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## ID 1414 | EMPTY HOUSING: CRITICAL REVIEW ON THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF HOUSING VACANCY

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**ABSTRACT:** The issue of housing vacancy as a spatial phenomenon, as an outcome of urban restructuring or as part of a rhetoric developed around urban generation, has been considerably debated in the fields of housing and urban studies and policy-making. However, the definitions and the conceptualizations of empty, underused, vacant or abandoned housing in urban agglomerations as topics to look into, as well as the theoretical frameworks developed to understand the procedures and the reasons behind their emergence, are diverse and sometimes controversial, depending on the disciplinary origins and epistemological paradigms adopted. The essay attempts to provide a better understanding of the various types of urban housing vacancy through a critical review on key theoretical frameworks in the fields of housing economics, housing studies, geography and spatial planning to identify key points and assumptions between various disciplinary perspectives; as well as to reflect on whether more or less multi-dimensional explanations are able to grasp the complexity of the phenomena, which as it is argued, occur in many different contexts for many different reasons. For the purposes of this paper, the most prevailing concepts and theories used and translated by planners and researchers in urban studies to explain housing vacancy phenomena, are explored. The review focuses on literature dating back to the 1960's and attempts to cover the debate on housing vacancy, with a reference mainly to North-American and European cases, through the following three conceptual frameworks: i. housing vacancy as mobility "opportunity" ii. vacancy as demand variation and iii. vacancy as a "shrinkage". Four key concerns are discussed in detail regarding each of the conceptual frameworks: the extent of attention paid to spatial aspects and to cross-scalar relationships, to actors' role and impacts, as well as the understanding of vacancy as part of context-dependant historical processes. The paper concludes with a more general reflection on whether these commonly used theoretical frameworks are able to touch upon the complex social, economic, political and cultural relationships embodied in housing and conceptualize housing not only as a "composite commodity".

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades housing vacancy and abandonment have been thoroughly examined in academic literature, either by means of providing a descriptive-analytical view on the phenomenon or its measurement (Hillier et al. 2003, Yin and Silverman, 2015, Accordino and Johnson, 2000) or incorporating the vacancy issue in a wider debate on urban restructuring, policy change, neighborhood transformation and gentrification (Marcuse, 1985, Häußermann and Clock, 2004). Conceptualizations of empty, underused, vacant space as well as explanations on the reasons behind its emergence have not been agreed (Morckel, 2014). The article focuses on the latter aspect and provides a critical review on three key conceptual frameworks which, albeit developed under different historical, political, circumstances and socio-economic conjunctures and referring to different housing systems and urban settings, are often used for the analysis of vacancy process in different contexts. The aim of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of the diverse mechanisms, reasons and phenomena intertwined to housing vacancy and reflect on whether underlying disciplinary logics might restrict the views only on certain facets of complex vacancy issues.

The article examines three conceptual frameworks: i. housing vacancy as part of the supply-demand link and as a necessary condition for residential mobility, as shown in filtering and vacancy chain models; ii. vacancy as a result of changing demand for specific tenures or neighborhoods, investigated through the theories of tenure residualization and the low-demand hypothesis and iii. housing vacancy as the outcome of universal patterns of demographic and economic restructuring explored by the "global" framework on urban shrinkage. After a brief review of the main definitions and the key points addressed by each concept, three key concerns addressed by all frameworks are critically discussed and disciplinary limits are presented. Considering that housing vacancy has been seen as a social or/and a spatial phenomenon, the first key point examines to what extent theories provide a spatial understanding of the phenomena. In this sense, spaces as well as scalar relations are key points on the basis of which concepts are compared. The second point concerns the potential importance of the physical space has in the explaining reasons for housing vacancy. The third point addresses the role of actors in the process of vacancy and raises questions on whether and when housing vacancy is structural or a result of aggregated individual attitudes. The paper concludes with a more general reflection on whether these commonly used theoretical frameworks are able to describe complex social, economic and political issues intertwined to housing vacancy, on whether contextual specificities play a role and the way the various conceptualizations of the issue of vacancy highlights different values which when translated into policies might lead to highly diverse approaches.

## 2 CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF HOUSING VACANCY

### 2.1 VACANCY AS OPPORTUNITY: FILTERING & VACANCY CHAINS

Filtering is a concept, developed primarily for the US and UK context, to model the operation of housing markets and the nexus between housing supply-demand and household mobility patterns. This theoretical model, explored in depth by post-war scholars in housing economics, has its roots in early urban ecological perspectives, with the study of (Gibb, 2003). In the following part a brief presentation of North-American literature on filtering will address the origins and the main concepts around filtering models and their links to vacancy.

