



Social innovation in affordable housing

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Abstract:

The lack of affordable housing is a longstanding global challenge. Addressing this issue requires not only technical solutions but also new social practices – social innovation. This article explores the role of social innovation in increasing access to affordable housing through a theory-focused literature review. We find that the concepts often lack clarity and theoretical grounding, making it difficult to measure innovation outcomes or guide practical implementation. We adopt the social innovation ecosystem framework developed by Audretsch et al. (2022) and discuss policy, finance, culture, supports, human capital, and market perspectives. We propose an expanded version of the framework, adapted specifically for affordable housing. It introduces two key additions: explicit identification of the social innovator and the integration of spatial concepts—space and place—to capture the inherently local nature of housing initiatives. This contribution aims to advance both social innovation theory and housing research, while also informing policy and practice.

Keywords: social innovation, innovation, affordable housing, social housing

JEL-codes: O35, R21, R31, R38, R58

Introduction

Affordable housing is generally defined as housing for middle income households rented at below-market rates (Czischke et al., 2012). A lack of affordable housing makes it difficult for households to pay for other necessary expenditures and may result in a lower quality of life (Anacker, 2019). Similarly, living in unaffordable housing is linked to several health problems (Pollack et al., 2010). Housing affordability is a global crisis, with urban areas being the most affected. This is a result of increased urbanisation, the availability of cheap credit, and rising inequality in many societies (Wetzstein, 2017).

Since the solutions to increasing affordable housing are complex and multi-faceted, it can be considered to be a ‘wicked problem’, as defined by Lönngren & Van Poeck (2021) and included in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 11.1 (United Nations, 2015). Scholars refer to such issues as ‘grand challenges’ (Audretsch et al., 2022; Colquitt & George, 2011). Although humans have become skilled at solving technical problems, we have yet to adequately address the more fundamental issues facing all of humankind (Nelson, 1974; Nelson, 2011). This suggests that current practices for providing access to affordable housing need to be reconsidered.

Social innovation (SI) is one approach to increase access to housing for households unable to gain access to the regular housing market (Bouchard, 2012; Midheme, 2013; Raynor, 2019; Vitale & Membretti, 2013). SI has long traditions in innovation research. Nelson (1974; 2011) discussed the complexities of SI early on, and Sachs (Sachs, 2014) outlined a framework for implementing the 17 SDGs through societal transformations – one of which concerns sustainable and socially inclusive cities and communities. These contributions pave the way for a deeper understanding of affordable housing. Nevertheless, SI lacks a commonly accepted definition and a coherent theoretical framework. Today, SI is a rich field of study. However, different concepts of innovation are used ambiguously, and the literature is fragmented. As a result, SI concepts are still highly debated (Abad & Ezponda, 2022). Moreover, the understanding of SI, especially related to affordable housing, lacks theoretical grounding in both the innovation research literature and the housing sector literature.

We ask: *What is the role of social innovation in increasing access to affordable housing?* We conduct a theory-focused structured literature review, adopting the SI framework proposed by Audretsch et al. (2022), which focuses on policy, markets, human capital, supports, culture, and finance – aligning with the traditional entrepreneurial ecosystem model (Isenberg, 2011). We review SI literature related to affordable housing, through reading and coding 54 studies.

Our contribution to the SI literature is as follows: First, we adopt and extend the theoretical framework proposed by Audretsch et al. (2022), and we propose modifications to better align it with the context of affordable housing. Specifically, we refine and explicate the concept of ‘social innovator’ and introduce the concept of ‘space and place’, as these play a significant role in the reviewed literature. Furthermore, by contextualizing this framework within the affordable housing literature, we contribute to a deeper understanding of a relevant, applied domain of SI. Finally, the extended framework and its categories can aid in identifying relevant components of the SI ecosystem, thereby offering guidance to managers and policymakers.

Theoretical background

Social Innovation theory

Innovation has traditionally been associated with technological advancements and business growth. However, considering the pressing global challenges such as climate change, rising inequality, and social fragmentation, this narrow focus is no longer sufficient. Scholars argue that innovation must adopt a broader meaning, one that addresses societal needs and sustainability (Fagerberg, 2018; Lundvall, 2013; Schot & Steinmueller, 2018; Schumpeter, 1942).

SI has emerged as a promising approach to addressing societal needs beyond what market mechanisms or traditional government policies can achieve (Murray et al., 2010). While the concept remains contested, social innovation can broadly be described as new practices in areas of social action that address needs and problems more effectively than existing practices (Howaldt et al., 2017).

The SI research literature has a transdisciplinary character (Rodrigo et al., 2024), drawing from fields such as sociology, urban planning, public policy, and business. This disciplinary heterogeneity brings richness, but also introduces conceptual ambiguity and fragmentation. Furthermore, the literature is characterized by different ontological and epistemological viewpoints, as well as a local or regional focus and an emphasis on solutions that are embedded within specific problem domains (Lee et al., 2019). Some researchers view SI as a possible solution to SDGs (Howaldt, 2019), although others argue that it might not provide adequate answers to all wicked problems (Domanski et al., 2020). SI has also become a popular theme in political initiatives, networks, and organizations across government, business and civil society (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017).

