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Relational housing across the North–South divide: learning between Albania, Uganda, and the UK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine how to understand housing as a relational process. Drawing on research in three diverse cities, we stage an unlikely dialogue that brings together narratives of housing across the global North–South divide. In doing so, we are concerned with thinking housing relationally in two broad senses: first, housing as a relational composite of economy, space, politics, legality and materials, structured by particular relations of power and resource inequality. Second, housing as a space of learning through comparison, which connects geographically and culturally in distinct cities. What do we learn about relational thinking with regards to housing when we compare it across the global North–South divide? In response, we explore a dialogue between a set of cities often off-the-map in debates on housing and urban research: Gateshead (UK), Kampala (Uganda) and Tirana (Albania). In comparing how housing is produced, distributed and inhabited, we seek to contribute to a wider understanding of the relationalities of housing.

1. Introduction

Housing is a fundamentally relational space. It connects the near and far, the human and material, the domestic and the social, to the economic and political. In this paper, we experiment with *comparison* as a methodological tool for shedding light on the relationalities of housing. When we compare across cultural, economic, and political contexts globally, we see not just that housing is, in broad terms, a relational entanglement of all manner of materials, knowledges, economies, regulations and policies, but that the form of relationality varies considerably. Through an analysis of the ways in which housing's economies, materialities, governance and social relations are connected in under-researched and under-represented locations, we aim to open up a conceptual space for rethinking housing's relationalities through difference, and

across the Global North–South divide. We do so by examining three neighbourhoods with diverse geographies, histories, cultures and practices of housing, in quite different contexts, albeit all in economically disadvantaged and vulnerable areas of the UK, Uganda and Albania.

Whilst we offer analysis of particular contexts and their diversity, this does not mean that we are arguing against generalization. After all, there are resonances with regard to the pressures on housing for low-income communities. These pressures emerge through the intertwining of global markets and housing-related finance, which has both local and international effects (Merrifield, 2014). Housing is evermore bound up with labour markets, international finance, economic security and social status (Dorling, 2014; Glynn, 2009), and housing problems across the world, whilst experienced differently, often resonate. As a result, the relational approach to housing we advance here is designed to allow learning about housing in a global sense, without diminishing the primacy of contextual specificities (Jacobs, 2012). As Teresa Caldeira (2017) has argued in the development of what she calls 'peripheral urbanization', what we see when we examine the dynamics of housing is a pattern composed of *singularities*. These are singularities of distinct but resonating pasts, presents and futures, which Caldeira neatly refers to as the 'juxtaposition of dissimilar cases' (Caldeira, 2017, p. 5).

The task then becomes one of revisability and provisionality in claims and understandings about housing as we move between generalizations and contexts. It is in this context that we position comparison as 'experimental'. The relational approach to housing we pursue here entails a commitment to attending to how differences, as well as similarities, operate not just as 'add-ons' or 'mere particularities' but become the means through which housing and its problems and solutions might be understood. Rather than homogenizing or flattening out diversity, or seeking out a global theory of housing, we draw attention both to housing's global relationalities (such as the effects of global economic trends) at the same time as focussing on housing's local relationalities (such as the relationship between the household economy and its materiality). This is an analytical frame which is able to nurture a space of learning on housing between the Global North and South.

Bringing forth an analysis that is both situated and general, and which roams across three quite different contexts, demands a degree of analytical tentativeness and provisionality, a certain openness to connecting housing across vast geographical space while paying attention to particularity (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016). It is, inevitably, a less linear and more entangled process. Katz's (2001) concept of 'counter topography' helps us here. She advocates observing the intersections between social practices in highly differentiated places (what she calls 'contour lines'), not simply to valorize the global scale, but to value the range of active and often entangled struggles that connect and echo in and beyond place.

We begin by arguing for the value of thinking between difference and similarity, to open up new conceptual space for understanding housing's relationalities both within each case study, as well as between each study. We do so by drawing attention to the active role that comparison can play. We then introduce each case study, and the historical particularities of each site, as well as offer a note on how the different

forms of data that were captured in each site shape our analysis, drawing as this paper does on three distinct research projects.

We next examine different ways of seeing the relationality of housing, and argue for the value of holding distinct, even contradictory approaches to housing relationality in creative tension. We then move onto our comparative analysis, paying particular attention to what we identify as the key factors that resonate across the three case studies and that animate the relational nature of housing: *household economies*, *the state, social and political networks*, and *housing materialities*. We use comparison as a way of seeing and understanding both differences and resonances across the three cases, generating a narrative which moves back and forth between specificity and generalization. This offers a deepened insight into housing relationality globally; how it is produced, consumed, contested, exchanged, politicized and governed.

2. Thinking housing relationally

The case studies presented in this paper were not initially selected for the purpose of comparison. Rather, they are the bringing together of three separate research projects by all three authors to stage a dialogue and challenge how we can think housing relationally across distinct places. This paper therefore opens up ways to think housing relationally, through comparison across difference. The case studies offered here are important because they are all peripheral urban places and do not map easily onto 'global cities' narratives. They are places, amongst many others, that are under-researched in housing studies and thinking them comparatively offers a generative tool for researching relational forms of housing.

A challenge in bringing together three distinct case studies from separate areas of research not initially intended for comparison is that they draw on separate theoretical frameworks developed for each place. However, a central claim in our approach is that while there is a tendency in critical urban thought to attempt to resolve debates or deepen understandings by choosing this or that theoretical 'camp' or tradition whilst excluding others, we find value here in comparing places empirically, informed by differing concepts. What we offer is not a fixed framework for understanding relational housing, but an approach that opens up thinking housing relationally through comparison.

