

PRIVATE OUTSIDE SPACE AS A FACTOR IN HOUSING
ACCEPTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The private outside space (POS) that surrounds the traditional single-family detached house is often ignored by designers and builders. Yet, recent research shows that individuals and households in all segments of the population hold a high value for having this space as part of their home environment. This paper reviews evidence that the desire for having POS underlies major residential trends of this century. It is an essay on the importance of understanding why the availability of private outside space is an important attribute of housing in American society.

INTRODUCTION

A "home" is often thought of as the physical structure that lies between the welcome mat and the back door. In contrast, the private outside space (POS) that surrounds the traditional single family detached house has usually been ignored. Home construction is subject to intricately detailed building codes enforced by building inspectors. However, the same rigorous regulations usually specify little detail about the surrounding POS. Decisions on its use are usually left to the occupant's desires and the pressure of informal neighborhood norms.

Rising housing costs have generated considerable interest in POS and the extent to which it represents an important component of one's one's home. Many Americans are faced with the prospect of accepting less housing than expected because of its high cost. There is some danger that efforts to reduce the size of the American housing dream to affordable proportions will focus only on preserving the qualities of the physical structure. Efforts to resist reduction of interior space could lead to POS being traded-off by builders for other structural amenities.

This paper is a call for research to learn the reasons consumers believe POS has importance to them. Such research would help

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architects, planners, builders and housing consumers make better decisions about the incorporation , or deletion, of POS from the American housing pattern of the future.

THE CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION

It is tempting to suggest that a transition point has been reached in housing the American people. Fluctuating mortgage interest rates and the emergence of adjustable rate mortgages mean that housing consumers are now operating in a changed housing market. The national economic situation burdened by a high budget deficit casts a cloud of uncertainty over future housing choices. Only a few years ago comments about the national economy would have seemed irrelevant to a paper on the topic of what families want from their housing. That is no longer the case. After World War II, the homes of most Americans steadily increased in size and amenities. Government actions encouraged ownership. Few investments provided a more direct financial reward to people whose incomes were rising than did the deductibility of interest payments on home mortgages. While crime rates rose, environmental quality worsened, energy costs rose, and a host of other societal conditions were worsening, homes became larger, better equipped and financially more rewarding. This situation began to change in the late 1970s.

One change was in the average size of new homes. The increase slowed in the late 1970s and peaked at 1760 square feet in 1979. New homes gradually declined in size to an average of 1690 square feet by 1982.

Another change is the slower rate of yearly appreciation in home values causing people to consider their housing choices more carefully. Housing is now being considered more for its role in meeting family needs, with less emphasis being placed on its investment value or as a speculative purchase.

American society is fairly well buffered against immediate housing adjustments of a substantial magnitude. Building codes, zoning ordinances, substantial equities, a lack of population change in some areas of the country, a host of private contractual means for transferring property while retaining lower interest rates on first mortgages and family transfer of wealth to children prior to the death of a parent all act to prevent wholesale changes in how Americans are housed. Yet, the necessity of having new housing stock at affordable cost is urgent in some areas of the country. The 1970s saw incredible growth in some parts of the country, primarily the South and West, and very moderate or no growth in the central and Northeastern states (Beale, 1981). Those communities and areas of the country facing continued growth are likely to have immediate impacts from interest rates and construction costs.

If efforts to supply affordable housing require housing alternatives that differ substantially from those now being supplied, it is important that builders, developers and designers be guided by better knowledge of what households are willing or not willing to give up. Any efforts to redesign the traditional and much desired detached single-family house must be based on sound research if these efforts are to be regarded as acceptable to housing consumers.

RESULTS OF HOUSING PREFERENCE RESEARCH

In 1977, Dillman, Tremblay, and Dillman (1979) began a line of research aimed at describing and explaining housing preferences. The major finding of their research is that if people are given their preferences, they would prefer to live in detached single-family houses that they own (76.2 percent of the 2,801 respondents in a survey of Washington State households gave it as their first housing preference) They also investigated what types of housing families would turn to if their first choice could not be attained, as seemed distinctly possible in the 1980s.