Several theoretical perspectives aim to define and characterize the different research areas within SI. Cajaiba-Santana (2014) identifies two polarizing perspectives. The school of social entrepreneurship adopts an *individualistic perspective*, emphasizing the role of specific individuals in driving SI (Mulgan, 2006; Mumford, 2002). In contrast, researchers in organizational analysis adopt a *structural perspective*, viewing SI as shaped by broader institutional and contextual factors (Domanski et al., 2020; Oosterlynck, 2013). Urban planning scholars view SI as path-dependent and contextual, often linking it to specific places and communities (Christiaens et al., 2007; Moulaert et al., 2007; Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert & Mehmood, 2020; Paidakaki & Moulaert, 2017, 2018).

Despite growing academic and policy interest, the concept of SI remains contested. Critics argue that the concept risks becoming a buzzword (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017) and “void of content” (Abad & Ezponda, 2022). Others note the lack of coherent theoretical foundation, with concerns that dominant interpretations overlook the importance of space, place, and scale of SI (Beckman et al., 2023). According to Pol and Ville (Pol & Ville, 2009), SI and business innovation are distinct, but overlapping concepts.

Given the multitude of perspectives and definitions, we sought a comprehensive framework suitable for analysing SI in the specific context of affordable housing. We draw on the work of Audretsch et al. (2022), who extend the concept of the entrepreneurial ecosystem to include the needs and activities of social innovators. In line with this approach, we adopt the definition by Murray et al. (Murray et al., 2010, page 3) who describe SI as:

“new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. In other words, they are innovations that are both good for society and enhance society’s capacity to act”.

Affordable housing presents a particularly urgent and complex area of SI. The concept itself varies widely across national and local contexts, often overlapping with the concept of social housing, leading to the two being used interchangeable in many cases (Czischke et al., 2012). We adopt the broader definition of affordable housing offered by van Bortel and Gruis (2019), which encompasses both the narrow definition of affordable housing, defined by rents lower than full market rents, and the definition of social housing, where rents are related to household income. To ensure comprehensive coverage in the literature review, we include both search terms in our analysis.

Audretsch et al.’s social innovation ecosystem framework

We have chosen to use the framework developed by Audretsch et al. (2022), which builds on the traditional entrepreneurial ecosystem model proposed by Isenberg (2011). This framework presents an ecosystem model for SI that is grounded in the needs of social entrepreneurs. As such, it adopts an

individualistic perspective, even though it is rooted in a structural view that shapes the actions of individual entrepreneurs. Our choice of this framework is based on two main reasons: first, it combines both individualistic and structural perspectives; second, it offers a comprehensive view of the fundamental ecosystem surrounding SI in the context of affordable housing.

