

## EDITORIAL

# FROM AN AMERICAN RIGHT TO “A DECENT HOME” IN THE 1940s TO ADEQUATE HOUSING AS A GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHT IN 2021

“Everybody needs a place to rest  
Everybody wants to have a home ...”  
(Bruce Springsteen, “Hungry Heart,” from the album *The River*, 1980)

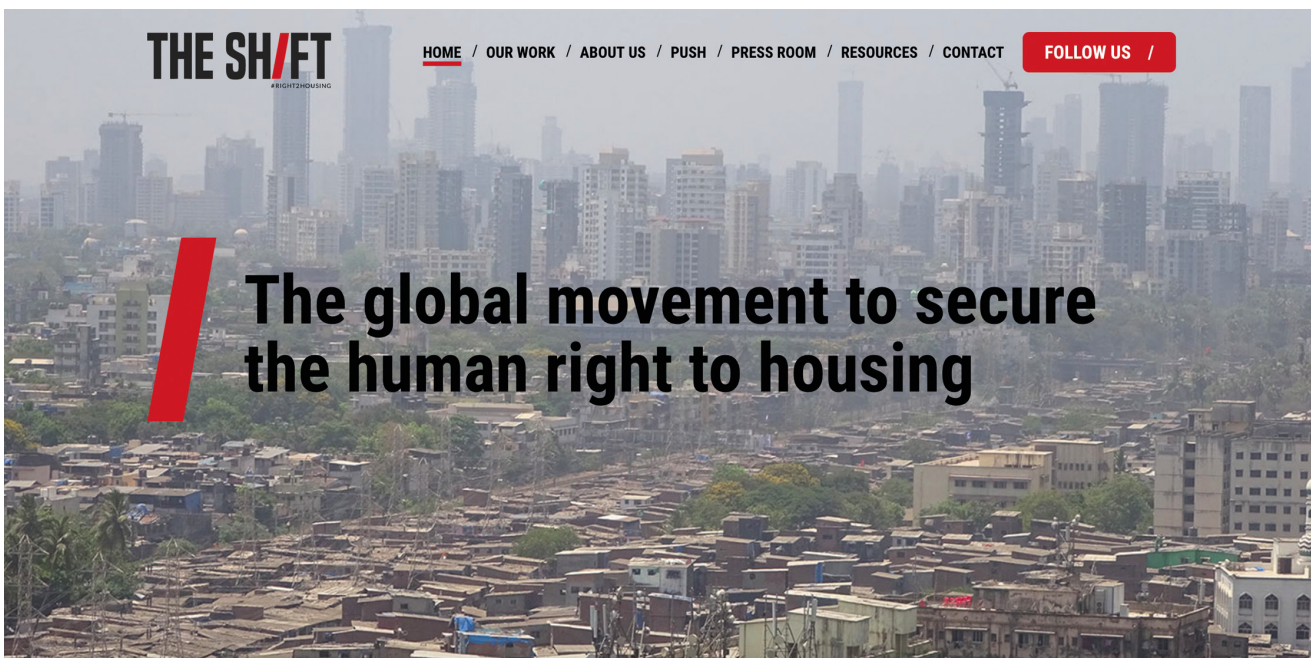
“We need more photos that inform, that tell stories, that remain etched in the memory and start the imagination working. The thing we need least of is politicians’ faces.”  
(Frederick Gutheim; quoted in Marion Massen, “Better Annual Reports Are Possible,” *Journal of Housing* 8, no. 1 [January 1951]: 28)

“It is our duty now to begin to lay the plans and determine the strategy for the winning of a lasting peace and the establishment of an American standard of living higher than ever before known. We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our people—whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth—is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure.”  
(Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Message to Congress, January 11, 1944”)

