

>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2019 saw 21 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney all on one night. In this podcast you'll hear Sophia Mallesons talk Housing Hack, a new model to home ownership. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

>> Thank you. I just want to say I'm having my infant daughter moment and I've waited a long time for this. So, the headsets amazing. I have just found out that I have very small ears so, and so if it slips off, it's not my fault, it's my parents' fault. Also, 10 out of 10 to my students down the back who managed to come after a tutorial, so they're definitely getting HDs. I'll put that in. But on that lighter note, I guess I'll actually talk about what I'm here to actually talk about tonight rather than praise my students. I'm not paid to do that. All this actually. So, what am I talking about? Anyway, on a more serious note, into character. So, consider for a moment that there is no hope, that we've already lost, that this housing affordability crisis is actually going nowhere and is in fact by design. That many young people, I know it's a very optimistic note to start on, that many young people will struggle to get on the property ladder without the bank of mum and dad, that even if you own our own home, you might not be safe from this loss either. We have an increasing number of Australians falling out of home ownership or retiring with a mortgage still to pay. Older women are our highest growing group at risk of homelessness, which is unsurprising when you think that many of them actually may have owned a home before, but after a divorce have lacked the material assets to purchase another home or rent independently. And we're also seeing more people share housing, and for longer, and later into life or returning to share housing in their mid-thirties, in their forties and above. And some people are sharing housing for the first time in their seventies. So, we know the causes of the housing affordability crisis and we actually know how to fix it. There's quite a good few options. Many of my colleagues that I'm lucky enough to work with have been doing great work in this area for many years, and we research, and we advocate, but there's still limited action. The lack of clear leadership and a lack of clear housing policy and good housing policy means that this falls on deaf ears. Maybe deaf ears as well. Who knows? And it will continue too, if Australia's emphasis continues to be on housing as a side of investment rather than the something that provides home. And it will continue to if government continues to fail to invest in public housing. And it will continue if planning and policy mechanisms incentivize making profits from housing. The housing market is exactly that, a market, and it's working exactly as a market should. So, my talk here tonight acknowledges this work and advocacy on changing housing policy and our attitude to housing as something that we need to continue to do. This is work that is necessary. But it also acknowledges the needs to be making interventions that can help alleviate the situation for many of us now. We're not going to change the housing market or the government's approach to housing policy anytime soon. The slow pace of change is not going to help us address the very urgent need

for affordable or secure housing that we need now. As I said before, we've lost this battle. It's, you know, let's just accept that. And I'm angry about this and you should be too. But while we may have lost, there are avenues of resistance and resistance of sorts is materialising in sometimes innovative and informal responses to housing, what I refer to as housing hacks; resistance that makes living in insecure tenures slightly more bearable. Although the New South Wales government actually have an opportunity to do something significant and constructive about that with the rental reforms in 2018 by, for example, a very simple solution, ending no grounds for evictions, but they didn't. Again, it's unsurprising that the majority of the parliamentary members who voted against reform were landlords. And I should say actually that the title given to this talk that it's about a new model for home ownership, I think is a little bit misleading, sort of happening in the marketing, but – So, sorry guys, just a point you all need to know this now. But there are different models to home ownership such as the Nightingale Model in Melbourne, which is being hopefully replicated here through the Metropolitan Land Trust Policy. Which is part of the city of Sydney's Alternative Housing Challenge winners. But tonight I'll be mainly focussing on how different types of living are occurring as a response to this and the digital disruption of these. And also I guess another sort of note to make, because it's very hard to cite people when you're doing a speech rather than a written form; so the opening line I use, a very inspirationally depressing one, was inspired by Natalie Osborne who's paper, For Still Possible Cities: a politics of failure for the politically depressed, is one of the best I've read this year and you should all go and read that as well because it is a bit politically depressing, but it also gives us hope. Anyway, maybe it's time to have another sip of your drink after that really, you know, light introduction before we go on to actually defining hacking in terms of housing. So, hacking itself, as many of you are probably aware of, emerged from the early cultures of computing. Hacking described the process of problem solving and generated a culture of experimentation, creativity and openness. Since then, hacking as a term has been, oh, and as practice has been applied to anything that disrupts or creatively engages within flexible rules, regulations and infrastructures to find innovative solutions. And so we can see this hacking emerge in housing if we look at it through this lens. The hacking of housing production and consumption processes is increasingly common, such as the development of digital platforms, for those seeking to share accommodation, some very not so great rent bidding apps, household management platforms. And hacking, in the sense of also applying experimental and iterative approach is more commonly associated with these sort of startup cultures and entrepreneurial activity, is also occurring in the way that we think about housing. A framework of hacks shows us how a housing system characterised by increasing diversity and innovation is produced by adhering to the rules of the system, but using those rules in counterintuitive ways to solve problems in ways unimaginable to those confined to conventional thinking and methodologies. So the hack allows us to expect the confines of our current ways of thinking about housing, to ask new questions, to generate new data, and to identify new solutions. There are four key ways in which housing is