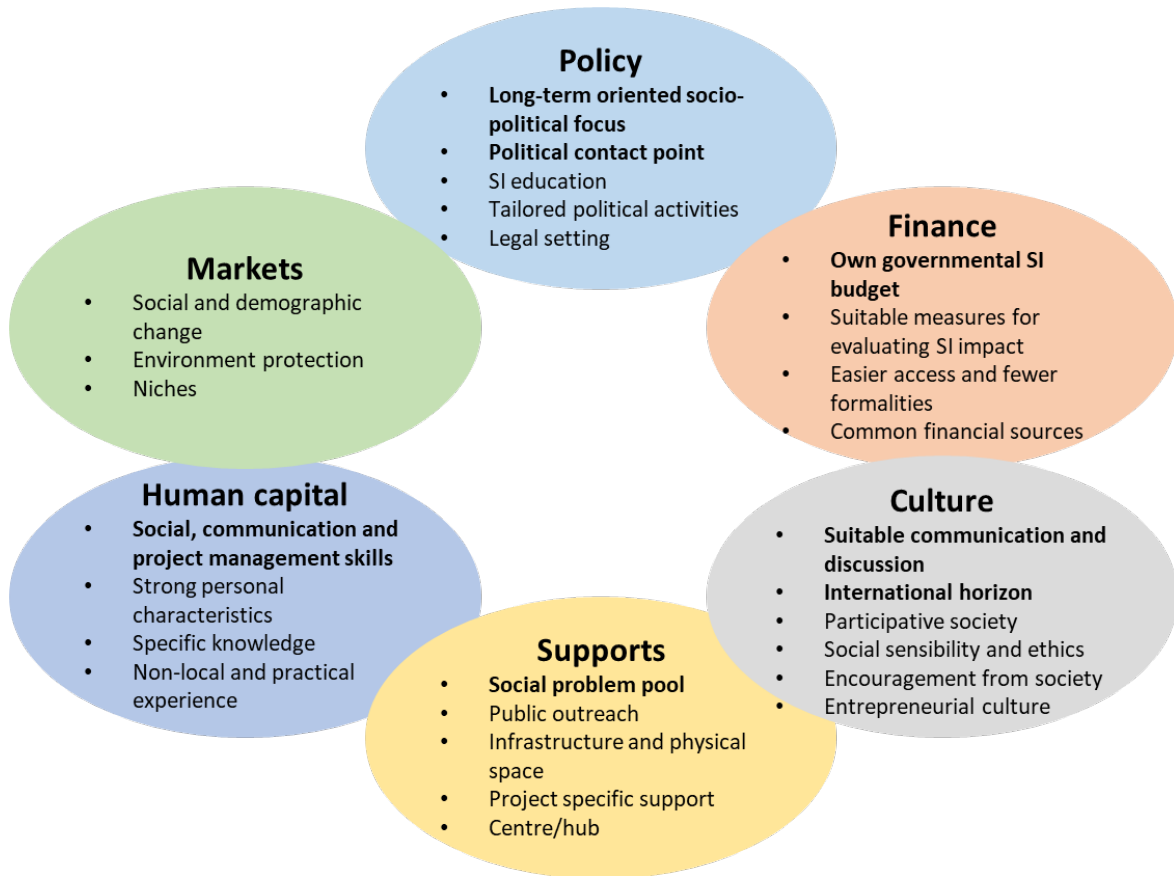


Figure 1. The SI ecosystem model. Emerging needs of SI (largely neglected in the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem literature) are highlighted in bold, all according to Audretsch et al (2022).

The framework describes the ecosystem surrounding entrepreneurial activity and consists of six pillars: policy, finance, culture, supports, human capital, and markets. The policy pillar encompasses the legal framework and targeted political activities. These may include a long-term socio-political focus, political contact points, and SI education. Finance refers to financial resources, improving access to finance, and reduced bureaucratic barriers. For SI specifically, this includes appropriate methods for evaluating social impact and the allocation of dedicated government (or municipal or regional) budget for SI. Culture is defined as societal encouragement and the broader entrepreneurial culture. Specific for SI, this includes effective communication and discussion, an international outlook, a participative society, social sensibility, and ethics. The support pillar involves public outreach, infrastructure and physical space, project-specific support, innovation hubs and centres, and a repository of social problems that needs to be addressed. Human capital is defined as specific knowledge, non-local and practical experience, strong personal characteristics, and skills in social interaction, communication and project management. Finally, markets refer to factors such as social and demographic change, environment protection, and the identification of niche areas for SI.

We also explicitly include social innovators in our framework, as they are the ones actively driving SI. Although this factor is not explicitly part of the original framework, Audretsch et al. (2022) provide a definition and discussion of social innovators (Audretsch et al., 2022). They define social innovators as “social entrepreneurs and non-profit-oriented innovators who voluntarily develop social innovations”. These innovators “does not necessarily involve a commercial interest, but does not preclude such interest”. Social innovators can be commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations, or volunteers (Audretsch et al., 2022; de Wit et al., 2019; Westley & Antadze, 2010).

Furthermore, an aspect vital for affordable housing is missing from this framework, which is the spatial context. Therefore, we expand the framework with the category ‘space and place’, which enhances the framework’s applicability to affordable housing. Furthermore, we extend the existing categories of the framework through a thematic analysis of the affordable housing literature.

Method

To enhance the understanding of the role of SI in affordable housing, we conducted a structured, theory-driven literature review. First, we chose a structured review approach, as it can be of great value for making theoretical progress in a research field (Webster & Watson, 2002), especially in fragmented topics such as SI. The topic has been studied in multiple research fields; therefore, our review draws from various sources and disciplines, making it interdisciplinary by nature. Furthermore, structured reviews can promote the transfer of knowledge across disciplines and provide transparency and replicability, which are important for the quality and reliability of research. Second, despite the research question being framed around the phenomenon of SI in housing, our review is primarily theory-driven and employs deductive coding for reviewing this literature. The review is therefore confirmatory (Webster & Watson, 2002), meaning that it seeks to confirm facts in the literature.

We followed the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009) to conduct the literature search and selection. After several rounds of iterations, we selected the following search terms: "social innovation" AND housing (Topic) OR innovation AND "social housing" (Topic) OR innovation AND "affordable housing" (Topic), as these terms yielded a comprehensive set of the most relevant literature. "Topic" refers to a Web of Science field tag that includes article title, abstract, author keywords, and keywords plus. We limited the search to the following document types: article, early access, review article, and editorial material, and restricted the results to documents in English. This search resulted in 274 papers. We then reviewed the abstracts of the 274 papers and excluded 172, leaving 102 papers for further analysis. The reasons for exclusion were that the papers either did not address innovation or housing, or lacked a social aspect. For example, some papers were excluded because they focused on technical advancements related to energy efficiency or construction. We also excluded older papers with few or no citations.

After these search and selection steps, the final sample contained 54 articles. These were published between 2002 and 2024 in 39 different journals. We read all 54 articles in full and coded them according to the theoretical categories in the framework by Audretsch et al. (2022). In addition, we coded for concepts of SI and affordable housing, as well as the roles of social innovators and spaces and places. The findings are presented according to these categories. The articles were equally divided among the authors for reading. Any articles with uncertain coding were highlighted and discussed collectively to reach a common interpretation. Furthermore, we identified dominant themes and selected examples from the literature that illustrate each category, which are presented in the findings.

Findings

We first present a review of the concepts and understandings of SI and affordable housing, then discuss the six pillars of the SI ecosystem model, and finally address the roles of social innovators as well as spaces and places.

