

Capitalizing on Crises. Airbnb's Transformations from the Great Recession through the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has relentlessly accentuated the interconnectedness and interdependency of our bodily and social lives (Butler and Yancy 2020). Sharing the same space and breathing the same air puts human bodies at risk of spreading or contracting a potentially deadly disease. This awareness has become particularly problematic for digital tourism platforms such as Airbnb, which had long promoted the romanticized notion of sleeping in the intimate spaces of unknown Others as the most meaningful kind of travel experience. Over the years Airbnb and other “short-term rental” platforms have repeatedly run marketing campaigns suggesting that penetrating the everyday lives and homes of those living in tourist destinations results in more “authentic” travel than staying in commercial accommodation (Roelofsen and Minca 2018). As internet-based platforms, they have provided digital connectivity infrastructures, facilitating the temporary renting or renting out of private properties, rooms, or beds – where the host(s) may or may not be present during a stay. The last ten years have seen these companies thrive on, and contribute to, the increased mobility of millions of tourists and the residential spaces and labour provided to them by local “hosts”. Indeed, “short-term rental platforms” have sparked radical changes in the organization and marketization of tourist hospitality; furthermore, until recently, their global share of online bookings of tourist accommodation and services was rapidly increasing (UNWTO 2019). These sites are frequently analysed as examples of “platform capitalism,” given that they mine and control huge amounts of data in their efforts to generate profit, and are interwoven *with* and reliant *on* pre-existing capitalist segments of the tourism market (Barns 2020; Sadowski 2019; Srnicek 2017). Prior to the pandemic, Airbnb dominated the short-term rental market, with a share of 80 %–95% in many European cities (Smigiel 2020; UNWTO 2019). Compared to other short-term rental platforms such as VRBO and Wimdu, Airbnb has probably received the most scrutiny in academic and popular debates, in light of its singular contribution to the rapid development of unsustainable mass tourism practices. In recent publications on “overtourism”, Airbnb has been depicted as a key player in the increased flow and volume of visitors in tourist destinations that are already subjected to other stress factors (Celata and Romano 2020; Fletcher et al. 2020; Peeters et al. 2018). Yet, like other actors in the tourism and hospitality industry, Airbnb was suddenly and severely hit by the crisis that followed the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The platform and its users have seen the cancellation of large numbers of bookings due to restrictions on individual mobility, the closure of national borders, lockdowns, and the social distancing rules imposed by the authorities in countries affected by the public health emergency (Roelofsen and Minca 2021). As a result, Airbnb has incurred significant losses in revenue, prompting it to adopt cost-cutting measures. Media reports suggested it suspended all its marketing activities to save US\$800 million, but it also imposed salary cuts and laid off about 25% of its staff (Bosma 2020). Despite these steps, Airbnb has remained optimistic that its business model

will continue to operate in the future, albeit under radically different conditions. The platform is currently viewed as one of the most valuable hospitality companies worldwide, in terms of market capitalization. Despite apparently gloomy prospects, Airbnb's initial public offering on the stock market in December 2020 was hailed as a major success and secured a valuation of close to US\$100 billion (Allyn and Schneider 2020). In this chapter, I outline some of the social, economic, and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the tourism sector's "platform economies", using Airbnb as a case study. More specifically, I examine how Airbnb's economic practices and relationships have changed, proliferated, or become embedded in the current times of crisis, as well as asking what remains of the Airbnb economy in the present times of political and economic uncertainty? To address these questions, I detail some of the main ways in which the platform has been impacted *by* and has responded *to* the pandemic-provoked crisis, while also considering how the crisis might act as a potential catalyst of structural change. My aim is thus to contribute to recent academic debates that have assessed the crisis as an opportunity to reflect on tourism "as-we-know-it" (including its flaws and sometimes devastating impacts) and to imagine what transformations might be required for the sector to become a more responsible, inclusive, and sustainable "force for good" (e.g., Brouder et al., 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; 2021). The chapter is organized as follows. After outlining my research methodology, I chart key aspects of Airbnb's history, showing that "crisis" conditions have become foundational to the platform's success as a tourism business. I next discuss how Airbnb, similarly to other short-term rental platforms, has contributed over the past decade to what has contentiously been termed "overtourism". I then go on to explore key changes to the platform's protocols, standards, and digital infrastructure that have been introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, I discuss what these changes may tell us about the future policy directions of Airbnb and what alternative strategies might potentially contribute to more ethical, responsible, and sustainable forms of tourism.

