

HOUSING: OBJECT AND SUBJECT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

This is a synthesis of the depth and width of the housing field, of the perennial housing problems, and of solutions as undertaken in housing studies. Experiences and knowledge are brought to bear upon the aim of discerning paths of critical analysis and professional choices that students and scholars face. There are two fundamental standpoints here: *housing is the most conventional life support system, and housing studies are yet to become more scientific than managerial*. This position is argued in the Section 1 along with key problems requiring multidisciplinary housing studies.

In the Sections 2 and 3, the social and economic dimensions respectively of housing and housing policies are analyzed in order to single out problems whose solutions increase the mutual dependence among these and additional dimensions. Special attention is given to the increasing amount of factors interfering with planning, the extent to which politics dictates policies and scientific ways of pursuing housing related goals. Planning goes beyond designing and realizing plans. It amounts to compromising on well grounded but conflicting interests, among which well-fare and environmental ones are the most challenging. Therefore, criteria of evaluating policies prior to their implementation are specifically aimed at.

The methods and research strategies that are discussed concern the decision-making orientation of housing studies. Future shifts in scientific interests are signaled finally with a view on expected changes in housing in the context of globalization not only of economy but also of social pathologies and the need for sustainable development.

1. Necessity, Commodity, and Beyond

Housing is an extremely comprehensive and diverse phenomenon ranging from a more or less stable shelter to long lasting estates. What is meant by *house* varies according to the functions it is supposed to make possible, which is why both the physical and the functional features are equally definitory. Because no other phenomenon relates and integrates the human into nature more than housing, settlements are certainly the most essential material expression of the built environment. Although there are examples of productive activities that cause the occurrence of settlements, facilities for goods production and services are built in order to allow and sustain life in residential buildings, most of the times. This makes housing the widest spread, the most conventional and irreplaceable life support system. Hence, the importance of housing studies whose object is not simply the house but the housing phenomenon and the solving of housing problems.

A synthesis, as intended here, will inevitably echo the dilemma confronting the best specialists in the field, namely adopting a more theoretically strengthen position or putting faith in empirical-statistical data. At stake here is the way in which assessments are worked out, conclusions over the rightness or wrongness of a solution are drawn, and interventionist decisions are implemented.

Housing studies see this dilemma rather as a matter of gradually raising the problem-solving competence, and in as far as the disciplinary tradition can tell, the decision-making process is often ahead research, and changes are analyzed *post factum* rather than foreseen.

With a view on the need to increase the prediction capacity of housing studies, the results and thesis discussed here are based on long-standing trends and explanations rather than statistics limited to one or another specific case. Already part of the housing studies' tradition is the establishing of sensitive, expressive and testifiable indicators of the degree to which housing units satisfy four basic categories of necessities:

- *Biological* – dwellings are equipped to protect live against unfriendly nature and criminal activities, whereto health, access to infrastructure and security indicators are used;
- *Socio-psychological* – occupiers can function as social actors according to their age, needs for education/professional performance and recuperation, or relationships among them. Amongst expressive indicators hereto there are: isolated vs. collective space, spare room, extra facilities;
- *Cultural and spiritual* needs refer to recreation, cultural consumption, and creation. These needs may be identified through bundles of variables rather than quantitative indicators.

The actual indicators vary according to:

- (a) The local physical geography and weather patterns such as periodically flooded or earthquake recurrence;
- (b) The taking into account of the dwelling's and neighborhood's type of vicinity (industrial, air/land heavy traffic facilities, or residential);
- (c) The physical state of the buildings in the actual stock;
- (d) The gap between demand and supply. The critical value of one third of the demand which cannot be met by the supply is to be watched;
- (e) The specific problem that research and decision-making are asked to solve.

In a broader sense, housing satisfying the basic necessities is also a commodity. In a narrow sense, however, commodity begins with the occurrence of spare rooms, spacious rooms allowing for flexible adaptation to care and education, work and communication activities, extra facilities for storage, hobby, or interstice. The second level of equating house with commodity occurs when the house has an exchange value that people make use of in order to adapt their living conditions to the actual needs (typical of which is the exchange of a larger house for two smaller ones or vice versa). The third commodity level begins with the second house, which is used either for consumption or for financial gains. Here an important distinction exists between commodity for consumption and commodity for production or money generator as in the case when a part of the house is used as work place or rented for profit.

