Architecture

Measuring the Dream

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

EARNEST study follows earnest study, in the immortal words of New York Times columnist John Corry, and nowhere are they more earnest than in the housing field. The fact that I find them thoroughly absorbing and would rather read them than dull porn obviously marks me as some kind of a nut. The latest, "America's Housing Needs: 1970-1980," produced by the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, while not exactly "The Story of O," is required literature for housing study buffs. It is, in its earnest and institutional way, a fascinating document.

What I look for in such reports are insights through the statistics, revealing flashes about American life and society, occasional blinding basic human truths derived from the unlikely depths of demographic analysis. These nuggets of societal wisdom usually have got to be dug out, but they are all there for the connoisseur.

Each study has its own style. The Kaiser Report, prepared by The President's Committee on Urban Housing in 1968, is a solid, nuts and bolts document with heavy emphasis on financial machinery and operational procedures. It is also the document on which the Federal government's housing programs, now largely abandoned, were based.

The Douglas Report of the same year, "Building the American City," is the official record of the National Commission on Urban Problems. This one is more abstract, more richly philosophical, with occasional soul-searching about the quality of life (1968 was a good year, as they say about wines, for urbanology; the Johnson Administration was as committed to cities and housing as the Nixon Administration has been uncommitted, to put it delicately).

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These reports rarely, if ever, give answers to anything. Each, in its own way, simply states the problem. That problem, disguised and dulled by data, is a mix of bruising tragedy — housing deprivation and stoic suffering at extraordinary numerical levels—and for those who can afford it, the unending pursuit of the American Dream. There usually are wishful recommendations at the end, stated ringingly and consistently full of holes.

The Joint Center report goes considerably farther toward relating human aspiration to statistical abstraction than any of its predecessors. There is a significant reason for this: the work draws as much on behavioral science as on conventional data extrapolation. That departure extends the data dramatically by providing new kinds of interpretation for the figures.

What emerges is a portrait of American social values that has barely been suggested inferentially before, and is now shown as a prime determinant of housing needs and desires in this country. It becomes clear that the realities of housing need—the study projects 23 million units for the next 10 years—are as concerned with people's hopes and fears as with construction counts and dollar investment.

This may sound a little like discovering the umbrella. But the reliance on relatively new behavioral research makes this study a sociological, as *well as a statistical docu*ment. Because the research has also been able to take advantage of the 1970 census finding, it is automatically *one up on earlier efforts,* which relied on much outdated material. The results sometimes startle by their obviousness (the truth, like the umbrella, was always there) or their occasional unexpectedness.

The man in the street knows, for example, that he is having a harder time paying for housing and is getting less for what he pays; the report now puts cost high under the heading of "housing deprivation." This category has been traditionally limited to definition by substandard physical condition. In a conspicuous change in emphasis, the Joint Center stresses financial factors in determining deprivation. "Housing deprived" families, in fact, have just about doubled from the six to eight million of the 1968 Kaiserist count to 13.1 million today.

These new figures are shocking. They are due in part to the fact that the Joint Center definition of deprivation is broadened from measurement by substandard physical dwellings to include factors of crowding, financial burden and neighborhood environment. It is also noted that much more attention needs to be paid to the social and environmental context of housing—a truth that has come conveniently with hindsight.

Perhaps the report's most extraordinary conclusion is that any assessment of housing need in this country depends to a remarkable degree on what the study calls "neighborhood dissatisfaction." People look for neighborhood first, housing second. Whether it is the underprivileged dreaming of health and safety and basic amenities or the overprivileged "trading up," the name of the housing game is the quality and stability of the neighborhood. And everyone is bailing out, not just the rich.

Another name is class. Basic standards and values must be alike, even more than in the past, as they become, and the pattern of housing need is closely linked with the desire to be with one's own kind, away from the discomforts and dangers of the inner city. Variety, often cited by residents as desirable, apparently means having a doctor, or journalist, or management type as a neighbor, as long as he shares similar styles and convictions. Neighborhood threats are considered to be the influx of an alien class or group with "different" standards, or deterioration of municipal services. A good neighborhood, as defined by one respondent, has "no bars or buses."

Although the Douglas report established the tie between housing and neighborhood, it remained for the Joint Center study to hold up the mirror to the odd and sometimes frightening actualities of the American social processes and its effect on housing demand. The changing formation of households, for example, is also a statistical fact, but in human terms the increase in household numbers reflects a social and emotional revolution, with the breakup of the nuclear family and the young and the old living separate lives.

Only the pursuit of happiness and the American dream is seemingly unchanged. The out-migration continues from city to suburb to country, unchecked in spite of rumors to the contrary, and as the suburbs develop urban ills the movement is to exurbia, where the pattern is being repeated over again.

Because it is not just the city that is being abandoned, but the older suburbs as well, for the more spacious house on its own lot for the working class, the two-car garage and rec room for the middle class, Arcadia for the upper class, and an extra bathroom for everyone. All the same defects are being created in all the same ways; nothing succeeds like failure. The only thing that will slow down the process is costs, and possibly the energy crisis.

Although the report offers no recommendations, conclusions are implicit. We must understand that housing deprivation in this country is much greater and more complex than we had believed. We must see that the stock of low cost housing is declining, and as cost hardships rise we must accept the idea of subsidies other than those for construction. Housing production alone is not the answer; it is neither a complete nor successful response. Neighborhood rehabilitation, about which we still know so little, must be high on our list of priorities.

Most important, there is no national norm for housing, as formerly believed or sought; areas vary in problems and potential solutions and programs must be devised and administered locally, with a mix of answers. A large-scale and generous response is necessary, but it must be more sensitively conceived than ever before.

"For men expect more than the safe and sanitary box," the Douglas report concluded five years ago. "Men seek a new quality in urban life and its setting and they ask for this on a scale no society has ever provided." As for the city, it "has become the place where the poor and the discouraged cling together in neglected houses along dreary streets." There are places where they don't even have the American dream.

The New York Times/Edward Hausner

Youngsters at play at the Co-op City housing complex in The Bronx.

The name of the housing game is the quality of the neighborhood