The respondents' second choices are clearly patterned. Combining the percentage of respondents who gave alternatives to the owned, detached, single-family house as a first or second choice, three types of housing situations emerged: buy a mobile home and a lot (34.8 percent), rent a single-family house (23.4 percent) and buy a townhouse (20.8 percent). Three other choices appear quite undesirable: rent a duplex (12.2 percent), rent an apartment (10.8 percent) and buy a mobile home which is located on a rented space in a mobile home park (7.5 percent) (Dillman, Tremblay and Dillman, 1979).

This attempt to explain that pattern of preferences drew upon the concept of housing norms as developed by Morris and Winter (1978). Based largely upon their work, four housing attributes are identified that are sanctioned positively when present in the home. The four attributes are home ownership, private outside space, conventional structure and detached structure. The owned, detached, single-family home is the only housing alternative that fully meets all four of the norms identified. Each of the three alternatives that emerges as a desirable second choice met from two to three of the norms. Each of the three least desirable housing alternatives satisfies only one or two of the norms. The four housing norms help explain housing preferences. The more norms a housing situation satisfies, the more it is preferred. Thus, explanations are offered as to why, for example, living in a rented apartment or mobile home park seems to be disliked by Americans (Tremblay, Dillman and Dillman, 1977; Dillman, Tremblay, and Dillman, 1982).

A major limitation of the 1977 study by Tremblay, Dillman and Dillman is that it reveals in only gross terms what families seek in their housing. The limitation of this and other studies of housing preferences is discussed by Tremblay (1981). Housing of all types can be designed in ways that incorporate more or less of the normative attributes mentioned above. A 1979 study of 3,860 Washington and Oregon households was undertaken to discover the relative importance of four norms. Such information could provide clues for designing more acceptable housing in the United States.

In the 1979 study, four normative housing characteristics were described to respondents. They were asked to identify which they were most and least willing to accept. These statements of characteristics were designed to describe the loss of one of the four norms. The results show that respondents are most willing to live in a mobile home (41.9 percent)---a measure of nonconventional construction. The remaining alternatives are a rented home (21.6

percent), a home that is attached to another home by shared sidewalls, roof or floor (19.0 percent), and a home that has no outside space such as a yard, balcony or patio belonging only to the inhabitants (17.4 percent). The percentage accepting each of these alternatives as one of their first three choices is 76.3 percent, 69.1 percent, 74.8 percent and 54.8 percent (Dillman, Dillman and Schwalbe, 1980). These data indicate that the respondents are least willing to give up POS.

Another question in the survey was designed to test whether each of the four housing attributes had normative qualities. Respondents were asked whether each was "essential," "desirable," [the respondent] "did not care," "undesirable" or "not acceptable" in their housing. Conventionality is deemed undesirable or not acceptable by 3.1 percent (a measure that emphasizes prefabrication) and 21 percent (a measure that emphasizes the mobile home). The remaining three housing attributes are deemed undesirable or not acceptable by 2.8 to 5.0 percent of the respondents. All four qualities are deemed desirable or essential by a substantial majority of respondents and, except for mobile homes, by an overwhelming majority. This question does not provide information that suggests that any of the housing attributes under study lacks normative qualities.

Importantly, it is found that the unwillingness to forego POS is fairly evenly distributed throughout the population. Examination of current housing situation, community size, household size, age, marital status, sex, income, education and occupation all reveal very little variation in the percentage of people in various response categories willing to give up POS (Dillman, Dillman and Schwalbe, 1980). These findings about the importance of POS are bolstered by replies to a question in the 1977 survey that asked respondents their choice if forced by rising housing costs to choose between building smaller homes (one to two fewer rooms) on average size lots or building their present size of home on a smaller lot. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents opted for a smaller home rather than a smaller lot (Tremblay, Dillman and Dillman, 1977). These are the same respondents who, in considering a list of 23 possible complaints about their housing, are less likely to complain about their present home being "too big; too much space inside," than any of the remaining items. Thus, these data suggest that POS is an important aspect of housing. At the same time, the data offer very little insight into the reasons for its importance.

LOCATION TRENDS AND HOUSING PREFERENCES

Identification of private outside space as an important housing attribute raises some tantalizing questions. One question is the extent to which the search for housing with more and/or better POS underlies the dominant geographic mobility trends of this century.

One of those trends is the suburbanization of the United States, a movement which has gone on most of this century. Suburbanization, which entails a distinct separation between the community where people live and the place where they work, is propelled by a variety of factors including government home mortgage policies and the rapid economic growth of urban places. It is

Housing and Society, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1987

possible that the desire for POS is a reason for the move to the suburbs, the latter being an American innovation that saw the separation of the rich and the poor, leaving the latter in the city centers.

