

The first in a series of interviews about housing



By [Jay Caspian Kang](#)

[How to solve the housing crisis \(Part 1\) \(nytimes.com\)](#)

Today's entry is an interview with [Ananya Roy](#), a professor of urban planning, social welfare and geography at U.C.L.A., where she also directs the Institute on Inequality and Democracy. In recent years, she and the institute have turned their focus to housing and homelessness. Their work, which is deeply tied to tenant and anti-gentrification activists, can be found here. She has been one of the most pointed and consistent critics of pure market-based housing advocacy, also known as YIMBY (yes in my backyard), which she sometimes calls the "all housing matters" movement.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Kang: What effect will the end of the eviction moratorium have on the housing crisis? And did President Biden and the C.D.C.'s extension of it ward off any of what's to come?

Roy: The eviction moratorium has been important relief for rent-burdened and rent-indebted tenants. As our research in Los Angeles shows, many of these tenant communities are those that have been hardest hit by the pandemic, with disproportionate and systematic exposure to job loss and coronavirus infection, as well as exclusion from relief funds. In this sense, the moratorium has been a safety net of sorts, and its disappearance will be sure to expand and expedite evictions. Let's also be clear that it's the hard work of housing justice movements and tenant unions that ensured the temporary relief of the eviction moratorium. And it is the tenacity of leaders such as Representative Cori Bush who have roots in such movements that ensured its extension.

The moratorium, though, is not a cure for housing insecurity. In this sense, it is a postponement of crisis rather than a solution. What is immediately needed is full rental debt cancellation, and what is ultimately needed is public investment in housing for working-class communities. While there are various forms of rent relief programs afoot, most of them are actually landlord bailout programs, and very few seem to be actually reaching tenants in need. This then sets the stage for mass evictions, something that we have been sounding the alarm on since last summer and that is sure to precipitate mass displacement and homelessness.

What has been at hand has been a postponement of evictions. What is needed is an end to evictions, whether that end comes through landmark legal action that exposes the unfair process of eviction or through the social recognition that keeping people in their homes is smart and necessary policy.

Kang: Cities across the country are seeing homeless encampments pop up at a scale that alarms their residents. Do you think we're reaching a crisis point where housing becomes

an issue that spills beyond activists, wonks and academics? Are we about to see some reckoning or another?

Roy: There are these haunting scenes from the Great Depression of what came to be called Hooverville squatter camps, including one right in Central Park, which should seem unimaginable to us today. Well, it's all around us again.

In the research we've been doing at the institute, we started building out scenarios once the pandemic hit. They are still quite modest because we still have a so-called eviction moratorium. The full economic impact of the pandemic, combined with the inequality that already existed, has not played out. It's going to play out over the next three, four, five years. The housing crisis to come will be worse than the Great Depression

Kang: How will that happen? What do the next five years look like for housing?

Roy: I think there's going to be three dimensions to it.

One is going to be mass evictions. They're not necessarily going to happen on one single day. But our estimates have been that in Los Angeles County alone, thousands of households will become homeless as the eviction crisis plays out. It should be said that there has been money flowing into giving landlords relief, but tenants were already rent-burdened before the pandemic. One number that really sticks with me was that in 2018, 600,000 people in Los Angeles were paying 90 percent of their income in rent. That was when people were doing well, when they had a safety net and full employment. So imagine what happens now.

Second, we already have a massive homelessness crisis. And what we have to address that is a system that just shuffles people through shelter and temporary housing. This makes sure that the unhoused stay permanently unhoused. Other than that, the current approaches to homelessness are criminalization and policing. All that is bloody expensive. It doesn't work.

Here's the third thing: A few years after the height of the Great Recession of 2008, corporate entities went on a buying spree of distressed properties. The bulk were Wall Street firms, [Blackstone being the most notorious](#). But there were also real estate empires hiding behind L.L.C.s. A similar acquisition of distressed property will happen again in the Black and brown neighborhoods of our cities, wiping out the sort of accessible housing that we have and once again dramatically shifting real estate power to the wealthy.

