

Politecnico di Milano
Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU)
Doctoral Programme in Urban Planning, Design and Policy (38th cycle)

Class Matters for Migrants' Housing (In)Accessibility

The Conditions, Processes, And Strategies to Gain Housing Access for Migrants in Zurich's Urban Area



Arch. Beatrice O. M. Meloni

Supervisor:

Prof. Stefania Sabatinelli

Co-supervisor:

Prof. Gabriela Debrunner



**POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863**

DIPARTIMENTO
DI ARCHITETTURA
E STUDI URBANI

Class Matters for Migrants' Housing (In)Accessibility

The Conditions, Processes, And Strategies to Gain Housing Access for Migrants in Zurich's Urban Area

Candidate: Arch. Beatrice O. M. Meloni

Ph.D. candidate in Urban Planning, Design and Policy (38th cycle)
Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU)

Politecnico di Milano
Via Edoardo Bonardi 3
20133 Milan, IT

beatriceolga.meloni@polimi.it

Supervisor: Prof. Stefania Sabatinelli

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano
stefania.sabatinelli@polimi.it

Co-supervisor: Prof. Gabriela Debrunner

Institute of geography and sustainability, Université de Lausanne
gabriela.debrunner@unil.ch

Declaration of Authorship: I hereby declare that this PhD thesis is my own original work and has been written solely by me. All sources of information and ideas from other authors have been properly acknowledged and referenced. This doctoral research was conducted at Politecnico di Milano.

Funding: This work was supported by Politecnico di Milano Ph.D. scholarship and IDEA League research grant.

Statement: During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to check English grammar and fluency and improve sentence structure and readability. After using this tool, the author always reviewed and edited the content. AI was not used to generate text or content.

Cover Photo: Zurich (Source: Creative Cloud, Adobe Library).

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Stefania Sabatinelli and Prof. Gabriela Debrunner for the academic supervision and human support, and to the members of the PhD board in Urban Planning, Design, and Policy at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU), Politecnico di Milano, for their valuable feedback and comments. I am also deeply grateful to Prof. David Kaufmann, Prof. Hanna Hilbrandt, and Prof. Ola Söderström, as well as to my colleagues and scholars at Spatial Development and Urban Policy (SPUR) at ETH Zurich, the Department of Geography at the University of Zurich, and the Institute of Geography at the University of Neuchâtel, for their generous support during the visiting period. I would also like to thank Ifigeneia Dimitrakou, Luisa Gehrig, Martina Bovo, Paola Briata, Giuliana Costa, Simonetta Armondi, Costanzo Ranci, Francesca Governa, and Martina Schretzenmayr for the fruitful collaborations and guidance. Special thanks go to ETH Wohnforum, the Swiss Forum for Migration Studies, and the NCCR On the Move for the enriching events and discussions that contributed meaningfully to the development of this research. Another thank you goes to the housing and migration scholars I met at various conferences and presentations throughout my doctoral studies, whose comments and feedback proved very valuable to the progress of my work. I am also deeply grateful to the many people, colleagues and friends in both Switzerland and Italy, who engaged with my work in both formal and informal discussions. My deepest gratitude goes to the participants in my research, who generously shared their time and experiences, particularly those who did so despite the pressures and stress connected to their housing and migration situations. Lastly, I wish to express my solidarity with the movements and organizations, several of which have supported my research, that advocate for housing justice in Zurich.

ABSTRACT

Housing (in)accessibility is exerting pressure across several European cities, and gaining access to housing is becoming increasingly difficult for a broader range of inhabitants, notably in those Western cities considered competitive and attractive. Challenges in housing access for disadvantaged groups have always been prevalent in these cities, but in the last decade, as housing pressure has also affected the middle classes, and sometimes the upper-middle classes, the debate has relentlessly entered the media and political discourses. Even when policymakers and housing providers try to tackle the problem, what is built is hardly affordable, and even when below the market prices, it is not automatically accessible to people in need.

