

Josef Hegedus, Martin Lux and Nora Teller (Eds.) (2013)

Social Housing in Transition Countries.

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The changes to political and governance structures which swept across Eastern Europe from the late 1980s onwards left in their wake a range of societal challenges which garnered far less attention from commentators and observers than was warranted. Core issues relating to employment, social welfare, poverty and social deprivation and health seem to have been marginalised on the basis that all remnants of the ancient regime had to be flushed out as a new market model was ushered in on the assumption that this was by definition a superior model of economic and social organisation.

Needless to say the evidence has been stacking up over the past two decades that the “magic of the market” has proven to be decidedly uneven in its effects and new problems and social inequalities of a socio-economic nature have emerged which have replaced those rooted in party affiliation and privilege which characterised the previously centralised system of production and consumption. Key social indicators around mortality rates, population health, risk of poverty, and unemployment show how the promised benefits of economic liberalisation have been at best unevenly distributed and at worst captured by elite groups who were well positioned to capitalise on the privatisation policies and stripping of state assets in such sectors as energy, natural resources and telecommunications.

One sector which has been subject to profound changes has been the housing systems of the transition societies. Of all areas of social provision it might have been expected that the basic human need of adequate shelter would have been prioritised in the transition to the market society. However, across most transition societies the desire of governments to develop market economies meant the re-introduction of the concept of private property which effectively set public housing up as fair game for exploitation under the new conditions. Privatisation was often pursued in its most simplistic and crudest form by simply giving dwellings away to sitting tenants. There was little by way of exploring alternatives which might have buffered the fabric of public housing from the most deleterious effects of privatisa-

tion, through for example, stock transfers to not for profit entities such as housing associations and co-operatives, or through disposal of units at market cost to tenants. While there have been some variations on this trend as might be expected, these don't represent structural exceptions, and over time local policy differentiations have been largely eliminated to the degree that the concept of public housing in transition societies has all but disappeared.

A clear outcome of this has been deepening inequality. While some strata were "more equal" than others under state socialism prior to the transition, they were also the ones most positioned to capitalise on the changes and become both richer and more privileged post transition. For instance in Serbia, Russia and Poland households who by virtue of their pre transition "*nomenklatura*" status, became even more privileged post transition when their status could be consolidated through property acquisition.

This book is an attempt to draw together the disparate strands and experiences of how housing systems have fared since the collapse of state socialist regimes of varying complexions and their replacement by market based arrangements. The book is divided into four parts. The first sets the analytical context and provides the tools by which to understand what has been happening. It identifies the similarity of the broad structural changes which have occurred but also points out that the policy responses in different countries were shaped by factors such as the structure of the political system, the role of the state in the economy, and the structure of the financial sector. Part two highlights a range of critical issues which the transition processes have revealed including privatisation and restitution, finance, rents regulation, housing management and social exclusion. The third part presents a series of country case studies detailing the housing experiences in twelve transition societies, and finally part four offers an extended reflection on the challenges facing social housing in post socialist societies. Each of the sections are appealing to the reader in their own right and combined offer insights at different levels: – conceptual; thematic; policy; and empirical. This reviewer found part four to be a particularly interesting approach to concluding the discussion. In a single extended chapter the authors construct a commentary on where public housing has come from and where it is going and in doing so critically appraise the consequences, which have been mostly negative, for concepts such as equity, redistribution, and sustainability. Their use of subheadings to weave the narrative is particularly useful.

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All in all this is a useful reference, which provides a well-organised and accessible source documenting the transformation of public housing in Eastern Europe. The reader can engage with the book on a country by country basis by reading the case studies or gain broader insights into the experiences of the Eastern European Model as a whole through the conceptual and thematic contributions.

Cathal O'Connell

School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland