Abstract
Social housing varies from society to society. Globalisation continues to impact on local social housing systems. As researchers, we seek to understand these various social housing systems and their relations to broader economic, societal and global trends; we seek to identify the interests that drive social housing, learn from successful innovations and propose practical innovations. The adequacy of our results depends upon the adequacy of our methods.

This paper argues that current methods are no longer adequate to the task of dealing with the complexity of social housing in a global context. It examines four issues critical for social housing research: theory, interdisciplinarity, a scientific approach and making progress. It introduces a new framework for collaborative creativity, Functional Collaboration. This is a set of eight methods that integrates the diversity of current methods. It is a scientific, collaborative, cyclical and global approach oriented to progress in social housing.

Keywords
Social housing research, theory, method, science, interdisciplinarity, functional collaboration, Bernard Lonergan, functional specialties

Introduction
In the 20th century, social housing spread to many countries throughout the globe. While social housing originated in Europe and its history “is deeply embedded in the history of European industrial modernity” (Lévy-Vroelant, Reinprecht & Wassenberg 2008:46), it has taken different forms in different countries with different roles, objectives, governance and regulation, financing and ownership, styles of management, target groups and housing forms (Whitehead & Scanlon 2007; Scanlon & Whitehead 2008). Moreover, it is embedded in countries with different climates, natural resources, environments, economies, polities and cultures.

Social housing is one of the most recent significant achievements in the history of housing. Whether social housing or, indeed, the private rental market or owner-occupied housing will be forms of housing in the future is impossible to predict. What we can say is that social housing now plays an important role in many societies despite its shortcomings. It is not a once-off solution but rather an ongoing and evolving one. Social housing must continue to adapt to the demands of a changing environment. Better forms of social housing will emerge or, indeed, it will provide the grounds for some new and better solution to the problem of adequate and affordable housing. It is through
understanding and evaluating/critiquing the experience of current forms of housing as well as through our creative intelligence and commitment that we will discover more adequate solutions to our housing problems and develop better future forms.

As each social housing system, so each society is the product of the decisions and actions of past generations. Its ongoing success is measured by the extent to which its members find solutions to the problems they encounter. Each generation learns from the accumulated experience of past generations and has the opportunity to maintain, destroy or creatively innovate on their inheritance. This accumulated experience can be shared with other people and other societies. New forms of communication now facilitate the rapid transfer of knowledge and ideas. New forms and modes of transport facilitate the rapid transfer of goods and services and, of people, their culture, their skills and their labour. New forms of money facilitate the rapid transfer of funds. As a result, globalisation has had and will continue to have different impacts on different local social housing systems.

If social housing researchers are to explore the vast panorama of social housing globally and learn from this accumulated experience, there is the prior need for method that can operate within a global context and so, can garner this experience, can learn what works and what doesn’t and can propose practical advice to policy makers and practitioners, advice that takes accounts of the local context within which it is being implemented. Yet, such an enterprise raise many critical issues for future social housing research such as: comparative housing frameworks that adequately account for social housing systems not just in western Europe but also in eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and South America (Oxley 2001; Hantrais 2009; Lawson, Haffner & Oxley 2010); policy transfer between countries with different economies, polities and cultures (Oxley 2001; Dolowitz 2003; Dolowitz & Marsh 2012); interdisciplinary and collaborative research (Adams 2012, 2013). In my view, we have yet to develop and implement an adequate framework for such an enterprise.

In this paper, I will explore four critical issues whose resolution is necessary for social housing research in a global context and, propose that: to bring about progress in social housing (indeed, in any area of human endeavour), we need to ask and find new answers to eight questions; progress in social housing research is contingent upon a new understanding of both collaboration and interdisciplinary research; a scientific approach to social housing is constituted by a complete ordered set of these eight inter-related question; and, one of those questions is a theoretical question and that a shift into the world of theory is indispensable to the future social housing research.