Both users and analysts cross the fine line separating the above-mentioned categories. What represents a commodity for a user at a certain period of time becomes a necessity in the next period. Analysts may use different standards of an indicator according to the research purposes they follow. That which is acceptable as minimum standard in some areas (squatter, slums) falls beneath the minimum standard in other areas. In other words, there are symbolic and social class values attached to housing, which go beyond the mere commodity. For that matter, house is used first of all for what it is (satisfying housing necessities cannot be postponed or accumulated for too long), and secondly, for what it represents (the handiness of housing commodity), no matter how much these two usages are contingent and simultaneous. Unveiling hidden needs such as north-south orientation, distance between neighboring windows, interior design or home-based study, creation and production are no longer considered as supplementing but complementing the complex of functions housing is expected to fulfil. Beyond the overlapping necessity and commodity, there is the need for self-identity and the sense of feeling *at home*.

1.1. Contexts of Housing Studies

Despite of having a distinctive and rather easily identifiable object, housing studies are rarely performed free of other disciplines' influence. It is not only the taking into account of factors endorsed and qualified as such by other disciplines, but also the involvement of bundles of variables, concepts and findings provided by the related disciplines. Quantitative methods of gathering and processing data, including advanced

modeling, constitute the main avenue through which housing studies acquired a broader framing. The house is characterized primarily by the inseparability of physical and functional performances, which means that the house determines the quality of daily life to a great extent. Unlike other physical-functional commodities, the house has a stable location, long usage duration, and is expensive. This makes it impossible for the housing phenomenon to be studied other than in a multidisciplinary framework. Not only are housing studies hosted by departments of sociology, economics, architecture, civil constructions, social geography, or demography, but also disciplines such as aesthetics, design, community and family psychology, education, work sociology or systems sciences began to contribute hereto increasingly.

As a result, housing studies are practised in broader and sometimes quite interdisciplinary contexts, two of which are considered to define the mainstream.

One such context is developed along the line of exchanges between *house* and *outer space*, whether the surrounding or far distanced space. Of concern here are urban and rural-urban studies, regional studies, social geography, economics of housing markets, services and infrastructure building, and ecology. Space allocation, (re)distribution and exploitation require this shift in housing studies. Typical of this is planning and systematization, the aim of which is to strike a balance between residential zones on the one hand, and each of the industrial, commercial and leisure-cultural zones, on the other. Hence, the focus on such research is on dependent versus self-sufficient neighborhoods, and interdependencies between large cities and smaller surrounding towns. A label for this orientation would be *land-use* focussed housing studies.

Processes accommodated in the house's inner space and its perimeter substantiate another broader context. Such processes are the demographic and intra-family cycles, professional and labor mobility, needs for security, privacy and self-expression, and ultimately the impact that housing has on the quality of labor force. Possibilities are explored with a view on improving living conditions that range from solutions to sanitation, to the more flexible redistribution of functions and utilities. Special needs fulfillment became an important category in itself dealing with the increasingly aging population, the disabled/incapacitated persons, or professionals functioning from their homes (based on communication-information technologies). Accordingly, the core of this orientation is given by the fact that, because house is a long-term-use commodity, a balance has to be struck between current affordability and (near) future needs. A great deal of housing studies is focused, therefore, on *residential unit(s)*.

However, one may well think of another order of contextualization, which nourishes the mainstream of the 'proper' and narrower housing studies. The multidisciplinary mode of conducting studies is less visible because of the internalization, or rather disciplinarisation of what has been borrowed over the last decades since housing studies became widely institutionalized. Nonetheless, the two main clusters of disciplines – sociology and economics – remain the two strongest standpoints from which calls for interdisciplinary integration are more successfully argued.

Studies that are more sociologically profiled place a heavy emphasis on the social, demographic and work-related processes which determine significant changes in

housing in terms of location, size, residential mobility and living conditions, as well as the social-demographic dynamics behind the continuous change in housing demand. This kind of studies are more than any other kind interested in addressing and seeking solutions for the disadvantaged segments of population, for those living in conditions that do not qualify as housing (homeless, displaced, or marginalized), or for so-called social housing.

A great deal of other studies are concerned with the economic and economic-political systems that allow or not for planning and regulations to interfere with, and sometimes to be part of the demand-supply mechanisms. As these mechanisms became increasingly complicated by policies established at central rather than local governmental agencies, on the one hand, and on the other, by financial markets, banks and speculation means, the economics-based housing studies are on the rise. Their contribution to the regulatory means in housing is more likely to be listened to and followed.