Unfortunately, there is not the space here to document the different relational approaches to housing which informed the work we have respectively done in the UK, Uganda and Albania. Instead, we will spotlight just two quite different traditions which differently inform our thinking here: actor-network theory (ANT) and the strategic relational approach (SRA). ANT approaches the relationality of housing with a focus on the coming together of various materials, life-forms, and connections as forms of labour and power that make and remake relations (Blok & Farías, 2016; Latour, 2005). There is a long history in urban research motivated by this style of thinking, including on questions of housing (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Blok & Farías, 2016; Jacobs & Smith, 2008; Latham & McCormack, 2009). As Jacobs & Smith (2008, p. 517) put it, 'the acts of "housing" and "dwelling" are a coproduction between those who are housed and the variant technologies that do the work of housing: ornaments

and decorations, yes, architecture and bricks and mortar, sanitation and communication technologies, too, but also housing policies and practices, mortgage lending and insurance, credit scores, and all the other lively "things" of finance'.

Outside of ANT-informed work, this line of thinking the relationalities of housing is not so distant from the seminal interventions of John Turner. For Turner (1977, p. 62), housing is an active process, it does things in people's lives and must be 'used as a verb rather than as a noun – as a process that subsumes products'. Understanding housing-as-verb also entails an expanded understanding of 'dwelling'. As Tim Ingold (2000) writes, from a phenomenological perspective, dwelling should mean not only to live within, but also to build, to construct, to preserve and to care for. And so it also draws attention to the *subject* of the dwelling: how people learn, build social networks and form identities through the housing process (on dwelling and assemblage, see Dovey, 2012; McFarlane, 2011). A focus on dwelling opens out, too, housing as a site of social reproduction and not just economic reproduction (which housing has come to signify above all in recent years) (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Whilst Jarvis (2011) writes about housing as being the 'feminist infrastructures of daily life', we can also see how a feminist perspective emphasizes housing as a site of resistance, offering new imaginaries for alterative housing futures as well as enacting new forms of social justice through mutualism and collective action (Saegert, 2016).

Along with ANT, these disparate bodies of work have unsettled how we think about the relationalities of housing in some of our individual work, and has also served to question how we think about the agents of change in housing, which in this reading, can come from any number of actors interacting relationally, and sometimes in unpredictable ways. Indeed, what ANT focusses our attention on is the relation itself, and especially the relations formed between materials and other social, economic, and political elements. It follows that efforts to improve housing conditions, from this perspective, need to be attentive not just to policy and economy – vital though these nonetheless are – but to the materialities of construction, the work of algorithms and financial models, and cultures of 'home' in different contexts; in short, to a wider cosmopolitical realm of housing-making relations (Blok & Farías, 2016).

To do so, it is vital to foreground the state, and in particular, the ways in which the state can shape how people house themselves or are housed, be that through land ownership, politics, planning or funding. Here, other traditions of relational thinking become especially important, and a key resource has been state theory, particularly the body of work that understands the state (and how people interact with it) as being made up of social relations such as a strategic relational approach (SRA). An SRA understands the state as a complex institutional ensemble; a fluid site of political practice, wherein examining social relations can reveal changing balances of power (Jessop, 2016). Such thinking can be useful to contextualize and nuance how geographically specific state projects or actions in housing are shaped in local contexts; to better understand decision-making, the balance of power relations, politics, social networks, and how people navigate these. Examining social relations allows thinking across scales – from personal relations at home to the local, regional, national and international governing of housing. It makes space to consider structural forces in housing without absolute rigidity; understanding them as peopled, negotiable and permeable – in essence highly political.

While we might be tempted to conclude that these different renderings – ANT or SRA – are mutually exclusive, we would like to suggest that collectively they provide fertile ground for providing a comparative methodology of housing relationalities across time and space. We value the relational focus on the human and non-human in ANT, and the reminder of the often central role of the state in shaping the political economy of housing in SRA. But as useful as these and other theoretical traditions have been for us in our thinking about the relationalities of housing, including through the tensions between them, what they tend to downplay is the specificity of place as well as the resonances between places. This is where the comparative dialogue brings a contribution to how we understand the relationalities of housing, and it is this that we seek to develop in what follows.

We have been inspired to do so in part by Teresa Caldeira's (2017) comparative approach to 'peripheral urbanization'. Her use of geographically distinct case studies offers a framing as well as a provocation for thinking housing in ways that capture both particularity alongside generality. Caldeira identifies particular forms of agency that shape the dynamics of land and housing: those of improvisation, bricolage, calculation and imagination that compose a broader repertoire of 'autoconstruction' involved in making and maintaining. This agency is typically long term and gradual, and its forms often unfinished: '[S]paces that are never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated', often facilitated by alternative credit markets (Caldeira, 2017, p. 5). The value of Caldeira's approach is to position low-income housing as the product of both resonating processes globally but to cast a keen eye on the particular routes through which housing emerges relationally in place. What we see is that quite distinct stories emerge, even if domains like speculation, regulation, improvisation very often repeat across spaces. While we don't seek to apply peripheral urbanization here, we want to hold onto this way of thinking through generality and difference, and the important supplement it brings to our discussion of relationality via ANT and SRA, as we move through our analysis.

3. Learning between the UK, Uganda and Albania

The different forms of data available for each case study have impacted the approach we take in this paper and it is worth setting these out upfront. For the Gateshead study in the UK, in-depth research using mixed methods was conducted over a nine-month period. The research aimed to understand the process and people's attitudes towards recent housing regeneration. A grounded approach was taken which bases theory in the observations of the real world, as opposed to the abstract. Such an approach enables an understanding of reality that can allow for multiple and nuanced accounts of the place. The research involved 38 in-depth interviews with local government officers, politicians, community organizations and residents. 40 informal, place-situated interviews and participant observation also helped to better understand people's lived experiences of housing regeneration. Archival research was used to understand the historical context and document analysis aided in critically analysing local government housing regeneration strategies and policy.

