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Size and the good life: Tiny houses, social housing and the role of social imaginaries

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Among the key figures of global housing inequality is the average living space per person. Thus, it comes as no surprise that during the past decade, tiny houses have become an attractive option for some who want to set an example in an affluent society of the global north: free-standing, two-storey building with a total floor space of less than 30 m². At the same time, in many countries of the global south, people are confined to a similar floorspace – not out of choice but out of need. In bringing together these two very different contexts, I am arguing that from a perspective of capability justice, the concept of home is more than just the need for shelter. In order to enable people to participate in societal life, housing solutions require processes of urban transformation, as well as careful planning and design for social housing. Even in a situation of hardship, living in a small-scale house can be a step towards a realisation of concepts of the good life within the given circumstances. Taking up Charles Taylor's concept of social imaginaries and presenting architectural examples from the Mexican context (Apan housing laboratory and work done by Tatiana Bilbao), I am drawing some unlikely parallels between the effects that tiny houses, on the one hand, and suggestions for social housing, on the other hand, might have within their respective societies. In this, the concept of social imaginaries helps to see parallels between architecture as a medium of the social and the role of religion.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article argues that in questions of housing justice, architectural solutions can fruitfully supplement considerations of justice.

Keywords: tiny houses; social housing; social imaginaries; capability justice; urban transformation; utopia.

Introduction

Justice

For approaching the topic of housing from a perspective of justice, as this Issue suggests, at least two different concepts of justice can be considered: distributional justice, on the one hand, which aims for an equal distribution of available living space within a society, and capability justice, on the other hand, which focusses on enabling everyone to participate in societal life.

The relevance of distributional justice is obvious. There are massive global inequalities connected with housing, not only in energy and water consumption per capita but also in floor space per capita. In Germany, in 2015, the average living space was 47 m² per person, while in Brazil, it was 33 m² and in Kosovo, 23 m². Even in well-to-do societies, this creates economical, social and ecological problems. Economically, with the extreme rise in prices in the housing markets of many Western societies, fewer and fewer people can afford the housing standard they have become accustomed to. Socially, as societies age, an increasing number of elderly individuals remain alone in the large homes they once shared with their families, leading to relatively affluent yet socially isolated lives. Ecologically, a spacious, free-standing single-family home is problematic because of high thermal emissions.

Seen in this light, it comes as no surprise that during the past decade, in Western societies, tiny houses have become an attractive option for some who want to actively reduce their needs, minimise their ecological footprint and thus set an example in an affluent society. In the section 'Global North: The tiny house movement', I shall explain this concept and give reasons for its present popularity.

Besides aspects of distribution, a concept of justice also has to address the ability to strive towards and realise an idea of the good life. Therefore, in philosophical debates over the past decades, the

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concept of justice has been widened beyond the question of the distribution of goods. *Capability justice*, as American philosopher Martha Nussbaum understands it, includes certain basic capabilities which, when realised, enable a person to participate in societal life in a full sense, even under the constraints of limited economical means. These basic capabilities include 'senses, imagination, and thought', as well as 'practical reason' (Nussbaum 2020). Combined, these two comprise the ability to express and realise ideas about leading one's life, both in the sense of structuring one's life in its immediate surroundings and in the sense of planning for one's personal future. For both aspects, *home* – the place where someone lives and their immediate built environment – is of crucial importance.

Nussbaum does not specify a minimal threshold above which one can speak of a good life. Rather, the concept is meant as a qualitative guideline for assessing what is needed to enable an individual to lead a good life. Subsequently, the concept has become very influential in welfare politics and development politics.