Classical filtering models assume that higher income households and their demand for "better quality dwellings" drive urban growth and that wealthier households' movement towards the outskirts, their increasing demand for housing triggers construction while creating vacancies in the existing housing stock. Vacancies along with suburban expansion decrease market values and render second-hand dwellings available to the next lower income group (White, 1971; Grigsby, 1963). In this regard, vacant housing constitutes an "opportunity" (Ratcliff, 1949; Turner, 2008) for low-income households who can improve their living standards without increasing their costs. Prior conceptualizations focus on the relation between supply and market prices and assume that households' conditions and income remain unchanged. Framing filtering solely as occupancy change, the excess in housing supply and therefore vacancy is linked to housing affordability (Ratcliff, 1949). When the decrease in market value is quicker than the decrease in quality, households can access better dwellings without extra costs (Grigsby, 1963). Recent

conceptualizations suggest that instead of housing units "filtering-down" the social hierarchy, households tend to improve their living quality while moving up the housing hierarchy (Marullo, 1985; Bier, 2001).

In first filtering explanations, aspects of heterogeneity, spatial fixity or durability of housing commodities have not been taken into consideration. The submarket hypothesis (Grigsby, 1963; Sweeney, 1974) and the development of vacancy chain models provided insights on the structure and the interdependencies between parts of the housing market and better explained supply-demand dynamics and relations between flows of housing resources and rent (Galster and Rothenberg, 1991). Vacancy chain models made the measuring of degrees of mobility in a given housing market and the evaluation of distributive effects and vacancy occurrence during the process of filtering possible. Chains conceptualize the way in which material resources or social positions are distributed in a housing system (Chase, 1991 p. 134). Similarly, filtering these models suggests that chains are initiated with the creation of new housing units and ended either when new actors join the system, or when the last units in the chain are destroyed, merged or abandoned (Marullo, 1985).

Irrespective of the diverse methodological assumptions in measuring the impact of new construction, most empirical studies claim that every new unit generates multiple additional vacancies and increases housing choices for other households (i.e. see Turner, 2008). However, the extent and the type of vacancy supply, the "optimal" allocation of new resources in submarkets as well as the "effectiveness" of the market in delivering "better" housing services to low-income households have been debatable. Most empirical findings demonstrate that higher vacancy rates tend to concentrate in the lower parts of the market (Ratcliff, 1949; White, 1971; Malpezzi and Green, 1996), although the reasons are not clear. Certain authors speculate that new dwellings introduced in higher submarkets remain available longer and change hands more often than units introduced in the middle or lower ranks (White, 1971; Skaburskis, 2006), or find correlations between vacancy chains' length and tenure (Turner, 2008). Others identify the problem with the time-span in which better dwellings trickle-down the market hierarchy, suggesting that filtering is effective when new dwellings address middle-income household demands (Ratcliff, 1949). Most studies on filtering distributive effects assume that an increased supply facilitates households' upward mobility independently from their position in the market (i.e. see Bier, 2001). Interpreting surplus and vacancy as a higher degree of mobility opportunities is rather inconsistent and research is needed on the type of "opportunities" found at the lower level, or on whether resources are accessible (Clark, 2006) as well as on the probabilities for low-income households to experience upward mobility (see Chase, 1991; Marullo, 1985; Galster and Rothenberg, 1991).

## **2.2 VACANCY AS DEMAND: RESIDUALISATION & "LOW DEMAND"**

Housing vacancy phenomena, manifested in Europe and primarily in the UK context in the 1970's and the 1980's, have been long-debated in the fields of social policy and housing studies. The following part draws on the UK experiences and comprises the analysis of the debate on housing vacancy for both the private and public sector through the concept of "residualization" and the concept of "low-demand" for housing.

"Residualisation" describes a set of parallel, more or less interrelated, processes operating at a global, national or local scale with impacts on national macro-economic, political/ideological, policy and social dynamics and between others, on the social structure of the housing consumption as well as on the role of social housing. This process refers to a wider social economic and political transformation which led to the relative shrinkage of the social rented sector, its de-prioritization from social policy agenda and its conversion into a "residual service" solely for the needs of the lower-income groups (Forrest and Murie, 1983; Malpass and Murie, 1999; Lee and Murie, 1999; Hall et al., 2005).

