



Editorial

Housing and society: research approaches addressing the provision of adequate housing in the face of crisis and historic neglect

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Amid the environmental crisis and concurrent social, political and economic disruption, the twenty-first century will most likely see housing as the essential element of the built environment that demands the greatest attention from architects, urban designers, developers, policy-makers and scholars. A crisis of availability, affordability and resilience is now the critical context for housing research, recognising housing as a foundational condition for a stable life for individuals and communities. Housing is also the major component of the fabric that largely defines the character of the built environment in a geographic and cultural context. The urban form of our cities, towns and villages has its primary qualities because of the typologies and configuration of housing in these places. Beyond spatial definition and character, housing impacts human life in myriad ways: our physical and psychological health, the flourishing of family/communal life, happiness, safety and sense of safety, ease of social engagement, social/community support, economic stability and wealth generation, daily patterns of movement/travel and environmental resilience, to name but a few.

The necessary provision and adequacy of housing are critical to the stability and flourishing of society. The provision of adequate housing is a multi-layered, complex process that spans the scale of the housing unit itself, its position in geography and landscape, the grouping of units along a street or within a building, and its distribution in all forms across a village, neighbourhood, town and city. At all scales, issues of material and tectonics, policy and code, sustainability and resilience, economics

and politics, and culture and preference must be addressed. Today housing research and creative development, much like the interwar and post-war periods in the twentieth century, must reflect on the essential characteristics of the individual unit and the provision of housing for large populations at the same time, in the context of the availability of land and capital steered by policy and culture. This special issue contributes to the current literature on housing by grouping together four articles that approach housing challenges, with the overarching goal of supporting the emerging trajectories and framework for housing research and creative development. While research centred on policy and legal frameworks is largely place-specific, there are intersections with social, economic and political issues that transcend national or state boundaries, making these articles pertinent to the international discussion of housing in the twenty-first century.

For example, the goal of providing necessary and adequate housing requires an examination of how this effort can be stymied, intentionally or inadvertently. In the American context, zoning policies that perpetuate and protect a monoculture of single-family housing have not only had a profound impact on efforts to increase the housing supply, they also undergird decades of social injustice through discriminatory practices. While there are many attempts across the United States to end the dominance of single-family zoning, many of these efforts are fiercely resisted by existing homeowners, which means that new strategies and approaches to increasing housing density on scarce urban land are required. The first article reviews this context and outlines a critical tactic that works creatively within existing zoning law to increase housing density, housing diversity and affordability within existing neighbourhoods.¹ Importantly, this tactic seeks to build community support for increased housing density and diversity through new forms of partnerships and common ownership of land.

As noted above, single-family zoning is problematic – not only is it a tool for perpetuating monoculture and low density, but it is fundamentally tainted by an unjust legacy of segregation and discrimination that still impacts minority populations' opportunities for social stability and mobility. While single-family zoning distorted the nature of American 'communities' outside city centres, decades of zoning and housing policies in American cities have resulted in an equally problematic inequitable distribution of and access to adequate housing. In cities across the United States, many African American city residents suffered as they were restricted in their choice of neighbourhood and housing, and, thereby, were at the mercy of slumlords who demanded high rents from residents without investing in the upkeep of the housing stock.² This combination of loss of income to cover high rents and deteriorated housing conditions was an enormous burden on African American urban residents, which also impacted their health. At the same time, it stymied economic opportunities and wealth generation. The second article centres on the zoning policies' manifestation of the historic inequitable spatial distribution of housing and economic opportunities in the urban neighbourhoods of New York City and the intertwined acute impact of the commodification of urban land and real estate, arguing for spatial reparations to address this long-standing injustice.³ This article reveals the impact of decades of economic and spatial discrepancies and the deprivation of freedom of choice/self-selection of housing opportunities; and it provokes new thinking through the creative transformation of policy, housing development strategies, housing typologies and opportunities for equitable wealth generation.

Providing and maintaining necessary and adequate housing for extremely low-income individuals and families have proven challenging in cities across the globe, especially in countries like the United States where the willingness to carry these costs evaporated in the latter half of the twentieth century. This has left low-income residents in many cities worldwide in neglected or ad-hoc deteriorating housing. Further, many low-income urban neighbourhoods in the United States and other countries were developed through a tainted legacy of slum clearance, with the large-scale destruction of the urban fabric and the displacement of local people, institutions and businesses. In American cities, new housing built on cleared urban land was largely built with an anti-urban form that distinguishes and disconnects the low-income residents' homes from the streets and blocks around them. Now, the cycle of substandard housing is being repeated through the neglect and consequent deterioration of public housing, a condition exacerbated by social isolation and the stigma of the 'projects'. Through its documentation of the historic evolution and transformation of the urban form of a case study site, the third article's research and creative urban design 'test fits' the potential of an aggressive urban in-fill strategy that seeks to address the inherent economic and social challenges of low-income housing, leveraging and extending the current tentative programme proposed to address their economic needs through revenue generation by new in-fill development.⁴

Lastly, the goal of providing necessary and adequate housing requires understanding the nature of housing and dwellings at the most fundamental level, especially the relationship between its physical characteristics and social effects. Are there qualities and quantitative characteristics that are essential for a dwelling? Does the qualitative and quantitative examination of housing reveal cross-cultural intersections? How does dwelling space impact on our sense of self, our social relationships and our engagement with the larger community? How can housing play a supportive role in human flourishing? These questions require a framework for research, theoretical understanding and tangible design strategies and approaches. The final article in this volume seeks to develop a socio-physical research framework that will allow a community of researchers to dig into questions like these.⁵ A typological framework emerges in this article through the intersection of multiple theoretical frameworks offered by a diverse range of architectural thinking focused on dwelling/housing.

The increasing pressure across the globe to provide tens of thousands of adequate new housing units is a critical task facing society. The path to the provision of this housing is not easy and clear; it requires sustained examination and the probing of physical-socio implications, as well as social, cultural and legal barriers that slow the response to one of the most significant crises of our time.

Notes

¹ Harpster, 'Regulatory islands'.

² Ironically, as the appreciation of the historic housing fabric in these previously neglected neighbourhoods continues to grow, gentrification and displacement perpetuate historic injustices.

³ Rickenbacker, 'Toward design reparations'.

⁴ Montgomery, 'Addressing urban social and spatial stratification'.

⁵ Lambrix et al., 'Towards a residential socio-physical framework'.

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