



Interview with Emmanuelle Cosse, President of the Social Union for Housing and former Minister of Housing, and **Jean-Claude Driant**, professor at the Paris School of Urban Planning (École d'urbanisme de Paris)

by **Ariella Masboungi**, winner of the 'Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme' in 2016



ARIELLA MASBOUNGI

Ecology and housing are related, but may sometimes seem in conflict especially in current discussions regarding green cities, nature cities, bikeable cities, urban greenways, and human health. Yet housing is intimately related to ecological issues. Housing is fundamental to our quality of life — and work, as more and more people work in their homes. We discuss these issues with Emmanuelle Cosse, former Minister of Housing and now president of USH, the social housing umbrella organization in France, and Jean-Claude Driant, professor of urban studies specializing in housing.

JEAN-CLAUDE DRIANT

'Ecology' may not be the most familiar term in my work on housing policies. On reflection, it is evident that ecology is pervasive in the issue of housing. But its very pervasiveness makes it hard to delineate its contours. In the current situation, there are two main areas where ecology and housing intersect: the issue of the energy transition, and the issue of controlling land use and construction. These are the terms in which ecological issues are often approached. We will see that the consequences of these two dimensions also have major consequences for society.

EMMANUELLE COSSE

I'm an ecological activist and I've been strongly committed to the subject. At the same time, I have also become a housing activist. Today, I am very uncomfortable when, in the name of an 'ecology' that remains to be defined, we see protest movements targeting housing issues in particular. For reasons that are easy to understand, worldwide changes require that we examine our carbon footprint on land use, on material composition of cities, on urban planning and development projects. That being said, we cannot deny that ecology also means human relations. This calls for a commitment to and respect for the planet and for ecology. This begs the question of living conditions and therefore access to housing, the human habitat, well-being, a home of one's own. These are fundamental issues when you are an ecologist. I am strongly opposed to those who brandish a certain conservatism on these subjects when their ecological ambitions and desire for greater environmental protection should encourage them to consider how to bring about greater social justice through housing. That's what is at stake in this debate, and it is very exciting.

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI

The housing crisis. The housing shortage. This crisis has been a leitmotif in France for decades. Yet France builds extensively and many neighbouring countries envy our housing subsidies. Jean-Claude Driant, you co-authored a book called *Housing Crises*, with Crises in the plural, which describes a number of crises in recent decades. How would you analyse the current crisis from a quantitative and qualitative standpoint, particularly with the pandemic? And what are causes of the crisis — institutional, financial, or due to the way the French go about doing things?



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JEAN-CLAUDE DRIANT

That's an important question because when I started work on our little book with Pierre Madec and the other co-authors, we wanted to examine the idea of a housing crisis in France today. This idea of a 'crisis' is controversial and contested.

This controversy stems from the fact that the components are no longer the same as in the classic housing crises of the 1950s and 1960s and even the 1970s, which were quantitative, due to a housing shortage.

Today, France has an abundant housing stock in terms of quantity. We are building more than neighbouring countries, if we look at the population and housing conditions. The macro indicators are rather good. But the price of housing has continued to rise, for both rents and home prices.

This has deepened inequality in a number of areas: between those who were able to purchase their homes and those who can no longer do so... For the past fifteen years, working-class home ownership in France has stagnated. In other words, the ability of middle-income households to move up the residential ladder to home ownership, allowing turnover in the social housing rental stock.

Lower turnover in the social housing stock, which explains the shortage of supply for all those people on waiting lists, is clearly linked to the slowdown in residential trajectories and mobility. The result is longer waiting lists, decreasing demand for social housing, and young people taking longer to move up the residential ladder. This is an example of factors leading to inequalities between generations and across territories, because there are radical differences between sprawling medium-sized towns, large regional centres, and Paris.

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI

What needs to be done? What are you working on? Should we continue to build? Rehabilitate? What should we build? There is also a crisis in the quality of housing in France. Where should we build? What, how and with whom?

EMMANUELLE COSSE

There is no single answer. We have to explore every option.

That's the sticking point: some people would like one or two simple solutions to deal with these multiple crises. There are places where additional construction is needed because the location is attractive and people need housing, mainly but not only in urban centres. There are barely built up areas, and smaller towns that should come up with an offer better suited to today's lifestyles.

We need speed, to go identify brownfield sites that are polluted but worth investigating. We need firepower. That's what I'd like to see recognized today. We can't solve our housing crisis with a small-scale solution: it requires sustained action.

The biggest problem in recent years is that every time we've built momentum and firepower, it suddenly grinds to a halt. The pendulum swings back and forth. When the Covid crisis finally ends and we face the same questions about residential trajectories with the social crisis looming ahead, we'll again be at a standstill, because we will have lost 3 or 4 years. We are still far from having solved the issue of access to housing and providing homes that people are happy to live in. Until we've resolved that, many of the country's social problems will remain unsolved.



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JEAN-CLAUDE DRIANT

Following up on what Emmanuelle said, we must realize that the most important factor is the existing housing stock. Most of the housing of the foreseeable future has already been built. But not everything is acceptable in quality, price or location. Looking at future construction based on our assessment of the existing stock, we have to see how new construction can help to correct shortcomings and problems with the existing housing stock. There's energy consumption, prices... New housing isn't just a matter of controlling zoning and density. You mustn't overlook the notion of supply shock. Just building an additional 20,000 housing units won't suddenly bring down prices. Those 20,000 units would have to be affordable, in the right location, with the right quality. The health crisis has taught a number of things, especially regarding the size of dwellings. Which is now a problem in many of the new-built units.

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI

Rehabilitation is necessary but there can be conflicting government policies. Zero percent interest loans, for instance, promote the periphery while making it more difficult to finance rehabilitation. Yet there is considerable know-how, especially among young architects who work in outlying areas and small towns. There are positive approaches. Let me ask Emmanuelle Cosse to help us imagine a better world in these difficult times, to propose a utopia for a brighter tomorrow. Optimism is essential, otherwise we would have to change professions.

EMMANUELLE COSSE

I agree entirely. We need utopias if we are to win difficult battles. I would like to mention several utopias. The first deals with homelessness, which goes beyond our immediate topic today. During the spring 2020 lockdown, because there was a health emergency, all of a sudden, we managed to house all the homeless. For the first time ever, there were nights when social services found housing for everyone who applied. This shows that by scaling up our response, it's possible to make a difference. Since then, homeless people are back on the streets. Preventing people in dire need from transitioning to homelessness would be a major change. I have utopias that are entirely feasible. The waiting lists for social housing are getting longer and longer whereas in reality, building 150,000 social housing units a year would drastically reduce the waiting lists, and it can be done. There were years when France built 130,000 to 135,000 units. It's possible, but is it an objective, a utopia in the sense of a policy initiative that everyone shares? Owners and developers aren't the only decision makers. There are also elected officials, the State, other stakeholders. And finally, here's a greater utopia, that may be easier to bring about: How can we all reconnect with nature in the future? Consider this curious dream, that each of us is responsible for a tree, an animal, a species, something, so we form a connection with our surroundings, a concrete relationship. These would be ways of living differently with our environment and it's something we can pass on to our children. I think it's important to pass on the living world around us, and not leave only money or property.

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI

Let me thank both of you for your message. Let's hope that the policy makers, who are attentive to this issue, will hear what you say and help make these utopias come true. Thank you.



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