Seen in the light of a capability justice approach, the concept of home is more than just the fulfilment of the need for shelter. It is the prerequisite and the basis for participation in public life, in private and in professional contexts alike. The home is the centre of activity and of structuring one's life while contributing to the structure of life in the neighbourhood and in the city. Therefore, a house should enable its inhabitants to participate in these fundamental aspects of individual and communal life. This is why, in many cases, participatory justice as an aspect of capability justice requires processes of urban transformation. Furthermore, a house should convey self-reliance and a sense of agency. This calls for careful planning and design. In the 'Global South: Apan Housing Laboratory and the work of Tatiana Bilbao' section, I will present examples from the Mexican context that shows that even in a situation of emergency and distress, constructing and living in a small-scale house need not just mean to put up with limitations but can be a step towards a realisation of concepts of the good life within the given circumstances.

The two very different contexts of the tiny house movement in Western societies and the social housing crisis in Mexico can, however, be seen under a common perspective: the concept of social imaginaries and their potential for societal transformation, as advanced by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. This concept shall be explored in 'Taylor's concept of social imaginaries' section, together with the role religion might play here ('The role of religion' section), and the way architecture, too, can be seen as an expression of such imaginaries ('Architecture as a medium of the social' section). The final section points out some of the similarities that can be brought out in this perspective ('Tiny homes and social housing – Similarities despite considerable differences' section) before concluding with reflections on the role of architecture and religion in processes of urban transformation ('Architecture and religion' section).

Global North: The tiny house movement[1]

In past years, the tiny house movement, which started in the United States of America, has been gaining popularity in Western societies. Typically, tiny houses are free standing, often timbered two-storey building with a total floor space of less than 30 m². According to proponents, they provide an affordable, environment-friendly alternative in an overheated housing market. While until recently it was illegal to live in such homes in Germany (Maile 2020:90f), local authorities have reacted and since 2019 legalised tiny house settlements have come into existence.

What is it that motivates an increasing number of mostly young, often relatively well-to-do people to confine themselves to a floor space, which is just a little more than that of a student's average home? A qualitative empirical study conducted in 2018 and 2019 indicates that, besides economical and ecological reasons (Maile 2020:86f), such as coping with extremely high rents in urban areas and reducing one's spatial footprint (Ford & Gomez-Lanier 2017:394), the current boom of this form of living is part of a lifestyle phenomenon. For many of those interviewed, the idea of a tiny house seems to incorporate much of what is desirable in their present phase of life. Often, the concept is connected with simplifying one's life and with the romantic imagery of the solitude and sobriety of life in the woods, as Thoreau's Walden suggested as early as 1854. Moreover, there is an aesthetic aspect to it (Boris quoted Maile 2020 *author's translation*):

> 'The tiny house we build is aesthetically very appealing, and this was one of our highest goals, that we have an aesthetically appealing tiny house, […] attractive to the eye. (p. 83)

As one can see from many pictures in which tiny house owners present themselves, the perceived beauty of a tiny house is normally connected with the elegance of the solutions found to reduce space – the drawers under the staircase or the workspace doubling as a kitchen table (Maile 2020:71–73). Materials and the surroundings also play a role in the perception of such a home as being harmonious and inherently consistent.

Besides, such a house has the connotation of property (Maile 2020:81f) while remaining flexible, which is typical for the 'digital Bohème' (Maile 2020:86). Last but not least, and despite the attractiveness of solitude, when living is elementarised to the basic needs, the social aspect comes in, too. A tiny house settlement offers a community of like-minded people (Maile 2020:88) without too much commitment – an aspect that is typical for 'temporary community-formation' (Prisching 2009:35).

To sum up, tiny house inhabitants choose this form of living not only out of economical necessity or ecological bad conscience but also are intrinsically motivated (Maile 2020:89). At first sight, this seems to be a win-win situation:

1.Parts of this section and of section 5.1 have been published in German in Wabel (2024).

By choosing an economically, ecologically and socially conscious way of life, people realise their idea of a good life.

For others, however, the tiny house movement is hypocritical. Many tiny houses do not fulfil energy efficiency standards. Material, energy and space consumption are higher in relation to living space than in apartment blocks – tiny houses are therefore not sustainable per se. In addition, according to critics, the concept presupposes the abundance it is supposed to leave behind, for example, infrastructure or job security, and only miniaturises existing economic and class privileges, instead of challenging them (Anson 2019:74).