### I.

In his hit song “Hungry Heart,” Bruce Springsteen sings about the most basic desires that every one of us has, not least of which are the longing for a “place” and a “home.” Having a “home” without owning or taking possession of a “place” (or even just renting one) is a difficult thing to do, unless you become very philosophical about it. Having a home, in other words, is quite practically and mundanely about having a roof over your head. Even without saying it directly, the iconic singer gives the impression first, that people have a need for “housing,” and that this is a need that unites everyone, and even more, that there is a

human right to *decent* housing, to housing that is fit for human beings. This puts Springsteen in line with the United Nations, which defines “adequate housing” as “a human right enshrined in international human rights law. Failing to recognize, protect, and fulfill the Right to Adequate Housing results in the violation of a plethora of fundamental rights including the Right to Work, Education, Health, and Security.” (See <https://unhabitat.org/programme/housing-rights>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/housing/pages/housingindex.aspx>, visited August 23, 2021, 5:20 p.m. See also “Das Recht auf Wohnen”: <https://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/themen/wirtschaftliche-soziale-und-kulturelle-rechte/recht-auf-wohnen>.) It was former UN staff who founded The Shift, a non-profit organization that forcefully advocates for the human right to adequate housing. The banner image on the organization’s website (<https://www.make-the-shift.org/>) shows a stark contrast between a tract of slums and a row of high-rises characteristic of modern cities worldwide, with these architectures appearing to visualize the oppression of the many and the aspiration of the few (fig. 1).



1] Homepage of the nonprofit organization The Shift (screenshot, September 20, 2021), <https://www.make-the-shift.org/>.

## II.

There is currently a lot of talk about “crises,” especially of the “climate crisis,” but of the “housing crisis,” too (<https://www.make-the-shift.org/>, visited on August 23, 2021, 5:39 p.m.). The interdependence of the “crises” being experienced globally—we could in principle also call them current issues and historical events: as crises of humanity, of the climate, and of aging—poses significant challenges to the sciences. Scientists are more used to analyzing such paradigms (humanity, climate, aging) separately. However simplistic and popular Springsteen’s neoromantic lyrics may seem, in contrast, they connect central, grand themes of being human and of living together.

One is tempted to think that a singer like Springsteen can allow himself to say, in his own genre, what scientists hardly dare. No wonder, then, that politicians seem to be unnerved when their political program or election campaign is unexpectedly confronted with this complexity. The political party CDU’s current candidate for the election of the German chancellor, Armin Laschet, found himself in deep water, literally wet from head to toe (fig. 2), amid the disastrous floods in mid-July 2021 in the North Rhine-Westphalian town of Stolberg near Aachen. In



images that went around the world, he was completely unable to offer any explanation or even address the wider causes for the catastrophe (DIE ZEIT, “Ist er der Richtige?,” Tina Hildebrandt and Stefan Willeke, no. 34, August 19, 2021, 13–15). Entire houses, apartments, washed away—a total of 3000, according to estimates. It didn’t take long for critics to mock Laschet for a stance they found ridiculous. Frederick Gutheim’s saying from 1951—“The thing we need least of is politicians’ faces”—might capture the fatally flawed visual strategy of Laschet’s media and election team. In this setting, even a heroic portrait of a politician would have been out of place. The empathy of viewers, one would have to assume, was directed toward the people who had been hit by the disaster, the ones who had lost their homes and everything connected to them. But just who in this situation was and is truly out of their depth in terms of political representation? Perhaps the public? In still expecting clear (black and white?) guidance and answers? Not to mention quick solutions—which certainly won’t be found overnight.

We see this in the issue of the “housing crisis.” It’s been a historical constant since 1900, manifested primarily by the Industrial Revolution. Prominent depictions of miserable housing conditions were famously produced, for instance,

2] Armin Laschet visits the area stricken by floods in the North-Rhein Westphalian town of Stolberg, August 3, 2021. Photo: Christoph Hardt/imago images/Future Image.

by the F.S.A. (Farm Security Administration) under the Roosevelt administration, as the destitution and poverty caused by the Dust Bowl sent waves of migration to California. During World War II, the politicization of the housing issue in the United States intensified; the main aim was to keep up the morale of industrial workers for war production. After the war, the destruction of housing represented a global catastrophe, which was met with reconstruction and, in Germany, the “economic miracle” aided by the Marshall Plan. In the so-called migration crisis of the twenty-first century, housing as a phenomenon has once again captured the attention of the public—images of huge refugee camps and of shipping containers repurposed as housing for asylum seekers are broadcast into the living rooms of people in the countries the refugees are trying to reach. What’s more, some of these camps and containers have been creatively decorated with graffiti and other art projects to reflect politically and aesthetically on these social places and their architectures.