Jackson (1979) suggests that a view of POS developed from about 1840 - 1900 influenced the development of American suburbs. Prior to 1845, a row pattern of urban housing prevailed in the United States. Front and side yards were almost nonexistent and small rear yards were "rancid and disreputable". Rear yards were a place to dispose of wastes and were rarely used for anything else.

Through the influence of several important 19th century writers, the ideal home became associated with manicured lawns and picturesque gardens, Jackson (1979) notes: "By romanticizing the benefits of private open space, individuals like Catherine Beecher, Andrew Downing, Alexander Davis and Frederick Ohnns were in the forefront of a fundamental switch in American residential attitudes." The changing view of what constituted a desirable home was confirmed by Thorsten Veblen, who noted that well-manicured lawns were being used in the early 1900s to convey one's wealth and social status to others. The newly ascribed importance of one's yard is also confirmed by casual observation in driving through virtually any suburb. Spacious lawns are a given. The more expensive the home, the larger and better kept the lawn tends to be.

More recent sociological research suggests that POS may have played a role in household moves to the suburbs. In Philadelphia during the early 1950s, Rossi (1980) finds that 28 percent of the respondents register complaints about the "open space about their home," exceeding 12 other complaints. Michelsen's (1970) examination of relations between families and the urban environment repeatedly refers to POS as an important aspect of the home that seems to be associated with moves to suburbs. Past research has not reached definitive conclusions about the role of private outside space in the movement to the suburbs. Perhaps this is because POS has not been articulated as a distinct housing attribute separate from street and neighborhood.

The second major population trend of this century, from the 1920s to about 1970, was the decline of rural areas. By 1970, this decline left 200 counties with less than half the number of people once residing there. This trend could hardly be considered a response to the desire for POS. That migration was the result of greater fertility in rural than urban places (Johnson and Beegle, 1982), and the technological transformation of American agriculture (Rodefeld, 1982) which required fewer farmers to produce the crops. Those changes were coupled with economic opportunities closely tied to urban locations, further fueling the suburban growth of America. One can reasonably assume that the rural-to-urban migrants had been socialized with abundant POS and possessed the expectation and the desire for POS in their new locations.

During the 1980s, a third and distinctively different demographic trend developed. Although suburbanization continued, especially around smaller metropolitan cities and cities of all sizes in the South, a migration reversal between urban and rural areas began. For the

first time in this century, nonmetropolitan counties increased 15.4 percent, whereas metropolitan counties increased only 9.1 percent (Beale, 1981). The striking feature of the turnaround was its pervasiveness. Rural growth cannot be accounted for by the simple expansion of metropolitan fringes of already established urban areas.

The renewal of population growth in rural America seems to be the result of both economic and noneconomic factors. Several of the apparent explanations suggest that people are moving to rural places because they prefer them to urban ones. These explanations include early retirement and affluence, giving people the freedom to live wherever they desire. An explicit search for an improved quality of life has been found to motivate some moves to rural areas (Williams and Sofranko, 1979; Stevens, 1980). It seems likely that rural areas provide greater opportunities for people to obtain housing with POS, although it is not known whether that is, in fact, the case.

Considerable research dating from the early 1970s has been aimed at understanding the precise nature of locational preferences. Results from this research are summarized elsewhere (Dillman, 1979). The locational preference research shows without exception that if given a choice, people prefer a more rural location than the present one (Zuiches and Fuguitt, 1972; Fuguitt and Zuiches, 1975). Unpublished Gallup surveys confirm the persistence of this preference into the mid-1980s. A Washington state survey shows that two-thirds of the 3,137 respondents prefer living outside rather than inside the city limits of the nearest community. Is it possible that families desiring rural locations are, in part, opting for a set of housing attributes not well supplied in the cities?

An attempt to explicitly relate preferences for living in the types of housing discussed earlier to community size preferences shows that there is very little relationship (Tremblay, Dillman and Van Liere, 1980). However, the desire to live in the most popular second choice, "buy a mobile home on a lot," increases substantially in relation to less densely populated county sizes. Also, people who want detached, single-family houses or own mobile homes on a lot are substantially more likely to want to live outside the city limits of communities (Dillman, 1979).

