Housing cooperatives, housing systems and the state. Historical lessons from Europe, Australia and Latin America

Article *in* Housing Studies · September 2025

DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2025.2560434

CITATIONS
0

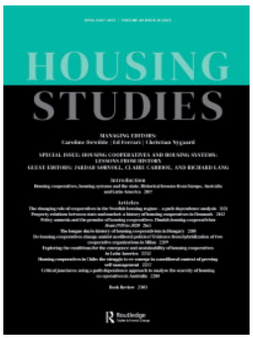
READS
59

3 authors:

Jardar Sørvoll
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University
88 PUBLICATIONS **641** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Claire Carriou
Lab'urba
46 PUBLICATIONS **308** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Richard Lang
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano
55 PUBLICATIONS **1,484** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE



Housing Studies

ISSN: 0267-3037 (Print) 1466-1810 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/chos20

Housing cooperatives, housing systems and the state. Historical lessons from Europe, Australia and Latin-America

Jardar Sørvoll, Claire Carriou & Richard Lang

To cite this article: Jardar Sørvoll, Claire Carriou & Richard Lang (2025) Housing cooperatives, housing systems and the state. Historical lessons from Europe, Australia and Latin-America, Housing Studies, 40:10, 2107-2120, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2025.2560434

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2560434

Published online: 23 Sep 2025.

HOUSING STUDIES
2025, VOL. 40, NO. 10, 2107–2120
https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2025.2560434

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

Housing cooperatives, housing systems and the state. Historical lessons from Europe, Australia and Latin-America

Jardar Sørvoll[a], Claire Carriou[b] and Richard Lang[c]

[a]Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway; [b]Paris School of Urban Planning, Paris Est Créteil University, Lab'urba, France; [c]Faculty of Economics and Management & Competence Centre Management of Cooperatives, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy

ABSTRACT

This special issue addresses the relationship between the historical development of cooperative housing and broader housing systems in different national, regional and local contexts. Several studies suggest that housing cooperatives, meaning rented or owner-occupied housing managed and owned by residents, have both influenced and been shaped by wider housing system dynamics. 'Housing systems' (often used interchangeably with 'housing regimes') may be defined broadly as the actors, norms, rules, laws and policies governing the planning, financing, production, exchange, and distribution of housing within a state, region, or city (see for instance: Hoekstra, 2020; Ruonavaara, 2020). However, the historically oriented cooperative housing literature does not include many references to the debate on the development of housing systems and consists mainly of case studies from countries with a rich and long-standing tradition of cooperative housing, such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany (see for instance: Balmer & Gerber, 2018; Lang & Stoeger, 2018; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018; 2020a).

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 August 2025
Accepted 9 September 2025

KEYWORDS
Australia; Europe; history; housing cooperatives; housing systems; Latin-America

Introduction

This special issue addresses the relationship between the historical development of cooperative housing and broader housing systems in different national, regional and local contexts. Several studies suggest that housing cooperatives, meaning rented or owner-occupied housing managed and owned by residents, have both influenced and been shaped by wider housing system dynamics. 'Housing systems' (often used interchangeably with 'housing regimes') may be defined broadly as the actors, norms, rules, laws and policies governing the planning, financing, production, exchange, and distribution of housing within a state, region, or city (see for instance: Hoekstra, 2020; Ruonavaara, 2020). However, the historically oriented cooperative housing

CONTACT Jardar Sørvoll jarso@oslomet.no Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, Oslo

literature does not include many references to the debate on the development of housing systems and consists mainly of case studies from countries with a rich and long-standing tradition of cooperative housing, such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany (see for instance: Balmer & Gerber, 2018; Lang & Stoeger, 2018; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018, 2020a).

Cooperative housing has also been largely neglected in the housing systems literature (see Stephens, 2020a; Grander & Stephens, 2024; Kohl & Sørvoll, 2021; Sørvoll *et al.*, 2024, for exceptions). Even though cooperatives are a quite limited phenomenon in most countries compared to private-rented, social-rented and owner-occupied housing, this is still somewhat surprising. After all, cooperative housing has since the postwar years been a major presence in Sweden, the adopted home country of Jim Kemeny, the most celebrated scholar of the housing systems literature (cf. Kemeny, 1995; Kemeny *et al.*, 2005; Kemeny, 2006). In his work, the question of tenure plays a central role, as he identifies rental strategies to distinguish between housing regimes he calls dualist, unitary and integrated respectively. In current scholarship on housing systems, the role of tenure is sometimes played down or at least reconsidered, as we can see in the recent efforts of housing scholars to develop a better theoretical understanding of change in housing systems. In recent housing systems literature, the drivers of change discussed include finance systems and financialization, economic inequality, monetary policy, globalization, and a wide variety of national-level institutions (Hegedüs, 2020; McNelis, 2020; Norris, 2020; Stephens, 2020b; Grander & Stephens, 2024). Nevertheless, Stephens calls for continued attention to tenure 'as its study can be illuminating of the system as a whole, provided that it is treated in […] a "system-embedded" way' (Stephens, 2020b, p.589). In this perspective, cooperative housing appears as a good alternative vantage point to the classic categories of 'owner-occupied', 'private renting', and 'social renting'. By studying the rich and changing institutional variations of housing cooperatives around the world (Moreau & Pittini, 2012, p.6), one may shed light on the main features and some key drivers of change in housing systems over time.