The historical stages of the housing crisis show that its history has quite often been causally linked to crises in politics or of the climate. From a scientific point of view, this entails an interdisciplinary complex of issues that will doubtless be addressed by a wealth of research.

### III.

Delving into the “Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles” and its photo collection, Nicole Krup Oest’s doctoral thesis directly confronts these political issues. She does not understand photographs as documenting the ambitions of housing initiatives but rather analyzes them in their multifaceted relationship to ideas, political strategies, urban planning, and architecture, along with notions of “good citizenship” and “harmony” among people. The fact that eliminating “slums” often provokes both new slums and racial segregation is one aspect of the problem’s ambivalent structure, which can be seen in the world’s first public housing project, Ramona Gardens, initiated in 1940 east of downtown Los Angeles. Here, tensions between gang members from drug cartels and the police continue to erode the idea of an “American standard of living” combined with “lasting peace.” (For a current discussion, see the article by Michael Finnegan in the *Los Angeles Times* on the prosecution of hate crimes in Ramona Gardens: “Gang Member Gets 16 Years for Firebombing Black Families’ Homes,” March 23, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-03-23/gang-member-sentenced-ramona-gardens-firebombing>, visited August 27, 2021, 2:27 p.m.)



3] [Unknown], Catherine Bauer Wurster, 1940s, William and Catherine Bauer Wurster Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley.

Developments around housing in the United States make it hard to avoid concluding that this is a core theme of the American Dream, despite the global universality the phenomenon claims or all its structural contradictions and ambivalences. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the right to “fair housing” to be part of the “American way of life,” while also trumpeting his signing of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 in the shadows of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. (See <https://nationalfairhousing.org/>; <https://shelterforce.org/2018/09/05/the-most-important-housing-law-passed-in-1968-wasnt-the-fair-housing-act/>, visited August 27, 2021, 2:40 p.m.) The comprehensive significance of the topic has not only provoked intensive work by sociologists and historians—it is so telling and important that it is time, too, for an analysis of this historical process that seeks to determine its impact in the medium of photography.

The author of this study recently curated an exhibition at University of California, Berkeley, devoted to the color slides made by the photographer and housing activist Catherine Bauer (fig. 3). Not least, the exhibition explored Bauer’s prominent involvement with the Housing Act of 1937 and her role as a dedicated and tireless educator in the cause of housing. (See <https://archives.ced.berkeley.edu/blog/seeing-modern-architecture-in-color-in-catherine-bauers-kodachrome-slide-collection>, visited August 27, 2021, 1:30 p.m.) In her text for the online exhibition, Oest writes that “Bauer’s collection offers material for future research on the creative contributions of women to the history of housing and photography—especially women who never proclaimed themselves [to be] pho-

tographers the way their celebrated contemporaries like Roger Sturtevant and Julius Shulman did. This research promises to destabilize the murky categories of ‘applied photography’ and ‘amateur photography’ and [to] urge historians to look closer not only at what these photographs show, but how they show it.”

#### IV.

Back to Springsteen: The American singer, with his status as a popular legend, is politically concerned, no doubt about this. However, his work as a musician has a timeless tune of humanistic generalization, even beyond the United States. As a songwriter, his strong narrative style revolves around the fates and dreams of the “little people,” especially of workers. He sings about difficult though eminently human lives lived on the outskirts of big cities, in small towns, or in the countryside, where people marry early and follow in the footsteps of their parents, all the while dreaming of the big wide world—and of a place to call their own that would also mean independence, self-determination, and social advancement, or at least social stability. It is precisely this largely white working class, threatened by unemployment and pushed to the social margins of the American success story, to an industrialized world caught in a cycle of decline, that has in recent years appeared to Europeans to be the bastion of Trump supporters. In popular perception, it is made up of people who live bitter, hard lives in impoverished places that were once industrial centers, often enough in trailers, frequently in run-down single houses or rental units—one might think these are precisely people who could use a housing project.

