

Research Article



Housing stories – Documenting a dysfunctional housing market

September 24, 2021

Issue: [Tales of a City](#)

Carina Listerborn

"The way we narrate the city becomes constitutive of urban reality, affecting the choices we make, the ways we then might act" (Sandercock 2003, p.12).

Just as storytelling is an inevitable part of being human, it is also an essential part of urban life and urban development. Leonie Sandercock, a planner, scholar and scriptwriter, argues that a better understanding of stories, and the work they do, can make better planners by sharpening their critical judgment and by widening the circle of democratic discourse (Sandercock 2003). Storytelling within a city appears in several different forms. From a municipality's 'official' position, storytelling is often formulated through place marketing and city branding. Within urban representations, urban imaginaries and branding practices, political dimensions are involved (Vanolo 2017). In parallel, 'counter-stories' of the same places exist. Stories can be contradictory, illuminating conflicting positions. In this article, voices from the precarious side of the dysfunctional housing market in Malmö, Sweden, will be in focus to 'reveal' hidden, marginalised, and forgotten experiences. The purpose of the article is to use these stories, and the documentation of a dysfunctional housing market, as a starting point to discuss the role of storytelling in documenting social and economic urban struggles. The usages of stories told about a city are a delicate issue.

The precarious housing situation has to be understood within the broader context of housing de-regulation from the 1990s onwards and the accompanying increased housing inequality, while a large part of the Swedish population lives in good housing. The lack of affordable housing particularly affects low-income groups, young people and people who are excluded on other grounds, such as racialisation and lack of networks.

In Malmö, approximately 90,000 people are in the housing queue system. This number has increased in the past few years. Between 2020 and 2029, there is an estimated need to build 8,260 to 9,670 new housing units every year in the Malmö-Lund area. The population in Malmö is young, but also relatively poor in a national context. According to *Boverket* (Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning) (2020), 14.2% of households (20,310 households) live in overcrowded properties, and 13.9% (19,909 households) in strained economic situations. A strained economic situation refers to the absence of a disposable income that covers both basic consumption and standardised housing expenses. The collection of these stories documents a snapshot of a de- and re-regulated housing market where the responsibility for housing allocation is given to the free market. The purpose of collecting these stories was to argue for everybody's right to good and secure housing.

Experiences of housing inequalities in Malmö

The basis for this article is built on a research project carried out between 2014 and 2015, when 49 people were interviewed in Malmö about their housing situation. The study aimed to understand how the housing market *actually* works through open questions concerning their experiences of finding accommodation, their reasons for moving, the difficulties they faced in relation to housing, the best housing experiences, the meaning of 'home', and their thoughts about the contemporary housing market. The interviewees were selected

on the basis of being suspected to have difficulties finding housing and likely to end up in precarious housing: young people, newly arrived migrants, unemployed people, retired people, and people in transitional phases (for example, those on long-term sick-leave or going through divorces). The age span of the interviewees was 18 to 86 years, but the majority (53%) were between 20 and 30 years old. Not everybody was living precariously at that moment, but all informants were concerned about the contemporary housing market and had experienced some form of difficulty in relation to finding housing. The result of the study has been presented elsewhere, in Swedish (Listerborn, 2018) and English (Listerborn, 2021). Here I will just give a few examples of what the stories told. The stories chosen for presentation here illustrate in particular the situation for young people.

Several stories concern young people's troubles entering the housing market, especially if their parents were not able to help them. Elisabeth moved to Malmö with her boyfriend from a small town to start her 'dream' education, but housing remained difficult. After trying all possible channels, she got in contact with a retired couple through her parents and they could rent a room within a three-room flat. She describes her situation as a choice between staying in her small town and probably find housing or having to move to a larger city where there are career opportunities but no housing: 'I sort of have to choose. I have to choose between living and having a life. And that is a great injustice'. She also describes herself as naïve and too much of a coward to accept an illegal contract, which left her with very few choices.

"For example, we had contact with a person who had a one-room flat. But it turned out that this person had a 'special contract apartment' [through the social services] that he rented out to stay with his mother for the time. We were so desperate that we were close to taking it. But it felt bad. Because there are people who really need that more than us. We couldn't rent a special contract apartment illegally. But we were very close."

