

Every Single Person Has a Right to Housing

BY

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Building a humane city should start from the premise that every person deserves a decent place to live. And the only way to accomplish that is through collective action, carried out by working-class movements.

Review of *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*, by Leslie Kern (Verso, 2020) and *Modern Housing*, by Catherine Bauer (University of Minnesota, reissued: 2020).

When geographer Leslie Kern first moves to Toronto's Junction neighborhood, its public spaces are overwhelmingly geared toward male and working-class customers. There are pawn shops and porn shops, cheap donut shops, and greasy diners. A coffee shop, the Nook, establishes a safe place for women to go and "take up space," with restrooms and a small play area in the back to make women and families with children feel comfortable.

In *Feminist City*, Kern describes the Nook as the kind of "third place" urbanists celebrate as "an environment (and, of course, a brand) where people can be alone, together." The porn stores and (non-artisanal) donut shops close, more cafes like the Nook open, and the construction of new condos echoes over pricey strollers gliding down sidewalks.

At first, certain institutions in the Junction neighborhood seem unchanged. The Salvation Army Evangeline Residence, the second-largest women's center in the city, continues to provide short- to medium-term shelter for up to ninety women. Shelter rules do not allow women to stay in the shelter all day, so they are forced to be in public, where they are "watched

constantly” and informally policed by their increasingly affluent neighbors as their “physical appearance, habits, and occasional expressions of mental illness mark them as ‘other.’”

A nearby cafe sets a bench outside for customers waiting for a table or reading, and complaints are lodged: the women from the shelter are smoking on the bench. In online forums, the women are called a “freak show.” The cafe owner, who has been donating meals to shelter residents, expresses sympathy for the women at the Evangeline but removes the bench.

Increasingly, the women who move to the Junction are different from the women who stay at the Evangeline Residence. White and college-educated, these women face some of the same struggles as the women in the shelter — responsibility for childcare, gendered harassment in public spaces — but they’re spared the long-term and chronic poverty.

Still, the story of the café bench drives home one of *Feminist City*’s more compelling claims: that the harassment and violence women experience in public spaces is linked to the private violence they sometimes experience at home. Even middle-class women found themselves trapped and unable to afford high housing costs without their partners. In other cities, Kern notes, a desire to attract women to city neighborhoods has led to the underreporting or recoding of sexual assaults (as “unfounded” and “investigation of person”), in which “the appearance of safety comes to stand in for the end goal.”

Modern Housing

The term “third place” refers to spots that are neither home (first place) nor work (second place) but public locations that still allow for individual privacy and space: everything from workers’ clubs, churches, and parks to coffee shops, barbershops, cafés, bars, libraries, and community centers. While third places are ostensibly free of social hierarchies and accessible to everybody, they’re often spaces of consumption and thus exclude those who lack the requisite income. In working-class neighborhoods, that exclusion is minimal — most people can afford to eat at a cheap diner. But in gentrifying neighborhoods — less inexorable, slow-motion catastrophes than the product of exploitative practices driven by real estate capital — the exclusion is essentially the point.

Third places have been part of neighborhoods for as long as neighborhoods have existed. As Catherine Bauer writes in *Modern Housing*, first published in 1934 and newly reissued, communal public spaces are essential to the new minimum dwellings then being constructed in Europe. This “modern housing” varied from city to city, but all boasted basic standards for planning, construction, and administration.

America’s housing, by contrast, was a mess: “Congested tenements, wooden three- and four-deckers, and jerry-built, jostling bungalows; foreclosures, evictions, worthless mortgages, tax-delinquencies, and municipal bankruptcy; miles of unused pavement, vacant lots and expensive rotting utilities; a vastly increased and rapidly increasing area of blight and decay; and an oversupply of gadgeted millionaires’ rookeries.” War-weary Europe has “millions of low-rental, high-standard, modern dwellings in communities planned carefully to provide a maximum of amenity, pleasantness, efficiency, and long-time economy.”

More than just shelter, these minimum dwellings ensured privacy and dignity for those who lived there, with enough rooms for separate bedrooms for parents and for children of different genders, “relatively soundproof walls,” a humane commute

(Bauer specifies not more than thirty minutes from employment), running water and a ventilated toilet, “adequate sun,” ventilation between units, spaces for children to play, and — perhaps most importantly of all — “security of tenure” for tenants and homeowners alike. In Bauer’s mind, modern housing should be considered part of a “national minima,” along with sanitation, clean air and water, education, health care, and social insurance.

In the decades since its publication, *Modern Housing* has been celebrated for bringing Bauhaus ideals and European innovations in architecture and urban design (like the Frankfurt kitchen and garden cities) to American audiences. While Bauer was interested in new technology, she doesn’t position these innovations as solutions for housing shortages. Instead, she spends the majority of *Modern Housing* demonstrating that housing crises aren’t an accidental market misfortune — a problem of temporarily limited supply, brought on by the market, that could be fixed by rezoning or by building more houses or more efficient housing units — but a normal outcome of capitalism.

With a convincing history drawn from newspapers, pamphlets, testimony, and governmental sources, Bauer establishes the nineteenth century as a “failure of civilization,” during which “the Social Contract became largely a code of noninterference with property rights.” In Bauer’s history, periods of sufficient housing supply and adequate housing are rare, and the housing crisis is nearly perpetual, endemic to capitalism. Even during periods of sustained prosperity, real estate speculation has always threatened cities, Bauer writes, citing a seventeenth-century account of property developers. “Thes sort of covetous Buylders exact great renntes, and daiely doe increase them in so much that a poore handie craftsman is not able by his paynefull laboure to paye the rennte of a smale Tenemente and feede his familie” and “neither regard the good of the Commonwealthe, the preservacion of the health of the Cittie.”

If Bauer’s history of housing is a history of capitalism’s failures, it’s also a history of practical utopias. Researched and published during the years of Red Vienna — the socialist-led city still lauded today as a model for social housing — *Modern Housing* notes that in Europe, cities had found that “bad houses made bad cities, and wasteful houses made cities bankrupt” and “bad dwellings are not an unavoidable necessity.”

But the impetus behind these reforms had been the workers’ movements of the day, not bosses or landlords or top-down reformers. As Bauer would write elsewhere: “No one expects the bosses to initiate and carry through strikes, nor the manufacturers of an obsolete commodity to be the ideal promoter for the industry which put him out of business.” Safe, affordable housing would only be secured through collective action.

Security of Tenure

Modern Housing was revolutionary at the time, not just for its history (Bauer cites Friedrich Engels in German and in English, and summarizes *The Communist Manifesto* as “The first clear declaration of revolutionary Communism and its opposition to partial reform, including housing”) but for the future that it imagined. Bauer envisioned a national housing program, driven by organized labor and dramatic federal intervention, “as a long-time measure which must eventually rebuild most of America — not merely as a temporary means of providing employment.”

Bauer then worked with the American Federation of Labor to organize the Labor Housing Conference, which pressed for publicly funded worker housing and supported the United Textile Workers of America’s challenges to “feudal conditions” in

company-run mill towns. Bauer also helped author the Housing Act of 1937, and is credited with provisions that restricted rent to 20 percent of a family's income and the creation of the United States Housing Authority.

Of all the standards for dwelling that Bauer advocates in *Modern Housing*, none seem so radical today as “security of tenure”: the idea that even tenants deserve long-term secure housing, regardless of how many children they may have or their employment or income.

It's exactly what the women described in *Feminist City* need, whether middle-class newcomers or those in shelters. Housing has to be a public utility if housing is to have any utility — any right to the city begins with a stable, secure home, not exclusionary “third places.”

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