

BOOK REVIEWS

SAGE HANDBOOK OF HOUSING STUDIES, edited by David F. Clapham, William A.V. Clark and Kenneth Gibb, London: Sage Publications, 2012

This excellent compendium is a unique contribution to the field of housing studies. Much scholarship on housing represents either a single-country approach (for example Mullins and Murie, 2011; Shwartz, 2010) or a focus on a single issue, such as housing production (Carmona, Carmona and Gallent, 2003), social housing (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2008), or home ownership (Ronald and Elsinga, 2011).

The weighty (and expensive) book is unique in bringing together essays from a range of countries, on multiple issues, and from diverse and explicit economic and social perspectives. The wide-ranging approach makes it an especially useful introduction for researchers from other disciplines, who may have little previous knowledge about housing. I have found myself recommending this book to colleagues from economics, public policy and urban planning as a broad yet focused introduction to the state of the art in housing studies research. As an academic and policy consultant, I was especially pleased with the thoughtful introductions to each section, particularly where they provide a context for understanding the multi-national perspectives.

The Handbook poses the question: “what is housing studies?” Among the answers: it is a relatively recent field with a number of inter-disciplinary research centers and a few international research networks (many of the articles are by scholars active in the European Network of Housing Research), but no single-purpose university departments; it is often critiqued as dominated by a policy perspective, with research aimed at informing political and professional decision-making; and the wide-spread mortgage market crisis has brought renewed interest in housing studies, internationally and across disciplines.

The Handbook of Housing Studies has twenty-four essays organized into four sections: Markets, Approaches, Context, and Policy Issues. Each section is introduced by one of the editors, with an overview of the topic and the five or six essays in that section. The editors have clearly worked hard with their contributors to ensure a common framework: most essays open with clearly defined terms, review main arguments and evidence from different countries, and point to future directions for further research.

The Market section, edited by Kenneth Gibb, is dominated by an econometric approach. The essays explore how developers decide where to build, how people

decide where to live, and where to work. A particularly illuminating contribution by George Galster asks whether 'neighborhoods' are a useful unit of observation in trying to understand the dynamics of housing markets. The short answer is 'yes', since he finds that neighborhoods are "an unmistakable cause of market failure" with inequitable outcomes that disproportionately influence low-income people. This finding leads Galster to argue that governments facing housing crises should intervene on the neighborhood level, and not only on the national or urban scale, with geographically targeted financial incentives, regulations and infrastructure investments.

The Approaches section, edited by David Clapham, aims to correct what he sees as a bias in housing research towards policy-oriented studies of 'what works'. The range of theoretical perspectives covered in the section includes institutional economics, social policy, social geography, housing politics and people-environment studies. Christine Whitehead's critique of the neo-liberal approach to housing is a shining gem. This is the essay that I will re-read over and over in trying to explain to government officials why it is not enough to 'just remove obstacles to the market'. David Clapham contributes a fine investigation into the strengths and weaknesses of the social policy approach. He concludes that housing research from a social policy perspective has been effective in helping policy-makers to fine-tune policies to which they are already ideologically committed, but less effective in challenging broader ideological approaches. Surprisingly, the section lacks a chapter on legal approaches to housing, which might have examined issues of discrimination, the right to housing, and regulatory barriers to affordable housing. Also lacking is a built-form approach, reviewing the influence of architectural and urban planning trends and questions about density, high-rise housing, changing sizes of flats, and the relation between housing and public and private open space.

The Context section, edited by William A.V. Clark, is a broad grouping of articles that link housing to one other issue: housing and the economy; housing and environment; housing and urban form; housing and social life; and housing and state welfare regimes. Some of the articles in this section make rather difficult reading for those without prior knowledge of the specific field, and the introduction could perhaps have been more helpful in drawing together the main insights and findings.

The final section, on Policy Issues, edited again by Kenneth Gibb, is a particularly welcome contribution to comparative research on housing policy. Here in one place are clearly edited articles about homelessness (Suzanne Fitzpatrick), affordable housing (Chris Leishman and Steven Rowley), housing subsidies (Judith Yates), residential segregation (one article by Sako Musterd and another by Rowland van Kempen and Gideon Bolt), and managing social housing (Hugo Priemus). Each one of the essays carefully, and rather unusually for housing policy, reviews research from a number of countries, primarily North American, Northern Europe and Australia. This is the section that I would use as the basis for an inter-disciplinary workshop on housing policy issues.

The volume has limitations, of course, as the editors themselves acknowledge. The research is mostly from the US, northern European countries (particularly the Netherlands and Austria), and Australia. The editors call for further research particularly in countries with hot housing markets, including China, and other far-East Asian countries. Research from the former Soviet Union, South America and Africa, as well as southern Europe, would have helped to make this a truly international review.

As a housing policy scholar in a country that is now trying to re-invent policies for housing affordability, I would have welcomed an additional section examining the roles of different sectors within housing policy. Many countries outside the North-American- Northern European axis are now looking to develop systems for affordable housing, and grappling with important questions about the interplay of national government, municipalities, non-profits and the private sector. Essays in this missing section could have examined the changing role of municipalities in building and managing social housing; the very different relations between government and non-profit housing developers in different countries, and the financial tools and incentives that are increasingly bringing the for-profit sector into developing and investing in private rental and affordable housing.

The cover of the handbook features an image of a simple black and white concrete modernist housing structure morphing into a multi-colored many-sectioned glass and steel building. The image may be intended to signify the evolving complexity of the field, and perhaps the inevitable limitations of the handbook should be viewed in light of the complexity and evolving nature of housing studies.

The SAGE handbook of housing studies is a hugely important contribution to the field of housing studies, and should be in the library of every university, and on the shelves— or desks—of housing scholars everywhere.

References

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