Housing Research And The Concept Of Home

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Over the past few decades, there has been an increasing interest in the relationship of physical environments and psychological processes (Proshansky, Ittelson, & Rivlin, 1970, 1976). Indeed, the relatively new field of environmental psychology now draws upon a number of interesting findings and concepts which have emerged from research in institutional settings such as hospitals and residential care facilities as well as more informal settings such as playgrounds and home environments. In this article, it is argued that housing research can profit from the perspective offered by environmental psychology, leading to a better understanding of how housing environments can contribute to individual satisfaction, self-esteem, and well-being.

Housing environments have been studied for a variety of purposes. However, much of the research has been focused on structural and functional features of such environments without sufficient attention to the ways in which housing is psychologically important in people's lives. This criticism may indicate an underlying difference in orientation as much as anything else. For example, there appears to be a difference in orientation when comparing how people think of their own housing (as residents, as occupants, as users) and how others of us have tended to think about housing for "the public" (in our roles as planners, as developers, as "impartial" researchers, as policy makers). When urban renewal programs began the massive demolition of older housing stock to make way for new housing, many people were outraged because their own neighborhood—their home—was being called "a slum" in the media. Planners and decision makers were thinking about housing in impersonal and objective ways, while the neighborhood residents were thinking about housing in very personal and subjective ways. Similar differences in orientation continue today.

Thus it seems to be a reasonable goal to better understand how people think of and give meaning to their own housing. This does not mean that we should ignore substandard housing conditions and other more objective measures of housing quality. Rather, we should focus on people's *concepts* of the environment—beyond the study of strictly "physical" environments—so that we can understand what's important from an occupant's point of view.

Housing Research

Two general observations about housing research can give some context to this interest in

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people's conceptions of housing (and, more specifically, to the concept of 'home'). First, there has been an enduring interest in the relationship between housing and well-being, and secondly, there is a widespread need for a general conceptual framework for psychological issues relative to housing.

Many researchers have been interested in housing/well-being relationships, although their interests, measures, and conclusions have not been coordinated. For example, Riemer (1945) developed the idea of "maladjustment to the family home," relying on a primarily social definition of the home. A different kind of housing/well-being relationship has been emphasized by Newman's (1972) "defensible space" concept, and by Cooper (1974), who has described the ways in which housing acts as a symbol of self. Another perspective is offered by Angrist (1974), who looked for relationships among thirty established measures of well-being. Her research indicated five general housing/well-being relationships: poor livability, fear of crime, identification with the housing project, future aspirations, and social ties.

The need for a general conceptual framework concerning this wide range of housing-related issues is best expressed by Craik and Zube (1976), who developed a research agenda for perceived environmental quality. They point out the need for a taxonomy of perceived residential environments (how people think of their housing), and an analysis of "the concept of residential and institutional satisfaction, especially its dynamic properties and relation to psychological needs." And Ladd (1976) concluded that one step toward solving the problems of families and individuals in poor housing and in public housing may be to clairfy the psychological dimensions of housing, and particularly the legislative concept of *a decent home*.

Taken together, these two themes suggest that a focus on people's conceptions of their housing environment may lead to a broader understanding of the relationships between physical settings and psychological experience. Interestingly, the mere shift in emphasis from researchers' concepts ("housing") to popular conceptions ("home") indicates the potential richness of meaning, yet vagueness of definition which is likely to be encountered in this approach.

Concepts of 'Home'

The decision to conduct research concerning the concept of *home* was stimulated by other sources where the occupants' point of view was also emphasized. For example, Fried and Gleicher (1961) studied a neighborhood in Boston which was about to be torn down for urban renewal, and concluded that the common core of attachment to the local area was that it represented *home* for the people who lived there. Fried later used this same concept (in "Grieving for a lost home," 1963) to describe residents' dissatisfaction and depression after relocation to other areas. More recently, Angrist's (1974) review of literature relevant to housing and well-being pointed out that some low-income families seek public housing "as a permanent home." Beyond these social scence interests, it is also interesting to note the charge which was given to President Johnson's Committee on Urban Housing. It was to address

> the most pressing need of our society. That need is to promote a decent home and healthy surroundings for every American family now imprisoned in the squalor of the slums.

