

## EMPTY HOMES COLLABORATIVE: WHY AIRBNB

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I was three years old the first time I tried to run away from home. With great dignity, I packed a small suitcase and marched my little legs down the stairs to our front entrance. My father, being ever willing to play along, closed the door behind me as I was left to stand tall in defence of my boldness. It was a humbling experience to stare out into the vast landscape that lived beyond the walls of our house, all alone. Shortly thereafter, the tears came without permission and my great escape came to an abrupt end. My father opened the door to let me back in and from that day forward, we laughed about the time that his rebellious toddler tried to make a run for it.

Although my first attempt to grasp freedom failed three steps from the front door, I continued to dream about using my savings to build a life all my own. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure if I was running towards something or running from something, but either way, these early memories became part of the foundation by which I understood what it meant to have a home. To *be* home. In my case, I knew I wanted to be away from it. To create something new.



So, when the gates of opportunity finally did open, I happily walked through them with reckless abandon. Looking back, it shouldn't have come as a complete surprise that I not only ended up going to law school, but I also ended up using that degree to navigate the never-ending contention that seemed to occur between the very real human side of the housing issue and the very toxic side of the real estate legal system.

Legal systemic change and socially responsible housing.

It's almost laughable how obvious it all is given my history. But I simply couldn't go any other way. Because behind the dream of beautiful furnishings and family photos and holiday gathering, there is a litany of obstacles that stand between people and the lives they want to live. There are tax issues and government laws and third-party liabilities. It's a mess, and someone has to know how to trudge through the mud of it all. But it doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to be so hard and so combative and so consuming. There is a way for all of this to be more human. And it was the discovery of collaborative law, when I was 52 years old, that helped me to realize this. It was also that discovery that lit a much bigger spark within me. It was bigger than my education, bigger than my expertise, bigger than my story. It was the inner energy that started the *Empty Homes Collaborative* dream.

The dream that says every human is deserving of a home.

The details behind why a toddler would try to leave home with the eagerness of a newly minted explorer has become a faded memory on this long, and sometimes tumultuous, road. But the relevance remains; we seldom land at the foothills of our life's work by accident. Rather, we arrive there, baggage in tow, having endured our own personal struggles, and ultimately, we find ourselves standing alongside one of the most meaningful questions life can ask us: *What makes my heart break?*

This was it for me: The lack of home.

The courts. The contracts. The claw marks left in its wake.

Abraham Maslow, theorized that humans live within a hierarchy of needs. The base need being physiological. *Food. Shelter. Water.* It is only in meeting our most basic of necessities that we are able to elevate and thrive as individuals and as a species. The great unawareness of our current day is that we live in an age where this is entirely possible. With the right technology in

the housing market and the right collaboration in the legal field, every displaced human on the planet could have a roof over their head from which to begin anew.

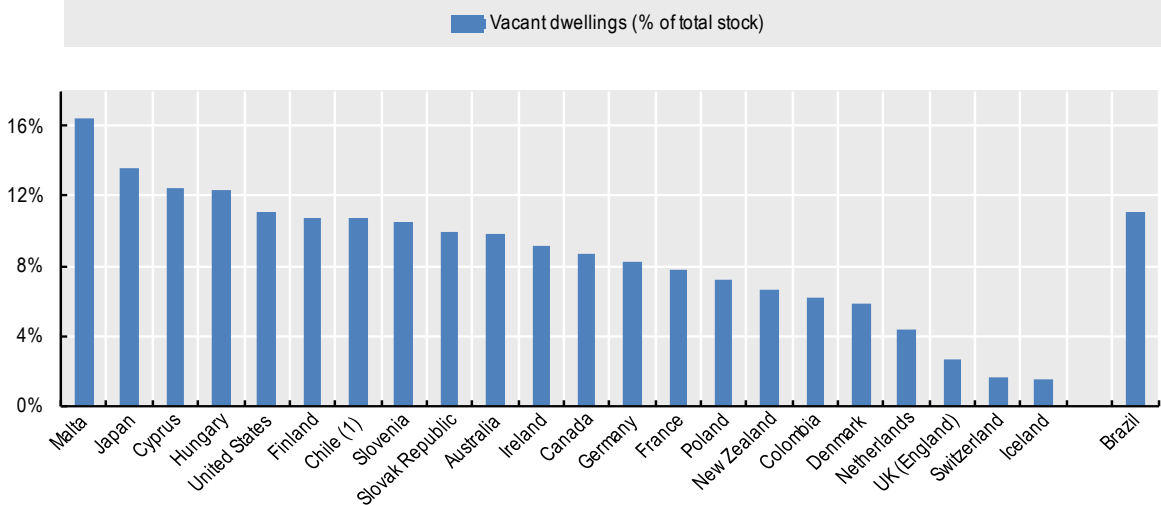
And most importantly of all...those roofs already exist.

