

# Housing and Aloha ‘Āina

## Beyond Building Our Way Out of the Crisis

Tina Grandinetti

“I will *never* be homeless in Hawai‘i” answered Uncle John when I asked him why he refers to himself as “houseless” instead of “homeless.” We were sitting in the shade at Kaka‘ako Gateway Park, just steps away from his encampment. In front of us, blue tarp tents were packed densely onto a grass strip along a narrow sidewalk. Across Ala Moana Boulevard, blue glass high-rises towered above us, glistening monuments to speculative investment. Uncle John has lived on the streets of Kaka‘ako on-and-off for almost a decade—a proud Kanaka, houseless in his own homeland. Despite years of sweeps and laws criminalizing his presence, his voice was steady as he explained his unshakeable connection to his home.

“Hawai‘i is the place of my ancestors. I have family here. I have culture here. I have the ‘āina.”

Months later, Governor David Ige issued a statewide stay-at-home order in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the weeks that followed made it clear that the meaning of “home” is more contentious than we might expect. Despite Centers for Disease Control guidelines stating that those experiencing houselessness should be allowed to shelter-in-place during the pandemic, Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell has continued to sweep people like Uncle John from the encampments they call home. Caldwell and Ige even endangered these people’s lives by shuttering public restrooms and blocking access to potentially life-saving hand-washing facilities. Things also became more precarious for people who had houses to live in. Renters received some relief through Ige’s eviction moratorium, but experts warn that a catastrophic surge in houselessness awaits us when the moratorium is lifted.

What does it mean for our government to sweep our houseless ‘ohana during a pandemic? What does it mean for a houseless and criminalized Kanaka to stand steadfast in his claim to belonging and home? And what does all of this tell us about the state of housing in Hawai‘i? What I see is a growing gulf between *home* as an intimate part of who we are, and *housing* as a commodity and asset. Under this capitalist system, homes are commodities purchased on the market, and our ability to pay determines how deserving we are of shelter, and of life. But as Uncle John reminds us, Kānaka Maoli have long considered home as something inalienable— as ancestor, family, culture, and, most importantly, ‘āina.

Now is the time to take Uncle John’s words seriously and to reevaluate how we relate to land, home, and each other. The housing crisis became unbearable long before COVID-19. Almost sixty percent of Hawai‘i renters were housing cost burdened, spending thirty percent of their income to keep a roof over their head. One-third of households spent *half* of their income on shelter alone. Meanwhile, even though seventy percent of Hawai‘i’s housing demand comes from low-income families, entire neighborhoods were being built for the luxury market. Though this affects all of us, for some, housing is a matter of life and death. Between 2014 and 2018, 373 people died on Honolulu’s streets. The average age of death was fifty-three years old—thirty years shorter than our average life expectancy.

In policy discussions about these injustices, however, housing is reduced to a numbers game. Projected housing demand suggests that Hawai‘i will need 64,693 new units by 2025. But the only question ever asked is how do we build more, and faster? Governor Ige’s 2018 *Affordable Rental and Housing Report and Ten Year Plan* presents the crisis solely as a matter of supply. The plan’s two goals are to “increase the supply of rental housing affordable for low- to moderate-income families” and “for the remainder of the resident population” (9). All subsequent recommendations deal with meeting these production goals. Non-development solutions, such as the rent stabilization measures and tenant protection laws being passed in New York, California, and Oregon, are sidelined. The only acceptable solution is for the private sector to build, build, build—fueling further development without demanding any change in how it takes place.

Even though state reports admit that “the market is the most effective in producing high-end units” (46), rather than shifting power to tenants, the primary strategy has been to offer private developers incentives to build units for households making up to 140 percent area median income (up to \$142,250 for a family of four), despite the fact that most demand comes from households making less than half this amount. Developers are rewarded for fueling displacement, as out-of-state buyers purchased nearly a quarter of Hawai‘i homes in 2018.

Viewing housing purely as a commodity devalues both ‘āina and working families, but again and again, public monies and lands sweeten the deal for developers, in hopes that this time, they might build something people can actually afford. And then we watch in awe and anger, as luxury towers rise into the skyline, agricultural lands become suburban subdivisions, street encampments swell, and our loved ones leave for the US. It’s time to ask ourselves, do we have a crisis of supply, or of accountability?

Though I wish I could offer an ingenious policy solution, there is no easy fix. Since the Territorial era, people have been writing about a housing crisis in Hawai‘i. It is not an acute ailment, but a persistent condition resulting from capitalism’s deeply flawed way of relating to ‘āina, and the State of Hawai‘i’s own denial of its occupation of Hawaiian lands and sovereignty. Housing discussions have long been confined by the needs of capitalism, and dictated by market speculation.

Breaking free will require asking new questions. The pandemic has exposed how close most of us are to losing our housing, and because of this precarity, ideas that were unthinkable a few months ago no longer seem so radical. In the United States, tens of thousands of tenants are organizing rent strikes, and thousands more are forming tenants unions to fight for stronger rights and protections. In Los Angeles, houseless families are reclaiming empty homes. In Ithaca, New York, the city council passed a rent forgiveness resolution. There are even calls to cancel rent and mortgage payments. All of these movements seek to loosen the private market's grip on our homes and to build power among people facing housing insecurity. Solutions are out there, and they are coming from the people whom we think of as the most vulnerable.

In Hawai'i, we know this is true, because housing and land have long been gateways for challenging systems of oppression. As Haunani-Kay Trask argued, the modern Hawaiian sovereignty movement emerged from the anti-eviction struggle at Kalama Valley. Our recent history is filled with stories of how housing precarity brought people into communities that served as pu'uhonua from dispossession, and kīpuka for greater forms of resistance. In the 1990s, Kānaka at Waimānalo Beach resisted eviction so fiercely that they secured a long-term lease from the State, and created a community that enacts sovereignty and self-governance at Pu'uhonua o Waimānalo. Houseless Hawaiians at Mākua Beach resisted eviction, and the military's bombing of Mākua Valley. And today, Kānaka women have created abundance out of scarcity at Pu'uhonua o Wai'ānae.

Stemming COVID-19's impending tide of evictions demands that we radically redefine how we think about home. The real estate experts or developers who have fueled housing unaffordability and overdevelopment of 'āina cannot help with this. Nor can a system built to extract profit from the occupation and development of 'āina, the dispossession of Kānaka Maoli, and the displacement of poor and working class families. Instead, we must turn to each other and build power within the spaces we have created to sustain ourselves through this precarity. The multigenerational households, where 'ohana share in the labor of raising keiki. The pu'uhonua on the slopes of Mauna Kea, which has taught us different ways of standing together for 'āina. The houseless encampments, which have been transformed into spaces of healing for people otherwise criminalized and persecuted.

In these spaces we will find a politics of liberation, and create a future that will refuse the false choice of rampant corporate development or housing exodus. The home we build in this pandemic's wake will not be a commodity divorced from land and life, for that divorce lies at the root of the crisis itself. Instead, home will become expansive enough to confirm Uncle John's certainty that even though he can't pay, and no matter how much his existence is criminalized, he can never be homeless in Hawai'i. Because forever and always, home is 'āina.

### **Work Cited**

*Affordable Rental Housing Report and Ten-Year Plan*. Special Action Team on Affordable Rental Housing Report to the Hawai'i State Legislature, July 2018.

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