

BUILDING HUMAN CAPACITY AND WAYS OF RESIDING: DUAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE FIELD OF HOUSING

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Abstract

The modern dynamics in the urban field of housing is characterized by increasing diversification of ways of residing. As a facet of life style and a sign of quality of life, diversification reflects as individualization of the demand for higher quality, more personalized supply of residence as well as continuous standardization of sometimes low-quality residential solutions. Given the symbolic nature of residence manifested in its architectural and socio-spatial expressions, often linked with tenure structures, housing acts as a judgemental device on individual actors' preferences and choices in the market. A wider perspective for conceptualizing housing is suggested to envisage the formation of the demand and supply/provision of diverse residences in a dual relationship continuously reconstructed between agents and structures bearing aside strictly economic relations upon cultural perceptions and meanings ascribed to residence. Shaping capacities disposing actors towards distinct strategies within the interplay of institutional and individual practices embedded in a societal experience is a focus of insights into qualitative research from Estonia drawing on Bourdieu, Kemeny and some architectural considerations.

Introduction

There is a general agreement about residential realities transforming towards greater diversification amongst housing researchers. This is particularly expressed on a widening scale of distinct ways of residing, which are linked with changing life styles and differentiation of quality of life of social groups (Bourdieu, 1998, 2005; Rowlands and Gurney, 2000; Flint and Rowlands, 2003; Ozaki, 2003; Ærø, 2006 etc). Hence the gradually individualised demand for higher quality housing met by the supply of more personalised residences in terms of their design and aesthetic qualities exists in parallel with continuous need for the provision of relatively less costly standardised and sometimes low-

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quality housing. Also, the analysis of the dynamics in the housing market as well as of individual practices in the field has become gradually more conscious and thus knowledgeable of the significance of the continuously changing multifaceted symbolic meanings attached to housing and informing the formation of residential preferences, choice-related and actual behaviours as well as directing institutional policies, provision and production strategies (Bourdieu 1993, 1994, 2005; Townshend 2006; Sirgy et al 2005).

Diversification, however, concerns less, especially in quantitative terms, the tenure structures. Although occurring to a varying degree in different societies, the private housing sector is growing along with gradual and ongoing transmission of ownership of housing property from the public sector to individuals, particularly in the advanced societies. This includes the 1990s' societal transformation in CEE countries, which resulted in massive privatization of the former predominantly public stock and subsequent overwhelming emergence of homeowners. Paraphrasing upon what Forrest and his associates have asserted already a couple of decades ago, by today diversification of the housing field has become a matter of degree rather than of kind and thus the 'tenure wide' focus of research is being explored in strong parallel with a 'tenure sensitive' approach (Forrest et al 1990:196). Or as Choko puts it: 'When everybody owns, it is not being a home owner itself that establishes status and some guarantee of wealth. It is rather, what you own, where, under what conditions and so on' (Choko 1995:142).

The changing residential realities, both in qualitative and quantitative terms have led to a paradigmatic shift in conceptualising of the complexity of processes in the field. The three most significant aspects of these theoretical and methodological reconsiderations particularly concern understanding (1) the constitution of relational, market and everyday residential practices as intertwined in a dual relationship continuously reconstructed on a reciprocal basis between agency and structures, (2) processes in the field and the performance of different institutional and individual actors in a culturally sensitive perspective considering the socio-structural development embedded in distinct societal histories and hence (3) conceptualising housing and the related activities beyond economic relations as social (political) and cultural constructions informing action. Well substantiated in the founding works of, for example, Bourdieu (since 1972/1999 onwards up to 2002), Giddens (1984/1997) and Kemeny (1992), the benefits of this approach have, with a special reference to Bourdieu, been recently recognized by also some economists. Leander asserts that understanding preferences, markets and behaviour as social constructions in time and place requires serious focussing on social processes and 'abandoning the basic assumption that economics is hermetically sealed off from the rest of social reality' (Leander 2001:347).