For the Namuwongo study in Kampala, Uganda, the research involved exploring how different residents experience, perceive, and move around the city. Housing here emerged as part of the texture of people's daily experiences as they moved between home and work, friends and family, in the neighbourhood and beyond. This research focussed in particular on a small group of residents and on a host of different methods: interviews, follow-alongs, workshops, focus groups, and an exhibition based on individual stories of life in Namuwongo (this work was collaborative, and some of it is reported here in McFarlane & Silver, 2017).

In Bathore, the research traced self-build processes of incremental construction, including the design process, use of materials and collective participation in building. Thirty semi-structured interviews helped to understand how resident participation in the house-building process is culturally and historically embedded, whilst interviews with government agencies, such as ALUIZNI, the organization responsible for the legalization of informal settlements in Albania, helped form an understanding of the state strategies employed towards informal housing processes.

The stories we discuss across these places involve an overarching narrative of economic scarcity, housing precarity and uncertainty which has brought forth particular housing forms, whether these are narratives of migration and building, or demolition and displacement. Yet this scarcity is distinct across all three case studies. For example, in the Gateshead case study, this emerges through post-industrial decline and long-term high levels of unemployment, low wages and relatively low house prices. There is also the role that recent UK housing trajectories and experiences have been impacted by the austerity policies, welfare cuts and caps that have been imposed in the UK since 2010 which have disproportionally impacted northern cities (Newcastle City Council, 2013). In Kampala, war in northern Uganda led to migration and the expansion of Namuwongo, and structural adjustment inflicted a kind of austerity with powerful consequences for health care and community provisioning, and there is often a lack of affordable, decent housing. In the Tirana study, scarcity has emerged through economic insecurity inflicted by similar (yet post-communist) structural adjustment policies, as well as a lack of welfare and state housing provision, which has triggered wide-scale informality in Albania. The housing histories of each place are important. Let us turn, then, to the cases before getting into the comparison and its role in making sense of housing relationalities.

Bensham and Saltwell is a neighbourhood formed from two of the earliest housing suburbs of Gateshead, a de-industrialized town in North East England. Developed initially from ancient common land that was divided amongst privileged holders of office, pressure to develop the land came from the middle-class wanting to escape the high levels of pollution, disease and over-crowding that heavy industry brought to the town in the 1800s. A century later Bensham and Saltwell had been densely developed to house the growing working class (Taylor & Lovie, 2004). However, as capital made a geographic switch away from the heavy industries of North East England, Bensham and Saltwell found itself in the unstable economic position of moving from a neighbourhood that had housed industrialization to one that housed its decline. By the 1930s, it was described by visiting author JB Priestly as 'a dingy dormitory… a workshop that has no work' (Priestley, 1934, p. 306).

Housing in wider Gateshead became a particular site of political-economic struggle, one that prompted the demolition of housing through various urban and area-based policy interventions at different points in time ever since. Pockets of Bensham and Saltwell itself have been demolished at various times, including the most recent housing market renewal initiative (HMRI). Under this central government initiative, areas deemed to be enduring protracted 'housing market failure' were identified and 'radical and sustained action to replace obsolete housing with modern sustainable accommodation, through demolition and new building or refurbishment' was recommended (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003, p. 24). In Bensham and Saltwell, this led to the demolition of certain streets, and the refurbishment of others, as we will go on to see.

Yet, the abundance of affordable housing in this neighbourhood has long attracted displaced local residents from nearby demolition areas, as well as lower waged economic migrants and refugees. As a result of the ongoing need for such housing, the neighbourhood's physical landscape today remains largely unchanged from its late Victorian development; characterized by grid-like rows of terraced houses and Tyneside Flats.[1] With approximate 21,000 inhabitants, large parts of this neighbourhood fall within 10% of the most deprived populations, with above-average unemployment and lower than average wages (IMD, 2015, cited in Gateshead Council, undated).[2]

We turn now to Namuwongo, an informal settlement in central Kampala. Namuwongo is an industrial zone of largely small-scale manufacturing. An estimated 15,000 people live in the area, with patchwork combinations of formal and informal infrastructures and services. Almost everyone here earns less than US$2 per day, youth unemployment is high, and people regularly move in and out of work, mainly in the informal economy, as domestic workers, street vendors, taxi drivers, cleaners, carpenters, small-scale manufacturers, market workers, or waste recyclers, retrieving and remaking broken or discarded objects in what Rosalind Fredericks (2018) calls a social economy of 'salvage bricolage'.

While in the early 1980s, Namuwongo was dominated by mud and wattle structures, a combination of residential consolidation, economic diversification, and 'slum upgrading' (led by UN Habitat and the government in the mid-1980s) has led to material reconfiguration and spatial transformation. Parts of the neighbourhood are being formalized and divided into plots. Many of the original beneficiaries sold their newly acquired land title or were marginalized from the process (Mann & Andabati, 2014). Life in the city, for many, is a shared experience of profoundly fragmented basic service provision, ongoing threat of evictions, and land and resource conflicts (Kareem & Lwasa, 2011). Furthermore, for most, life is replete with uncertainties about the present and the future, about how limit vulnerability and provide opportunity, however slim, to get on. As the city becomes more unequal, there is growing concern about the lack of affordable housing.

