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Navigating Housing Approaches: A Search for Convergences among Competing Ideas

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ABSTRACT   *Since the late nineteenth century, researchers, policy-makers and planners have searched for housing solutions. Nowadays, housing projects are closely connected to global socio-spatial challenges, such as urban equity, vulnerability and resiliency. In the context of these urban challenges, housing emerges as a local, national and global concern influenced by shifting globalized economies and dynamic real estate markets. Thus, housing can no longer be understood as a one-dimensional problem that can be solved by providing more housing units through a top-down mechanism, nor can it be perceived as personal space distinct from national and global contexts. But most studies in housing focus on one issue and explore it from a single perspective, contributing to a complex, specialized and fragmented body of knowledge. This specialization and fragmentation result in the loss of the ability to see the whole picture from its parts. By responding to these issues, this paper aims to establish the importance of (1) becoming familiar with the varied levels of housing studies as well as their underlying premises and paradigmatic boundaries and (2) exploring convergences or expansions among these levels as an initial step in establishing possible paths for a research synthesis that can support new research agendas and action strategie.*

KEY WORDS: Synthesis thinking, Housing theory and research, Paradigmatic boundaries, Mechanism, Process, Experience

Since the late nineteenth century, researchers, policy-makers and planners have sought housing solutions for the poor in an attempt to resolve the housing shortage that resulted from the "sudden rush of population[s] to the big cities" (Engles [1872] 1970, 16). A century after the influential texts and projects of Ebenezer Howard, Peter Kropotkin, Patrick Geddes and Le Corbusier, people in Europe, North America and parts of the developing world are assumed to "live in affluence, enjoying comfortable lives in comfortable homes full of equipment not available even to the rich

in 1900" (Hall 2002, 265). However, as the 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated, the issue of housing still demands attention (McKee and Muir 2013). In an era of increasing life expectancy, rapid urbanization, natural disasters, wars and displacement, the task of providing housing solutions is a major concern for professionals and policy-makers (Obama 2015). Calls to address housing have also been heard from below (Castañeda 2009), especially after the 2008 financial crisis and the spontaneous growth of the occupation movement in the US and other parts of the world. These calls emphasize the growing polarities in society and suggest the need to approach housing in new ways (Qu and Hasselaar 2011; Sinclair and Stohr 2012). The "growing urgency to provide more homes to millions of households in the developing world" (Un Habitat Website 2015) and the need to address affordable housing issues in the developed world indicate the need to develop new directions for housing in both research and practice.

Exploring new directions in housing studies is not a simple task. Contemporary studies in this area face both contextual and epistemological challenges. Contextually, housing projects are closely connected to global challenges, such as urban equity, vulnerability and resiliency. In the context of these urban challenges, housing emerges as a local, national and global concern that is influenced by shifting globalized economies and dynamic real estate markets. Housing has become a multifaceted, complex endeavour. As a result, housing is no longer understood as a one-dimensional problem that can be solved by providing more housing units through a top-down mechanism, nor can it be perceived as personal space distinct from national and global contexts. Housing is a manifestation of personal experiences, social processes and state mechanisms. Consequently, housing construction is influenced by physical, economic, political and social realities (Easthope 2004).

Epistemologically, the study of housing has been developed as a multidisciplinary, fragmented field that involves multiple themes and ideas. As a body of knowledge, housing is not an independent discipline (Clapham 2009); it involves many disciplines from the social sciences and humanities that study diverse themes such as land allocation, morphology, density, tenure, mortgage policies, banking systems, public assistance, social and familial ties, and cultural and personal preferences. This scope of study is also manifested in the interpretation of the term *housing*, which has become multifaceted. Some disciplines prefer the use of associated terms, such as dwelling, home or house. For example, the word *housing* is often used in the fields of public policy, housing studies, economics, law, and planning to refer to spatial development or delivery processes (e.g. DETR 2000; Bratt 2008; Bolt, Phillips, and Van Kempen 2010). In the fields of cultural studies, social studies, environmental psychology and architecture, the words *house* or *dwelling* are used more commonly (e.g. Rapoport 1969; Vom Bruck 1997; King 2004). The former term refers to the place in which living occurs, and the latter refers to the living experience in a place. In cultural geography, psychology and philosophy, the use of the word *home* is prominent (e.g. Cooper Marcus 1997; Mallett 2004; Blunt 2005) and refers to the emotional, material, spatial, temporal, social and procedural aspects of the living environment (Coolen and Meesters 2012). Although *home* is associated with the built form, such as a house, the two terms are not identical; the latter does "not capture the complex socio-spatial relations and emotions that define home" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 3).

