Volume 8 | Issue 1 | 2021 | 107-118 Available online at www.housing-critical.com https://dx.doi.org/10.13060/23362839.2021.8.1.527

Airbnb, Platform Capitalism and the Globalised Home

Nicole Gurran (corresponding author)

Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney, Australia <u>nicole.gurran@sydney.edu.au</u>

Pranita Shrestha

Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney, Australia pranita.shrestha@sydney.edu.au

Abstract: Airbnb, the most ubiquitous of the many online short-term rental platforms offering residential homes to tourists, has infiltrated local neighbourhoods and housing markets throughout the world. It has also divided policy-makers and communities over whether tourism in residential homes is a benign example of the so-called 'sharing' economy or a malignant practice which destroys neighbourhoods. These differing positions reflect alternative and changing notions of 'home' within wider processes of financialisation and platform capitalism. This paper examines these themes with reference to stakeholder statements solicited in response to government inquiries on how to regulate short-term rental housing in Australia.

Keywords: Airbnb; home, platform capitalism, residential tourism, globalisation.

Introduction

Second home ownership has been largely neglected in housing studies (Paris 2009), conceived as a form of tourism with localised impacts peripheral to the wider financialisation of housing. However, the rise of the so-called 'sharing economy', underpinned by digital platforms such as Airbnb, has propelled residential tourism to the fore. Originally imagined as 'an egalitarian vision built on peer-to-peer exchanges' (Slee 2017:10), the sharing economy is more accurately understood as a form of 'platform capitalism', whereby digital technology allows profit to be extracted from information rather than traditional forms of capitalism, whereby profit is accumulated through production or assets. The success of firms in the 'sharing' or 'peer-to-peer' economy hinges on their potential to 'curate connectivity' (Van Dijck 2013: 6) at a large scale through their platforms.

In this paper, we consider the implications of Airbnb-style platforms and the new practices they enable for housing and the meanings of home. In doing so, we draw on the voices of those engaged in regulatory struggles over how governments should respond to short-term rental platforms in Australia. We examine stakeholder submissions to parliamentary inquiries on regulating short-term rental accommodation held in the Australian states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria (VIC), highlighting the ways in which different notions of home are mobilised to contest or champion tourism in residential localities.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we explain Airbnb-style short-term rentals and the so-called 'sharing' or 'peer-to-peer' economy as a form of platform capitalism, with particular implications for accessing and experiences of home. We then provide contextual information on the nature and scale of short-term rental accommodation in Australia before turning to our review of stakeholder submissions. In conclusion, we reflect on the potential short- and long-term implications of our findings in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic as well as for responding to short-term rental platforms in housing policy and urban regulation.

The 'sharing economy', Airbnb, and platform capitalism

Early research venerated the so-called 'sharing' or 'collaborative' economy, where 'peers' interact with each other rather than with businesses, often to 'borrow' consumer items such as garden tools or vehicles rather than 'buy' or 'own' (Sustainable Economies Law Center 2013). Initially resembling an online version of the classified section of a local newspaper, geo-enabled platforms such as 'Craigslist' popularised and amplified informal markets for goods and services, including shared housing and real estate (Boeing and Waddell 2016). As 'peer-to-peer' economy platforms began to specialise, with the entrance of ride 'sharing' services such as Uber, urban planners and environmentalists welcomed the potential to reduce consumption and mobilise latent space in city infrastructure (Martin 2016). It is this capacity to connect 'peers' and profit from their digital transactions without the need for physical assets that make 'lean' platforms such as Airbnb so potentially disruptive for cities and housing systems (Srnicek 2017). Utilising 'network effects' (Langley and Leyshon 2017:13) whereby platforms with the most users become the most valuable to other users because of the size of their network (and market), lean platforms such as Uber and Airbnb have enjoyed exponential growth without needing to acquire or develop physical property. By 2019 Airbnb had listed around 5.7 million

residential homes (Adamiak 2019) via individual property owners, without the upfront costs or regulatory hurdles faced by traditional tourist operators.