In housing studies, migrants are recognized as one of the most vulnerable groups; research points to specific obstacles they encounter in accessing dwellings, leading to indecent, precarious, unaffordable, and segregated housing solutions. However, the relationship between housing and migration has been mainly studied from the perspective of the unprivileged, and by country of origin, legal status, or time of arrival. Not much research has been performed on housing access for migrants from the lens of class, looking at both privileged and unprivileged migration. Additionally, most literature on housing and migration tends to associate migrants with ethnic minorities, reinforcing an ethnicity-centered understanding of who is a migrant and risking reproducing binarism and inequalities.

Contrary to these positions, this thesis points out that not all migrants are disadvantaged in socio-economic terms nor belong to ethnic minorities, and tries to go toward a more nuanced understanding of their position in the housing market by adding a class perspective. Accordingly, the objective of this research is to understand **why, how, and for whom** class determines the **housing access conditions, processes, and strategies** for migrant groups belonging to the lower- and upper classes in the Zurich urban area, an economically competitive and attractive context that is witnessing a consistent immigration influx and a severe housing pressure.

More precisely, I ask: **What are the conditions under which lower- and upper-class migrants gain access to the urban rental housing market? How does class influence the process of making housing (in)accessible for migrants? For whom (which migrants) do class-based strategies succeed in securing housing access?** To answer these research questions, I conducted 33 in-depth qualitative interviews with housing experts, housing professionals, and migrant tenants of urban rental housing in Zurich, carried out 12 site visits, and participated in 7 housing movement initiatives. I additionally analyzed secondary data, institutional documentation, and regulations on housing and migration at the national, cantonal, and municipal levels. The goal is to: (1) First analyze the *political, spatial, socio-economic, racial and migration history conditions* that determine housing (in)accessibility for lower- and upper-class migrants; (2) Second, study the housing access process for migrants, from *housing search*, through *viewings and application*, to final *selection and allocation*, looking at class-based dynamics; (3) Third, focus on *individual material and immaterial strategies* deployed in the housing access process in terms of class-based resources and performances. The goal is to understand their impact on housing (in)accessibility—encompassing *housing affordability, housing location and proximity, neighborhood and housing quality, housing pathways and trajectories, and housing security and precarity*—for migrants by class.

My key finding is that the economic dimension plays a more prominent role in securing housing for migrants, enabling access to additional resources, such as contact with gatekeepers and time resources, while also mitigating the effects of discrimination. Specifically, the *labor position*—such as labor income, employment status, job security, and prospects—significantly influences the access conditions to the housing market, the extent to which migrants' applications are selected, and the capability to meet their housing needs and aspirations. In response, foreign applicants perform as 'good tenants' and 'good migrants' in the housing access process to meet housing access criteria and broader societal expectations. These performances are often expressed in economic terms, such as demonstrating financial capacity, career aspirations, and being willing to integrate according to local standards of professional success.

The predominance of material and economic factors deepens class divides, which become evident in the spatial and residential distribution of migrant groups in the urban area. This reflects the combined effects of restrictive and selective migration regimes, as well as insufficient or ineffective housing policies. This thesis demonstrates that, in contexts where migration regulations facilitate the settlement of privileged migrants, urban policies prioritize competitive development, and the housing market is dominated by economic players, *money*—with the resources it confers and the performances it enables—is the most decisive factor in housing (in)accessibility for migrants.

Migrants' inequalities in housing access thus illuminate broader systemic socio-economic racial divides in cities where class stratification appears to be shifting toward the extremes. Accordingly, to inform urgently needed housing policies in highly commodified and exclusive markets, further research must adopt a class perspective on housing (in)accessibility for migrants. A class-based approach to this issue can help move beyond simplistic 'foreigner' vs. 'national', 'us' vs. 'them' distinctions and contribute to the broader goal of ensuring accessible housing for all, regardless of nationality or migration background.

