

Bruns, Antje

Book Part

Foreword: Social housing in times of transformation

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Suggested Citation: Bruns, Antje (2026) : Foreword: Social housing in times of transformation, In: Alves, Sónia Andersen, Hans Thor Keunen, Els Vuksanović-Macura, Zlata (Ed.): Social housing opportunities and challenges: Perspectives from Denmark, Germany, Portugal and Serbia, ISBN 978-3-88838-449-3, Verlag der ARL - Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, Hannover, pp. 1-, <https://doi.org/10.60683/1y1k-8k80>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/339562>

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In:

Alves, Sónia; Andersen, Hans Thor; Keunen, Els; Vuksanović-Macura, Zlata (Eds.) (2026): Social Housing Opportunities and Challenges – Perspectives from Denmark, Germany, Portugal and Serbia. Hanover, 1. = Arbeitsberichte der ARL 40.

<https://doi.org/10.60683/49v1-jz17>



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Antje Bruns

FOREWORD: SOCIAL HOUSING IN TIMES OF TRANSFORMATION

Housing has always been fundamental to just and equitable spatial development. Yet today, across Europe and worldwide, we are witnessing the far-reaching consequences of decades of housing market liberalization, shrinking public investment, and the growing commodification of land and homes. The result is a mounting shortage of affordable housing, especially in urban centers where market forces dominate planning agendas. These dynamics challenge the ability of municipalities and national governments to secure housing as a human right and call for renewed debate on the public interest in land use and the social responsibilities of housing policy. This book arrives at a pivotal moment in this ongoing transformation.

The pressures on housing systems are intensifying. Rising land and construction costs, the financialization of housing markets, and the retreat of the public sector from housing provision have all contributed to the scarcity of affordable homes. At the same time, the climate emergency demands a fundamental transformation of our built environment toward low-carbon, climate-resilient, and resource-efficient forms. These developments converge in the housing sector, making it a central arena for questions of distributive and procedural justice.

As societies grapple with the converging challenges of climate change, demographic shifts, infrastructural decline, and growing social inequalities, the role of social housing is being fundamentally redefined. No longer merely a safety net for the most disadvantaged, social housing is increasingly recognized as essential public infrastructure – deeply connected to spatial justice, environmental sustainability, and the provision of public goods. Yet, the uneven distribution of affordable housing in both urban and rural areas perpetuates exclusion, segregation, and displacement. A just approach to spatial development requires embedding the right to adequate housing within broader policies of inclusion and participation.

Integrating social housing into comprehensive territorial strategies has proven effective in correcting spatial disparities, fostering social cohesion, and supporting diverse communities. Such approaches also strengthen local economies and reduce dependence on speculative real estate markets. Spatial planning, as a tool of democratic decision-making and coordinated territorial development, plays a critical role in this context. Social housing must be reimagined by planners, policymakers, researchers, and communities as a proactive driver of spatial transformation – one that helps ensure sustainable and liveable futures for all. This is not just a technical challenge, but a question of political will, imagination, and ethical responsibility.

Prof. Dr. Antje Bruns, Secretary General of the
ARL – Academy for Territorial Development at the Leibniz Association