Methodology

This chapter offers a critical analysis of Airbnb, interrogating its role in the production of controversy, inequality, and disruption in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic and shortly thereafter. Accordingly, I explore the platform's socio-spatial impacts on people's livelihoods and engage with the highly uneven ways in which Airbnb has (dis)advantaged its users, urban residents, and other social groups imbricated in its economy. The chapter is informed by Higgins-Desbiolles and Whyte's (2013; 2014) definition of critical tourism theory as a field concerned with deconstructing power and privilege and co-developing emancipatory practices with those affected and disadvantaged by these same dynamics. Consequently, I track forms of opposition and protest against the platform that have arisen over the last decade or so, and outline strategies that might potentially foster a more even distribution of opportunity and income in the "post-pandemic" futures of tourism and hospitality. I draw on engaged, reflexive, and subjective approaches and predominantly qualitative methodologies to tap into the complexity of the Airbnb phenomenon. The empirical data presented are the outcomes of multiple interrelated research projects carried out between 2014 and 2021. These projects used a range of methods to investigate the socio-spatial impacts of Airbnb at the scales of the city, the home, and the everyday life of residents in various regions (Roelofsen 2018a and 2018b; Roelofsen and Minca 2018; 2021). Together they offer an extensive and continuous analysis of Airbnb's digital infrastructure and applications between 2014 and 2021. Over time, key changes to the platform's protocols and standards, and terms and conditions were tracked and recorded. In parallel, Airbnb's "travel philosophy" was studied via qualitative content analysis of its promotional materials, hospitality guidebooks, blog posts, discussion boards, and policies. This included an analysis of 80 blogposts published by the company on the *Airbnb Newsroom* between October 2019 and February

2021, which detail some of the major changes introduced by the platform since the outbreak of the pandemic. For the purposes of the chapter, I also indirectly draw on (digital) ethnographic research, conducted between 2015 and 2020, consisting in participant observation and in-depth interviews with 30 Airbnb hosts in Bulgaria, Denmark, Ghana, and the Netherlands. Participants discussed in depth their experience of hosting via the platform. Those interviewed in 2020 were invited to reflect on how they had adapted their practices since the outbreak of the pandemic, including in response to the changes in Airbnb's standards and protocols. I further rely in this chapter on my analysis of 30 blog posts (with over 1700 responses) by Airbnb hosts, which were published on the Airbnb Community Center (ACC) during the public health emergency. These posts were selected because they directly (and critically) engage with the changes made by Airbnb to its protocols and standards and shine light on the company's "crisis management" strategies. The ACC is a social media application on which Airbnb hosts can interact with one another and with Airbnb administrators. It is available to all Airbnb hosts and it processes, stores, and retrieves user-generated content. Finally, the chapter is informed by over six years of my own (digital) autoethnographic research, which entailed participating in the Airbnb "community" both as a host and as a guest (totalling over 50 stays in homes around the globe). My membership of Airbnb and my experience with the platform predated my decision to carry out research on this topic, hence my autoethnography might be defined as "opportunistic" (Anderson 2006). In the course of my participation in the Airbnb economy, I came to appreciate that many of the concepts and practices that I was studying (e.g. "home" and "hospitality") were conditional upon my own interactions – as a researcher-participant – with my hosts and guests. Adopting the stance of researcher-participant also meant having full access *to* and engaging *with* Airbnb's software and digital community. Thus, my autoethnographic work is also digital in that it extends to digital spaces and places, such as Airbnb's Dashboard for hosts and the ACC; and because it includes my first-hand experience with and contribution to multiple processes of datafication and commodification of everyday life and hospitality between 2014 and 2021, processes that are key to understanding both the workings *of* and participation *in* the Airbnb economy. Ultimately, my (digital) autoethnography shaped some of the research questions that I formulated with a view to identifying and analysing the struggles experienced by other hosts and guests in the Airbnb economy.