The rent is cheap, but her boyfriend is unemployed, and the retired couple do not work, so they all spend a lot of time at home. This creates a bit of tension.

"Every day I dream of having my own place in life. Get to be my own person and be able to decide for myself what I should have. Something as pathetic as having my own sheets, which I myself have chosen to have. It feels very pathetic. Feels like I've never had my own place in life. Only lived off others. Living with others. With their means and their things. And I long for it. But then I chose this education. So, I'm not really going in that direction. I don't have the money yet. I can't make it. But that's what I dream about. A big dream and just to cope on my own. It's not easy in today's society."

To be a lodger, renting a room or a closet, is one way to solve the housing dilemma. Twenty-year-old Lena says,

"I've lived in many places that have been crowded and lived with many in the same room. Many apartments with mould. And lived in even a walk-in closet. When I lived in the small storage room, or closet, it was probably most crowded. I couldn't even lie down straight in there."

For this walk-in closet, she paid SEK 3,500 per month. She was sometimes close to ending up on the street, but she never did, thanks to friends: 'I've never slept outside. I am very grateful for that. For my friends. But not for authorities that *could have* done something.

We are let down by the not-welfare society’.

Other stories concern moving to Sweden. Ludwig, 25 years old, moved to Sweden from a European country to find work. His housing trajectory is long and complicated. Money is often the main problem, but he has also encountered discrimination:

“They demand a certain income. Three times the rent. I often had to sleep at other people’s places. With friends and so. Never had anything permanent or something I can call my own. So, I stayed with my closest relative for almost a year. Tried to put myself in a housing queue – several of them. Even paid membership to be in the queue. I joined the tenants’ union. [...] I have been very close to getting a contract. But as soon as the landlord sees my name or appearance, it is over.”

This situation lasted for a couple of years, where he lived on sofas and floors, one week at a time, sometimes in a car: “You thanked for what you got. And right then, I thanked very much. It wasn’t that much to get to sleep. I had to take a shower, brush my teeth. I didn’t feel so good. But at least I wanted to be clean”. He compares the feeling of this situation to becoming short of breath: “I got no air! I didn’t even know where to shower. I went into Q8 [service station] and stuff just to rinse off and so. It was horrible”. Eventually, a friend of his was able to take a mortgage to buy him a flat, which they renovated themselves and sold, and then he had enough money to be able to get a first-hand rental contract through his friend.

Several stories express feelings of hopelessness for the future and loneliness. The stories illustrate that being without permanent housing creates a sense of being excluded from society. The aggregated analyses of these stories show that all of the 49 interviewees claim that: (1) New housing is only for the rich and too expensive for ‘ordinary’ people; (2) first hand contracts are very difficult to get, so there is hardly any use in trying; (3) the sublet market is insecure; and (4) the illegal rental market is a common way to get hold of a flat, despite the risks. If you are not able to enter the ‘regular’ housing market, that is either to obtain a first-hand rental contract, or to buy an apartment, or are not eligible for support from social services, which only give support with housing if you have a ‘social’ problem, you end up on the precarious housing market of subletting, lodging or entering the illegal section of the housing market.

Each individual struggle is a consequence of a structural economic-political context, and when these stories of the precarious housing market come together, they have the potential to become political in the sense of raising awareness of inequalities and lack of justice on the housing market. However, the process of documentation and collecting stories does not take place without consideration. In the following part, I will reflect upon the process and purpose of documenting housing stories.

Storytelling has the power of bringing us together

Trinh T Minh-ha, a filmmaker, writer, composer and literary theorist wrote in 1989, “The storyteller, besides being a great mother, a teacher, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fairy, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories ... has the power of bringing us together” (p. 140). The thought of stories holding

the power of 'bringing us together' will be further investigated here in relation to struggles to find housing and the role of documenting such struggles.

Storytelling is the activity of writing, telling or reading stories, and a narrative of a story contains a series of events. In order to turn stories and narratives of precarious housing situations into a political claim for housing justice, a meta-narrative needs to be formulated. A meta-narrative can be organised by documenting and analysing the stories and narratives, and there is also a need to understand the context of housing and welfare policies. Within housing studies, there is a historical tradition of documenting housing conditions (Engels, 1872; Riis, 1890; Nordström, 1938) for a political purpose to change the existing situation.

