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# Exploring comparative research on housing policies in German Cities: a literature review and directions for further research

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## Abstract

*In response to the recurring housing question, municipal decision-makers in German cities developed a variety of local housing policies. In recent years, we correspondingly witness an increase in comparative perspectives which analyze the variation and changes in German urban housing policies and planning instruments. This article, first, reviews research on housing policies in German cities with a particular focus on conceptual debates, comparative methodologies, and case selection. Therefore, the review categorizes academic contributions from geography, policy analysis, and planning studies. The article's second part revisits approaches from comparative housing studies, comparative urbanism, and policy mobility studies in order to explore the extent to which these perspectives offer complementary lenses for analyzing the geographies of urban housing policies. Thereby, the article proposes new directions for research on inter-urban policy mobility and sites of learning from elsewhere. This entails framing urban policy arenas not as static or isolated, but as embedded in inter-urban processes and networks which contribute to learning processes through knowledge acquisition and best practices.*

## Zusammenfassung

Als Antwort auf die immer wiederkehrende Wohnungsfrage haben kommunale Entscheidungsträger in deutschen Städten verschiedene lokale Wohnungspolitiken entwickelt. In den letzten Jahren ist dementsprechend eine Zunahme vergleichender Perspektiven auf wohnungspolitische und planerische Instrumente zu beobachten, die Variationen und Veränderungen der Wohnungspolitik in deutschen Städten analysieren. Dieser Artikel gibt zunächst einen Überblick über die Forschung zur Wohnungspolitik in deutschen Städten, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf vergleichenden Methoden und konzeptionellen Debatten liegt. Dazu werden wissenschaftliche Beiträge aus Geographie, Politikanalyse und Planungswissenschaften berücksichtigt. Im zweiten Teil des Artikels werden dann Ansätze aus der vergleichenden Wohnungs- und Stadtforschung sowie aus der Forschung zur *Policy Mobility* aufgegriffen, um zu erkunden, inwieweit diese komplementären Perspektiven für die Analyse der Geographien von städtischen Wohnungspolitiken bieten. Dadurch eröffnen sich schließlich neue Forschungsperspektiven zur Mobilität von Politiken zwischen Städten und zum Lernen von anderen Orten. Dies impliziert, Arenen der städtischen Wohnungspolitik nicht als statisch oder isoliert zu betrachten, sondern als eingebettet in interurbane Prozesse und Netzwerke, die durch den Austausch von Wissen und *Best Practices* zu Lernprozessen beitragen.

**Keywords** housing policies, municipal policy instruments, Germany, policy mobility, comparison

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## 1. Introduction

For some time now, housing has been an important area of geographical research (Adams 1984; Bourne 1981). Thereby, housing policy is one issue complementary to others, such as location, markets – their financialization (Aalbers 2017; Heeg 2013) and regulation (Raco et al. 2020) – segregation, gentrification, or displacement (Beran et al. 2019; Großmann et al. 2015; Helbrecht 2018). Housing research, then again, has become a fertile ground for interdisciplinary approaches. Accordingly, housing policies are addressed from various disciplinary perspectives, such as political science, urban planning, law, economics, and geography. Thereby, research on urban housing policies has tackled them as a mix of policy instruments, such as rental market regulations, incentives for new construction, management of existing stock, subsidies addressing particular social or income groups, and spatial planning as well as other programs and strategies (cf. Egner and Rink 2020). In Germany, municipalities have a certain room for maneuver – due to the withdrawal of the national state from its responsibility for social housing since the 1990s and the decentralization reforms in the mid-2000s. At the same time, local authorities bear the responsibility and liability to act with the variegating support of regional states (cf. Krummacker 2011). Accordingly, the housing question is answered unevenly which contributes to geographically variegated policies. Hence, urban housing policies vary with regard to where development takes place (location), in what form (quality, urban design, and ownership), but also in what quantity and timing. This variation provoked several comparisons of particular historic-geographical contexts. Few comparisons, however, have explicitly engaged with recent geographical debates on comparative urbanism and policy mobility (but cf. Schipper 2017; Wetzstein 2019).