So, there follows a brief discussion of these critical issues for social housing research in a global context under four headings: towards theory in social housing, towards interdisciplinary social housing research, a scientific approach to social housing research and making progress in social housing.1

1. Towards Theory in Social Housing

Defining theory

Over 20 years ago, Jim Kemeny called for theory in housing research (Kemeny 1992:xvii). While the shift to theory is critical, we also need a better understanding of what theory is (King 2009:51). So, what is theory? Indeed, how do we go about answering such a question given the great variety of answers presented in the literature?

We could go about answering this question by examining the work of social theorists such as Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel etc. We could examine various social theories under such generic titles as functionalist theory, Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, structuralist theory, grounded theory, rational choice theory, systems theory, social constructionist theory, critical realist theory, post-modernist theory, feminist theory, queer theory, action theory etc. etc. We could examine the work of metatheorists who examine, compare and critically assess various social theories (such as Ritzer (2001) or Blaikie (2007)).

From this menu, a researcher could make a leap of faith and adopt one or other approach, even vary it according to circumstances. This could fit with their ideological preferences or with the fashion of the moment. In doing so, however, it is doubtful whether the researcher has come to some understanding of what theory is. Then again, on what basis would a researcher adopt one or other approach to theory? On what basis would they be prepared to accept what someone says about theory – this is theory and that is not theory? A rigorous approach would demand that a researcher at least sort through the different and sometimes conflicting positions on theory, the disagreements and arguments about what it is; that they sort through the various and sometimes conflicting activities of social scientists engaged in what they and others regard as theorising; that they bridge the gap between what a social scientist is doing when they are theorising and their understanding and articulation of this. In the end, however, to answer the question, what is theory, requires something beyond theory; it demands an understanding of ourselves as researchers, of what we are doing when we are theorising.

So, an understanding of theory depends upon a researcher having an experience of theory and being able to identify it as such. Moreover, at the outset we need to recognise that a decision by a researcher to shift into the world of theory is a shift into a new world, one which is not continuous with our everyday taken-for-granted commonsense world in which we live in. This shift involves a radical transformation in perspective, a metamorphosis. So living in the world of theory stands in stark contrast to the world of everyday living.

In the world of our everyday living, we are oriented towards solving the many and various immediate problems that can arise as we live our lives. Our orientation is decidedly towards what is immediately required, what is immediately practical. Our learning is through trial and error; either learning from others or finding out for ourselves what works and what doesn’t. Within this world, each person and each economic, social, political, ethnic, national, cultural and religious group develops and operates within a horizon that presupposes an understanding of the world and the way in which problems are solved. Within this immediate orientation, we, collectively, put in place and continually adjust the vast structures of economy and society, health and education, housing and urban living, knowledge and technology, history and culture, literature and the arts etc.
Like other groups operating within the horizon of everyday commonsense living, social housing researchers direct their attention to some events rather than others, regard some events as more important than others and incorporate the interests of one group rather than another. Although they may recognise ongoing and unresolved conflicts between different groups, they just cannot presuppose that the solutions they propose from within this horizon will resolve such conflicts. The social housing researcher operating within this horizon is inescapably trapped (Allen 2009).

If we are to get beyond these conflicting horizons, we need a higher viewpoint, one whose ultimate purpose will provide a better insight into what is happening. This higher viewpoint is the horizon of theory.

_Theory as an explanatory definition_

Research is about asking and answering questions. There are different types of questions which anticipate different types of answers and, which are answered by different type of methods. I would suggest (i) that a scientific approach would distinguish these different types of questions (ii) that, in distinguishing these types of questions, we can distinguish different understandings of theory, and (iii) that the primary meaning of theory is an answer to one particular type of question, viz. a what-is-it-question.

A what-is-it-question is asking for a definition. Any good book or article on social housing, begins with some sort of definition either one that describes how a term is being used or one that is in the form of an analytic or conceptual framework. Indeed, the literature on housing, social housing, globalisation, social theory etc. is replete with various attempts to define what is being discussed. Such definitions describe things from the point of view of a researcher operating within the horizon of everyday commonsense and thus, depend upon the purpose or use for which the person needs the definition. It is this confusion between what something is and its purpose that has created a long history within the social sciences of not dealing with what-is-it-questions. Yet, they continually surface in the form of descriptive definitions and analytic frameworks. These two types of definition get caught up in the time and place associations of the everyday commonsense world and such definitions depend upon the cultural, political and economic horizon of the researcher. In my view, these types of definitions are not adequate answers to a what-is-it-question.