At first glance, the broad scope of inquiry associated with housing, the diverse terminology, and the multiple paths in the development of housing policy imply

a rich, multidisciplinary discourse. However, this state of affairs has also contributed to fragmentation and specification, with different disciplines developing expertise in particular areas of this subject. Researchers in different fields explore similar issues related to housing "yet speak in their own disciplinary voice, often confining their discussion to interested researchers in their own discipline" (Mallett 2004, 64). Confining the discussion to a particular discipline has the benefit of developing consistency, which aids in the exploration of specific dimensions of this field and the achievement of proficiency. However, the drawback of fragmenting the issue into separate components is that we know more and more about less and less (Campbell 2012, 140). This phenomenon has made it increasingly difficult for both researchers and policy-makers to navigate among various studies, which has contributed to a gap between knowledge and action that influences both housing studies and housing delivery.

The key argument of this paper is twofold. First, researchers and professionals face difficulties in navigating the available housing knowledge and practice in their responses to contemporary housing realities. Second, as a result of this situation, studies tend to focus on one issue and explore it from a single perspective, contributing to a complex, specialized and fragmented body of knowledge. *This specialization and fragmentation results in a diminished ability to see the larger picture* (Campbell 2012, 141). Synthetic research that examines convergences among different levels of housing studies might be a first step in exploring new directions in this field.

By responding to these issues, this paper aims to establish the importance of (1) becoming familiar with the varied levels of housing studies as well as their underlying premises and paradigmatic boundaries and (2) exploring convergences or expansions among these levels as an initial step in establishing possible paths for a research synthesis that can support new research agendas and action strategies. Based on these aims, this paper comprises four parts. The first section begins with methodological remarks on the process of collecting materials and their categorization to formulate a roadmap of housing studies. Building on the methodological discussion, the next section presents three key levels underlying the study of housing: (a) housing as a national mechanism, (b) housing as a socio-cultural process, and (c) housing as a personal experience. The subsequent section identifies possible convergences between the housing levels. The last part presents concluding remarks pertaining to the normative aspects and flexibility of the research framework suggested and calls for a re-thinking of the relationships between action and practice by developing integrative knowledge that can better inform practice.

Drawing a Map of Key Housing Ideas: Methodological Remarks

Various methods for mapping trends in housing development exist, but two perspectives are prominent: the historical and empirical. The historical (diachronic) perspective tracks change in the evolution of housing policies and developments as a reflection of cultural, political and economic dynamics. Examples of this perspective include detecting ideological transformations in the history of public housing policies in the US (Goetz 2012), mapping housing reform over the course of a century (Von Hoffman 2009), and deconstructing the history of public housing as a series of social experiments (Vale and Freemark 2012). By contrast, the empirical perspective (using either single or multiple case studies) tends to illuminate gaps or opportunities in the studied projects or policies. This perspective often focuses on a specific policy

(Bratt 2008) and/or population, such as racial or ethnic groups (Galster 1990; Pader 1994), elderly people and low-income families (Howe and DeRidder 1993), residents of multi-hazard environments (Zhang 2010), or people with mental illness (Walker and Seasons 2002). Although the majority of studies focus on a single case, some comparative studies examine multiple cases with the aim of identifying patterns in housing developments and policies. Both perspectives offer an informed and significant analysis. However, they lack a map of the key housing levels as a necessary step in encouraging synthesis in thinking and research.

In the process of arguing for synthesis in thinking and research, two key steps have been initiated:

(1) Moving away from multidisciplinarity, in which different disciplines are placed side by side, toward an interdisciplinary approach (Clapham 2009). A review of literature published in the last century from various disciplines, including planning, architecture, housing studies, social studies, anthropology and philosophy (using a search including the terms "housing", "dwelling" and "home"), was conducted with particular attention to the following questions: What is the meaning of housing in the text? How is it defined and approached? What are the methodologies used to explore the theme? This process required temporary suspension of disciplinary and terminological divergences with the aim of focusing on cross-disciplinary similarities. To meet the objectives of this paper, the term "housing" was chosen as a generic, inclusive term associated with an action (e.g. "dwelling"), a physical place (e.g. "house"), an abstract idea (e.g. "home") or a system (e.g. "housing"). The review process yielded three key levels of study: (a) housing as a national mechanism, addressing the transformative power of housing and to recognize a potent and often deliberate tool to provide a basic human need and to shape identities, achieve social control and craft desired social norms (Marcuse 1986; Vale 2000; Kallus and Yone 2002); (b) housing as a socio-cultural process, viewing the physicality of the house as reflecting "equivalences between physical space and social space" (Bourdieu 1990, 71); and (c) housing as an experience, focusing on the home as a subjective reflection of the self – a reflection that is intertwined with the individual's own identity and psyche (Cooper Marcus 1997; Lewin 2001).
(2) The identified levels were used as key categories in developing a matrix-shaped framework that explores possible convergences among the varied ideas that the levels represent. In developing this matrix, the aim was not to resolve contradictions and conflicts through the postulation of a well-ordered framework; rather, the goal was to search for possible linkages. The matrix offers new relations between pairs of categories and syntheses between levels and encourages the exploration of innovative themes, questions and methodologies. These convergences demonstrate possibilities in addressing housing from a multi-layered approach.

The next two sections follow the steps above. The first section maps key levels in housing studies research and illustrates each level with varied approaches. The subsequent section explores the convergences between levels.