Global economic changes of the 1970's had an important impact on local dynamics of growth, labor market, employment and income, affected housing consumption and altered the scope of social policy (Harloe, 1995). Global competition, the new international division of labor and the tertiarisation of the economy have resulted in the increase of unemployment among the lower-skilled workers in several European advanced capitalist economies. The distribution of the aftermaths, however, has been uneven for both parts of the population, social classes and in areas (Forrest and Murie, 1983; Ball, 1983), with the regions dependent on manufacturing facing a "decline". As it is argued, long-term unemployment have fostered income-polarization between economically active and inactive households and led to their economic and political marginalization (Forrest and Murie, 1983). In this context an increasing, non-causal

though, correlation between income and tenure, linked either to labor structure or to consumption practices, has reflected a "polarization" between tenures and social classes (Hamnett,1984). The shrinkage of the formerly "mixed" private rental sector, the expansion of owner-occupation in size and scope and the considerable concentration of lower income groups in housing estates have been only some of the indications (Hamnett,1984). Policies played an important role in the process as well. The promotion of homeownership since the 1960's (Lee and Murie, 1999; Clapham et al., 1990), the subsequent "right to buy" policy (Kemeny, 1995; Allen 2008) and the expansion of the mortgaged markets, rendered homeownership an "attractive" as well as feasible option for middle-class households. The increasing maintenance costs-to-rent ratio in the social housing sector was coupled with an overall decreased funding directed to council housing and a shift in the system of financing, according to which subsidies were channeled to individual beneficiaries fostered the process of residualisation (Malpass and Murie, 1999; Harloe, 1995).

The expansion and the relative social diffusion of homeownership and the cross-tenure socio-economic and ethnical divisions, raised questions on whether "tenure" is a relevant analytical tool for understanding changes across parts of the housing system (Lee and Murie, 1999). This fact coupled with the persistence of "decline" and abandonment in specific geographical areas and its emergence in private sector housing (Kennan et al. 1999) have led to the adoption of "all-embracing" conceptual models on neighborhood change (van Beckhoven et al. 2005). Theoretical perspectives on "low-demand" provide a spatial understanding of the process of housing provision and focus on specific locations usually associated with "poverty" and "deprivation". Early research is influenced by the US debates on "neighborhood change" and "decline", and by the "social exclusion" policy debate in the UK (Lee, 2010; Watt and Jacobs, 2010). Recent contributions investigate micro-dynamics and the role of individual perceptions and choices in housing consumption and in the process of "decline" and redevelopment.

Hypotheses on the role of economic, social and policy restructuring remain relevant and incorporated in the analysis. Some contributions stress that the uneven distribution of housing demand across England is the projection of the long-standing regional disparities and divisions (Lee, 2010). However, they pay particular attention to the way in which these tendencies have been consolidated in inner-city neighborhoods of former industrial centers in England. As suggested, inner-city "decline" is the result of culminated events and processes. The gradual, later more rapid, "de-skilling", de-population and poverty concentration, is assumed to affect the "popularity" of inner-city neighborhoods and to lead to the stigmatization of their inhabitants. Local communities, experiencing multiple levels of distress (i.e. unemployment, low quality services, fear and crime) have often lost their sense of belonging. State-initiated decentralization (Lee and Nevin, 2003) on the one hand and delayed policy responses (Keenan et al., 1999), mismanagement of council housing or even renovation and demolitions programs (Jones and Watkins, 2009) on the other, have fueled household moving, vacancy and resulted in a generalized decline (Power, Mumford, 1999; Goodchild et al. 2002). Additional studies have considered the relationship between low-demand and changing "consumer preferences" and suggested that in order to understand the reasons behind "unpopularity" a more thorough look is needed on local experiences (Goodchild et al. 2002), individual perceptions on homeownership (Lee and Nevin, 2003), or on the meanings attributed to suburban lifestyles (i.e. safety, family and quality) (Townshend, 2006).

### **2.3 VACANCY AS SHRINKAGE: "DECLINE" IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

Urban shrinkage, albeit its metaphorical use in former studies on "urban decline", is considered to be a relatively recent conceptualization of disruptions in the urbanization process linked to demographic and economic shifts. More precisely, the analysis on "urban shrinkage" concerns a macro-scale view on urban development process and explains spatial transformation as the interplay between demographic and economic drivers examined, in most of the cases, through the prism of globalization. The term "shrinking cities" refers to cities or urban agglomerations experiencing important population losses due to structural economic changes, political and rarely environmental crisis and as a phenomenon has often been associated with processes of deindustrialization, economic restructuring, suburbanization and urban sprawl, with demographic change being the main driver or the most prominent aftermath (Haase et al., 2016; Turok and Mykhenko, 2006). These urban transformations have been long-researched in the North-American context since the 1970's and in (Easter)Europe mainly after the 1990's. Nevertheless, there is no consensus about whether "urban shrinkage" addresses a new condition or constitutes a re-conceptualization attempt.

The theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of "urban shrinkage" can be found in literature about urban change with more recent contributions claiming to offer an alternative view on "urban decline". In recent years, a number of writers questioned the main assumptions of cyclical development theories, such as the staged nature of urban development and the "inevitable" succession of "decline" by redevelopment (i.e. see Friedrichs, 1993), while proposing that shrinkage is a long-term component of urban development (Fol and Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Growth and decline are seen as structural and relational components of urban development that in the context of globalization evolve simultaneously (Bontje and Musterd, 2012). This asymmetrical relation between locations of growth and shrinkage has been explained as the spatialization of processes linked to the expansion, reproduction and crisis of capital accumulation in and through space (Harvey, 1982; Harvey, 2001) which, among others, consolidate in the spatial and functional re-organization of production globally (Massey, 1994) and has numerous consequences for local economic and social dynamics in several old industrial economies.

In a similar vein, the development of "global cities" (Sassen, 1991), characterized by the spatial concentration of financial-service businesses, information and communication networks and an advantaged location in terms of infrastructure, institutional development, economic and cultural production (Scott, 2008), evolves in parallel with the expansion of "shrinking cities", which face difficulties while adapting to the post-Fordist condition (Bontje and Musterd, 2012; Wiechmann, Pallagst, 2012) or coping with international competition for investment. Although these relations are fairly unexplored empirically, researchers argue that the level of integration of localities to global networks and their ability to attract capital and labor, is the key for understanding growth and shrinkage patterns at a global scale (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2014).

Apart from the interactions of capital and labor flows in the context of global economy, demographic change and population decline in Europe has been associated with low fertility rates and population ageing. Long-term change in population structure is considered a driver of shrinkage as well, with numerous effects on the households' structure (i.e. size, number) and on the labor force (Haase et al. 2016). Research suggests that demographic shrinkage, although in place since the 1960's, has been further intensified by structural economic and political changes (i.e. post-socialist state) and the subsequent out-migration, having cumulative effects on local economy and taxation revenues, housing markets, public service delivery and physical manifestations with housing vacancy being a "typical" indicator (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012). Nevertheless, micro-scale or rather contextual housing-related issues such as housing vacancy, apart from some relevant contributions (i.e. Haase et al. 2016; Couch and Cocks, 2013; Häußermann and Glock, 2004) have been rarely examined in depth, probably because of the general focus on the macro-scale causalities of shrinkage.

### **3 DISCIPLINARY LIMITATIONS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

#### **3.1 OBJECT OF STUDY AND DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES**

The main difference between the conceptual frameworks and theoretical underpinnings analyzed above is the way in which the core object of study is defined. Although all three address a certain, short-or long-term, housing-related process or transformation with social and spatial impacts, the main focus as well as the lenses through which this change is explained may differ. Filtering and vacancy chain models, being primarily concepts of housing economics, conceptualize moves and transactions in the housing markets, while "residualisation" with a strong influence on political-economic approaches, investigates shifts in class structure and divisions in relation to changing institutional forms and meanings (i.e. property or state). On the contrary, "low-demand", with links to sociological traditions, investigates the nexus between preference, place and community and "urban shrinkage", a more recent conceptualization with roots in the fields of geography, regional science and urban planning, searches for universal (spatial) patterns concerning the way in which globalization forces interact with demographic and capital flows and impact on territories. Despite the fact that common intellectual developments, philosophical and social theory influences can be identified (i.e. global-local debate or post-modern views on individuality), or common theoretical understandings (i.e. theories of cyclical development, theory of "spatial fix") each of these frameworks is to a certain extent limited by disciplinary lenses. In the following part, main assumptions and common points between theoretical frameworks will be critically analyzed. Special attention is paid to



socio-spatial considerations, multi-scalar dependencies and collective / individual actors' roles in the framing of each concept.

### **3.2 SOCIAL, SPATIAL PHENOMENA AND SCALAR RELATIONS**

Key distinctions between the three analyzed frameworks lie in the ways in which vacancy is explained in social or spatial terms, with priority given to economic, social or cultural aspects and in the ways scale is conceptualized. Housing economics investigation of filtering and vacancy chains focus on market spaces and instead of relations, investigates "positions" of actors and assets in the housing market. The phenomena are described in economic terms while space-related aspects are limited to spatial attributes (i.e. "spatial fixity", "durability" and "location"). The necessary simplifications implied by econometric modeling, and the nature of quantitative methods (i.e. data limitations), restrict the complex spatial and cross-scalar considerations and discard the social reality, political and institutional conjunctures in and through which housing markets operate. In this regard, instead of using space to explain economic processes, filtering use spatial characteristics and boundaries (i.e. administrative) to rationalize dynamics, which may operate beyond the confined metropolitan limits.