being hacked. And the first one is hacking policy and housing, hacking housing provision, hacking housing and work, and finally hacking living. And I feel my ears are doing something at the moment and I just have to adjust my mic. There we go. Thank you. So, hacking policy in housing is emergent in iterative experiments with policy in housing model changes. And these are generally tested in small sections of the city before being scaled up if successful. Sorry Mr. Sound Man. It's my ears. I apologise [laughter].

>> Do you need help?

>> Yeah, [laughter]. Some technical assistance. Is that – Am I right? It's just feeling weird. There's a tumour on the side of my face. It's really disorienting. Madonna must, you know, have practised a lot.

[Laughter]

Or she's a natural. Who knows? But anyway, back to hacking housing. So, for example, what we see is local governments experimenting with agile and experimental approaches to policy in order to respond to housing market pressures. Similarly, we have alternative housing models such as co-living as experiments in this sort of smart approach to housing. And they kind of harness this creativity, innovation and entrepreneurialism that we see as characteristic of hacking cultures. An example of this is the Boston Housing Innovation Lab, which is part of the mayor's office of new urban mechanics. And they apply what's a sort of an agile and iterative approach characteristic of the startup and texts cultures to their housing challenges. For example, the lab conducts experiments, trialling challenges to codes and regulations to evaluate their effect and potential for alleviating housing challenges. These experiments are conducted in small parts of the city. They then observe their effects, and they go back and they evaluate this at a manageable scale, and then they decide whether they scale up these interventions further out throughout the city. So, the lab describes their use of prototypes and experimental approaches as creating opportunities to learn from the success and failure of small scale experiments, iterate and create improved policy, improve housing models or systems as a result. You know, and this is the way that they use to sort of negotiate their housing challenges, which are quite similar to Sydney. Boston has quite high pressure of housing affordability crisis or so very big student population. So, they've been struggling with this for some time. I mean, the ICT government as well, like Canberra and not the, you know, what you don't necessarily identify with really cutting edge innovation in terms of this kind of stuff, is also taking a similar approach with the housing innovation fund. So, the fund essentially crowd sources innovative solutions to housing affordability. Winning projects are awarded funds to develop their trial project. And in the last round in 2018, this included a new affordable rental real estate management model and two co-housing projects. The second round of funding includes a call for home sharing – for home scheme among other approaches. And few of you might be aware also that the city of Sydney has hosted their alternative housing challenge this year as well and a couple of the finalists included things like the Equity Housing Model, pop-up shelters, the

