



# Precarious residence: Indigenous housing and the right to the city



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on findings from a study of Indigenous housing in a regional Western Australian city, this paper examines the experiences of Indigenous peoples as a particular set of ‘right bearers’ within the right-to-the-city discourse. In settler-states, colonial discourses of absence, threat, and authenticity have informed policy frameworks that have militated against various Indigenous claims of belonging, rights, and aspiration in relation to urban places. Housing has been a representative domain of struggle in this respect. Consequently, today, Indigenous peoples have disproportionately high rates of dependence on more volatile and discriminatory forms of tenure than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The paper examines the incongruence between State aspirations to move (Indigenous) people along a housing continuum in urban environments, and the actual experiences of Indigenous urban residents, which fix discursively on barriers to such movements. It also traces the deleterious, displacing impacts for urban Indigenous households of the retreat of the State in its role as a landlord for the socio-economically disadvantaged, and in responding to market signals and particular sociological theses regarding poverty, with specific spatial logics. In so doing, we advance two interwoven arguments. First, we assert that Indigenous people face a unique precarity in the Australian urban housing system, which is a result of both colonial and racially discriminatory forces, and economically discriminating processes such as capital concentration and the commodification of land. Second, we contend that this precarity sets many Indigenous people on housing career trajectories that are antithetical to policy intentions.

## 1. Introduction

With respect to issues of urban social and spatial justice, Henri Lefebvre’s (2003, 1996) conception of the ‘right-to-the-city’ has become a fertile, if highly variegated, ground for dialogue and action amongst both scholars and practitioners over the last decade. The right-to-the-city might be broadly conceived of in this context as the participatory and common right of urban residents to be actively engaged in the work of city formation in ways that produce just and inclusive outcomes. In his elaboration of the concept, Harvey (2008) describes the increasing commodification of urban space, land and housing wrought by the entwining of capitalism and rapid urbanization processes. He argues that this entwining animates a process by which rights to the city, and the power of decision-making about its formation (in terms of land use planning and culture), are conferred upon the wealthy few who direct the process of commodification, and are increasingly inaccessible to the socio-economically disenfranchised (Harvey, 2008). Here, the ‘use’ rights of urban inhabitants are positioned in threatening opposition to property rights as conceived within liberal democracies

and granted by the state (Purcell, 2013). Under this logic, urban inhabitants without property rights can be, and often are, subjected to displacement processes (such as gentrification) that push them to the urban periphery.

For Lefebvre and Harvey, the right-to-the-city is not conceived of as a natural or normative right. Rather, it is struggled for (Njoh, 2015; Purcell, 2013). It is a clarion call to city inhabitants to participate in the formation of the city in ways that push back against the unbalanced power base of those who orchestrate the escalating commodification of land and space. In post-industrial cities, affordable and secure housing tenure has become a key battleground in this struggle. Recent scholarship has focused in particular on the contraction of public housing sectors and the deliberate dismantling of public housing estates (Aalbers and Gibb, 2014; Darcy and Rogers, 2014; Kadi and Ronald, 2014; Samara et al., 2013). Much of this work recognises that the struggle for the right-to-the-city, and the related struggle of many individuals to access affordable and secure housing arrangements, is not contested exclusively in the domain of the political economy. It is not simply a question of class structures. As Wienstein and Ren (2009: 407)

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note, rights to the city are also socially and culturally mediated. For example, historical and contemporary processes of colonisation, can also serve as critical mediators of the right-to-the-city for Indigenous peoples (Peters and Lafond, 2013).

While the literature on the right-to-the-city has explored the experiences of certain disadvantaged ethnic minorities (such as African Americans) in respect of diminishing access to affordable and secure housing tenure, very little scholarship has explicitly situated Indigenous peoples within this conceptual terrain (Njoh, 2015). This paper examines the struggle to access affordable and secure urban housing tenure amongst Indigenous Australians. Drawing on empirical case study findings, as well as a collection of other Australian studies, we argue that a potent combination of capitalist and colonial forces exerted on urban areas produces a particular precarity<sup>1</sup> in the urban housing system for a disproportionately large share of Indigenous peoples. This precarity is underpinned not just by higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage, but also by subliminal discursive challenges to the viability of urban Indigenous presence and belonging wrought by the legacy and ongoing effects of colonisation.

Our analysis draws certain parallels with Porter's (2014) critique of urban planning systems, in which she brings together observations regarding processes of colonial dispossession of Indigenous land, and displacement imposed upon urban residents through gentrification and urban renewal (Porter, 2014: 388). She contends that though they are distinct processes "separated by time, space, politics and culture" (Porter, 2014: 388), they share important similarities in respect of the subjectivities (residents that are positioned as 'moveable') and 'possessory politics' at play. In this paper, we seek to highlight how the dual dynamics of historical colonial dispossession and contemporary processes of urban change that generate displacement, have in fact intersected to apply significant pressures on many urban Indigenous households.

