

How class matters for housing accessibility. Conditions to gain housing access for lower- and upper-class migrants in the Zurich metropolitan area.

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"The housing crisis is everywhere: also in European cities, access to housing is becoming increasingly difficult for a broader range of inhabitants. Within this framework, some migrant groups are more severely disadvantaged, while others are undisputedly favored in the rental market and within recent urban development, making housing access further unequal.

In contrast with dominant political discourses in competitive cities that often blame immigration for the housing shortage, we try to shed light on the fact that the interconnections between demographic growth and housing scarcity are complex and generally mediated by political decisions. Subsequently, different migrant groups play distinct roles in the rental housing market. Accordingly, we affirm that the possibility of migrating and making a home in a particular territory is a matter of class, which we will conceptualize more in detail in the light of this paper.

Firstly, our research starts from the premise that migration, like other global phenomena, is an unequal process that can be characterized both by privilege and vulnerability. Furthermore, the construction of who is a migrant and who is not – in the housing market - is always class-specific (Castles, 2010; Çağlar, 2017; Dahinden, 2016, 2023; Glick Shiller, Salazar, et al., 2013). Secondly, within this research, housing is understood as a political and spatial issue:

a. around the housing question is where the inequalities are most visible, but also where the responses from the inhabitants are enacted (Hildebrandt et al., 2023; Lancione, 2020; Madden & Marcuse, 2016); b. the lack of affordable housing policies and the commodification of housing is seen as strictly connected to profit-oriented urban transformations (Cavicchia, 2022; Debrunner & Hartmann, 2020)

However, the relationship between the housing issue and the migration phenomenon has been studied mainly from the perspective of the vulnerable (Boccagni et al., 2020; D. Robinson et al., 2007; Sowa, 2020). While some studies on urban elites have highlighted the impact of the global super-rich on the lower classes (Andreotti, le Galès et al., 2015; Atkinson, 2020; Atkinson & Ho, 2019; Briata, 2021; Sassen, 2010), there is still no research tracing the interrelations between housing accessibility of the lower- and upper-class migrants. Therefore, this article looks at the intersection of housing and migration from a class perspective (hooks, 2020; Roy, 2019) (instead of nationality and origin), giving insights into the differences between upper and lower-class migrants in the Zurich metropolitan area, an economically prosperous context that is witnessing a consistent and increasingly polarized immigration influx and severe housing pressure.

Our goal is to investigate housing accessibility by exploring different levels: a. political and legal, b. urban and spatial, c. socio-economic, d. racial and cultural. Specifically, we ask: What are the conditions under

which lower- and upper-class migrants gain access to the rental housing market? How do these conditions materialize in the process of searching, visiting, being selected, and – eventually - accessing a room/apartment/house for rent? What tactics are deployed to cope with the housing shortage depending on the inhabitants' resources?

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with eight stakeholders, six experts, and 14 inhabitants from the target groups in the Zurich metropolitan area, we show that racialization and discrimination based on cultural differences have a significant impact, but always in relation to material conditions and social resources. These conditions often determine who is migrantized during the search, application, and selection procedures, and, as a response, the strategies commonly revolve around meeting expectations as good migrants and good tenants.

Additionally, our study reveals that in the context of selection of high-skilled migration and inadequate provision of affordable housing, “expats” are removing segments of affordability from the market for the “migrant poor,” who are, as a result, moving to the urban peripheries, with serious consequences on the social composition and residential distribution of the urban area.

We affirm that in a highly exclusive and selective housing market, class – understood from an intersectional perspective – matters the most in gaining access to housing.

In conclusion, in Zurich, as in other competitive western cities, the housing crisis is not exceptional but systemic, and around the housing question is where the inequalities are most visible, with migrants being represented among the most vulnerable but also the most privileged groups.