right size service and, you know, have a look on their site. There's some really interesting ideas there. The second way in which hacking housing is emerging is through the hacking of provision of housing. And this emerges as what we can kind of describe as housing on demand. You know, selected Uber of housing. And that's this sort of very specific area but generally encompasses housing startups and platform housing. And here housing is actually offered as a service, which, you know, it's kind of, when you think about it, but anyway. But the promise is that it allows tenants to spontaneously move between housing networks at the click of a button and a small fee. Targeted at digital nomads, these services are underpinned by the platforms which facilitates this mobility. And then we have examples of this, again, sort of stemming from New York and Boston again such as Bedly, which is you join the Bedly Network and they put you in shared accommodation, but once you're in their network, you can shift. Eventually, the idea is from city to city within 24 hours and have housing. What these models offer and where they're sort of coming from is actually for mobile workforces, when you think about that we have increasingly mobile and precarious job situations. So, they're catering to this, I guess this sector of the market. They offer flexibility and highly serviced housing options that disrupt how we access and think of housing. You know, by catering to mobile digital work as an entrepreneur, it negates the challenges such mobility encounters within the traditional housing sectors. Sort of these locked in minimum linked leases, evidence of income and local bank details and generally poorly serviced accommodation which present significant barriers to a highly mobile workforce. You know, we have this also emerging in the co-living sub-sector. Sydney has a few popping up. UCO in Stanmore. I think there's one opening up in Paddington and another one in Newtown, which in Australia is part of the build to rent sector of the market. Again, the spaces are highly, you know, furnished and provided for because they're also there to be sort of workspaces. They're not designed for long-term living, but they fill, you know, they fill a spot. The third way in which housing is being hacked, which is kind of very similar in one way to hack too, is through the hacking of housing and work combined. So, you know, it's emergent in housing innovations at the responses to the broader changes driven by the labour force changes, you know, this contract and mobile work. And also a shift to the innovation and knowledge sector, which really emphasises entrepreneurial cultures. So, for example, in Adelaide, which is itself trying to, you know, branding itself as a smart city. It's one of Australia's first smart cities. They have the Tonsley Innovation District, which is the former, I think it was Holden plant, correct me any car fans out there, whether it was Holden or Ford or something. Anyway, this huge site. And this is part of both their strategy to becoming a smart city, but also using the innovation agenda and connecting that with housing. Because it's Australia's first innovation district, it's designed to provide both commercial and residential spaces. And it's a key site in the state's efforts to attract these entrepreneurs and grow the innovation sector as a pathway to economic growth. Toms Lease Housing Offerings are directed to providing affordable and connected housing to support their innovation economy. The site's marketing material itself emphasises this connexion

between housing and the innovation sector. You know, there's quotes there that say like, where you get coffee next to scientists, techpreneurs, like techpreneurs, and startups, where clever people live in smart homes. All of which is noted as being accessible at one gigabyte per second internet speeds. And the internet speeds sound pretty good. But, you know, the rest of it, who wants to get coffee next to a scientist or a techpreneur? Like –

[Laughter]

– I don't know. Maybe. Each to their own. Anyway, it's surprising something. It is, I guess, notable in the fact that it's doing a commercial and a residential combined in their plan, which doesn't always happen here. We don't do a lot of mixed use development. And the fourth way that we're hacking housing is the actual hacking of living. So, this predominantly materialises in the digitalization of the ways that we access housing and particularly sharing housing. And so while there's always been models and practices of sharing housing, the digitalization of sharing illustrates this link again between the housing and the more entrepreneurial hacky sort of framework that we can look at it. And the way that these digital disruptions are responding to change housing needs. Sharing housing is increasingly facilitated by platform services which are actively reconfiguring the way that we access and experience housing. And this can be quite disruptive. I mean Airbnb is an example of sharing housing, and that's itself creating these on sort of exacerbating some further housing needs. And then we also have housing, shared housing platforms and household management apps designed specifically for people sharing houses. Now I'm going to elaborate on hack four. The living, particularly the sharing because a lot of my work actually deals with share housing, and why share housing, and what's so hacky about share housing. I hear you saying like, I came here for new home ownership models and I said I would disappoint you at the start, but I will give you some, you know, some interesting stories I hope. And for many of us actually sharing housing it's not about options. We've always had this way of, you know, housing communes, and co-ops, and co-housing, and I think this is just another iteration of the sort of way to go. So, firstly, we see share housing having changing demographics and a changing role in the housing careers. And secondly, it, as you've kind of picked up on the theme by now I'm sure, is increasingly digitalized. And in this way it's made, you know, its digitalization is done in a way to make finding and living with flat mates easier.

