

Book review: Randy Shaw: Generation Priced Out - Who Gets to Live in the New Urban America

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Revington, N. (2020). Book review: Randy Shaw: Generation Priced Out - Who Gets to Live in the New Urban America. [Review of the book *Generation priced out: who gets to live in the new urban America*, by R. Shaw]. *Intergenerational Justice Review*, 6(1), 32-34. <https://doi.org/10.24357/igjr.6.1.798>

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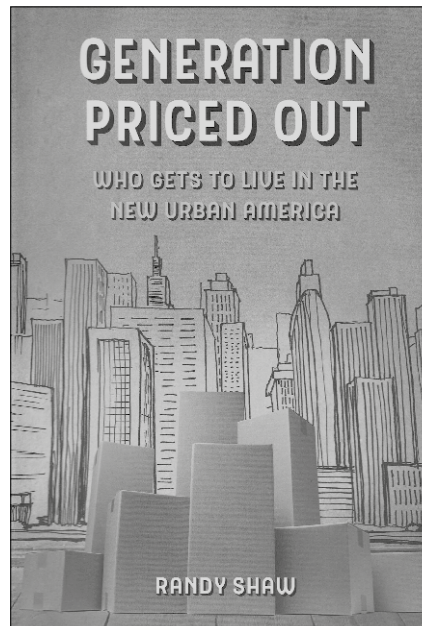
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Randy Shaw: *Generation Priced Out: Who Gets to Live in the New Urban America*

Reviewed by Nick Revington

Escalating housing costs in many American cities – and especially those with strong job markets and a reputation for quality of life – have placed housing affordability issues centre stage for an increasingly broad swath of the population. In *Generation Priced Out*, Randy Shaw channels his nearly 40-year career with the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, a tenant rights and homelessness advocacy organisation and low-income housing provider in San Francisco, into explaining why this is the case and what can be done about it. Written in a lucid and engaging style, the book draws on extensive first-hand experience of tenant organising, activism, and policy-writing as well as interviews with a real who’s-who of housing activists in several high-cost US cities not only to make the case for urban policy to take housing affordability seriously, but also to outline concrete steps to get there.

The book offers an accessible guide for housing activists, politicians, bureaucrats and policy wonks, as well as for the casual



reader with an interest in cities and social justice. Despite being from a university press, this is not a scholarly book, per se. Those seeking theories of urban inequality, politics, and development should look elsewhere, as should those looking for rigorous empirical policy analysis.

Shaw’s main contention is that many cities with ostensibly progressive reputations do not have very progressive track records when it comes to housing policy. An insufficient supply of housing to meet job and income growth, combined with inadequate tenant protections, is pricing the working and middle classes and racial minorities out of their homes in these cities altogether. It’s hardly a progressive outcome.

Shaw argues for cities to “address the housing needs of those of all income levels” (4) by rethinking the housing crisis in four ways. First, there is a generational divide between millennials (born 1981 to 1996) facing a constricted housing supply and baby boomers

(born 1946 to 1964) who have benefited from the rapid rise in home values that has resulted from the shortage. Second, gentrification is not inevitable, but rather a consequence of political decisions. Third, neighbourhood activism – which often holds a progressive veneer – has actually been a major culprit in preventing housing opportunities for lower-income residents. Finally, preventing infill development within cities has environmental consequences as new housing and jobs are displaced to distant suburbs requiring longer commutes. None of these are particularly new ideas for urban scholars working on these issues, but Shaw does an excellent job presenting the issues in a clear and accessible way.

The first chapter recounts victories in the fight against eviction by seniors, people with AIDS, and families in San Francisco. The second chapter highlights how Los Angeles' housing crisis has resulted in rapid gentrification and tenant organising against displacement, while homeowners and landlords benefit from the crisis and oppose change. Shaw also outlines how the city under Mayor Eric Garcetti is attempting to reverse course through new strategies. In the third chapter, we see how inadequate protection for tenants' rights is a factor in displacement in Austin. Shaw draws on the experiences of Seattle and Denver in the fourth chapter to argue that new housing supply is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improved affordability.

Chapter five returns to San Francisco, with a focus on the regulatory and political barriers facing small-scale developers seeking to provide much-needed housing in the city. Generational conflict over housing is the subject of the sixth chapter, highlighting millennials' housing activism in Austin, Boulder, Cambridge, the East Bay, Portland, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle. In the seventh chapter, Shaw explains how the neighbourhood preservation movement, once a progressive response to the excesses of urban renewal, has in the vastly different contemporary context become a force for exclusion, with examples from Berkeley, San Francisco, New York City, and Minneapolis. Chapter eight highlights, with cases from New York City, Oakland, and San Francisco, how failing to preserve or provide new affordable housing also undermines cities' racial diversity. Finally, the concluding chapter distills the most relevant policy takeaways.

The book's greatest strength is undoubtedly its basis in Shaw's longstanding involvement in housing issues. Shaw is able to provide examples of what works and what does not, from the perspective of tenant organising as well as through a policy lens. The value of political organising is a consistent theme throughout the book, and undoubtedly a key to achieving more progressive housing policies in the face of well-organised opposition. Shaw shares stories of both wins and losses for organising, thus recognising the potential power of organising without providing an over-idealised, rosy picture of guaranteed successes. A second strength is the way Shaw humanises housing struggles by including the stories of working-class and immigrant families resisting displacement, fighting to stay in their homes and neighbourhoods. While making effort to preserve affordable housing personal, the text avoids devolving into so-called "poverty porn" voyeurism.