Capitalizing on crises, homes, and everyday life

The Great Recession

"Airbnb was founded in San Francisco in the midst of the Great Recession as a way for people to turn their greatest expense, their home, into a more fully used asset—a way to cover the household expenses, pay the rent or mortgage, and even avoid eviction or foreclosure."

(Airbnb 2017a)

Although in recent debates the COVID-19 pandemic has often been discursively positioned as a "singular event", I reflect here on other complex and on-going crises that have shaped the development of Airbnb, drawing connections between earlier lived experiences of crisis situations and current stresses (Gibson 2021). It is important to acknowledge that a climate of crisis is by no means new to Airbnb. Looking back over its brief history, one might even argue that extracting value from situations of insecurity, uncertainty, and despair is a constituent component of the platform's business model. Airbnb was formally established in San Francisco in 2008, a year that marked the beginning of another notable crisis: the collapse of global financial markets and the "Great Recession" that followed. One of the causes of this crisis was the bursting of the so-called 'housing bubble'— a bubble that has been attributed to the financialization *of* and speculation *on* housing, risky mortgage-

backed securities, and collateralized debt obligations (Martin 2011). The recession led to some of the highest rates of unemployment, home foreclosures, and evictions ever recorded in the United States since the Great Depression, although its effects were certainly not confined to the US (Martin 2011; Roy 2017). Many millions of citizens affected by the Great Recession struggled to pay their rent, mortgages, or household expenses and, for some, trying to avoid eviction or foreclosure became a lived reality (ibid.). Since its founding, Airbnb has consistently leveraged the notion of the “Great Recession” in its marketing campaigns and in-house publications to advocate for platform-facilitated “home sharing markets” as a solution to this crisis. The key message that emerged from much of its traditional promotional material was that the platform could (positively) transform the social and economic lives of “struggling homeowners” who were trying “to make ends meet” (Airbnb 2015; 2020a). Airbnb proposed to bring economic empowerment to millions of people, by enabling them to make a profit from resources currently lying “idle” – specifically their homes and “spare time” (Friedman 2017). Users of the platform could temporarily rent out their homes or rooms to tourists and travellers for extra income, and this would help them to overcome or alleviate their financial pressures. To support these claims, Airbnb has published over the years dozens of promotional blogs on its numerous subdomains. These blogs usually feature interviews with individual hosts who epitomize the typical crisis-struck individual. In these interviews, hosts share their routine struggles to finance their everyday expenses, childcare, tuition fees, or home renovations, or to pay off loans and mortgages that they have taken out on their homes. Norbert from Paris, for example, “had a real impulse buy” and borrowed “a lot of money” to pay for his 6th floor apartment in Montparnasse in 2008. Hosting via Airbnb allowed him to “pay charges and taxes” after an unexpected “tax hike” (Airbnb 2017b). Alfredo and Claudia from Madrid, on the other hand, used the money they earned from hosting on the platform “to cover the cost of renovating” their new home (Airbnb 2018). Isabelle from Lyon meanwhile was facing a financial shortfall and had been advised to sell her apartment. After hosting via Airbnb for a few months her “financial situation rapidly improved” and she was able to keep the property (Airbnb 2017c). What these blogposts and in-person interviews with Airbnb hosts communicate is an ambivalent notion of the “home” as both a “problem” and a “solution”, as both a burdensome expense and a (potential) source of income. Rather than examining why tenancy or homeownership have become increasingly unattainable (including in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis), the platform continues to associate the home with capitalist values, inviting further speculation and its exploitation as a commodity. Hosts are invited to share their private financial struggles, after which “sharing their space” on Airbnb is presented as a solution. The rhetoric of “sharing” recurs across many of Airbnb’s materials and, especially in the early years, the “universally positive idea of sharing” enabled the platform to occupy the same economic and discursive space as non-profit platforms, such as Couchsurfing (Ince and Hall 2018, 3). Today, however, the idea that Airbnb constitutes a “sharing economy” is strongly contested, as I outline in the next section.

