

Editorial

The Right to Housing

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The right to housing is one of the most elemental. Yet access to housing—and the type of housing we have access to—is the site of increasingly pronounced inequalities in our society. Pākehā, for instance, are twice as likely to own their own house as Pasifika. Young people are now far less likely to have the opportunity to buy their own house than previous generations. Renters face increasingly extortionate rental prices in the country's large cities. Anyone involved in frontline community work in this country sees daily the impacts of homelessness, substandard and overcrowded accommodation, and high housing costs on families and individuals. Māori, Pasifika, stranded foreign workers, and people with illness and disabilities are disproportionately affected.

Significant interventions from national and local government are needed to curb these problems. Addressing the chronic under-supply of housing is the obvious first port of call. But solving the housing crisis will require more than freeing up extra land for development, relaxing building regulations, or increasing the state-housing stock. There are deeper historical-systemic issues that must also be addressed. The introduction of the capitalist market to this country was enabled and accompanied by the dispossession of Māori land. Reform of housing in this country needs to be approached with a view to decolonise. This means returning stolen land

and recognising tino rangatiratanga. It also necessitates a conceptual shift: the settler-capitalist system of property ownership must be knocked off the throne from which it proclaims itself the only game in town.

The dynamics of capitalism in this country must also be confronted. In recent decades, financialisation has driven economic growth in Aotearoa New Zealand. The property market is one of the linchpins of this growth strategy. Rapidly inflating house prices provide collateral for leveraged business strategies and boost consumer demand among homeowners, driving economic growth but also inequality. Household and financial-sector debt has swollen as a result, undermining financial stability. In response to the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, the state has dispensed monetary largesse to the banks and the asset-owning classes while dealing out punitive austerity measures to workers. Housing reform must also, then, be undertaken with a view to restructure our economic system. Housing should be decoupled from its role in financialised capitalism, and a new strategy for generating and equitably distributing wealth found.

For many people, housing is a source of constant anxiety. There is the fear of not making rent or covering the mortgage, and of being caught perpetually in housing precarity. There are also the petty humiliations of flat inspections and the not-so-petty power imbalances between landlord and renter. At the other end of the spectrum sits a substantial class of multi-property-owning rentiers. This class, composed of (largely) older middle-class citizens who own multiple properties and full-time property speculators from both home and abroad who own many, enriches itself by expropriating the incomes of working people. If serious steps are not taken to reverse, or at least arrest, upwardly spiralling house prices and the concentration of property ownership, the power imbalance between those who own property and those who do not will intensify, as will social polarisation and civic unrest. A class politics clearly underpins struggles over the right to housing. To reform housing, we must name and confront this politics, an uncomfortable proposition for those who still labour under the idea that Aotearoa New Zealand is a country free from class conflict.

So far, the Labour-led government, while great on aspirational language around tackling the housing crisis and on the importance of wellbeing, has made little headway with housing reform. The well-documented bungling of KiwiBuild and the obstinate refusal to entertain a capital-gains tax stand out as failures. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the government has made some small steps forward such as the 30m² change and the commitment to training more apprentices to address the shortage of builders in the country. More substantively, the government has committed to the construction of 12,400 state and community houses over the next five years. But while a welcome step forward, this does not even cover the current waitlist of 16,309 households, which is likely to balloon as the Covid-19 recession bites. As commentators on the Left have noted, when considering the massive amount of spending it is undertaking elsewhere in response to the pandemic, the government's housing programme is underwhelming.¹

Ensuring the right to housing is realised involves connecting struggles in this sector to a push for broader economic and political change. One of the problems here is the fractured character of Left responses to the housing crisis. The first issue of *Counterfutures* carried an article reflecting on the fault lines that were preventing a broader and more united Left fightback on housing issues in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time.² It explored the ways in which different sites of struggle and disagreement over definitions, priorities, and tactics can serve as impediments to movement building and offered some thoughts on how a more strategic approach to Left organisation around housing issues might be achieved. While the context has shifted in significant ways, including three years of a Labour-led government and the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic, the fundamental fractures and gaps in political mobilisation around housing have barely changed.

The notable exception is the battle for Ihumātao. In the face of a conjunction of private-developer profit-taking and government determination to ride roughshod over a history of raupatu in the name

1 Vanessa Cole et al, 'Budget 2020 Report,' Auckland, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa, 2020.

2 Sue Bradford, 'Fractured Fightback,' *Counterfutures* no. 1 (2016): 145–166.

of housing needs, people came from all over the country to support the land occupation. However, Ihumātao, focussed on a particularly egregious set of circumstances and driven by a small group of particularly tenacious mana whenua, is exceptional. While some new organisations have developed over this period—such as the inspiring grassroots response to the Porirua regeneration project discussed in this issue and the evolution of the Wellington group Renters United! into a consistently strong voice for tenants—a broader, cross-sectoral Left movement around housing issues is yet to emerge.