Although the systemic understanding of social change provided by the analysis of residualisation, relations between macro political-economic processes and socio-spatial configurations are not always strong. More specifically, "tenure" as an analytical tool might provide an aggregated understanding of complex patterns of social change, thus causalities between class and tenure restructuring can be misleading (Somerville, 1991). Furthermore, the notion of tenure does not involve per se spatial considerations, while it refers to specific material settings (i.e. council estates). Socio-spatial patterns of housing provision in residualization debate are not always central in the residualization debate. In this sense, a scale-gap can be found between macro-level explanations (i.e. national / regional) and the micro-level considerations focusing on the physical characteristics of council estates (i.e. condition, typology, morphology etc). Similar issues can be identified in the analysis of "low demand". In this case, a more elaborated area-specific framework of analysis provides insights on the ways in which communities, neighborhoods and individual perspectives and cultures interact with economic and political changes operating outside the neighborhood. Nevertheless, structural changes are usually a background since cross-scalar links between regional disparities and "neighborhood decline" are often assumed.

Urban shrinkage is problematized primarily as a spatial phenomenon. Its explanation, linking global economic networks to local effects, such as population loss, is supposed to offer a "relational" and scalar understanding of growth and decline in urban agglomerations (i.e. Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). As suggested, the reasons that part of the empirical research conducted have not traced the manner in which specific macro-scale dynamics relate to context-dependent aftermaths might be linked to the centrality of demographic / quantitative view, as well as to the rather generic operational definitions of the "shrinkage" issue (Bernt, 2015). As shown by Haase et al. (2016), housing vacancy is considered to be a "typical" aftermath of shrinkage, nevertheless it might have various explanations and relevance in each context undergoing demographic decline. Considering that the macro-scale dynamics of capitalist development impact on the socio-spatial forms and territorial divisions (Soja, 2000), the examination of shrinkage and growth beyond the dualisms of urban-suburban or beyond urban agglomerations, may reveal different facets of this transformation, and might explain the phenomena as a change in the pace or the socio-spatial organization of the urbanization process.

### **3.3 BUILT ENVIRONMENT & THE "NEIGHBORHOOD COMPONENT"**

Although the units of analysis or the spatial focus of each of the concepts may differ between cases and perspectives, the role of the physical settings in which these transformations occur and the centrality of the "neighborhood" in the analysis have been considerably debated. Analytical frameworks investigating structural social changes or city-wide dynamics, providing a systemic understanding of urban change, pay little attention to the effects that physical environment or neighborhoods' material structures may have on this process, while concepts with stronger links to the sociological perspectives consider that a neighborhood is the meeting point between macro-and micro-scale socio-economic dynamics and is, therefore, the key for understanding urban transformation.

In the case of filtering, albeit the quantitative focus and the non-spatial understanding of housing market mechanisms, some research takes into consideration the spatial aspects and blueprints of filtering processes (Baer, Williamson, 1988). More specifically, spatial aspects of vacancy and urban abandonment are addressed as neighborhood phenomena (Arsen, 1992). Research exploring the nexus between household mobility and neighborhood change, suggest that instead of dwellings' characteristics, demand is affected by the "quality" and structure of neighborhoods (Leven et al. 1976; Grigsby, 1963), while determining probabilities of filtering (Sommerville and Holmes, 2001). In the same vein, housing abandonment is interrelated with neighborhood socio-economic, ethnical composition and the pace of change, with factors such as racial composition, income levels, social status, levels of ethnical segregation being crucial for identifying probability of abandonment and explaining its clustering (Sternlieb et al., 1974). . Most of these contributions, based on urban ecological premises, give importance more to the ways in which the social and physical structure of neighborhoods affect household mobility and vacancy, and to a lesser extent on where filtering occurs and why, tracing, sometimes, questionable assumptions on households behaviors (i.e. the tendency of households to choose neighborhood in the basis of social or ethnical homogeneity).

In tenure residualization and low-demand research there is no agreement on links between physical characteristics and vacancy and the possible neighborhood effects in the process. Certain scholars suggest that poor dwelling conditions are the key for the depopulation of council estates, since they have direct impacts on the popularity of housing (Praag and Priemus, 1983 in van Beckhoven, et al. 2005). Other perspectives though, find no causal links between the two processes (Power and Mumford, 1999; Kennan, et al., 1999; Bramley and Pawson, 2001). The neighborhood component, albeit non-existent in studies of tenure residualization, is considered to be crucial for the explanation of low-demand dynamics, according to which there are explicit and sometimes causal links between housing demand, high vacancy levels and inner-city neighborhood abandonment (see Keenan et al. 1999 and Goodchild et al. 2000). Drawing on sociological traditions, explanations of changing housing demand suggest that housing "unpopularity" and the de-densification of neighborhoods of economic and social activities are interrelated and lead to the disruption of the community. The so called "vicious cycle of decline", manifested in neighborhoods, runs along with the growing households' dissatisfaction leading to neighborhood depopulation (Keenan et al., 1999; Bramley and Pawson, 2001).