The primary aim of this special issue is to provide new insights into how housing cooperatives and actors that promote it, have affected and been shaped by housing systems in different geographical and historical contexts. Secondly, we seek to extract general historical lessons from the articles in the current issue and discuss their relevance to contemporary attempts to establish housing cooperatives as viable alternatives in different housing systems worldwide. We believe that this is a particularly timely goal in 2025, a year the United Nations has declared the international year of cooperatives (Cooperative Housing International, 2025b) and many housing systems across the globe are deeply troubled by unaffordability, inequality, low quality and limited resident participation and influence (Egner & Krapp, 2025 eds.; Hochstenbach *et al.*, 2025). In our view, housing cooperatives may help mitigate some of these deep-rooted challenges, as research suggests that living in a cooperative may be beneficial to residents' well-being, security of tenure, and sense of home (Crabtree *et al.*, 2021; Guity-Zapata *et al.*, 2024, 2025).

From the beginning, our aim was to include contributions from many different housing systems in a variety of global contexts. Thus, the special issue includes studies from Latin-America, the Nordic countries, Central- and Southern-Europe,

and Australia. While the cases analysed in the special issue are quite different in many respects, some of the articles included are studies from housing systems that share a rich and long-standing tradition of housing cooperatives, such as Sweden, Denmark and Hungary (Bengtsson, 2024; Larsen, 2024; Jelinek, 2024), while others originate from national contexts with weaker, but still traceable and notable traditions more hidden from contemporary eyes, such as Australia (Grimstad *et al.*, 2024), Chile (Czischke *et al.*, 2025) and Finland (Charlesworth, 2024). In addition, one of the articles focuses on the historical development of the local housing system of Milan (Peverini, 2025) – a welcome addition due to the centrality of local level in the execution of housing policy (Hoekstra, 2020) – and another on the prospects of housing cooperatives in neoliberal Latin-American housing systems based on evidence from Uruguay, Colombia and El Salvador (Encinales *et al.*, 2024).

As many housing cooperatives date back more than a century, this special issue explores their development over large tracts of time, not through traditional detailed historical reconstructions of the past, but by way of using the past as a heuristic instrument to better understand the present (Foucault, 1963; Rosanvallon, 2003) and current attempts to establish and grow housing cooperatives. 'Taking a long view' (Flanagan & Jacobs, 2019) helps reveal the role of 'critical junctures' or forks in the road (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2010) and highlight specific drivers of growth or factors that have inhibited growth in the evolution of cooperative housing in various housing systems.

In brief, the contributions in this special issue suggest that overall, housing cooperatives show strong adaptability to different institutional circumstances, clear potential for scaling, and the potential to make a real difference to affordable housing provision. For instance, in the case of Milan, cooperative initiatives managed to impact urban regeneration policy and reshape a tenure framework even in a highly commodified urban setting. Yet, it is only under specific conditions that housing cooperatives can substantially shape the wider housing system and exert strong and lasting institutional pressure. As other evidence in this special issue shows, the capacity to scale and have enduring influence hinges on being deeply embedded politically, maintaining a resistance to commodification, and developing strong federative structures that represent the sector in national and local politics. In this respect, Uruguay appears to be the most compelling example, covered in this special issue, of achieving both scaling and system-shaping through a cooperative movement that became highly politicized and built durable sector support structures over time that achieved implementation of legal support frameworks and cultural legitimization of housing cooperatives as a tenure. Thus, the case of Uruguay exemplifies that both state support and grassroots mobilization are key growth factors for cooperative housing movements. This contrasts with the cases of Finland and Hungary, that provide evidence for scaling that stalled due to fragmented and depoliticized cooperative movements that meets path-dependent policy inertia. Moreover, the contributions on Denmark and Sweden arguably tell the story of failed resistance to commodification, which over time weakened the distinctiveness and influence of the sector in the housing system, despite substantial scale.

In this introduction to the special issue, we first provide a brief historical overview of the phenomena that is cooperative housing. Then we present the articles

in the special issue, focusing on their contribution to the literature on the relationship between historical changes to housing cooperatives and housing systems. In the conclusion, we discuss some of the key insights provided by the articles and ask what they can tell us about the prospects for long-standing and recently developed models of cooperative housing.

Housing cooperatives in historical context

The contributions to this special issue originate from geographical contexts as different as the Nordic countries, Southern- and Central-Europe, Latin-America and Australia, and illustrate that cooperative housing has come in many varieties and filled many different functions in housing systems across time and space. Indeed, if we were to a write a comprehensive world history of cooperative housing, it would take us to all corners of the globe. This vast geographical and historical scope reflects that cooperative housing is one of the classic modern era housing alternatives, along with public-rented housing and homeownership, championed as part of the answer to the squalor, overcrowding, limited tenure security, low physical quality and unaffordability that characterized housing in towns and cities during the industrial expansion and urban growth of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Novy & Förster, 1991; Harris, 1999; Sørvoll, 2024). In the literature and amongst practitioners, it is common to distinguish between tenant and homeowner cooperatives, as well as financing, building and consumer housing cooperatives. Consumer housing cooperatives, the form that is most often analysed by scholars, are generally owned and governed by member shareholders that may be classified as tenants or collective homeowners (Ganapati, 2010; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018).