Bathore lies on the edge of Tirana in the Municipality of Kamëz and is the largest informal neighbourhood in the city at around 400 hectares in size (Kusiak, 2011). During Communism, Kamëz was a collective dairy farm and had a population of 5,000 but it has since grown into a town with over 100,000 inhabitants (Mele, 2010),

whilst Bathore's population is 30,000 (Rina, 2014, p. 209). In the early 1990s after the fall of Communism, industries closed and agriculture was decollectivized. At this time, 75% of the population was employed in agriculture, therefore this created a redundant workforce and moreover, critical food shortages with agriculture only existing at subsistence level, suffering from an acute lack of fertilizer, seeds and machinery (de Waal, 2014). With a lack of basic resources and services in the northern-most, mountainous and isolated regions of the country people began to move to the Southern plains en masse. As a result, the population of five northern districts halved between 1989 and 2001 (Carletto *et al.*, 2004) and 270,000 people left their villages and settled on the peripheries of cities and self-built homes, as in Bathore (INSTAT, 2014).

With a lack of social house-building programmes, people and families had to respond to scarcity themselves, and continue to do so in the present day. It is estimated that over 55% of the country now lives 'informally' (Mele, 2010) making it the mainstream housing tenure in the face of a state that cannot or will not provide. Physically, Bathore is a mix of small two-room dwellings, built in the mid-1990s–mid-2000s, and newer multi-storey dwellings. Whilst legalization of housing has begun this is a slow process and has not, as yet, created a formal property market in the area. Life in Bathore shares some similarities to the rural life that migrants left, such as raising livestock and growing produce for household use. This is one source of sufficiency for Bathore's residents in an area where the unemployment rate is around 52% (Pojani, 2013), with youth unemployment particularly high.

4. Relational comparison: multiplicities and resonating themes

Here, we identify four key comparative areas that emerged across the similarities and differences in each of the cases: *housing economies*, *the state*, *social networks* and *materialities*.

4.1. Housing economies

For increasing numbers of residents globally, the urban economy is about coping with erratic incomes, unreliable work, and unregulated working conditions. Formal economies typically absorb less than half the labour force. African and Asian cities hold increasingly young populations, but the prospects for what has been called a 'lost generation' in a state of 'waithood' are often bleak (Jeffrey McFarlane, & Vasudevan, 2012). Exacerbated by uncertainties around labour and the economy, uncertainty about the future enters into the making of housing in the present. People often have little choice but to live in precarious housing, although precarity differs from place to place. Across all three case studies of Bensham and Saltwell, Namuwongo and Bathore are varying stories of housing precarity and uncertainty, but at the heart of these are two underlying similarities: household economies shape access to certain types of housing and such housing is actively shaped by class-based aspirations.

In the informal economies of Bathore and Namuwongo, the incremental processes of house-building are strongly connected to household economies. Albania's economy is reliant on remittances earned in Italy and Greece which equal around €700 million a year (Kurani, 2013). Most families in Bathore have at least one member of their family who lives abroad and sends money home. This form of economic activity has implications for the building process and for the housing typologies employed by families who build as and when they receive money from abroad. So floors are added when they can be afforded, partitions are inserted and roofs replace terraces. In Gezim's house, for instance, a new floor is inserted into the old roof 20 years after the house was first built, in order to accommodate his growing family. As a result, we can see how economic scarcity brings forth specific material typologies and processes.

In Namuwongo, the informal economy of manufacturing and services has slowly thickened, from street vendors and markets to economies around woodwork and metalwork, plastic recycling, fuel such as charcoal or kerosene, farming, and alcohol. Work is largely unregulated and often unpredictable. Josephine, for example, sells fruit and vegetables in the city centre, and lives day-to-day, with constant uncertainty over whether there will be enough food to eat that evening, or to cover her son's school fees, or whether she can meet the rent or invest in the house. She works in town without a permit, and is routinely hounded by municipal workers whose role is to help 'beautify' the city by chasing out vendors. In response, a cat-and-mouse geography has arisen, whereby vendors pass rumours to one another of where municipal workers were last seen (McFarlane & Silver, 2017).

As AbdouMaliq Simone & Edgar Pieterse (2017) argue, the scale of informal economies has a knock-on effect on government tax bases. In Kampala, a city of 1.4 million people, the state raises an average of US$29.2 per person (compared with almost $15,000 per person in London). The public and private resource that does exist is too often channelled into largely middle-class aspirations for a certain kind of urban aesthetic and commodified economies, increasingly codified by a narrow set of logics and aesthetics around green, smart, compact urbanisms that rarely make space for housing in neighbourhoods like Namuwongo. The consequence is that housing remains in the realm of the makeshift: through 'continual recalibration' in line with local relational conditions (Simone & Pieterse, 2017, p. 40).

In the context of the UK's formal economy, house prices are strongly linked to labour markets, and Bensham and Saltwell conforms to a broader geographical pattern of low house prices being concentrated in ex-industrial areas across the north of England (Dorling, 2014). Built to house the working classes of an industrial town, the dense terraced housing has continued to attract low-income workers through affordable rents and house prices. It was this geographic concentration of low house prices that became the subject of the most recent central government intervention, HMRI in 2002. Here, some 440 dwellings were designated for demolition in Bensham and Saltwell, driven by aspirations of modern housing and higher house prices. With the average house price of a now demolished Tyneside flat reaching around £70,000, and the starting price of a replacement three-bed house at £160,000, there is also the aspiration to replace existing residents with new ones, and a hope that 'trickle-down

economics' will kick in. Julie describes watching her old home being demolished from the step of the similar house she lives in now. She rents her home privately, and is aware that the replacement housing she now looks onto is not for her. There is a strong sense of exclusion of some existing residents from the replacement housing, and resentment towards the new residents.