Narratives and stories are subjective and speak from a specific social position, however, they have the potential to become political when presented collectively (Sandercock, 2003). The situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of storytelling can never be denied and subjective experiences, when gathered, can become a powerful contemporary representation that goes both deeper and broader than scientific interviews or surveys. Narratives, then, can broaden our understandings of urban lives and the experiences of urban enclosures, which may not be revealed through other methods like quantitative surveys as they limit the scope of investigation. Within the housing debate, the loudest voices commonly originate from market actors, while people in search of housing are less vocal. At the same time, as Haraway (1988, p. 584) points at, there is a "serious danger of romanticising and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if 'we' 'naturally' inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges".

The act of documenting, in this sense, brings the stories together but does not necessarily bring the 'us' of storytellers together, as Minh-ha wrote. The stories can be spread, but the people who told their stories are not in contact with each other. Especially if the documentation is done by a professional stakeholder, in the case of a scholar, a journalist or policymaker. Storytelling initiated by a documenting agent, risks positioning the storyteller in a specific and potentially unwanted corner or being subjected to stigmatising narratives. Essential parts of the storytelling and narrative will be left out in the documentation process. The documenting agent may risk rewriting the story to such an extent, that the storyteller cannot recognise him- or herself in it. Even with the intention of truly mirroring the stories, there is still also a risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations on the part of the documenting agent, especially if the documenting agent is not familiar with the situations and contexts of the storytelling. A mutual respect and learning process is then a basic condition for a meaningful documentation process.

Collecting stories to reveal the inequalities of the housing market, as done here, is not without pitfalls, and has to be done with ethical considerations of different kinds. The role of the scholar is dubious, but the documenting agent is also a useful method to collect and put different stories together that may not have otherwise been placed in relation to each other. Within this project, the general impression was that people genuinely wanted to share their housing stories, even though several stories also expressed a sense of personal

failure. The contextualisation by the documenting agent of housing stories as part of contemporary and historical political decisions about the housing market can help to ease the feeling of a personal failure. By politicising the housing stories, they are formulated within a collective narrative. The research is inspired by Peter Marcuse (2009) who argues that to Expose, Propose, Politicise, is the ultimate purpose of critical urban theory. The exposure of the housing stories within this research has been used to propose and politicise. Peter Marcuse develops this triad as a way to point to solutions and hope. To expose means to analyse “the roots of the problem and make clear and communicate that analysis to those that need it and can use it” (p. 194). In order to develop proposals, programmes, targets and strategies, there is a need to work with those affected: “Critical urban theory should help deepen the exposé, help formulate responses that address the root causes thus exposed and demonstrate the need for a politicised response” (p.194). To politicise included “clarifying the political action implications of what was exposed and proposed and supporting organising around the proposals by informing action” (p.194). The Expose, Propose, Politicise approach and Marcuse’s assignment for critical urban scholars rhymes well with the scholar activist approach (Driscoll Derickson & Routledge, 2015). Collaboration and mutual learning between scholars and activists – which sometimes coincides in one and the same person, the scholar activist – helps to bring stories and storytellers together. Around the world, scholar activism around housing is growing, which is expressed, for example, through new international networks like the Radical Housing Network, the Radical Housing Journal and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. In Sweden, the Housing Roar (*Bostadsvrålet*) is one such arena. Housing networks, with the goal of equal housing opportunities for all, bring ‘us together’. When it comes to housing, there is an ‘us’ as housing is an essential part of life, and we are still far from a world of housing justice. Storytelling is an essential part of radical housing activism and scholar activism seems to be an important part of learning from such stories.

Toronto Downtown, 2019, by Carina Listerborn.

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Authors



Carina Listerborn

Professor » Malmö University

Carina Listerborn is a Professor in Urban Planning at Malmö University and the Director of the research center Institute for Urban Research (IUR). Her research on intersectional spatial experiences, urban and housing justice and planning practices is grounded in methodologies about the everyday. Her research publications cover racism in public spaces, urban planning strategies, intersectional perspectives on safety discourses, housing inequalities and smart cities.