In the literature on "shrinking cities", the role of the physical environment in the process of shrinkage is introduced only at the more specific analysis at the local scale. The aim is the examination of the physical manifestations of shrinkage (i.e. housing vacancy), yet no causalities between the process of shrinkage and typological/morphological characteristics of the housing stock, are found. Material aspects are used to explain the reason that in the context of generalized shrinkage, sub-areas of urban agglomeration follow different trajectories in the vacancy process (Hausermann and Glock, 2004). As mentioned, urban shrinkage analysis pays attention to the impacts of global and regional dynamics on urban agglomerations. Nonetheless, the "multi-dimensionality" proposed in theory is not always present in empirical research, since in-depth specific relations between global tendencies and neighborhood dynamics are not demonstrated (Bernt, 2015). The variegated forms of growth-shrinkage relations are examined either in terms of various urban forms (i.e. inner city or suburban locations) or in terms of hierarchies between cities (i.e. capital or second cities), or else in different contexts and rarely between neighborhoods. Empirical investigations, however, use the neighborhood space as an analytical tool in order to understand spatio-temporal juxtapositions of economic, demographic tendencies in situ (Haase et al, 2014). Nevertheless, the centrality of the neighborhood component in the urban shrinkage framework depends more on the context or the scale of analysis the former knowledge and less on disciplinary limitations (see Bentley et al., 2016 or Hackworth, 2015)

### **3.4 STRUCTURAL OR ACTOR-CENTERED DRIVERS OF CHANGE.**

Collective and individual actors' roles identified in three conceptual frameworks, depend primarily on the approach adopted. Although both structure and actor-centered approaches can be found in each conceptual framework, the over-representation of the one or the other approach relates to the disciplinary scope and the way in which the "problem" is defined.

The role of individual behaviors and choices are considered important for the explanation of housing vacancy in neighborhood studies with this perspective being adopted, albeit in different ways, by filtering

and low-demand hypothesis. Filtering models, echoing premises of rational choice theory, assume that aggregate social behavior results from the behavior of individual consumers seeking to maximize their utility or profit. In many filtering and vacancy chain models, individual household decisions to move in order to improve living standards, change "lifestyles" or to seek for "newness" and neighborhood "homogeneity" (Galster, 2001), are considered the driving force of the whole process, therefore the ones shaping residential mobility patterns. Distortions in the process of housing allocation, which may result in long-term vacancy and abandonment are usually explained by research as a result of (aggregated) landlords' decision to disinvest (Sternlieb et al., 1974), while in other cases the result of state intervention in the housing market (i.e. taxation, see White, 1971). Furthermore, collective private actors such as real estate agents or developers involved in housing supply are conceptualized as passive followers of housing demand (White, 1971), which in fact has been contested by studies about real estate speculation (Smith, 1979; Aalbers, 2006).

According to the changing demand hypothesis, housing vacancy is the result of rising "unpopularity" of specific areas or types of housing schemes. The debate focuses mostly on community responses to changes and on individual preferences, assuming that choices constitute the driver of neighborhood change. Individual actors' "aspirations", tastes, perceptions of specific "unpopular" areas are not embedded in a social/class/ethnic structures' or discourse analysis, which could provide more insights on the manner in which "positions", "behaviors" and symbolic meanings are shaped beyond consumer preferences. Similar and rather undermined simplifications can be found considering the links drawn between spatial concentration of actors with similar "situations" and problems, the rise of anti-social behavior and disruption of community bonds that foster "flight". Although the term "popularity" is strongly interconnected with individual "tastes" and preferences, some research attempt to explain relationships between individual and collective actors' practices, while combining aspects borrowed from institutional and sub-cultural approaches to explain neighborhood change (i.e. Power and Mumford, 1999). Nonetheless, both filtering and low demand hypothesis frame residential mobility in terms of "choice", thus failing to recognize that the spatial concentration of "poverty" and spatial "entrapment", as well as households' "exclusion", might be linked to the limited accessibility or feasible housing options and highlight structural forms of discrimination.