4.2. The multiple roles of the state

The relationship of the state to housing unfolds differentially across places, scales and times. States can have a strong presence in housing, be that through welfare as landlords or enablers, or though market actors as developers or financers. States can also feel absent, or passive, through the retreat of provision and funding in what Pierre Bourdieu has referred to as the *left hand* and *right hand* of the state (Scott, 2013). Such a presence or absence in housing is ambiguous: it is at once felt to protect through housing-related welfare, support and the provision of affordable housing, whilst at the same time it can also be bureaucratic, controlling or even punitive, through demolition campaigns, state-driven gentrification processes and an unwillingness to regulate the market. It is precisely this ambiguous role of the state in housing that offers a common thread across our three cases.

In post-communist Albania the state was seemingly fairly absent, the 1990s was a period of so-called *s'ka shtet, s'ka ligj* ('there is no state, there is no law'). Yet during this period, the state played a central role in actively *creating* these widespread informal housing processes. In 1995 President Sali Berisha (the 'strong man' leader who had firm control over the media, the police and the judiciary) made his famous *Fytyrë Nga Deti* ('Faces Towards the Sea') speech, in which he openly recommended resettlement on the plains (de Waal, 2014). This has been seen to be both a party-political move as well as a concession to those living in the northern-most parts of the country for lost services and infrastructures (de Waal, 2014). This speech occurred following new land distribution laws in 1993 and 1995, which both attempted to restitute land and property to pre-communist owners (such as that of Bathore) at the same time as giving ownership rights to each family working on the land at the fall of Communism.

These contradictory and unclear land distribution laws evidently created a complex and confused situation that could be exploited by new migrants. In this case then, the state played an active role in creating new informal housing paradigms (and new housing problems), through its ability to define legal mechanisms and enforce (or not enforce) these. After many years of inactivity with regards to informality in Albania, or regressive measures, such as the demolition campaigns suffered in Bathore in the mid-1990s, the government is now actively undertaking the slow legalization and/or upgrading of informal neighbourhoods. However, for many residents, the pace of change is too slow coupled with 'vote bank' politics (Benjamin, 2008), meaning that pre-election promises are rarely adhered to.

The presence of the state in post-industrial Gateshead appears at first to be a polar opposite to Bathore. Here, a growing reliance on central state funding has developed over the past four decades. This funding has been increasingly channelled into

property-led regeneration, with a significantly enhanced role for the private sector (McCarthy, 2007). Successive central government attitudes towards housing in the North of England has traversed party-political alignment, and maintained strong area-based initiatives designed to promote social mix and stabilize neighbourhoods through trickle-down economics. The cumulative effect of such state intervention in Bensham and Saltwell has been residualized: cyclical periods of demolition have shifted residents into concentrated areas of poverty, only for them to become the target of the next round of regeneration. A break in this trajectory threatened to come in 2011 under the auspices of austerity localism (Featherstone et al., 2012), with the retreating of central state funding for housing regeneration alongside the return of autonomy to local governments.

However, in reality, the local solution to this central state withdrawal has been a strengthening of the local state presence: the local state has become a housing developer in its own right, through a public–private partnership, although this new role is hidden from public view (Ormerod & MacLeod, 2018). Local residents are confused over the development of new houses, in an area where many residents strongly desire the provision of council houses, such a term is taking on a new meaning. Just as the state in Bathore practiced a particular selectivity in housing governance, the state in Gateshead also appears to be actively maintaining its ambiguity in relation to housing.

In Namuwongo, residents are deeply aware of the contradictions of the state in relation to housing. The wider development plans of the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) are often seen as excluding Namuwongo's current residents, violently so if necessary. The KCCA, alongside the wetland and railway authorities, are often accused of planning nothing more than eviction and demolition of many parts of Namuwongo, partly in view of a major redevelopment plan for the city that extends to Lake Victoria. One resident, for example – Jennifer – witnessed the late night eviction and demolition of homes by the authorities in 2014, where families woke in the night to horrifying noise of bulldozers, and had to grab what they could as they left their homes.

Yet the municipality, some residents argue, has also been responsible for providing some essential services such as waste collection and road improvements. One urban planner at KCCA embodied the state's contradictions here: the state, she insisted – both the central state and the KCCA – has a responsibility to ensure that all of its citizens have housing, adding that beyond the question of state responsibility it was anyway a 'human right', but, she went on in the same breath, if people choose to locate housing on land without permission, then the state cannot be expected to provide compensation.

These are the kinds of 'grey spaces' that so many residents in low-income neighbourhoods globally are forced to live with, and in such a context investing in fragments or collaborating with the state to address them can seem near impossible, fanciful even (Yiftachel, 2009). Whether in the UK, Uganda or Albania, then, the local state can seem impossibly aloof, or at worst oppressive, at the same time as it can make provisions for peripheral communities. Yet far from holding a progressive commitment to learning from and with the connections, collaborations, and learning

practices of residents in low-income neighbourhoods, and reflecting upon the agency of residents, the state so often marks these peripheral neighbourhoods as a 'problem' needing to be dealt with through physical oppression, policy action, a refusal to regulate the market and/or taking an active role in the housing market.

4.3. Reciprocal social networks

As with the economic and housing precarity discussed above, social networks matter for these neighbourhoods, albeit in differing ways. In Namuwongo, when a wall of Josephine's house collapsed, neighbours and family members helped with the rebuild. Jennifer, another woman living near Josephine, plays an important role in local networks by training women in bead-making which they later sell, which in turn provides some added security for housing. There is an expansive form of mutual economy in the neighbourhood that exists alongside the capitalist economy, one based around borrowing, supporting, and gifting, often peopled by women, from food sharing and furniture making to community and religious groups that help raise funds for school fees or health care or train women to make and sell crafts, to formal and informal aid economies, to everyday tasks like watching or feeding one another's children which play small but important roles in the economic life of the neighbourhood.

