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Choice in Housing

Promoting Diversity, by **Sherry B. Ahrentzen**

AFTER MORE THAN fifteen years as an advocate for rethinking the nature of house and home and for broadening our production of housing options, I remain perplexed about the persistence of certain myths that we in the United States cherish about our residences. As John B. Orr, professor of religion and social ethics at the University of California, says, "Ours is a society that measures freedom in terms of proliferation of choices. . . . Thus my bias is towards policies and procedures that insure the civil rights of conventional and deviant families and insure as broad a choice of lifestyles as can be included within the bounds of a democratic society."[1] Applied to housing, Orr's words suggest that significant social progress would be achieved if we were to expand the array of available living environments.

But where on the residential landscape can we find a proliferation of choices? In your own city, how often do you see GoHomes, SROs, group homes, cohousing, granny flats, grandfamilies housing, live/work, or hybrid housing? How many of you even know what these terms refer to? A panoramic view of contemporary housing reveals not vibrant diversity but pointless pastiche—skin-deep architectural novelty—or cookie-cutter conformity. And residential envelopes usually mask interiors that hardly bother to stretch or challenge bureaucratic standards of use, occupancy, and layout. The plan and siting of most residential developments respond to the living arrangements of "conventional" households—the nuclear family that participates little in neighborhood life and uses their dwelling mainly for private purposes. Our residential landscape, and its popular imagery and legal regulations, remain homogeneous in form, goals, and context. We promote more or less the same ideal for everyone; when *Life* published plans for a neotraditional shingle-style residence designed by Robert A.M. Stern, it described the project as "a house for all America."[2]

Housing providers—bankers, insurers, private developers, building designers and architects, market researchers, etc.—cater to the dominant rather than the diverse. Typically we portray the dominant—the single-family detached suburban house—as

the cultural norm, the ideal and standard. Even the term for the physical structure of the dwelling—the "single family" house—presumes a certain social structure. And this intermingling of concept, terminology, and social agenda is embedded in our various discourses, legislative as well as popular and professional.

And yet, in sharp contrast to the homogeneity of our housing, the current social, demographic, and economic diversity of contemporary America emerges clearly in statistical studies. Only one-quarter of U.S. households fit the traditional model of a married couple with at least one child. Only ten percent of American households fit the "Ozzie and Harriet" model—working father, homemaking mother, children younger than eighteen. Of families with children, more than one-fifth are headed by a single parent. And another form of family structure is reappearing: grandfamilies, comprising not only three-generation but also two-generation households of young children whose primary caregivers are their grandparents. In fact, the grandparent-maintained household has become so prevalent—increasing seventy-six percent since 1970—that it will be a separate classification in the 2000 census.

Another significantly growing cohort is homes without children. Twenty-nine percent of households consist of married couples without children, reflecting an increase in "empty nesters." Even more significantly, one of four dwellings is occupied by one person living alone; this group includes not just the young but also, increasingly, the elderly. Given that women usually outlive men, many such households consist of older women.[3]

Not only are our households changing; so too are the uses to which we put our homes. Telecommunications technology and the growing service sector allow us to shop at home using the Internet or mail-order catalogues. Satellite dishes and VCRs bring movies into our living rooms. In Oregon people can vote at home. Major industries such as insurance and health care are bringing their services into the home—witness the growth of home health care. And the number of home businesses is steadily rising. Recent Labor Bureau statistics indicate that twenty million nonfarm Americans work at least part-time at home. While many who do so are merely taking work home from the office, nearly 7.5 million are self-employed.[4] And although most media attention has focused on middle- and upper-middle income households that contain home offices, many working- and lower-middle-class families have established home businesses as well, as much because of capital constraints as family and work situations and preferences.[5]

As historian Stephanie Coontz points out, colonial Americans would find the contemporary social landscape—the diversity of family structures, high rates of premarital pregnancy, families in which both parents work, intergenerational and blended families—far more familiar than the patterns that dominated the 1950s. Although the homogeneity of that decade was, as Coontz has shown, not only anomalous but overemphasized, much of our popular imagery and political rhetoric still assume that that decade constituted a kind of norm. And yet contemporary family and household patterns reflect the increasing pluralism, tolerance, and informed choice of our citizens. Most Americans over the course of their lives will experience a variety of family types and life situations.[6]

