PRECARIOUS HOUSING IN EUROPE

Working Paper 1
Precariousness and the Right to Housing

PusH

Precarious Housing in Europe.
Pushing for innovation in higher education.

This working paper has been prepared in the context of the Erasmus+ project *Precarious Housing in Europe. Pushing for Innovation in Higher Education (PusH).* The project aims to develop engaging learning materials concerning the issue of precarious housing in Europe targeted at students and teachers.

This working paper presents a draft version of what will later serve as the introduction and first chapter of the final PusH-textbook.

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1 Introduction

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What does 'home' mean to you? What are your requirements relating to housing? What are the implications when adequate housing is not available? In this chapter, we introduce the concept of precarious housing and give an overview of the themes that will be dealt with in the following chapters of this book. The chapter starts with a section on the concept of home and the importance of housing. The second section (1.2) shows that the recognition of housing rights by EU member states has not led to a reduction of housing precariousness. On the contrary, we see an increasing problem of housing unaffordability and a rise in homelessness. Section 1.3 delves deeper into the concept of precariousness based on studies in the field of labour markets, where the concept originated. Section 1.4 gives a short introduction to the effects of neoliberalism on housing precariousness. The case study of Grenfell Tower is then brought forward as an illustration of how precarious housing conditions, shaped through years of neglect, austerity, and profit-seeking at the expense of public housing provision, can interact with precarious social conditions of immigration status, race, and class, to create tragedies that are all too avoidable. Section 1.5 provides an overview of the remaining chapters of the book.

1.1   Home and the importance of housing

What does 'home' mean to you? For many of us, thinking of home will bring to mind housing of some form. It might be a house or an apartment, a rural cottage or an urban tower. It might be the place we grew up in or the place we now occupy. A sense of home changes and develops over time, with some places retaining their importance whilst others come and go – for example, despite having moved out twenty years ago, Jonathan still has his parents' house listed as 'home' in his mobile contacts list!

Irrespective of where home is for you, it is likely that home carries some kind of attachment. Whilst not always a positive place, home is most often associated with elements of security, comfort, and belonging. Yet despite their intimate connections, home and housing are not always aligned. Many of us have lived in properties that never quite feel like home, perhaps because they are temporary, uncomfortable, or do not quite fit our imaginaries of what 'home' would or should be like. Yet to feel at home relies on housing of some form, as at its most basic level shelter and security are crucial for us to feel at home. Being housed is not the same as being at home, but it is an essential starting point.

Through the chapters of this book, we want to get you to interrogate what it means to be housed in contemporary Europe, and to question how rights to housing are asserted, denied, averted, and contested. How we are housed, in what conditions and under what constraints, is fundamental to our wellbeing and to our sense of how we fit within society. Studying housing thus sheds light on the various social, cultural, economic and political forces that are shaping our lives. At the same time, as the chapters to come will illustrate, housing is a site of considerable struggle, as multiple groups challenge those same forces and claim rights to housing that extend beyond a demand for adequate shelter and towards a right to feel 'at home'.

For many groups across Europe, the right to housing is increasingly under threat, as economic inequality, housing market discrimination, and the risk of displacement combine to make housing precarious. At the same time, new arrivals to Europe seeking asylum and refuge face significant barriers to accessing security and shelter, and minority groups across the continent continue to face discrimination and displacement. It is these issues of inequality, access, and discrimination that we foreground in the coming chapters, to encourage you to think about who is affected by precarious housing conditions, how those conditions are responded to, what implications precarious housing has for different groups in society, and in what ways European societies might address the challenges of precarious housing. To begin with, we want to explore the right to housing in more detail and outline what we mean by 'precarious' housing in particular.

1.2   The right to housing and the rise of precarious housing

Housing provides a wide variety of functions for its residents (e.g. Harvey, 1973: Hooimeijer, 2007; Kearns et al., 2000): These include being:

(1) **A safe haven**: Housing is more than shelter. It can also provide privacy, personal safety and ontological security[1].

(2) **An activity centre**: The house is the location where people perform a wide range of activities (like sleeping, eating, caring for others, relaxing, and working) and where they can invite guests.

(3) **A base of operations**: A dwelling provides a relative location from which residents reach destinations like workplaces, schools, shops, and family and friends.

