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Housing

The urban character is shaped through its residential neighborhoods, some of which have been intact for centuries. Scholars and public policy officials recognize housing as a critical element of community development. Thus, efforts to rejuvenate communities within metropolitan areas are often accompanied by a strategy to rejuvenate housing as well. Because of the multidimensional nature of housing, it is both an important element of an urban area's macrolevel character and a primary determinant of individual living experiences through its interaction with the physical and natural environment. In addition, social policy is often concerned with issues of homeownership, commonly seen in cities' attempts to move families and households along a continuum of housing, in hopes of improving both consumer welfare and socially desirable outcomes. Improving social well-being through housing choice also requires policies directed toward improving the physical quality of the housing unit itself, the degree of choice in housing selection, and the variety of housing that is made available across urban areas and cultures.

The Importance of Housing to Community

Over the past century, there has been an attempt throughout the developed and the developing worlds to recognize a universal right to housing. During the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, the Roosevelt administration legitimized the role of the federal government in creating and providing housing through the formation of large-scale public housing. This was followed shortly thereafter by the National Housing Act of 1949, which went further than any national government had previously gone in legitimizing a standard of housing for citizens by stating the need for "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family," without necessarily codifying the terms of such a standard.

On the international stage, the United Nations created its own standardization of a basic level of housing quality through the passage of its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which stated that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including . . . housing." In addition, housing's importance as a driver of economic growth cannot be underestimated. In the developed world, residential transactions directly create a variety of job categories, including home builders, real estate agents, mortgage lenders, and appraisers, just to name a few. Beyond these direct employees, such activity generates enormous multiplier effects on the general economy.

In many areas, a distinct architectural quality of housing helps define the urban area's character. For example, Baltimore's historic row-house model is uniquely identified with the city as a housing form unlike any other. In other cultures, there is an emphasis on vernacular housing, in which locally available resources and production methods are employed, as a way of maintaining local tradition rather than being influenced by a particular architect or designer. By emphasizing purpose over aesthetic appeal, such an approach allows neighborhoods and cityscapes to be created and maintained in a consistent manner and for habitants to feel a sense of connectedness as a result.

The Integration of Housing Within Existing Sociological Theoretical Frameworks

Housing serves an important role within the context of one's physical and natural surroundings. The human ecology model, popularized by Bubolz and Sontag in 1993, emphasizes that the built environment serves as a conduit between the self and both the social–cultural environment and the natural environment. Similarly, housing also has a connection with each stage along the pyramid structure of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, first popularized in the 1940s. The most basic need is physiological. Housing serves this role by providing shelter and protection from the natural elements. Housing also serves the second stage of Maslow's pyramid by providing safety and security to its inhabitants, as a form of protection from potential harm. In the subsequent level, a sense of belonging, the home environment serves as a place in which families are raised and nurtured and where people interact with friends and other community members. The final two stages of the hierarchy, self-esteem and self-actualization, address the important roles that housing plays in people's identity and social status and in satisfying their creative side and allowing them to reach their full potential.

Housing Continuum

Morris and Winter, in *Housing, Family, and Society,* put forward a housing adjustment theory, which shows that housing consumption can be analyzed along a continuum. Just as it is important from a community standpoint to plan for area growth through the adequate construction and provision of housing and housing infrastructure, it is also important from a household perspective to prepare for different levels of housing consumption along a household's life course. As a result, at each stage of a household's development, there will be a shift in the types of housing norms or housing expectations. The need for housing space, and hence, housing consumption, tends to increase along with increased family size and economic resources during the early years of a household. As household size stabilizes, housing consumption may also stabilize. Later, as children leave the home and household size shrinks, space needs will tend to decrease. Finally, as age brings functional decline, more accessible and supportive housing characteristics become critical.

However, this ideal of housing consumption across the life course is often unavailable. At the most extreme end of this continuum, families experience homelessness. Homelessness typically means an individual has no access to a conventional residence. This can result in sleeping in homeless shelters or nonresidential public or private spaces, such as abandoned buildings, cars, streets, subways, bus terminals, or parks. Although statistics on world homelessness are not consistently available, it is safe to say that homelessness is a concern in both developing and developed countries throughout the world. The reasons behind homelessness are myriad, ranging from displacement of people after natural disasters, the failure of cities and metropolitan areas to adequately provide enough low-income housing stock for their populations, and the individual lack of available income due to unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, mental disorder, or expenses associated with children.

