Magical or monstrous? Hybridity in social housing governance: Understanding market oriented reforms of social rental housing

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The curiosity behind this study emerged from professional experience in a related field. After working in Australian public housing redevelopment, I was seconded into a policy reform project. The plan was to sell off many public dwellings and rapidly transfer tens of thousands more to a small sector of not-for-profit charities eligible for private loans. Even as public housing continued to provide crucial support at a time of shortage, it would now be restricted to people with high and complex needs. Any further growth would occur in the not-for-profit sector, under the label ‘affordable housing’. While the public housing authority had considerable in-house expertise, extensive property assets, and rich redevelopment opportunities in a strong property market, it was framed as both politically and ideologically obsolete. Not-for-profit ‘community’ housing associations that combined social and commercial tasks were promoted as the most ‘modern’ and efficient way forward.

While new highly paid executives envisioned a rapid transition to ‘community sector partnerships operating commercially to deliver public value’; highly experienced colleagues voiced doubts. Plans to transfer thousands of dwellings within a year seemed unrealistic. To whom did these properties really belong? Without tenant consent, would transfer even be legal? How would small not-for-profits, many inexperienced in property development, deal with new responsibilities? Time has substantiated these concerns. Eight years later, only a small portion of the projected transfers to the not-for-profit sector have actually occurred.

As the reform agenda unfolded in the late 2000s, I took leave from the public service to do a master’s degree in Amsterdam and New York. This enabled me to study not-for-profit law and to focus academically on the changing role of not-for-profit housing associations. I was immediately struck by the capacity of the Dutch sector. A unique system combining state guarantees, mutual support and cross subsidization of social tasks with commercial proceeds enabled housing associations to assist a broad section of the population and to undertake diverse urban interventions.

My fascination with this system led to this PhD; an opportunity to explore the dynamics of privatization of public housing across several national contexts, free from the ideological confines of any public policy reform agenda. As I began the project, the Australian government announced a strategy to encourage the growth of large, ‘commercially sophisticated’ housing associations to correct a mainstream housing shortage. Yet in the Netherlands, where this aim had been realized, the social housing sector was rocked by scandals over private inurement and mismanagement of what were still perceived to be public assets. To further complicate things, complaints by commercial investors in the property market under European Competition Policy had sparked calls for the mandate of housing associations to be narrowed: they would now focus on serving low-income households. While this would make more room in the market for commercial actors, it would reduce the capacity of housing associations to cross subsidize social projects. Although the Dutch sector of commercially sophisticated social housing associations had accomplished great things, its growth had raised a new set of complex governance problems. These challenges, which inevitably arise when private actors pursue public housing goals in commercial property markets, form the basis of this study.
I’m grateful to many people who have helped, inspired, supported and advised me along the way. A conference paper by Willem Salet and Dick Schuiling inspired my approach to the study. I thank Willem Salet for helping make the project possible and acting as my promoter and supervisor. Willem has consistently provided me with insightful and direct advice, bringing any policy problem I raised to an abstract level that I could approach academically. His professionalism and kindness, along with the blend of support and freedom that his guidance allows, helped me to face the challenge of leaving a career in public policy to resume study. As my co-promoter and daily supervisor, Leonie Janssen-Jansen has been extremely generous with her wise advice, support, and all kinds of help without which this whole project would have been so much more difficult. Her understanding of emerging policy issues and property market dynamics has helped me better understand the Dutch state of play. My PhD would not have been possible without the support of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), both on a financial level and in the form of excellent guidance from Edwin Buitelaar as a further co-promoter. My thanks also go to the professionals who took time out of their busy working lives to participate in academic research.

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While this study involved considerable geographical travelling, the most difficult part of the journey was moving to a new professional sphere. Entering academic research meant starting again from scratch, even though I had already moved from project managing public housing redevelopments to housing and urban policy research. This move was a decision that I’ve often questioned and sometimes still do. It was made easier by support from other academics active in urban and housing policy. Just before leaving Australia for the Netherlands, I met Vivienne Milligan, an academic consulting policymakers at my workplace. Vivienne’s career, including a PhD at the University of Utrecht in 2003, has thus far spanned academia and public administration. Her wisdom, kindness, curiosity and practical help have made a real difference to me. Through Vivienne, I met Tony Gilmour; another internationally oriented housing academic active in policy advice. I learned a great deal from Tony and was lucky enough to write with him as well. I’m also extremely grateful to David Mullins, Gerard van Bortel and Darinka Czischke for their inspiring work, feedback and collaborations along the steep learning curve of my PhD. While I initially knew these people only from their academic work, I eventually joined them as coordinators of the Social Housing Institutions, Organizations and Governance group, within the European Network for Housing Research.
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