(4) **A neighbourhood location**: A dwelling is located in a neighbourhood, which characteristics may positively or negatively affect the well-being of its residents (for example through the presence of green space, meeting facilities, crime, pollution or stigmatization).

(5) **An investment good**: Buying a house is a means for storing and enhancing wealth. The investment may not necessarily be focused on making a profit but can also be targeted at acquiring a substantial asset, which cushions the financial shock of reduced income in old age.

(6) **A source of status**: Residents may derive social status from their house. Feeling safe and in control of the home are necessary conditions for obtaining social status

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[1] Giddens (1990, p.92) defines ontological security as: *"The confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments. Basic to a feeling of ontological security is a sense of the reliability of persons and things".*

from it. Next to that, the reputation of the surrounding neighbourhood is an important determinant.

As housing is a basic need, which no individual can do without, the right to adequate housing is recognized in the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[2] and the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe.[3] Article 11 of the ICESCR obliges State' Parties 'to recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.'[4] The European Social Charter establishes a right to housing, which includes access to adequate and affordable housing as well as a reduction of homelessness (Article 31 of the Charter). In addition, it requires a housing policy targeted at all disadvantaged categories; procedures to limit forced eviction; equal access for non-nationals to social housing and housing benefits; and housing construction and housing benefits related to family needs (see e.g. Articles 15 and 16 of the Charter; Kenna et al. 2016).

All EU Member States have ratified the ICESCR, as well as the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe. However, the reality is that EU Member States have breached their promise to ensure the effective exercise of the right to housing. FEANTSA[5] and the Foundation Abbé Pierre (2020) estimate that the number of homeless people in the EU has increased by 70% in the last ten years. About 700,000 homeless people are currently sleeping rough or living in emergency or temporary accommodation across the European Union. Next to that, the documentary PUSH, directed by Fredrik Gertten (2019), shows housing affordability is decreasing at a record pace in cities across Europe and the rest of the world.

Both trends point to an increasing precariousness of housing, both within Europe and beyond. By **'precarious housing'** we mean:

> People either living in unsuitable, insecure, unaffordable, or unsafe housing, or not housed at all and living either as street homeless or in hostels, encampments, or temporary accommodation provided by states, charities, and some religious organisations.

The increasing precariousness of housing negatively affects residents' abilities to claim urban spaces and limits opportunities for social justice. Muñoz (2018, p.371-372) argues that without *"…access to stable affordable housing, from which urban residents are able to engage in long-term homemaking practices, access urban resources, and actively and publicly engage in urban life, there is no right to the city"*.

As Muñoz (2018) highlights, housing provides a key foundation for other social activities and can offer an anchor for belonging, especially for those new to a town or city. In this way, whilst adequate housing is important to ensure people's welfare, health, and security, it is also critical in giving a stable basis on which to interact with others. Precarious housing places these opportunities at risk in different ways, whether that be through the physical risks of unsafe accommodation or the stress and fatigue of insecure tenure and the fear of eviction. What makes housing precarious is complex and refers to different forms of economic, social,

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[2] Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966.
[3] European Social Charter (revised) of 1996, ETS No.163.
[4] See: https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx
[5] European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless

and cultural exclusion and inequity. You might, for example, consider whether your own housing is precarious in some way, and what factors are at play in making this housing precarious? You might also reflect on how precarious housing is experienced, as housing conditions shape how we feel about the places we live, our sense of self-identity and self-worth, and our willingness to engage with others. As the following chapters highlight, precarious housing opens up many questions and prompts many forms of political response.

Figure 1.1: Protest for housing rights at Bakats square (Budapest)

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Precariousness is a complex concept and has been discussed in relation to a range of different topics. Precariousness may relate to labour market relations and the rights of workers, to the status of migrants in relation to citizenship and residency rights, or more generally to a rise in insecure and unstable positions within society. Our aim in this book is not to cover all of these dynamics of being precarious, but instead to focus on how precariousness as a condition experienced by different groups impacts people's ability to access, experience, and sustain secure, affordable, and safe housing. With this in mind, two key dimensions of precarious housing run throughout our engagement with the topic, and we want you to consider these two themes as you read:

(1) How do different aspects of precariousness as a condition or experience (associated with limited labour rights, low wages, insecure employment, irregular migration status, and racial discrimination) influence access to safe and secure housing in Europe?