Table of Contents

Abstract	p. 4
List of Figures	p. 8
List of Tables	p. 9
1. Introduction: Understanding Migrants' Housing Access through class	p. 11
1.1 A Class Perspective on Housing (In)Accessibility for Migrants	p. 12
1.2 Addressing the Research Gap in Migration and Housing Studies	p. 16
1.3 Why, How, and for Whom Class Matters	p. 20
1.4 Zurich Urban Area: An Extreme Case Study	p. 21
1.5 Thesis structure: Structural Conditions and Lived Experiences	p. 27
2. Theory: Class and Privilege as Multidimensional and Intersectional	p. 31
2.1 Framing Housing Access for Migrants in the Urban Context	p. 32
2.2 Migration and Class, Classed Migration, and Transnational Class Making	p. 36
2.3 Multidimensional and Intersectional Class Dimensions	p. 42
2.4 Definitions of Lower- and Upper-Class Migration	p. 45
2.5 Housing Access Conditions, Processes, and Strategies	p. 50
2.6 From Categories to Research Questions	p. 64
2.7 Reflexive Account and Dual Positionality	p. 68
3. Research Design and Methodology: Defining the Research Area and Actions	p. 69
3.1 Case Study Selection: Competitive, Polarized, Unequal	p. 70
3.2 The Urban Research Area and the Migrant Target Population	p. 78
3.3 Empirical Data Collection and Analysis	p. 81
3.4 Qualitative Methods and Methodological Limitations	p. 95
4. Why Class Matters for Migrants' Housing Access: The Structural and Individual Conditions	p. 99
4.1 The Political Conditions	p. 100
4.2 The Spatial Conditions	p. 107
4.3 The Economic Conditions	p. 117
4.4 The Social Conditions	p. 120
4.5 The Racial and Migration History Conditions	p. 122
4.7 Why Class Matters: The Political Responsibilities of Housing Inequalities Among Migrants	p. 126

5.	How Class Matters for Migrants' Housing Access: The Housing Access Process	p. 131
5.1	The Stages of the Housing Access Process	p. 132
5.2	Migrants' Lived Experiences of (In)Accessible Housing Process	p. 136
5.3	Class-Based Perspective at Every Step of the Process	p. 141
5.4	How Class Matters: Exposing Class Divides in the Housing Access Process	p. 147
6.	For Whom does Class Matters for Migrants' Housing Access: The Individual Strategies	p. 151
6.1	The Individual Material Strategies	p. 152
6.2	The Individual Immaterial Strategies	p. 159
6.3	For Whom Class Matters: The Intersection of the 'Good Tenant' and the 'Good Migrant'	p. 162
7	Conclusions: Class matters for migrants' housing (in)accessibility	p. 167
7.1	Migrant's Housing Access from a Class Perspective	p. 168
7.2	Conditions, Processes, and Strategies	p. 170
7.3	A Theoretical and Empirical Contribution	p. 174
7.4	Policy Implications and Future Research	p. 176
	Reference list	p. 182
	Annexes	p. 200

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Housing (In)Accessibility Diagram	p. 13
Figure 2: The Six Dimensions of Housing (In)Accessibility	p. 18
Figure 3: Location of the City of Zurich in the National Swiss Context	p. 22
Figure 4: Swiss and International Media Coverage	p. 26
Figure 5: Thesis Structure Map	p. 20
Figure 6: Housing Access Conditions	p. 64
Figure 7: Housing Access Processes	p. 64
Figure 8: Housing Access Strategies	p. 66
Figure 9: Zurich Urban Area	p. 71
Figure 10: Building Sites in the Zurich City Center	p. 77
Figure 11: Housing Trajectories Map	p. 89
Figure 12: Arulmihu Sivan Temple, Glattbrugg	p. 92
Figure 13: Greencity, Leimbach	p. 92
Figure 14: Wohndemo (25 May 2024)	p. 94
Figure 15: Schwamendingen Bleibt! (6 April 2024)	p. 94
Figure 16: Europaallee	p. 109
Figure 17: Home Viewings	p. 133
Figure 18: Advertisement on Supermarket Notice Board	P. 153
Figure 17: Class and Privilege Spectrum	p. 169

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Administrative Entities and Population	p. 72
Table 2: Interview Questions Examples	p. 82
Table 3: Interviewees: Housing Experts	p. 84
Table 4: Interviewees: Housing Providers and Professionals	p. 85
Table 5: Interviewees: Tenants	p. 87
Table 6: Site Visits	p. 91
Table 7: Migrants' Lived Experiences in Accessing Housing	p. 141