Hence, this paper attempts to contribute to the above considerations by exploring, first, the concept of capacity and its formation in the interplay of unique individual experiences and collective experience in the housing field and on a wider scale of a society. It then goes on outlining the specific nature of a notion of housing interconnected with its symbolic meanings derived primarily from a cultural experience of home. The latter part of the paper discusses the ways the shared cultural experience of residence and homes informs the market behaviour of individuals and institutional actors. Theoretical discussion draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice and his basic concept of habitus, which is by no means purely structuralist in nature as has been frequently misread, Kemeny's conceptualisation of the notion of 'myth' behind institutional and individual practices of residence and to a lesser degree conceptualisations on the role of architectural design in creating actors' self-perceptions, identities and residential cultures at large. The paper provides occasional insights into the results from a recent qualitative study of the social construction of residence as home in the experience of Estonian homeowners.

1. Shaping capacity – a dual relationship

A number of 'over-socialized' and 'under-socialized' explanations of individuals' market strategies and daily residential behaviour (Kemeny 1992 on Granovetter 1985) leading to distinct ways of residing, exclusively follow the rationale of social or economic or even the physical structural conceptualizations, which have a limited scope for capturing the complexity of the phenomenon. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to learn about the structural context of human conduct in a dual relationship with the performance of actors, with an attempt to define the nature of actors' capacity shaped in specific filed relations. Such a detailed analysis of action enables to understand the differences between individuals' and social groups' as well as behavioural modes, which might occasionally seem irrational. The analysis has to take into consideration equally the reality and the perceptions about reality, which are having a constitutive effect on the formation of the multifaceted realities rooted in the unique experiences of individuals intertwined with shared collective experiences in the field (Bourdieu 1994). In other words, the study of actors' capacity in the market and generally in the housing the experience of residential relations and that of the shaping mechanism of capacity especially, may well inform about the circumstances of individuals' and institutions' distinct dispositional strategies constructed as in the housing market as well in any other field.

The notion of 'capacity' is derived as an operationalised concept from Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which he conceives as:

'...a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor' (Bourdieu 1999/1972:72).

As Bourdieu explains, habitus is by no means a mechanical principle of action. It is conditioned and limited spontaneity not necessarily dependent on the immediate position of actors, neither the situation (Bourdieu 2005). It is shaped throughout actors' experience of the field and the entire social experience of cross-cutting field activities. Individual capacity can be assessed only against the relational situation forming in the field but can be understood only in the context of individual conduct interrelated with other fields. This is why the actions performed in the housing market cannot solely be explained within the relations and structural context in the field of housing but has to be related with conduct in fields of family, work, education etc. Yet habitus reveals itself as differentiated and differentiating capacity in particular field relations, where it is expected to enable to meet actors' goals, for example as applied in individuals' efforts for acquiring a house of a desired aesthetics and in institutional market actors' strategies to supply the clients with a variety of choice to satisfy their distinct tastes. Observable particularly on the market dynamics, individuals as well as institutions continuously face new circumstances, which assume adaptability of actions (Paadam 2005:167). However, actions subjected to new experiences appear as highly differentiated because actors improvise upon their distinct capacities having been shaped within their previously distinct experiences. Thus, capacity is durable but not eternal (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:123) and always related to actors' self-perceptions (Paadam 2007: 265). Capacity disposes actors to specific market behaviour, whereas the dispositional structure characteristic of different actors informs capacity building.

In his insightful and refined theory of practice, Bourdieu introduces his understanding of the formation of actors' capacity by distinguishing between four basic species of capital – social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital – in an interplay, which empowers action respectfully as to the volume, structure and nature of capital at actors' disposal. There is no misunderstanding as it comes to assessing successful market strategies in economic terms, for example, acquisition of affordable and preferable residential property by individuals or making good profit from selling property as institutional actors. Possession of economic capital or obtaining economic capital in a variety of ways - from income to inheritance or in the form of gifts in fields of work, family residence

and other – is an essential precondition for any successful performance in the housing market. However, it is known upon abundant research evidence that actors occasionally display most unpredictable market behaviour, for example buying property at most unfavourable market conditions or giving up purchase intentions regardless of the most favourable market conditions and availability of personal resources. In such cases simple economic argumentations seem to be insufficient.