(2) How do different forms of housing become precarious in Europe (through, for example, unsafe conditions, insecure tenancies, aggressive eviction regimes, and forms of displacement driven by state interventions and market-led gentrification)?

It is this interconnection between precarious subjects and precarious housing that we foreground in the coming chapters. Reflecting on housing opens up questions over not only how we are housed, but also over our roles within wider structures of social, economic, and cultural life. To return to our opening question, we would ask you to consider not only where 'home' might be, but also who has the right to feel at home in Europe today, and what constrains that right for some more than others.

In the next part of this chapter, we want to focus a little on the first element above, on precariousness as a concept that has a number of different dimensions. Despite the importance of the concept, precariousness has received relatively little attention in housing literature compared to the labour market literature where the number of studies on employment insecurity has grown explosively. The next section draws upon the literature on employment precarity, as this is one of the main factors that increases the risks of housing precariousness. Moreover, both labour market and housing precariousness are driven by similar forces, namely, the rise of a neoliberal economic model that prioritizes competition and individual responsibility over state support and collective action.

1.3 Precariousness, precarity, and its links to the labour market

1.3.1 The concept of precariousness: two approaches

Precariousness is subject to a rapidly growing body of literature and debate in the social sciences and humanities, with the concept being connected to all manner of different facets of contemporary life, from housing and labour conditions, to citizenship status and identity. Whilst we will not outline all of these uses in detail here, it is important to note that the terms 'precariousness' and 'precarity' have mixed but distinct meanings, and that whilst some authors use them interchangeably, others point to critical distinctions in their use (see Butler 2004; Han 2018). In this Introduction, we highlight to particularly influential approaches to understanding precariousness.

First, in social anthropology and cultural studies, the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2010) has been highly influential in proposing an ethics of political responsibility framed around shared conditions of living precarious lives. Butler (2004) argues that whilst all human life is fragile, interconnected, and vulnerable to injury, loss, and illness, how our societies are structured (through hierarchies of class, gender, race, and ableism) mean that some people are exposed to such fragility far more openly than others, and some countries are subject to violence whilst others are protected. For Butler, the world is structured by this differential exposure to vulnerability, be that within our proximate communities or through conflicts occurring many miles away, such that some lives are made safe and protected whilst others remain exposed. In this body of work, precariousness names a vulnerability that is inherent in human life, the fact that we are all exposed to risk and that we rely on others to help us at various stages in our lives. By contrast, **precarity** names the structures and conditions that distribute precariousness differently, that ensure that some groups of people are exposed in their precariousness more than others (Butler 2016; Han 2018).

Importantly, this is only one reading of precariousness among many others. We highlight it here because it is valuable in showing how precariousness has been thought of as a condition of vulnerability that may be common to us all and may reach into different aspects of our lives (Ettlinger, 2007). As we discuss throughout this text, a key factor in precarious

housing is the way in which different aspects of precariousness combine to make certain types of housing precarious for different people. This is where the term precarity is useful as it has a history associated with varying types of insecurity, most notably in the labour market, and has thus been used to highlight the structures and inequalities that shape how precariousness is experienced (Waite 2009).

In addition to the cultural account of precariousness advanced by Butler (2004), a second key approach to understanding precariousness is tied to developments in the labour markets of the Global North. This approach focuses on **precarity** as a condition experienced by workers as their jobs become increasingly insecure as a result of the dual forces of globalization and neoliberalism (Waite, 2009).[6] In particular, during the mid and late 1980s, in many post-industrial economies, it was recognized that employment did not protect workers from poverty and the concept of the 'working poor' entered academic debates (Waite, 2009). The rise of precarity within the labour market should be seen in the light of the declining profitability of traditional mass-production and the crisis of Keynesian welfare policies in the 1970s (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). As a consequence, **neoliberalism** gained more and more support, and politicians like Reagan (US president from 1981 to 1989) and Thatcher (UK prime minister from 1979 to 1990) were more than willing to pursue this agenda (Jacobs, 2019). Their aim was to diminish the role of the state as well as the influence of trade unions. Furthermore, welfare systems had to be scaled back in order to remain competitive in a world where investments were getting more and more footloose. One of the articles of faith of neoliberalism was 'labour market flexibility'. This is based on the assumption that by making labour markets more flexible, labour costs could be cut, enabling nation-states, regions, and cities to prevent the loss of financial capital to investment elsewhere. As most social democratic parties in Europe also embraced the neoliberal agenda at least to some extent, the trend towards more insecurity within the labour market has been widespread across Europe irrespective of the political composition of individual national governments. A focus on 'flexibility' thus translated into insecurity for many workers, as workers' rights were diminished, employers gained the ability to fire people at short notice, and responsibility for economic wellbeing was passed to individuals (see Box 1.1 below for details on forms of labour security and insecurity).