>> Your listening to Raising the Bar Sydney, 2019.

>> So, this is where the hacking comes in, trying to work with the limitations of the system to make things a little bit better. So, they don't have to be big changes. So, shared housing in the mid-2010 or getting towards the late of the mid-2010s, it's playing an increasingly important role in housing beyond its traditional short term transitional form of housing. You know, we often associate it with student housing to the provision of much longer term housing across the life course. Recent research has revealed an increase in share housing among groups who would have traditionally been owner occupiers by now. So we've

got professionals from the mid-thirties upwards as well as seniors and retirees. Now there's a whole service in one of these digital platforms that is devoted to seniors, people over 65, 65 and over excluding the 65 year olds, to sharing housing, either opening up their own house to share or finding other people to live with. Data from the online flat mate finding platform, flatmates.com, suggests that the share housing market grew by more than 36 percent from January, 2015 to January 2016 with approximately 280,000 users. The latest census data, the 2016 census data, also supports this. Across Australia, we saw the number of group households, which is the ABS's way of sort of categorising share households, grew to 10.56 percent. In New South Wales, they increased by 15.05 percent. And in capital cities, particularly like, you know, where the housing pressures are quite high, they saw significant growth. In Sydney, group households increased by 18 percent. While lone households only grow 2.2 percent. So quite a significant difference. So, that's the growth of the, you know, this increasing role. But the digital platforms are also mediating the experience of share housing without online share housing sites reconfiguring practices of searching, applying for an accessing housing. And then we have these household management and finance and communication platforms, which increasingly underpin the shared responsibilities and finances of the home. So, we have the sites such as flatmatefinders.com.au, Gumtree and even Facebook specific housing groups, which require users to provide details about themselves and what they're looking for in a share house or a flat mate. So, the requirements vary by site. Your Facebook group – Your Facebook groups are generally honest prescriptive, so they sort of allow you just to post whatever you want. Although they're often moderated, so you have to get access via a site admin. Other sites such as Flatmate Finders have, you know, far more prescriptive option boxes, which not necessarily compulsory prompts users to – Leah.

>> Sorry.

[Laughter]

>> I thought you would know better. But that's all right. She's a lady in demand. It's true. But, [laughter] there is an app for it. There's also an option to turn your phone to silence. Oh, I didn't mean it like that. It just it was too good not to take it [laughter]. Anyway, so these kind of options prompts users to include things such as their lifestyle choices, vegetarian, vegan, you know, sporty, whatever. New York rent ranges and other things in their profile and often a profile picture. And so this becomes a performance of housing identities. And it's demanded, this sort of performance is demanded by platforms, which are an example and how the digital reconfigures the housing market and the actual work involved in finding housing. So, using digital platforms and profiles as a conduit to housing streamlines the process of finding housing but also still requires labour. It's supposed to make our lives easier, but you know, it's, itself, it's still work. And there can be a lot of work in finding the right flat mate. But, by developing an online profile, users curate a narrative about themselves frequently accompanied by images. And a lot of this is to frame them as the