This article reviews recent literature on the comparison of urban housing policies, broadly understood as municipal programs, instruments, or measures addressing housing (markets) explicitly or implicitly, and attempting to steer housing development. The literature review was stimulated by the increasing recognition of housing as a pressing social and spatial issue in growing German cities. Despite the continuous interest in the dynamics of urban housing politics, few studies have explicitly questioned how German urban housing policies are compared methodologically and conceptually. In order to fill this gap, the article addresses the following questions: What are key topics

addressed in comparisons of urban housing policies in Germany? Which comparative methods are used? Which cities are selected as case studies or examples? The first part of the article reveals a nuanced picture of thematic focuses and methodological approaches adopted in current academic publications. The second part then brings German perspectives on urban housing policies into conversation with a wider international debate on comparative urbanism and policy mobility. Which concepts contribute to further developing comparative studies on urban housing policies? Based on the literature review, the article suggests addressing one particular gap in research by complementing current comparison with perspectives on learning from elsewhere and urban micro-political processes.

The article is structured as follows: after a short description of the literature review's key methodological steps in Section 2, the next sections review the ways in which current research accounts for the variegated geographies of urban housing policies in Germany. Section 3 reflects on central themes and Section 4 analyses the selected literature's comparative methodologies. Section 5 revisits comparative housing studies and comparative urbanism as two complementary lines of the international debate, and points to inter-urban circulation of policy knowledge and intra-urban policy arenas as potential entry points for understanding the geographies of local housing policies.

## 2. Literature review: methodological steps

Literature reviews have a certain tradition in geography<sup>1</sup>, as well as in housing studies (e.g. Soaita et al. 2021). Broadly understood, academic literature reviews survey and synthesize what has been published on a particular topic. More specifically, a systematic literature review is defined as “a qualitative, structured, and repeatable process for collecting and categorizing of the literature to answer a specific research question.” (Williams 2019: 2714). This article undertakes a systematic review insofar as it uses an explicit method for selecting, analysing and comparing literature (see also Moher et al. 2009: 1).

The article's main interest lies on exploring ways of doing comparative research on urban housing policies. Accordingly, a set of analytical research questions on topics, methods and cases was formulated in

the introduction. For this literature review, German-speaking and English-speaking academic publications published between 2010 and 2021 were collected, including monographs, journal articles, contributions in edited volumes, selected grey literature and PhD theses. The following keywords (in German and English) were used in combinations as search criteria: urban / municipal / local / cities, housing policy / policies, housing political strategies / programmes / concepts / instruments, comparison / comparing / comparative / variation, Germany. After an initial search in *Google Scholar*, complementary searches in *Web of Science* and *Baufachinformation*<sup>2</sup> were conducted. *Baufachinformation* was chosen as both English-speaking data bases only partially reflect the German state of the art. Publications were included which address urban housing policies in Germany in either title or abstract and feature a comparative perspective, i.e. including more than one city or location. Other overviews and handbook articles, single-case studies or studies which focus on national or regional housing policies were excluded. The initial search resulted in selecting 54 publications. Based on a snowballing technique, an additional 10 publications with particular relevance for the topic were added, resulting in 64 publications overall (marked with an asterisk (\*) in the reference list). For the systematic review, the publications' titles and abstracts were collected using a citation software (Citavi), in which topic, cases and methods were categorized manually. Upcoming *Table 1* provides an overview of key topics and specifications, the thematic strands' comparative approaches and case selection with corresponding examples. Throughout the discussion, selected references were added in order to situate the literature in a broader context.

### 3. Thematic focuses: housing policies as market interventions or as steering spatial development

The literature review shows that urban housing policies in German cities received the attention of scholars from political science, planning research, geography, and neighbouring disciplines. More recently, interdisciplinary and collaborative perspectives on housing policy emerged in the form of edited volumes (e.g. *Egner et al. 2021; Schipper and Vollmer 2020; Schönig et al. 2017a; Schönig and Vollmer 2020; Rink and Egner 2020; Wehrhahn et al. 2019*). Instead of drawing on disciplinary traditions, the next section focuses on key topics and concepts as starting points for com-

paring current research on urban housing policies. Thereby, the section seeks to answer the first analytical research question by describing and juxtaposing the key topics addressed in comparisons of urban housing policies in Germany.

One main difference found in academic approaches to urban housing policies is understanding them either as a social or as a spatial issue: one understanding frames housing policies as a subfield of social policies or market interventions, emanating either from a cleavage between the market and the (welfare-)state or based on neoliberalism as a conceptual lens. Another understanding focuses on the spatial-material dimension and frames housing policies as steering urban development through planning instruments and development projects. While both understandings can be complementary and fruitfully combined, they have developed largely in separate streams.

The first understanding conceptualizes local housing policies as social policies in response to market developments (*Egner et al. 2018; Egner and Rink 2020: 318*) or as instruments for balancing social disadvantages. This often builds on conceptualizations of cleavages between the market and the state, between liberal and socially oriented positions (*Rink and Egner 2020*). *Schönig et al. (2017b)*, for instance, identify transformations in local housing strategies, interpreting them not as incidences of paradigmatic change towards socially oriented policies and welfare state transformation, but as temporary shifts in public agendas.

Moreover, a widespread typology of municipal housing policies (cf. *Musil 2019: 76*) differentiates interventions into local housing markets:

- first, regulatory instruments addressing the rental market directly such as limiting possible increases in the rent level (*Mietpreisbremse*) or prohibiting the use of apartments for commercial uses (*Zweckentfremdungsverbot*; cf. *Deschermeier et al. 2014; Holm et al. 2018*),
- second, redistributive financial policies regarding the taxation of land use and property (e.g. *Grundsteuer*), and,
- third, distributive financial incentives and subsidies related to the (municipal) housing stock, its privatization, and ownership (cf. *Montanari and Wiest 2014*).

In line with this third type of distributive housing policies, several studies define urban housing policies as addressing issues of affordability and providing rent subsidies (e.g. *Schönig* 2020) and frame them, accordingly, as a subfield of social policy in the context of the welfare state (*Grohs and Zabler* 2021; *Krapp and Malottki* 2021).

The debate on neoliberal and post-neoliberal shifts offers an alternative perspective on housing policies as market responses. A younger generation of critical housing scholars (e.g. *Kadi et al.* 2021; *Metzger and Schipper* 2017; *Vollmer and Kadi* 2018) increasingly adopts such a focus on post-neoliberal housing policies and an accompanying political-economic perspective on neoliberal housing policies' shift towards more affordable and democratic housing systems. Such critical viewpoints often emphasize the potential and limitations of alternative initiatives for setting housing issues on the political agenda and for naming conflictual issues such as gentrification or segregation (cf. *Hurlin et al.* 2021; *Vogelpohl et al.* 2017: 118; *Vollmer* 2019). A comprehensive example for a post-neoliberal take on housing policies is *Schipper's* (2017) comparative analysis of social movements and housing struggles in Frankfurt and Tel Aviv.

In the second understanding, local housing policies are framed as tools for steering spatial urban development through land-use planning and the allocation of building plots. This line of argumentation raises broader questions on the causal relationship between planning instruments, urban development, and housing policies (*Altrock and Kienast* 2021; *Schmitt* 2017). Moreover, such an understanding comprises voices that consider the quality of urban design, spatial form, and location of (subsidized) housing (*Schönig* 2020: 1024). Another spatial aspect, currently under-researched in comparative approaches, is the city-regional (non-)governance of housing developments considering continued population growth in urban areas and the increase in land-consuming housing developments at the fringes of growing metropolises (cf. *Kiwitt* 2017 and *Schmitz-Veltin* 2015 on the example of Stuttgart). While this dilemma is often discussed with regard to (the lack of) city-regional planning, it is less so linked to urban housing strategies themselves.

Several comparative studies emphasize the importance of integrated approaches to housing. Thereby, spatial planning is often framed as a key domain for responding to housing challenges by drawing on ex-

isting formal municipal plans – the preparatory land-use plan (*Flächennutzungsplan*), the binding land-use plan (*Bauleitplan*) – and informal instruments including masterplans and spatial guiding principles. *Böttcher* (2017a, 2017b), for instance, compares municipal housing policies in Münster and Frankfurt. Her analysis differentiates types of housing policy instruments – urban development, regulatory and financial policies – and describes long-term paradigmatic changes for each of the cities in detail. In an overview article, furthermore, *Brombach et al.* (2015) compare municipal housing strategies in Stuttgart, Mannheim, and Freiburg. They emphasize the spatial dimension of housing construction and redevelopment as part of overall urban development and, as a result, find differences in the cities' emphasis on particular housing policy instruments.

In addition to these integrated perspectives on the mix of plans, programs, and instruments, other comparisons focus on selected municipal planning instruments, such as building permission procedures according to the German federal building code and the urban development law (see *Ganser and Schneider* 2020: 35). Geographical studies on particular planning instruments tend to have a more analytical character based on theoretical considerations. For example, *Helbrecht and Weber-Newth* (2017) discuss the potentials and limitations of land value capture (*Abschöpfung des Planungsmehrwertes*) as post-political urban policies based on Munich and Berlin as illustrative cases. Furthermore, *Pirzer and Wiegandt* (2020) compare municipal models for developing building plots (*Baulandmodelle*). Their comparison systematically describes the procedural measures in Munich, Cologne, and Hamburg, and carves out differences in the instruments' application and implementation. Then again, contributions from planning practice and research tend to address concrete applications and results (e.g. *Dransfeld* 2018; *Faller and Beyer* 2018; *Drixler et al.* 2014) more than viewpoints from geographers and political scientists. However, only few comparative studies in planning go beyond illustrative cases (but cf. *Suering and Weitkamp* 2020). An example from planning research that systematically assesses the implementation of instruments is *Guhl's* (2018) comprehensive analysis of neighbourhoods built since the 1990s, which combines a quantitative, descriptive comparison of large-scale housing developments (> 4 ha) with more detailed case studies (cf. *Guhl and Spars* 2020). Further, practice-oriented contributions regularly propose and discuss compila-

tions of planning instruments that refer to different aspects of urban housing development (e.g. *Bodelschwingh and Gilewski 2016; Klöppel and von Lojewski 2021; Pätzold 2021; Rohland 2017*).

The above paragraphs elaborated how, on the one hand, research based on an understanding of housing policies as market interventions addresses topics of affordable housing and post-neoliberal tendencies in urban politics. On the other hand, studies building on a conceptualization of housing as a spatial question focus on planning instruments and their implementation. Other distinguishing features of the selected literature are methodological choices, such as, first, the comparative methods applied, and second, the cities selected as cases studies or examples.

#### 4. Comparative methodologies: from implicit illustrations to deterministic causality?

One of the main criteria for selecting the literature was a comparative approach, i.e. including more than one city or location. Other types of literature, such as single case studies of urban housing policies (e.g. *Sarnow 2019; Vogelpohl and Buchholz 2017; Klus 2013*) were excluded from the literature review. The review focuses on comparative methods because they hold particular potentials and challenges to further our understanding of housing policies in historical-geographical contexts.

The reviewed studies' methodology ranges from implicit comparison of illustrative cases to deterministic or rational research designs<sup>3</sup>. Several comparative studies follow a descriptive approach, for instance, by giving an overview of local housing strategies' *status quo* or by assembling diachronic case studies on local policy instruments. For instance, *Marquardt and Glaser (2020)* propose a political-economic perspective on affordability and social housing in Berlin and Vienna as a result of state-market relations (also cf. *Egner and Kayser 2020* comparing Munich and Dresden). Others, such as *Böhler and Kayser (2021)* pursue a social-constructivist approach for explaining local housing policies – analysed through local discourses and context-specific framings – as a reaction to perceived problems such as increasing market dynamics. In contrast, *Rink and Egner's (2020)* encompassing comparison of housing policies in 14 German cities builds on detailed, similarly structured case studies by authors familiar with the local context. Their

concluding chapter compares the mix of policy instruments and shows that the selected cities currently apply a similar set of policy and planning approaches (cf. *Egner and Rink 2020: 319; Rink and Egner 2021*). Other recent studies pursue a nested analysis by combining a quantitative, statistical comparison for identifying relevant cases with a subsequent qualitative analysis of a small number of case studies (*Egner et al. 2018; Fina et al. 2020*). Concerning research methods, several qualitative comparisons apply a historical or diachronic perspective on local housing policies. Only a few comparisons focus on policy-making processes or question applied policy instruments' effectiveness and innovative capacity (but cf. *Böttcher 2017a*). These comparative methodologies' blind spots underline *Rink and Egner's (2020)* plea for more systematic and in-depth research on urban housing policies in Germany.

#### 5. Case selection: the 'big seven' or cities 'off the map'?

Another remarkable aspect of the selected comparative studies on urban housing policies in Germany is their choice of cities as case studies or illustrative examples. Several contributions, particularly those with overview character or with only an implicit comparative approach, name selected cities or local policies as illustrative cases. These studies predominantly refer to Munich as a forerunner in the German context, as well as to Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Stuttgart, and to a lesser extent to Düsseldorf as the least renowned of the so-called 'big seven'. In addition, university cities, such as Freiburg, Tübingen, Münster, and large cities in East Germany with an increasingly dynamic housing market, such as Dresden and Leipzig, are selected. In contrast, more systematic qualitative comparisons with a small number of cases apply elaborate strategies for case selection and consequently also include German cities 'off the map' (additionally) in the comparison (for instance, Dortmund, Jena, Göttingen and Kassel, *Egner and Rink 2020*; Kiel, Osnabrück and Wilhelmshaven, *Kaufmann 2013*; Bocholt, Hannover, Offenburg, *Drixler et al. 2014*; Friedrichshafen, Göppingen, Nürnberg, *Suerling and Weitkamp 2020*). Only a few studies explicitly focus on housing policies in small and medium-sized cities (such as Fürstenwalde (Spree) and Neuruppin in Brandenburg, *Bůžek and Mießner 2021*; Marburg, Tübingen and Weimar, *Löffler 2017*).

Quite remarkable, moreover, is the framing of Vienna as a European model. In comparative case studies, Vienna is often taken as the ideal-typical case, asking what German cities, such as Berlin (*Marquardt and Glaser 2020*), can learn from Vienna's housing policies (cf. *Gluns 2019*). Thereby, only a few scholars reflect on the extent to which Vienna's housing policies as the best practice of a continuous, state-led social housing regime is transferable to other contexts (for a critical perspective cf. *Kadi 2015; Reinprecht 2017*). As *Egner and Rink (2020: 315-16)* note aptly, Vienna's blueprint of a progressive housing policy often remains a utopian ideal for German cities. Munich, furthermore, has a similar status as the German exception, with a continuous and financially meaningful housing program, and the renowned building plot model (*SoBoN, Sozialgerechte Bodennutzung, Faller and Beyer 2018; Kötter 2014; Pirzer and Wiegandt 2020*) – which despite its efforts has only weak effects on market developments and social segregation.

In sum, comparative urban housing policies in Germany have emerged as a research field with some methodological pitfalls. In particular, strategies for case selection show a certain success bias, i.e. creating an overemphasis on pro-active municipalities with growing populations and increasing housing demand. Studies on urban shrinkage, in return, seldom address housing policies (but cf. *Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012*), yet, focus on other issues, such as the German Restructuring Programme (*Stadtumbau*, e.g. *Radzimski 2016*). Overall, this generates an underrepresentation of studies on smaller, passive, or 'ordinary' cities<sup>4</sup>.

### 6. From blind spots to directions for further research

Based on reviewing and categorizing recent comparative literature on urban housing policies in Germany, the remainder of this article addresses the identified blind spots and brings German perspectives into conversation with a wider international debate. Which concepts contribute to further developing comparative studies on urban housing policies? Here, inspiration comes from a relational understanding of comparative urbanism, comparative housing studies, and policy mobility, which takes into account the increasing interdependencies and multi-scalar spatial embeddedness of local policy making. This opens up one potential direction for comparative research on

urban housing policies – while other aspects, such as questions of ecology, scale, power struggles, or financialization, equally call for further attention, yet cannot be addressed in-depth here.