Key Levels in Housing Studies: Mechanism, Process and Experience

During the twentieth century, the dominant paradigm that framed both housing studies and delivery was the institutionalized and rational approach of the modern movement (Mumford 2002). This paradigm, which viewed housing as a mechanism that operated in a top-down manner to achieve social order or endorse certain social behaviours, began to fragment by the mid-twentieth century. Alternative voices calling for an examination of the roles of individuals and culture in the living environment resulted in the development of other epistemologies that addressed housing as a dialectic between the bottom-up (agency) and top-down (structural) perspectives. Many of these studies challenged not only the ways in which housing projects are developed (i.e. action) but also, and primarily, the premises and ideas that underlie these projects (i.e. knowledge). In exploring this dynamic between knowledge and action and between the abstract and the concrete in the field of housing, three levels are identified: *housing as a mechanism, housing as a process,* and *housing as an experience*. Notably, the presentation of each level is a compilation of multiple approaches that are driven by a shared general idea. This presentation concludes with a comparative table that presents the major similarities and differences between each level.

   (a) Housing as a Mechanism

   "The Housing Act of 1949 also establishes as a national objective ... a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family." (Harry Truman, President of the United States, 1949)

Housing as an institutionalized, systematic and planned phenomenon can be traced to nineteenth-century industrialization (Franklin 2006). As populations faced overcrowding and poor housing conditions (Rowe 1993), a series of legislative acts marked the end of the laissez-faire housing market and the beginning of state intervention. More recently, a lack of affordability has replaced physical deficiency as the primary housing problem (Skaburskis 2004; Stone 2006; Yates 2008; Schwartz 2010). Regulatory infrastructure has replaced the physical form as the key tool in solving housing problems using subsidies, tax incentives and tenure regulation (Schwartz 2010). With these tools, governments define and regulate the types of housing to be built as well as their location, cost and tenure type (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

   The premise of this area of study is that adequate housing may contribute to an individual's opportunities in life, physical and mental well-being, personal safety, sense of worth and economic status (DETR 2000; Bratt, Stone, and Hartman 2006; Schwartz 2010). Moreover, housing is regarded as a tool to enhance individual opportunities (Musterd and Andersson 2005) and to motivate greater integration between social groups (ODPM 2001; Bolt, Phillips, and Van Kempen 2010). Thus, for advocates of this area of study, housing is viewed as a mechanism for achieving a certain social order that is actively promoted by the state and executed by the market. This view does not necessarily imply a systematic and well-structured policy; rather, it can be understood as an agglomeration of social experimentations subject to shifting political winds (Vale and Freemark 2012).

Research based on these premises is prominent in housing studies, economy, law and planning as well as among policy-makers and practicing planners. Both in practice and in policy-oriented studies, a quantitative methodology is often used. Physical deficiency and affordability are defined using quantifiable parameters, such as residential density, incomplete plumbing or the ratio between household income and housing expenditures (Schwartz 2010). Although housing regulations and policies have a profound effect on the built environment, they often remain marginal and are regarded as an outcome rather than as tools in their own right.[1]

Some scholars who have investigated the use of housing as a mechanism have critically questioned the agendas and intentions behind housing policies promoted by the state. In deconstructing the myth of the benevolent state (Marcuse 1986), four key lines of critique are apparent. First, housing is used as a mechanism for achieving social control through the endorsement of certain social behaviours (Hill and Lian 1995) and/or the provision of rewards for good citizenship (Vale 2000). Second, housing is used as a mechanism for assimilation (Debicka and Friedman 2009) and as a tool for constructing a shared national identity (Ooi 1994; Kallus and Yone 2002). Third, the housing market, although officially open to all, is marked by deep patterns of ethnic segregation and exclusion (Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003; Arbaci 2008). Finally, housing is used to promote economic interests, provide jobs and create economic benefits (Marcuse 1986). Although based in Marxist thinking, these critiques share a basic premise with the positivist analysis presented above, which sees housing – and especially housing policy – as a top-down mechanism employed by the state.

The main strength of this level of study is its applicability. It is oriented toward implementation, and its reliance on empirical data increases its appeal among decision-makers. By contrast, its main drawback lies in its disregard of qualitative aspects of the living environment and its view of housing as a universal need, which sometimes leads researchers (and professionals) to ignore local contexts, conflicts and power struggles.

(b) Housing as a Process

> *"[S]ocialization instills a sense of the equivalences between physical space and social space and between movements (rising, falling, etc.) in the two spaces and thereby roots the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body."* (Bourdieu 1990, 71)

The perception of the house as a socio-cultural artefact is rooted in the idea that the physical form of a house represents, reproduces and stabilizes social life (Gieryn 2002) by encouraging certain activities and preventing others (Bourdieu 1990; Dovey 2002). In this structural approach, the house is considered a "teaching medium"; once learned, it becomes a mnemonic device to remind one of "appropriate behavior" (Rapoport 1990, 67). This approach minimizes the role of change and has often been criticized for its view of culture as monolithic, uniform and static (Lawrence 2000) and its attempts to force an a priori categorization of a complex reality (Vom Bruck 1997). Consequently, the concept of the house as a static representation of culture has changed in recent decades. Recent studies highlight the dynamic relations between cultural values and the physical form of the house. When cultural norms, power relations and social groups change, the physicality of the

house and the arrangement and boundaries of spaces are also modified (Toker and Toker 2003; Ozaki and Lewis 2006; Guney and Wineman 2008).