Historically, housing cooperatives have appealed to a vast variety of political persuasions, from liberal reformers to the radical left (see for instance: Gulbrandsen & Torgersen, 1978; Balmer & Gerber, 2018; Peverini, 2025). Their wide appeal may reflect that they are civil society hybrids embodying several features that have commonly been regarded as virtuous, including self-help, autonomy from the state and large corporations, participatory resident democracy and collective ownership. Housing cooperatives may attract support across the democratic political spectrum, including liberals, and even conservatives, because they may be seen as more cost-efficient and ideologically superior alternatives to social-rented housing provided and controlled by the state. Between 1959 and 1964, for instance, the governing British Conservatives were much enamoured with some form of cooperative cost-renting (O'Hara, 2008). Some conservatives and Christian groups have also been attracted to housing cooperatives as vehicles to promote individual ownership and family values. In Italy, for instance, many housing cooperatives have roots in Catholic social activism (Peverini, 2025). On the left, groups voicing support for housing cooperatives have sometimes seen them as anti-landlord and anti-capitalist housing alternatives. For social democratic tenants' movements, such as in late nineteenth century Sweden, establishing housing cooperatives were regarded as 'protest action aimed at the landlords' (Rolf, 2021: 174), circumventing their power over tenants' lives and securing the right of ordinary workers to own and inhabit their own homes at affordable terms (see also: Bacqué & Claire, 2011; Kohl & Sørvoll, 2021). Even today many housing cooperatives are non-profit

alternatives living up to the aim of operating 'by and for the resident members and not for the purpose of personal or corporate profit' (Cooperative Housing International, 2025a). At the same time, resident-led cooperatives have also encountered opposition within social democracy, such as documented for the period of local, state-led reformism, known as Red Vienna, in the interwar years in Austria (Lang & Novy, 2014).

Non-profit principles are, however, arguably not defining features of all housing cooperatives worthy of the name. As illustrated by Jelinek's study of Hungary in this issue, housing cooperatives are not always progressive housing communities that serves purposes that go beyond the economic interests of residents (Jelinek, 2024). Even though there still exist many non-profit or limited profit cooperatives in which individual members are not allowed to sell their shares and exclusive housing rights to the highest bidder, market-rate cooperatives resembling individual homeownership have thrived in other contexts. Post-1989 Eastern Europe, contemporary Scandinavia, and New York are prominent examples of the latter (Moreau & Pittini, 2012; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018). Housing cooperatives have generally proved adaptable to many societies and historical eras and been integral features of housing systems as different as Communist Poland (1946–1989), social-democratic Sweden and Norway (1945–1980), corporatist Austria (1945–2000), and contemporary neoliberal Zürich, Berlin and Copenhagen (Barenstein *et al.*, 2022; Coudroy de Lille, 2015; Lawson, 2009; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2018; Larsen, 2024; Lang & Novy, 2014; Laug & Hölzl, 2025). It has also functioned as a significant supplementary form of housing in many national and regional contexts, including post-independence India (Ganapati, 2010), the northern part of Central- and Eastern-Europe in the 19th and twentieth century (Kováts & Kohl, 2024), German-speaking Europe in the post-war era (Lang & Stoeger, 2018; Kohl & Sørvoll, 2021; Pfatteicher *et al.*, 2024), Brussels (Aernouts & Ryckewaert, 2019), and Uruguay after the election of a progressive government in 2005 (Barenstein *et al.*, 2022), to name but some of the most obvious examples. In some countries and regions, housing cooperatives have made significant but discontinuous historical contributions to the housing system. In France, for example, the conditions for building and operating cooperative housing associations have varied according to the legal and political climate (Bacqué & Claire, 2011; Bresson & Denèfle, 2015). Even where housing cooperatives have always been virtually non-existent or never become more than a small niche in the housing system, it has sometimes been the talk of the town amongst social reformers and housing policy experts. For instance, it is well known that the British government flirted with importing Scandinavian-style housing cooperatives in the 1960s (Clapham & Kintrea, 1987; O'Hara, 2008), and that cooperative ownership has sometimes been seen as the solution to the challenge of limited tenant participation in British council housing (Birchall, 1991).

The articles the in special issue

The special issue includes three historical case studies from Nordic housing systems. Bengtsson (2024) examines the constant but changing role of housing cooperatives in the Swedish housing system from the early twentieth century to the present through the theoretical lens of path dependence and the idea of critical junctures.

Bengtsson regards the historical development of housing cooperatives as important for the wider changes to the Swedish housing system since the 1930s. For instance, the deregulation of 1968–69 not only meant that cooperative shares could be sold to the highest bidder but also provided incentives to convert public rented housing to market-priced cooperatives. Along with changes in the municipal rented sector, this contributed to undermining 'the market position of households with lesser means' in the contemporary Swedish housing system (Bengtsson, 2024, p. 16).