Tiny house tenants admit to their privileged situation (Van Bo quoted in Maile 2020):

> All this sustainability issue, for me, is a privilege-discussion. I mean, privileged people like me for example can afford it […], but the people I work with […] can't afford such a discussion, because they just don't have the money or the time. (p. 79)

Likewise, some tiny house owners are aware of the danger of just following minimalism as a lifestyle concept (Leonardo, quoted in Maile 2020):

> It's the thing that I really don't want to be a Minimalist. (p. 100f)

Moreover, biographically, living in a tiny house might be a temporary phenomenon. Even those who do admit that they would stop living there once they have kids (Maile 2020:84).

Sometimes, a tension between self-perception and reality can be observed: Tiny house tenants tend to regard themselves as (upper) middle class (*Mittelschicht*), but in fact, it is really the avant-garde that is influenced by their example (Van Bo quoted in Maile 2020):

> [*T*]he middle class, normally academics, managers of some sort, state employees and so on, intellectuals, artists […] – *they* build Tiny Houses. (p. 77)

It is not necessarily a disadvantage to address the avant-garde, because they might become change agents – but it is important to be aware of such limitations. This form of housing is not primarily intended as a design for a comprehensive solution to a problem. It is an expression of ideas for a good life and at the same time a realisation of an impulse for social change (Leonardo, quoted in Maile 2020):

> I don't believe in Tiny Houses as a permanent location for a place because it doesn't make sense […], but it is very good to show that we could completely rethink the way of living and then to open the discussion. (p. 95)

The Tiny House movement thus highlights an important driving force behind social change: what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls 'social imaginaries' – implicit images that form the basis of a community and that a community creates of itself. The 'Social imaginaries as a potential change agent' section will briefly explain this concept, as, to my mind, it offers a common perspective under which both the tiny house movement and recent approaches to the problem of social housing, despite considerable differences between the two, can be compared.

Social imaginaries as a potential change agent

Taylor's concept of social imaginaries

Charles Taylor coined the concept of social imaginaries to describe and analyse how, in the course of history, change in a society could take place. I understand his concept in a twofold direction: *implicit* images lying at the foundation of a group or society – and *explicit* images that a group or society sketches when they ask: How do we want to live? Three characteristics of such imaginaries shall be hinted at:

Taylor understands social imaginaries as an *unspoken ensemble of shared ideas and values* that enable living together. They comprise (Taylor 2007):

> […] [*T*]he ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p. 23)

Social imaginaries imply an ideal of flourishing social life, which in turn is embedded in a (often unthematic) metaphysical, religious or general ideological horizon (Taylor 2007):

> Implicit in [the] understanding of the norms [which underlie a certain common practice] is the ability to recognize ideal cases […] And beyond the ideal stands some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense. (p. 24f)

Social imaginaries are therefore not identical with certain ideological convictions but are related to them.

It is via social imaginaries that we can explain how academic knowledge and evidence-based political convictions find their way *from the sphere of experts into the broader population* (Taylor 2007):

> It often happens that what start off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society. (p. 24)

Finally, social imagery can be seen as a *mediator between theory and lived practice* (Taylor 2007).

> [Theories] gradually infiltrate[] and transform[] our social imaginary. In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices […]. But this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In coming to make sense of the action the theory is […] schematized in the dense sphere of common practice. (pp. 28–30)

Theoretical knowledge alone is not sufficient to set free the energy needed for change in society. Rather, knowledge stands in need of a reservoir of images of life in society – a reservoir that fuels engagement for change (Forster & Wabel

2019:213). Therefore, social imaginaries in Charles Taylor's sense are the anthropological basis for changing ways of life.

