

Booknotes

Fish, Gertrude, ed., *The Story of Housing*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1979. 550 pages, \$15.95.

The Story of Housing, written as a textbook for students of housing and related fields, traces developments in American housing from the colonial period through most of the 1970s. Sponsored by the Federal National Mortgage Association (FNMA), it contains specialized chapters which deal with the secondary mortgage market, as well as other particular issues such as race and housing or housing in developing countries. For the most part, however, it is organized chronologically. Each chapter is usually devoted to a number of decades, and presents housing problems as seen at the time and the governmental policies undertaken for their solution.

The chronological presentation permits the presentation to be made in the context of population growth, urban development, and sociological change during the period under discussion. It gives the student a historical perspective on how concern for housing standards and the quality of housing for lower-income families has developed through the years, and how governmental involvement has changed and grown. The actors and political forces leading to enactment of legislations and the legislation itself are presented in detail. A chapter by the late staff director of the Senate Subcommittee on Housing, Carl Coan, describes the procedures through which housing bills must go to be adopted, an important piece of knowledge I do not recall ever seeing presented in other housing material. Thus, the book contains a wealth of information with which any student of housing, planning, or related disciplines should be familiar.

This is not, however, the kind of textbook which is purely factual, to be accepted unquestionably by the student. Each chapter is written by a different author, who brings his own views of the nature and causes of housing problems. There is need, that is, for a critical understanding of the material presented. If this encourages classroom discussion, it is, of course, all to the good.

The major deficiency, and one shared by most books dealing with housing, is the concentration on problems of lower-income and other families handicapped in obtaining housing, almost to the exclusion of the work of the industry in supplying acceptable housing to most American families. Attention is paid to problems associated with mortgage finance, particularly in the Great Depression, and the subsequent legal and institutional developments which resulted in our present mortgage finance system. But the financial arrangements have not been related to the physical processes and institutional organization of the industry. Missing is a description of the types of firms and workers that produce housing. Developments in technology are alluded to in passing, but one gets no sense of the great changes which have taken place in the way houses are built as distinct from the facilities they possess. Statistics on home ownership are given, but the reader is left wondering how, in the face of the problems so vividly described, the industry produced housing that two-thirds of American households could and did buy, and how the great majority of households are able to find units, either owner or rental, which are not overcrowded, not substandard by whatever definition of substandard is used, but are, in fact, satisfactory to them, according to those polls or censuses which have addressed the issue.

This is not to say, of course, that the problems presented should have been ignored. The horrendous experiences of immigrants in our central cities, particularly in the northeast, and the laggard response to their needs, are a part of our history which should be familiar to any student of housing. The current difficulties of lower-income and minority households in obtaining acceptable housing should be continually in our minds, and current programs of assistance critically examined with a view to their improvement. Students whose interest lies in housing are most probably going to be employed in developing or administering local or national governmental policies and programs for assistance, since governmental programs in our society usually attempt to correct deficiencies in private performance. They should know how programs developed, what they are now doing, and what they are failing to do.

It is to say, however, that such correction of deficiencies can best be accomplished by those with a knowledge of how the private industry functions, knowing not only where it falls short but also why it works as it does and why it falls short, not in ideological terms but in specifics of the construction industry functioning in the economy.

It was to be hoped, that is, that a book called *The Story of Housing* would give the whole story, not simply the parts of the story which warranted public — that is, governmental — attention. Further carping criticism could be made of some misprints, some tables which are incomplete. Despite these comments, however, it seems to me that what the book apparently set out to do, it has done well, giving both an overview of the development of policy and programs and the details of legislation which will be of great use to all students in the field. Its editor, Gerturde S. Fish, and the authors of the chapters are to be thanked for filling a gap in the current educational material.

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Note: The views in this paper are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Congressional Research Service or of the Library of Congress.

McKown, Cora F. and Walter L. Calbert, *Residential Energy Alternatives*, Center for Energy Research, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, 79409. 90 pages. Free.

This book, written for consumers and other housing decision makers including builders, bankers and architects, is one of the best overviews of energy and housing that I have seen. It is clearly written in non-technical language so that even a novice in the energy area can soon feel like an expert and have a good understanding of the hows and whys of many means of energy conservation. It is abundantly illustrated with large, clear line drawings. Topics include passive forms of energy conservation (site location, plantings, window locations), inexpensive collector systems, various types of active solar heating and cooling systems, and earth sheltered housing. Also included are special sections on non-conventional housing such as

manufactured housing, zomes, domes, and foam houses. Attention is given to interiors of energy conserving housing, highlighting types of floor, wall, and window coverings as well as furnishings and colors that can increase the function and livability of the homes.

Of special note is the section on home finance. Although people may not think of finance as related to design, the book aptly points out that if you can't get someone to finance it, you probably won't get the home. Thus, convincing the consumer is not sufficient. Those who control the money, establish the building and zoning codes and develop federal housing programs must also be convinced.

Most of the measures presented are currently used primarily in new construction. Although the principles presented would apply to retrofitting, the economic and technical problems of retrofitting are not discussed directly. Other topics not covered in great detail include insulation and evaluating the economics of energy saving alternatives. Given the scope and purpose of this book, I do not consider that these are serious omissions.

The main strength of this book is that it makes unfamiliar energy saving alternatives seem not very mysterious at all, and very possible for the average consumer. The clarity of the book is due in large part to the understanding and research on the part of the authors and students who prepared it. The references and notes include many sources to which the more advanced reader would want to turn.

I recommend this book as a source of information to those unfamiliar with energy alternatives, and as a general reference for those who may already have substantial knowledge in the field. The book is short enough to be read in an evening, and should serve a broad range of readers. My copy has already been on loan to a high school teacher developing a unit on energy, to a grad student just becoming interested in the area, and to a newspaper reporter doing a story on earth sheltered housing. It should be of interest to those who are staunch supporters of energy conserving measures as well as to those who do not yet think they are.

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