There is, however, a third type of definition, an explanatory definition. It draws upon material from the other two types of definitions but it does so in way which seeks to explain the occurrence of social housing in any time or place.

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2 Within housing research, examples of analytic frameworks include Peter Ambrose’s Housing Provision Chain model (1991; 1992); Michael Ball and Michael Harloe’s structures of housing provision thesis (Ball 1986; Ball, Harloe & Martens 1988; Ball & Harloe 1992; Ball 1998); Lennart Lundqvist’s framework on privatisation in housing policy (1992); Kath Hulse and Terry Burke’s framework on allocations systems in social housing (2005); and, Sean McNelis’ framework for understanding social housing rents (McNelis & Burke 2004; McNelis 2006).

3 Explanations are often related to why-questions. However, it is important to note that why-questions are ambiguous and, depending upon the context, can anticipate different types of answers. Why is a house, a house? (i) because it consists of certain materials – bricks, timber, concrete etc., (ii) because these materials are ordered in a certain way, (iii) because it was built by a group of people, and (iv) because it meets some purpose that accord with certain interests and motivations. These different answers to a why-question point to different types of causes: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause and final cause. As such, why-questions reflect different types of questions.
When we ask a what-is-it-question we are anticipating an answer with certain characteristics. If we asking, what is social housing, for instance, our answer will distinguish social housing from other things, highlighting what is unique about social housing. It will incorporate all the significant, relevant and essential elements and their relations and exclude all that is misleading, insignificant, irrelevant and not essential (such as those elements that are only associated with social housing in time and place). It will distinguish those elements that constitute social housing from those characteristics of social housing that come about because social housing has some function or role or purpose in constituting other things. This explanatory definition or theory of housing will be:

- Abstract – it only includes the significant, relevant essential elements and their relations
- Systematic – it relates the elements that are necessary for housing to occur
- Complete - it includes the complete set of elements and their relations, and
- Universal – it is applicable in all times and places.

So, to come back to our original question, how do we go about answering a what-is-it-question. By asking a question such as what is social housing? we turn to and gather data on the occurrences of social housing. Initially, we want to understand what things, events, processes could be associated with social housing; we explore the data, juggle it and mess with it as we seek to make sense of it; as we shift contexts and perspectives, we distinguish events, select some, reject others. All the time we use ‘fantasy and lateral thinking’ (Kemeny 1992:xviii referring to Wright Mills (1970)) as we reach for a discovery, an insight which systematically relates the data (those elements that constitute social housing) (Lonergan [1957]1992). It is through insight into the data, a combination of the data and the creativity of researcher, that we reach an answer to a what-is-it-question.

Theory as an explanatory definition can be distinguished from other understandings of theory that arise from asking different questions and using different methods to answer them (see the Section on science below). Qualitative and quantitative research ‘theorise’ by seeking to grasp the associations in time and place between things. For example, the classic work of Esping-Andersen (1990) and the subsequent work of Hoekstra on welfare and housing in Europe (2010) associate different types of welfare (and housing) with types of political systems. Historical methods grasp the dynamics, trends or drivers of changes over time in actually operating housing systems. For example, in his classic work *The people’s home?: social rented housing in Europe and America* Harloe (1995) traces the history of social housing in five European countries and the United States of America from late 19th Century through to the late 20th century seeking to explain why social housing did not become one of the welfare pillars of advanced capitalism. Critical methods grasp the role of social housing in other purposes (motivations or interests of various groups) such as status, profit, aesthetic design, location, amenity, private place, equity etc. For example, Ball and Harloe’s structures of housing provision thesis (Ball 1986; Ball, Harloe & Martens 1988; Ball & Harloe 1992; Ball 1998) explains housing by relating its production, exchange, finance and consumption to the interests of the agencies involved.