SI concepts and understanding

The reviewed literature presents SI as a multi-dimensional and contested concept, often grounded in context-specific practices. A more detailed examination of the reviewed papers divides the perspectives into four categories. First, critical perspectives on SI (Christiaens et al., 2007; Gilmour & Milligan, 2016; Marques & Bichir, 2024) include papers that question whether "innovation" truly transforms power structures or simply masks neoliberal shifts in housing provision. Second, service-integrated perspectives frame SI as the integration of housing with social support services — especially in Housing First and youth-focused programs (Gaetz et al., 2023; Parkinson & Parsell, 2018; Tsemberis et al., 2003; van Dijk et al., 2022). Third, resilience and crisis response perspectives focus on adaptive strategies for post-crisis housing, urban segregation, or ecological disaster recovery (Bridi et al., 2024; Cruz et al., 2017; Paidakaki & Moulaert, 2018; Widyaningsih & Van den Broeck, 2021). Fourth, design-driven SI emphasizes architectural and spatial design as means to foster new forms of living, community, and sustainability (Bamford, 2005; Khatibi, 2022; Marchesi & Tweed, 2021; Qiu & Lai, 2024).

Furthermore, three perspectives also stand out for their focus on innovation driven by different types of actors:

- Governance and Policy Innovation as a tool to improve governance, decentralize decision-making, and enhance institutional responsiveness (Basolo & Scally, 2008; Bouchard, 2012; Gaetz, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2016; Raynor & Coenen, 2022);
- Hybrid and Market-Innovation Models, with an emphasis on combining business models, public funding, and community involvement for scalable solutions (Bhanot et al., 2019; Mangialardi et al., 2022; Phillips & Johnson, 2019; Quirino et al., 2020; Raynor, 2019);
- Grassroots/Civic Empowerment, where SI is described as bottom-up resistance, grassroots organizing, and civic co-production of housing solutions (Cabré & Andrés, 2018; De Weerd & Garcia, 2015; Parés, 2019; Semperebon & Haddock, 2016; Widyaningsih & Van den Broeck, 2021).

While definitions vary, several core ideas recur in the reviewed papers: SI is seen as a process of reconfiguring social relations to better meet social needs, especially where traditional mechanisms (market/state) fall short. SI often involves bottom-up approaches, participatory governance, and collaborative practices. There is also a growing recognition of the potential of SI for policy transformation, resilience-building, and empowerment of marginalized groups.

However, interpretations differ significantly depending on the region, disciplinary angle, and sectoral context. Bouchard (2012) defines social innovation as a collective process aiming at satisfying unmet needs through new institutional arrangements, while Gaetz (2020) and Gaetz et al. (2023) describe SI as a way to rethink systems, especially regarding homelessness prevention and integration models. Raynor & Coenen (2020), by contrast, emphasize business model innovation as SI in hybrid housing organizations, blending social and financial goals. Cabré & Andrés (2018) use the concept in relation to housing cooperatives, seeing innovation in collective ownership and democratic governance.

Christiaens et al. (2017) provide a critical view, arguing that the use of social innovation in urban planning can transform radical practices into neoliberal agendas. Paidakaki & Moulaert (2017) focus on resilience-based innovation, distinguishing between superficial and genuinely transformative practices, while Phillips & Johnson (2019) position SI within the impact investing ecosystem, emphasizing outcomes, metrics, and hybrid funding. Widyaningsih & Van den Broeck (2021) link SI to everyday urban practices in resistance to eviction and disaster-induced displacement.

Affordable housing: Concepts and understanding

What is apparent in our findings is that affordable housing is described in various ways, depending on the geographical context. The most used concept is social housing (Mangialardi et al., 2022; Seo, 2022),

followed by affordable housing (Phillips & Johnson, 2019; Svidronova et al., 2020). These concepts are sometimes intertwined, as housing can be described as both social and affordable (Kraatz, 2018; Morris, 2002). Another common theme is housing targeted at addressing homelessness (Gilmour & Milligan, 2016; Tsemberis et al., 2003), including Housing First programs (González & Puelles, 2019), and public housing (Bijen & Piracha, 2017; Peverini et al., 2024). Specific forms of housing that often, but not always, target low-income households include cohousing (Bamford, 2005; Khatibi, 2022), coliving (Qiu & Lai, 2024), and collaborative housing (Cucca & Friesenecker, 2022).

Finally, a variety of other terms are used to describe similar types of housing, such as municipal housing (Kabus & Dziadkiewicz, 2022), housing for disadvantaged groups (Cruz et al., 2017), low-income housing (Wijburg, 2024), and socially inclusive housing (Christiaens et al., 2007).

Policy

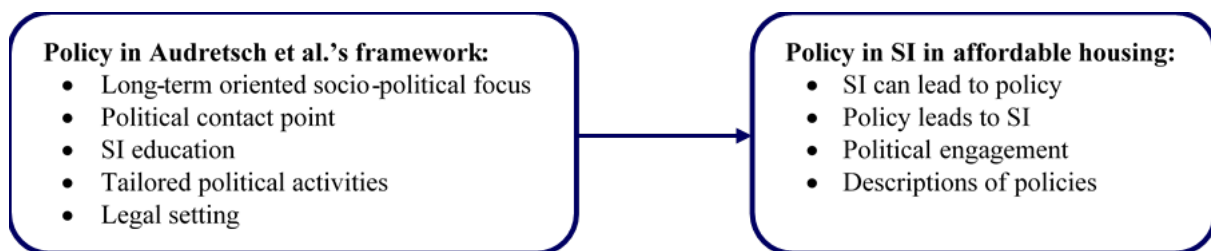


Figure 2. SI ecosystem model on policy and policy in SI in affordable housing.