It is these changes across Europe, that Standing (2011) focuses on in discussing the emergence of a distinctive socio-economic group – the precariat precariat. This term combines the adjective 'precarious' with the noun 'proletariat'. For Standing, the proletariat consists of *"workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with."* (Standing 2011, p. 6). By contrast, the precariat lacks such securities,

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[6] Waite (2009, p.419) argues that *"…precarious workers are not a uniquely 21st- or 20th-century phenomenon, insecurity is not a new experience for working classes, and of course the particular development trajectories of countries in the global South have meant that the 'precarious condition' is rarely even noted, perhaps because it is so ubiquitous. If we widen the perspective both geographically and historically to countries where informal sector work absorbs the majority of the workforce then precarity arguably becomes the norm."*

and consists of people who lack the seven labour securities described in Box 1.1.

Standing (2016, p. 16) argues that research on precarity should not only focus on the conditions of the precariat, but also on the way in which people are 'precariatised'. This focus on process argues that even parts of the 'salariat' (those still in stable full-time employment and enjoying a wide range of benefits) are at risk of drifting into the precariat. This can be related to the concept of **commodification**, which is defined as *"…treating everything as a commodity, to be bought and sold, subject to market forces, with prices set by demand and supply, without effective 'agency' (a capacity to resist)"* (Standing, 2016, p.26). Commodification has led to a more fluid division of labour within enterprises, as relocating activities within firms or to other firms have become increasingly common, namely in the context of offshoring (where the physical location of labour is changed, often with employment moving from higher- to lower-wage areas) and outsourcing (often a shift from public sector employment to private sector employment). Next to this, companies themselves have become commodities, to be bought and sold through mergers and acquisitions. This makes internal careers within a firm less and less likely. An OECD study of 26 European countries revealed that about half of the jobs created between 1995 and 2013 were in non-standard jobs (i.e., an indicator that combines workers on temporary or part-time contracts with their own account, and self-employed persons who do not employ others). For the latter part of the period (2007-2013), this proportion increases to approximately 60% (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Within the EU, the highest proportions of precarious employment can be found in Eastern Europe and the lowest in Nordic countries (Matilla-Santander et al., 2020). The groups that run the highest risks of precariousness are younger workers, immigrants, manual workers, and women (Benach et al., 2014). Precarious employment has been found to have a negative effect on both physical and mental health (Benach et al. 2014; Bentley et al., 2019; Matilla-Santander et al., 2020) and increases the exposure to (sexual) harassment at work, especially for women (Matilla-Santander et al., 2020; Reuter et al., 2020).

Box 1.1: Forms of labour security

Labour market security – Adequate income-earning opportunities; at the macro-level, this is epitomized by a government commitment to 'full employment'.

Employment security – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on.

Job security – Ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment, plus barriers to skill dilution, and opportunities for 'upward' mobility in terms of status and income.

Work security – Protection against accidents and illness at work through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work, as well as compensation for accidents.

Skill reproduction security – Opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunity to make use of competencies.

Income security – Assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes.

Representation security – Possessing a collective voice in the labour market, though, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike.

Source: Standing, 2011, p. 10.

Taken together, these changes in labour market structures have served to depress wages,

reduce workers' rights, and place workers in competition with one another, thereby making employment less secure and more precarious. Importantly for our focus on precarious housing, these discussions of precarity and labour, highlight how changing economic conditions serve to shape and constraint housing choices, as insecurity of income impacts the ability to afford housing (see Chapter 2). Similarly, unaffordable housing, through which individuals have to pay an increasing proportion of their income on housing, risks drawing people into precariousness through reducing their financial security.