Government Support

Affordable housing is often developed through government support of private development or direct government construction and management of housing. In the United States, there has been a shift away from concentrating government-managed affordable housing in large, centralized public housing projects in one location (normally in mostly low-income neighborhoods) within each urban area. Instead, newer strategies encourage diffusion of poverty through construction of smaller, scattered-site public housing and subsidization through housing vouchers that allow low- and moderate-income recipients to choose from many private-market dwellings, often in less economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

From an international perspective, several developed and developing countries also offer varying degrees of public assistance to low-income households, often with the intention of having these households eventually transition to nonsubsidized housing. Such a transition is rarely an easy one, however, in that the ability of these households to

afford housing has been hampered by years of rapid house price appreciation in many urban areas.

Beyond the transition to nonsubsidized market rent housing, a common policy objective is to encourage homeownership. Several city governments encourage such a move along the housing continuum through offering such incentives as down payment and closing cost assistance, a phenomenon that accelerated during the 1990s. Despite the recent housing downturn, such home buyer assistance programs are still widely offered by many states and large municipalities.

The concept of the housing continuum, of course, also allows for movement away from, as well as toward, homeownership. For example, in the event of a mortgage default, owners may be forced back into renting. In addition, life cycle changes may cause older homeowners to voluntarily forgo the effort and expense of home maintenance by selling and returning to renting.

Housing Quality and Residential Satisfaction

Many urban areas attempt to ensure the quality of their housing stock through the implementation of zoning laws and building codes. Zoning, which became widespread during the early twentieth century, was intended to subdivide land parcels throughout a metropolitan area and to limit the uses of land for particular purposes within particular zones. This usually meant separating commercial and industrial land uses from those intended for residential purposes. In major industrial areas, these types of laws helped to create more value within a city's built environment and drastically reduce public health concerns by separating residential areas from factory areas.

Building codes are city or county regulations that mandate the quality of the built residential structure, rather than the location of residential homes. Building codes can improve building safety and quality, as well as force the incorporation of modern building and construction techniques. However, in some areas, building codes may also add excessive requirements designed to keep the construction costs of new housing high and limit the entry of low-income residents into wealthier enclaves.

Housing quality concerns can come from the aging of the current housing stock as well as a lack of affordable housing. In many nations, the lack of habitable housing stock, coupled with the large number of urban dwellers in extreme poverty, forces many city residents to occupy high-density slums. As housing ages, the need for capital repairs begins to mount. Historically, repair needs for low-income apartment units in major cities have been ignored, causing housing quality to suffer as a result. Within U.S. cities, there is a demonstrated pattern of housing "filtering" occurring, in which housing is gradually passed down to lower-income populations as it gets older. Such a situation helps to create an imbalance in the quality of housing among income groups. As construction techniques and processes improve, the potential increases for even wider disparities in housing expenses related to housing quality. For example, the move toward more environmentally sensitive and energy-efficient housing, sometimes referred to as "green" housing, dramatically reduces energy expenses, but it is generally available only to higher-income households.

Aside from the residential structure itself, many cities are currently experiencing difficulties in their supportive infrastructure systems as well. Such inadequate services can lead higher-income residents to leave the cities for suburban or exurban locations, where newer housing stock with adequate road networks, utilities, and other services are offered. To counter some of these forces of inequality in housing, urban planners have advocated, and in many cases implemented, mandatory mixed-income housing within urban areas.

Housing quality and residential satisfaction can also have indirect effects for families and societies. Low residential satisfaction is a key predictor of residential mobility. Excessive residential mobility prevents individuals from rationally investing in community and neighborhood well-being. People who are not planning to stay in a neighborhood generally do not invest their time or resources in improving the neighborhood. This lack of investment in neighborhood social capital in turn produces socially undesirable neighborhoods. Poor neighborhood quality, especially in issues of safety and security, can be a key driver of residential

dissatisfaction. Such dissatisfaction leads to increased mobility for those with opportunities to move, which can exacerbate the downward spiral of some communities.

Differences in Housing Across Cultures and Countries

Across regions and across time, the very character of housing may change dramatically. In the United States, the average square footage of a new house rose from about 1,000 square feet in the 1950s to more than 2,600 square feet in the beginning of 2008. Such changes correspond with increases in the average American household's housing norms over time. This trend is occurring despite a concomitant drop in household size. Meanwhile, in other countries, average square footage per living area is much lower. In some international urban cities, housing size may be limited by the lack of developable land, when compared to a country such as the United States. The joint effect of the two trends on the built environment has been an increasing stress on the natural environment.

