

# Informal housing in the Netherlands. Interview with Richard Staring

Kim, M.J. & Y. Purwanto

*Informal housing is a global phenomenon, increasing in relevance as well as in magnitude. While not often associated with Western countries, informal housing also occurs in the Netherlands. This raises many questions in a country known to be heavily regulated in many areas of life. There is a conservative estimate of 97,000 undocumented migrants who turn to informal housing. They turn to these housing options as they can not access the Dutch public housing schemes. Since urbanists have a major influence on the development of public housing what can or should the profession do about it? To shed light on this issue, Atlantis spoke with Professor Richard Staring, an expert in irregular migration and illegal stay in the Netherlands.*

## **As your expertise lies in the field of undocumented migration, can you tell us where this kind of informal housing takes place?**

There have been several investigations in relation to informal housing. One of the big questions posed was where do all those undocumented migrants live? If you look at the estimates of the number of undocumented living, the most recent ones claims there are around 97.000 undocumented people in the Netherlands. However, the question is where do all these people live? If you look at the research, there are two major conclusions: First, they live very close to their kin and close to people from the same country. These principles are valid for the majority of migrants and they are well documented with all different kinds of nationalities, backgrounds. As the majority of migrants live in urban areas, the undocumented live there too. Secondly, undocumented people lives in the more rural areas; so not only close to their labours in urban area but also close to the labour areas in the rural parts of the Netherlands such as industrial or farming areas.

## **How would you define 'the informal' in informal housing, based on your field?**

From the field of undocumented migration, I find an exact definition of informality rather difficult to give; I guess it is something outside the box, outside the formal rules. In my field it is anything outside the laws on migration; so people who are here but who are not supposed to be here. 'Informality' as a term really depends on the field from which you are looking at it, think about informal labour or informal housing. Putting it most generally it is something beyond the line defined by authorities.

**The Netherlands has an extensive system of public housing, it is odd that informal housing still takes place. Are there connections between the two?**

In my field, informality is connected with public housing in two ways, both depending on the relation between formal and informal tenant. First, some of the undocumented migrants live in Dutch public housing estates via their relatives and friends. Public housing units are rented by migrants who then invite their friends or family to live in the same house. The second way is a migrant, who lives in a public housing unit, charges money to undocumented migrants for a room.

**To what degree has informal housing developed itself as an alternative to the regular housing market?**

It very much depends what way you are looking at it. Sometimes it is a very loose organised solution, some undocumented migrants travel almost on a daily basis from house to house. Others live for years with friends or relatives in the same house. In a way there is an informal market parallel to the formal housing market, perhaps quite similar to the labour market. In any case, how you use those markets depends on your background. If you look at the more classical migrant groups (Turkish, Moroccan) who live for a long time in the Netherlands, you see more of a family based connections. If you look at new groups, you see much more of a market relation, people on the move more often, switching between public and private housing. The bottom line is, that one way or another, the undocumented have to live somewhere, and to a large extent you see them living close to relatives or friends.

**What are the negative and positive consequences of informal housing?**

It has both kinds of consequences. It very much depend on the individual's perspective. From the undocumented perspective, and even for some of the documented migrants, informal housing is very important. From the government or housing corporations' perspective it has negative consequences. They do not know how many people live in the public housing estates they own; so many difficult estimates have to be made on the actual number of people in houses, combining the formal and

informal number of people who live in public housing. I would not agree with coining it just as a negative side of society because it is very important. If your starting point is the realisation that undocumented migration is a contemporary element of society, then you are confronted with informality, as it is much better for people to have some place to stay opposed to sleeping on the streets.

**Do you think that informality fills a crucial role in society?**

To a large extent, yes. I think that without informal housing, there would be a social problem. Housing corporations face major difficulties to rent their spaces to undocumented migrants formally. In the past we did some research on experiments by major housing corporations in Rotterdam to rent houses to undocumented by legal means. It became very clear that many of those corporations were resistant to do so. Partly because of the legal difficulties they face, even if they are willing to provide the housing. I think it would be a problem, with much more people on the street, if you further restrict the informal space present in social housing. I think that landlords, especially the less scrupulous ones, would start to exploit their houses by offering space to undocumented migrants. So not having informal space would have several effects, criminal entrepreneurs and people who profit in a negative way of undocumented by offering housing for too much money; on the other hand you expect that the pressure for shelter on NGOs who offer housing to undocumented (like the Salvation Army) would increase. People still need to live somewhere.