In fact, there are more than 100 million empty homes—worldwide—that could be used for this very purpose.

In 2019, I started to feel defeated in my attempts to make a real difference with my work, but it was in during those same months that I decided to dig further into the numbers, and it was this research that enabled me to cross over the threshold of doubt and into a position of deep purpose. We knew (thanks to the Guardian) that there are millions of empty homes.

Over the next four years, we collected as much data as possible and as a result, we attempted to create the most complete picture of the EHC story by writing a Empty Homes paper <https://ehcollaborative.org/2024/06/17/ehc-paper-published-empty-homes-offer-green-and-just-transition-opportunity/>

**Figure HM 1.1.2.a: Vacant dwellings in selected countries**  
Percentage of vacant dwellings, out of the total dwelling stock, 2020 or latest year available  
OECD



In April of 2020, I found myself intrigued to see what online vacation rental sites were doing during the lockdowns. This is how I discovered that Airbnb had been using their platform to support refugees in finding urgent and essential housing during their time of need. In December of that same year, this initiative would formally become known as Airbnb.org and, to date, has been able to arrange temporary housing to more than 210,000 refugees.

It is a partnership like this that I now dream about when I close my eyes at night. It is Airbnb's business model of valuing empty homes while also valuing the homeowner. It is EHC's vast experience in housing and conflict management and immense belief in the power of trust. It is CEOs coming together with a vision and desire to make the world a better place.

A project of this magnitude needs partners who need each other.

Admittedly, it's an ambitious undertaking. For many, the current global mindset is not one of building a longer table, but rather, building a taller fence. We have been taught to protect ourselves, to look out for ourselves, to acquire for ourselves. And our legal system has encouraged us to do so. It has enabled our division by capitalizing on our fear.

But what if there was another? A better way? What if there was a way that we didn't even know we needed, because we didn't even know that it existed? And what if that way was built around more trust, more compassion, more understanding? What if that way supported our society, supported our environment, supported our fellow humans? What if that way encouraged us to lock our arms instead of clenching our fists?

It's possible. All of it. And collaborative law makes it possible.

If that fearless three-year-old girl—who tried to march out into the great unknown one day—taught me anything; it's that we can't do it alone. We need each other. As humans, as organizations, as leaders. If we are going to make a profound difference, then we are going to need

to do it together. Between collaborative law and the hospitality industry, we have the opportunity to innovate and show up for our fellow humans at a scale that has never fully been done before.

Because it is only together, with the right partners, that we start to see what is truly possible. It is together that we best honour the stories that lead us all to where we are today.

It is together, alongside partners in a Societal Challenges project at the UK's Open University aiming at leveraging digital thinking tools for challenges such as depolarization and education, that awareness is growing around the opportunities presented by empty homes.

### **Open Societal Challenge contact**



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And it is together that we can give others not only a house...but a home.

For in-depth data from the Empty Homes Collaborative, please visit <https://ehcollaborative.org>