Thus, paradoxically, the financialization of housing and debt-driven homeownership, which have been seen as major causes of the crisis that triggered the Great Recession, have not only provided the initial basis for Airbnb’s business model but have remained central to it. The company has appealed to this ideology in an increasingly all-pervasive fashion. In recent years, it has more explicitly emphasized the attractiveness of real estate as a consistently lucrative asset. On a number of its webpages, hosts are offered guidance on how to take out “Airbnb-friendly” mortgages or refinance their original mortgages in order to continue hosting (Airbnb 2021). In the case of its UK host-base, it has promoted homeownership by recommending Barclays Bank for mortgages, allowing its users to rent out their homes on Airbnb if they have met Barclays’ conditions. Concerning the bank’s new mortgage policy, Patrick Robinson, Director of Public Policy at Airbnb, said: “We are delighted to see Barclays help *mainstream hosting* on Airbnb. Innovations like this create new economic

opportunities for families and support the modern way they live, work and travel. The new mortgage policy will help more people share their homes and follow their mortgage terms, which is good news for everyone” Airbnb 2020b (*italics added*). Partnerships between Airbnb and lenders like Barclays are not exclusive to the UK and the platform promotes different financing arrangements in other settings. For example, in the US, Airbnb has offered “homeowner-hosts” the opportunity to refinance their mortgages with Quicken Loans and Better Mortgages, via a joint programme with *Fannie Mae* – a government-sponsored enterprise whose purpose is to expand the secondary mortgage market (Airbnb 2021). The messages conveyed by the promotional materials for this programme mirror some of the ideas and processes underpinning what has been termed “*property-led financial accumulation*” (Fields 2018, 118). In this case, Airbnb promotes the idea of an “asset class” – (future) homeowners who secure rental income by renting homes, or rooms in these homes, out to tourists – with or without actually being present as “hosts” for the duration of their “tenant-guests” stays.

Airbnb as platform economy and urban institution

While formal and informal accommodation rental practices between homeowners and travellers have existed for centuries (Timothy & Teye 2009), arguably the invention and widespread adoption of Airbnb’s novel and efficient digital infrastructure have underpinned the relentless growth and popularity of this sector. Furthermore, effective marketing strategies, large-scale venture capital investments, and billion-dollar loans have contributed to making Airbnb one of the (seemingly) biggest platforms of scale today (see also Barnes 2020, Chapter 6). Over the years, Airbnb has also invested significant time, effort, and money in lobbying practices designed to convince (local) governments of the benefits of its platform economy – particularly in those cities where its practices have been contested (see below). It has deployed a range of strategies to influence, with considerable success, the terms of current and future policy on short-term renting in various cities (van Doorn 2020). For example, it has mobilized groups of hosts and helped them to form “Home Sharing Clubs”. These clubs have been actively involved in advocating for Airbnb’s objectives and have framed their “Airbnb-ed” properties and hospitality as essential urban assets in times of crisis. As an *urban institution*, Airbnb has become a powerful social player in the governance of many cities (*ibid.*). In little over a decade, the company’s operations have grown exponentially and begun to move in a monopolistic direction. The company has acquired various competitor platforms and now, together with other accommodation platforms such as Booking.com, Agoda, and Expedia, dominates the global “short-term rental” market (Adamiak 2019). Like other short-term rental platforms, Airbnb implements a “lean” business model (Srnicek 2016). First, platform companies do not own the properties advertised on their websites. Second, they rely on the domestic labour and hospitality of their users without offering standard labour conditions and securities. Third, they earn revenue by charging user fees and rely on (user) data to generate profit and competitive advantage. Yet, as Sarah Barns (2020, 197) argues, platform giants like Airbnb are not merely “data agglomerates and rentiers of the platform age”, they are also deeply embedded in the everyday lives of people and function as tools and urban interfaces. Furthermore, platforms can be emancipatory for some of the people who use them, affording them the opportunity to participate in more liberatory relationalities (Roelofsens 2018a). In this respect, platforms can also be co-productive of intimate and hospitable space and transform the meaning of “home” and homeliness for their users depending on the kinds of interactions that that they elicit (*ibid.*).