Between these latter contexts or profiles there is more tension than collaboration and integration. That which in sociological terms is called affordability, for instance, becomes prices, share holding or interest rate. Subsidies that were initially meant as a social means to facilitate the access to housing for low-income families are now analyzed and planned in economic terms only. Secondary analysis on the literature, however, allows for the conclusion to be drawn that the two orders of contextualization above are frequently intertwined. Empirically tested studies in particular contain assessments in which both the spatial and the socio-economic dimensions of the phenomenon are integrated.

1.2. Key Housing Problems

It is worth distinguishing two main aims of housing studies: to address housing problems and to solve them. But then, these are the same ends as those followed by each actor involved whether this is an occupant, an entrepreneur, social and political agencies, or intermediary systems. The question arises as to whether the solving competence of housing studies exceeds that of each actor or agency. The answer is affirmative for at least two good reasons – the formulation of problems in housing studies' terms underlines their relatedness (the correlation between a particular problem and other problems), and solutions are checked against their potential for generating other problems. A third reason may be that, unlike other solving agencies, housing studies is the only one which offers the whole picture of a housing system. Because of this, housing studies became, since the early 1950s, an actor, if not an agency in the housing system, though it lacks the decision-making means that are available to other agencies. It is, therefore, worthwhile distinguishing between managerial recurrent obstacles which are handled and overcome through current decision-making, and problems that only the specialized discipline can properly identify, define and issue a solution thereto.

The benefit of taking seriously this view is that not every managerial problem is a scientific one, but bad management generates many of the long-lasting problems, and they occur in clusters or in chains very difficult to handle as such. As a result, a system

rather than an inventory of key housing problems seem to be the appropriate approach. This rationale holds when the ultimate generator of problems is at issue. Namely, because any house hosts life in all its complexity, housing consists of a multiplicity of possible objectives and, accordingly, a wide range of ways available of meeting them. One deep-running implication hereof is that the potential for conflict between different housing and housing related interests is large. Most of the conflicts become apparent under the form of dilemmas faced by policies that are forced to correct or reverse (side-)effects of previously implemented policies (see Section 3).

In studies concerned with key housing problems the interest goes to the roots of conflicts and their pre-conflict forms of manifestation. As housing is extremely costly compared with other commodities (in terms of time and resources required to construct a house), the relation between *affordability and real needs* generates most of those housing problems that have the potential of initiating chains of problems. The two largest critical ways in which this relationship manifests itself are the demand-supply ratio and the imbalance between public and private sector. Cross cutting this dichotomy, there is the difference between solutions that are temporary versus long-term, local versus regional, and markets that are free versus regulated. In addition, the framework hereby is set by past and present policies, all of which fail to be as comprehensive as the housing system itself is. The housing system dynamics becomes more complex with the growing intermediary subsystems meant to satisfy the demand in a way that has to be financially responsible, socially controllable and economically feasible. This gives rise to the problem of planning. No housing problem – individual or societal – can be dealt with unless plans are carried out, and no proper planning can be restricted to a single dimension of housing, no matter how critical this is. Planning, therefore, is the very mechanism of solving and preventing problems.

2. The Social and Sociological Emphasis

By the end of the 19th century, the view has been adopted that housing is in fact a social right. See, for example, the 1859 building code of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Public Health Act adopted in Great Britain in 1848, or the Swedish Health Code introduced in 1874. This right was gradually reinforced with constitutional rights of the occupants (such as protection against unlawful transactions, safety standards, or privacy), on the one hand, and consolidated, on the other hand, with accountability rules and punitive measures against those violating what became '*a complex of social, civil and basic human rights*'. (The United States' Housing Act of 1949 sets the overall scope for "a decent home and a suitable living environment for all Americans".)

The translation of a complex of necessities into a complex of rights is in fact a strong way of codifying the ultimate social nature of any housing system, as well as maintaining the sociological standpoint of evaluating housing policies. As this standpoint seems to have been overlooked more recently, it is worth underlining the deeper importance of the built environment sociology.