The rapid rise of this phenomenon means that the implications of short-term rental platforms for tourism, cities, and housing are still unfolding. In contrast to more conventional forms of 'second home' tourism (Roca 2016), whereby city dwellers acquire a holiday house in high amenity coastal or rural regions – sometimes leasing it to visitors when not in personal use – Airbnb's core markets began in global cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles. In doing so the platform precipitated a form of gentrification and displacement without the physical redevelopment usually associated with new housing investment (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018). Early research showed the impact of Airbnb style platforms on the availability of rental housing in Los Angeles (Lee 2016), New York City (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018), and Sydney (Gurran and Phibbs 2017), where landlords moved swiftly to convert permanent rental units to holiday accommodation. Later studies have shown increased risk of rental evictions (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019), higher house prices and rents in cities where short-term rental accommodation has proliferated (Garcia-López et al. 2020; Wyman et al. 2020).

Short-term rental platforms and housing in Australia

Airbnb was not the first online platform to offer residential tourist accommodation in Australia, but it popularised and scaled-up the notion that anyone could 'host' fee-paying visitors in their own home. After establishing in Australia in 2011, Airbnb listings concentrated in Sydney, NSW, for the first few years of operation, spreading to other cities and in regional areas from about 2016 (Gurran et al. 2020). It was at this point in time that conflicts between local residents and short-term rental hosts began to erupt.

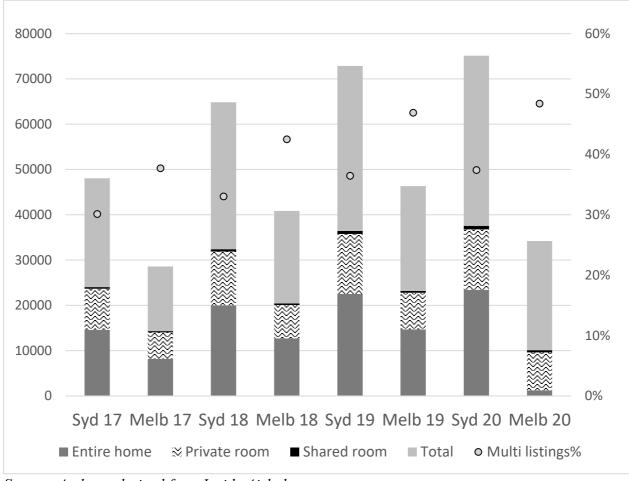


Figure 1: Airbnb Listings, Sydney and Melbourne April 2017-2020

Source: Authors, derived from Inside Airbnb.com.

As shown in Figure 1 above, around two-thirds of all Airbnb listings in Sydney and Melbourne are entire home or whole houses or apartments, with the balance as 'hosted' private or 'shared' rooms. In April 2020, this situation reversed in Melbourne when there was an evident contraction in entire home property listings, likely in response to the sudden cessation of tourist demand in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of Australia's international borders. However, trends in Sydney remained consistent with pre-COVID-19 levels. A rising proportion of properties – around 40% in Sydney and 50% in Melbourne – are classified as 'multi-listings' and thus likely to be managed by a commercial operator.

In 2016 and 2017, respectively, the two largest Australian states – NSW and Victoria – announced parliamentary inquiries to investigate the impacts of short-term rental accommodation and the need for regulatory response (Legislative Committee of Environment and Planning 2016; Parliament of Victoria 2017). The NSW Inquiry had a wider remit than that of Victoria, which focused primarily on impacts within residential apartment buildings. A total of 212 written submissions in NSW and 108 submissions in Victoria were lodged by individuals ('hosts', neighbours, or local residents); state and local government, apartment building owners' ('strata') corporations (representing apartment residents living in buildings where short-term rental units have begun to emerge), tourist operators/organisations, Airbnb, and other online short-term rental (STR) platforms. These submissions were publicly exhibited and

provided a unique window into the ways in which these different stakeholders understood and experienced tourism within residential homes and neighbourhoods. Notably, despite the time which has elapsed since these inquiries commenced, the regulatory response by each government continues to emerge, as discussed further below.