Airbnb’s contribution to “overtourism”

It is now clear that Airbnb has successfully managed to develop an economy of significant scope and scale in numerous countries by exerting and maintaining control over the global short-term rental

market via a set of strategic interventions. Yet its success has come at considerable cost. In fact, in recent studies, Airbnb has often been associated with what is popularly termed “overtourism”, or, “the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have caused permanent changes to their lifestyles, denied access to amenities and damaged their general well-being” (Milano et al. 2019). Various studies have brought to light the role of Airbnb in the commodification of housing and its adverse effect on the affordability and availability of housing for residents in many cities (Arias Sans & Quagliari Domínguez 2016; Cocola Gant & Gago 2019; Gutiérrez and Domènech 2020; Mermet 2017; Wachsmuth & Weisler 2018). The platform has become a powerful enabler of business opportunities for a large group of professional operators who act in different capacities and have been identified as real estate investors, property management companies, and individual landlords (Gil and Sequera 2020; Semi and Tonetta 2020; Smigiel et al. 2019). Airbnb has allowed these professional actors to rent out properties to tourists rather than to local residents, flouting “existing housing and land-use regulations in many or even most of the cities in which it operates, and ... in a fashion which appears to undermine policies aimed at protecting the supply of affordable housing” (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018, 1149). As the rental income obtained from tourists tends to be higher than monthly payments from tenants who are long-term residents in the area, renting out to tourists is viewed as far more lucrative (Cocola Gant & Gago 2019; Mermet 2017; Yrigoy 2018). Other perceived benefits of renting out to tourists rather than residents are the opportunity to constantly speculate on rental prices and receiving tourists’ payments in advance (Cocola Gant & Gago 2019). This shift from a residential to a touristic use of housing has been shown to produce a gap between actual earnings from renting to residents and potential earnings from renting to tourists, also known as a ‘rent gap’ (Wachsmuth & Weisler 2018; Yrigoy 2018). By attracting visitors to neighbourhoods that were not originally planned as tourist places, platform companies have contributed to the intensification of land use in these areas, indirectly pushing up the value of commercial and residential properties. The consequent rise in housing and rental prices has effectively resulted in the direct and indirect displacement of residents in these areas (Celata and Romano 2020; Cocola Gant and Gago 2019). The platform has also contributed to exacerbating existing social inequalities in other ways. While Airbnb’s advertisement campaigns imply that its economy provides opportunities for ordinary residents who are trying to “make ends meet” (e.g., Airbnb 2015; 2020a), studies have shown that the members who profit most from the Airbnb economy are usually already privileged, middle-class, and white (see Schor 2017; also, Roelofsen, 2018a; 2018b). Professionalization practices on Airbnb benefit asset owners in particular (van Doorn 2020; Bosma 2021). These are “hosts” who tend to operate multiple listings on the platform or who are able to rent out entire homes rather than rooms. Other categories of “professionalism” are attributed to hosts who can rent out properties permanently or for extensive periods of time, and/ or outsource the labour of cleaning and hospitality to others. Hence, the benefits produced by Airbnb tend to be unevenly distributed, further adding to existing socio-economic disparities within cities. Meanwhile, residents have been affected by the increasing presence of short-term guests in their apartment buildings in a variety of ways. Local councils have noted a rise in complaints concerning issues such as inappropriate tourist behaviour, garbage disposal, and parking problems, as well as a lack of awareness of security, fire, and safety protocols (Gurran and Phibbs 2017). Several studies have documented instances of neighbours and household members having to deploy ad hoc strategies to avoid bodily co-presence and unwanted intimacy with Airbnb guests (Roelofsen 2018a; Spangler 2020). Other research has shown that platforms like Airbnb are used as a substitute for existing accommodations such as budget and mid-range hotels (Guttentag and Smith 2017). Accordingly, a quantifiable negative impact on local hotel revenues has been observed in places that have