1.3.2 Precarious migrants

Lewis et al. (2015) argue that the concept of precarity lumps together exploited migrants and workers that at least have some degrees of freedom in pursuing their working career. They propose the term '*hyper*-precarity' to capture the additional constraints that migrants with a compromised socio-legal status are confronted with on top of barriers in the labour market. They illustrate this claim with three manifestations of the layering of insecurities produced by labour and immigration regimes:

- *Deportability*: For irregular migrants, the risk of deportation pushes them into the most invisible parts of informal markets where they are less likely to be caught in raids executed by immigration officers. Given their vulnerable status, they have a weak bargaining position vis-a-vis employers and they are unlikely to organize themselves or to take action against mistreatment at work.
- *Risk of bodily injury coupled with restricted access to healthcare*: Migrants with a comprised legal status tend to work in sectors with a relatively high risk of injury (e.g. construction, agriculture, catering and cleaning). Moreover, many employers hiring workers with an uncertain migration status are not inclined to adhere to health and safety standards. Workers that are injured often refrain from visiting health services, because they are not insured or may fear detection by authorities and subsequent deportation.
- *Transactional relationships*: Migrants without permission to work (like refused asylum seekers) are often forced to rely on non-commercial transactions for the provision of services for their survival (such as shelter). The services they provide to other asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, or established residents may range from childcare, cooking and housework, to sex work. Due to the difference in power between the receiver and the provider of these kinds of services, these arrangements run a significant risk of being exploitative.

The precarious position of irregular migrants also has negative impacts on their housing conditions, as we discuss further in Chapter 4. Irregular migrants often depend on rogue landlords that offer substandard housing conditions (Van Meeteren, 2014). Migrants with legal status are less likely to be exploited, but they still face hurdles that do not exist for other groups. They may be hampered in their residential choices by discrimination on the part of all kinds of actors within the housing market, such as mortgage lenders, real estate agents, (social) landlords, or authorities at the local and national levels (Aalbers, 2007; Bolt 2012). For instance, research from Belgium and Germany points to landlords as one of the major sources of housing discrimination against minority ethnic groups (Heylen & Van den Broeck, 2016; Mazziotta et al., 2015). Field experiments found that individuals with 'foreign-sounding' names have fewer chances of being invited to see a dwelling, an indication of how landlords were discriminating against certain ethnicities (Auspurg et al., 2019). The precarious status

of many migrant groups in Europe, and the insecure housing conditions they experience, are critically intertwined and ensure that precarious housing is a particular concern for this part of the population. We focus on these issues in more detail in Chapter 4, where we dig deeper into the obstacles that different categories of migrants face in trying to access adequate, safe, and secure housing.

1.4 Neoliberalism and precarious housing

1.4.1 A housing crisis? What crisis?

Madden & Marcuse (2016) take issue with the term "housing crisis" as invoked by many commentators and activists, especially since the global financial crisis of 2008. They argue that the word crisis implies a temporary departure from a standard in which affordable and adequate housing is sufficiently available for all income groups. Their argument is that housing is always in crisis for dominated groups. For them, the word crisis is only in vogue when middle-class homeowners, as well as investors, face the consequences of a crashing housing market. They argue that this so-called 'housing crisis' is *"…a predictable, consistent outcome of a basic characteristic of capitalist spatial development: housing is not produced and distributed for the purposes of dwelling for all; it is produced and distributed as a commodity to enrich the few. Housing crisis is not a result of the system breaking down but of the system working as it is intended"* (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p.11).

The **commodification** of housing markets in the neoliberal era has meant that the exchange value of housing is emphasized at the expense of its use-value. The **use-value** of a commodity is defined by the degree to which it satisfies the needs of its consumer. To meet the needs of residents housing must provide the various functions as introduced in the first section. The **exchange value** is the value realized when a commodity is sold or rented (Harvey, 1973). In the case of housing as a commodity, consumers who buy a house will often see it as a (long-term) investment, but there are many other players in the housing market in pursuit of exchange values. Developers and construction companies make money on new housing projects. Landlords make money on rent on their properties. Realtors derive exchange value from transactions and financial institutions from mortgages.