The analysis reported here involved a process of categorising each submission by as takeholder group, and subsequent coding of themes relating to the ways in which particular notions of home are mobilised in arguments over how governments should respond to short-term rental accommodation. We identify three loose constructions: 'home' as a physical object with a particular function relevant to land use regulation; 'home' as a place in which particular experiences of belonging are nurtured through relationships built over time; and 'home' as an economic asset and potential source of income. For brevity we focus particularly on three groups: (1) 'hosts' and platforms (specifically Airbnb); (2) local residents, neighbours, and building owners' corporations; and (3) local councils with responsibility for land use regulation.

The function and purpose of a home

The written submissions to both inquiries reveal tensions over whether using a property for short-term rental purposes changes its function from a home to a form of tourist accommodation, which would therefore require planning permission and/or may be restricted in residential zones. Local council submitters expressed views that using a home as short-term rental accommodation constituted a 'change of use' from residential to commercial tourist activity:

'A change of use occurs when a dwelling is let to visitors on a commercial basis, changing the nature of the occupation of the property.' (NSW Sub. 157 – Local council)

This was refuted by Airbnb and its proponents who argued that 'regular individuals' should be allowed to rent out 'space in their own homes', and that 'home sharing' in residential buildings and areas should be exempt from hotel like rules and allowed in "neighbourhoods" with residential zoning.

"...the majority of Airbnb's Victorian hosts are regular individuals renting out space in their own homes...Home sharing rules should not discriminate between neighbourhoods or building types, instead regulation should allow residents to responsibly share their home with visitors." (VIC Sub. 18 - Airbnb)

Yet neighbours and residents felt strongly that short-term rental platforms and the tourist uses they enable transform the 'character' of the residential 'home environment' into 'transient hotel' accommodation:

'A hotel like ambience is created. After each short stay, cleaning staff bring trolleys in lifts, prop open doorways, leave linen in hallways etc. The character of the building is changed from a residential community and home environment to a transient hotel.' (NSW Sub. 181 - Owners corporation)

For these residents, the sights and sounds of short-term rental accommodation – even the relatively minor evidence of regular, professional cleaning staff – undermined their experiences of home and neighbourhood.

Experiencing home

Theories of home emphasise that home is a site of belonging, 'authenticity' or 'localness' (Roelofsen 2018: 24), 'saturated with the meanings, memories, emotions, experiences and relationships of everyday life' (Dowling and Mee 2007: 161). This grounds domestic spaces as sites for family and local relationships to be cultivated, in comparison to the transient encounters associated with short-term tourist accommodation. Submissions by local residents and neighbours emphasised this distinction between tourist accommodation and residential homes and buildings where relationships are built over time, forming communities:

'Hotels are hotels and residential apartment buildings are where communities live every day.' (VIC Sub. 96 - neighbour)

Opponents of short-term rentals describe the disruption to these neighbourly relationships as eroding the feelings of security and safety they associate with home:

'The most concerning to me is the lack of security/safety...I am sharing my home surroundings with absolute strangers.' (VIC Sub. 51 - neighbour)

'Unfortunately, it is the first time that I don't know anything about my neighbours. I never see the same person twice. It's always different people, even in common areas and lifts.' (VIC Sub. 29 - neighbour)

In addition, for these local residents, these 'absolute strangers' or 'different people' have little respect for the residential shared environment or community.

'No regard for their surroundings or the property they are staying in...parties, noise, yelling, screaming, throwing of bottles and rubbish.' (VIC Sub. 107 – local resident)

By contrast, the opportunity to 'live like a local' is marketed as a 'unique guest experience' by 'hosts' who argue that "online" short-term rental platforms enable a 'globally "connected' community.

'Online platforms connect people with people. People with a need for a unique guest experience to live like a local can easily and safely connect with people who have spare capacity (space/room/apartment). There is a return to connected societies on a global scale.' (VIC Sub. 75 - host)

For platforms and 'hosts', 'homemaking' becomes an act of performance (Roelofsen 2018), uploaded on the internet to attract fee-paying 'guests', in a complete 'digitization of life' (Slee 2017: 38). Thus, the platform enables 'strangers' to imagine that they 'belong' 'as a local does', while 'hosts' cast themselves as 'ambassadors' for their communities:

'Simply put, Airbnb allows anyone to belong anywhere. Our platform helps strangers see a city as a local does and lets hosts become ambassadors for the communities they love, using communication, payment, and trusted tools to empower users around the world.' (VIC Sub. 18 - Airbnb)

Home as an asset and income source

There is a particular irony in marketing local communities for tourism while demonstrably contributing to processes of gentrification and displacement. Short-term rental platforms have supported those seeking to finance second or multiple homes, providing flexible rental income to service residential investments and/or consumption while draining local rental supply (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2019; Gurran et al. 2020). Similar concerns about the impact of short-term rentals on local house prices and rents were raised by submitters to both inquiries.