#### 6.1 Learning from comparative urbanism and comparative housing studies

As noted above, comparisons of urban housing policies in Germany often focus on best practices and illustrative cases, which has implications for the conclusions to be drawn from their empirical insights. From an epistemological viewpoint, a more cautious case selection<sup>5</sup> contributes to reflecting on two aspects: first, how the selected cities relate to other cities (generalization), and, second, how they relate to the broader phenomena or theoretical concepts under investigation (subsumption). Thereby, *Robinson (2011)* reminds us to learn from ordinary cities instead of delving into exceptionalism. Thus, instead of questioning what other cities can learn from exceptional cases, she suggests considering the relational embeddedness of any other city.

Moreover, the international debate on comparative housing studies can potentially enrich and further develop comparative methodologies on urban housing policies in Germany. Since the 2000s, comparative housing studies became increasingly interested in the local level, or what *Matznetter (2006, referring to Oxley 2001: 104)* calls "micro-scale comparative politics" (11). Examples include comparisons of urban policies in different national contexts. *Steinführer's (2005)* multi-level and multi-method comparison of urban policies in Dresden and Brno can be seen as a starting point for a series of micro-scale comparative studies (see also *Lawson 2010*).

Eventually, comparative studies on urban housing policies started exploring alternative methodological tactics stemming from comparative urbanism. For example, *Wetzstein (2019: 277)* builds on a "comparative-relational methodology" which follows a historical-ethnographic approach to trajectories of urban policies that face similar challenges and are embedded in local-global relations (p. 289). In a similar vein, *Schipper (2017, Chapter 2)* reflects on the comparative method as part of critical housing research by referring to *Robinson's (2016)* 'comparative imagination' (p. 18). *Schipper (2017: 22ff.)* brings two cases into conversation with each other by following more sys-

tematic comparative steps. Both comparative studies by *Wetzstein* and *Schipper* indicate that there is potential for cross-fertilizing comparative urbanism and housing studies, and, in particular, for considering methodological tactics of a more relational comparative urbanism (cf. *Robinson* 2016: 19 ff.). The following two sections elaborate on the extent to which policy mobility studies and a focus on intra-urban policy making processes consequently enrich the comparative study of urban housing policies.

### 6.2 Inter-urban policy mobility as learning from elsewhere

Another source of inspiration for comparative urban housing studies comes from the international debate on policy mobility. Comparative research on urban housing policies in Germany potentially profits from engaging with the increasing literature on transnational policy mobility in housing studies (cf. *Soiata et al.* 2021) involving inter-urban networks and bilateral forms of knowledge circulation. Selected comparative housing studies in Germany imply that intentional inter-urban policy learning influences the making of urban housing policies. For instance, *Egner et al.* (2018: 47) suggest that observation, imitation, and competition causally influence the making of urban housing policies in German cities. *Egner et al.* (2018: 116) support these claims by pointing to the involvement of external experts and research institutes in municipal housing policies. Other practice-oriented contributions on instruments for housing development point out the potential of learning from other municipalities' practices (cf. *Ginski and Schmitt* 2013). In particular, *Faller and Beyer* (2018) reflect on the Munich model (*SoBoN*) and how it is adapted to other contexts by altering procedural steps and calculation methods. Furthermore, *Ganser and Schneider* (2020) explicitly address the potential of learning from other cities' experiences on sharing infrastructure costs with private developers for developing housing at affordable prices.

Besides these explorative studies, only a few scholars analyse the relevance of exchange and learning for housing policy in a constructivist-relational perspective. One innovative example is *Wetzstein's* (2019) comparison of neoliberal approaches' mobility, in which he explains the globalization (i.e. convergence) of urban policy-making through the transfer and traveling of models and programs. Thereby, *Wetzstein*

(2019: 274) uncovers imbalances between local housing problems, which are historically and geographically rooted, in contrast to fashionable policy learning in global circuits through best practices and policy transfer. While *Wetzstein's* study points in a promising direction, studies on the relevance of inter-urban circulation of knowledge and expertise in urban housing policy-making are still scarce (cf. *Faulconbridge and Grubbauer* 2015 focusing on building practices).

However, in a relational, comparative perspective, mobile ideas are always already local, as the 'arriving at' of policies involves the "mixing and folding of here and elsewhere into distinctive local policies" (*Robinson* 2016: 20). More detailed, ethnographic comparisons could uncover the interplay between mobile, exogenous ideas and contextualizing processes which contribute to the production of local housing policies (see 6.3 below). Moreover, future research should also investigate the mobility of policy failures (*Bok* 2020; *Temenos and Lauermann* 2020) in contrast to the current focus on success stories of best practices.