Advocates for approaching housing as a process argue that housing is a perpetual and continuous process of social construction. Therefore, the analysis should focus on language and discourse as they are used to describe housing (Hastings 2000) as well as practices and interactions within the house through which one assigns meaning to oneself and to reality (Clapham 2002). With the aim of avoiding relativism and the infinite regress associated with social-constructivism, many contemporary studies do not entirely reject the notion of an objective understanding of reality but rather distinguish between "ideas and concepts, which are socially constructed, and the social and spatial processes, which have a material existence" (Jacobs and Manzi 2000, 38).

These ideas have resulted in the frequently acknowledged concept in social sciences that housing is a dialectic process between agency and structure (Kemeny 1992; Clapham 2002). Studies vary in their use of analytical frameworks, employing theories such as structuration theory (Clapham 2002), thin rationality (Somerville and Bengtsson 2002), actor-network theory (Smith 2004; Gabriel and Jacobs 2008; Jacobs and Smith 2008) and affordance (Clapham 2011). Discourse analysis (Hastings 2000; Marston 2002) and spatial analysis (Attfield 1999; Toker and Toker 2003; Ozaki and Lewis 2006; Guney and Wineman 2008) are frequently applied methods. In spatial analysis, the built form of a house (including the room arrangement, in-out relationship and boundaries) is examined as a manifestation of social norms and values, such as family structure, hierarchy and privacy (Madanipour 2003). The strength of this area in housing studies lies in its focus on socio-spatial transformations, change and emergence, whereas its limitations lie in its inherent relativism and the supremacy of agency over structure, which may inhibit wider theorization and generalization.

(c) Housing as an Experience

"Dwelling is something we all experience, but it is not something we necessarily experience together. For each of us dwelling is unique, in that it is something we do by and for ourselves. We all dwell, but each of us does it separately." (King 2004, 17–18)

The view of housing as an experience is rooted in the idea that individuals have a deep relationship with their own living place (Cooper Marcus 1997). A dwelling is an individual's primary anchor in the environment and provides shelter, privacy, security, control, identity and status (Porteous 1976; Coolen 2006). As primary anchors, houses convey certain aspects about the self both consciously (by the placement of particular books, artifacts and objects in plain sight) and subconsciously (by the choice to live in a particular house), similar to dreams (Cooper Marcus 1997). Thus, for example, the choice of a particular house is often driven by personal experiences in childhood (Feijten, Hooimeijer, and Mulder 2008) or by a desire to be part of a certain lifestyle or social group (Fleischer 2007). As such, a house or home is a "complicated fabric of symbols, dreams, ideals and aspirations" (Lantz 1996, cited in: Lewin 2001, 356) and an integral part of the identity of an individual (Lewin 2001).

Advocates for addressing housing as an experience argue that housing is personal and subjective and that is an embodiment of the self in a concrete object. Naturally, this view does not claim that the home accommodates only one person. On the contrary, the home is regarded as a setting comprising the basic unit of society (i.e. the household) (Saunders and Williams 1988) or, alternatively, as a site of internal tensions and contradictions, such as gender and generational struggles, alienation and, in some cases, oppression (Somerville 1989; Blunt and Dowling 2006).

Because every person is perceived as an individual, every house is perceived as particular. Hence, this area of study tends to view the production of housing (or dwelling) as a bottom-up phenomenon and calls for "understanding the truths that emanate from the mouths of ordinary people *in situ*" (King 2009, 74). This view negates the positivist epistemology in housing research and the production of systematic knowledge using so-called objective methods (Allen 2009). Advocates of these ideas disagree with the practice of importing ready-made concepts that ignore the actual experience of dwelling (King 2009).

The view of housing through the lens of experience is prominent in cultural studies, psychology, philosophy and architecture. Studies and actions that adopt these lenses often follow phenomenological methods with an emphasis on narratives, episodes and anecdotes (King 2004). The built environment itself is often presented through an analysis of residents' practices and the use and management of different spaces and technologies within the home (Cieraad 2002; Ozaki and Lewis 2006; Hand, Shove, and Southerton 2007). Some studies focus on the tension between residents and the physical environment and see homemaking as consisting of negotiations, either within the household or between the household and the outside world (Levin 2014). Spatial analysis may include the physical layout, decoration and artifacts of a house (Rose 2003; Tolia-Kelly 2004; Levin 2014).