We might think of this distinction between use-value and exchange value as a difference between a house or property as a space for living in and as a space of investment. The two are not mutually exclusive, but they emphasize different elements of what is important in housing and draw our attention to different things. For example, we opened this chapter by asking what 'home' might mean to you. For most of us home refers to a house or property that we have an attachment to. That sense of attachment is, in part, associated with the use-value of a property – how we use it and how we value it as a site for living in. When we are asked about 'home' most of us would not consider an answer that referred to the financial value of a property or consider how much 'home' is worth in monetary terms. In this way, we have two different ways of potentially valuing housing and what it means to us as not just an economic commodity, but also a social space and basis for relationships, community, and security.

According to Madden & Marcuse (2018, p. 18), we have entered the 'Age of Hyper-Commodification'. If the extent of commodification expands and contracts historically, we are currently living through a period of unprecedented expansion. In today's transnational,

digitally enhanced market, housing is becoming ever less an infrastructure for living and evermore an instrument for financial accumulation. In our example above, exchange value is becoming a dominant way of thinking about property, and use -value is relegated to a secondary concern.

There are three more specific, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing factors that constitute the hyper-commodification of housing today. The first factor is the contemporary counterpart to enclosure[7]: deregulation, the removal of restrictions placed on **real estate** as a commodity. Second, and relatedly, housing has been undergoing a process of **financialization**. This is a generic term to describe the increasing power and prominence of actors and firms that engage in profit accumulation through the servicing and exchanging of money and financial instruments. Finally, commodification is reinforced by the **globalization** of housing. Residential real estate may be fixed in place, but it is increasingly dominated by economic networks that are global in scope. We might think here of the trend for wealthy investors from across the globe to buy properties in European capitals with no intention of living in them. Property is thus a global market, but also one where investment increasingly trumps living.

The next chapter will dig deeper into the concepts of commodification and financialization. The remainder of this section describes the tragedy of Grenfell Tower to explain what the deleterious effects of the neoliberal articles of faith on the lives of residents can be. The case of Grenfell Tower also serves as an illustration of how the production of precarious housing relates to wider forms of precarity, such as precarious employment, immigration status, and forms of racialized disadvantage.

1.4.2 Case study: Grenfell Tower

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a refrigerator malfunction in a fourth-floor flat started a fire that would engulf the 24-storey Grenfell Tower building. 72 people lost their lives in the fire, 70 were injured, and a further 223 escaped as the tower block burned out of control. It took 70 fire engines and 60 hours to fully extinguish the fire. Grenfell Tower had been built in the 1970s as a response to London's need for social housing, forming a central part of the Lancaster West Estate in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

The speed at which the fire spread through the building was primarily caused by a flawed £9 million refurbishment that took place in 2014-16. This process involved the addition of new external cladding to the tower block, cladding which was found to have extremely low fire resistance, and which enabled the fire to travel rapidly throughout the tower. As part of the refurbishment process, a more expensive non-combustible cladding was originally allocated, but this was subsequently changed in order to save costs amid an **austerity** drive by the local government. The refurbishment process, and its cost-cutting measures, 'fatally compromised the building's original fire-resistant structure' (Hodkinson 2019, p. 2).

In the weeks and months that followed, anger and grief solidified into a desire for justice for those who lost their lives, as questions were asked about the conditions of the tower, its safety record, and the ways in which residents were treated by local authorities, housing providers, and politicians (Bulley et al., 2019). The tragedy shed light on a number of concerns at the heart of precarious housing in the UK for those in low-income employment,

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[7] Enclosure refers to fencing off and claiming of common land by individual landowners. The process has led (in the course of centuries) to the migration of dispossessed people to cities to become laborers.

with precarious immigration status, or reliant on social welfare.