Our analysis shows several differences (Figure 2) when compared with the framework by Audretsch et al. (2022). The most prominent changes concern the influence of SI on policy, which is evident in 22 of the reviewed papers. SI can lead to policy changes (Bhanot et al., 2019; Marques & Bichir, 2024; Szüdi & Kováčová, 2015; Yung, 2023), may advocate for policy reform (Qiu & Lai, 2024), or may require policy change to function effectively (Sempredon & Haddock, 2016; Seo, 2022). In some cases, policy is already strongly present, but has been altered due to the influence of SI (Weinzierl et al., 2016). Notably, some papers identify a possible feedback loop between policy and innovation. Arentshorst et al. (2019), for example, hypothesise that contextual factors such as funding and regulation not only shape innovation but are also reshaped by it.

Conversely, changes in policy can also lead to SI – a result identified in eleven papers. One prominent example involves policy shifts towards more market-based approaches, which reduce affordable housing availability (Gaetz, 2020; Raynor, 2019). In these cases, SI is viewed as a solution to providing housing for low-income households. In some instances, the government seeks new solutions for affordable housing through SI (Gibb, 2011).

Eight papers discuss the level of political engagement in SI. This engagement can be both positive and negative. Negative engagement is mostly expressed as a perceived lack of political support for SI (Hamdouch & Galvan, 2019). Valenzuela Aguilera and Tsenkova (2019) note that while housing and financial policies have facilitated innovation, efforts have been constrained by institutional barriers and inconsistent political backing. However, there are also examples of positive political support for SI (Hacke et al., 2019).

A few papers describe the relationship between policies and SI (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Mangialardi et al., 2022; Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020; Wijburg, 2024). Basolo and Scally (2008) explore the influence of state-level politics in California and New Jersey, highlighting how housing policy innovation is often shaped by broader political trends and agenda-setting dynamics.

Finance

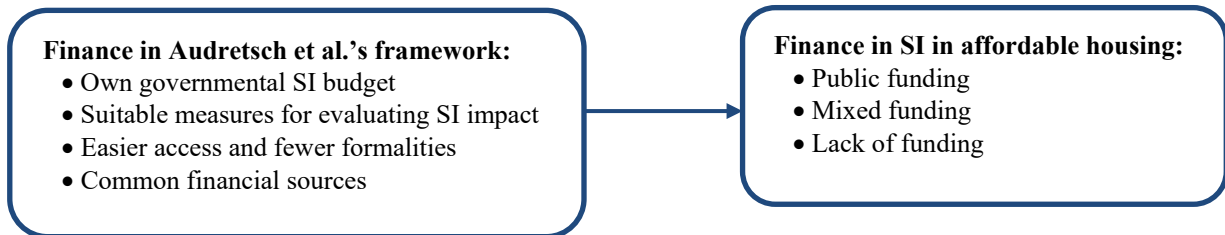


Figure 3. SI ecosystem model on finance and finance in SI in affordable housing.

Several papers discuss the public funding of SI. Valenzuela Aguilera and Tsenkova (2019) explore how social housing has been supported through federal government investments, despite limited participation from private finance. They underline that innovation in housing finance remains constrained by policy and institutional limitations. Similarly, Basolo and Scally (2008) investigate how California and New Jersey have implemented forms of public support, through either providing financial assistance or through specific incentives to stimulate housing development.

The most common type of financing described in the selected papers is mixed financing. In Australia, there has been an increased focus on public-private partnerships to finance social and affordable housing (Bijen & Piracha, 2017; Raynor, 2019; Raynor & Coenen, 2022). Peverini et al. (2024) describe the privatization and financialization of public providers and assets in Italy. Notably, we did not identify papers that discussed SIs funded exclusively by private actors.

Culture

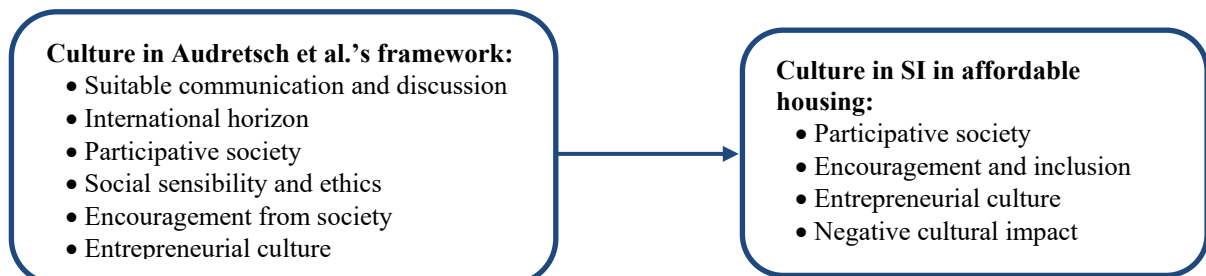


Figure 4. SI ecosystem model on culture and culture in SI in affordable housing.

Participative society as the involvement of diverse stakeholder groups in the development of SIs was found in several papers (Bamford, 2005; Hacke et al., 2019; Nettleton & Sufan, 2017).