Acts of colonial dispossession and subsequent policies that excluded Indigenous peoples from emergent Australian cities and towns, fueled a spatial logic that positioned authentic Indigeneity as antithetical to urban landscapes. They militated against the assertion of Indigenous urban belonging and genuine equality of access to the urban housing system. We will argue that the resultant contemporary socio-economic and socio-cultural marginalization experienced by many urban-dwelling Indigenous households, leaves them more disadvantaged by the discriminating practices that govern the private real estate market, and proportionately more dependent on a public housing sector characterized by increasing disinvestment and de-concentration. In the study reported on here, Indigenous people have responded by actively advocating for decolonized housing policy and practices that locates them as critical co-labourers in the work of addressing these marginalizing and discriminating practices and processes.

## 2. A right to housing? Australian housing policy in context

A growing body of scholarship argues that a right to affordable housing is a precondition of realising any meaningful right-to-the-city. Raquel Rolnik, former UN Human Rights Council special rapporteur on the right to housing and noted Brazilian scholar has described the right to housing as 'a condition that has to be fulfilled in order to ensure the exercise of belonging [in the city] in all its aspects' (Rolnik, 2014: 295).

<sup>1</sup> We do not operationalize the notion of precarity in the most established scholarly sense as "something specific to work under neoliberal labor market conditions" (Lewis et al., 2014: 584), or to signal affiliation with broader activist movements and/or migrant exploitation (see also Gill and Pratt, 2008; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008 for a more detailed discussion). Rather, consistent with its broadened use in sociological and geographical literatures we employ the concept as a descriptor of "life worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability" (Waite, 2009: 416) and one that "more explicitly [than notions of vulnerability or risk] incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs" (Waite, 2009: 421).

She goes on to argue that to be deprived of access to adequate housing 'is to be deprived of the very possibility to be part of and enjoy the city life' (Rolnik, 2014: 295). However, like the right-to-the-city, the concept of a right to affordable housing is not normative or natural right. It is struggled for and contested. As Morris (2010) notes, if the right to housing were defined as a real right to affordable, adequate, and secure housing tenure, many Australians, for example, simply would not have it. Very few countries, Australia included, have made any attempt to embed such a right in policy or legislation. In fact, many researchers examining questions of urban housing access in wealthy countries note several trends that are eroding the possibility of realising such a right for socio-economically disadvantaged households. In the United States and UK, for example, Fenton et al. (2013) describe processes of gentrification that foster the suburbanisation of poverty, as well as shrinking public housing sectors that further limit the housing options for the poor. In the United States in particular, the contraction of the public housing sector has been coupled with highly contested 'deconcentrating poverty' (Arena, 2013; Samara et al., 2013) and 'neighbourhood effects' (Goetz, 2010) policy approaches that mark a definitive shift in the spatial logic of public housing provision away from concentrated estates toward more dispersed arrangements.

These same logics have also gained significant momentum in Australia (Darcy, 2010, 2013; Darcy and Rogers, 2014; Morris, 2013; Shaw, 2007). However, as Arthurson and Darcy (2015) note, the history, sociology and geography of the public housing system in Australia is distinct from both the UK and the United States. They identify two key differences. First, much of the public housing mass-produced in Australia between the 1950s and 1970s was lower density, single detached dwellings in more outlying suburban estates, compared with the predominance of higher density, inner-city developments in the UK and United States. Second, unlike in many European countries, public housing tenure in Australia never exceeded 10% of the total stock in any state jurisdiction (Arthurson and Darcy, 2015). In Australia, affordability and homeownership have been the twin foci of housing policy since the first Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement was signed in 1945 (Hayward, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

In Western Australia (WA), where the present study is located, declining housing affordability in the wake of a sustained resources boom (Cassells et al., 2014), and an aging stock of public housing units not being replenished and expanded at a rate commensurate with demand,<sup>3</sup> led in 2010 to three important housing policy developments that have remained the guiding framework for housing policy, and had significant implications for access to affordable and secure urban housing tenure. The first was tighter eligibility criteria for public housing. Now the system accommodates only the most marginalised households: usually those with multiple, complex forms of disadvantage. The second was a greater investment in diversifying the social housing sector (Department of Housing, 2010). In line with national trends (Morris, 2013), the State's 2010–2020 housing strategy set out a plan for encouraging the not-for-profit sector to play a greater role in the provision and management of affordable rental housing. It argued that partnerships with the not-for-profit sector are a key mechanism for creating a 'contestable market' to alleviate the shortage of affordable housing for middle- and low-income earners in urban areas. However, it also made

<sup>2</sup> Within the Australian Federation, each State became responsible for managing its own public housing system using grants provided by the Commonwealth government from major, multi-year agreements referred to as Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements.

<sup>3</sup> For example, data from the Productivity Commission show that over the decade from 2006–2015, public housing stock in Western Australia increased from 31 006 units to 33 361. The most significant growth (1869 units to 6608 units) occurred in the Community Housing sector, while there was a decline in the stock of Indigenous Community Housing from 3213 to 2493 units. However, over even the much shorter period from 2011–2015, the number of low income households in rental stress (a crude proxy measure of demand) increased by 12 352 (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016).

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