'Renting residents have been obliged to leave Byron Bay – due to being unable to afford tourism inflated residential rents.' (NSW Sub. 54 – local resident)

In response, hosts and platforms argued that short-term rentals bring local economic benefits, while supporting people to meet their own housing costs.

'Home sharing provides vital income for living expenses such as mortgage and rent for people who want to live in their own home.' (NSW Sub. 139 – host)

Others spoke of new income-generating opportunities for older people.

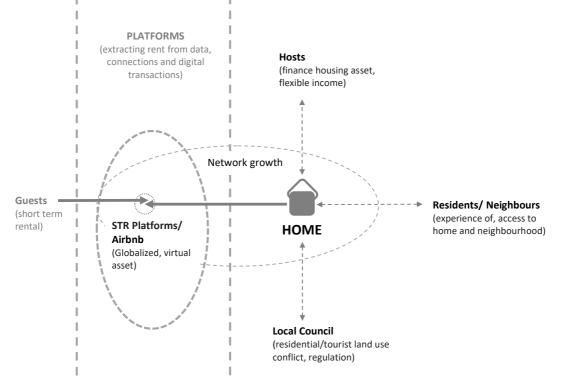
'Airbnb provides an opportunity for retired people or pre-retirees to generate an income.' (NSW Sub. 151 - host)

Here, concerns about the wider impacts of short-term rental platforms for local housing stock are countered by anecdotal stories about individual hosts seeking extra income through the benign and uncontentious practice of renting a room within their own home.

Figure 2 below summarises the ways in which key stakeholders understand and mobilise particular notions of home in their arguments about how governments in NSW and Victoria should regulate short-term rental accommodation.

Available online at www.housing-critical.com https://dx.doi.org/10.13060/23362839.2021.8.1.527

Figure 2: Short-term rentals and meanings of home



Source: Authors.

As shown, the demand for short-term rental accommodation has created an opportunity for STR platforms such as Airbnb to extract capital from the transactions between 'guests' and 'hosts', milking a global, virtual inventory of residential space. 'Hosts' see their homes as opportunities for flexible income, enabled by short-term rental platforms; while local planning regulators see potential land use conflicts between tourism and residential activities. Lastly, neighbours and local residents experience feelings of loss as their sense of 'being at' home is threatened by disruptive tourist behaviour and the potential risk of rental displacement.

Critically, the review of submissions highlights the unbalanced distribution of costs and benefits associated with short-term rental accommodation whereby platforms and individual hosts gain income, but the costs are incurred by neighbours, strata corporations, and local governments, notwithstanding broad claims of local economic benefit. The notion of 'regular individuals' as hosts 'sharing' rooms 'in their own homes' (VIC Sub. 18 - Airbnb) camouflages the actual revenue-generating source for this global company, which depends on the much more lucrative and consistent income derived from whole home listings (Slee 2017). Thus, the platform has transformed traditional practices – renting out a 'second home' or spare room while not in use – into a new and flexible strategy for financing residential investment via a global tourism market.

There are limitations with written submissions as a source of data; for instance, that they reflect the perspectives of a self-selected cohort at a particular point in time. Nevertheless, the views of stakeholders and particularly those with personal, lived experience as 'hosts' or affected neighbours shed important light on the implications of tourism within residential homes and communities. Future research may extend to the increasingly voluminous expressions of

concern about the impacts of short-term rental units and their regulation now being communicated via multiple forums, such as social media.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined how notions of home and home-making have been mobilised by different stakeholder groups in contests over the regulation of short-term rental accommodation in Australia. On the one hand, global platform Airbnb and supporters employ notions of 'home-sharing' to market accommodation and influence regulatory debates; countered by residents impacted by tourists in residential areas who appeal to emotive understandings of homes as places for people to live. More widely, our analysis highlights tensions associated with the state of housing under-financialisation, and the role of platforms such as Airbnb in opening residential space as tourist accommodation to a global tourism market - intensifying demand for housing as investment while exacerbating the shortage of rental supply. The question is whether ongoing attempts by governments to regulate short-term rental accommodation – or external events such as the global COVID-19 pandemic will interrupt these processes.