Within the context of Great Society goals, it is clear that *home* was used as a way of conceptualizing a desirable housing environment. *The implication of 'home' as an evaluative comment on one's housing makes it an especially important concept to understand.*

Home, of course, has many meanings. But although almost every individual grapples with the idea of home at some time in life, there is practically no consensus on what a home is and what role it plays in a person's life. Obviously, home is not simply a place to live. The idea of home em-

braces the satisfaction of a wide variety of personal concerns, aspirations, motivations, and values as well as personal well-being and lifestyle issues. For young adults, the decision to leave home often marks an important step toward establishing an adult identity. Ideas about home often have a strong influence on where a young couple with children will live, what kind of dwelling they will choose, how long they would like to stay, and what percentage of the household income and time schedule they will devote to achieving their aspirations about home. For older adults, the question of continuing to live in the family home once the children have gone is also a question about the feelings, memories, and dreams associated with home.

But what is a home? Is it a place? A set of relationships? A group of possessions? A feeling state? A quick glance at the dictionaries makes it apparent that home is a complex idea, possibly involving meanings as diverse as house, family, a habitat or region, as well as a center or base of operations and a refuge. And although famous sayings about home are often delightful and sometimes thought-provoking, these traditional sources raise more questions than they answer: Can't an apartment be home? Does home necessarily imply a family? How does the quality of housing stock relate to the idea of home? Does one have to own the residence for it to be home?

To pursue these issues, and to make a start toward a general conceptual framework for psychological issues relevant to housing, some empirical research seemed warranted. The following discussion summarizes a series of exploratory studies concerning the concept of *home*.

Research Methods and Results

Briefly, this research began asking about the meanings of home through open-ended questions, in both interviews and questionnaries. Eventally, more structured questions were used because people found it hard to discuss the complexity of their ideas about home. Thus the research strategy emphasized the development of clusters or *categories of similar meanings*. The primary research method has become a card sorting task, involving eighty-five different meanings of home (derived from preliminary interview and questionnaire data), each of which is displayed on a separate index card. In this method, people are asked to group together cards (meanings) which express the same kind of idea about home. The results from this method are then supplemented with evaluative ratings of each meaning, with interview data, and with comparative material from other literature in order to develop the best possible understanding of the categories of meaning.

The main findings of this research up to this point are highlighted in Table 1. These results show that home is a complex, multidimensional concept embracing ideas about family, social network, self identity, privacy, continuity, personalization, behavior, childhood home, and physical structure. This richness of meaning is especially gratifying since many people believe that home is such a personal idea that it virtually defies definition. Yet in these results the meanings are fairly clear and straightforward. Furthermore, they are interesting and thought provoking as this overview manages to span a range of housing-related issues from the physical structure and functional setting to more intangible ideas such as privacy, belonging, and "roots."

Interpretation of Results

Although there are many ways to use and interpret these findings, two conclusions are highlighted here. First, it is interesting that the people in this study distinguished two kinds of meanings from the variety of references to the physical environment: they separated the immediate, changeable, personalized environment (home as a personalized place) from the unchanging, larger-scale, structural environment (home as physical structure). This distinction implies that planning for housing should consider not only the structure (and its influence on behavior) but also how dwelling units can be furnished, and how we can im-

Table 1. Nine dimensions of meaning regarding concepts of home.

Home as intimate others is the primary category of meaning to emerge from this research. Exemplary ideas within this category include: (home as:) a sense of belonging, love and togetherness, "where someone cares for me," intense emotional experiences, warmth and security, mutual respect, and feeling welcome. The title to this category reflects its emphasis on family and close friends, and the feelings, affection, and the security of these relationships.

Home as social network is a second category of meaning, and it refers to a wider social context, including relationships among friends, neighbors, the community, local shopkeepers, and acquaintances in the neighborhood.