Perhaps most significant was how the tragedy of Grenfell reflected longer-term trends in the decline of social housing across Britain. This decline had three dimensions. First, it was decided to sell social housing to its inhabitants under the 'right to buy' scheme, seeing 2.5 million homes pass from public to private ownership since 1980 (Hodkinson, 2019, p. 6). Whilst generating revenue for central government, and associated with encouraging aspirations of homeownership as part of a neoliberal agenda of individualized economic responsibility, this decision left many local authorities with limited, and often poor quality, housing to support the most vulnerable (Boughton, 2018). Second, there was a drive to deregulate housing and reduce the perceived 'red tape' that affected building development, planning, and maintenance. Since 2010, a succession of Conservative-led governments has cut regulations on housing standards, safety requirements, and inspection regimes, in an attempt to stimulate urban development, a move that has bolstered the profits of building contractors but done little to provide new social housing (Hodkinson, 2019). In Grenfell, this deregulation trend combined with the outsourcing of building management and maintenance responsibilities to a private contractor meant that cost-cutting in the upkeep, repair, and safety of the tower was not only possible but also economically profitable. A final component in the decline of social housing has been the demands of austerity placed on local government. Austerity has meant 50% cuts to social housing and 40% cuts to local government budgets since 2010 (MacLeod, 2018). One impact of this policy has been that local government is unable to monitor and inspect housing conditions. These trends in social housing indicate that Grenfell must be understood within a wider context of financialization, highly unequal housing markets, and profit-orientated deregulation. Indeed, as Dan Bulley (2019, p. 12) has argued *"The Grenfell Tower fire was an intricate product of an international political economy…that prized cost savings over human life"*.

The precarious conditions of the housing itself were compounded by the way in which residents' concerns over safety were routinely ignored. Some residents in Grenfell Tower made repeated attempts to raise concerns that conditions were not meeting health and safety requirements, with central fire alarms and emergency fire lighting having failed in the past. However, such concerns were passed between a range of outsourced contractors and companies, never able to fully address the needs of residents. At the same time, Grenfell Tower was home to families from across the world. Many had secure immigration status in the UK, but some did not, and this meant that many residents were reluctant to lodge concerns over safety before the fire, and fearful of seeking help afterwards. As Bradley (2019. p. 136) notes, *"health workers and legal representatives found that some people were too afraid to seek support from the emergency services or other officials, fearing that any contact with the state would be used as a pretext to detain and deport them"*. A year after the fire, two-thirds of affected households were still without a permanent home (Bradley 2019).

The confluence of precarious immigration status, with a housing system that lacked clear accountability for safety and standards, served to heighten the precarity of residents, enabling the development of what MacLeod (2018, p. 473) argues was a *"…grievous vacuum of accountability alongside a scandalously anti-democratic approach to governing public housing"*. One response to this lack of accountability for the violence of the Grenfell Tower fire, has been a concerted campaign of community activism centred on demanding justice for those who lost their lives, and those who lost their homes, in the fire. Whilst a judge-led inquiry is underway into the tragedy, campaigners such as the Grenfell Action Group question

the extent to which this will truly hold those in power to account (Bulley et al. 2019). A sense of this anger and outrage is evident in the comments of the Radical Housing Network, a London-based social movement advocating for the rights of tenants in precarious housing. In response to the tragedy, they wrote:

> "The fire at Grenfell is a horrific, preventable tragedy for which authorities and politicians must be held to account. Grenfell's council tenants are not second-class citizens – yet they are facing a disaster unimaginable in Kensington's richer neighbourhoods. This government, and many before it, have neglected council housing and disregarded its tenants as if they were second class. Nationally and locally, politicians have subjected public housing to decades of systematic disinvestment – leaving properties in a state of disrepair, and open to privatisation. Regeneration, when it has come, has been for the benefit of developers and buy-to-let landlords, who profit from the new luxury flats built in place of affordable homes. Across London, regeneration has meant evictions, poor quality building work, and has given tenants little meaningful influence over the future of their estates. The chronic underinvestment in council housing and contempt for tenants must stop. It is an outrage that in 21st-century Britain, authorities cannot be trusted to provide safe housing, and that people in council properties cannot put children safely to bed at night" (Radical Housing Network 2017).

Figure 1.2: Grenfell Tower, London

Source: Alex J Donohue, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The fight they outline here, against neglect and disrepair, the stark inequalities of housing provision in London, and the impact of punitive immigration rules on the ability to access safe and secure housing, is an ongoing one. In this context, Grenfell Tower serves as a traumatic reminder of how precarious housing conditions, shaped through years of neglect, austerity, and profit-seeking at the expense of public housing provision, can interact with precarious social conditions of immigration status, race, and class, to create tragedies that may be all too avoidable.