The capacity to invest in, improve and manage the house operates as part of this larger relational ecology. Through Namuwongo, housing emerges as uncertain, provisional, unreliable, and composed of fragments of provisions, materials, and opportunities, precarious labour, social ethics of care, and affective atmospheres of anxiety and community. Social networks, especially those of extended family, neighbours, and co-workers, play an important but quite particular role here in helping people to get by.

In Bathore, the process of building incrementally also signifies how fledgling processes of community consolidation occur *through* the building process. Housing is inherently social, and it is an arena of social reproduction. This is perhaps even more so in informal communities, whereby the process of building forms an expanded process of collective dwelling. Migration strategies were heavily informed by existing social relations and the siting and construction of housing in Bathore is deeply connected to family and kin relationships from their places of origin. Extended families live beside each other and aid each other in the everyday process of dwelling, whether this be building housing, caring for young and old or growing food. These existing community bonds and the social organization stemming from this allowed residents to make claims for land, services and infrastructure through formal political mechanisms. There was a sense of weight and agency to this collective organizing.

Furthermore, these connections have formed new reciprocal welfare networks, such as employment support, foodbanks, schooling arrangements and mutual savings groups. As with Namuwongo women played a central role in the creation of these groups. For example, an informal school was set up in the mid-1990s by a group of mothers, eager for their children to learn, despite the difficult conditions in which they were living. The same women also created a womens' group to try and bridge

cultural boundaries within the neighbourhood through social events, educational activities and community dinners. As a result, there is a sense that a form of progressive politics, centred around an expanded process of dwelling and home/community building emerged in Bathore.

In contrast to Bathore and Namuwongo, Bensham and Saltwell is not a new urban environment. The majority of housing is over 100 years old and most new housing is sold on the open market to the highest bidder. As a result, there is not the same sense of attachment or closeness to the physical process of building for residents. Whereas strong and more formalized social networks have arisen through the process of house-building in Bathore and Namuwongo, the sense of community in Bensham and Saltwell is often described as being 'lost', with people nostalgic about times gone by. That is not to say social networks do not exist, for this is a place often described a relative 'step back in time', where it is not uncommon for extended families to live in close proximity to each other. People, largely women, maintain the long-standing working-class tradition of 'sitting on the step' to talk to each other. Neighbours, as well as local community organizations (largely religious groups), provide support in terms of caregiving, food banks, lending and giving for many people who live precariously.

There are strong social networks, but multiple (and of course overlapping) 'communities', which brings tensions over housing and belonging. This tension is revealed, or even intensified through the active role of the state in re-modelling housing, amidst the uncertainty of who will occupy the replacement housing. Relatedly, the presence of a strong political network in the neighbourhood is a further point of tension. Made up of long-standing councillors who live in the neighbourhood, community organizations with whom they are affiliated, and residents who are aligned through social relations and/or party-political alignment, this network is both working for local residents and reinforcing the role of the state. There is a firm belief in and support for the local state to govern this place. The shared desire for change to alleviate poverty is sufficient to smooth over conflicting opinions as to how such change is achieved through housing.

4.4. Housing materialities and the politics of aesthetics

As we saw earlier, thinking housing relationally can go beyond understanding a house as an object, or collection of objects, to consider it as dwelling, an ongoing process of building, maintaining, and in many cases re-building. But that is not to deny the significance of the materiality of housing, or as these three cases highlight, the centrality of aesthetics in thinking housing (or un-housing) relationally. Exploring housing through its materialities – or more accurately the relations that its material things become enrolled in and generate as processes over time – reveal the work and agency of putting housing in place and sustaining it. Focussing on relationality through material relations, we can consider how the house is produced, maintained, and sustained over time through a focus on the *stuff* of housing – land, structures and materials.

In the context of Bensham and Saltwell, the struggle over housing is led – on the surface – by the de-valuation and subsequent demolition of the material built-environment. However, understanding the housing market itself as a social construction, which as we saw is influenced by the state, the valuing of the material is more realistically read as a valuing of the socio-economic. In seeking to replace industrial-era housing with less dense, more modern, more 'aspirational' and higher value housing, the state (both central and local) deploys a very specific way of valuing people and their homes. The specifics of this have been dependent upon the relation of fluctuating economic, social and political conditions at different times. Recently in the regeneration programme HMRI, the use of experts and evidence with specific and exclusive claims to knowledge was used to diagnose housing market failure via the deployment of a 'marketized philosophy' (Webb, 2010). This was particularly evident through the 'rapid visual assessment' by contracted land agents GVA Grimley (2006). Here, the overall *impression* of housing was categorized (very good–very poor) through a rapid, superficial and external assessment of the frontages of houses.

What Zukin (1998) has called a process of 'aestheticization' – where the housing market was shaped for consumption – led to the creation of a strong narrative of decline. The effective stigmatization of housing was, in turn, pivotal in justifying its demolition. Such a highly selective assessment and valuing of material aesthetics harnesses a particular politics of seeing, one that is driven by 'expert' values and perceptions of the place, arguably above the needs or values of the people living there (Allen, 2008; Mitchell, 2003). Despite plans for radically different replacement housing, the land constraints have meant that the new housing is not entirely different from that it has replaced in terms of scale, materials and type. The difference comes from the lower density; houses have replaced flats, the more contemporary design, paving materials, elements of outside space and of course the price. In those old terraced houses that have been renovated, such alterations have been external: railings, and boundary walls. Internally, some residents described private rental properties as being ill-maintained and sub-standard, with damp, broken doors and deteriorating kitchens. In streets where old and new houses face one another, the material difference is felt, but only as it represents the economic, and therefore social difference that we saw earlier.

