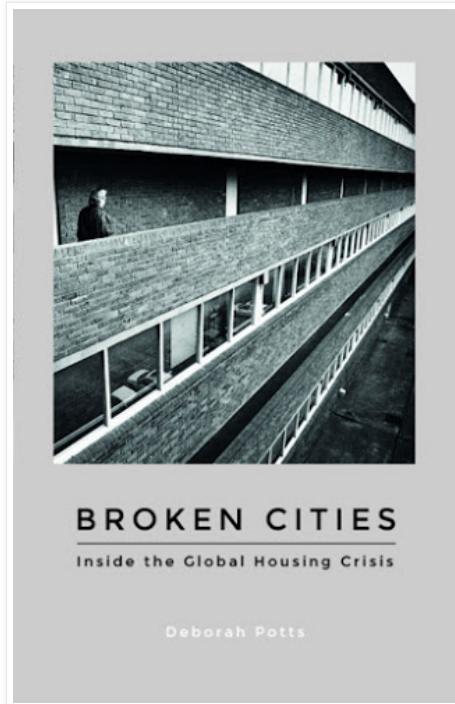


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Reading Broken Cities: Inside the Global Housing Crisis



Anna Lindley writes:

In large cities all over the world, people talk about ‘the housing problem’ or the ‘housing crisis’ – but what exactly do they mean? And to what extent is it a global problem, or many different problems? Are we on the edge of a very different kind of urban future? These are the questions that Deborah Potts tackles in her tour-de-force book *Broken Cities*, published by Zed earlier this year. The neoliberal approach tends to frame the problem as one of market supply – that there is a shortage of housing or land to build on. If enough houses are built, the market logic goes, prices will fall and become affordable. But research suggests that while house-building may help those on the edges of the affordability line, they tend to have limited impact on the majority of those on low incomes, who fall well below. Drawing on decades of research and

teaching focusing on urban centres in Southern Africa, the UK and elsewhere, Deborah Potts emphasizes the role of demand-side problems driving the affordability conundrum. While poorer people in these cities undoubtedly *need* housing, they do not have near enough income to secure what is understood as a ‘decent’, ‘legal’ home. While unemployment can make this worse, most people thus affected are in fact in work – the stark reality is that their employers just do not pay truly liveable wages. In many cities, incomes at the bottom end of the spectrum have long fallen short of the cost of social reproduction (particularly the rising cost of housing) and the minimum pay and pensions increases that would be required to rectify this are so big as to be unlikely without major political transformation.

***Broken Cities* illuminates common responses of low-income city-dwellers to the affordability challenge.** People may squeeze on space (e.g. crowding families or co-workers into one room, co-ordinating bed use around shift patterns); they may resort to more basic or improvised structures (e.g. trailers, subdivided housing units, office conversions, backyard shacks, squats); they may live in informal settlements on city peripheries (in cheap housing close enough to employment opportunities but with insecure tenure and poor conditions); they may fall into an itinerant, ‘hidden homeless’ existence (sofa-surfing or spending prolonged periods in ‘temporary’ accommodation). These are pragmatic, bottom-up, informal ‘solutions’ that avoid street homelessness but are a very long way from what most people think of as an appropriate home – and indeed may be endangering to health and contravene local housing standards. A particular strength of the book is its global and historical reach, connecting urban housing problems across the world, probing contextual detail, differences and distinctiveness, but always with a close eye on common features and the core conundrum of affordability of decent housing for the poorest in society.

The writer argues that the affordability problem cannot be solved by market forces alone. Indeed, over time, states around the world have stepped in to make urban housing more affordable to people on low incomes: indeed, ‘the housing dilemma means that governments are subsidising capitalism to quite astonishing extents’. Whether on grounds of pro-poor policy, public health, political control, political embarrassment, or because the problem has begun to affect the middle classes, a wide range of housing interventions have emerged, from provision of social housing priced at below-market costs, to subsidizing the rent or purchase of property, to approaches to informal settlements. The book provides examples of housing policies from Harare to Berlin to Mumbai to Beijing to Singapore to New York; ranging

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across colonial, communist, apartheid, state capitalist, and neoliberal ideological/policy contexts.