Of course, though, these kinds of projects don’t usually come from right-wing, conservative politicians or activists, but rather from the progressive, left-wing camp. The paradox embodied by Springsteen is the attraction he has for anti-intellectuals who tend politically to the right, alongside his appeal to Democratic, visionary intellectual figures, from Roosevelt to Kennedy to Obama, who have been attacked and accused for supposedly having socialist, even communist, intentions. Springsteen has always managed to escape this moral dilemma, while at the same time becoming politically involved. Barack Obama visited him in his recording studio to great media fanfare, where the two men carried out a series of conversations under the title: “Renegades: Born in the USA,” a pointed hint at the racist discussion about whether Obama was really born in the USA (the “birther conspiracy,” as it was called). The production stylized its interlocutors as heroes in the American struggle to get ahead through prosperity and success—a struggle that is perhaps most acutely expressed in

housing. The visit of the first Black president of the United States to the studio of The Boss, the country's biggest rock star, was no coincidence. Even before he left office, Obama must have known that a Republican successor would undo his "fair housing regulations." (See <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/06/trump-roll-back-obama-housing-desegregation-094874>.)

It was especially glaring that it was HUD Secretary Ben Carson, the only Black member of Donald Trump's cabinet, who was instrumental in this roll-back. The color of one's skin, it hardly needs to be said, does not necessarily correlate with progressive politics. And that's a good thing, because otherwise political positions would be tied to race, to class, to gender. And this kind of biologicistic determinism is no way to start, it offers the wrong foundation, if we want to build a world based on diversity and reason. Still, and this is also an important argument, it must be said that calls for equality and human dignity, paired with denunciations of racism, have not historically contributed in any sustainable way to fair housing. In today's debates and discourses, the question is thus often whether a new housing policy must not first begin with an awareness of the existing forms of systemic and structural racism.

It is racism, of course, that produces the construct of "race" to begin with, as Ta-Nehisi Coates, for example, instructively outlines in his preface to Toni Morrison's volume of essays, *The Origin of Others* (2017). Morrison devotes one of her essays to the "housing" of "blacks," to "people of color," during and after the American Civil War (1861–1865), and to their attempt to define themselves in terms of "blackness," to form a separate community, one that is ostensibly "pure," in order to escape threats to their life and limb emanating from "whites." It is a fact that these constructs of skin color, originating since the eighteenth century from racist biological research, still stand in the way of ending the painful dilemmas of human coexistence. Here, though, the crucial new point is the shifts in contemporary discourse. Perhaps it will be possible in the future to dispense with categories of "black" and "white," with skin color as a basis of identity. Perhaps we might be able to meet each other as human beings sharing a common political, social community, in which skin color has become an obsolete category. But this can only happen if actions are taken to counteract the harms caused by racism, if those whose existence and opportunities have been limited by racism are given ways to overcome these disadvantages.

The meetings with Obama allowed Springsteen to expand the narrow "white" world found in his rock songs and ballads, works conceived, one might say, more as folk songs if not sermons. As though all of them mean to say: everyone's got problems; everyone has a hungry heart that longs for housing as it does for love, for a family, for peace, for belonging.

4] Boy on skates near 746 Hopkins, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1940, lantern slide, 8.25 x 10 cm, Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library, Joseph S. Stern, Jr. Cincinnati Room.



## V.

It is precisely these universally shared human longings, which come together in the desire for housing, that characterize HACL's photo campaigns, with their aim of communicating the idea of fair housing to a broad public. The campaigns also included photographs of before and after situations, such as those also preserved in the archives of the Cincinnati Better Housing League. (See Cincinnati Better Housing League: <https://digital.cincinnati.library.org/digital/collection/p16998coll44>.) Children, moreover, were often employed as visual messengers (fig. 4). The images juxtapose chaotic, desolate housing conditions with the vision of a new model of construction, a new kind of modern housing with clear vertical and horizontal lines and structures: before, dirt and misery; and after, cleanliness and purity, materialized in architectural structures and materials. We have long known that these are binary ideologies. Whereas only a few years ago such a topic would have stood out as isolated in histories of art and photography, today the surfeit of digital images depicting historical housing projects, among other things, is making it possible to reconstruct and critically analyze the significance of how these political and social engagements and initiatives have been visualized.