Whatever their configuration, our homes carry important shared meanings. More than just shelter, they convey identity and social standing. The home is a means to privacy and the setting for our intimate relationships. The home contains our histories and inspires our dreams for the future. Just as important, the home can function as an economic development tool: for many of us, it is our single largest financial asset and the base from which we maintain or achieve social standing, wealth, and mobility. But if we share a sense of the multiple meanings of home—shelter, identity, retreat, rootedness, economic support—we nonetheless differ in our ideas about how our dwellings can help us achieve these goals. Only the financially secure, for instance, can attain economic security through home ownership. On the other hand, for those with more limited means, converting an attic into a tailoring shop or renting out an extra bedroom are available housing strategies.

Unfortunately, our housing rarely reflects the diversity of household structures or the variety of household uses. In housing, one size does not fit all; nor does one strategy. While housing diversity can be implemented in many ways, I will focus here on one aspect.

My avocation—an extension of my vocation—involves traveling around the country, locating and assessing housing innovations that enhance choice. Recently I have been tracking efforts that attempt to respond to the social changes brought about by the 1996 welfare reform legislation—the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act." While the legislative agenda and media spotlight has focused on job training, employment placement, and childcare, little attention has been paid to housing. How can housing help ameliorate the difficulties of poor single parents who are moving from full-time parenthood to full-time employment and who have few means to help balance the two responsibilities?

In Wisconsin, where I live, welfare reform occurred early, and certain consequences are now evident: despite the boom economy and low unemployment rate, the job prospects for participants of "Wisconsin Works"—or W-2, as the initiative is known—are bleak. Wages are low for women with little education and few skills. And although W-2 funds some daycare, it has not been able to prevent a crisis in child-care availability. Further, hous-

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ing costs are high, and options are few for poor households.[7]

Many poor single parents do not live near their workplaces; some spend more than two hours daily commuting between home, work, and day care, thus leaving little time to spend with their children. Day care and public transportation are often unavailable when they work outside the nine-to-five workday hours—as shelf stockers, cleaning crews, etc. Some Wisconsin housing providers contend that W-2 has produced positive changes—neighborhood pride, better behaved children, and quieter streets. But Milwaukee-area newspapers and the national press also report that social service providers and apartment owners have claimed increases in evictions, doubling up, children moving in with their grandparents, and mothers in homeless shelters since the start of W-2.[8]

Such transience undercuts the goals of welfare reform—moving effectively from reliance on welfare to meaningful employment. Homeless or transient parents find it difficult to search for housing and sustain employment at the same time; some are hampered by lack of a telephone number or stable address where they can be reached. Some become too demoralized to sustain an ongoing search for employment. Nonetheless, many are resourceful in their efforts to be good providers and good parents.[9] Again, the question becomes: how can housing support their needs and goals?

Many low-income households will be helped by the provision of more affordable apartments and of subsidies and programs that encourage home ownership. But even more is needed: a pro-choice strategy to increase the diversity of residential options, to support the production of well-designed and affordable shared housing, transitional housing, hybrid housing, and multigenerational housing. Such housing types are sometimes viewed merely as "transitional"—i.e., not as the housing "ideal"—and yet they respond to what is a new and significant transitional stage in the lives of many affected by welfare reform.

Let me briefly profile these housing types. Rather than deploring the option of "doubling-up"—of two or more households sharing a house or apartment—we need to view this as a viable way of living. In her research on non-kin households, Carole Després discovered that transitional shared housing enhanced the domestic life of many households. Residents often felt safer and more economically secure; pooling rent and expenses enabled some to live in better homes and neighborhoods. Interestingly, older urban dwellings accommodated shared housing more easily than did recent suburban housing. Town houses and row housing were originally designed to include relatives, boarders, or servants. Their spatial organization often adapts to many circumstances; their multiple circulation patterns, enclosed rooms, and distinct separations between various spaces all contributed to easier shared living experiences. In many cities, such housing is old and in disrepair. Some has been gentrified. But much remains that could provide good housing for poorer households, especially if renovated to accommodate two families under one roof.[10]