Larsen (2024) provides an analysis of housing cooperativism in Denmark since the mid-nineteenth century. He traces the origins of the contemporary limited-equity Danish housing cooperatives to the building and financing cooperatives of the late nineteenth century and regards their further development as a product of the combined efforts of the state as facilitator and civil society actors that established relatively affordable collectively-owned housing. The theoretical point of departure for Larsen's contribution is what he calls the property relations of cooperative housing, more specifically Savini and Bossuyt's (2022) distinction between commissioning rights, management rights, inclusion rights, and income rights. According to Larsen, more than hundred years of history reveals that the strong autonomous management rights of individual cooperatives meant leeway to strengthen income rights, to the extent that 'right to profit', rather than 'right to use', increasingly became the guiding principle of most Danish housing cooperatives after the millennium. As we will return to below, like the Swedish case examined by Bengtsson, this is an example of how developments within housing cooperatives may contribute to changes in housing systems by increasing commodification and financialization levels.

Charlesworth's (2024) contribution covers cooperative housing in Finland from 1920 to 2020. She shows that cooperativism in housing has been the subject of many experiments and debates over the years. Charlesworth evokes waves of regular re-emergence of cooperative ideas, followed by abandonment and amnesia. These waves have generally affected building cooperatives, whereas the cooperative tenure has historically played a limited role in the Finnish housing regime. Charlesworth discusses three possible reasons for the latter. The first is linked to the complex relationship between housing cooperatives and the wider Finnish cooperative movement, which is highly fragmented in ideological terms. When the movement has supported cooperative housing in the past, it has mainly supported building cooperatives. Secondly, she points to the short-termist pragmatic and piecemeal character of Finnish housing policy. This is an example of how elements of housing systems may constrain the growth of cooperatives. Thirdly, she highlights the 'companization' of cooperative identity, a trend that has also affected other national contexts.

Jelinek (2024) analyses the various forms cooperative housing has taken in the understudied case of Hungary since the mid-nineteenth century in four different historical periods: from the formation of the Austria-Hungary dual monarchy in 1867 to the first world war, the interwar period (1918–1945), the years of state socialism (1945–1989), and the capitalist post-1989 era. Jelinek discusses the function of cooperatives in the housing system, the relationship between housing cooperatives and the state, as well as the social classes mainly benefitting from cooperatives, in each of these historical epochs. He concludes that state ideologies were reflected in the types of housing cooperatives that dominated in the housing systems of each

era, and that state subsidies have been crucial drivers of cooperative housing development. Jelinek also shows that different types of the middle social strata of society have been the typical beneficiaries of cooperative housing in Hungary across very different historical periods. Finally, Jelinek's study from the European capitalist periphery provides general insights into the cooperative housing form. The various forms of cooperative inspired housing models identified in his paper, illustrates that housing cooperatives come in many different historical varieties that do not necessarily conform to universal ahistorical definitions that emphasize progressive ideals.

In his study of the local housing system of Milan, Italy, Peverini (2025) discusses the hybridization effects of neoliberal policy shifts for two cooperative models–undivided rental cooperatives with socialist roots and divided homeowner cooperatives with origins in the social-catholic tradition. Peverini argues that the development of the two models in the post-war era, were driven by path dependencies and changes both within Milan's urban housing system and within the cooperatives themselves. In the long run, homeowner cooperatives more successfully adapted to the shifting neoliberal policy landscape from the 1980s, through commercially-oriented strategies, whereas cooperatives with a more social aim stagnated.

Encinales *et al.* (2024) explore the political, institutional and socioeconomic factors that enable or constrain the foundation and growth of housing cooperatives in contemporary neoliberal housing systems in Latin-America. They base their arguments on previous studies, theoretical perspectives on collective action, and empirical research conducted in Uruguay, El-Salvador and Colombia, and ask if the relatively successful FUCVAM-model of affordable cooperative housing is possible to emulate elsewhere in Latin-America. The authors conclude that some of the key factors that helped the expansion of cooperative housing in Uruguay since the 1960s is absent in El Salvador and Colombia. The missing factors include durable state and institutional support on the one side, and strong demand and political support from a politically conscious and collectively organized working class on the other side. According to Encinales *et al.*, the El Salvadorian and Colombian examples suggests that it is necessary to adapt affordable housing solutions to local contexts and the socioeconomic realities of the people in need of housing.

The contribution of Czischke *et al.* (2025) is a case study of Chile that covers three historical eras: 1890–1973, the period of military dictatorship and neoliberal democratic regime (1973–1995), and the mid-1990s to the present day. All these eras had political regimes that shaped the housing system and the prospect of cooperatives within them in distinct ways. For instance, the expansion of catholic and worker's cooperative housing target at middle-income households stagnated in the years of military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, and those cooperatives that survived adapted to the neoliberal and individualistic housing regime of the era. According to the authors, a substantial reemergence of cooperative housing for low-income groups in the current neoliberal climate depends on both changes in public policy and increased mobilization at the grassroot level.

Grimstad *et al.* (2024) discuss why cooperative housing has never been a major tenure in the Australian housing system drawing on the concept of path dependence and common enduring features of Anglo-Saxon settler colonies. They argue that the liberal Australian welfare state and the strong emphasis on private property rights

and homeownership in settler ideology, are factors that served to undermine the political support and cultural resonance of consumer housing cooperatives despite the presence of a sizeable co-operative housing finance sector. Grimstad and her co-authors note the current interest in cooperative housing in Australia but also conclude that 'housing co-operatives and their active resident-members are not visible and are often perceived as somewhat obscure historical solutions' (Grimstad *et al.*, 2024, p. 16) in a housing system based on homeownership, private renting and social housing for only the most disadvantaged.