The underlying premise of this area of study is that residents are able to shape and change their living environment, both physically (Datta 2008) and cognitively (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2012). Therefore, the power of this area of study lies in the holistic view of human interactions with their dwellings. The drawback, however, is that these studies often overlook the wider spatial, social and political contexts that assist in using this knowledge to generate change and to contribute to housing development.

These three levels of housing studies reflect inherently different premises. Housing as a mechanism focuses on the *state and capital* as the dominant logics of social power, emphasizing the structural forces that actively shape housing policies. This level assumes that housing is a basic (and universal) human need that can be used to achieve a desired order. Housing as a process focuses on *social groups* and the socio-cultural context in which housing is produced. It presumes that cultural transformations are reflected and reproduced by the residential environment. Housing as an experience focuses on the *individual* and on the singular unit. It assumes that the house is a reflection of the self and is therefore inevitably unique.

Table 1 summarizes the key ideas of the three approaches and provides a comparative display showing the scope and drawbacks of each level of study. The table clearly indicates that (1) existing knowledge offers a wide spectrum of levels and varied approaches within the key levels, including abstract, top-down approaches based on quantitative data at one end and more concrete, bottom-up approaches based on qualitative data at the other, and (2) disciplines tend to adopt particular levels as the basis for analysing reality and/or as tools for action.

Table 1. Summary of levels of housing study: mechanism, process and experience.

Levels of Study	What is housing?	Point of entry	Process of Production	Reference to the built environment	Disciplines	Drawbacks
Housing as a national mechanism	A top-down mechanism employed by the state	State (and capital)	Top-down (by the state and the market)	An abstract representation, a stock of residential units	Housing studies, economy, law and planning, (including planning practice)	Overuse of quantitative data and the exclusion of qualitative and design aspects
Housing as a socio-cultural process	An ongoing process of social construction	Society	Dialectics between bottom-up (agency) and top-down (structure) perspectives	Spatial relationships within the residential unit and with surroundings	Social sciences, sociology, anthropology and housing studies	Relativism, general axioms about cultures/societies
Housing as an experience	A personal expression, reflection of the self	Individual	Bottom-up	Concrete place, spatial arrangement of decoration and artifacts	Cultural studies, psychology, philosophy and architecture	Limited attention to structural powers

Although disciplinary boundaries and specifications are effective in the process of analysis or in developing a particular action, they may be limited in developing synthetic thinking as a means to enrich the development of housing projects and policies, which are often based on multiple factors. Thus, the question arises as to whether we can consider these levels of study differently. Can we view these levels as a matrix rather than a spectrum? What types of themes and methodologies might emerge from this reading? How might this view affect housing development?

Seeking Convergences: Themes, Methodologies and Practices that Emerge from Juxtaposing Levels of Study

When viewing the living environment as a layered reality with multiple actors and challenges, it is helpful to consider the levels identified (i.e. mechanism, process and experience) and the categories of key actors (i.e. the state, the society and the individual) in the form of a matrix (see Table 2). The underlying premise is that by juxtaposing levels and actors in a less generic way, new themes and methodologies might emerge. The top-left to bottom-right diagonal on the matrix represents practices based on the key identified levels of study. The top-left cell of the diagonal represents housing as a top-down mechanism that is monitored by the state, the central cell represents housing as a social process and the bottom-right cell represents housing as an individual experience. All other cells suggest less common possibilities in research and action that transcend the more familiar levels. Each cell offers alternative ways to explore the interplay between key categories in the process of housing research and development.

Table 2.   Summary of the potential convergences among housing levels.

Point of entry	Fields of Research and Action		
	State	Society	Individual
Housing as a mechanism	**Political approach with a focus on the state**	Investigating housing developments initiated by social groups as a tool for mobility	Exploring development frameworks that would allow flexibility and future change initiated by individuals
Housing as a process	Investigating the adjustment and adaptation of generic mechanisms to local socio-cultural preferences, limitations and circumstances	**Culture-oriented approach with a focus on society**	Studying inconsistencies, repetitive patterns, and distances between individual desires and structural aims
Housing as an experience	Assessing possibilities of bottom-up (yet systematic) production of personalized houses	Studying bottom-up housing adjustments as a means to understand shifts in the community living environment.	**Phenomenological approach with a focus on the self**

The following text offers a reading of the matrix with particular attention to possibilities for extending the three layers identified. These possibilities are illustrated by examples that aim to address the drawbacks of research and practice presented in the previous section. These examples are arbitrary and merely illustrate the ways in which the key levels can be expanded and can enhance synthesis.