The role of religion

Social imaginaries are an often neglected factor for processes of societal transformation, be it processes of transformation regarding the housing problem in cities or transformation with regard to sustainability: '[T]ransformative research […] has to take the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of […] [the] framing [of the problems] into account'. Hence, its results 'also change discourses, narratives and social imaginaries about the problems that were the starting point' (Meisch 2019:15). Granted, for bringing about a change, giving economic incentives, setting the right political parameters and providing a stable environment are indispensable. But it is also crucial to present images of positive identification, which are connected with a change in the self-understanding of individuals and of society (Forster & Wabel 2019:213), in order to motivate individuals and groups to work towards 're-imagining and re-creating/co-constructing urban villages that are hospitable […], caring […], and just' (De Beer 2024:301).

How could religion(s) contribute to encouraging such positive images? Metaphors of dwelling, the city and the garden in the Jewish-Christian tradition find their place in the history of salvation and give voice to eschatological hope. This applies to the proverbial Garden of Eden (Gn 2:15) but also to metaphors of growth and flourishing, which Deutero-Isaiah uses to depict the return of the people from exile (Is 41:18–20; 43:19f; 44:3–4; 45:8; 49:10–11; 55:13) or the plant metaphor for a blessed life in the face of God (Ps 1:3; Is 58:11). Images taken from the built environment, such as the dwelling places of the Lord (Ps 46:5; 84:2; Jn 14:2) or the heavenly Jerusalem (Rv 21:2–4), are metaphors of eschatological longing. In many cases, they stem from historical, negative experiences of catastrophe and homelessness (dwelling place: Jr 9:18; Lm 2:2; city: Mk 13:1–2 parr). Danger and devastation as well as hoped-for stability and growth are reflected here as experiences of human life that are interpreted against the horizon of God's actions and his continuing creation.

Of course, such vast imagery goes beyond the scope of day-to-day decisions about social housing and the transformation of city life. But such background narratives, images and symbols are not unrelated to social imaginaries in Taylor's sense. In fact, both can complement each other. Social imaginaries present a middle ground between utopia and realisation, between comprehensive worldviews, on the one side, and concrete contexts of action, on the other side. They, too, give voice to visions of the good life – and there are aspects of such visions that show a close connection to religious ways of understanding one's life. Finally, in the complex interplay of externalisation, objectification and internalisation described by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann 1966), material objectifications play a decisive role in creating a new reality (Steets 2015:245). Seen in this light, architectural projects, too, can serve as best practice examples and as paradigmatic cases for ideas about the good life. With this, we turn to an aspect of architecture that goes beyond mere functionality.

Architecture as a medium of the social

If we regard architecture under the aspect of social imaginaries, it may become an expression of the good life. For buildings themselves are images that reveal something about our understanding of life in society. What we build, whether privately or publicly, is (also) an expression of our wishes, our ideas our self-understanding. From the perspective of the sociology of architecture, the buildings a society constructs are emblematic of the way a society wants to see itself. As Heike Delitz, a German architect, philosopher and sociologist, puts it: Architecture is 'a medium of the social' (Delitz 2005, 2010). It is not only an expression of what is valid in a society, but it can also contribute to changing deeply held assumptions.

Seen in this light, constructing an edifice that is as small as a tiny house can become an image for the transformation of society (Boris quoted in Maile 2020):

> I realised that with a tiny house you can communicate a lot of things that […] are very relevant these days […], it is sustainable, it is ecological, it is mobile. (p. 86)

If we take this emblematic effect into account, the concept of tiny houses acquires a much larger scope. Tiny houses are instantiations of social imaginaries in the threefold sense just mentioned: They give expression to shared but as yet unspoken ideas and values. Moreover, their popularity might be part of a trickle-down effect from the sphere of experts (or, the avant-garde) into the broader population. And finally, they can serve as a mediator between theory and practice: A tiny house is not just a small-scale building, it also brings concepts of self-limitation, spatial planning and justice, into a visible, tangible, inhabitable form. Thus, rather than being an example of self-restraint, the need for transformation of city life opens up a 'space of possibilities' (eds. Kagan, Kirchberg & Weisenfeld-Schenk 2019).