In our everyday taken-for-granted living, anticipating the actions, responses, attitudes and motivations of social agents (whether individuals or organisations or institutions) are particularly important as we work out how to negotiate our world, how to get what we need or want to achieve, how we develop solutions to immediate practical concerns. It is also helpful to understand how social housing has been shaped in history by various interests and thus, the future embedded in our economy, politics and culture. An understanding of the “varying relations of power and of domination and subordination”
among the social agents involved in housing provision helps us work out with whom to align to bring about some change in policy direction and/or some benefit to ourselves and the groups to which we belong. This understanding, however, is not an understanding of housing *per se* but rather an understanding of the social agents involved in housing provision and how they are using housing (and exercising their power) to achieve something else that is in their own interests.

Moreover, quantitative and qualitative research, historical method and critical method presuppose an answer to a what-is-it-question; it is an answer to this question that provides a heuristic for undertaking this research. Without an understanding of what we are investigating, our research in these areas will slide between different things.

*Theory in context*

In different places, we find social housing playing different roles with different eligibility/allocations systems, different capital financing systems, different rental systems, different management styles, different target groups etc. (Whitehead & Scanlon 2007; Scanlon & Whitehead 2008). At different times, we also find such differences, so, social housing in one country fifty years ago is very different from social housing in the same country today. While it is still social housing, the particularities of social housing are variable. How, then, do we ‘explain’ these particularities and differences?

A theory of social housing will be the elements and their relations that constitute it. While this theory is abstract and denotes the significant, relevant and essential elements that constitute social housing, they are not fixed. Rather they are variables that admit a range of possibilities. So, for instance, we might develop an explanatory definition of a house as constituted by foundations, walls, roof etc. But the foundations, walls, roof etc. could be made of bricks, timber, stones, ice, canvas, thatch etc.

The question then is what orders this particularity. I would suggest that it is the function, role or purpose that social housing plays in constituting other purposes - neighbourhoods, homes, welfare, an economy, privacy, equity etc. They are higher purposes in that they depend upon the successful achievement of lower purposes. These higher purposes provide a series of related inter-dependent contexts within which social housing operates. They order the range of possibilities among the elements in such a way that social housing will contribute to the achievement of these purposes. An adequate theory of social housing will grasp these various contexts, their relation to one another and the way in which they order the set of variable elements that constitute social housing. Together, they will form a particular type of hierarchy in which each level orders lower level elements yet depends upon the occurrence of these lower level elements. They mutually condition one another – the lower level provides the conditions for the higher level, the higher level orders the particularity of the lower level such that this higher level is achieved.4

In this way, an adequate theory of social housing will incorporate (i) the set of variable elements and their relations that constitute it (ii) the complete range of purposes in which social housing plays some role or function or purpose, i.e. all the different ways in which individuals and groups use housing for

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4 For an illustration of how these different contexts can relate to one another, see the illustration of a theory of social housing rent in McNelis (2009, 2014) in which distinctions are made between (i) the relevant, significant and essential that constitute rent (ii) a hierarchy of roles/purposes - financial viability, social housing, a standard of living and an economy - and how they order the particularity of rent.
their own purposes, (iii) the ordering of the particular characteristics or properties of social housing by these higher roles, functions or purposes such that social housing contributes to the achievement of these higher role. This theory provides a heuristic (a methodological guide) that will account for any actual social housing system regardless of time and place. (See McNelis (2014: Chapter 5) for a more extended discussion and an illustration.)

Theory: its significance

In my view, social housing researchers can no longer continue to operate within their own commonsense taken-for-granted everyday framework without recognising its attendant problems.

Theory is the way in which we get to what is most significant, most relevant and essential to what constitutes social housing. It is understanding what we are researching in some adequate way.

An adequate theory of social housing will provide us with a heuristic of possible relations such that we can grasp social housing as it actually is at a particular time and place. As a heuristic, it provides a guide for empirical research, for historical research, for critique, and for the implementation of new solutions to the problems that confront social housing. Indeed to serves to pinpoint whether the problem lies with housing per se or with purposes in which housing plays some (and not exclusive) role.

Theory and its significance is a critical issue for social housing research. No longer can we continue to assume that theory is an optional extra or that we can select a theory out of a range of theories according to our preferences and circumstances.