Tourism has been one of the hardest-hit sectors in the COVID-19 pandemic (Nicola et al. 2020). Initially, it seemed that COVID-19 had managed to 'disrupt the disrupter' (Dolnicar and Zare 2020); with restrictions to international travel, Airbnb listings in Melbourne declined at the start of the pandemic (Figure 1). Longer term, some tourism scholars foresee a potential fall in investor-hosted listings of short-term rental accommodation and suggest that platform based rentals will not bounce back to pre-COVID levels (Dolnicar and Zare 2020). However, signs in many parts of Australia seem to suggest otherwise. With the pandemic under control and domestic travel returning to states such as NSW by mid 2020, demand for short-term Airbnb-style rentals resurged, even as permanent rental markets beyond Sydney hit all time lows (Buckle et al. 2020).

Thus, despite the interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions over the penetration of tourism within residential homes and communities will likely continue. As to whether government regulation will exert a break on platform 'home-sharing' in Australia, the answer remains unclear. In 2019, the Victorian government acted to allow owners to ban short-term rentals within apartment buildings (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2019); however, it has avoided calls to control the use of residential houses. The NSW Government has actively endorsed short-term rental accommodation, announcing in 2018 that it would move to override local planning constraints through a state law establishing permissibility in residential dwellings (NSW Government 2019). In a nod to the state's rental affordability crisis, the practice is limited within Sydney to 180 nights per year – although this is unlikely to be a significant deterrent given that this level of occupancy is commensurate with traditional tourist accommodation. Airbnb celebrated the NSW Government's decision by hosting a party at the Sydney Opera House in 2018:

'To mark this occasion, the Airbnb community came together at the Sydney Opera House – Australia's iconic house – to celebrate the new state of welcome in NSW. The evening was a moment to celebrate the community of hosts who share their homes with others from around the world, where guests from every corner of the planet can feel like



they can belong anywhere and acknowledge that responsible home sharing is here to stay.' (Airbnb 2018)

Occupying 'Australia's iconic house' for its celebration, Airbnb offered a master class in platform capitalism – profiting from global demand for residential space, without owning a single home. As the role of short-term rental platforms in cities and housing markets continues to evolve, ongoing research and policy development will be needed to understand and respond to the impacts of global tourism within local communities and homes.

References

Adamiak, C. 2019. 'Current state and development of Airbnb accommodation offer in 167 countries.' *Current Issues in Tourism*, published online: December 4, 2019. DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2019.1696758.

Airbnb 2018. New State of Welcome for Home-sharing. Sydney: Airbnb.

Boeing, G., P. Waddell 2016. 'New Insights into Rental Housing Markets across the United States: Web Scraping Big Data to Analyze Craigslist Rental Listings.' *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 37 (4): 457-476. DOI: <u>10.1177/0739456X16664789</u>.

Buckle, C., N. Gurran, P. Phibbs, P. Harris, T. Lea, R. Shrivastava 2020. *Marginal housing during COVID-19, AHURI Final Report No. 348*. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. DOI: <u>10.18408/ahuri7325501</u>.

Cocola-Gant, A., A. Gago 2019. 'Airbnb, buy-to-let investment and tourism-driven displacement: A case study in Lisbon.' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, published online: August 19, 2019. DOI: <u>10.1177/0308518X19869012</u>.

Consumer Affairs Victoria 2019. *Short term rental accommodation - owners corporations*. Melbourne: Consumer Affairs Victoria.

Dolnicar, S., S. Zare 2020. 'COVID19 and Airbnb – Disrupting the disruptor.' *Annals of Tourism Research* 83: 102961. DOI: <u>10.1016/j.annals.2020.102961</u>.

Dowling, R., K. Mee 2007. 'Home and homemaking in contemporary Australia.' *Housing, Theory and Society* 24 (3): 161-165. DOI: <u>10.1080/14036090701434276</u>.