It is argued here in line with Bourdieu that the most curious behaviour patterns as well as distinctions forming between different actors' residential behaviour and actual residential choices have to be always interpreted as a combination of species of capital at actors' disposal. With a special emphasis on the cultural capital, considered as the most durable of the forms of capital, increasing rather than decreasing in time and the unique residential experience of a beholder since the early stages of childhood, it acts as an ever growing and developing deposit of knowledge, skills, tastes as well as preferences supported by their varying symbolic value at distinct societal circumstances. The persistent nature of cultural capital is well explicated, for example, under extreme conditions of expropriation or loss of property, economic failure which might be accompanied by considerable reduction of actor's social and symbolic capital - prestige – along with overall symbolic and actual power at pursuing particular goals in the housing market or society at large (Paadam 2003).

Social capital, in Bourdieu's terms, differs considerably from widely used concepts and is part of a complex set of species denoting relations and connections, social circles actors get involved in during their conduct in various fields. Social capital, however, acts as a facilitator of capital conversion between fields of conduct or clients targeted by institutional market actors.

Central in Bourdieu's conceptualization of the formation of actors' capacity is the convertibility thesis concerning modes of inter-transference or exchangeability of distinct species of capital as well as between fields and actors – residents, architects, property developers, policy makers and others - facilitating this way building of the capacity required for the performance of specific field activities of individuals as well as of institutions or between them. A study of a market case forming around a gentrified residential area clearly demonstrates the significance of convertibility in obtaining capacity for and within professional performance of estate agents in the translation process between taste and price – a conversion of cultural capital into economic capital (Bridge 2001).

2. Housing – a visible good

Modern diversification, especially in societies with predominant owner-occupancy, is apparently about the quality of the built structures - architectural

types and forms of residences - and spatial characteristics of neighbourhoods, which are intimately related with residents as well as associated with their capacity to act in the field and performance in the society at large. Housing represents structure and commodity of specific quality and function - usually long-lasting, non-portable, basically fixed or localized, deeply rooted in a system of common culture and a necessary precondition to be established to create a home. Consisting in the majority of the built legacy – renovated, restored, rebuilt or converted – rather than that of the newly constructed buildings, the housing stock forms a curious market for “second-hand” goods as has been pertinently asserted by Agnew (1981). Diversity is inherent in this market in historically shaped layers of residential culture (re)presented, (re)created and (re)invented in multiple ways of residing as well as with salient references to the nature of societal relations at a time. As Bourdieu argues (2005:19):

‘As a material good which (like clothing) is exposed to the general gaze (...) this form of property expresses or betrays, in a more decisive way than many other goods, the social being of its owners, the extent of their ‘means’, as we say; but it also reveals their tastes’.

Tastes are often considered reflective of the social hierarchies existing in different societies and objectified in the socio-spatially segregated residential neighbourhoods. This way housing becomes a judgemental device for the identification of its residents. It has been also indicated elsewhere that social image of a neighbourhood might be a far more important factor to be considered in making residential choices than the location of residence or geographical distance (Townshend 2006). While housing in its built form and locality – the ‘place occupied’ (Bourdieu 1999:123-124) - may be considered ‘a sign of identity’ (Gullestad 1984:152) in regard to the social positioning of its residents and especially for societies of long-standing relative stability of establishment of societal structures, it appears to be subjected to considerably different interpretations in societies having recently experienced fundamental transformation of a social system. For example, it has been put forward that massive large-scale housing estates in cities of the former socialist block do not necessarily reflect on the concentration of the lower strata in these areas neither do they bespeak residents’ tastes, preferences or choices explicitly (Sykora 1999). This type of built residential structures rather tells about specific collectivist ways of residing imposed on people discarding their preferences in the ideological conditions of severely restricted individual residential choice (Leemet and Paadam 2002). This implies that individual tastes remained hidden in the immediacy of flats masked (Korosec-Serfaty 1985:73) by facades of buildings concentrating a mix of social, economic and cultural capacities of residents.