Shaw is pro-housing, but provides a welcome counterpoint to libertarian elements of the loose coalition known as the "YIMBY" (Yes-In-My-Back-Yard) movement. For Shaw, new housing supply is needed, but the solution is not simply to hand over cities

carte blanche to developers. Instead, developers should be required to build affordable units or pay linkage fees to support affordable housing. Meanwhile, cities should pursue affordable housing development by (among other things) leveraging city-owned land, supporting non-profit groups seeking to acquire housing to preserve its affordability, and enforcing tenant protections, including rent control where it is not pre-empted by the state. The alternative in the cities Shaw highlights has been all too often to stifle development entirely, so wealthier residents outbid poorer ones for the inadequate supply of housing, causing gentrification. But another conceivable alternative is for unfettered development and real estate speculation to upend working-class, African American, and immigrant neighbourhoods, also resulting in massive displacement. Shaw attempts to chart a middle ground that results in a more equitable city.

Such a middle ground comes with some ambivalences that the book would do well to address more explicitly. First, it paints organising in working-class neighbourhoods resisting gentrification in a favourable light – and indeed, as a crucial component of any strategy to protect and promote housing affordability – while criticising middle- and upper-class neighbourhood groups that have organised to stop development. These are different issues, as one is seeking to preserve affordable housing while the other seeks to prevent it. However, drawing this distinction more explicitly would pre-empt market-oriented agendas that conflate these two positions to vilify marginalised residents' legitimate concerns over displacement as anti-housing.

Second, it is unclear why Shaw persists in asserting that the cities profiled in the book have a "progressive" reputation for social justice when the housing issues he discusses demonstrate precisely the opposite. As Shaw observes, "By raising ideas long considered politically off limits, [activists] are exposing the 'emperor has no clothes' component of those who claim to be political progressives but who will not allow rental housing in their neighbourhoods" (162). Rather than hold those making such false claims of progressivism to account, Shaw himself participates in the charade. For instance, he writes that "Nolita is a politically progressive voting district. Its residents support social and economic justice" (188), a fact that is immediately contradicted by the next sentence: "Yet the community became engaged in a struggle to stop the only chance working- and middle-class seniors had to live in the neighborhood." Perhaps it's time cities are called "progressive" based on their actions instead of hollow assertions.

It's also unclear, exactly, in what sense contemporary housing struggles are truly a generational divide. There may be some difference in generational consciousness of the housing crisis, but Shaw's framing elides the fact that many millennials stand to benefit from the vast housing wealth of their boomer parents through intergenerational transfers, which are likely to exacerbate *intra*-generational inequalities, or that intergenerational living (as a form of intergenerational solidarity) provides a key strategy for navigating expensive housing markets.

This framing also overlooks how what appears to be a generational divide on the surface is actually one of class and race. In general, income from labour increases over the course of one's working life, as do the propensity for homeownership and the likelihood of earning non-labour income. In this sense, the apparent divide between millennials and boomers with respect to access to housing, the financial benefits of homeownership, and

resulting political contestations over creating new housing supply actually reflect differing class positions across the life course. Positioning the contemporary housing crisis as generational conflict provides an unproductive distraction from the *class* conflicts that have specifically benefited boomers at the expense of millennials: rising income inequality, stagnant wages, the hollowing out of an already weak social security net (including the chronic underfunding of affordable housing), exclusionary zoning, union busting, and tax cuts for the rich.¹

Like surging housing prices and gentrification, these trends are not inevitable. They are a product of decades of neoliberal policy. Yet Shaw's stated intention to ensure that neighbourhoods provide housing to protect "economic diversity" naturalises heightened income and wealth inequality, which, for many, compounds issues of housing affordability. Little attention is given to the policy choices behind the rampant income and racial inequalities that make housing affordability an issue for some and not others.

To be sure, these other domains may be beyond the scope of the book's stated focus on housing, but it does seem a crucial component in answering Shaw's titular question: who, indeed, gets to live in the "new urban America"? Other policies that escape attention in the book, however, are far more closely linked to housing. Policy choices have favoured ownership financially, and reinforced a culture that positions homeownership as the ultimate aspiration. Combined with the de facto reliance on housing wealth as social safety net, the stakes are much higher and the incentives much

stronger for owners to protect their own property values, no matter the social cost. As Shaw notes, perhaps the biggest social cost is the pricing-out of working and middle classes from central cities.

These criticisms do not deflect, however, from Shaw's ultimate policy prescriptions, which are well argued and summarised in a handy ten-point list in the book's concluding chapter. They are clear, actionable and realistic, and for the most part are general enough that they do not get bogged down in the legislative quirks of individual cities and states (and they may be equally valid outside the United States). The flip side is that they may not go far enough in upsetting the deeper dynamics that produce housing crises in the first place. That they may not go far enough is not a reason to shy away from them, but a call to do even more. Most encouraging is Shaw's optimism that organising, in the context of a growing generational awareness of housing issues, can and will produce more equitable housing conditions. Perhaps then America's "progressive" cities will be worthy of the name.

Shaw, Randy (2018): Generation Priced Out: Who Gets to Live in the New Urban America. Oakland: University of California Press. 304 pages. ISBN 9780520299122 (hardback), ISBN 9780520970991 (e-book). Price: \$29.95/£25.00.

Notes

1 A fuller version of this argument is presented here: Christophers, Brett (2018): Intergenerational Inequality? Labour, Capital, and Housing Through the Ages. In: *Antipode*, 50 (1), 101-121.