In the 'Global South: Apan Housing Laboratory and the work of Tatiana Bilbao' section, I am turning to a very different context: the social housing crisis in Mexico and the steps towards dealing with it. I will argue that here, too, architectural images of the good life and the imaginaries and imaginations connected with them for processes of urban transformation are important.

Global South: Apan Housing Laboratory and the work of Tatiana Bilbao

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider a serious objection, which could be raised at this point. There is a sense in which the thoughts I advanced so far are deeply ambivalent. The implicit appeals to reduction connected

with a tiny house must seem cynical to those who could never afford anything close to the average living space of Western European industrial societies. There is a big difference between living in a tiny house out of choice, in a highly privileged society or out of need. The aesthetic considerations and questions of lifestyle that I have addressed might sound rather petty for someone from the global south.

There is, however, a sense in which some of the aspects connected to the gaining popularity of tiny houses – reduction connected with careful planning, internal consistency, flexibility and a sense of possibility – become relevant also in the context of social housing projects.

Apan Housing Laboratory – Regionally sensitive solutions for a nationwide problem

In Mexico, the right to housing is enshrined in the constitution. The government therefore repeatedly launches huge housing construction programmes that churn out millions of houses typically offering 43 square metres of space, without any input from architects, resulting in dull, standardised grids and leading to dwelling abandonment, spatial fragmentation and social segregation (Bilbao & Ghosh 2022:23f; Corona 2018:104). Sometimes such settlements do not even provide street lamps, parks, playgrounds or access to public transportation (Meyer 2019).

In an attempt to improve this situation, in 2015 the Centre for Research for Sustainable Development within the Mexican *Institute for the National Fund for Workers* (INFONAVIT) solicited new approaches to affordable housing. Eighty-four architecture studios were asked to design prototypes for low-income houses, which were to be optimised for the different climate zones across the country, make use of the existing infrastructure and contribute to integrated urban landscapes as well as to developing a local identity (Corona 2018:105). These were narrowed down to 32, which were built in a campus of prototypes in Apan (Hidalgo), about 80 km northeast of Mexico City. The houses are flanked by an education centre that informs about the project (Gerfen 2019).

Even though the campus is built for demonstrational and educational purposes only and is therefore not inhabited, it brings out a number of features for successful social housing projects:

- The entire project was spurred by research identifying the basic needs of people living in different towns across the country. The sensitivity towards different climatic, social and cultural contexts contradicted the idea of replicating one housing concept for the entire country (Gerfen 2019).
- Despite all the diversity in design, most architects worked with plain materials, bringing out the vernacular traditions of building in the country (Kühnlein 2020).
- Many architects followed an add-on concept, to potentially multiply existing houses (Gerfen 2019).
- The space between the buildings and the way these open up to the environment contributes to the urban tissue in which the houses are placed (Corona 2018:105). This is facilitated by the arrangement of the total plot: It follows the idea of a garden with footpaths rather than a traditional city plan, with private and public areas intersecting (Gerfen 2019; Kühnlein 2020). Even though this is, of course, a result of the artificial array in an Expo-like setting, the arrangement of houses could equally well attach to existing houses, thereby enhancing the social aspects of housing.
- Functionality and beauty can go hand in hand when mere 'niceness' is omitted (Kühnlein 2020).

The Apan campus explicitly aims at passers-by and experts alike and encourages them to visualise alternatives to the status quo. It is a space of possibility in that it helps to 'see that it is possible to do things differently' (Gerfen 2019). As one of the planners says: 'The whole point of this plan is trying to present alternatives – trying to think about other possibilities for houses in general. It's very optimistic and utopian at some level' (Gerfen 2019). In this, the project mirrors what the 'The role of religion' section pointed out for the interrelation between social imaginaries and architecture: It is important to see an idea realised and to be able to walk into it, in order for it to catch on and eventually transform the way people approach social housing projects. Moreover, the Apan project is an example of the trickle-down effect of social imaginaries: The experts – architects, urban planners and project developers – made the designs available for free download in order to help disseminate the ideas behind them (Gerfen 2019).