Concluding remarks: general lessons for research and practice

The papers presented above show that there is no universal definition of housing cooperatives, but rather socio-political formulations constructed in specific contexts and situated in time, whose content and form can change dynamically over the course of history. Moreover, this collection of articles illustrates how shifting elements of housing systems have influenced historical development in understudied parts of the global cooperative movement. For instance, Jelinek (2024) discusses the function of cooperativism in Hungary's housing system in four historical epochs. He argues that state ideology and the regulations or absence of regulations in the housing system were crucial for the prospects and character of cooperative housing in each era. Charlesworth (2024) points to competition from other urban housing forms, namely joint-stock company apartment ownership, when explaining the limited role of consumer housing cooperatives in the Finnish housing system, whereas Grimstad *et al.* (2024) regard the strong legal, cultural and political support for private property and homeownership as a major obstacle for cooperative housing in Australia. In this housing system, the adoption of a 'strata-legislation' made it possible to develop multi-unit housing and filled a role that could have been played by housing cooperatives. Several of the contributions, moreover, point to the detrimental consequences of limited state spending on housing and targeted neoliberal social policies on the growth of housing cooperatives (see for instance, Peverini, 2025; Jelinek, 2024; Grimstad *et al.*, 2024; Czischke *et al.* 2025).

Revolutions, coups, democratic transitions of power and other forms of major political regime change may also strongly influence housing systems and the cooperative forms of housing within them. In this special issue Hungary and Chile stand out as cases affected by this type of critical juncture. In Chile the military dictatorship (1973–1990) meant that housing cooperatives were forced to adopt an individualist and market-adapted form of cooperativism in line with the neoliberal housing policy of the new regime (Czischke *et al.* 2025). The Communist takeover in Hungary in 1949, eventually led to the introduction of a form of cooperative housing that 'was used by the state as a smokescreen to package a hidden process of commodification into a seemingly socialist-friendly organizational form' (Jelinek, 2024, p. 16). Political decisions which are likely to have an impact on housing systems and, by extension, on cooperative forms of housing, are also frequently taken in the context of severe housing shortages. In Finland, public institutions have primarily agreed to give support to housing cooperatives in direct response to specific challenges, such as post-war reconstruction in the 1940s or

the rural exodus and rapid industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s. Housing cooperatives were seen as a means of ensuring the continuation of housing production, even in periods that were unfavorable to private developers (Charlesworth, 2024).

The contributions to the special issue suggest that causation mainly runs from housing systems to cooperative housing and not the other way around. Nonetheless, some of the articles arguably also illustrate how internal dynamics within housing cooperatives have contributed to substantial changes in housing systems. For example, as noted above, Bengtsson (2024) regards the lifting of price controls on cooperative shares in 1968–69 as one of the preconditions for the limited housing alternatives for low-income households in contemporary Sweden. This outcome was not at all anticipated by the political actors involved in the deregulation of the late 1960s but still constituted a significant shift in the orientation of the Swedish housing system. Similarly, Larsen (2024) shows how members of housing cooperatives were decisive actors behind the marketization of cooperative housing in Denmark in recent decades. Residents both worked within the law and exploited legal loopholes to increase the economic value of their cooperative shares and user-rights in the market.

Along with Bengtsson's contribution Larsen's analysis illustrates how Nordic homeowner cooperatives have proved more vulnerable to deregulation and financialization compared to rental cooperatives in German speaking countries. In turn this has arguably shaped core features of Nordic housing systems, as Sweden, Norway and Denmark all experienced higher homeownership rates, housing prices booms and increased household debts in the aftermath of cooperative housing deregulation (Kohl & Sørvoll, 2021; Sørvoll *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the Nordic example is very different from the intriguing case of Uruguay, a country where the cooperative movement so far has succeeded in exerting significant influence on the national housing system as a non-profit self-help alternative to individual homeownership. As we touched on in the introduction, Uruguay thereby arguably provides the clearest example of a system-changing cooperative housing movement covered in this special issue (Encinales *et al.*, 2024).

Authors writing in the special issue also advance the existing theorization of cooperative housing from a historically embedded perspective, see for instance the contributions by Jelinek, Larsen and Peverini on the longue durée of housing cooperativism in Hungary, Denmark and Milan respectively. This theorization potentially provides historical lessons that are relevant for current attempts to promote housing cooperatives to combat unaffordability, inequality and housing insecurity. Larsen (2024) argues that all limited equity housing cooperatives are faced with the commodification gap challenge, namely that there is value gap between the value of commodified land and the ground rent of de-commodified land. According to Larsen, it is hard for residents to abstain from exploiting this gap for their own economic advantage. Based on his study of Milan, Peverini (2025) suggests several hypothesises for the prospects commercially and socially oriented housing cooperatives in different economic and political contexts. For instance, he opines that even non-commercial housing cooperatives may thrive in cheap land markets even if not aided by government subsidies. He also suggests that a commercial orientation is necessary to thrive if supportive public policies are non-existent or limited.