Home as self identity centers on the idea that what people call 'home' serves as a symbol of how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Thus, home may be thought to be a center of one's world, a reflection of one's ideas and values, and an important influence on being comfortable and happy with oneself.

Home as a place of privacy and refuge is a fourth category, articulated by ideas such as: getting away from outside pressures, a chance to be alone and not be bothered, a place of peace and rest, where you can do what you want, and be safe and secure.

Home as continuity describes a cluster of meanings which emphasize one's relationship to an environment over time. Ideas in this group range from home as a place you can return to (like a home town, or a family homestead) to other ideas about permanence, stability, and familiar surroundings.

Home as a personalized place articulates home as a concept which emerges from an active process of creating and controlling an environment. It includes ideas such as ownership, investing time and money in a place, and changing a place or decorating a place to reflect your ideas and tastes.

Home as a base of activity acknowledges more of a functional and behavioral orientation to home: it involves work and leisure, it is where one's day "starts" and "ends," and is often the locus of activities such as eating, sleeping, and recreation.

Home as childhood home refers to a kind of heritage, or "roots," which seems to be primarily related to where people grew up, and perhaps where their parents live.

Home as physical structure describes a rather impersonal view of a housing environment, yet this is the way that home is often referred to since it is tangible. It includes meanings such as a room, a building, an apartment, a house, a neighborhood, architectural design, being near the ground, and the amount of space in and around the dwelling.

prove the opportunities for personalization in dwellings.

A second conclusion from this research stems from the emergence of the *home as self identity* category of meaning. This category apparently confirms some of the evidence and speculation in Alvin Shorr's discussion of the relationship between housing and self-perception more than a decade ago. That is, a person can have a place of privacy, or relationships with others, or a base of activity in many circumstances, but home is a special setting in which one makes commitments to those relationships: a person is willing to say things like "I am a West Sider; I belong here; people here share my values and interests." Thus it is not only a *house* which can act as a symbol of self (an individual design or color, a lawn, a car in the driveway—see also Clare Cooper's work on this topic); but also other aspects of the housing environment (and what one calls *home*) which can be a source and symbol of self identity and self esteem. These other aspects may include the size and physical condition of the building, the appearance of the street block as well as the front door, and even the kind of people and community life that one finds in the neighborhood. Thus it would appear that an important prerequisite of *decent housing* is that it should enhance people's self esteem and enable them to identify with their immediate surroundings.

Conclusions and Future Research

As with any research, one must question wheather the results have general application or whether the results have general application or So far this research has focused primarily on middle income families with young children living in urban apartments, although it has also relied on some older and younger adults, as well as people living in suburban houses. Thus, it is hoped that these categories of meaning will prove to be sufficiently general for an overview, although some categories are probably more important than others, and different people probably evaluate these categories differently. A replication of this research would be tremendously valuable in testing whether or not these ideas and meanings apply as well to people living in houses. Such research could also pursue some of the preliminary variations in how people evaluate these categories, including sex and role differences, building type, family size, duration of residence in a particular place, and differences in ownership status.

To conclude this brief article, three conclusions are highlighted:

1. It is possible to construct an overview of the concept of *home*, showing that there exists a core of meaning which can be called upon to understand the meaning and significance of housing environments.

2. The concept of *home* involves social and psychological as well as physical meanings, suggesting that research which focuses only on housing design, or only on social factors, constitutes a short-sighted approach.

3. Although *home* is objectified as an environment, as a dwelling, a physical structure, it is concluded that a person's concept of *home* is better understood as a *relationship* to such an environment, rather than the environment itself. This conclusion reiterates the importance of the influence of the structure and layout on behavior, the importance of satsifactory and successful community life, management practices, and the ability of people to create a residence which reflects favorably on their self image and which can also serve as a place of privacy and refuge. In other research, it has been demonstrated again and again that each of these kinds of issues is permeated with physical design considerations, with issues of personal abilities and resources, and with social influences, simultaneously.

If we are to improve the quality of housing in this country, we must recognize the psychological issues related to housing and use them as a guide to improving the quality of life.

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