Kang: Problems like rent prices outpacing wages seem to require long-horizon solutions, some of which seem almost revolutionary at this point. But if we are truly in an emergency, what do you think would work in the shorter term?

Roy: I have been writing a set of ideas called emergency urbanism. This is a moment of great crisis. But it's also a moment to do things we would not otherwise do. It turns out that local politicians — mayors, for example — have the authority to commandeer property for the protection of life. Well, the mayor of Los Angeles, the mayor of San Francisco all have had the power to come into your hotels and turn them into housing.

There is also the possibility for a more immediate, quick mass expansion of low-income housing by buying distressed properties, vacant properties, all of the stuff that Blackstone is already buying up. The real estate industry is already doing its webinars on how to do something similar. They've created an algorithm for distressed hotels and motels. Why is the government not doing the same thing?

We have shown that buying and converting distressed property into housing comes at a much lower price point than building new housing. So in Vancouver, there's now a huge effort pushed by tenant movements, where the city government has bought up privately owned single resident occupancy hotels and is committed to converting them all to social housing. We could do the same thing here. That seems like a no-brainer.

Kang: Your institute has written about the use of eminent domain to create more housing. In Los Angeles, specifically, eminent domain has a pretty disturbing history tied to mass displacements of Latino Angelenos to build Dodger Stadium. I find it hard to believe that people will support an eminent domain program, because of that history but also because it will feel like government overreach. How do you go about convincing people that it's OK and that the government won't just use that power to build a stadium?

Roy: I think we've only seen certain uses of eminent domain, but we've been doing a lot of work on how local authorities like municipalities can use eminent domain, for example, to purchase underwater mortgages.

The idea behind this is a public stake in what seems to be private property. So, for example, when we talked to people in downtown Los Angeles, so many of the hotels down there said, "No, no, no, no, we don't want the homeless people in our buildings ever." And I think that's the option that has to be exercised in all sorts of creative ways. Well, they are private property, yes, but they also received millions and millions of dollars in public subsidies. That's what it means to have a public stake in private property, and that option needs to be exercised in creative ways.

Kang: How do you make that a political reality? It's hard to imagine Eric Garcetti, the mayor of Los Angeles, for example, suddenly using eminent domain to build public housing. What has to happen politically to make this a reality? It feels we are talking about what would be a small revolution in attitudes and leadership.

Roy: It has to start with organizing. We have several housing movements, like Moms 4 Housing in Oakland and Reclaiming Our Homes in Los Angeles, that have made the case for reclaiming vacant property and for using tools such as eminent domain in order to keep tenants in their home. A crucial piece of their demands is community control over land and housing. They have built collective power in order to put political pressure on elected officials, and most important, they are building a new common sense about the public stake in property and about housing as a public good.

Kang: So much of the housing debate right now seems to be about eliminating single-family zoning. I understand the importance of this, but it sometimes feels as if it's being sold as a panacea to solve housing inequality. I live in Berkeley. There's been a lot of credit given to

the city's commitment for eliminating single-family zoning, which absolutely has a racist, exclusionary history in the city. But in reality, if you look at a map and see the wealthy areas that are single-family zoned, there's almost zero chance that any significant amount of housing is going to be built there.

Roy: I get the ways in which zoning has been a key instrument of segregation and exclusion. But I wish the solution to inequitable housing was as simple as doing away with that instrument. I don't think that's going to work.

I keep thinking about the subprime crisis and also what happened in the late '70s. The idea was to see investment flow into neighborhoods that had been deprived of investments. And it did flow, except on terms that simply created a new form of segregation and predation. So I feel that these issues can't be addressed until and unless we center the communities that are the most impacted, until we center tenants from working-class communities of color. Not all housing matters in the same way. So I feel very strongly that those who are most impacted by the housing crisis have to be at the center of this and any housing policy has to be judged, first and foremost, by the impact that will have on those communities.