It is this understanding of theory as an explanatory definition that underpins the following discussion of interdisciplinary research, science and progress. The discussion below briefly points to the questions: what is interdisciplinary research? what is science? and, what is progress? It proposes the set of ordered variable elements and their relations that constitute each.

2. Towards Interdisciplinary Social Housing Research

The second critical issue for social housing research in a global context is that of interdisciplinarity. If we are to have interdisciplinary research, if we are to have teams of researchers operating in different disciplines collaborating, then is important that each understands not just their particular role but their role in relation to the others. Interdisciplinary work presupposes some understanding of how the disciplines relate to one another, the disciplines relate to the whole and the disciplines together form an integrated whole.

Many literatures including those on globalisation refer to three different domains of society: economic, political and cultural (See, for example, Ritzer 2008). Kemeny in Housing and Social Theory (1992:3-4) argues that each discipline in the social sciences (sociology, economics, psychology, politics and geography) ‘dimensions out’ or abstracts different aspects of social relationships. Each has its own set of conceptual tools, its own mode of discourse and its own debates.
On an initial view, we might think about the integration of the disciplines as one of relating the disciplines as they are to one another, just like we might put the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together; the pieces are already pre-formed and putting them together will give us the complete picture.

Such an attempt to integrate the disciplines as they are is doomed to failure. For, we must remember, that each discipline has its own history of development, its own external power struggles for recognition, its own solutions to various problems, its own internal power struggles over methods and discourses; in short, its own horizon. So, our problem becomes one of sorting out what is significant, essential and relevant to a discipline from what is insignificant, unessential and irrelevant, its historical baggage.

The current approach to theory within the social science disciplines complicates the question of interdisciplinarity. Most social sciences, particularly economics, are notable for their attempts to seek explanations by relating the occurrence of events to human motivations, interests and attitudes such as self-interest.

A more adequate notion of theory points to a more radical recasting of social sciences. The drive here is towards a higher viewpoint, one which integrates the disciplines into a larger whole. But what is that large whole, of which the disciplines are parts? In some sense, then, we are seeking a theory of society or, more fundamentally, a theory of sociality, an understanding of the dynamic within each person to relate to another (Mead 1938; Winter 1966). In asking, what is society or what is sociality, we are asking what are the elements and their relations that constitute this whole. In this larger context, an economy, a polity, a culture etc. are defined in such a way they will constitute a society and economics, politics, cultural studies etc. will reflect these elements and their relations. In asking, what is economics, what is politics, what is culture etc. it is no longer sufficient that we describe them. We are looking for a set of explanatory definitions of the disciplines within the larger context of our sociality. An explanatory definition will demand a grasp of (i) a complete set of elements, (ii) the relations between this set of elements and (iii) how the set of elements and their relations constitute a whole.

On an initial view, we might identity the following dimensions of our sociality:

(i) our recurring need for know-how to transform the potentialities of nature;
(ii) our recurring need to produce a standard of living (goods and services) using our know-how;
(iii) our recurring need to reach effective agreement on how we co-operatively work together to produce this standard of living;
(iv) our recurring need to discover, express and develop meaning and value in our living together; and,
(v) our ever-present desire to transcend our current identity and to live in a larger and better world.

These dimensions provide the grounds for five major disciplines: technology, economics, politics, cultural studies and personal identity studies.

These disciplines are related in that they form a hierarchy in which the higher purpose depends upon lower purposes and the higher purpose systematises the lower purposes such that not only are the lower purposes achieved but the higher purpose is also achieved. So, technology evokes (that is,
provides the conditions for) and is systematised by an economy, an economy evokes and is systematised by a polity, a polity evokes and is systematised by a culture, and a culture evokes and is systematised by persons who, in the measure that they have critically appropriated their tradition, can enlarge their own lives and that of others and become the source of new technological meanings, new economic meanings, new political meanings and new cultural meanings for future generations.

