Shared and Hidden Housing: The (Re)commodification of 21st Century Boarding Houses in Comparative-Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

While processes of financialization and governance of urban spaces shift over time, the underlying contradiction between Capitalism and housing remains (Engels; 1935 [1872]). As such, housing is continuously reorganized utilizing newer technologies and mechanisms to obfuscate and proliferate commodified housing arrangements. In recent years, platform-based cohousing, such as Alcove, Padsplit, Zillow, HotPads, Ollie, Common, and others, have moved to develop mechanisms to connect tenants with owners from a variety of backgrounds and to offer alternative housing choices for a wide range of people in diverse geographies. These forms of hidden housing are often missing in existing discussions as they are often perceived as quasi-legal and lacking social legitimization. Thus, the ability to access data about and evaluate them remains elusive.

In this paper, we describe the operation of one national platform-based co-housing mechanism in which service providers connect operators of mostly single-family rental homes with tenants via a membership-based software platform. Utilizing a comparative-historical framework, we situate the contemporary process, whereby new technology has created conditions for housing to be platformed and commodified, allowing the proliferation, obfuscation, and reformulation of alternative shared housing.

We compare the development of this modern form of co-housing with traditional boarding houses and the historical changes in housing, to understand the reinvention(s) of hidden housing mechanisms. Differing from but also mirroring traditional boarding houses, these arrangements aspire to a standardized model for people seeking access to affordable rental housing, where all tenants engage equally in maintenance of the space, re-formalizing the model of shared housing that was mostly lost in twentieth century urban spaces in the United States.

Extended Abstract:

In February 2024, in an effort to provide more affordable and flexible housing options, the online real estate marketplace Zillow announced an option for users to rent individual rooms on its platform: "Zillow expands rental marketplace with room listings, offering more affordable and flexible options" (Zillow, 2024). Citing surging rental costs and cost burdens as well as flexibility for landlords and homeowners (Lake, 2024), Zillow joined a growing number of internet platforms which have formally entered a historic and traditionally hidden sector of the affordable housing market: the room rental. In the organization's 2024 press release announcing the move, Michael Sherman, Vice President of Zillow Rentals, explains:

> By introducing room listings, we're crafting a robust marketplace of options that truly reflects the varied needs of renters. We're committed to providing a platform where searching for a room, a house, an apartment or anything in between is as easy as clicking a button.

While Zillow is not the first corporation to enter this market space in recent years, the company is arguably the largest and most well-known to engage this mechanism of the housing market. As access to internet technology has become increasingly ubiquitous, room rental has been platformed through the "digital informalisation" of housing (Ferreri and Sanyal, 2022). The use of digital spaces and algorithms has led to a creative plethora of attempts to make alternative housing arrangements more accessible but also more monetized, managed, and curated through digital risk control processes.

In this paper, we describe a process whereby new technology has created conditions for housing to be platformed and commodified, not only allowing the proliferation and renewal of alternative housing options, but also producing new mechanisms for their obfuscation and reformulation. Using one such creative housing mechanism in which service providers connect operators of mostly single-family rental homes with tenants via a membership-based software platform, we illustrate how shared housing is being platformed and re-commodified in a new set of conditions in the 21st century

We compare the development of this modern form of co-housing with traditional boarding houses and the historical changes in housing, to understand the reinvention(s) of hidden housing mechanisms. Differing from but also mirroring traditional boarding houses, these arrangements aspire to a standardized model for people seeking access to affordable rental housing, where all tenants engage equally in maintenance of the space, re-formalizing the model of shared housing that was mostly lost in twentieth century urban spaces in the United States.

Urban scholarship has long explored the relationships between housing access and social inequality, demonstrating the importance of housing policy, urban planning, and community engagement in creating mechanisms that promote housing equity or exacerbate existing housing inequalities. Social factors associated with historic oppression and inequality such as race, education, and socioeconomic status predict the likelihood of access to safe and dignified housing for individuals, groups, and geographic communities (Wilson, 1987: Massey and Denton, 1993). While details change over time as new opportunities, processes of financialization, and governance of urban spaces shift, the underlying contradiction between Capitalism and housing remains (Engels, 1935[xxxx]). As such, housing constantly reorganizes, reflecting changes driven by individuals such as landlords and by financial and governance processes, and as the bourgeoisie continuously seek newer technologies and forms to ultimately obfuscate and proliferate commodified housing arrangements.