Tatiana Bilbao

Mexican architect Tatiana Bilbao was among those whose entries were selected to contribute to the Apan campus. She placed four smaller pavilions in the form of windmill sails around a courtyard, each of which corresponds to one specific element of living in a home: living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom.[2] This leads to a number of consequences:

- The design counteracts the traditional image of a house – a boxy volume with a roof on top. Instead, the traditional idea of home is reduced and elementarised 'into its basic elements – bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and garden/terrace' (Bilbao & Ghosh 2022:24). By reimagining the traditional spaces in a house, Bilbao leaves behind the well-intended attempts to serve the basic necessities by putting up a minimum set of rules, which are potentially counterproductive. Following the assignments for minimum areas for the kitchen, bathroom or bedroom often leads to identical solutions.
- Thus, the standardised monotony of endless rows of single-family homes, skirting the edges of Mexican cities, and the corresponding, socially isolated ways of

2.See https://tatianabilbao.com/projects/apan-housing-ocoyoacac-minimum-housing (last accessed June 15th, 2024) – the aerial views among the images presented there.

inhabiting such homes are broken up.[3] The hope is that by 'reorienting the house through the lens of use, need, and desire', specificity and cultural diversity might be reached (Bilbao & Ghosh 2022:24).

- In addition to the central courtyard, the set is delimited with outer courtyards, some of which function as an element of interaction with adjacent homes[4], thereby contributing to social exchange and, thus, to the urban tissue within the settlement.
- With the courtyard, an optically widening effect is achieved. Moreover, the courtyard offers additional living space that can be accessed from the surrounding rooms.
- In addition, the courtyard presents an outdoor space, which Bilbao deems essential for a livable home. As one of the basic elements of living in a home, a garden or terrace are places of withdrawal, interaction, invitation to nature and 'reconnect[ing] our bodies to space' (Bilbao & Ghosh 2022:29f).
- Finally, this courtyard is intended as the future area of growth. Money permitting, it can be covered and transformed into an additional room. Of course, then the central outdoor space would be lost, but the smaller adjacent courtyards remain, opening up to the surrounding plots – which might offer a possibility of fusing several of those to create a bigger, shared space (Hayden 1980:184).

Other social housing projects of Bilbao's, too, show that housing solutions that have to make do with an extremely low budget profit from considerations of people's actual use of the living space. In a reconstruction programme after a tornado in Acuña (Coahuila), southwest of the border with Texas in 2015, Bilbao demonstrated how taking into account the basic needs not only for shelter but also for private space and for aesthetic appeal can improve the results decisively. By rearranging the rooms, she was able to create more private space and a first-floor patio. Similarly to the Apan project, the patio can be transformed into an additional room later on, without the house looking unfinished as is – an aesthetic feature that was deemed important by many interviewees during the planning process (Arámburo 2016).

In both projects, Bilbao makes use of a modular concept that allows for expansions and alterations, as well as for the possibility of rolling out the concept nationwide, with modifications according to the country's different climate zones.[5] However, this adaptability also aroused criticism, because it runs counter to the original bidding that asked for specific solutions for the different regions of the country (Corona 2018:110f).

In other respects, too, Bilbao's social housing projects are received in an ambivalent way. While some critics imply that the acclaim for her social housing solutions is because of earlier, big and expensive projects, others call her a Robin Hood architect for precisely the same reason: She takes from the rich (i.e. from those commissioning prestigious projects) and gives to the poor (Meyer 2019). In any case, both criticisms show that there is a distinctive architectural handwriting, so to speak, which characterises her buildings and catches the attention of experts.