There is a particular focus on how neoliberal structural changes have deepened the housing dilemma around the world. This is vividly illustrated by parallels between the UK and Malawi. By 1970s UK had largely solved the housing dilemma (i.e. there was no great shortage of affordable housing for people on a low income) via massive post-war state investment - by 1979, 42% of people in the UK lived in council housing. Thatcher unpicked this settlement, allowing council housing to be sold to tenants at a significant discount. While accompanied by pro-poor arguments, Potts argues that the main aim was to downsize the public housing sector, underpinned by market ideology, antipathy to pro-poor public expenditure and vested capitalist interests in urban land/housing and government. Local governments (predominantly left wing) only received half of the proceeds of the sales but continued to be responsible for the provision of public housing, meaning that while the policy benefited those able to purchase their homes, it pushed future cohorts of low income households firmly into the private rental sector and the housing affordability problem reared its ugly head again. Meanwhile, around the same time, Potts notes that Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries, also entered a period of structural adjustment. The government had devised publicly funded site-and-service schemes, allocating plots to poor people for low-tech, low-cost home-building, in areas with basic services, adhering to basic health standards. But under pressure from international financial institutions to cut public expenditure, the government sought cost recovery, which meant targeting housing schemes at better-off groups; without proper investment in the existing sites, overcrowding, health and environmental problems multiplied, and formerly promising urban settlements degenerated into slums. Through examples like these from different settings, Potts shows how the dismantling of 'functioning and long-standing public-sector large-scale provision of urban housing', in favour of pro-market 'policy solutions' worsened housing prospects for people on low incomes.

Another interesting discussion revolves around approaches to informal and unplanned settlements. *Broken Cities* charts policy responses ranging from eviction and demolition, to tacit toleration, to formalising and upgrading these settlements. The account of approaches to the informal *colonias* that have emerged on the outskirts of urban areas on either side of the Mexico/US border is particularly intriguing. In both Texas and the northern Mexican states, workers occupied peri-urban land not zoned as part of the urban area and lacking basic infrastructure. On the Mexican side, following the general trend in Latin America since the 1970s, policy-makers have tended to take a more pragmatic and constructive approach, gradually integrating these settlements in socio-political terms, extending basic infrastructure and developing more secure tenure for residents. On the US side, the government taken a dimmer view of the settlements, largely inhabited by Mexican-Americans and Mexican migrant workers, variously ignoring them, limiting their development, funding technical upgrading to defuse public health hazards, and sending in immigration enforcement. This comparative policy history vividly illustrates different responses of policy-makers to 'quiet encroachment' in different political-economic settings.

Clearly housing has myriad connections to mobility patterns and family life. An obvious response to rising housing costs, explored in the book, is that citizens leave cities to make their lives in other places. For instance, London has been experiencing negative net internal migration, the unaffordability of housing drowning out positive job market signals, or forcing city workers into long commutes. In London average rent for *one room in a shared house* is around half net minimum pay (a general rule of thumb is that housing costs for low-income people should not exceed 30% of their income). While it is hard to trace the exact nature of the relationship, it seems probable that kinds of housing situations hamper urban family formation, with some dramatic falls in fertility outcomes in the largest cities. Potts underscores that if cities are to be about people rather than purely economic production, policy-makers need to grapple with how to 'maintain contemporary large cities as places where ordinary people, doing ordinary jobs and earning ordinary incomes can be "at home" and pursue a family life. In the case of London, the city's overall net migration rate is kept positive by substantial international migration. Following a long political history of scapegoating immigrants for structural problems, the miserable housing conditions low-waged immigrants may find themselves in are too often framed as a problem of immigrants or caused by immigrants, when the key issue remains still the mismatch between workers' wages and housing.

Admittedly, where there is constant 'moving out and moving on', there are obstacles to collective organizing, but it would be good to hear a bit more about housing activist strategies by low-income people around the world, which it is acknowledged can also shape policy intervention. Nevertheless ***Broken Cities* is a rich, systematic, yet massively readable and engaging book.** It was published at the start of 2020, and reading it now, **one inevitably wonders how the global pandemic will affect the housing trends and issues outlined.** Across the world slum housing and refugee camps, where it can be hard to protect people from high levels of disease transmission, have been brought into the spotlight: this may prompt narrow 'sanitation syndrome' responses or broader-based public interventions that promote the basic, universal human need to have a decent, legal home, as a place of shelter, safety, privacy, family and social life. Also Potts notes that in the global North people on low incomes

are finding themselves in conditions of housing poverty that may be dispersed and less visible but clearly endanger their health, something which lockdown conditions intensify.

The pandemic has also shone a spotlight on links between labour market and housing space. For example, there has been widespread promotion of remote working for professions that require less contact: if this becomes more embedded, it weakens the link between certain jobs and the need for housing close to city offices. Meanwhile, the immense pressure and praise heaped on urban key workers in recent months have raised questions about the valuing of their work, which often requires high levels of public contact, locking them into poor or expensive housing or long commutes (for example, half of London's 'blue light' emergency workers live outside the capital). Finally, and importantly, many low-waged workers have insecure contracts or work in sectors hard-hit by the lockdown, and with unemployment set to grow, how to house people in cities is looks set to remain big politics in the months to come.


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Posted by [Richard Carver](#) at [18:42](#)

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