(a) Beyond Housing as a Mechanism

How is it possible to extend the research and action frameworks that perceive housing as a socio-economic mechanism of the state to include sensitivity to social groups and individuals' needs? This question emerges from recent studies that have challenged the effectiveness of top-down mechanisms and the accuracy of universal understandings of housing problems. It suggests a need to expand the perspective of housing as a *mechanism* to include different types of explanations and sensitivity to the role of other actors. This approach is also associated with the contemporary ideas of urban resilience and social resilience, or the ability of social groups and communities who are the central stakeholders to cope with external threats and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental changes (Adger 2000; Collier et al. 2013). Research and projects that follow this path of thinking perceive housing as a mechanism as a major level of study and a tool for action but search for ways to go beyond a political, abstract, state-focused approach to a more adaptive society-focused approach. More specifically, expanding the level of housing as a mechanism might be achieved in the following ways: (1) *juxtaposing the level of mechanism with process* and seeing housing as an *adaptive mechanism tool* that is sensitive to flexible development, economic and cultural preferences; (2) integrating *qualitative factors* of the living environment, such as local contexts, conflicts and power struggles, in the development of housing programmes as a means to expand the abstract approach often used at this level; and (3) addressing the *citizen as an active participant* in housing developments.

Over the last decades, this approach is slowly being adopted both in theory and in practice. In theory, a perspective that aims to provide multilayered explanations is critical realism. It assumes that reality is structured, differentiated, stratified and unfixed (Denermark et al. 2002) and suggests stratified causation on multiple levels, including physiological, psychological, sociological and economic levels (Fitzpatrick 2005). This perspective rejects postmodern relativism; it focuses on mechanisms and strives to generate explanations. These mechanisms are not seen as deterministic (Lawson 2006) but rather suggest a middle-range theorizing that identifies patterns and mechanisms that *may* occur under certain conditions (Somerville and Bengtsson 2002). An example of the application of a critical realist approach can be seen in the study of homelessness by Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2005), which presents an alternative to existing accounts that assume a positivistic causality and focuses instead on personal and structural explanations for the social construction of homelessness. Fitzpatrick lists potential mechanisms, such as economic structures, interpersonal structures and individual attributes, *without* assuming a hierarchy among them as a means to analyse the category of "homelessness".

In practice, the expansion of housing as mechanism to include the role of the individual and social groups in shaping housing systems may be more challenging. This expansion demands a synthesis of seemingly contradictory objectives: housing delivery for an anonymous mass public and flexibility for future growth and personal

change. An example of an effort in this direction can be seen in the project of the Quinta Monroy housing project in Chile, which was planned by the architectural firm Elemental and succeeded in synthesizing these contradictions. The project's aim was to generate a technical scenario that would guarantee increased value over time without the need to change existing policies or market conditions. The project follows a row house typology but allows residents to expand their units over time within a pre-planned structure depending on their needs and financial ability (Fabrizio 2005; Elemental 2015). Thus, it incorporates housing as a mechanism and structural innovation that accounts for the dynamics of family changes and individual will. Implementing this project involved "meshing the know-how and experience of professionals and local authorities with the views and aspirations of the citizens" (Aravena 2011, 37).

Going beyond housing as mechanism does not object to its underlying orientation of mass delivery and implementation; instead, it strengthens it by addressing its resiliency. This expansion requires the development of multi-disciplinary research that integrates quantitative and qualitative data. By conceptualizing housing and as a mechanism and as a socio-cultural process, this perspective can enrich the development of contextualized mechanisms for housing.

(b) Beyond Housing as a process

How is it possible to extend the research and action that perceives housing as a process to include the individual's role and the state's structures? The major limitation of housing as a process lies in its focus on contextual discourse, interactions and practices that may inhibit broader theorization and generalization. A broader consideration of these interactions may include an analysis of interactions between individuals (e.g. residents) and officials in power positions (e.g. housing officers) (Clapham 2002) or between residents and different institutions (e.g. child protection services) (Natalier and Johnson 2012). These accounts can also extend beyond micro-interactions and can include an additional layer of structural explanations for residents' housing pathways. This approach expands the level of housing as a process in the following ways: (1) investigating the *dynamic* between local socio-cultural preferences, limitations and circumstances and generic mechanisms; and (2) studying *inconsistencies*, *repetitive patterns*, and *distances* between individual desires and structural aims as a means to challenge the discrepancies between personal preferences and political/societal norms. This perspective may be beneficial for bypassing the inherent relativism of housing as a process and the supremacy of agency over structure.

Over the last decades, this perspective has been apparent in various studies and projects. Critical studies focus on housing as a process with particular attention to the *dynamic* between local socio-cultural preferences and generic mechanisms within the nation state. This approach is significant for understanding contemporary housing development in the contemporary transnational immigration movement, in conflicted societies, or among groups of minorities. An example of this approach can be found in a recent study on Israel that shows that despite global processes of individualization, the family remains central in both Jewish and Arab populations; this centrality cannot be decoupled from the unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rutlinger-Reiner 2013). The notion of the family as a "collective" affects national housing policies. This line of research goes beyond the relativistic approach

to housing by examining the dynamics between communities and structural–political perspectives.