We chose to rename the category “encouragement from society” to “encouragement and inclusion” in order to better reflect the themes found in the literature. For example, Arentshorst et al. (2019) describe a project aimed at creating a lively, joyful, and inclusive living environment, while Paidakaki and Moulaert (2018) emphasize culture as a key element in fostering social resilience.

A few papers addressed entrepreneurial culture (Bhanot et al., 2019; Gaetz et al., 2023; Gilmour & Milligan, 2016). Quirinho et al. (2020), for instance, describe a case in Brazil where the government implemented a comprehensive social business model for social housing, thus transforming the national housing market.

However, culture can negatively influence SI, as discussed by Raynor (2019), where local opposition to housing development was overruled by municipal authorities. SI can also have a negative influence

on culture, as noted by Bijen and Piracha (2017), who discuss the loss of cultural history and identity resulting from new housing development. Similarly, Valenzuela Aguilera and Tsenkova (2019) describe how a politically motivated large-scale housing project led to financial instability and a national crisis.

Supports

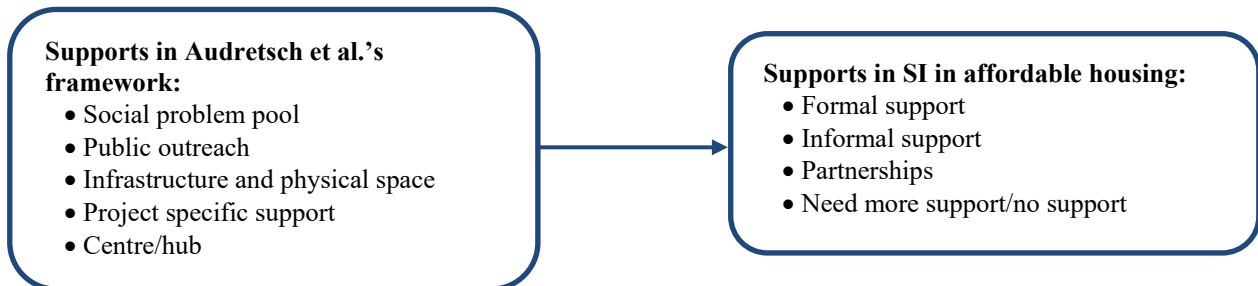


Figure 5. SI ecosystem model on supports and supports in SI in affordable housing.

Our analysis reflects and extends the notion of supports by identifying varying levels and types of support across the selected papers. In five cases, it was explicitly noted that the SI received formal support, typically in the form of public funding or governmental investment (Mangialardi et al., 2022; Valenzuela Aguilera & Tsenkova, 2019). However, the most prevalent form of support was informal support, which appeared in 17 of the papers. Informal support came from volunteers (Parkinson & Parsell, 2018), the tenants themselves (Arentshorst et al., 2019), and most frequently, from the local community (Cabr e & Andr es, 2018;  erna & Gojova, 2023) (Kraatz, 2018). Liu and Zhang (2022) discuss support within informal urban settlements, while Szudi and Kovacova (2015) highlight local empowerment movements. A particularly interesting case is presented by Tsemberis et al. (2003), where the lived experience of a formerly homeless person who hosted his former social worker helped shift service providers’ professional perspectives on Housing First initiatives.

A common type of support is through partnerships (Bijen & Piracha, 2017), networks (Quirino et al., 2020), or hybrid organizations (Gilmour & Milligan, 2016). Svidronova et al. (2020) note that NGOs are establishing cooperation with the non-governmental housing organization, while Christiaens et al. (2007) discuss interactions between political institutions and civil society.

Human capital

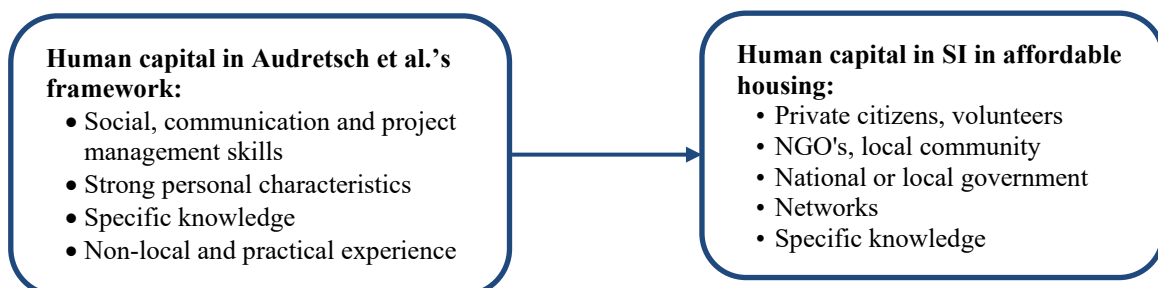


Figure 6. SI ecosystem model on human capital and human capital in SI in affordable housing.

Private citizens can be the driving force behind SI (Bamford, 2005; Qiu & Lai, 2024; Semprebon & Haddock, 2016; Svidronova et al., 2020). Cruz et al. (2017) discuss the mobilization of local actors and the and shared skills in networks.

The human capital supporting SI can originate from the local community (Beretić & Talu, 2020; Raynor, 2019) or from NGOs (Bouchard, 2012; Cabré & Andrés, 2018). For example, De Weerd and Garcia (2015) discuss the role of activists in urban social movements after a housing bubble. Furthermore, eight of the selected papers describe that the SIs rely on the human capital of public officials, ranging from city and local planners (Gaetz, 2020; Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020), to a combination of national and municipal civil servants (Gaetz et al., 2023; Gibb, 2011), and federal government personnel (Bridi et al., 2024).