1.5 Overview of the themes in the textbook

In exploring precarious housing in Europe, the remaining chapters of this book examine a range of themes, focusing on how experiences of precarious housing intersect with other dynamics of precariousness, associated with insecure immigration status, racism and discrimination, class, wealth, and income disparities, and forms of homelessness and displacement. Each chapter draws on examples from across Europe to explore different experiences of precarious housing, and different responses to these conditions. Chapter 2 outlines some of the wider structural changes in European economies and housing policies, that have shaped contemporary housing markets and led to a lack of affordable housing in much of Europe. Focusing in on how housing has become commodified and how the exchange value of housing has gained prominence over use value, the chapter provides a range of examples of the shifting political, economic, and cultural structures shaping precarious housing in Europe. Chapter 3 then examines one of the key consequences of a growing lack of affordable housing in Europe, the growth of housing evictions and the displacement of residents and tenants. Drawing on first-hand experiences of eviction and the growth of the 'eviction industry', the chapter explores how evictions have been challenged and how displacement from housing leads to a range of damaging social, physical, and psychological effects for displaced people.

With these foundations in place, Chapter 4 then moves to consider how precarious housing conditions intersect with experiences of migration. Chapter 4 considers the varied ways in which migration status impacts migrants' ability to access affordable, safe, and secure housing. From discrimination in the housing market to constraints on the owning of property in different parts of Europe, the chapter traces why it is often migrants who consistently face precarious housing conditions across Europe. Building on these insights, the chapter then focuses on one specific group of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, in order to consider how they have been accommodated in different European countries and what challenges this has posed, both for European governments and societies, and for asylum seekers and refugees themselves. Chapter 5 shifts our focus to consider how forms of housing that might be considered 'informal', or beyond the boundaries of formal planning and legal regulation, have grown in significance across Europe, from homeless encampments and tent cities, to informal squatting among migrants and the occupation of space by Roma communities. In considering these examples, the chapter traces how informality as a legal category can be used as a tool to police access to housing and to destroy informal settlements, but can also be a source of negotiation and pragmatism between

authorities and communities. Chapter 6 draws many of these precarious housing conditions together to examine experiences of homelessness and to consider how different European states, and European cities, have responded to a growth in homeless populations. Exploring some of the causes of homelessness, together with a range of experiments undertaken to find sustainable and sensitive public policy responses to homelessness, the chapter considers how homelessness is related to the insecure and precarious housing conditions noted throughout the earlier chapters of this book.

In drawing these threads together, and concluding the book, Chapter 7 focuses on how the development of affordable, safe, and secure housing as a right for all in Europe, might offer a challenging, but feasible, policy response to precarious housing. Working through examples of policy innovations designed to provide security of tenure, higher quality and safer housing, and affordable housing costs, the chapter considers what lessons we can learn from looking at housing solutions across Europe.

At a glance

Key points

- The recognition of housing rights by EU Member States does not necessarily mean that housing policy leads to a reduction of housing precariousness.
- Precariousness has received relatively little attention in housing literature compared to the labour market literature.
- Both labour market and housing precariousness are driven by similar forces, namely, the rise of a neoliberal economic model that prioritizes competition and individual responsibility over state support and collective action.
- The precarious status of many migrant groups in Europe, and the insecure housing conditions they experience, are critically intertwined and ensure that precarious housing is a particular concern for this population.
- The commodification of housing markets in the neoliberal era has meant that the exchange value (value realized when a commodity is sold or rented) is emphasized at the expense of its use-value (the degree to which it satisfies the needs of its consumer).

Start thinking

- What are the things that make you feel at home (or not at home) in your current housing situation?
- Do you consider your own housing (or the housing from someone you know well) as precarious in some way, and what factors are at play in making this housing precarious?
- S1.3.2 argues that neoliberal policies are partly responsible for the Grenfell Tower disaster. How would you react to that argument if you were representing a government that advocates neoliberal policies?

Learn more

Have a look at our corresponding e-module.: https://mdl.donau-uni.ac.at/push/mod/page/view.php?id=52

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