

Book Review

Phillips, Shane. 2020. *The Affordable City: Strategies for Putting Housing Within Reach (and Keeping It There)*. Washington, DC: Island Press. 280 pp. \$32 (paperback). ISBN: 9781642831337.

Reviewed by: Jenna Davis, *Columbia University, NY, USA*
DOI: 10.1177/0885412221989241

More than 28,000 people sleep on the streets in Los Angeles, yet neighborhoods have waged pitched battles over residential development proposals that will add to the city's housing stock (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority 2020). Los Angeles is not alone. In cities across the country, the housing crisis demands urgent action, but communities remain deeply divided on the best approach for increasing housing production while minimizing harm to existing residents. For pro-supply housing advocates, the antidote to soaring housing costs is increasing the supply of both subsidized and market-rate units, while pro-tenant advocates have taken a different tact, favoring housing preservation and protection policies such as rent control to mitigate displacement and dispossession. Although both camps arguably share a common enemy—unaffordable housing—the two coalitions often work at cross-purposes. This conflict forms the impetus for Shane Phillips' new book, *The Affordable City: Strategies for Putting Housing Within Reach (and Keeping It There)*, in which Phillips cuts through the noise, arguing that the goals of both coalitions are not as misaligned as some housing advocates may believe them to be.

Instead, Phillips posits that cities must draw policy insights, or what he calls the “Three Ss: Supply, Stability, and Subsidy,” from both pro-supply and pro-tenant camps. Supply policies refer to those policies that lift artificial constraints on housing supply and reduce barriers to increased housing production (e.g., upzoning or eliminating density caps). Stability policies include approaches that recognize housing as a human right and aim to increase access to safe and affordable housing (e.g., tenant protection programs and just-cause eviction standards). Subsidy policies encompass city, state, and federal direct assistant programs that support the most housing-insecure households (e.g., supplemental rent assistance or subsidized housing). Throughout, Phillips makes the case that the “Three Ss” should be weighted evenly, cautioning that planners and policymakers that implement policies from one “S” without consideration of policies from the other “Ss” will face inevitable failure.

The Affordable City is organized into three parts. In *Part I: Principles and General Recommendations*, Phillips outlines a series of shared principles and values to guide housing policy-making. For example, Phillips recommends that housing stakeholders must consider at every turn how to tailor policies to local conditions, amplify the voices and needs of disenfranchised communities, and pursue institutional reform of institutions that perpetuate housing inequalities. These chapters provide a useful reminder of the values that should guide policymaking, especially when stakeholders must weigh difficult policy trade-offs.

Part II: Policies comprises the bulk of the book, in which Phillips outlines a series of policy prescriptions to address the “Three Ss.” In this section, Phillips provides a dozen or so policies addressing Supply, Stability, or Subsidy policies. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific policy and includes background about the policy, a description of the benefits and shortcomings of each, and case studies of cities that have implemented each policy. The book's focus on drawing on lessons learned from the usual suspects—Austin, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle—is most apparent in this section, although Phillips takes care to call out how smaller cities might adapt recommendations to their local context.

In *Part III: Bringing It All Together*, Phillips classifies a handful of policies discussed in *Part II* by their ease of implementation and identifies which policies cities should prioritize implementing in the immediate, medium, and long-term. This section will be of particular use to policymakers looking for succinct summaries of the main policy takeaways from the book and who are interested in distinguishing between recommendations that will be “easy wins” versus those that will require a greater lift. Throughout, Phillips remains steadfast in his call for cities to pursue policies from each of the “Three Ss” but acknowledges that the “Three Ss” will sometimes be in tension with one another. Will upzonings lead to subsequent displacement? Will rent control dampen housing supply and construction? Phillips refrains from prescribing a specific policy cocktail, leaving it up to local stakeholders to choose the right combination of policies best-suited to address local conditions.

For readers interested in understanding how to overcome political opposition to policies that face frequent resistance (e.g., upzonings), *The Affordable City* provides minimal guidance. That is, how can housing policy stakeholders generate greater buy-in for some of the politically unpalatable policies

Phillips recommends? How can stakeholders effectively broker relationships between polarized communities? While Phillips suggests that greater coalition-building will naturally flow from pursuing policies from each of the “Three Ss,” one of the book’s blind spots is that it does not fully address how to navigate continued opposition to some of the more controversial policies outlined in the book.

This limitation notwithstanding, *The Affordable City* should be required reading for housing advocates of various stripes, urban planners, policy analysts, and elected officials working to address housing unaffordability in their own cities. The book includes an instructive primer on basic real estate development concepts for students or audiences less familiar with real estate economics in the appendix. Those readers looking for thick descriptions of how housing unaffordability has touched down on specific communities will not find that in the book (a point

that Phillips acknowledges) but instead will find a collection of carefully curated policies that together aim to address the root causes of housing inequalities.

While it will remain to be seen whether those in power make a good-faith effort toward implementing the necessary housing policies Phillips recommends, *The Affordable City* articulates a promising path forward to begin to mitigate the nation’s housing crisis.

Reference

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. 2020. “2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count—total Point in Time Homeless Population by Geographic Areas.” Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. Accessed 7 January 2020. <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=4692-2020-greater-los-angeles-homeless-count-total-point-in-time-homeless-population-by-geographic-areas>.