Housing Tenure

The difference in housing tenure trends across countries is also notable. Since the mid-1990s, the United States has heavily advocated a homeownership strategy, culminating in a homeownership rate approaching 70 percent by the mid-2000s. Such a high homeownership rate is unusual in many other countries. For example, Germany has a homeownership rate just over 40 percent, suggesting a difference in housing norms across the two countries. However, tenant rights also vary dramatically across nations, which makes it difficult to compare tenure categories. The disparities in homeownership rates across different ethnic and racial groups in the United States is also dramatic, with African American and Hispanic homeownership rates consistently more than 25 percentage points below non-Hispanic White homeownership in recent census surveys.

The age of the housing stock can also differ dramatically across urban cities. In the case of Paris, nearly two thirds of its housing stock was erected before 1949, while about half was constructed before 1915. The age of New York City's housing stock is slightly lower by comparison. Those American cities incorporating more land mass and sprawling housing developments, such as Los Angeles and Houston, meanwhile, have much younger housing stock. Across the international landscape, the age of the housing stock may not necessarily be negatively associated with quality. Several cities, such as Florence, Italy, boast of centuries-old housing that is among the highest priced within the metropolitan area. In several other cities where older neighborhoods are protected by historic preservation policies, housing is both well preserved and highly valued.

Throughout much of the world, a nascent movement is gaining strength toward implementing adaptive reuse as a redevelopment strategy. Such a strategy seeks to recycle older commercial buildings for residential purposes, allowing such things as old factories and schools (among other building types) to become apartments and condominiums. Housing can also be shaped by cultural differences such as religion. In some Muslim countries, for example, housing is placed in an environment built for promoting Muslim societal behavior. Such architecture blends basic spatial/policy parameters with existing religious tenets and local conditions.

The persistent drive for greater and greater residential size may have peaked in the United States and elsewhere. Average new home sizes have actually began to fall recently in the United States, driven by economic change and possibly growing concern for green living and limiting one's ecological footprint. The ever-expanding American suburbs have led to an increased realization of the ecological impact of housing choices. Dramatically increased commuting time and fuel consumption accompany these suburban and exurban expansions. Ironically, it is often the desire for green space, in the form of one's own private large yard or garden, that drives suburbanization.

Return to the City

In the United States and elsewhere, the limits of suburbanization and commuting have led to a reemergence of urban residential living as an appropriate and desirable solution. Here, however,

the amenities are of a quite different character than suburban developments. Rather than the focus being on individual yards and perhaps a neighborhood pool, urban residential developments are large multifamily buildings where amenities include retail and cultural opportunities conveniently located within walking distance or available by mass transit. Such urban residential amenities may differ substantially by climate and culture. For example, the shared open courtyards of the Mediterranean may be less functional in the colder climates of Scandinavia.

While various cultural and climactic circumstances can impact the design and function of housing, many characteristics are consistently important for housing satisfaction across regions, nations, and cultures. In studies of residential satisfaction in Japan, Western Europe, and the United States, the presence of noise from traffic or neighbors has a dramatically negative effect on residential satisfaction. Although greater size is typically associated with higher residential satisfaction, the characteristics of the space, especially the inclusion of areas such as multiple bathrooms that allow for zones of privacy, are more important in determining residential satisfaction. However, many of the factors that drive residential satisfaction do not relate to the physical structure of the home itself. For example, a variety of studies have shown that perceived neighborhood safety and security is a driving characteristic of residential satisfaction.

Individual housing choice may be driven by specific characteristics, but almost inevitably, broad location choices are based on available employment. In nations where public school availability is based on housing location, such extra-housing characteristics can also drive housing choice for families with children. As with many issues within urban studies, the goal of residential satisfaction can be achieved only with a combination of successes at the individual, neighborhood, community, city, and regional levels.

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See also Affordable Housing; Housing Policy; Housing Tenure; Social Housing; Suburbanization

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Housing Policy

Housing policy may be defined as government action to achieve housing objectives. These objectives could include the improvement of the quality of the housing stock of dwellings or dealing with homelessness. Another definition of housing policy would be government intervention in the housing field. The difference is that some interventions in the housing field may be directed at objectives outside the field. Examples could be the regulation of housing finance markets to influence activity in the national economy or restrictions on the amount paid in subsidy to low-income households to encourage incentives to