In contemporary art, the theme of housing is clearly linked to diversity and new sets of values. Artists have long moved past moral appeals, to instead highlight, for example, the incredible creativity of people who are "homeless" but





5] Kyohei Sakaguchi, Solar Zero Yen House, 2000, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

nevertheless endeavor to create a “home” for themselves—whether it be under a bridge in Kyoto, or on the go on the luggage rack of a bicycle. The images testify to impressive moments of self-empowerment in the face of the depressingly long history of the global housing crisis. One example is the project “The Zero Yen House” (fig. 5), in which Japanese artist Kyohei Sakaguchi has devoted himself to positively conveying this image of housing as a human achievement. (See <https://www.spoon-tamago.com/2012/12/19/the-zero-yen-house-kyohei-sakaguchi/>.)

## VI.

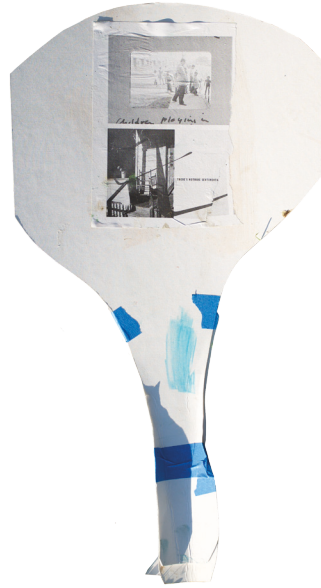
The cover of the book was designed by the Austrian artist Alois Köchl, in keeping with the long-term concept of this publication series (fig. 6). Many of his works have started out with photographs and have a stylistic feel that can be explained through comparisons with graffiti. His intensely colored tonal values, reminiscent of van Gogh and Cézanne—here, a bright yellow—set an accent while making a connection to an abstract-figurative depiction of construction and destruction. We can recognize architectural, plastic forms: precarious, wavering, and reminiscent of some of the “negative” images meant to provide striking visual evidence of the structures in which completely impoverished



6a] Alois Köchl, cover image, mixed media, 2021, 92.5 x 141.1 cm.

people live. On the cover, a group of people emerges in the center right, also precariously caught in their configuration between constitution and dissolution. As his starting point, Köchl took illustrations in Oest's text, intended to demonstrate a future human coexistence ridden of racism. The Kodachrome slide from the Bauer and Wurster collection (see fig. 58 in this book) was never published, but it was used for Bauer's lectures. The depiction, almost certainly shot by Bauer herself, shows a street outside Pueblo del Rio, where a bunch of children happily enjoy their day, or so it seems, and an adult seems to take guard and responsibility. A lot could be read into this image—and no doubt, one could and should criticize the obvious discrepancy between the white “father-figure” and the children of color. In any case, it is a document about how activists and architects at the time wanted to communicate their vision. Interestingly, Köchl takes up this seemingly marginal slide for his own creative work, his sharp eye and critical mind at work.

The visual characteristics of Köchl's work are particularly apt in the context of this research, because after all, the point is to open and adjust one's eyes to see



**6b]** Alois Köchl, preparatory work with photocopy and mixed media, 2021, 60.5 x 32.5 cm.

conditions that we can certainly expect a global community, at least on the whole, to improve and eradicate. Köchl's cover conveys: there's nothing depressing about the issue the book addresses, because it's a topic that can be charged with energy and positivity, as long as we learn to see it right.

In the same way that Springsteen connects popular culture and American literature, at least as he is read by Harvard professor Robert Coles, who compares “The Boss” to Walt Whitman, the housing projects and their images interweave diverse elements and levels of society and culture. These range from politically engaged Hollywood stars like Frank Sinatra and Bette Davis, who supported HACLA, to the socially underprivileged protagonists of the housing projects; from the culture of national and international exhibitions to promote the projects, to the lived culture of people's homes, to architecture and garden design. It is not difficult to understand that these entanglements have always entailed, and still do, not only antihierarchical and progressive aspects, but also political ideologies and strategies. However, there was also this utopian, third, and the way I see it, nonideological position, namely a human right to “better housing”—for all.

The book owes its existence to a collaborative effort by people living in Zurich, Heidelberg, Berlin, Stralsund, and (not least) California. My heartfelt thanks to all of them.

Bettina Gockel

Krummenau (Aemelsberg), August 27, 2021