The fact that Bilbao's simplistic style is so attractive to the Western eye is interesting in the context of this article, for it points to aspects of how human beings envisage their way of dwelling and living, regardless of their economic means. This is underlined by a further example. In a 2022 exhibition in the *Danish Architectural Center* in Copenhagen titled *A Room of One's Own*, Bilbao created circular brick structures with a diameter between 1 m, 5 m and 4 m, some of which were half-transparent with spaces between the bricks, others secluded against the environment. According to her (Carlson 2022):

> [*I*]t's a room of one's own, but none of us have the same concept of intimacy and our structure aims to exist in a way where spaces can be intimate even if they are open, or social even if they are closed. (n.p.)

Consequently, she calls the structures, which she sees as a space for reflection, *A Room, You and Us*,[6] thereby pointing to the interrelation of private space and shared social space that also proved to be important in the Apan campus. In affluent societies as well as among those who live in poverty, there is a need 'for anyone to define their own definition of self-care, of intimacy, of socialness and of sharing'. As the 'Global North: The tiny house movement' section on how inhabitants perceive themselves in relation to their tiny homes has shown, the space to withdraw *and* to reach out to others is elementarised in such a house, as is the case with *A Room, You and Us*.

There are other architects, too, whose work shows that solutions for form and function that are simple, but not dull, resonate with Western experts, precisely when it is derived from, or connected with, housing for people in need. Probably the best-known example is the architect Debedo Francis Kéré. Born and raised in Burkina Faso, he studied and pursued his professional career in Germany. Despite huge success in the Western world (among others, the Aga Khan Award in 2004 and the Pritzker Prize in 2022), Kéré keeps coming back to his home country and village to contribute to better living conditions there. His opera village, commissioned by the late German stage and film director Christoph Schlingensief, is a famous example. Kérés work has been termed 'radically simple' (eds. Lepik, Beygo & Kéré 2016). The term conveys more than just acting out of necessity, it might also be more than just a stylish feature, which Western spectators happen to like. When simplicity is thought through and realised in a way that is more than just providing shelter, it might be a distinguishing feature between social housing projects that will look run down in a few years and such that prove to be sustainable – not only economically and, hopefully, ecologically, but also socially and culturally.

3.See https://afasiaarchzine.com/2020/01/tatiana-bilbao-27/, last accessed June 4th, 2024).

4.See https://tatianabilbao.com/projects/apan-housing-ocoyoacac-minimum-housing (last accessed June 15th, 2024) – the information text.

5.See https://tatianabilbao.com/projects/housing (last accessed June 15th, 2024).

6.See https://tatianabilbao.com/projects/a-room-you-and-me (last accessed June 15th, 2024).

Housing, the good life and the role of religion

The differences between tiny houses in the global north and social housing in the global south are, of course, considerable – the most important being that people choose to live in the former, while they have no choice but to live in the latter. Still, despite all differences in their respective social, economical and regional setting, some similarities between tiny houses and small-scale homes for social housing can be pointed out – provided that the latter are thoughtfully designed, like those we encountered in the Apan campus and in Bilbao's designs. These similarities go beyond mere functionality and have to do with the ideas and images for a good life connected with them.

Tiny homes and social housing – Similarities despite considerable differences

Admittedly, one methodological caveat is in place here. While the perspective of tiny house owners enters into the reflections of this article in 'Global North: The tiny house movement' section via a qualitative-empirical study (Maile 2020), the analysis of the social housing projects in 'Global South: Apan Housing Laboratory and the work of Tatiana Bilbao' section rests on the data provided by architects and critics. However, because empirical research did enter into both the planning process for the Apan Housing Laboratory (Gerfen 2019) and Bilbao's designs (Arámburo 2016), we can assume that the perspective of the inhabitants is present at least in an indirect way. With attention to these differences in mind, we can now turn to some observations on similarities:

- Just as tiny houses, for their inhabitants, are not just economical dwellings, but an expression of how life could be, social housing projects, when they are well done, present the house, despite all reduction, as a chance for the individual and for society, and not just as a necessarily evil.
- This is so if and when the fulfilment of the basic needs connected to housing is not seen as a minimum standard to which the inhabitant is reduced and which would unfailingly connote deficiency. Rather, as we have seen in the case of Bilbao's design, basic needs can be regarded as a starting point around which the entire concept of the house is developed.
- By the same token, both cases contribute to a de-colonisation of city planning (De Beer 2024:9). Starting from the needs of the individuals defies top-down processes leading to grids of standardised houses and streets. Seen in this light, both the tiny house movement and the initiatives to rethink social housing can contribute to urban transformation.
- Both tiny house constructions and good designs for social housing combine two elements that contribute to the contentment of those who live there. In the process of planning a tiny house as well as when living in a social house with an area for future growth, there is an opportunity to shape the built environment of one's life by arranging or re-arranging the design. Even though, in both cases, the architect's expert knowledge is the starting point, there is an element of co-constructing on the inhabitants' side. Not only is this participatory element important for the concept of capability justice, but re-imagination and co-construction are also important for processes of urban transformation (De Beer 2024:74f, 60f).
- Finally, in both cases, two important ways of opening up play a role. The constructions do not aim at withdrawal but are oriented towards the immediate neighbourhood, both in terms of social cooperation and connectedness to nature. Both a tiny house village and the Apan campus are interspersed with green and provide social interspace. Thus, in their avant-garde function, they present two equally important aspects of urban transformation.

Seen together, these aspects of similarity draw attention to the fact that even in striving for reduction and simplification, good architectural solutions, beyond their functional aspects, point to a dimension of how the good life is visualised within a society. This, finally, brings us back to the role of religion in processes of societal transformation.

Architecture and religion

Of course, the appreciation of good architectural solutions to diminish the effects of spatial injustice and the role of architecture for social imaginaries in society are not meant to say that architects are the prophets of a time to come. This would mean overburdening their work and to diminish the role of religion. But the fact that a building can be a material embodiment of an idea can certainly influence the self-perception of those who live there. One of the tiny house tenants describes the effects life in a tiny house has on him (Leonardo quoted in Maile 2020):

> You appreciate the value of something more that's really needed […]. So, I think it's the house itself – in my case – which helps you to be this way. (p. 103)

For Leonardo, the house becomes a symbol of the way he wants to live, and it enables him to judge what really matters in life. One is tempted to think of Jesus' parables of the treasure hidden in the field (Mt 13:44) or the pearl of great price (Mt 13:45f). Maybe one could assume that in the case of social housing, too, living in a building that, despite its affordability, conveys aspects of the good life, has an effect of the way its inhabitants see themselves and of the choices they take for their opportunities in life.

Having said that, it has to be kept in mind that Christian images of flourishing do not necessarily coincide with social imaginaries in a religiously plural society. This difference, however, can create a fruitful tension. It can help to remind us that even the satisfaction resulting from successful building projects must not result in complacency. Jerusalem – in post-exilic times as well as in the Book of Revelation – is a place of longing. Its imagery is counterfactual to the experience of the preliminarity of all earthly settlements. Likewise, despite the feeling of being at home that is connected with religious belonging, imageries of urban

construction in the Jewish-Christian tradition have always also been a source of innovation, hope and celestial completion.

Suggesting a lifestyle that aims at reducing land consumption, as some tiny house tenants do, and building homes that, despite very limited economic means, carry an idea of how people actually want to live, as the Apan housing project and some of Tatiana Bilbao's architecture do, may be (small) steps towards alleviating the effects of housing injustice. Regarding these initiatives in the eschatological horizon provided by the biblical metaphors of growth, building and dwelling can, however, bring out the fruitful tension between biblical imagery and social imaginaries in our strife for spatial justice: We may act on the motivational power of social imaginaries but should also be aware that the outcome will always be far from completion.

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