For example, a technology of housing (building materials, building techniques etc.) evokes and is systematised by an economy of housing (the processes that organise machines, equipment, labour, land, building materials, finance etc.). An economy of housing evokes and is systematised by a polity of housing (agreements about the division of labour, the division of finance and wealth, how people access and occupy dwellings). A polity of housing evokes and is systematised by a culture of housing (values such as equity, privacy). A culture of housing evokes and is systematised by persons who to express their identity through where they live, with whom they live, the style of their dwelling, the functionality of the dwellings, the artifacts they include in their dwelling.

Each discipline, whether technology, economics, politics, cultural studies or personal identity, has a particular focus and seeks to understand and explain how a particular purpose is constituted or achieved. As a result, we can use this heuristic to identity how the current disciplines overlap and intermingle, that some disciplines are actually sub-disciplines, that some disciplines are not relevant in the new configuration, that our understanding of each discipline radically changes. 5

By recasting various disciplines according to their purpose, it becomes possible to integrate them within a larger framework and in this way we can develop a much more adequate theory of social housing or whatever we are investigating, we can collaborate much more effectively across disciplines.

3. A Scientific Approach to Social Housing Research

The third critical issue for social housing research in a global context is whether it is scientific or not.

Notions of what is and is not science are largely dominated by the natural and formal sciences. Disagreements about what is and what is not science revolve around differing descriptions. To my mind, these descriptions do not reach what is constitutive of science, what is most central, significant and relevant to an understanding of science. Like all descriptive definitions, they focus on characteristics – in this case the characteristics of the methods and results of a discipline: whether the data collection is sound; whether its methods produce accurate, rigorous and precise results; whether the discipline can predict what will happen.

Here I want to suggest that instead of thinking about the products of our research, we think about the types of questions that emerge spontaneously from a curious and inquiring researcher and the types of answers these questions anticipate. In this way we will come up with an explanatory definition of science, a theory of science, based upon the starting point of all science – asking and answering

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5 While I might use the terms economics, politics and culture, I understand them differently from current usage. For example, the traditional understanding of economics focuses on the market - the relations between three major entities (households, firms and government) and the role of self-interest in maintaining equilibrium between supply and demand - an alternative view focuses on how two circuits of production (basic and surplus) function together to constitute a standard of living (McNelis 2010).
questions. Surprisingly, very few researchers reflect on the questions they ask and it is rarely talked about in books on method in the social sciences or in the philosophy of the social sciences (McNelis 2014: Chapter 3).6

In our everyday living, we ask all sorts of different questions which emerge from within us as we puzzle about something. We are puzzlers, and questions as thought and formulated emerge as expressions of this puzzling, as expressions of our desire to understand and to solve problems. They reveal something about our dynamic orientation towards understanding and responding. They emerge in response to something that we are interested in or care about or are puzzled by.

If, however we consider our questions more closely - and in science we have to be more precise about what we doing and the questions we ask - we will find that eight different types of questions emerge from within us as we puzzle about something. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, four of these relate to understanding the past, four relate to looking to the future.

![Figure 1: The complete ordered set of eight inter-related questions that constitute science](image)

So taking the example of social housing we can ask:

**Understanding the past**

- **Empirical** questions: what events associated with social housing are occurring in this time and place? How often and in association with what other events?

- **Theoretical/definitional** questions: what is social housing? What are the elements and their relationships that constitute social housing?

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6 One notable exception is Normal Blaikie (2007). However, as discussed in McNelis (2014: Chapter 3), his treatment of questions is cursory and inadequate.
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Historical questions: what dynamic or vector has provoked ongoing change in an actual operating social housing system and moves it from one form to another form?

Evaluative/critical questions: what is the best dynamic of the past? What has been achieved? What are its limitations? Here we include a critique of power and, of self or group aggrandisement that has resulted in classism, racism, imperialism, sexism etc. How can the best of the past be integrated?

Looking to the future

Transformative/visionary questions: who will I be (as a social housing researcher) or, who will we be (as social housing researchers or as a society)? What do we aspire to?

Policy questions: what new dynamic or vector will best promote the future development of the current actual operating social housing system into future systems?

Strategic questions: what course of action will integrate this new dynamic or vector within the complex series of contexts - technological, economic, political and cultural - that constitute an actual operative social housing system?