Elements of human capital also come in the form of networks (Marques & Bichir, 2024), organizational hybridity (Gilmour & Milligan, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016), or partnerships (Peveerini et al., 2024). Weinzierl et al. (2016) highlight a strong alliance between the public administration and social service providers.

In our findings, six papers refer to specific knowledge as case-specific expertise relevant to SI. Ayoade and Ahmed (2020) discuss the importance of knowledge sharing to further innovation, while Parés (2019) underlines the value of collective leadership in driving social change. Conversely, a lack of knowledge is also mentioned as a barrier to SI (Hacke et al., 2019; Phillips & Johnson, 2019).

Markets

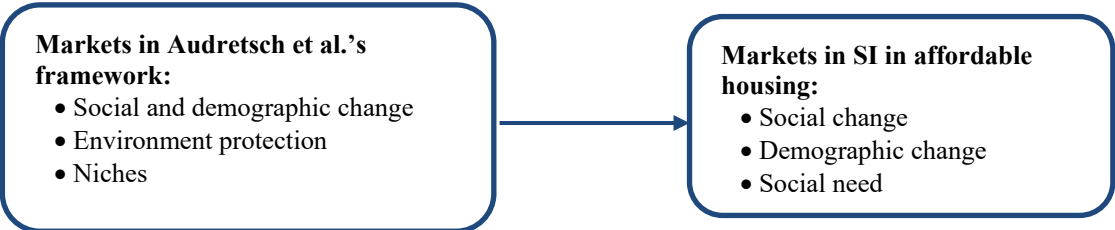


Figure 7. SI ecosystem model on markets and markets in SI in affordable housing.

Almost all of the papers describe some form of social change as the origin of SI. Scholars highlight how post-crisis financial deregulation and persistent policy shortcomings have undermined housing affordability (Ayoade & Ahmed, 2020; Valenzuela Aguilera & Tsenkova, 2019). These structural constraints have intensified pressures in both rental and ownership markets, contributing to widening social and spatial inequalities (Basolo & Scally, 2008).

Since housing is highly dependent on demographic trends, we have separated the social change from demographic change into a category of its own. The most notable demographic transformation concerns an aging population, which has profound implications for housing provision. The increasing prevalence of older adults underscores the limitations of conventional housing models (Arentshorst et al., 2019; Bamford, 2005). Several papers draw attention to the growing disparity between the existing housing stock and the lived realities of older populations (Qiu & Lai, 2024). Other demographic shifts concern rapid population growth (Gilmour & Milligan, 2016), urban gentrification (Khatibi, 2022), and an increase in migration (Liu & Zhang, 2020).

Social innovators

Audretsch et al. (2022) define social innovators as “commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations or volunteers”. A key finding in our review is that the housing market is place dependent. This is also reflected in the social innovators themselves – actors may operate at the national, regional, or local level. In many cases, the nature of their operations and ownership structures is self-evident to the authors and local communities but remains unclear to the reader. For our purposes, this has meant that we are not always certain what type of social innovator is being described.

The most common type of social innovator is a non-profit organization. These include civil society actors (Weinzierl et al., 2016), third sector organizations (Parkinson & Parsell, 2018; Yung, 2023), and cooperatives (Cabré & Andrés, 2018; Khatibi, 2022). Public actors are also frequently represented. These may include governmental agencies (Gaetz, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2023; Quirino et al., 2020; Wijburg, 2024), municipal resource managers (Kabus & Dziadkiewicz, 2022), or local social workers (González & Puelles, 2019). Private actors appear as affordable housing providers (Raynor & Coenen, 2022), housing developers (Nettleton & Sufan, 2017), or housing associations (Seo, 2022). Volunteers are also involved and may include tenants (Bamford, 2005), engaged citizens (Cruz et al., 2017), or peers with earlier experiences of homelessness (Černá & Gojová, 2023). Finally, different types of partnerships are common. These range from public-private partnerships (Bijen & Piracha, 2017; Hamdouch & Galvan, 2019), to private-volunteer partnerships (Liu & Zhang, 2020), private-non-profit partnerships (Marchesi & Tweed, 2021), and comprehensive public-private-non-profit alliances (Peverini et al., 2024).

Spatial dimensions: The role of spaces and places

Although entrepreneurial ecosystem theory — and the framework by Audretsch et al. (2022) — acknowledge the role of geography, our findings clearly show that SI in affordable housing has an important spatial dimension related to spaces and places. This includes the micro-locations where the housing is situated, but also extends to the broader set of actors and ecosystem pillars that are closely intertwined with these micro-locations.

This spatial dimension is important to the discussion of housing, as all housing, aside from mobile homes and house boats, is inherently tied to a specific place. The spatial aspect can be divided into two parts: space and place. We define space as a physical location characterized by its physical attributes and location. Place, on the other hand, is a geographical construct that holds significant social, cultural, and emotional meaning. This is evident in the broader literature that considers the design, construction, and use of housing as central issues in the context of SI and affordable housing.

