Interview with Dr. Ayse Pamuk

Rona Leigh de Guzman

Dr. Ayse Pamuk is tenured full Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at San Francisco State University. She joined San Francisco State faculty in 2000 and served as Chair of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning from 2008-2011. She is Founding Director of the PACE Applied Housing Research Initiative.

Her internationally recognized scholarship addresses urban development in a comparative perspective, with an emphasis on housing. Her expertise is in housing and urban policy, international planning, and research methods, including GIS. She is the author of Mapping Global Cities: GIS Methods in Urban Analysis (ESRI Press, 2006). She has advised national and local governments in Turkey, Trinidad and Tobago, and Brazil on low-income housing policy. She has been a consultant to the World Bank. She holds PhD and MCP degrees in city and regional planning from the University of California at Berkeley.

At San Francisco State, she is an Urban Studies and Planning (USP) faculty advisor and teaches Housing Policy and Planning (graduate PA 783 and undergraduate USP 580), Affordable Housing Development in California (USP 475), Data Analysis (USP 493), Dynamics of the American City (USP 400), and the Urban Studies and Planning Senior Seminar (USP 680).
Professor Pamuk is also a photographer. A collection of her photographs that provide a comparative, international perspective of affordable housing and urban transformation can be viewed here.

Q: You have published articles and research dating back more than 30 years ago, focusing on housing policies in different countries with different economic states and structures, and how it has affected vulnerable communities. What motivated (or motivates) you to dedicate your career towards this subject?

A: My research interests are driven by my long-standing desire to understand the evolution of human settlements throughout the world. Having experienced a comfortable childhood in Izmir, a port city on the west coast of Turkey, I was struck by how the "other half" of the population lived and became curious about uneven urban development. My fascination with the interdisciplinary aspects of housing issues for vulnerable populations, particularly immigrants took me to informal housing settlements in Trinidad and Tobago and the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I discovered that the struggles of low-income people and people of color in housing markets are universal. An important part of my professional life is educating future affordable housing practitioners in the San Francisco Bay Area. While writing my first book Mapping Global Cities: GIS Methods in Urban Analysis in 2006, I loved combining my research methods and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) skills with the housing concerns of Bay Area's low-income people and immigrant populations. My GIS exercises and theoretical formulations came to life in my classrooms where the struggles and perspective of my students fueled my desire to address those issues in my writing. On a personal level, my experience as an immigrant to the United States and life as a dual citizen of the United States and Turkey have profoundly shaped who I am and the topics I choose to study. I developed a deep appreciation and empathy with the struggles of historically underrepresented and marginalized populations, especially while working with my undergraduate and graduate students at San Francisco State for more than two decades. San Francisco State University's student population is demographically very diverse, and the majority come from low-income families. Many of our students are first generation college students and work part-time or full-time to support their families. During the current COVID-19 pandemic many of my students continued to show up at Zoom class sessions and submit assignments amidst their complicated personal lives. My recent research on local government responses to COVID-19 to meet the housing needs of vulnerable populations has been inspired by these experiences.

Q: Collectively, the housing concerns for the Bay Area's low-income people and people of color are still of great concern, how has these perspectives and/or priorities changed since the publication of your book in Mapping Global Cities in 2006?

A: Housing affordability has always been a main problem in the [Greater] Bay Area and a persistent theme. My desire to find solutions has led me to focus on a project with a team of students, both graduate and undergraduate, in 2017-2018 when we focused on the Inclusionary Affordable Housing Program in San Francisco. Using census tract level analysis, we wanted to show if the program helped retain city residents between 2000 and 2010. We analyzed changes in the percentage of Asian, Black, and Hispanic populations at the census tract level between 2000 and 2010. We also geocoded Below Market Rate (BMR) housing projects, which are predominantly market rate buildings with a certain percent as BMR units. We looked at whether [these developments] were able to retain city residents; did that help? Most of our research shows that it has not significantly helped during the timeframe of our study (2000-2010). The amount of BMR units were small when compared to the amount of market rate housing units going into those neighborhoods. It was not sufficient to prevent displacement (Pamuk and Hill 2019).

Q: So, even with solutions implemented to retain the low-income, vulnerable populations, the attempt has not been proven to be fruitful?

A: Yes, it is because the local government agencies are not required to do a rigorous assessment of their programs. Our [research] was the first to look from outside to see if it is working in this one dimension: has it helped retain minority populations at the neighborhood level? There needs to be more, at the government level, self-evaluation of existing programs to see what works and what does not work so we can learn and make further improvements.

Q: How have major events like the dot-com era, financial crisis, and the tech boom perpetuated these patterns in housing?