The early 1980s witnessed an abatement of the renewed population growth of rural areas--a change which became evident during the severe economic recession of 1980-82. It will be several years before one knows whether the nation is embarking on yet another major population trend or is simply going through a temporary adjustment.

At this time, the extent to which the desire for POS is a factor in population trends of the last century is not known. There is evidence to suggest that the desire for POS is not an anomaly that runs counter to other data on locational choices. The desire for POS may be a very important component of housing that is too often casually lumped together with features with which it is associated (i. e., the owned, detached, single-family dwelling). If so, more research is needed to ascertain the importance attached to POS.

RESEARCH NEEDS

The Need for Conceptual Clarity

The most important research need is to explicitly conceptualize what constitutes POS. In past research, outside space is often treated in a way that does not allow researchers to distinguish between what is public and what is private space. Often, this allows POS to be inadvertently treated as a neighborhood factor rather than an attribute of one's own housing. More than a decade ago, Michelson (1970) pointed out the fashionability of utilizing the cluster building concept in Reston, Virginia, and other places where open space under private control was exchanged for public open space. He noted that little was known about how people regard and use this space as compared to more common forms of POS. This research need still exists.

Once a clear conceptual delimitation of what constitutes POS is derived, then different kinds of questions to assess its importance can be developed and applied to new populations. This should allow researchers to note whether the research findings reported for Washington and Oregon are an anomaly of regional differences and the particular wording used in the questionnaires or whether the importance of POS can be confirmed elsewhere.

Why is Private Outside Space Important?

It is easy to build a case for why POS should be important. Margaret Mead (1966) suggests that the need for some sort of privacy, an identifiable special territory of one's own, is a basic human need. The quantity and kind of needed space varies greatly from one culture to another. In American culture, which places considerable importance on spatial distance in interpersonal relations, a demarcated area around one's house may fulfill a portion of that need in a culturally appropriate way.

Montgomery (1970) speaks of the need for mastery of the environment, privacy, replenishment, psychological stimulation, sense of place, and other needs. A private out-of-doors that responds to a gardener's tool and changes with the seasons would seem to help fulfill many of these needs in ways that the inside four walls of a home might not.

It is impossible to drive through most suburban residential areas without being struck by the amount of attention given to lawns and gardens. For the occupants of homes to not give at least some attention to their yard is as unthinkable as it would be to go into the street without wearing clothing. Working hard to make sure that grass grows and then working harder to make sure it is regularly cut may seem a little silly to a culturally detached observer. However, without doubt, one's social status is tied to this activity and strong social norms exist to make sure it happens.

Enormous amounts of money and time are devoted to the design and upkeep of outside space. A Washington State survey showed 90 percent or more of homes have flowers, trees, or shrubs in the space around them. About half of the households raise some vegetables

and two-thirds have some part of the POS fenced. Nearly half spend one-to-five hours per week in the summer months working in the POS and nearly 4 percent spend six or more hours per week on upkeep (Dillman and Dillman, 1977).

The presence of POS encourages a multitude of activities. It provides a place to sit, a place to cook food on charcoal grills and a place to keep pets. It is a place to entertain friends and a place for family activities. It is also a buffer to the outside that provides psychological and physical protection against intruders. For some adults, it is a place to which children can be banished for hours at a time in a socially acceptable way while parents seek psychological replenishment within the four walls. For still others, it is a disorganized storage area for recreational equipment and other paraphernalia.

It is important to learn what differences exist among various segments of the population regarding the need for and uses of POS. What kinds of people use POS and for what types of purposes? Informal observation suggests that whereas the desire for outside space may be nearly universal, the reasons for that desire are not. Designing POS to meet the needs of householders requires an understanding of those needs which researchers have not had. Among the questions that need to be asked is the trade-offs people are willing to make between inside and outside space.

CONCLUSION

Research on POS should be a high priority for housing researchers. It may help researchers understand the emerging population distribution pattern of the United States. It should also help in the design of houses that better meet the residents' needs. So long as there is only minimal understanding of POS, it seems likely that builders will continue to treat POS as what is left over after the building has been constructed, which more often than not is limited to what city codes require. To put it simply, not much is known about the POS that surrounds most dwellings. It is hoped that housing researchers will accept the challenge to study the importance of those spaces.

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Dillman and Dillman

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