of the early phases of the pandemic.

Philip Brown, Rachel Armitage, Leanne Monchuk, Dillon Newton, and Brian Robson ([Chapter Ten](#)) outline in broad terms how housing inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Drawing on interviews with households living in poor-quality housing, they investigate how pre-existing housing conditions amplify residents' experiences of that housing. Their chapter focuses on physical characteristics of dwellings (that is, damp and heating problems) as well as social aspects (including dealing with landlords and not enough space). Poor-quality housing amplifies stress and mental health challenges in large part because people are spending most of their time at home and therefore these substandard conditions

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were ever-present in their lives. In [Chapter Eleven](#), Alexandra Parker and Julia de Kadt examine the lives of elderly residents in the Gauteng city-region in South Africa, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has already placed a disproportionate financial and caregiving burden on the elderly. They use data from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory's Quality of Life Survey to better understand the challenges for the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They find that while they may be able to absorb some of the socio-economic shocks of the pandemic better than younger generations, they are particularly vulnerable in terms of their physical and mental health.

The next two chapters explore the housing experiences during the pandemic of specific populations. Rosalie Warnock's chapter ([Chapter Twelve](#)) focuses on life under lockdown for families who have children with autism. As her research points out, it is not the challenges of autism per se that contribute to different experiences during the pandemic, but rather the pre-existing social, spatial, and economic inequalities that often manifest themselves through the home and housing. Her chapter focuses on issues of space (crowding), safety, and care, and she recommends the appropriate allocation of social housing for families who have disabled children, combined with adequate financial and practical support for adults and young carers.

Detroit was one of the first American cities where the virus arrived. In [Chapter Thirteen](#), Tam E. Perry, James McQuaid, Claudia Sanford, and Dennis Archambault, all members of the Senior Housing Preservation – Detroit (SHP-D) coalition, discuss the ways in which the pandemic has impacted seniors in the city and chronicles the ways in which SHP-D and other organizations worked with residents to provide essential services for their community.

For many, the 'home' extends beyond a house or apartment to include schools, shops, and places of worship. In their chapter ([Chapter Fourteen](#)) on ethnic enclaves in New York and Chicago, Amanda Furiasse and Sher Afgan Tareen use this

broader concept of ‘home’ to examine how ethnic and religious enclaves have been subject to increased police enforcement of social distancing violations within these spaces. They argue that this has been aided by smartphone apps and social media which have allowed users to report violations within spaces that were once deemed private. Kamalika Banerjee and Samadrita Das also take the idea of housing outside the realm of private dwellings and in [Chapter Fifteen](#) explore the migration of tens of thousands of laborers out of India’s largest and wealthiest cities during the early days of lockdown. They walked, sometimes thousands of kilometers, back to their home villages because lockdown meant that their ability to earn livelihoods in the city had abruptly come to a halt. Their precarity was exacerbated by the withdrawal of the state in providing assistance to these laborers, generating liminal spaces of dwelling, governance, and citizenship. Already in precarious positions, Banerjee and Das argue that the pandemic generated new forms of dispossession and vulnerability for migrant laborers. As they moved from their homes to their native villages, they inhabited a state of both social and spatial liminality.

In [Chapter Sixteen](#), William Turman, Brian Doucet, and Faryal Diwan examine the lived experiences of very low-income and marginalized residents in a mid-sized Canadian city. Their research demonstrates that the concept of ‘home’ often exists outside of one’s own dwelling, particularly for unsheltered people. During the pandemic, many spaces that functioned as ‘living rooms’ closed, meaning that residents faced not only the pre-existing threats of gentrification and displacement, but a significant disruption to their daily lives due to COVID-19 as well. In a similar vein, Carla Maria Kayanan, Niamh Moore-Cherry, and Alma Clavin’s chapter on inner city Dublin ([Chapter Seventeen](#)) remind us that experiences of lockdown are contextually dependent, and rely on a normative interpretation of the home as a safe, comfortable space. They write that ‘already-disadvantaged communities were disproportionately impacted, compounding their vulnerabilities’. Like

Turman et al, they also highlight the ways in which closing third spaces such as community centers negatively impacts low-income residents. Another trend visible in Dublin and in other case studies such as Mardin, Turkey, was that when lockdown created a void in community and public services, local community bonds became critical to resilience (see also Auerbach et al, Volume 1). Finally, a short conclusion ([Chapter Eighteen](#)) reflects on how addressing the structural inequalities rendered visible during the pandemic requires centering the lived experiences of poverty, housing precarity, and discrimination within planning and policymaking. This is necessary in order to shape a more equitable and socially-just urban future.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> For more on intersectionality, see Crenshaw, 1991.

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