In Bathore, due to the insecurity of land tenure the building process was always tentative and uncertain, always an act of testing the authorities, with new migrants quietly embedded themselves in place and then incrementally building over weeks, months and years. They began by building a wooden shack and then, as dwellers became more sure of their position, they built more secure, bigger and permanent dwellings, using better quality materials. This is an ongoing process of dwelling, and one that, materially, also has a historical trajectory – building knowledges were learnt and passed down over many generations and from their processes of origin. Importantly the process of construction created social foundations within a new location. House-building is inherently communal, and, as we highlight below, social gains are formed through this expanded process of dwelling.

Physically, Bathore is part urban, part rural. Walking along the street a pedestrian is faced with walls upon walls upon walls, too high to see over, built-in breezeblock,

with huge metal gates scattered in between. To the naked eye, it looks like a kind of informal gated community. In a bid to protect their property not only from their new and 'unknown' neighbours, but also from the authorities, residents built large fences and gates around their land. One resident said, 'It's a type of marking the territory, but also preventing people from the street to see inside. Kind of protecting, privacy'. Beyond this there is a variety of housing within Bathore – the smaller, two-room buildings (one room for the family and the other for the cow in many cases) that were built in the early years of the neighbourhood are still in use, yet often these have been demolished and in their place, large dwellings which house many generations of the same family have been built. This housing often physically reflects a burgeoning consumerist culture that now exists in Albania, one which is aestheticized through the use of architectural additions such as kitsch classical columns, fake castle turrets, or the symbol of Albania – the two-headed eagle – which adorns lavish gates throughout the neighbourhood.

Housing in Namuwongo is typically small, brick-built, simple one-story structures. There is, though, also a significant variance here, with some small and composed of brick with makeshift wood, corrugated metal, and cloth for walls, openings and roofs, and others more elaborate, larger structures. Attending to the materialities of housing in Namuwongo provides one lens on the diversity and challenges of living with precarious housing. To illustrate this in more detail, we turn here to the inside of homes. Josephine's house is a small one room red brick place with electricity, shelves stacked with pots, plastic jars, a bed, a mirror on the wall, a storage basket hanging from the ceiling, and some cupboards. Outside, there is some space to wash utensils and hang clothes. Like many residents here in Namuwongo, space has to be used carefully. It is also vulnerable.

Across the neighbourhood, housing varies considerably. Masengere, for example, has a fairly large and stable house in a different part of the neighbourhood. He had been a chief in his village in western Uganda, and is now a chairman in Namuwongo and elected official for his part of the neighbourhood. Amiri, on the other hand, a young man living in the Soweto area of the neighbourhood, which is the poorest and densest lanes in Namuwongo, lives in a tiny, dimly lit one room place. If his home is sparse and minimal, he also uses materials in other ways to sustain some measure of livelihood. When he was younger he worked as recycler on a nearby garbage ground, and since he has got a job with his Uncle as a carpenter at a nearby woodshed.

The material configurations of housing – and in particular the material-human relations that ANT perspectives are typically more attentive to – matter for the differential experience and struggles with housing across places, but in and of themselves they do not provide a basis for a relational account of housing. As the stories briefly mentioned here indicate, writing a relational account of housing requires focussing on the relations themselves, i.e. less the materials per se but the connections and disconnections between materials and other processes and actors, which are dependent on multiple and intertwined things such as historical trajectories, social and cultural norms and the imposition or neglect of state regulations. For example in Bensham and Saltwell, housing materiality has been used to leverage social and economic change in housing, to create more 'aspirational' family homes, and as such a material

Table 1. Relationalities of housing.

	Resonances	Difference
Housing Economies	-Links between house prices and labour markets; -Struggles with erratic work and income, impacting building and maintenance.	-Remittances (Bathore); -Informal economies (Kampala); -Growing house prices (Gateshead).
The multiple roles of the state	-Common threat of demolition; -State actively developing new mechanisms to drive transformation to low-income housing.	-Changing legal frameworks (Bathore); -State funds driving property-led development (Gateshead); -'Grey spaces' between presence and demolition (Kampala).
Reciprocal Social networks	Vital but vulnerable role of networks in sustaining housing.	-Mutual economies (Kampala); -Community consolidation (Bathore); -Fragmenting networks (Gateshead).
Housing materiality and the politics of aesthetics	Centrality of materials in (un)making housing environments and neighbourhoods.	-Revaluing housing and the social (Gateshead); -Informal 'gated community' (Bathore); -Material diversities (Kampala).

barrier now represents the socio-economic barriers that have been created. In Bathore, material fortification represents social and economic insecurity but also the communal process of building and social signifiers of transported architectural additions, whereas in Namuwongo housing materiality is a signifier of provisioning, economic scarcity and 'making do' through use of a sort of adaptable 'makeshift urbanism' (McFarlane, 2011). A relational approach to housing therefore thinks beyond the fabric of the buildings, to the stories that such buildings tell; their histories, their changes – by whom, for whom.

As we have argued, our aim is not so much to 'rethink' housing but to argue for greater reflection on how we build generalizations about housing. Our contribution is principally, then, to prize open ways to think housing relationally through comparison between different urban contexts globally, revealing both resonances and differences in the nature of housing. Table 1 below summarizes these resonances and differences based on the four key elements in our approach to relational housing here: housing economies, the state, materialities and social networks.

The discussion above, summarized in the table, shows that while there are resonances across global space in the ways in which housing is produced, lived and contested, the specific contexts, histories and struggles demand a focus on place specificity if we are to understand the particular relational forms housing takes. We see here that while in all three cases the economy is vital to understanding the nature of housing, and in particular in relation to prices, markets, labour, and income, the manifestation of those relations is radically distinct in each city. This is also true in the case of the state. If the state is central in all cases, particularly in relation to the threat of housing demolition or in actively transforming housing conditions through new mechanisms, the particular ways in which demolition becomes a threat and the specific mechanisms used by the state to change low-income housing (legal, financial, or otherwise) is distinct in each case.