Prior to the large public housing projects of the twentieth century, shared housing was common, and housing arrangements varied extensively (Hareven and Vinovskis, 2015). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as industrialization swept the United States, shared housing was recognized as a viable and respectable housing option for working people. Many homes operated with 'lodgers' who were either juveniles, distant relatives, or persons of similar occupation or origin to those living in the established household (Modell and Hareven, 1973). In the 1850's, as many as one in five households contained lodgers; in Detroit in the 1880's, approximately one in six households had lodgers, and Boston households of the same period ranged between ten and thirty percent containing strangers (Bloomberg et al., 1971:39; Blumin, 1972:19-20; Glasco, 1972:28-31; Hareven and Vinovskis 2015). "Lodging was one major rubric under which…biologically-defined limits were breached, by an instrumental relationship, based on economic and service exchange" (Modell and Hareven, 1973:468).

People with limited social and financial capital approached creative shared housing mechanisms such as boarding houses as an effective and practical option. Scholars such as Du Bois routinely described alternative housing arrangements such as boarding houses and short terms rentals in African American and immigrant communities (Du Bois 1899; Central Park in NY citation; Chicago School citation). As young women increasingly joined the formal workforce, they also approached boarding as a safe and respectable option for housing. Parents sending their daughters into urban centers perceived boarding houses as respectable and comforting (Gamber 2007).

Technological and economic impacts of war and other social forces shifted United States housing and its associated culture dramatically during the mid-twentieth century, and the prevalence and affordability of automobiles, as well as the infrastructure to support them, drove a rise in suburbanization (Jackson 1985; Fishman 1996; Osterhammel 2014). Projects to establish an 'urban countryside' changed how housing, and the household associated with housing, was to be perceived (Quayle 1998). What Mike Davis called "keynesian suburbanization" (Davis, 2006), such as Shaker Heights in Cleveland or Niles Center in Chicago (Mumford, 2016), represented this new ideal housing form. Soon the preferred middle-class home was situated in a suburban neighborhood, where one nuclear family lived with a stay-at-home mother, commute-to-work father, and two or three children. The country which had long valued individuality now constructed this lifestyle as a desirable status symbol of success, while urban shared housing was increasingly stigmatized and restricted by policy and covenants (Rose, et al. 2016; Gotham 2000). Thus, by the 1970s, urban academic scholarship portrayed shared housing as predominantly an issue in developing countries and not a subject for research in the United States (Mitchell 1973).

Concurrently, with the rise of the large public housing projects and its associated deinstitutionalization in the 1980s, scholarly attention shifted from the varied housing mechanisms of the nineteenth century to focus extensively on urban renewal efforts and their associated programs that dramatically shifted how, when, and where governments supported access to affordable housing. By the close of the twentieth century, boarding houses signified poverty, low-quality living, and even crime. Many areas of the country capped the number of unrelated adults who could share a home, and zoning and land-use policies restricted homeowners' choices about how they could use their property, including room rentals. Homeownership became the standard ideal but also has remained increasingly elusive as economic inequality has grown and institutional supports for financing have dwindled (Arundel and Ronald 2021).

During the last decades of the twentieth century, single-family homes became larger, and ideas about privacy and structured space led to increased stigma about shared living (Gotham 2000; Sood et al. 2019; Rose et al. 2016). While this mostly eliminated the formal shared housing spaces of the past, some groups and individuals engaged in creative resistance strategies, both directly and indirectly. Those without access to mortgage financing continued to rent, engaging in formal leasing options or informal arrangements. Young people, long engaged in creative social mechanisms, continued to share housing, sometimes living with enough roommates in large homes to exceed legal limits or local ordinances (Cite Summerhill). People of color and women with limited economic power also continued to share housing and support each other through informal channels, financial as well as social.

In the past decade, the disconnect between formal governance and housing realities, combined with the shortage of affordable housing, has created the conditions for both the emergence and flourishing of digitized shared housing platforms. While these are operating formally in the economic sphere, the policies and practices applying to shared housing are still missing from formal governance. Nonetheless, the formal economic emergence provides the opportunity and evidence to formally study the phenomenon and ultimately (re)engage is position as forms of shared and often hidden housing that have long defined urban space.