### 6.3 Intra-urban policy-making: localizing housing policy knowledge

Moreover, studies of intra-urban political processes contribute to explaining policy variation beyond historical path-dependency. Thereby, urban policy arenas, networks, and sites present entry points for analysing how knowledge from elsewhere comes into play in local policy-making processes. Such a focus on the localization of mobile ideas aligns with *Matznetter's* (2006) call for detailed studies on the micro-politics of urban housing policies and with *Egner and Rink's* (2020: 325-326) plea for further research on the governance arenas and politics that contribute to the making of local housing policy.

Thereby, a first research focus regards the sites and situations of urban housing policies, addressing where housing policy ideas from elsewhere 'arrive at' and where knowledge exchange takes place. These local policy arenas can correspond to decision making sites, such as municipal parliaments and public administrations, yet, alternative forums and private sector networks might have their weight in promoting particular housing instruments. For example, *Heeg and Bitterer's* (2015) case study of communities of practice in Warsaw's building sector focuses on such intra-urban processes. Another innovative example is

Raynor and Witzmann's (2021) study of intersectional policy networks in Melbourne, Toronto, Vancouver, and Portland and their impact on affordable housing.

A second focus on the extent to which policy knowledge and expertise are considered in the making of housing policies offers entry points for understanding power struggles and strategies for agenda-setting (cf. Böhler and Kayser 2021). To that end, comparative studies of urban housing policies could focus on knowledge brokers' influence in this process, going beyond reflections on the relationship between academic research and practitioners in urban housing policies (e.g. Kleinhans 2012), and build on urban geographers' analyses of transnational consultants' influence on urban policies (cf. Vogelpohl 2019 for the German context).

## 7. Conclusions

This article set out to review the efforts that have been made to compare urban housing policies in Germany from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including geography, local policy analysis, and planning studies. Thereby, the review of German academic literature identified emerging interdisciplinary conversations and clusters around distinct framings of urban housing policy, either as a social policy in the context of the welfare state or as a spatial policy for steering urban development through planning instruments. The overview shows that comparative studies on urban housing policies address various issues. A first group of studies that frame housing as a policy field dominated by a cleavage between the market and the state, tend to focus on issues such as social movements, neo-liberal turns and affordable housing. A second group of studies that frame housing predominantly as a spatial issue instead focus on planning instruments for steering urban development. Moreover, the literature varies with regard to comparative methodologies, ranging from contingent use of anecdotal examples to comprehensive comparison or nested analysis combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

Overall, this overview underlines the potential that comparative perspectives offer for understanding similarities and differences between housing policies in particular historical-geographical contexts – as well for identifying causal mechanisms. Several of the reviewed comparisons describe the *status quo* and thereby importantly accumulate knowledge on hous-

ing policies. Meanwhile, others have developed refined comparative methodologies, that identify causal factors or historical trajectories and thus offer starting points for understanding the mechanisms and conditions for designing and steering housing development in social and spatial terms. When recognized by practitioners and policymakers, such comparative studies could in return contribute to innovating urban housing policies.

The reviewed comparative methodologies, yet, still show blind spots which could be filled by social-constructivist and relational perspectives suggested in international debates on comparative urbanism and comparative housing studies. To this end, the article explored selected concepts for further research: In order to further develop comparative methodologies, a focus on policy mobility could contribute to a refined understanding of the inter- and intra-urban processes of making urban housing policies. Research foci on 'learning from elsewhere' and urban micro-political processes could inform future comparative research that explores the sites of urban housing policies and, at the same time, emphasizes their relational embeddedness. Eventually, this literature review presents starting points for engaging in context-sensitive comparative housing research, which also considers failed housing policies in cities 'off the map' beyond archetypical examples.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Articles in journals such as *Geography Compass* or *Progress in Human Geography* review the current state of the art in selected research areas.

<sup>2</sup> See [baufachinformation.de](http://baufachinformation.de) by Fraunhofer-Informationszentrums Raum und Bau IRB.