Although considerations regarding the changing institutional and policy roles have been relevant for the analysis of low-demand housing, stronger influences of political-economic perspectives can be found in "residualization" and to a certain extent in the literature on "urban shrinkage". A considerable amount of contributions on "tenure residualization" analyze links between changing social configurations and the housing system. More specifically, they investigate impacts of social, political-economic processes in labor relations, class formation, state policies, housing provision or consumption patterns. Tenure-class interdependencies have been widely debated, yet their mutual or causal relationships have not been proved (i.e. see Saunders, 1984). Some research suggest that tenure residualization reflects the impact economic restructuring policies had on working class fragmentation and political disempowerment (Forrest and Murie, 1984). Others suggest that the declining "successful" class-based housing struggles might highlight the "political decline of the working class" (Savage, 2000 as cited in Somerville, 2005 p.113). From a housing system-welfare state transformation perspective, scholars suggest that tenure residualization constitutes a result of state value-laden responses to the process of "maturation", and involves a set of specific policy decisions (i.e. state-controlled non-profit sector, minimization of state subsidies, promotion of homeownership) (Kemeny, 1995). Not-profit housing, limited to low-income households' needs, is isolated from competition with commercial housing sectors, thus the formation of two polarized and disconnected tenure systems limits the possibilities for dumping rents in both sectors (Kemeny, 1995; Lennarz, 2013). Yet other, more determining views consider housing a "capitalist commodity" and suggest that shifts from residualist to mass housing models and vice versa, correspond to "normal" and "abnormal" phases of capitalist development (Harloe, 1995), disregarding the role of individual actors in the process.

Theories supporting the "urban shrinkage" concept are also influenced by political-economic theorizations. In this perspective, shrinkage is seen as part of the structural change of capitalist development with specific socio-spatial configurations in built environment. Despite the analysis of the drivers of change in a global context, the path through which shrinkage is analyzed at the local scale remains unclear and rather general, since pre-existing local or regional asymmetries, institutional and legal changes, specific private interests in situ as well as the ideological framework in which policies leading to shrinkage have been justified, are in certain cases not extensively explained. Thus, a specific pattern of global tendencies (i.e.



industrial restructuring, suburbanization etc. ) seem to be translated in the same way in each case (i.e. see Weichmann and Pallagst, 2012). These simplifications and argumentation gaps might be rather symptomatic of the attempt to fit all "urban shrinkage" specificities under a unitary framework that explains a "global phenomenon" (Pallagst et al., 2014).

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of the concepts reveals that housing vacancy might originate from rather different urban processes and be explored by various disciplinary perspectives. Some of the concepts analyzed share common points and influences, while having important differences. The critical review of certain important aspects such as spatial, scalar and actors' considerations revealed the over-sighted factors, the assumptions and the contradictions between the concepts. In this sense, it demonstrated that disciplinary lenses might limit the scope of explanations of rather complex phenomena, while highlighting on the other hand that similar overall tendencies might not impact in the same way each context.

The issue of vacancy seen as a spatial manifestation of economic, demographic and social change, is a measurable indicator of change in "taste" and "preference", a result of institutional failure, a natural market process, a societal necessity or even a driver of further "decline". Understood as problematic or as natural, housing vacancy is seen as the result of a dynamic and sometimes contradictory relation between fixity and motion (Harvey, 2014), places and flows (Castells, 1996), indivisibility of supply and heterogeneity of demand (Arnott, 1989), place-bounded meanings and individual aspirations. In this regard, it is considered to be framed through the interaction between social practices and material settings. However, the review revealed that when social or spatial components or their interrelations are missing, explanations seem to be shaped in a "void" (Madanipour, 2013). This is quite obvious for instance in the ways in which residential preferences is conceptualized in some of the theories. Choice seen solely as driver of residential and neighborhood change without reflections on the its relation to existing resources or on the contextual or societal conditions under which these preferences emerged, explanations tend to be incomplete.

Regarding the scalar interrelations, apart from filtering models, all concepts explore the causes and consequences of vacancy in different spatial scales without clear links between spatial, economic and political scales at all times. Considering the way in which research on urban shrinkage, and to a lesser extent on residualization, have analyzed the impact of globalization on local physical "decline", it could be argued that observations at a global scale might indicate tendencies, yet cannot explain in itself the conditions and processes under which capital and people fled from a specific urban context. At the same time, global restructuring cannot be translated in the same way in Detroit and Liverpool, although both cities have been affected by deindustrialization processes. Instead, the examination of these global dynamics at a local scale can only be meaningful when contextual specificities and historical developments are embedded in the analysis.

With regard to the methodological aspects of scale selection, each research prioritizes one spatial unit and timeframe, in which the phenomena are observed, measured and explained. A number of empirical studies, irrespective of the different disciplinary focus, examine housing vacancy at the scale of neighborhood. Neighborhood as a socio-spatial entity, albeit the ambivalence and diversity of definitions (see. Galster, 2012), and its changing meanings still comprises some of its "traditional functions" and constitutes a site in which social interaction, routines, everyday life practices and experiences can be studied (Forrest, 2004). However, the scale of the investigation depends not only on where the phenomena occur, but on the type of interrelations researched each time, as well. Therefore, even if we consider housing vacancy a neighborhood phenomenon, a multi-scale testing might be necessary in order to understand whether observations and conclusions are consistent when examined at different scales (Andersson and Musterd, 2010, p. 25).