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Photo 1. The '60s scale - still on the scene but changing in its socio-physical nature



Photo: K. Paadam 2008

Furthermore, after the privatization of public property the mixed composition of residents' capacities in these blocks presented one of the main obstacles for the redevelopment of these buildings, as is evident from a qualitative study of Estonian homeowners (Paadam, 2003):

'All locks to the doors have been broken... I really do not understand... these people must be of very different personal backgrounds and very different societies. They do not care... they have not been taught to care...' (Anton, an Estonian-born Russian employee);

'Nothing will change in this house before the residents change... the residents are not ready to act in their own interests.' (Alex, an Estonian-born Russian employee);

'I really do not know how to organise these people... Unfortunately a lot of residents are simply stupid and I'm afraid they need to be explained the basics...' (Agnes, an Estonian employee).

Purchase of this property under favourable conditions of privatization does not demonstrate the taste or preferences of these residents either, as the purchase of flats was made under the major structural reformation of the field and the sitting tenants had no alternatives at the beginning phases of the reform, except for a choice between owning and renting. Economic rationalisation had been supported by the construction of a new collective experience of a norm of homeownership, as a reflection of an emerging 'collective taste' (Lundgren, 2000:118) to be followed. As has been argued by Bourdieu, housing purchase is

not only a substantial economic investment but also a social and cultural and emotional investment as it is expected to survive as a transmissible heritage between generations, a home as a historical property and solid basis for identity building (Bourdieu, 2005). Thus, the behaviour of privatizers of public flats cannot be regarded a mere rational act, though perhaps calculated under specific circumstances of limited choice, but also an unconsciously intended strategy of securing a sense of emotional and economic safety, especially in a residence that is identified as home:

‘I’m very pleased to be a property owner. Everyone is happy to invest into one’s own property, into a home... You invest your money but also your thoughts and dreams... To be realistic I cannot afford more than having this flat. That’s why my only concern aside my flat is that the block should be brought into perfect order...’ (Alina, a doctor, a former sitting tenant in a large block).

Since housing is generally and intrinsically bound to the meaning of home it is of strong symbolic value – a basis of appreciation as well as stigmatization. In ‘normal’ conditions of predominant homeownership, which in itself is identified as a ‘promise’ or achievement of a desirable ‘lifestyle package’ including all components for the appropriation of a recognized social standing (Rowlands and Gurney 2000:125), the symbolic significance of residence bears upon not only the tenure status of residents but the quality of a residence owned by residents of distinct capacity.

3. Home – a symbolic market device

Studies of housing and home generally state that home neither occurs naturally nor is it created in an instant, but over time, in the process of “making a house into a home” (Dupuis and Thorns, 1998:31). Leach argues that ‘not only do we grow into and become part of our environment, but our environment becomes part of us’, making a clear reference to the connectedness between the physical and social dimensions of residence and the notions of housing and home. He takes further an idea of the role of residential architecture and design of home environments in shaping individuals’ identities as well as a sense of belonging (Leach 2006:7), which is a notably significant aspect of the symbolic meaning making affecting actors’ behaviour and forming part of their capacity building.

Dovey also conceives that the meaning of home is created through the dialectic of many inside/outside categories of perception that are at once universal and socially constructed (Dovey 1999: 139). He has argued that the meaning of home is strongly rooted in individuals’ dispositions as they have been shaped in the course of individual experience.

Home experiences are by nature memorable as people tend to be emotionally tied to places which they identify as homes. Edensor contends likewise that particular sites become symbolic and that memories related to them are integral to identity building (Edensor, 1997: 190-191). Bachelard emphasises that memories of our past housing are particularly persistent. They are imperishable because the house is a basic integrator of a person's thoughts, memories and dreams and, as such, "lived dreams" are revived in "new dreams" (Bachelard, 1999: 42). Balancing between the imagination and the concrete objects of reality, as if the "poetry" and "prose" of life, his analysis illuminates how people possess the capacity to adjust to or re-shape their behaviour according to their changing conditions as soon as they feel a sense of security: "*And I am lulled to sleep by the noise of Paris*" (1999: 67). Bachelard suggests that every really inhabited space holds the meaning of home when its inhabitants perceive its borders as forming a boundary between the place offering shelter and the outside world. Therefore, even "the most modest of homes may be perceived as beautiful" (Bachelard, 1999:40) by those who have it, because "the mental structures which construct the world of objects are constructed in the practice of a world of objects constructed according to the same structures" (Bourdieu, 1999: 91).