Since 1987, transitional housing has been federally supported by the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act as a way to help the homeless learn to live independently. Many transitional housing developments shelter low-income single-parent families; some face serious constraints of time and energy; some are fleeing domestic violence. Transitional housing offers security, service, support, and space for residents to restructure their lives, providing on-site child care, job training, and parenting classes as well as reduced rent and sometimes shared spaces.[11] An example is the YWCA Family Village in Redmond, Washington, designed by Pyatok Associates. Offices, child care, and social services are located on the ground floor of the four-story building. The residential floors of two- and three-bedroom units feature unusual shared spaces called "swing rooms." Located between adjacent apartments, with an entry into each, these rooms allow adjoining two-bedroom apartments to be converted into one three-bedroom unit and one two-bedroom unit. In other cases, two families can use the swing room as a shared family room or playroom.[12]

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Multigenerational housing involves shared living among residents of varying ages. Despite the simplistic portrayal of "leisure world" retirement communities in places like Arizona and Florida, a 1996 survey sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons found that more than three-quarters of those fifty or older preferred to live among people of all ages. Asked about apartment living, almost half preferred to live in an age-integrated building.[13] Despite some unfavorable ideas about multigenerational programs—which usually result from thoughtless siting or design that juxtaposes quiet and noisy residents or restricts access to commercial, recreational, or service facilities—these programs have shown that mutual assistance and companionship can improve the daily lives of family members.

One example of multigenerational housing is the Laurel/Norton Intergenerational Community, a forty-one-unit complex in West Hollywood, California, built in response to a local survey that indicated a lack of afford-

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able housing for families with young children and for elderly immigrants. Designed by Fonda-Bonardi and Associates, with consultants Peter Kamnitzer and Victor Regnier, the design accommodates these two groups, along with varying degrees of age integration and age segregation. The site plan shows the building configured along two axes, one running north-south, the other east-west, intersecting to form an "L." The main pedestrian entrance, community room and kitchen, manager's office, and residents' mailboxes are at the point of this intersection on the ground floor. The furthest point of the east-west building contains senior units and lounges; just outside is a raised garden and court used exclusively by the senior residents. The furthest point of the north-south building houses families with children in three-bedroom apartments of about 1,200 square feet. Multiple street entrances provide entry into either a family zone or the central area. The buildings surrounding the central area contain a mixture of one- and three-bedroom units for residents who want proximity to households of all ages. The site plan provides a coarse, blurred grain (to use Kevin Lynch's terms), facilitating options for both age-integrated and age segregated living.

Another important proposal for supportive housing is hybrid housing: a residential structure accommodating both residential and business spaces and activities, where residents occupy and manage both kinds of spaces. This is not a recent invention. As historian Tamara Hareven points out, many working-class families have long seen the home not only as private refuge but also as resource for generating extra income, paying debts, avoiding poverty, and maintaining autonomy in old age. Privacy was important but so too was flexibility of household space, which could be traded for services or used to supplement income. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, a large proportion of working-class households included boarders and lodgers whose rent helped the family pay the mortgage and fulfill the dream of home ownership.[14] In Northern cities at the turn of the century, many African-American women made ends meet by working at home in response to race and sex discrimination in factory and other low-income venues. While many worked for low wages in cottage industries, some advanced by developing branch factories in their homes, employing other neighborhood women and thus strengthening the economy not just of the household but also of the community.[15]

Self-employment and home businesses remain prevalent in low-income and single-parent households. Home businesses allow for greater schedule flexibility. Self-employment can offer desirable alternatives (or additions) to dull jobs that test neither talent nor potential, that necessitate grueling or unsafe commutes, and that complicate the difficulties of balancing work and child care. As the setting not only for domesticity but also for income-generating activity, the dwelling thus becomes critical in supporting and accommodating households and businesses, and the conflicts or synergies that might result. The design and layout of such homes are especially important when the business is small yet stable, and likely to be a part of the dwelling for years. For many poor people, the home can be a significant means of economic empowerment.