However, the analysis of the reviewed literature also shows the broader spatial relevance: The most common scope in the selected papers are case studies, with only a local reach. This was found in 34 papers. Six papers covered regional SIs, 13 covered national SIs and one was about international aspects of SI in affordable housing (Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020). Furthermore, the 54 papers represent cases from 22 different countries, plus one covering Latin America as a region (Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020). Finally, 45% of the papers focus on Europe, 23% on North America, 11% on Asia, 9% on South America, and 13% on Oceania.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on our findings, we propose an adapted and expanded version of the SI ecosystem model, originally developed by Audretsch et al. (2022). Our extended framework (Figure 8) tailors the model specifically to the context of affordable housing. It therefore presents novel themes within the six main categories. It further proposes two key additions:

- Inclusion of the social innovator: While Audretsch et al. (2022) place the innovator at the center of their model, our analysis shows the need to explicitly identify and define this actor, especially in the housing context. The key differentiator in our analysis compared to the Audretsch et al. (2022) framework is the emphasis on the place-dependent nature of social innovators in the housing sector, highlighting their varied scales of operation and complex, often unclear organizational structures.
- Incorporation of space and place: Given the inherently spatial nature of housing, we integrate these concepts as fundamental to understanding how SI unfolds in specific localities.

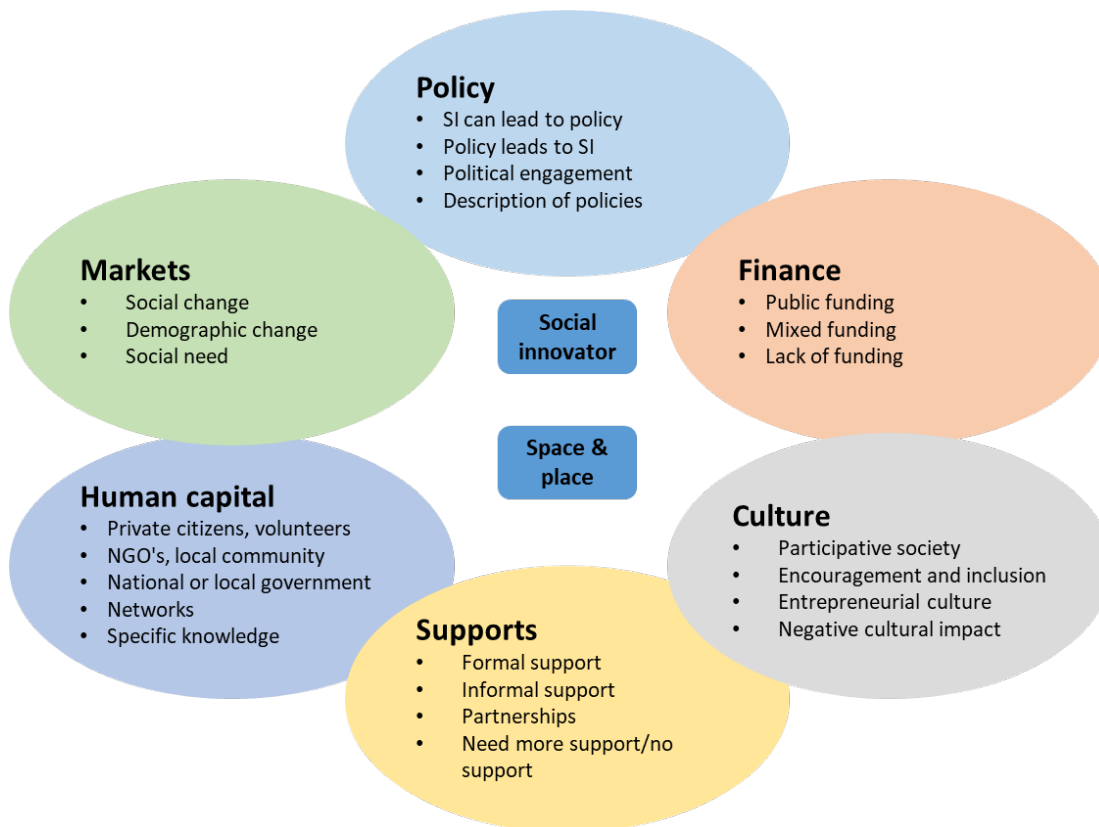


Figure 8. Extended SI ecosystem model for affordable housing.

In terms of policy, SI is often either shaped by existing policies or leads to new policy. Financial constraints are a recurring challenge, with many initiatives relying on mixed funding sources. The cultural dimension highlights the importance of participation, encouragement, and inclusion in fostering successful innovation. Support frequently comes from informal networks such as local communities and volunteers, as well as through partnerships. Human capital is contributed by a wide range of actors. Finally, demographic or social change, such as natural disaster or an aging population, often serve as a catalyst for innovation.

In conclusion, the issue of affordable housing is relevant across many countries, but potential solutions are highly context-dependent. SI in this field tends to emerge through small-scale, locally rooted case studies, although there are also examples with regional, national, or even international scope. Through our review, we have contributed a comprehensive overview of how SI is being applied to affordable housing and developed a theoretical framework that other scholars can build upon. This framework can be further expanded to include additional aspects of SI, such as outcomes and long-term impacts. However, we also acknowledge the limitations of our work, given that the existing literature is fragmented and marked by significant diversity.

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