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EDITORIAL

Living in the city in times of pandemic

Without housing there's no living.

15-M

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a veritable tsunami in awareness of what public space means, and in how the urban is configured. Present circumstances are forcing social movements to rethink their relationship with the city, both materially and symbolically, in a process of introspection unseen since the 15-M movement. At the same time, the unprecedented health crisis—which worsens, the more intense the housing crisis becomes—has put one of the central issues in the 15-M debate back on the agenda: the right to decent, affordable housing. In the present edition of *kult-ur* we examine this question through reflections on the inequalities that pervade access to housing, taking into account the path already trodden by citizen activism, and the uncertainties and challenges this new situation has thrown up in this field.

During the spring of 2011 many people left their homes to live in the squares. Others, without their own roof for shelter, created a shared home in the improvised camps. An extraordinary landscape of tents and makeshift constructions took over the centres of numerous cities in protest over the way management of the economic crisis had aggravated existing social and political inequalities. The heart of the city was oKupado, and through reflection, condemnation and consensus, the 15-M movement brought it to a standstill. The multiple causes of indignation—real estate scams, illegal demolitions, sky-high rents and the trauma of evictions—pumped new life blood into the fight for decent housing. Rebels without a house, Housing is a right, not a business, No houses without people nor people without houses were just some of the slogans that emblazoned the streets and invigorated the assemblies in which the occupy movement and the struggle for affordable social housing converged.

After a time, the squares were emptied—either of the protesters' own volition or by forceful police eviction—but the need to coordinate public spaces for civic action remained in the collectives and activists' consciousness. Undoubtedly, alternative forms of political organisation have not fully coalesced, and the social protests in the streets have ended up in very unequal forms. Yet, perhaps in an attempt to keep afloat in the midst of a stubbornly persistent economic crisis, institutions have had to open up to initiatives inspired by those earlier palpitations. The agenda of public opinion now prioritises alternative housing, the right to return a property in lieu of payment for mortgage arrears, or the removal of mortgage agreement clauses guaranteeing minimum interest rates for banks, and groups like the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages continue to play a key role in fighting evictions. Today, all public administrations must tackle a blatantly obvious housing crisis and the collateral damage left by decades under a predatory and corrupt economic system. And all movements fighting for social justice, human rights and an end to poverty have been impacted in one way or another by the struggle for decent housing.

As reflected in our *Àgora* section, housing is a multidimensional concept intersected by diverse strands of meaning: spatial, social, political, economic, environmental and symbolic. The compounded inequalities generated by neoliberal policies that favour exclusion, exploitation and domination can be analysed and combated from any one of these perspectives. In addition, and across all these spheres, initiatives can be coordinated to mount resistance and fight to change the rules of the economic and real estate game. The onset of the current pandemic has only served to invigorate this cause. Not only has it demonstrated that access to housing with decent sanitary conditions is a matter of life or death, but it has also brought social differences into the open by aggravating the precarity of employment and living conditions for a large part of the population. For this reason, in the present uncertain and fragile context it is especially urgent to remove the structural inequalities that prevent people from exercising their basic right to decent housing and that contradict the principles of the so-called Welfare State. Campaigns to put empty dwellings to use, introduce social rents and integrated housing legislation, or regulate building land are gaining momentum in response to these neoliberal policies that collude with speculation, exclusionary privatisation and increased



unemployment. The course of this debate and the possibilities for alternative policies will largely depend on the recovery of both our public health and that of our democracy.

However, as mentioned earlier COVID-19 has not only impacted the material conditions of access to houses and streets, but has also blurred the spatial parameters of citizen action. This debate and agenda has now moved out of the physical public sphere. Assemblies are held online and much of the dialectic takes the form of unsynchronised arguments curtailed by a determined number of minutes or characters. During lockdown, houses and apartments opened their front yards and balconies, and people used their time and spaces for social recognition. The noise of the traffic gave way to the sound of life in people's homes and new technologies provided access to private contexts where public matters were dealt with. In the 15-M, bodies and words took over places to give meaning to new forms of democratic participation, "We are the public" in the words of Marina Garcés. Today, that mass, in-person we is out of line and the limits of the urban setting as a meeting place have been blurred. When prevention and fear remap the territory, the challenge is to find ways of appropriating spaces for common shared purposes. Collective action must inhabit the city in the boundary between home and street; it must occupy the intersection between private and public to simply carry on living.