Although LionsGate in Redmond, Washington, does not provide affordable accommodations for low-income households—it is targeted to upscale "lifestyle-choice renters," those who could afford to buy but choose to rent—the development is a good example of housing that provides for commercial activity. Designed by CGLO and developed by Trammell Crow Residential, it includes home/office units and corner retail spaces. Modeled after traditional Main Street buildings in which retailers lived above their shops, the building' entrances open directly onto the sidewalks. The storefront business units contain about 225 square feet, enough for most one-person offices. Each home/office unit has two entries: a street entrance for clients, a courtyard entrance for residents. For tax purposes, utilities for businesses and residences are metered separately. Tenants can have separate business addresses and an office sign near the front door. Business and living areas are separated by stairwells and locked doors. The developer had the option of leasing ground-floor commercial space separately from the upper-floor residences. (This proved unnecessary. The development now contains twenty-four businesses. LionsGate leased within six months after opening, and now has a waiting list for its home/office units.)[16]

Another example of hybrid housing, this for low-income residents, is Jingletown Homes, in Oakland, California, developed by Oakland Community Housing and designed by Pyatok Associates. It includes fifty-three first-time homebuyer units and a child-care center. Some homes have expandable attics; others have the kitchen, living room, and an additional "non-denominational" room on the ground floor. This unprogrammed room was designed to be adaptable—as an extra bedroom, a rented room, or even a home business. It includes a private entry and bath, and is near the kitchen rather than a more private space.

Other options would enhance the housing market: SOS villages, single-room-occupancy housing, cohousing, congregate housing, and more. But the important question here, however, is less "What are the choices?" than "Why aren't they more visible?" Part of the answer has to do with the power of the market. Developers and financial institutions dislike risk. Their goal is not diversity, but the profits to be made from market-rate housing. And even though there are now fewer married couples with children than a quarter century ago, this cohort remains the most affluent group of home buyers.[17] Other types of households may

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together comprise a sizable group, but they lack the spending power of "single-family" buyers.

Profitable for developers and their funders, standardization has become entrenched in our housing production system. And standardization and the exclusivity that follows reinforce what Coontz describes as "our recurring search for a traditional family model [that] denies the diversity of family life, both past and present, and leads to false generalizations about the past as well as wildly exaggerated claims about the present and the future."[18] Why is the myth of the single-family house and the nuclear family so important to maintain, even to the detriment of the kinds of choices that would enhance our lives? According to planner Marsha Ritzdorf, all societies define family in ways that institutionalize and legitimize certain relationships. Zoning, she demonstrates, establishes a hierarchy of family definitions, sanctioning only certain types of family relationships. Through the use of zoning, minimum lot sizes, and building and occupancy codes, our residential landscape reinforces this stratified and value-laden classification of households and "protects various politically powerful subcultures."[19] But another reason for the paucity of housing alternatives is evident. The public has little experience or awareness of such options. When I tell people that I research "non-traditional housing," the response is usually, "Oh, do you mean condos?" Developers' brochures are filled with illustrations that offer the illusion of choice: the same buildings dressed in different styles, and large and small variations on the same theme of the "suburban single-family home." Real choice would consist of options for a diversity of living arrangements. The public can hardly ask for what they have never seen, let alone experienced. Residential architect James Wentling argues that people usually settle for whatever designs are available, particularly when they are affordable. When most homes on the market look pretty much the same, residents will begin to believe, "Well, that's just the way they build them these days." Thus will a particular set of standards be accepted as a general rule.[20] And still more factors account for the lack of choice, including politics, advertising, the construction industry, government policy and biased market research.[21]

Housing innovation does exist. Witness the spread of cohousing in suburbs and cities, in professional, popular, and grassroots rhetoric, and even in architectural thesis projects. Being "pro-choice" in housing means being on the front line, so to speak, as well as advocating in the statehouse.

Notes

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4. William G. Deming, "Work at Home: Data from the CPS," *Monthly Labor Review*, 17, no. 2, 1994, 14-20.
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7. In the Milwaukee area, the hourly wage needed to afford a two-bedroom market-rate apartment is $11.25, based upon working a forty-hour week. Earning only the minimum wage, one would need to work eighty-seven hours per week to afford that same apartment: hardly a reasonable expectation for a single mother who needs to take care of children and manage a household. The analysis of welfare reform to date suggests that the level of assistance and typical wage of recipients does not make it possible to afford a decent home. High housing costs leave too little left for clothing, food, health care, and transportation. See Trace L. Kaufman, *Out of Reach: Rental Housing at What Cost*, (Washington, D.C.: National Low Income Housing Coalition, 1997).
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17. Bryson, op cit.
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