The social emphasis is critical to the extent to which a study aims at explaining housing in relation to sociologically relevant categories. Indicators describing living conditions are merely orienting and sometimes misleading quantities if they are not calculated for each precisely defined social category. There are two important consequences of this

thesis. First, the sociologically construed variables are taken to be independent, and conclusions are drawn as to whether this differentiation is underwriting social differentiation or not. This does not come down to reading differently the same double-entrance table, but to select and construe variables that are consistent with proven social tendencies and the well-argued need to sustain or counter these tendencies. An example is the conclusion stating that demand undergoes significant qualitative changes as a result of construing variables that express the ratio of the 'special needs demand' in the 'total demand'. The same holds for the question of whether squatter upgrading is socially feasible or, in fact, is more socially costly than the reconstruction of the area at issue according to socially acceptable standards.

In general, formulating housing problems in sociological terms and identifying the affected social segments settles the principle that a social group can be neither studied or planned in disregard of another, nor actions taken in disregard of their social value. Sociologists, more than economists, are part-time activists, too.

The social dimension of housing increases in importance and dominates other dimensions as one looks at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. For that matter, social systems characterized by poverty are more likely to run a socially set housing agenda and sociologically led housing studies.

A central theme is the estimation of the housing demand at the low-income strata (including social security for unemployed), and housing social services like bed-and-breakfast accommodations run by local government, private organizations or social institutions. In these cases, the social emphasis of such programs is more visible, but programs aiming at containing social housing problems such as the demand-side subsidy in the public sector are, too, driven by social concerns.

For a large part, social services and social programs are intertwined, and so is the planning and running of social services in the context of all the housing services that a system develops.

It is rightly said that a housing system is as good as its services' subsystem is. Of particular interest are services such as: insurance companies (state-run, private, or cooperative), renting and buying intermediaries, maintenance and renewal, construction and design, and, above all, information and administration or management. In developing an adequate housing services' subsystem, the social and the economical aspects overlap largely, but it is the sociological analysis which is qualified and expected to identify mismanagement and malfunction, and whether there are social segments that are systematically disadvantaged.

As economic efficiency may be argued differently by one or another interest group, the social values and concerns are in a better position to add the decisive argument as to the less socially costly planning. There are, however, conditions attached. The society has to be liberal enough so as for the social values to have a say over mere profit, and the built environment sociology has to come with precise and well-grounded scientific findings. Good studies do not average out social segments of population in need, nor the type of housing they require.

2.1. The Education-Employment-Housing Correlation

There is ample statistical evidence that lower education/skills means lower employment and higher unemployment risks, which means poor housing, if any. Likewise, children born and grown in overcrowded, insalubrious houses are likely to perform poorly at school, to abandon school early, or to be unable to acquire high education. Health and social participation (which takes the more specific form of access to information) are also direct effects of bad housing. The education-employment-housing correlation remains valid in somewhat better off walks of life, and becomes insignificant amongst the richest. In general terms, housing dynamics is usually thought to be caused by changes in the labor market (in terms of demand for, and supply with specific groups of professions), and by the middle-class fragmentation into: producers scaled by their contribution to the GDP, as well as managerial/executive, highly specialized professionals, or services providers.

This correlation gains full explanatory consistency when it is worked out in the context of the current policy. There are studies concluding that, for example, as higher education leads to ownership, then a specific policy targeting tenure appears as inconsistent or incompatible with deregulation promoting the free market.

The main reason why the education-employment-housing correlation is not always straightforward and may deliver inconclusive results is that cultural, ethnic and human resources patterns of behavior interfere with housing, sometimes in a determining way. Efficiency, therefore, should be studied not only at the provider's and planner's side, but at the occupants' side as well. Efficient intra-zoning, furniture and equipment arrangements, organization of incompatible activities requires programs of education, on short term. On long-term, planners should accommodate the sociological point according to which the massive construction of one-, or two-bed rooms flats for the working class leads inevitably to over-crowdedness and hardship in every aspect of daily life.

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Biographical Sketch

M. Lunca, Ph.D is senior researcher, Fellow ISOR Utrecht University (during a leave), full member WOSC, and full member ISA, Dep. Sociocybernetics. Dr. Lunca's main field of research is the epistemology and methodology of inter/transdisciplinary problem solving applied to such topics as large-scale social research programs, theory of intervention for scientific management, interdisciplinarization as a programmed knowledge generation and transfer, computational complexity of solving complex problems, theory of information in ICT settings, and formal languages for cross-disciplinary fundamental research. Dr. Lunca's publications include several books and papers