In practice, the integration between process and mechanism and between a culturally oriented approach and an institutionalized housing policy can be seen in the case of Hageneiland in the Netherlands. This social housing project aimed to respond to social and cultural needs and challenged the negative image of social housing. Typically, social housing projects in the Netherlands have a particular development plan of row houses with repetitive units (Figueiredo 2011). This project challenged this plan by developing a different planning rationale in which the row houses are divided into smaller, uneven houses that are spread across the site. All houses are arranged in the same direction but in a scattered spatial arrangement that creates a system of interconnected and diverse open spaces with minimal separation between public and private spaces. Bold colours are used to distinguish between houses and to prevent the usual monotony (MVRDV 2015). The generic, state-driven housing policy was translated into a contextual project that replaced monotony with controlled irregularity. This approach demonstrates the adaptation of generic mechanisms to local socio-cultural preferences, limitations and circumstances.

Going beyond housing as a process does not reject its underlying orientation toward socio-spatial transformations, change and emergence; instead, it expands this orientation by addressing inconsistencies, repetitive patterns, and distances between agents within existing structures to inform future actions and policies.

(c) Addressing Housing as an Experience

How is it possible to extend research and action that perceives housing as an experience to include wider social and national contexts? One of the key drawbacks of studies that approach housing as an experience is that they overlook the broader spatial, social and political contexts that use accumulated knowledge to generate change and to contribute to housing development. Going beyond the individual scale involves the exploration of people's relationships with the external world (Easthope 2004) and, more specifically, attention to the role of society and/or the state in shaping this experience. However, this does not mean abandoning the examination of places and the spatial arrangement of decorations and artifacts; rather, it requires placing these studies in a wider context. Research and projects based on this perspective perceive housing as an experience as a major level of study and a tool for action but search for ways to map personal experiences as a means to understand social, economic and political major trends. Specifically, expanding the level of housing as an experience implies the following: (1) *comparing personal experiences with general trends* in the housing market, (e.g. normative models of family, and/or with housing policies). That is, it is necessary to question how experience shapes and is shaped by housing policies, social norms and society as a whole; and (2) assessing *agency within existing power structure,* or the power of the individual to transform, adjust and construct housing, by seeing the individual as an active agent in the development of housing.

In theory, this line of thinking is essential in examining personal and familial perspectives in housing projects initiated by the state. Contemporary studies have addressed the sense of place in deteriorating neighbourhoods (Brown, Perkins, and Brown 2003) and the experience of displacement among residents who go through massive urban regeneration programmes (Manzo, Kleit, and Couch 2008).

These studies, which map the individual experience, aim to understand larger trends in the neoliberal housing market. This approach can also support examination of the relationships among state policy, social norms and domestic relations to consider the way state policy regarding housing provision reinforces the model of motherhood and the male breadwinner (Saugeres 2009).

In practice, expanding the housing experience beyond the individual scale directs attention to improvisation and experimentation in housing, which can result in a significant transformation of an entire living environment (and the community that resides in it). An example can be seen in the project "Favela Painting" in Rio de Janeiro. This project was initiated by the Dutch artists Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn, who painted the facades of 34 adjoining buildings in the favela Santa Maria in bright colours (Favela Painting 2015). Local residents were recruited and professionally trained as painters. This action contributed to "subculturalization", a process by which urban social formations that have been marginalized and illegalized become formalized as subcultures and incorporated into the fabric of consumption and profit making (Daskalaki and Mould 2013). This development represents a fluid urban identity and creative state of becoming (Ibid.). Other examples of this approach can be seen in post-disaster housing solutions that represent an agglomeration of individual efforts in collaboration with the authorities, sometimes with the support of international organizations. These solutions use a generic and affordable prototype that can be implemented by numerous stakeholders in multiple configurations. In this respect, post-disaster housing is based on a generic platform that is supplied by civil society and ultimately shaped by local residents.

Going beyond housing as an experience requires the examination of housing through the lens of the phenomenological approach while expanding its focus beyond the self to include communities and the state. This expansion involves assessing the present (the "is") as well as reflecting upon future possibilities and implications.

This brief introduction provides the initial groundwork for the development of possible links among the fragmented perspectives in housing studies. Some studies and projects exemplify the pursuit of synthesis between varied levels of housing studies, such as between housing as an abstract policy or "the production, consumption, management and maintenance of a stock of dwellings" and housing as a concrete living environment that is perceived as "being settled on the earth" (King 2009, 42). However, these examples do not represent the core of research in housing studies. Instead, they represent a growing shift from a focused, one-dimensional analysis to a multi-layered approach of analysis and spatial development. This multi-layered approach demonstrates how housing studies contribute to the co-existence of multiple wills and orders (as opposed to a single, centralized layer).