Despite different discourses 'home' appears to be identified as "(...) a phenomenon that assists in manifesting these affiliative bonds to social structures, either through the demarcation of a socio-spatial place where these bonds occur, and the label for a place or state of mind where these social structures are experienced" (Benjamin, 1995:294-295). Central to Benjamin's assertion is the idea that home is where people are settled psychologically, socially, culturally and physically. Therefore, "home" may be understood as an aspect of societal culture associated with distinct ways of residing, which are transforming together with people's residential expectations. Thus, home as a concept is 'anything but static' with its meaning and importance varying between individuals, age groups, lifestyles, classes, and cultures (Wikström, 1995: 273; 1994).

Due to the strong and intimate relationship forming between the experiences of home and housing, distinct ways of residing are attached powerful symbolic meanings deeply rooted in a societal culture. As related to home, residential experiences are emotional by nature and as such are inclined to become the basis of shared societal myths. Kemeny argues that myths are more effective the greater the emotional energy that can be mobilised behind them (Kemeny 1992:103). Residential myths are simultaneously reflective and supportive of the formation of individual desires and institutional actions in the market and in the realm of policies, concerning both the shaping of tenure preferences as well as specific architectural designs for residences. As products of interaction within specific cultural and social milieux they must be understood

as an essential component of the process of reality construction (Kemeny 1992:103-104).

Photo 2. In search for new residential identities in a converted building



Photo: K. Paadam 2008

Kemeny's ideas are firmly supported by Bourdieu who identifies the phenomenon of interconnectivity between the notions of housing and home as 'mythopoetic' in nature evoking action in the housing market. Hence he asserts that housing markets are the product of two-fold social construction: the construction of demand through the production of individual dispositions as to preferences and the construction of supply through the supportive role of state policy in respect of credit to building companies and defining conditions of access to the market (Bourdieu 2005: 16, 24).

Knowledgeable and highly skilful professional market agents appeal on the culturally rooted symbolic meanings of housing, which for most people are associated with home as of a notion of great emotional value. As has been acknowledged by a number of authors the housing market today turns out to be the market for selling meanings rather than houses (Dovey 1999). By efficient use of the magic and charm of words market agents evoke a symbolic anticipation of the pleasure of inhabiting a world of things (Bourdieu 2005:24) – residences as specific cultural entities, part of lifestyles of symbolic recognition (Flint and Rowlands 2003:224).

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Photo 3 The desired residence, home and property



Photo: K. Paadam 2007

Concluding remarks

This paper has attempted to contribute to an understanding of the formation of actors behaviour in the housing market by introducing a broader view on its constitutive mechanism. The main assumptions behind this attempt have been the transformations of the tenure structures towards the growing sector of private owner occupation of housing and diversification of ways of residing as well as a wish to highlight the nature of the processes in the fields beyond the strictly economic considerations.

It has been argued that housing and activities concerning the conduct of individual and institutional actors are interconnected by and within the social and cultural relations rooted in societal history. In these terms the housing markets can be interpreted as cultural phenomena and the traded products – housing – as entities, which bear strongly upon the symbolic values derived from meanings attached to residence as home.

The mainly theoretical considerations presented in this paper have been informed by the qualitative study of housing histories of Estonian homeowners and their experiences of constructing residence as home in major post-transformational circumstances in the field and in the society. The study strongly drew on the originally Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus but built the analysis on the concept of capacity. However, it is considered that residential experiences in daily practice as well as the relations and strategies applied in the dual relationship between individual and market actors need continuous detailed study, especially in relation with different actors' changing lifestyles and distinct qualities of life. Also, the future research intends to contest Bourdieu's view on

the formation of preferences exclusively in the context of symbolically structured value system, which seems to contradict with his understanding of inherited cultural capital. In order to be able to foresee the possible solutions for the residential futures, the research on a trans-disciplinary basis, which combines the research in residential sociology, architecture and market studies has been initiated on a cross-cultural basis.

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