ideal flat mate, like the flat mate that you would want. And users are aware of this. And they have to show, this is how the other interesting thing, when you look at a lot of these ads, you know, we think about home as somewhere where we can be, you know, we have control and access over. It's a place for us to go. But in a lot of their ads, you can see people going, I'm not going to be at home much. You know, I've gone very busy. I want to know you, I'm just not going to be there. So, it's this weird paradox of saying, "I want to home, but I'm also not going to be at home." Because at the moment in order to sort of, you know, with the housing market and our housing lives to say, oh, it's this weird interplay of not actually having what we generally consider the characteristics of home and the freedom that that allows us to because of this situation. Anyway, so users, you know, to quote one of my research participants here, they're trying to find this balance between being independent but social in a good flat mate. So, and I quote, it's always weird trying to reach out to somebody that you want to live with. So, you want to be sensible and capable, you want to be a contributing housemate, but also you don't want to be too bland or to beige because you want them to take notice of you amongst the hundreds of direct messages you're likely to get in Sydney. And it's just like that weird balance of like, "Hey, I'm great. I'm fun. I can afford the rent, but I'm not crazy. I like a casual drink, but not like I'm actually an alcoholic kind of drink. I mean, like a communal one, very relaxed. But I'm not going to suffocate you. I promise I'll respect your space. I like mine too, but I'm also not a hermit. I will go out, I won't be at home all the time, but I'm not always out partying. I'd love to hear from you." So, it's this kind of balance of trying to be, you know, everything to everyone to get a room. Platforms such as London based one and go, go one step further. They actually use this data to deliver their key service, which is matching you to your ideal flat mate. If anyone is old enough to remember Perfect Match in the eighties, so what I sort of envisioned with the little love hearts in the background. So, their service is based on four core processes. So, number one, algorithmic matching. Two, trust. Three, finding your perfect flat mate and four, making these transactions safe. So, building trust and making it a, you know, like a dating platform basically for flat mates. And to quote one of the founders, it's like the dating concept. I mean, I think people just enjoy swiping through everything. I don't know, it gets a bit tiring. But what we're trying to do is say, "Look, rather than look through a thousand based on what you think you want, have a look at these." And we normally say sort of top 10, because if you can see 10 profiles, that gives you a reasonable chance of one of them coming off because, you know, we're making the actual introductions. Just because you're making introductions doesn't actually mean the person ends up moving in because you've got all of these other due diligence type factors. But by trying to give – match you to your top 10, it kind of, you know, limits this difference. So then, based on your data, the algorithm tries to match you and this is supposed to suit you and your needs and it promises to take this work out of finding your best flat mate. So, that's one way in which they're trying to make living easier. Inside the home though we have a plethora of apps and smart devices. So we've made it into the house now, we've passed the flat mate

tests, but now we've got to live with our flat mates. And, you know, anyone who has lived in a house, share house, paying bills, doing all of this kind of stuff, can get kind of tense. So these, you know, shared households offer a market for services that facilitate these sort of commerce and financial management apps for people who share. So Splitwise is a common example, easyshare, which is actually a Sydney based service, help manage these finances. It's to build – includes the ability to automate calculations, payments, compile a digital record of transactions, and importantly, they create a profile of a person's financial health. And this can be used to penalise, incentivize and shape behaviour. For example, reviews on easyshare website say, you know, they sing the praises, but they also provide insight into the way it actually mediates financial and social transactions in the home and make them a little bit better. It's like there are no more awkward conversations about who owes what. easyshare takes care of it all. So, here it takes up one stressor away. So, it's framed as incentivizing good financial behaviour and it's mediating good household relationships. Splitwise, Peer To Peer sharing app has similar qualities. To quote one of my participants, she said, "That's the weird thing. Even though it's bills, something that you know you have to pay, it's a weird thing. Like I think an app like Splitwise makes it a bit easier because there can be conflict sometimes. Like, did you actually pay that or didn't you? Because I think, especially my housemate now, we tried to be really chilled and no one ever makes a big deal or a big fuss out of anything. So, if I paid late, he's never going to tell me unless I'm moving out and then it'll be like, do you remember that? So, it's just a lot easier to Splitwise, be reminded by Splitwise. It's definitely easier." So, these shared finances of share housing actually as well entail financial risks for people. So, there's something that we do need to think about if more of us are sharing for longer. So, each household has their own methods. Sometimes people pay to one person, sometimes there's a joint bank account, and sometimes there's a group household kitty. But having multiple accounts in different names or trusting your one designated housemate to pay bills and rent on times, actually has risks for your own credit score if there're missed payments. So, navigating this, the risk is how such platforms are also marketing themselves. So, if for example, in many years' time when you finally got a deposit, you go for a loan and you've not always had very financially conscientious flat mates. Anyone who's ever had to cover the rent for a flat mate or being left in a position where they've left without paying. Notice that this can actually happen. Those missed payments on your record with the real estate agent, with the utilities company and it stains your record. So, this is something that these services are sort of running in on thinking that people need to demonstrate that, "Yes, this happened, but look, here's evidence here that I was actually conscientious and I paid." So again, it's not rocket science. None of these hacks are amazing. But they are a little hack that makes what's not always an easy situation, more bearable. And, of course, you know, always got to be a bit of a critique because that's what we do, don't we students? We can't just stay [inaudible]. We've got us critically think. While extensively these platforms enable us to better select flat mates, manage our households and mediate our share house relationships, the services