In further exploring these paths of thinking and synthesis thinking as a whole, four important points should be noted. First, juxtapositions among varied approaches located at different levels are not trivial and should be approached cautiously and consciously. Each approach is embedded in a particular philosophy, and it cannot be assumed that different epistemologies can be combined without confronting the differences in their philosophies and views of the nature of reality. Thus, there is a danger that synthetic thinking might result in internal inconsistencies or in the over-simplification of ideas. Second, synthesis is not obligatory; it might be useful in some cases and irrelevant in others, and it is impossible (and undesirable) for every housing study to operate on *all* levels. The purpose of this intellectual exercise is to

reveal potential themes and questions that stem from this juxtaposition, both in theory and practice, assuming that housing is a multifaceted body of knowledge that would benefit from a multilayered understanding. In other words, the matrix enables intersections of ideas; it does not promote the conflation of theories into one ideal explanation of the world. Third, perceiving the development of housing research as a complex web of interactions rather than a linear process is a strategy that can be used to better understand and react to various situations, problem sets, and contexts. Hence, the suggested matrix is adaptive and by no means offers a rigid theory that is forced on researchers or practitioners. Rather, it should be seen as an exercise in synthesis exploration. Fourth, the matrix, when used as a research framework, should be modified by other (contextual) categories in the quest to explore existing situations and opportunities.

In short, the explicit point of the matrix is that the individual, society and the state all participate in the production of housing. The differences among the varied examples presented involve the way synthetic thinking is conceptualized and the way it affects power relations in the act of housing development. This is not merely a technical issue but rather a normative one; there is a correlation between the way we understand, explore and act in the area of housing studies and the effect on the way people live and act.

Advocating for Synthetic Thinking in Housing Research and Practice

Housing environments are dynamic places embedded in particular political and social contexts. Scholars respond to this complexity by adopting analytic approaches. Yet, analysis often implies reduction, particularity and conclusiveness. When addressing housing, specifically housing delivery, what is needed is a synthetic approach that is simultaneously holistic, clear, universal and, as such, less dependent on robust qualities of reasonableness. Synthesis, Heather Campbell claims, is a process that requires acknowledging the limitations and possibilities of analysis and making informed judgements about what ought to be done (Campbell 2012, 144). Campbell is correct. However, the question is whether we can develop a comprehensive approach to housing with multiple facets and converging competing ideas.

By mapping the key levels and approaches in housing studies, including their scope and their drawbacks, this paper argues that housing cannot be approached in isolation or through the lens of specific parameters. In contrast to the reductionist perspective, a suggestion for scholars and practitioners in the area of housing is to develop synthetic thinking by juxtaposing competing ideas and developing them by experimenting with these juxtapositions. The main point is that synthetic thinking is a way to explore new ideas. It is neither an accumulation of knowledge nor a literature review but rather a unique composition of diverse issues that address a concrete situation. Clearly, this path of thinking and acting is not mandatory. Not *all* researchers/professionals in *any* situation ought to address housing from a multi-layered approach. However, by better navigating among housing levels and becoming familiar with synthetic thinking, researchers and practitioners can be more reflexive regarding (a) their approach(es) to housing and (b) the approaches or issues they ignore.

This call for synthetic thinking is explicitly normative. It assumes that each level of study sees the power relations between the individual and the state as well as within society in a particular way. These power relations are often perceived as

epistemological axioms and are difficult to challenge. Thus, synthetic thinking, which juxtaposes varied approaches that have their own stances toward power relations, may offer innovative ideas on the dynamic between structure and agency, which in turn would influence the lens through which we understand housing and the way we design and produce housing. More bluntly, synthetic thinking favours the examination of power and agency by examining the whole over the parts. It attempts to raise questions regarding existing conceptions and axioms of power; it thus attempts to defy stagnated thinking and welcomes practical change. With the aim of conflating ideas, agendas and actors, it supports experimentation and multiplicity by resisting hierarchical praxis.

Furthermore, assuming that knowledge based on a synthetic approach is a significant part of making more informed *normative* decisions in the process of housing delivery implies being aware of and deeply familiar with the concepts used in the study and practice of housing. This is not a simple task. Professionals, despite their natural inclination toward synthesis and action, are embedded in the process of production; thus, they perceive reflexivity as a hindrance. In contrast, researchers may be over-reflective and have a natural inclination to divide the whole.

Finally, one of the questions of this paper is how research can better support housing practices and how practice contributes to the development of knowledge. Indeed, there are varied relationships between research and practice, including (1) practice as a source of "ideas" for research, (2) practice as the place where academic research is conducted, (3) practice as a place where research is undertaken, and (4) practice as the object of academic research (Silva et al. 2015). Of these four models, the latter may best support efforts to inform and shape research and practice by embracing synthetic thinking. Rethinking the way knowledge is developed in housing studies may encourage dialogue between theory and practice. We live in a world with an abundance of information and data. Specialization is often critical to gaining better understanding of particular phenomena, and paradigmatic boundaries are inherent in scientific work. However, this approach poses some risks, especially because it may prevent connections across disciplines and professions (Campbell 2012, 144). This is both an epistemological concern regarding the ways in which knowledge is gathered and a methodological concern regarding the ways in which knowledge is used. Evidence from actions taken on the ground (i.e. protests and financial crises) and from scholarly writings clearly indicates the need to identify new ways to explore the urgent issue of housing.

Note

1. Some of the projects built under HOPE VI in the United States represent an exception because their success is attributed to the architectural design (Hanlon 2010).

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