Activist groups are few and far between and tend to be sectorally based. Part of the problem may be that we face too many crises at once—health, climate, inequality, racism, poverty, and housing to name a few. Yet our potential strength lies in the fact that these crises are all intrinsically linked, and that organising forms which build on those links have a greater likelihood of success. The more we can draw together answers from the length and breadth of a peoples’ responses to these crises, and the better we equip ourselves with the humility to accept that there is a range of solutions to each, the more likely we are to develop the kind of organisations capable of escalating our ability to put power behind our demands and initiatives. Solidarity is critical, yet it will only become meaningful if we enact it in the deliberate development of organisations capable of enduring beyond temporary bursts of enthusiasm, and beyond the fragmentation that so successfully continues to divide us. In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, pressure on housing needs is set to intensify. The months ahead are a time when we should be doing our utmost to exert influence on both this government and the next to take the kind of transformational action on housing that is needed.

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Intervening in this terrain, this issue of *Counterfutures* draws together diverse perspectives on the housing crisis and presents a number of visions for how it might be successfully overcome. A birds-eye view of the content

offers a sense of what a transformative and emancipatory approach to housing in this country would entail. In the opening contribution, Vanessa Cole offers a vision for an ambitious programme of universal state housing. A universal state-housing programme would aim to house anyone who wishes to have secure, healthy, and long-tenure housing, protecting people from the vagaries of the property market. The only losers from such a programme would be those who enrich themselves through expropriating the incomes of others. Mark Southcombe offers a complementary vision of a cooperative-housing sector. Cooperatives are a self-help response to the housing crisis that seek to exit from the individualistic, capital-investment-focussed housing market. Cooperatives seek to balance individual housing needs with the creation of collective assets and community spaces. A legislative mandate from government and the provision of low-interest loans would help realise such a solution.

Meaningful community engagement needs to sit at the heart of any state- or community-housing programme. This means moving beyond consultation and involving communities in every step of the process. As Rebecca Kiddle argues, people need to be democratically empowered to share their knowledge and understanding, which is rooted in place and community, to achieve design outcomes that meet a community's actual needs. Our current market-focussed approach to housing destroys community, separating people from their friends and families, a process Jasmine Taankink and Hugo Robinson show is especially visible in 'regeneration' projects that target working-class neighbourhoods. A progressive approach to solving the housing crisis will be one that ensures the ability of communities to persist through time.

Decolonisation involves returning land and resources to tangata whenua and the transfer of political power. It also involves valuing mātauranga Māori, accepting that the dominant European notions of private property and individualism are not the only ways of ordering the world and our relations with one another. Bringing the principles of papakāinga into broader discussions of how to develop housing and urban spaces should be prioritised, as argued in Jade Kake's contribution.

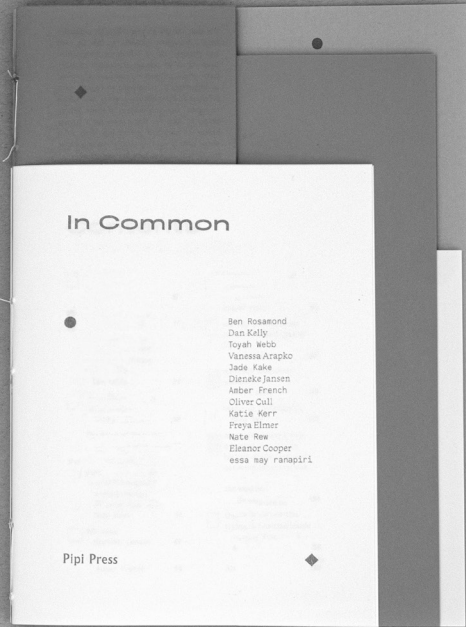
This means recognising key cultural landmarks and values, being active stewards of the environment, and prioritising culturally appropriate forms of housing for Māori family structures. As Elyjana Roach argues, expanding the cultural frameworks in which housing and urban space is developed also requires serious engagement with Pasifika values and needs. While a rapidly growing part of this country's population, Pasifika are all-too-frequently side-lined in the discussions that impact upon their communities. The above proposals are all attempts at imagining new ways of being and new ways of organising ourselves. Imagining the world we want to inhabit is a first step in transforming it. As Camia Young and Thomas Nash both argue in their contribution, regeneration should be a watchword of progressive imaginings to this country's housing crisis.

As we stand on the precipice of a long and painful recession, it is important to realise that we cannot return to 'business as usual'. It is time to radically rethink how we want to live together. There is no more important place to begin than the houses we inhabit and the communities in which we reside.

In Common

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Commons are often understood as land and resources shared by all members of a community, historically these were areas where people could forage and hunt food, graze livestock and gather together. However, this way of conceptualising the commons risks detaching the term from what is immaterial and not so easily measured. Perhaps the value of the commons is in what lies beyond this limit: an entanglement of living systems, human and nonhuman, where honouring interconnection prevails over principles of ownership, exchange and profit.

In Common gathers together thirteen pieces in the form of poetry, essays, photographs and interviews by Ben Rosamond, Dan Kelly, Toyah Webb, Vanessa Arapko, Jade Kake, Dienneke Jansen, Amber French, Oliver Cull, Katie Kerr, Freya Elmer, Nate Rew, Eleanor Cooper and essa may ranapiri. These contributions enquire into colonisation and land dispossession, management of resources, conservation and kaitiakitanga, urban planning and gentrification, housing, gender and containment.

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