themselves can enable bias. And we know that platforms aren't neutral technologies. They can affect the ability of someone to find accommodation. Some of my participants reported experiencing harassment and discrimination online and often tweak their profiles in a way to navigate that. More insidious services like Rentberry, which is a rent bedding app and you get to rate your tenant and you get to rate these sort of things and you compete against other people, have more, sort of, serious ethical considerations. They enable algorithmically sorting based on contextless assumptions of what a good tenant is and they reward and punish on that basis. So we have to keep on asking questions about these and about your financial management apps and all of the data that you put into your online profiles. Because who has access to that data and, you know, what happens if your flat mate or your landlord can do this, and can you monitor each other. So, we've got to keep on questioning this. There's a growing body of literature which reveals the discriminatory nature of digital processes. You know, the way that algorithms sort and reinforce distinctions along the lines of race, gender, class and sexuality. You know, practices of governance, and welfare, and surveillance is disproportionately focussed on marginalised groups. And so, you know, the algorithms, the codes and the platforms that are enabled by them are complicit in profiling, policing and punishing social and economically disadvantaged groups. And similarly housing platforms can equally work to variously discriminate in privilege based in the data submitted in an online profile. And again, if we think about it, there's the people putting into the data in, so people who can't afford to own their own homes who are the ones being increasingly surveyed now. And, you know, this is just a continuation of this surveillance of people in lower socioeconomic situations. So, I guess to wrap it up a little bit because you probably had enough of my hacks for now, hacks don't have to be high tech and hacking housing doesn't have to create radically new futures of housing. Although in the current housing climate, we could say that affordable and secure housing is actually a radical concept. While we need to keep working on the broader changes to make housing fair, we also need to take seriously the smaller, immediate and sometimes what seems like insignificant interventions to make housing just a little bit better for those for whom home ownership and renting independently or even obtaining secure housing is a long way off. So, here I focus on the digital mediation of share housing in particular as one way in which people are trying to make their limited housing options better and easier from accessing housing, choosing flat mates, managing the household and mediating their relationships. These hacks have some positive effects, although we must also be aware of their potential to discriminate and the more insidious sides of data collection. As the Australian dream of homeownership becomes increasingly out of reach for many Australians, we need to keep advocating for better outcomes, but also advocate for smaller interventions for those living in housing precarity and in different housing trajectories now because those who are already living it, are shifting their dreams too. And I'll finish to illustrate this and quote one of my participants. "The last couple of weeks, all the housemates were on a holiday. So, I had the whole house to myself for two weeks. So, it was just like go to the toilet and leave the door open. It's like, I'm living

the dream. Thank you.” All right, thank you.

[Applause]

>> Thank you for listening to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. If you want to hear more podcasts from Raising the Bar, head to raisingthe-barsydney.com.au.