It is also possible to extract other general historical lessons for policy and practice from the articles in the special issue. The contributions to the special issue, suggests that establishing large housing cooperatives that function as affordable housing for low-income and medium-income families in the long run is far from an easy task. One lesson from history is arguably that the state is a crucial ally for any sort of large-scale attempt to establish cooperative housing (Ganapati, 2010; Sørvoll & Bengtsson, 2020b). Without the state on board cooperative housing, it seems, may at best be a small-scale housing option for smaller groups of workers, activists or middle-class professionals. All the contributions to the special issue underscore this general insight of the centrality of the state. Nevertheless, it might be risky to count only on the state to safeguard against commodification of housing cooperatives, as this crucially depends on how management rights in cooperatives are defined and maintained, and thus, disbursing these rights among different civil society actors could be a fruitful alternative solution (Larsen, 2024; Savini & Bossuyt, 2022). Without substantial grassroot mobilization, federative structures, or labour union support it is hard to foster and maintain cooperative values such as organizational autonomy and residential governance and participation (Bresson & Carriou, 2014). Encinales *et al.*, for example, point to the importance of a 'strongly politicised and unionised working class' (Encinales *et al.*, 2024, p. 19) for the growth of housing cooperatives in Uruguay from the late 1960s. Drawing on the example of the conservative cooperativism in Hungary in the early twentieth century and previous studies, Jelinek (2024) suggest that a strong social democratic movement is necessary to create and maintain a progressive cooperative housing sector. Thus, one lesson from history may be that grassroots and civil society mobilization is a key factor behind successful cooperative housing development.

To be sure, this special issue is not the final word on the relationship between housing systems and housing cooperatives over time. We hope future work will explore some of the factors of cooperative housing growth left unanswered by both previous studies and this collection of articles. Future studies could, for instance, draw inspiration from Peverini's study of Milan (Peverini, 2025) and a recent analysis of housing cooperatives in Berlin (Laug & Hölzl, 2025) and focus systematically on the interplay between institutional contexts and the internal strategies of individual cooperatives, and thereby evaluate to what extent internal strategies and ideologies affect growth over time. There is also a research gap waiting to be filled by researchers interested in the influence of cooperative housing expansion on other tenures and housing providers. Does the growth of non-profit rental cooperatives influence other providers to compete in the same affordable housing segment, or does it nudge them towards the path of higher end for-profit housing? The existing literature has little to offer concerning such questions.

Finally, the articles in the special issue arguably tell us that cooperatives – even though they may have benefits in terms of tenure security, resident participation and well-being – are not necessarily easily funded and successfully managed panaceas to the contemporary global housing crisis. The homeownership variety of cooperatives seems inherently vulnerable to marketization, and housing cooperatives in general have historically depended on substantial state support and sustained civil society backing to thrive. Despite these challenges, the papers included in this issue

demonstrate the wide appeal of housing cooperatives across many housing systems globally. We hope that this collection of articles may provide inspiration and realistic lessons for policy makers, civil society actors, enterprises and residents striving to make cooperative housing associations function as viable long-standing small- or large-scale options for people in need of housing.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Managing Editors of *Housing Studies* – Caroline Dewilde, Ed Ferrari and Christian Nygaard – for valuable comments to this introduction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Jardar Sørvoll is a Research Professor at NOVA (Norwegian Social Research), Oslo Metropolitan University. He is also head of HOUSINGWEL, centre of housing and welfare research. Sørvoll has a PhD in history, and is an expert on the housing policies and housing markets in the Nordic countries. His specific research interests include housing cooperatives, the private rented sector, social housing, and housing in the ageing society. He recently headed the public committee that reviewed and recommended changes to the Norwegian Tenancy Act.

Claire Carriou is a full professor at the Paris School of Urban Planning, University of Paris Est Créteil. She is also a researcher at Lab'urba. She is co-director of the French Housing Research Network (GIS - ReHal), a member of the coordinating committee of the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) and co-organised the 2025 ENHR Grand Paris conference. Claire Carriou holds a PhD in urban planning and history and is an expert in housing policy in France. Her specific areas of research include the history of housing policy, social housing, collaborative housing, resident and tenant participation, and more recently new modes of housing tenure (property dismemberment).

Richard Lang is Full Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Management and Director of the Competence Center for the Management of Cooperatives at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy. He holds a PhD and habilitation in management from WU Vienna and JKU Linz in Austria. He has been a research fellow at the University of Birmingham, UK, where he conducted an international comparative study on innovations in cooperative housing, for which he also received an APART-Fellowship from the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His current research interests include new forms of cooperative and collaborative housing as well as social economy enterprise models and their role in urban and regional development. He was co-founder of the working group on collaborative housing within the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR).

References

Aernauts, N. & Ryckewaert, M. (2019) Reproducing housing commons. Government involvement and differential commoning in a housing cooperative, *Housing Studies*, 34(1), pp. 92–110. doi: 10.1080/02673037.2018.1432756

Bacqué, M.-H. & Claire, C. (2011) Participation et politiques du logement, un débat qui traverse le vingtième siècle, in: Bacqué M.-H. & Sintomer Y. (eds.), *La Démocratie participative. Histoire et généalogie*, pp. 155–174 (Paris : La Découverte).