Similarly, while we find that social networks play important roles in sustaining housing in each case, we find too that they are being manipulated largely (though not completely) out of existence in Gateshead while they are strong and indispensable in

Kampala and important to consolidating communities in Bathore. The fourth and final element of our relational housing framework – aesthetics and materiality – also has resonances across the cases, particularly in the key role materials have in how housing form and neighbourhoods are constructed, appear, and transformed. Yet the nature of and work done by those materials could hardly be more different, enfolded as they are into a politics of aesthetics in Gateshead, territorialization in Bathore, and radical diversities of housing in Kampala.

These resonances and differences remind us to exercise caution in making general claims about housing, whether in relation to the key drivers of housing, or its material forms, or its socialities and economies. They do not suggest that generalizations about housing are not possible. We have found it useful to work with 'resonance' and 'difference' as the key terms here, which we find helps us to arrive at a particular kind of generalization. If generalization is a form of abstraction, our hope is that the language of resonance and difference contributes to the wider challenge of placing our understanding of housing into a global context. This is a context from which we can see patterns recurring across urban space globally, but where we are closely attentive to the vital role of context, because context serves to show that the debate and stakes of housing – including what it means and how it matters – can be radically distinct. It is for this reason that comparison is such a useful tool through which to understand how housing is shaped relationally in different ways in different places, but in ways that also echo one another.

5. Conclusions: learning housing

In all of the contexts we have discussed, housing is often precarious and poor, as it is for growing numbers of urban residents globally. Key processes shape that precarity. We have identified household economies, the state, social and political networks and materialities as particularly important, but we have tried to do so without losing sight of the specificities that matter so much for how housing is produced in these three places. For example, if new forms of public–private marketization drive housing change in Gateshead, in Kampala it is an often hostile state driving out those whose rights are partial at best, partly in the name of a speculative large urban-regional development plan. There are resonances in these two cases, in both the state has an ambivalence to housing the poor, and housing for those on low incomes is under threat of new developments that risk excluding, violently so in Kampala, those in housing need. Yet understanding the particular relational configurations demands a close eye to detail, context and difference – to singularities in a world of urban change.

While the economics of housing in Bathore are intimately related to its material form through incremental processes of construction often over many years, in Kampala this makeshift urbanism is more explicitly a process of making use of found or reclaimed materials. Aesthetics in both Bathore and Gateshead have been used to leverage or represent social change, although in very different ways. In Bathore, this is not necessarily for marketing purposes, or to increase the exchange value of housing as in Gateshead. Instead, aesthetic additions are made to suggest social or economic status, or merely for creative purposes. We can find this tendency in Kampala too, albeit with different materials and aesthetic cultural registers. The importance of

social networks in processes of dwelling is present across all three places, sometimes as explicit political orientations, others as forms of mutualism which aid living with and through economic scarcity.

Housing is a global geography of singularities and resonances. An experimental comparative approach that works between Global North and South is, we hope to have shown, a valuable means for generating understanding of how housing is differently made relationally. In drawing attention to how housing's relationalities occur across vast geographical and cultural distance we can put relational housing studies to work to open up space for thinking through difference, nurturing a genre of housing thought that learns between seemingly dissimilar places.

We can then use this analysis to trouble preconceived practices and notions of housing, what it is, and what role it plays in people's lives, and enliven new directions for thought. We are aware, too, of the potentials not examined here, and which could inform a deeper exploration of learning housing across difference. For example, what might we learn from how residents in Bathore and Namuwongo deal with economic scarcity in relation to the future for housing practice in parts of the UK, or develop new imaginaries and approaches for the state in Kampala informed by critiques and lessons learned in Gateshead or Tirana. What does the ambiguity, the presence and absence of the state in housing mean for how housing struggles are practiced, for how low-income groups are treated, and what access they have to basic services and infrastructures? Through examining the politics of demolition, what can be understood about the state's role in defining and constructing housing precarity, or displacement?

Attending to these questions through comparison of case studies from both the Global North and South and across theoretical approaches is a useful route to better understand relational forms of housing, especially to how forms of housing precarity resonate around the world. We might, then, learn something about how precarious housing can be improved in ways that focus on context but drawn on lessons and provocations from elsewhere (Robinson, 2015). To return to the work of Teresa Caldeira (2017, p. 10), a key challenge lies in identifying the conditions that enable the 'continuing improvement of peripheral urban spaces while simultaneously preserving the ability of the poor to inhabit these spaces'. Caldeira's response is that two conditions – strong organization amongst residents, and working with states that are committed to social justice – are especially important. Yet in the cases, we have explored, rarely if at all are both conditions found at the same time in the same site. The necessary work of transformation in urban housing inequality will require more than strong organization and a willing state, critical those often are. Our analysis does not offer a blueprint. Instead, it opens up a tentative space to ask questions and to begin to think through possibilities by learning across urban contexts.

Notes

1. Tyneside flats are a housing type established in this neighbourhood that became common throughout the region. They were developed by industrialist William Affleck (Taylor & Lovie, 2004), and resemble conventional two (or occasionally three) story Victorian/Edwardian terraced houses but consist of two self-contained dwellings on top of each other with separate front and back doors.

2. Whilst considered as one 'neighbourhood' by local residents, Bensham and Saltwell are split into two electoral wards (Lobley Hill and Bensham and Saltwell), the population for which is combined here, but covers a larger geographical area than this neighbourhood.

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