Garcia-López, M.-À., J. Jofre-Monseny, R. Martínez-Mazza, M. Segú 2020. 'Do short-term rental platforms affect housing markets? Evidence from Airbnb in Barcelona.' *Journal of Urban Economics* 119: 103278. DOI: <u>10.1016/j.jue.2020.103278</u>.

Gurran, N., P. Phibbs 2017. 'When Tourists Move In: How Should Urban Planners Respond to Airbnb?' *Journal of the American Planning Association* 83(1): 80-92. DOI: 10.1080/01944363.2016.1249011.

Gurran, N., Y. Zhang, P. Shrestha 2020. "Pop-up' tourism or 'invasion'? Airbnb in coastal Australia." *Annals of Tourism Research* 81: 102845. DOI: <u>10.1016/j.annals.2019.102845</u>.

Langley, P., A. Leyshon 2017. 'Platform capitalism: the intermediation and capitalization of digital economic circulation.' *Finance and society* 3(1): 11-31. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from: <u>http://financeandsociety.ed.ac.uk/article/view/1936/2571</u>.

Lee, D. 2016. 'How Airbnb Short-Term Rentals Exacerbate Los Angeles's Affordable Housing Crisis: Analysis and Policy Recommendations.' *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10 (1): 229-253. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from: <u>http://harvardlpr.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/10.1_10_Lee.pdf</u>.

Legislative Committee of Environment and Planning 2016. Adequacy of the Regulation of Short-Term Holiday Letting in New South Wales. Sydney: Parliament of NSW.

Martin, C. J. 2016. 'The sharing economy: A pathway to sustainability or a nightmarish form of neoliberal capitalism?' *Ecological Economics* 121: 149-159. DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2015.11.027.

Nicola, M., Z. Alsafi, C. Sohrabi, A. Kerwan, A. Al-Jabir, C. Iosifidis, M. Agha, R. Agha 2020. 'The Socio-Economic Implications of the Coronavirus and COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review.' *International Journal of Surgery* 78: 185-193. DOI: <u>10.1016/j.ijsu.2020.04.018</u>.

NSW Government 2019. *Short term rental accommodation - A new regulatory framework*. Discussion Paper. Sydney: NSW Government.

Paris, C. 2009. 'Re-positioning Second Homes within Housing Studies: Household Investment, Gentrification, Multiple Residence, Mobility and Hyper-consumption.' *Housing, Theory and Society* 26(4): 292-310. DOI: 10.1080/14036090802300392.

Parliament of Victoria 2017. Inquiry into the Owners Corporations Amendment (Short-Stay Accommodation) Bill 2016. Melbourne: Parliament of Victoria.

Roca, Z. 2016. Second home tourism in Europe: lifestyle issues and policy responses. London: Routledge.

Roelofsen, M. 2018. 'Performing "home" in the sharing economies of tourism: the Airbnb experience in Sofia, Bulgaria.' *Fennia-International Journal of Geography* 196(1): 24-42. DOI: <u>10.11143/fennia.66259</u>.

Slee, T. 2017. *What's yours is mine: Against the sharing economy*. OR Books. DOI: <u>10.2307/j.ctt1bkm65n</u>.

Srnicek, N. 2017. *Platform capitalism*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Sustainable Economies Law Center 2013. *Policies for Shareable Cities; A Sharing Economy Policy Primer for Urban Leaders*. Oakland: Shareable, Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC). Retrieved December 20, 2020, from: <u>https://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/report-gorenflo-ekandari_qajar.pdf</u>.

Van Dijck, J. 2013. *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford: University Press. DOI:<u>10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001</u>.

Wachsmuth, D., A. Weisler. 2018. 'Airbnb and the rent gap: Gentrification through the sharing economy.' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50 (6): 1147-1170. DOI: 10.1177/0308518X18778038.

Wyman, D., C. Mothorpe, B. McLeod 2020. 'Airbnb and VRBO: the impact of short-term tourist rentals on residential property pricing.' *Current Issues in Tourism*, published online: January 29, 2020. DOI: <u>10.1080/13683500.2019.1711027</u>.