experienced a rise in Airbnb listings (cf. Zervas et al. 2017 for a case study on Airbnb in Texas, USA). In light of these adverse impacts, many urban governments have sought to make the short-term rental platforms subject to local regulations, with a view to protecting the public interest and creating a ‘level playing field’ for the industry (Frenken et al. 2020; Nieuwland and Melik 2020). This has entailed developing new or adapting existing urban policy to protect housing and enforce health and safety standards and taxation, to name but a few examples. According to Smigiel (2020, 256) “one of the major pitfalls of current forms of policy response is that [urban governments] address short-term rentals as a specific topic without including it in the wider frame of housing or economic policies”. Furthermore, urban governments “lack the data to know how and where to regulate” (ibid.). Alongside governmental efforts, neighbourhood- and community-based movements have similarly called for changes in urban development and planning models, effectively calling for the rights of residents to be prioritised over the interests of “platform capitalism”. Such drives have also been expressed through public demonstrations, graffiti and posters in the streets, and other place-based actions (Colomb and Novy 2017). In a similar vein, practices of resistance have been implemented digitally via social media, such as Twitter hashtag campaigns and other forms of digital activism (Morales-Pérez et al. 2020; Wilson et al. 2020). However, just like other businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector, the Airbnb economy has taken a major hit due to the COVID-19 emergency. While Airbnb critics and sceptics briefly speculated about a possible “end of Airbnb” (Neate 2020; Temperton 2020), critical urban- and tourism scholars were quick to reject such claims, noting the platform’s continued appeal to a specific group of users (Cocola-Gant 2020; Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Incorporating insights from a recent study on Airbnb and COVID-19 (Roelofsen and Minca 2021), the following section outlines some of the major transformations that Airbnb has undergone since the start of the emergency and what this may mean for post-pandemic travel and tourism landscapes.

Airbnb and the COVID-19 Pandemic

“COVID-19 has materially adversely affected our recent operating and financial results and is continuing to materially adversely impact our long-term operating and financial results. However, we believe that as the world recovers from this pandemic, Airbnb will be a vital source of economic empowerment for millions of people”

(Excerpt from the prospectus for Airbnb’s International Public Offering, Airbnb 2020c).

As governments began to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 with restrictions on mobility, border crossings, and social interaction, Airbnb issued its first formal response to its users. Given that a great number of hosts and guests were being forced to cancel bookings due to measures imposed by governments, Airbnb communicated that it would provide emergency relief to its users by activating its “extenuating circumstances policy” (Airbnb 2020d). This policy allowed hosts and guests to cancel eligible reservations through the booking app without incurring the usual charges or penalties. While Airbnb guests would be refunded advance payments that they had already made for their stays, neither would Airbnb hosts be sanctioned for cancelling as they would have been under normal circumstances. This particular decision provoked major upheaval among a specific group of hosts who had previously applied moderately or very strict cancellation policies. Under normal circumstances, they would have been able to count on being (partially) financially compensated even if a guest cancelled – whereas under the terms of Airbnb’s emergency policy they would receive nothing (Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Protests against Airbnb’s “guest-centric” emergency relief took the form of thousands of heated posts on social media and the ACC, including threats to leave Airbnb for other short-term rental platforms, and petitions aimed at forcing Airbnb to change its course of

