

## **Introduction**

### **HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

Ruth Brent

Humanity, it seems, has always struggled with providing adequate shelter for people. In Judeo-Christian literature, Adam and Eve sought shelter when they left the Garden of Eden. In 19th-century literature, civilization was linked to the dwelling of humankind: "The best security for civilization is the dwelling, and upon proper and becoming dwellings depends more than anything else the improvement of mankind" (Disraeli, 1874). For professionals in the field today, the strife and toil of sheltering in a civilized world continue in efforts to improve the dwellings of humankind regardless of age, handicap, race, and familial status (e.g., Fair Housing Act).

This Special Issue, entitled "Housing For People With Special Needs," considers housing problems as people problems and housing needs as people needs. Arguably, if we can better understand the special problems and needs of people within the larger social and cultural environment, we may come closer to our goal of providing high quality housing for them. Because of a personal commitment to better understand peoples' problems within the social and cultural context and to promote housing that is safe, functional, comfortable, and desirable for all people, this Special Issue was proposed.

The topic of housing for people with special needs is intrinsically a multidisciplinary concern. Therefore, a comprehensive call for papers was made to the following organizations: The Chronicle for Higher Education, The Gerontological Society of America, Andrus Gerontology Center, Environmental Design Research Association, American Home Economics Association, American Sociological Association, Interior Design Educators Council, Community Development Society, National Rehabilitation Association, The Human Factors Society, Equal Housing Opportunity Newsletter, and The American Association of Housing Educators. The result of this call for papers was an enthusiastic response from colleagues in related fields of housing, interior design, social work, sociology, family, aging, consumer economics, women's studies, and landscape architecture.

This Special Issue of *Housing and Society* is unique in another respect: It welcomed a broad range of empirical, theoretical, literature review, public policy, and position papers. Because of the overwhelming response to this issue, it has been expanded to include both Volume 18, Number 2 and Number 3 and has been organized thematically. There was a substantial response from authors contributing in the area of environmental gerontology. Therefore, Volume 18, Number 2 (Part I) is devoted to housing older adults. Volume 18, Number 3 (Part II) examines the housing of other diverse special populations such as migrant farmworkers, men and women recovering from substance abuse, Laotian refugees, children, and Native Americans.

The first group of papers in Part I relates to the housing of older adults and the social and cultural context. The lead paper by Daniel Detzner examines the meaning of home and possessions to public housing residents displaced by fire and helps us grasp the value of home and culture. It also sets the stage for rethinking homelessness for older adults as addressed by Rebecca Berman, Madelyn Iris, and Sharon Keigher. Next, the social and cultural contexts for women and black elderly are examined. Paul Luken and Suzanne Vaughn examine women living alone from a feminist perspective, and Stephen Moore and Baquar Husaini examine black elderly living in senior, high-rise apartments.

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The second group of papers addresses older adults' housing and health. The three papers by Deborah deLaski-Smith, Barbara Ames, Phyllis Barner, Marjorie Sebelius, and Marjorie Inman consider the stress involved when vulnerable, older adults struggle to live independently within the community rather than to reside in a nursing home. The special groups in these studies are elderly stroke survivors and their care-givers, frail elderly, and recent residents of a newly constructed apartment building designed specifically for older adults. The final paper in Volume 18, Number 2 by Sheila Baillie and Judith Foxworth plus the paper by JoAnn Shroyer, Margaret Dobbs, and J. Hutton raises concerns relating to housing for persons with Alzheimer's disease. Both papers suggest that the designed environment plays an important role in the quality of care for individuals with Alzheimer's disease.

The Special Issue manuscripts in Volume 18, Numbers 2 and 3 give us new insight into housing populations, help us to avoid stereotypes and stigmas, and help us to clarify peoples' problems and needs. The findings support the "environmental docility hypothesis" (Lawton, 1970) which maintains that the design of habitats is particularly critical for those who are most vulnerable in society. These research papers give further evidence that good housing design is for all people. Papers also support "universal considerations for design" (American Society of Interior Designers, 1989). There is a critical need for sensitivity and an informed approach to housing all people. These attributes are instrumental in expressing in a positive way the differences in gender, race, culture, age, physique, socio-economic status, health status, social roles, lifestyles, and familial status.

Despite our most noble efforts in imagining ideal housing for all people, the collected group of papers demonstrates that a simple, formula "tube sock house that fits all" is not possible. Study of the social and cultural tapestry suggests that as long as there are these individual differences among people there will be different housing problems and needs requiring individualized adaptation and focused attention to what is meaningful inhabitation for diverse people. Meanwhile, we will continue to struggle with providing adequate shelter for all people. Our hope is that as our knowledge increases, we can continue to improve dwellings for diverse people and to advance civilization for the assurance of a better future for humanity.

#### References

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