Then what are the reasons for housing corporations to exclude undocumented migrants?

This is a difficult one, I think that many people working in the field of social housing have a wrong image of undocumented migrants, for example that they are criminals. To some extent, there are these wrong impressions of undocumented migrants. We spoke to people working for housing corporations; some people reproduced the image of undocumented as criminals, people who should not be here, people causing a lot of insecurity and unsafety, people who are responsible for a lot of crime. These images play a role but I think that the main thing is the legal issue. The legal issue causes quite a discussion, because local government do have a 'Zorgplicht', a duty to care for all people in need in their community. This duty to care does not make a distinction between documented and undocumented migrants and it is discussed if it should be so irrespective of the juridical status of people. This debate is related to the willingness of municipalities and housing corporations to formally rent space to undocumented migrants.

**You mentioned the Zorgplicht and to a certain extent urbanism is part of it. As the existence of informal housing indicates a failure to meet it, how could urbanists start to fulfil this duty?**

In a formal way, there is nothing that urbanists are supposed to do. If you look at their formal rights of undocumented migrants, there is nothing written about their formal rights in housing. There is something in the field of health and access to healthcare and in the field of legal support. If you are a minor there are also some rights to education. Nevertheless, there are no rights the undocumented can claim in the field of housing. I think this is a very difficult element but if you ask me for what urbanists can do, I think there are some crucial elements: First, a less restrictive approach to undocumented migrants including the field of housing because restricting is not very effective in the current situation. If applied, people become house-less or they are driven in the hands of criminal landlords. This happened in the 1990s-2000s, Rotterdam saw a city clean-up where also much informal housing stock disappeared.

**If restricting policies are not the answer, in what direction should we look?**

Start with the recognition that there are no easy solutions. The majority of the undocumented is, due to their way of traveling here, very capable of finding housing themselves in their social circle. To help those who do not find space it would be the simplest to develop social housing schemes which specifically target undocumented migrants. For example, currently, undocumented people 'use' public housing by living with their family or friends: five or six people live in a space which is formally designed for four people. Larger designs, targeting migrant families within the specific areas could be helpful. It is however not very realistic that the Dutch government would support this in this era of more restrictive and criminalising policies towards undocumented migrants.

**Informal housing is mostly seen as a phenomenon occurring in developing countries, what are the systematic differences between developed countries and developing countries in informal housings?**

Migration in developing countries is also a major challenge for them. Not so much the migration from outside of the country but the internal migration, people moving from rural areas to urban areas. I would say that this migration adds to the general problems of developing countries. The migration flows are just too large to allow real formal solutions. So it is in that situation that you see people claiming land informally and building their own form of housing. I would say that this is a systemic difference, although if you look at a country as France, I was astonished by the presence of informal camps just outside the big cities as Paris, close to the railway or the high way. There were many camps, I do not know made by

whom, perhaps by Roma migrants. So in the end, this particular distinction between developed and 'developing' countries is not that big.

If the distinction between is small, are there remarkable similarities between developed and developing countries in terms of informal housing? I do not see that many similarities. Jack Burgers , Professor of Sociology once told a story about an American team of researchers visiting the 'real bad areas' of Rotterdam, and they started laughing because these 'neat, cosy areas' were called slums, they were miles away of the neighbourhoods they called slums. You could say that the Netherlands is very much over regulated, also in the field of housings. I think that the space for informality is very limited. There is so much control and surveillance on the different aspects of housing that the informal space is declining. So I do not see similarities, however, the Dutch over regulation in housing brings all kind of positive and negative aspects to the society.

**Can we conclude that in developing countries the physical factor of informal housing is the most challenging while the invisible social issues and incoherency related to informal housing are the most problematic for developed countries?**

I agree that in developed countries the physical structures are well organised and that it is the social elements which can get away from (some) of us such as undocumented migrants. If you look at the main criticism by Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch on the Dutch immigration policy, one of the main issues is the lack of humanistic characteristics in Dutch migration. If you reconnect this to the field of housing, you see that it talks about people mostly in terms of status of if people are allowed or not allowed to be here. Those who are not allowed are being criminalized and excluded and this also takes place in the field of housing. Housing is not part of the policies which include people.