action (Airbnb 2020e; Milavic 2020). However, what also emerged from these responses was the despair of numerous professional hosts who had become solely or substantially reliant on Airbnb income to make a living (see also Semi and Tonetta 2020; Bosma 2021). These were not the “casual hosts” that have featured in Airbnb’s countless promotional campaigns over the years. In the absence of Airbnb income, professional hosts of all kinds were faced with major uncertainty, particularly those who were paying off mortgages for their (multiple) Airbnb listings (Airbnb Community Center 2020; Neate 2020). The fact that, in the early stages of the pandemic, hosts held the company accountable for neglecting to support them financially, pushed Airbnb to clarify and reaffirm what its *actual* responsibilities to users were. In operating an “asset-light” business model that was “community-based” and “powered by people”, the company claimed that it was mainly accountable for its digital “infrastructure” (Airbnb 2020f; Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Although it wished to provide some form of support to its users in unforeseen circumstances, Airbnb insisted that it was predominantly an exclusive provider of software, or in other words, an intermediary. This rhetoric echoes strategies that other on-demand or “gig-work” platforms have deployed in the past. Extending *immunity* to the buyer of the product (the “guest” in Airbnb’s case) *and* to the company that owns the platform (Airbnb) protects both “these parties from the obligations that commonly pertain to an employment relationship” (Van Doorn 2017, 902). Consequently, hosts have been forced to bear most of the risks and responsibilities of listing their properties and providing hospitality, despite the fact that Airbnb makes profit from them doing so and determines, to some extent, their conditions of work (see also Minca and Roelofsen 2019; Roelofsen and Minca 2018). Airbnb’s first response to the crisis was noteworthy and laid the ground for the company to roll out a further set of strategic interventions in the months that followed with a view to re-exerting and maintaining control over its market, its products and services, and the practices of its users. One of Airbnb’s next strategies was to implement an emergency-inspired flexible cancellation policy called “More Flexible Reservations”, which effectively further transferred the risks of cancelled reservations to the hosts (Airbnb 2020g). While hosts were not forced to adopt the most “flexible” cancellation policies under this scheme, those who did were promised rewards by Airbnb, such as the opportunity to rank higher in guests’ search results, via search functions with the option to filter out hosts who apply moderate or strict policies (to their own disadvantage). In this way, Airbnb prioritized hosts/listings that were willing to shoulder as much risk as possible and to become infinitely flexible and liable (Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Other major policy changes that Airbnb has been able to push through concerns the area of domestic work. While there is no doubt that Airbnb homes have always relied on domestic work, it was not until April 2020 that Airbnb implemented a series of health and safety protocols with a detailed and rigorous outline of 1) what had to be cleaned in the house, 2) how often cleaning was to be carried out, 3) who was to perform the cleaning, and 4) with what products (Airbnb 2020h; Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Since November 2020, Airbnb’s “Enhanced Cleaning Protocol” has not only been compulsory for all its hosts, but the platform has also created signifiers (categories) by which hosts (and their listings) can be identified in listing profiles as adopters of the protocol. This is a new and powerful form of social regulation that is similar to the Superhost programme, yet more firmly embedded in practices of social and bodily hygiene (Roelofsen and Minca 2018). Airbnb homes are now required to be “sanitized” while in-person meetings between hosts and guests are subject to stringent COVID-19 protocols that detail the type of bodily conduct that is or is not permissible (Airbnb 2021b). Relatedly, Airbnb has announced new partnerships with chemical companies who will sell Airbnb-preferred detergents to hosts via linked platforms. It is also about to partner with professional cleaning services that it endorses and to whom hosts may outsource cleaning work (Airbnb 2021c). Although such a feature has not been implemented to date, it is not unlikely that “professionally cleaned homes” will be algorithmically prioritized in Airbnb search results and feature as more reliable forms of

accommodation (Roelofsen and Minca 2021). Finally, another notable transformation observed in Airbnb's marketing and communication is its recent push to cultivate the market for mid-term and long-term, rather than short-term, rentals. For over a decade, the platform associated itself with the tourism and hospitality industry, not least because it was purporting to sell travellers' authentic local life "experiences". However, since the outbreak of the pandemic, a major shift has come about in its "clients'" (i.e., guests') preferences. According to Airbnb's promotional material, guests are now looking for long-term stays closer to home. They also seek "private and socially distanced" homes where they can work, and prefer homes that offer "self-check-in" (Airbnb 2020i). Accordingly, Airbnb has urged its hosts to consider lengthening the period of time that guests are allowed to stay in their homes and has recommended to hosts to refrain from in-person contact with their guests if they can (ibid.). Clearly, the formula that Airbnb is now promoting resembles the type of tenancy that is ordinarily set up via established real estate agents and their platforms. Paradoxically, by moving in this direction, Airbnb is prompting a specific group of professional hosts to return or convert to a long(er)-term rental housing market that they had been accused of disrupting in previous years.