Practical questions: what practices/activities in this time and place will achieve a strategic course of action which will realise a new actual operative social housing system?

I would suggest that this is a complete ordered inter-related set of questions. Each question represents one stage in the process from the current situation through to implementing something new. Within the horizon of everyday commonsense we can ask these questions in different ways, we can mix them up within a single question. However, there are no other questions that we can ask and the complete set of questions constitutes science.7

4. Making Progress in Social Housing

The fourth critical issue for social housing research in global context is progress, improving social housing systems. So, what is progress?

When we think of making progress in social housing, we may think of some improvement in housing standards and quality, in tenant and consumer rights, in housing management and finance, in housing design, materials, technologies and building techniques etc. An improvement is not just a good idea but something that is actually implemented. As an improvement, it has to be practical.

If it is to be practical, it must be planned - it must take account of the context within which it is implemented – it must be strategic. Too many good ideas have failed because they were neither strategic nor practical.

7 For a more extended discussion of these questions, see McNelis (2014).
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But the plan or strategy must be grounded and it is grounded in the good idea. It is a good idea insofar as it introduces something that is worthwhile. It is the good idea that guides the process of implementation.

But what grounds the good idea? It doesn’t emerge out of some vacuum. Rather it emerges out of some tradition whether liberal or labour, whether Marxist or Capitalist, whether Muslim or Christian or Buddhist etc. etc. It emerges out of some decision as to which group I will belong and their aspirations for the future.

But a decision to belong to one or other group is preceded by some critique of other traditions, some evaluation and critique of who I aspired to be in the past. So we search the past as a pointer to the future, we retrace our steps seeking out the best of the past. We can not only recognise the limitations of this past but also appreciate its achievements.

As a good idea it presupposes some discovery about what is moving us forward. It presupposes an already moving history.

Further, a good idea presupposes some understanding of what the good idea is about, some understanding that distinguishes this from that.

Finally, a good idea presupposes that this ‘what’ is already occurring in some form or other.

An improvement, then, has its conditions. Here I am pointing not to the actual improvement, to the products of progress such as better quality, more appropriate housing, more affordable housing etc (as most definitions of progress do). Rather, I am pointing to the conditions that constitute it as an improvement. These conditions are the ordered set of inter-related questions. By asking and finding new answers to these questions we can implement something new that is progress.

This process, however, is not simple. Significant research is usually not the result of the work of one social housing researcher working alone. It is more commonly the result of researchers working together. Even researchers working alone draw upon the work of others through literature reviews, conferences, institutions etc. The work of each social housing researcher is part of a vast array of inter-linked and related activities involving many different researchers.

Social housing in the global context is complex and so, collaboration is very important if we are to make progress in social housing research. Traditionally the way in which the sciences have dealt with complexity is through two different forms of specialisation, field specialisation and subject or discipline specialisation. As specialisation has continued apace, fields and subjects divide into sub-fields/subjects and into sub-sub-fields/subjects. While this solution deals with increased complexity, it also fragments the academy. Social housing research has become very diverse, operating across many different disciplines, many different approaches and many different methods. While diversity is highly valued among researchers, different perspectives can raise challenging and fundamental questions. Without a unifying framework, diversity fragments research, it fragments solutions as each discipline offers a solution to some problem without reference to other disciplines. Researchers have little sense of how their research relates to the work of others. While there are calls for innovation, for international collaboration, for interdisciplinary collaboration, fragmentation makes collaboration and
interdisciplinary work difficult as researchers specialise and operate with different presuppositions. Fragmentation promotes silos between different approaches and methods; researchers misunderstand one another and operate at cross-purposes. The gap between theory and practice, between research and policy and, between local and global needs and demands has widened. As a result, it becomes more difficult to grasp the whole, to relate disparate fields and subjects to one another and, within fields and subjects to relate disparate methods to one another.