A: Indeed, housing shortages and affordability issues have been a recurring theme in the Bay Area, but the large amount of well-paid technology company employees put additional stress on housing markets. Many neighborhoods rapidly gentrified and San Francisco's nonprofit and government employees were unable to compete for housing units. These dynamics led to the loss of soul of San Francisco, in particular. Technology companies were aware of their role in disrupting the cultural, creative and intellectual vibe of city neighborhoods and began announcing pledges to supply funding for nonprofit housing developers to increase affordable housing supply.

Q: As a resident, how did a loss of soul look and feel like?

A: I have been around for a while. I have been enjoying the uniqueness of San Francisco neighborhoods when I am doing my writing or my teaching, and over time that has been lost. I do not see the same vibe or richness that I thought we had in these neighborhoods. For example, the dot-com boom replaced a lot of non-profit organizations.

You notice when you are walking down the street there are fewer working-class, artists, non-profit, and government people. In fact, our recent blog for Applied Housing Research Initiative summarized San Francisco State employees' housing situation, where many are forced to live as far as Napa, Sonoma County, Santa Rosa. This is very problematic because we want to be closer to our work.

Q: Your most recent work was based on the California government's response to COVID-19 and housing, highlighting projects such as Homekey, Rent Moratoriums, Emergency Rental Assistance Programs for renters. In many cases, these programs, or the expiration of these programs have shown direct correlation to the numbers of COVID-19 cases. How did the occurrence of COVID-19 raise awareness about housing policy issues, such as overcrowding and affordability for vulnerable populations in California?

A: During the pandemic, I assembled an incredible team of interdisciplinary women scientists to examine the role of inclusionary housing policies in California's cities in response to the pandemic. We designed and sent a survey to California's 482 cities to document which cities adopted emergency housing policies in response to COVID-19, whether those policies have equity goals and any challenges or successes related to implementing those emergency policies.

We found that the COVID-19 pandemic perpetuated an unprecedented response in the form of Emergency Housing Policy (EHP). Millions or tens of millions of Americans were at risk of eviction, and the homeless were particularly susceptible to the disease due to shelter overcrowding, older age, and health risk factors abundant within this population increasing their chances of morbidity and mortality to the virus. Thus, federal, state, and local governments created rental assistance and mortgage relief programs, enacted eviction moratoriums, and created Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) programs for the homeless.

Q: The global pandemic has also shifted the general public's view of densely populated cities, formulating the notion that it is a major health hazard. How can housing policies be designed in a way to alleviate this concern?

A: So true that densely populated cities saw large numbers of COVID-19 cases and high density typical of major cities began to be perceived as a health hazard. A closer look at the census tract level shows that overcrowding in housing units is a better predictor of COVID-19 vulnerability. We developed a COVID Vulnerability Index with four components: 1) socio-economic status; 2) household composition; 3) minority status, and 4) housing (variables in the table from Dr. XiaoHang Liu's report for each of the 4 dimensions are in her Working Paper, page 6). Most vulnerable cities were found in Central Valley, Los Angeles, Inland Empire. Least vulnerable cities were found in SF Bay area. They are among the wealthiest and whitest cities in CA.
Furthermore, our statistical analysis revealed that cities with inclusionary housing programs in 2019 were significantly less vulnerable to COVID-19 than cities without Inclusionary housing.

AHRI's research can be found here.

Q: In addition to COVID-19, other catastrophic events have affected the conditions and in some cases the attainability of housing. This includes emergencies caused by climate change, extreme shifts in tectonic plates, and wildfires that have threatened and displaced millions of residents globally. How can future planners and policy makers navigate and form resiliency in this climate?

A: Planners have to bring experts from different disciplines together to plan for, respond to catastrophic events and prevent displacement of residents from their homes due to wildfires and earthquakes. It may be too late when disaster strikes. For example, the location of fault lines and their seismic activity are well-known to experts specializing in seismology. This information must be considered when zoning areas for new housing development. Likewise, new housing development should be prevented in areas with high wildfires risk.

Q: How do you instill these ideas in your students

A: The lived experience of both graduate and undergraduate students informed and inspired me greatly in my own choice of topics for investigation in my research program throughout my career. It is gratifying to share research articles in my courses with students who will see themselves in those pages and will be moved to act and formulate responses to public policy problems. Through our in-person and virtual discussion forums I strive to have students engage with the academic material that directly relates to their lives. I would like my students to be able to identify public policy problems such as uneven urban development, housing insecurity, and racial inequity where it occurs and formulate innovative strategies to solve them informed by rigorous analysis of data.