Unless we take explicit accounts of how these racialized and class logics work, we run the risk of reinforcing those patterns of segregation.

Kang: I was reading about how the mayor of Paris is trying to get a quarter of its population housed in public housing. And the reason it was interesting to me was that I think Americans have a hard time imagining some cities being analogous to cities in the United States. So Singapore, for example, is hard for Americans to imagine as a possible reality. Roughly 80 percent of the population of Singapore lives in public housing managed by the government. Hong Kong is also hard. Almost half the population of Hong Kong lives in public housing.

There are all sorts of racialized, political and geographic reasons it's hard to imagine the United States as Singapore, but it struck me that if expanded public housing is possible in Paris, then perhaps Americans could envision it being possible in the United States. How do we get to a program like that, which seems to have at least been popular enough to get the mayor re-elected?

Roy: The Singapore and Hong Kong cases are crucial, because that's a completely different model of how land is mobilized for housing and how pensions are mobilized for housing, where public housing is not stigmatized but it's simply the way to live.

I think the challenge with Paris is that it is a deeply racialized, divided city, where public housing has been built on the peripheries of the city. And this is the case in many European contexts. That's been the big struggle in Europe at the moment. There's been a privatization of social housing, even in a place like Sweden. But also, a lot of the public housing has become a concentration of immigrant families, who are then stigmatized. And this is true in Paris. So there's a double challenge there, both expanding public housing and also rethinking this territorial and racialized stigmatization.

Kang: Does that stigma seem inevitable?

Roy: So, two things. One, I think that this housing crisis that I am anticipating might end up being worse than what happened during the Great Depression. And one of the reasons we got the New Deal was it wasn't just the poorest of the poor who were suffering. Those who were lining up at the soup kitchens were, in fact, the middle class. Those who were being forced to live in the Hoovervilles were those who never thought that they would be houseless. At moments when there's been a generalized condition of precarity, some of the stigma goes away, and a new politics of solidarity is possible.

The second piece of it is that social housing need not take the form of towers on the periphery of a city or the form of [Cabrini-Green](#) that is seen to be dangerous and must be torn down. There are many models of social housing, like community land trusts, tenant-owned housing coops and limited-equity co-ops. Many of those experiments have been with various kinds of decommodification of land and cooperative housing. There's a lot of imaginative work possible that various movements have been thinking about.

Kang: It's occurred to me that we can build middle-class housing, protect tenants, build public housing, repurpose abandoned or underwater buildings and fight homelessness at the same time. But this would require a lot of what you called solidarity between different spheres in the housing realm. How does one accomplish this?

Roy: I want to make a distinction between "all housing matters" and housing justice. Housing justice is a set of programs and policies focused on the experiences and needs of communities on the front lines of dispossession and displacement. It recognizes that the land and wealth loss suffered by such communities has often been the grounds for gentrification and other forms of urban development. Most important for the issue at hand, housing justice insists that the housing market is the problem, not the solution.

I think solidarity can be built between organizations and movements that share this approach, as we are seeing in the struggles that link unhoused neighbors with precariously housed tenants. But I do not think that such solidarity is possible with those who advocate market solutions to the housing crisis and imply that housing benefits will trickle down to those who are suffering or that such suffering is simply the human costs of all markets. As is the case with all markets, housing markets are a far cry from demand and supply equilibrium. Instead, they are controlled and manipulated by powerful actors who exercise dominance, evade regulation and thrive on the income and geographical segmentation of such markets. If building a certain type of housing means valorizing these actors and their extractive business models, then that runs contrary to housing justice and only aids the exploitation of those facing housing insecurity. There's a wonderful line by one of my favorite decolonial thinkers, Walter D. Mignolo, that applies here: "Why would you want to save capitalism and not save human beings?"