

EDITORIAL

Housing related impacts of the pandemic

The pandemic has shaken the world. People's health became a priority in most countries, adopting measures that hindered economic growth or the creation of jobs. Measures addressed to prevent social contact questioned the foundations of urban life in order to guarantee the health of population. The importance of relating to each other, the collective capital that the city embraces, the availability of urban resources, have been confronted by COVID-19. Quoting Sennett "A city isn't just a place to live, to shop, to go out and have kids play. It's a place that implicates how one derives one's ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, how one learns to talk with and learn from people who are unlike oneself, which is how a human being becomes human.' (Sennett, 1989)¹. Replacing public spaces, offices, schools, the home became more than ever the place for work, for leisure, for education... All of a sudden, our lives were constrained to the boundaries of the houses we live in.

The ongoing pandemic has proven to be a catalyser for action. A diversity of tools and resources have been used: combined efforts from top-down strategies together with bottom-up initiatives became essential to counteract the first impact of the virus in people's lives. Policies and actions are still in place to guarantee a secured transition to a post-COVID society. However, although the impact is generalized all over the world, the capacity and willingness for intervention differs between and even within countries.

The ENHR field of study, housing, became central in people's lives around the world. People stayed at home more than ever and their house became the boundary to the world. Households also reacted, when possible, to the circumstances, changing their preferences on the place to live, moving for instance, their home in the inner city to the peripheral even rural areas, using second homes as main residences, creating urban gardens on the balcony, rehabilitating, and redecorating the house. The platform economy dealing with temporary subletting, especially for tourists, has also experienced variations, as there were no more tourists in the city. These changes, among others, have also affected the housing markets, creating unprecedented variations in the evolution of rents and housing prices. Probably, some of the negative effects of the pandemics, such as the rise in unemployment, palliated by public interventions and subsidies, will also have a direct impact on the conditions of the housing system in years to come.

The shock of the pandemic has clearly affected the evolution of housing dynamics, but there are evident disparities in the way households could react. The importance of living conditions has shed light on the problems of the increase of housing costs in the household budgets. It is ever clearer that not every household has the means to adequately adapt its home as a place to work, live and leisure. The traditional problems of housing affordability have been further exacerbated by the negative impact of the pandemic on employment and the economy. Many households are experiencing cuts in their income while their housing burden is getting higher. At the other end of the income ladder, families less impacted (or even benefited) by the economic situation, manifest their changing housing preferences by moving from their current place to greener, more spacious locations, further away from the dense core areas of the cities. The conceptualization of the 'community' is also challenged by the fact that to control the virus, secured enclaves are emerging as a solution to its spread.

¹ Sennett, R. (1989): The Civitas of Seeing. In: Places, Vol. 5, Nr. 4, p. 84.

As housing researchers, we felt the need to set up a platform for dialogue and conversation, engaging with key stakeholders and researchers from different parts of the globe. We also wanted to reflect how ENHR Working Groups saw their topic affected by the pandemic and the policies and measures addressed to preserve the health of the population.

For these reasons ENHR organized a series of online events, that took place during two weeks in February 2021, with the title 'Housing related impacts of the pandemic'. In the opening plenary on the 12th February the first roundtable included the ENHR Chair, Peter Boelhouwer, who spoke about possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our housing markets, Kim van Sparrentak, Member of the European Parliament who gave a speech on the importance of the European Parliament resolution on decent and affordable housing for all and Jose Miguel Calatayud, journalist and Housing Project director at Arena for Journalism in Europe who reflected upon the journalist's perspective on looking at housing from the transnational point of view.

The second roundtable aimed at discussing with housing experts from ENHR-related organisations the impact of COVID-19 in different geographical areas. Ed Goetz from Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota (former Chair of UAA) talked about the pandemic and housing precarity in the U.S. Shenjing He from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong (Vice-Chair of APNHR) talked about the community question in post-pandemic cities and finally, Anacláudia Marinheiro Centeno Rossbach, representative of Cities Alliance – Latin America and the Caribbean talked about housing policies and informal settlements in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Both roundtables were rich in content and perspectives. Despite the differences in backgrounds and places of origin, there were broad coincidences in the conclusions of all speakers. Housing is even more central now in people's lives than it was before the pandemic and it has become more interconnected than ever with mobility, work, education, and health. The pandemic highlighted the mounting social problems of housing: while housing investments are booming, homelessness and affordability problems reached critical levels. Under such conditions strong political ideas emerge, such as ending homelessness by 2030. Steps towards this direction are the adoption of the action plan for the EU Social Pillar, the organization of the Social summit in May, and Homelessness summit in June. Another important novelty is the new EU fiscal rulebook which should allow more investments into affordable housing.

It was a general view that local governments are more progressive than national ones. Based on local innovations, to spread their effects, international cooperation and rules have to be strengthened and in this the EU has to play a larger and more progressive role. The new EU Recovery and Resilience plan with strong push towards energy efficient renovation shows into good direction. Although the future housing situation in a post-COVID society is uncertain, the larger role of local communities (15 minutes city) and the changing circumstances in inner city areas (return of housing) can already be identified.

The ENHR conference called the attention that more research in housing and the reinforcement of synergies with other perspectives (health, work, education, mobility, etc.) are needed, as well as more collaboration between the academia and other stakeholders. All this should be on the ENHR agenda for the future. The ENHR Working Groups, some of which also held their meetings during the two-week period, are essential to spread around the contributions of our members. The next ENHR conference in Nicosia (Cyprus), is an invaluable opportunity to share knowledge and experiences and have our say with respect to the post-COVID society in general and the housing related aspects.

*Montserrat Pareja-Eastaway and Iván Tosics,
Vice-chairs of ENHR.*