Every day that an apartment sits vacant is a social loss, essentially decreasing the number of available dwellings. Empty rental apartments also represent a financial loss, and they contribute to the increasing unaffordability of cities for most workers. By reducing vacancy through design, architects can begin to solve the economic problem of unaffordable housing. This paper builds on a research project that examined move-in / move-out data for 1,500 apartments over five years and provides case-study examples of significant predictors of vacancy, such as the relative size of the apartment, the position in the building, the layout and view. However, the research also found that vacancy is multi-causal, and the architectural attributes interact with the building’s context and the demographics of the residents. Incorporating these factors requires the architect to deal with a high level of complexity, and often contradictory information. This paper presents a unit-by-unit methodology for assessing the architectural contributions to vacancy and suggests tools for architects to design more socially sustainable housing. The methodology examines both the reasons for turnover...
frequency—how often people move—and for turnover duration—how long an apartment is vacant between residents—both of which have architectural influences. Much of the housing we need for the creation of sustainable communities already exists, vacant, and this vacancy is often related to design. The methodology can not only diagnose and lead to improvements in renovations, but also be applied to the creation of new housing. The paper concludes with a discussion on how critical architectural practice that incorporates an evidence-based approach to design can contribute to the creation of more sustainable housing and cities.

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Christina Bollo is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the Illinois School of Architecture and a practicing architect. Her research, teaching and creative work focus on the social, economic and environmental ramifications of housing design. She is committed to mitigating the built environment’s role in climate change by designing and retrofitting healthy, energy-efficient housing that people will choose to live in, sited in communities dense enough for low-carbon transportation.