Balmer, I. & Gerber, J.-D. (2018) Why are housing cooperatives successful? Insights from Swiss affordable housing policy, *Housing Studies*, 33(3), pp. 361–385.
Barenstein, J. D., Koch, P., Sanjines, D., Assandri, C., Matonte, C., Osorio, D. & Sarachu, G. (2022) Struggles for the decommodification of housing: The politics of housing cooperatives in Uruguay and Switzerland, *Housing Studies*, 37(6), pp. 955–974.
Bengtsson, B. (2024) The changing role of cooperatives in the Swedish housing regime – A path dependence analysis, *Housing Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–21.
Bengtsson, B. & Ruonavaara, H. (2010) Introduction to the special issue: Path dependence in housing, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 27(3), pp. 193–203.
Birchall, J. (1991) *The Hidden History of Co-operative Housing in Britain Department of Government Working Papers No*. 17 (London: Brunel University).
Bresson, S. & Carriou, C. (2014) Logement social et participation: la démocratie locative en question, Participations, n°N° 39(2), pp. 7–30. https://shs.cairn.info/revue-participations-2024-2-page-7?lang=fr.
Bresson, S. & Denèfle, S. (2015) Diversity of self-managed co-housing initiatives in France, *Urban Research & Practice*, 8(1), pp. 5–16.
Charlesworth, D. (2024) Policy amnesia and the promise of housing cooperatives: Finnish housing cooperativism from 1920 to 2020, *Housing Studies*, pp. 1–23. doi: 10.1080/02673037.2024.2406265
Clapham, D. & Kintrea, K. (1987) Importing housing policy: Housing Co-Operatives in Britain and Scandinavia, *Housing Studies*, 2(3), pp. 157–169.
Cooperative Housing International. (2025a) About us. https://www.housinginternational.coop/about/ (accessed 22 April 2025).
Cooperative Housing International. (2025b) International Year of Cooperatives. https://www.housinginternational.coop/international-year-of-cooperatives/ (accessed 22 April 2025).
Coudroy de Lille, L. (2015) Housing Cooperatives in Poland. The Origins of a Deadlock, *Urban Research & Practice*, 8(1), pp. 17–31.
Crabtree, L., Perry, N., Grimstad, S. & McNeil, J. (2021) Impediments and opportunities for growing the cooperative housing sector: An Australian case study, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 21(1), pp. 138–152. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19491247.2019.1658916
Czischke, D., Ruiz-Tagle, J., Valenzuela, F., Carroza-Athens, N. & Cortés-Urra, V. (2025) Housing cooperatives in Chile: The struggle to re-emerge in a neoliberal context of growing self-management, *Housing Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–23.
Egner, B. & Krapp, M.-C. (2025) *Housing in Crisis. Policies and Challenges in Europe* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan).
Encinales, D., Duyne Barenstein, J. & Quiñónez, N. (2024) Exploring the conditions for the emergence and sustainability of housing cooperatives in Latin America, *Housing Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–24.
Flanagan, K. & Jacobs, K. (2019) 'The long view': Introduction for special edition of housing studies. *Housing Studies*, 34(2), pp. 195–200. doi: 10.1080/02673037.2019.1558592
Foucault, M. (1963) *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Paris, UGE 10/18.
Ganapati, S. (2010) Enabling housing cooperatives: Policy lessons from Sweden, India and the United States, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 34(2), pp. 365–380.
Grander, M. & Stephens, M. (2024) *The Routledge Handbook of Housing and Welfare* (Oxon: Routledge).
Grimstad, S., Crabtree-Hayes, L., Power, E. R., Ayres, L. & Perry, N. (2024) Critical junctures: Using a path dependence approach to analyse the scarcity of housing co-operatives in Australia, *Housing Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–23. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673037.2024.2428744
Guity-Zapata, N., Stone, W. M. & Nygaard, C. A. (2024) Secure renting by living collectively? A relational exploration of home and homemaking in rental housing coopératives, *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 39(3), pp. 1355–1376.