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Airbnb's business model and travel philosophy have always been predicated *upon* but are also productive *of* crisis conditions. While the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges and opportunities for Airbnb, circumstances of uncertainty, precarity, and inequality have been central to the platform's functioning since its establishment in 2008. I have discussed how the financial crisis and the Great Recession in particular inspired over a decade of campaigning and lobbying activities by Airbnb. These activities were predominantly focused on promoting the rights of so-called "struggling homeowners", who were to be allowed "share" their properties with tourists and travellers. Rather than addressing the key causes that caused the Great Recession – i.e. financial speculation and predatory housing debt – the platform thus continued to link home ownership with profit-making. Additionally, Airbnb has actively encouraged debt-driven "hosting" among its (potential) users, by promoting "Airbnb-friendly" mortgages or the refinancing of existing mortgages through its partner-lenders. Such loans are intended to encourage hosts to remain committed to "hosting" on the platform in order to pay off their debts, effectively providing Airbnb with a stable user base. The platform has also exacerbated existing housing crises by allowing professional actors to operate through its digital infrastructures and to rent out residential property to tourists instead of urban residents. As such, Airbnb has been imbricated in processes of direct and indirect displacement of residents and has contributed to housing inequality. Existing urban and housing policies that have been shaped by forces of globalization and neoliberalism have certainly helped Airbnb to thrive. Long before Airbnb was established, housing was already viewed and treated as an investment asset within a globalized financial market – a dynamic that has been maintained right up to the present day by governmental support of homeownership via specific policies and heavily promoted by the real estate industry (Rolnik 2013). Effectively, the marketization and commodification of housing as a neoliberal strategy has "led public policymaking towards the abandonment of the conceptual meaning of housing as a social good" and has profoundly undermined enjoyment of the right to adequate housing across the world (ibid., 1059). As Raquel Rolnik suggests, such strategies have resulted in "the creation of world-class city enclaves for the wealthy and tourists, with those unable to afford to live in such areas being pushed into inadequate housing, living in areas with poor or no basic services at some distance from their sources of livelihood" (ibid., 1063). With millions of people globally facing joblessness and the inability to pay for their rent and other essential expenses, the COVID-19 pandemic is set to further exacerbate housing injustice and mass evictions (see e.g. Graziani et al. 2020). Inevitably, then, the very state institutions that have supported

inequitable strategies and policies for decades will have to be held accountable for adverse consequences and required to develop recovery policies and plans to avert other unprecedented housing crises (see also Cocola-Gant 2020; Graziani et al. 2020). This new approach will include holding short-term rental platforms accountable for their role in financial speculation and the conversion of residential housing into tourism accommodation at the expense of the growing housing precariat. In tracing some of the most recent changes in Airbnb's communications, standards, and protocols, I have also shown how the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the platform with new opportunities to make profits from previously relatively insulated realms of social life. Since the emergence of the pandemic, a whole new spectrum of health, safety, and hygiene recommendations has prevailed, driven by governments and organizations such as the World Health Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council. In response to such guidelines, the platform has implemented new standards and protocols with respect to domestic work and hospitality. Users are now compelled to engage with their guests in ever more specific ways and to clean their homes according to a set of pre-defined steps; additionally, they are advised to use a specific brand of cleaning products when cleaning their homes or to hire professional cleaners from companies that Airbnb has recently partnered with. Clearly, these new standards are more feasible for some users than others within the Airbnb economy and thus bear the potential to further exacerbate inequalities on the platform (see also Schor 2017). For example, those who manage entire homes and/or multiple listings on the platform may be able to rent out their listings on a long-term basis, while hosts who actually live in their properties may not want or be able to share their homes for long periods. Multiple-listing owners will more likely be able to afford the outsourcing of labour, given their economies of scale compared to those who boost their earnings by cleaning the listings themselves (Bosma 2021). Like the "gig economy" platforms that have recently been obliged to provide their workers with basic employment rights (e.g., Uber), Airbnb too increasingly determines and controls its users' conditions and processes of work by means of data capture and algorithmic management. This pattern is also evident in the way the platform now incentivizes hosts to rent out their properties on a long-term basis and to bear all the risks of cancellation themselves. The trend towards standardization and professionalization outlined earlier also raises questions about the platform's compliance with existing (national) legislation and guidelines regarding fair work and forms of labour protection in tourism (see also Roelofsen and Minca 2018; Ioannides et al. 2021; ILO 2017). Throughout this book, it is posited that the pandemic may bring about societal and economic change. In this chapter, I have argued that platforms like Airbnb can only act as catalysts of structural change if the laws and legislation they *should* comply with (rather than challenge), prioritize residents' access to a sufficient, adequate and affordable supply of long-term housing. Furthermore, in a truly transformative future for tourism and hospitality, platforms should play an active role in *averting* rather than capitalizing on and exacerbating current and past crises. Certainly, there is no lack of other accommodation platforms that seek to meet the needs and interests of the societies in which they operate in a more equitable fashion. These range from for-profit rental platforms such as *Fairbnb* to non-profit "home-sharing" platforms including *Servas* or *Bewelcome*. The task that lies ahead for tourism scholars who wish to contribute to redefining and reorienting (urban) tourism in a post-pandemic landscape is to foreground (already existing) alternative platforms that place the interests and rights of local residents and tourism workers at the centre of their mission.

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