Explanations of housing vacancy mechanisms prioritize economic over other kind of drivers of urban transformation. Either as the output of flawless markets' and consumers' logic or as an aftermath of capitalism inner logic, vacancy is often explained on the basis of economic rationality of the markets, state or individuals. This perspective is not problematic per se, but it might be misleading especially when individual and collective actors' roles and agency is seen as a minor aspect of the urban transformation process. Vacancy seen as part of filtering is explained as a "natural" housing market process and as

process detached from the agents and structures producing it. In this respect, vacancy is considered problematic only when it leads to extensive property devaluation with impacts for owners and markets. Similarly, when vacancy is explained as low-demand, it is more likely associated with "supply-demand" schemes in housing economics, than with the complex relations between poverty, space and place, which it actually refers to. In this perspective, vacancy takes a neutral meaning and housing is perceived as a consumption-driven process. Vacancy seen as part of tenure residualization process, is explained in wider economic terms with the difference that its implications are considered to be problematic. The "problem" is confined to a specific tenure and a segment of the working class and therefore the housing process is explained as the struggle between capitalist abstract logics and aggregated and predetermined social categories. Shrinkage, although potentially referring to a structural urban change in the context of global capitalism, is a relatively "neutral" term (Oswald, 2005). However, when shrinkage is rather explained as a (new) normality of urbanization under global capitalism, growth-shrinkage relations seen as "natural" and in this sense they are depoliticized.

The critical analysis of three commonly used concepts is an attempt to demonstrate the great variety of approaches that can contribute to the understanding of the drivers and the possible reasons behind housing vacancy phenomena. Deciphering the disciplinary origins of each concept is important in order to understand whether an issue, appearing similar at first glance, is actually referring to similar processes and whether it has similar meanings. Furthermore, looking at the concepts' disciplinary premises, in a dialectic manner the conceptual gaps, their similarities as well as limitations are better revealed. This might need be faced when trying to work on disciplinary boundaries, and to combine in a sophisticated way ideas and methodologies. Lastly, the various meanings and terminologies might be relevant for conceptualizing the overall patterns in each case, while potentially having several implications on the way the specific phenomenon is problematized, whom does it affect and in what way it is going to be addressed by policies.

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## ID 1432 | THE REUSE OF ABANDONED PUBLIC BUILDINGS: AN ANSWER TO HOUSING CRISES? AN INVESTIGATION ON THE CITY OF ROME

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**ABSTRACT:** The recent financial crisis had a strong impact on housing affordability. To the European Observatory on Homelessness the number of homeless has increased in all countries along the last ten years (Housing Europe, 2015). The current Europe refugee crisis is feeding this population, making proper policies more complex and urgent. Regrettably, the public support for housing in EU has decreased along the last ten years. In metropolitan areas’ peripheries, where there is a default in infrastructures and services, new residential buildings have been built. The Italian capital city well epitomizes this national framework. Between 2012 and 2015 Rome has consumed 160 ha. In this context, squatting has been often the only one solution for people who is waiting for a public house. Along these years, the movements for the housing right supported many people to have a quality dwelling. The research explored the re-use of public abandoned buildings as a possible solution for housing crisis investigating the case of the so called “Casilino 900” camp and of Roma people living there. Can the self-help housing for abandoned public buildings respond to the increasing housing demand? Employing municipal data on state-owned buildings, the paper proposes in its results a housing capacity map. The map shows the empty public properties in the city of Rome and identifies for each building its housing capacity. In the conclusions, considerations from the case study are drawn considering the broader national situation on re-use for housing of abandoned public space.

**KEYWORD:** housing crisis, public building, re-use, Roma population

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### 1.1 HOUSING POLICY AND HOUSING DEMAND IN ITALY: FOCUS ON THE CAPITAL CITY

In Italy 650.000 families are waiting for public housing (Federcasa, 2015). According to governmental data, eviction notices increased 48% between 2008 and 2015. The public housing stock (ex IACP) was partially sold or need to be refurbished. A critical lack of affordable houses does exist. Yet, due to the financial crisis, they are generally empty. Regrettably, the public support for housing in EU has decreased along the last ten years, from 1.1% of GDP in 2003 to 0.8% in 2012 (Pittini, Ghekière, Dijol, & Kiss, 2015). In Italy,