<sup>3</sup> This classification of comparative housing studies with regard to the complexity and epistemology of their research design aligns with Oxley's, 2001, differentiation of low-, medium- and high-level comparison in terms of methodological complexity and explanatory endeavors, ranging from descriptive to transferability or lesson-drawing, and systematic comparison.

<sup>4</sup> For alternative research initiatives on small and medium-sized cities in Germany, so-called *Kleinstadtforschung*, see Porsche et al., 2019, and <https://www.hochschulcampuskleinstadtforschung.de>.

<sup>5</sup> See Brenner, 2003, for a discussion of superlatives in urban studies, referencing to stereotypical, archetypical or prototypical cities.



Table 1 Overview of selected comparative research (2010-2021) on urban housing policy in Germany. Source: own compilation based on systematic literature review

Main topic	Subtopic	Methods or approach	Cases or examples	Concepts and exemplary authors	
Urban development	Relationship between housing policy and urban planning	Selective or anecdotal examples, qualitative comparison of up to three cities	Freiburg, Mannheim, Stuttgart, Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Hamburg	Altröck and Kienast 2021; Brombach et al. 2015	
	Urban renewal	Quantitative comparison, overview	No explicit comparison of cities, but of federal states	"Stadtbau", Radzinski 2016; "Stadterneuerung", Schmitt 2017	
Housing policies	Urban development projects	Nested analysis (consecutive combination of quantitative and qualitative comparison)	Frankfurt, Freiburg, Munich, Potsdam	"Wohngebietsentwicklung", Gühl and Spars 2020; Gühl 2018	
	Comprehensive comparison of housing policies	Qualitative comparison of five or more cities	Berlin, Cologne, Dortmund, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Hannover, Jena, Kassel, Leipzig, Munich, Stuttgart	Rink and Egner 2020, 2021; Schöning et al. 2017b	
	Housing political concepts and strategies	Qualitative comparison of two cities	Gießen, Frankfurt, Marburg, Münster	"Kommunale Konzepte zum Wohnen", Böttcher 2017a; "Wohnraumversorgungskonzepte", Velte and Diller 2021	
	Housing political instruments and land policies	Qualitative comparison of a small number of cities	Inter alia Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, Hannover, Munich, Stuttgart	"Baulandbeschlüsse", Drixler et al. 2014; "Baulandmodelle", Stiering and Weitekamp 2020; Kötter et al. 2021; Pirzer and Wiegandt 2020	
	(Post-)Neoliberal housing policies	Explaining rent level	Nested analysis	North-Rhine-Westphalia, Bonn, Düsseldorf, Münster	"Mobilisierung von Baulandpotentialen", Fina et al. 2020
		Financialization	Discourse analysis	Municipalities (Tübingen and Berlin)	"Baugebot" and "Enteignung", Kolocek and Hengstermann 2020
Selected examples			Cologne, Munich, Tübingen	"Konzeptverfahren", Schaller 2021; Peters 2020	
Housing and rent markets		Qualitative comparison of up to three case studies	Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Vienna; international comparison	Metzger and Schipper 2017; Vollmer and Kadi 2018; Kadi et al. 2021	
	Discourse analysis; quantitative comparison; nested analysis; qualitative comparison of two cities	Berlin, Dresden, Kassel, Munich, Oberhausen	Böhler and Kayser 2021; Egner and Grabietz 2018; Egner et al. 2018; Egner and Kayser 2020		
Social housing policy	Qualitative comparison of two cities	International comparison including Berlin	Fields and Uffer 2016		
	Qualitative comparison of three cities; quantitative comparison	Kiel, Osnabrück, Wilhelmshaven	Kaufmann 2013, 2014; Montanari and Wiest 2014		
Social housing policy	Qualitative comparison of two to four case studies	Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, Stuttgart; international comparison	Granath Hansson 2019, 2020; Marquardt and Glaser 2020; Schöning 2020; Wetzstein 2018, 2019		
	Quantitative comparison of policy instruments	Large German cities	Grohs and Zabler 2021; Holm et al. 2018; Krapp and Malottki 2021		
Social movements	Qualitative comparison of two to four case studies	Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt; international comparison	Hurlin et al. 2021; Schipper 2017; Vogelpohl et al. 2017; Vollmer 2019		

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