Guity-Zapata, N., Stone, W. M. & Nygaard, C. A. (2025) The collective meaning of "sense of home": Experiences from a rental housing cooperative in melbourne, Australia, and Choluteca, Honduras, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 2025, pp. 1–24.
Gulbrandsen, L. & Torgersen, U. (1978) Private sentiments in a public context: Aspects of Co-operative housing in Oslo, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 1(4), pp. 255–283.
Harris, R. (1999) Slipping through the cracks: The origins of aided self-help housing, 1918-53, *Housing Studies*, 14(3), pp. 281–309.
Hegedüs, J. (2020) "Limits of the Kemeny's housing regime theory" a comment to stephens' paper, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(5), pp. 567–572.
Hochstenbach, K., Kadi, J., Maalsen, S. & Nethercote, M. (2025) Housing as an engine of inequality and the role of policy, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 25(1), pp. 1–17.
Hoekstra, J. (2020) Comparing local instead of national housing regimes? Towards international comparative housing research 2.0, *Critical Housing Analysis*, 7(1), pp. 74–85.
Jelinek, S. (2024) The longue durée history of housing cooperativism in Hungary, *Housing Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–21. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673037.2024.2435902
Kemeny, J. (1995) *From public housing to the social market* (London: Routledge).
Kemeny, J. (2006) Corporatism and housing régimes, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 23(1), pp. 1–18.
Kemeny, J., Kersloot, J. & Thalmann, P. (2005) Non-profit housing influencing, leading and dominating the unitary rental market: Three case studies, *Housing Studies*, 20(6), pp. 855–872.
Kohl, S. & Sørvoll, J. (2021) Varieties of social democracy and cooperativism: Explaining the historical divergence between housing regimes in nordic and German-Speaking countries, *Social Science History*, 45(3), pp. 561–587.
Kováts, B. & Kohl, S. (2024) Varieties of East-Central european housing tenure structure: The long life of a North-South cleavage line, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 2024, pp. 1–22.
Lang, R. & Novy, A. (2014) Cooperative housing and social cohesion: The role of linking social capital, *European Planning Studies*, 22(8), pp. 1744–1764.
Lang, R. & Stoeger, H. (2018) The role of the local institutional context in understanding collaborative housing models: Empirical evidence from Austria, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 18(1), pp. 35–54.
Larsen, H. G. (2024) Property relations between state and market: A history of housing cooperatives in Denmark, *Housing Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–23.
Laug, L. & Hölzl, C. (2025) Growth for people, not for profit: The internal factorsbehind the expansion of housing cooperatives in Berlin, *Housing Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–21.
Lawson, J. (2009) The transformation of social housing provision in Switzerland mediated by federalism, direct democracy and the urban/rural divide. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 9(1), pp. 45–67. doi: 10.1080/14616710802693599
McNelis, S. (2020) The eight enduring challenges in housing studies – On explanations, an integrated comprehensive heuristic and, implementation: Some comments on mark Stephen's article, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(5), pp. 578–583. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14036096.2020.1816571
Moreau, S. & Pittini, A. (2012) *Profiles of a movement: Co-operative housing around the world* (Brussels: CECODHAS Housing Europe and ICA Housing).
Norris, M. (2020) Commentary on stephens' "how housing systems are changing and why: A critique of Kemeny's theory of housing regimes", *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(5), pp. 552–556. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14036096.2020.1816575#d1e91
Novy, K. & Förster, W. (1991) Einfach bauen: Genossenschaftliche Selbsthilfe nach der Jahrhundertwende. *Zur Rekonstruktion der Wiener Siedlerbewegung [Building simple: Co-operative self-help after the turn of the century. Reconstructing the Viennese settlers' movement]*. Vienna: Picus.
O'Hara, G. (2008) Applied socialism of a fairly moderate kind, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 33(1), pp. 1–25.
Peverini, M. (2025) Do housing cooperatives change amidst neoliberal policies? Evidence from hybridization of two cooperative organizations in Milan, *Housing Studies*, 2025, pp. 1–23.

Pfatteicher, P. A. C., McCarthy, O. & Power, C. (2024) Housing co-operatives in Germany: 160 years of evolution and resilience, *Journal of Co-Operative Studies*, 57(1), pp. 39–53.
Rolf, H. (2021) A union for tenants: Tenant militancy in Gothenburg as a historical example, *Radical Housing Journal*, 4(1), pp. 167–186.
Rosanvallon, P. (2003) *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France faite le jeudi 28 mars 2002* (Paris: éditions du Seuil).
Ruonavaara, H. (2020) Rethinking the concept of 'housing 'regime, *Critical Housing Analysis*, 7(1), pp. 5–14.
Savini, F. & Bossuyt, D (2022) Housing commons as a degrowth planning practice: Learning from Amsterdam's de Nieuwe Meent, in: F. Savini., *et al.* (Eds) *Post-Growth Planning: Cities Beyond the Market Economy*, 35–48 (London: Routledge).
Stephens, M. (2020a) How housing systems are changing and why: A critique of Kemeny's theory of housing régimes, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(5), pp. 521–547.
Stephens, M. (2020b) Towards a multi-layered housing regime framework: Responses to commentators, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(5), pp. 584–596.
Sørvoll, J. (2024) The history of cooperative housing in the modern world 1880–2024. Why housing cooperatives succeed and fail in in housing systems with limited economic and political capital. Plenary at the European Network of Housing Resarch in Delft, the Netherlands, 28.08.2024.
Sørvoll, J. & Bengtsson, B. (2018) The pyrrhic victory of civil society housing? Co-Operative housing in Sweden and Norway, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 18(1), pp. 124–142.
Sørvoll, J. & Bengtsson, B. (2020a) Mechanisms of solidarity in collaborative housing – the case of co-operative housing in Denmark 1980–2017, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 37(1), pp. 65–81.
Sørvoll, J. & Bengtsson, B. (2020b) Autonomy, democracy and solidarity. The defining principles of collaborative civil society housing and some mechanisms that may challenge them, *Urban Research & Practice*, 13(4), pp. 390–410.
Sørvoll, J., Listerborn, C. & Sandberg, M. (2024) Housing and Welfare in Sweden, Norway and the wider Nordic region, in: Grander, M. & Stephens, M. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Housing and Welfare*, 88–106 (Oxon: Routledge). https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.120