Whatever we might say about our current environmental, social and economic problems, we know that they are ongoing, complex, global and difficult to resolve. We, therefore, desperately need a new way of dividing up the work, a new way of specialising, a new way of dealing with complexity, one which will more effectively promote collaboration among researchers such that they can find solutions to our pressing social problems.¹⁸

The explanatory definition or theory of science as the complete ordered set of eight inter-related questions suggests another form of specialization and collaboration called Functional Collaboration. Based upon the functions within the process of moving from the data of the current situation to results that provide practical advice to decision-makers, Functional Collaboration specializes in the methods required to answer the eight questions.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Functional Collaboration has eight functional specialties: Research which answers empirical questions; Interpretation which answers theoretical/definition questions; History which answers historical questions; Dialectic which answers evaluative/critical/comparative questions; Foundations which answers transformative/visionary questions; Policies which answers policy questions; Systematics which answers strategic questions; and, Communications which answers practical questions.

Figure 2: Functional collaboration and its eight functional specialties

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¹⁸ In comparative housing research, Michael Oxley (2001) has proposed that we divide up the work between four teams with different purposes, explorers, empiricists, theorists and scientists: explorers discover, describe and report on new territories; empiricists “find more facts and collate and organise these facts” (p.91); theorists “provide ideas to make sense of facts and they may build models and formulate hypotheses” (p.92); scientists “test hypotheses” (p.93).
Specialties can form around each of these questions as the methods required to answer them (McNelis 2014). Rather than slicing and dicing the whole that is being investigated and coming up with different solutions according to discipline, this division of labour maintains the whole. It deals with the whole at each stage as it progresses from the current situation through to the implementation of something new in the future. These specialties are functionally related in that they are stages in this process. Each stage has a particular purpose that relates to other purposes and to the whole. Each specialty specialises in answering one type of question and continues to develop methods to answer that question.

Functional Collaboration does not depend upon personal or social relationships or ad hoc relations between institutions. Rather, it depends upon how one type of work relates to another type of work within the process from data to results. As functional, it is global in scope. It envisages all social housing researchers operating within functional specialties, wherever they are. It is oriented to praxis; it links research, policy and implementation; it links theory and practice; it cycles through the process from data to results producing cumulative, ongoing and progressive results (Lonergan [1972]1990).

Progress is brought about by asking and finding new answers to this complete ordered set of eight inter-related questions. The process here is not an idealist fantasy, a dream of some future utopia. Rather, it formulates a discovery of something that already operates, albeit confusedly. It articulates how human history has already brought about progress. It articulates the elements, their structure and their relationship to one another.

As questions, they are open, they do not point to any particular understanding or product as progress. There are no definitive external or objective criteria. There are no a priori answers as to what is best. We learn what promotes progress by ‘retracing our steps’, by reflecting upon, evaluating and critiquing our history as individuals, as societies, as cultures and as humanity in solidarity with one another, our natural environment and the cosmos. We have to work this out in the great experiment of history, learning as we go.

5. Conclusion

If we want to improve our chances of developing good research, then it will help to understand what goes on when we are researching. Once we understand what goes on, then we can take some deliberate control over how we proceed and over the varied but related activities that constitute research (to paraphrase Shute and Zanardi (2006:31)).

In 1965 Bernard Lonergan discovered Functional Collaboration as the way in which we bring about progress. A decision to implement this discovery opens up a vast range of possibilities in any area of human endeavour. It provides a key to future progress.

If we are to make progress in our understanding of social housing in a global context, draw on the accumulated experience of social housing operating in different economies, polities and cultures and provide practical advice to local decision-makers (whether policy-makers or practitioners), we need an adequate framework of analysis. Here, I have proposed that this framework is a new understanding (and doing) of science as a complete ordered set of eight inter-related questions. New answers to these questions constitute or bring about progress. It grounds a collaborative ‘framework of creativity’
within which the work of groups of social housing researchers operating within one functional specialty (and seek to answer one of the eight questions) is related to the work of groups of other social housing researchers operating within other functional speciality.

If we are to make progress in some area of human endeavour, it is vitally important we understand how improvements come about. We then have criteria for distinguishing improvements from setbacks; improvements have been subject to the whole process whereas setbacks slide over aspects of this process, ignore understandings or critiques of the current situation, or ignore the strategic context or practicalities.

Through collaboration we can make progress in social housing, globally.

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