

New Households New Housing

Edited by

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Van Nostrand Reinhold
New York

To Dorothea Seelye Franck and Lois Boland

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 89-5351
ISBN 0-442-22486-9

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Printed in the United States of America

Designed by East End Graphics

Van Nostrand Reinhold
115 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10003

Van Nostrand Reinhold International Company Limited
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE, England

Van Nostrand Reinhold
480 La Trobe Street
Melbourne, Victoria 3000, Australia

Nelson Canada
1120 Birchmount Road
Scarborough, Ontario M1K 5G4, Canada

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

New households, new housing.

Includes index.

1. Shared housing. 2. Single parents—Housing
3. Single people—Housing. I. Franck, Karen A.

II. Ahrentzen, Sherry.

HD7287.85.N48 1990 363 5'9 89-5351

ISBN 0-442-22486-9

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Foreword

In 1949 the U.S. Congress passed the Urban Renewal Act. As readers of this book will know, that landmark legislation promised a decent, safe, and sanitary dwelling for every American. Although many of us do live in better housing now than when the Act was passed, the number of Americans who experience problems with housing quality or cost or both has changed very little. Moreover a grave new problem has arisen in recent years: widespread homelessness. This most serious form of housing deprivation—the negative side of urban revitalization—continues to show steady growth.

Not only has the number of households needing decent homes increased, but also the composition of these households has changed and their incomes relative to housing costs have declined. As we will learn in this volume, single parents with dependent children now represent nearly 20 percent of all U.S. family households. Most of these single parents are women, and most have low incomes. Another fast-growing group is single individuals, who now constitute nearly a quarter of those seeking housing. In fact only one household in ten today consists of an employed father, a homemaker mother, and children. While no demographic projections suggest significant changes, this minority remains the focus of public and private housing efforts.

This timely book describes the growing number of American households that do not fit the conventional family mold. Despite their numbers—which now approach half of all those seeking shelter—they are still commonly referred to as nontraditional households. This book elevates them to the central place they deserve in the housing debate and brings together in a single place the most successful experiments and thoughtful proposals regarding dwellings appropriate to their varied needs.

At the same time this book is concerned with new forms of dwelling for those households that, while still of conventional structure, seek closer social contact or increased amenity through sharing and cooperation. It describes a continuum of housing types, differentiated in terms of size, cost, and degree of self-containment—ranging from SRO units in reconditioned hotels in New York to residential clusters in Scandinavia designed to lighten the burden on working parents.

Karen Franck and Sherry Ahrentzen have addressed their book to that disparate group we call *housers*—the public officials, architects, planners, and developers who shape the nation's housing policies and production. Although this group has been a powerful collective force for more than a generation, in recent years dissension over building types (high-rises versus low-rises), locational strategies (revitalizing the slums versus integrating the suburbs), and financing (subsidies to buildings versus subsidies to households) has reduced its influence, permitting conservatives to dismantle the structure of public support for housing. This book, by providing a clear framework for rethinking American housing needs, will help reforge the consensus that effective housing action requires. By challenging housers' traditional assumptions, it will shift the agenda toward increased pluralism and user control.

Housing as a responsibility of government and a specific concern of architects and planners is a matter not much more than a century old: a frequently cited point of origin is the London County Council's decision to build its first low-income flats around 1890. Although there were isolated, private experiments in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it took the Great Depression of the 1930s to force government housing action here. In that time of

national crisis, leading housers formulated a now-familiar program: lowered densities, increased light and air, and affordable apartments for nuclear families temporarily deprived of their birthright—a house with a yard of its own. These goals for individuals and dwellings were never seriously questioned: those as yet unmarried were destined to marry and have children; single parenthood was surely a temporary condition; and apartments (or any other form of collective living) were merely stepping stones on the way to family houses.

We now see that this conception of the housing task contains a number of dangerous myths. First, it accepts only one choice of marital status. Except for the young, failure to establish a conventional family is seen as a form of deviance justifying housing deprivation. But as we have seen, half of all households today are “nontraditional.” Most remain so for long periods; many remain so for life.

Second, this conception assumes a perpetually rising economic tide that will float all ships into the desired port: a private home. In fact, the real incomes of young couples with children—the backbone of the single-family house market—have declined by nearly a quarter since 1980. Is it ambition or lack of housing choices that accounts for the fact that more than half of the women with children today go to work? What more affordable housing alternatives are there for them or for the still less-affluent single parents and young people leaving school?

Third, this conception is built on the belief that ours is and must remain a heartless world and that housing privacy is the appropriate response. The purpose of housing, it is implicitly argued, is to generate protective islands, each complete in regard to human complement and equipment. In his first book Lewis Mumford dubbed this the “Myth of the Country House.” Tracing its origins and impact to the Renaissance villa surrounded by pleasure gardens and private hunting grounds, Mumford saw clearly that the proliferation of this myth diminished concern for the public realm. He wrote:

It does not matter very much whether [it] is an estate on Long Island or a cottage in Montclair . . . the Country House today tries to make up by an abundance of physical goods for all that has been lost through its divorce from the underlying community; more than ever it attempts to be self-sufficient within the limits of suburbia.

As the common possessions of the community dwindle, the private possessions of individuals are multiplied; and at last, there remains no other community than a multitude of anarchic individuals, each of whom is doing his best to create for himself a Country House.

This passage appears in *The Story of Utopias*. It was Mumford's point that the modern, private anti-utopia of the country house, even if it were feasible for an entire society and not just for its richest members, is destructive of human potential. In proper utopian fashion he makes no bones about his preference for active participation over passive enjoyment, creation over consumption, and a good measure of community over the extremes of privacy we Americans have learned to require.

In the Introduction Sherry Ahrentzen assures us that this book is not concerned with utopia, but rather with the practical and economic advantages of new housing for new households. Like good utopians, however, the editors see things whole—balancing the political, financial, administrative, and architectural aspects of housing. Like serious utopians they celebrate those who have persevered to find solutions to problems others ignored or wished away. Like generous utopians they argue the primacy of participation, creativity, and community. Their book—itsself a collective effort—describes the kinds of housing that can satisfy these needs. It deserves close attention.

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Introduction

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This book is for architects, planners, developers, and others who are concerned with designing and developing housing for nontraditional households. The contributors to this book describe the physical design, development process, social characteristics, and management approaches of over 50 cases of contemporary and historical housing in the United States, Canada, and Europe. These buildings were designed specifically for those individuals and families whose needs have not been well accommodated by conventional single-family houses and apartments. Their housing needs are numerous and diverse: affordability and security, accessible social and support services, minimal housekeeping and maintenance responsibilities, convenient child-care services, ample opportunity to be with other residents, and other housing amenities that enhance daily life. This text provides information on the needs of particular households and how those needs have been addressed in specific housing cases.

While we use the word *new* in the title of this book, the diverse household compositions of today continue demographic trends that began in the past century and even earlier. Many of the household types described here are not new but rather have been unrecognized in recent years or are transformations of earlier types. Thus the term *new* is used with the understanding that what is now seen as new may have existed previously but now merits "renewed" attention and consideration from architects, planners, and developers, as well as from students, faculty, and residents themselves.

NEW HOUSEHOLDS

The image in the United States of the traditional family—a married couple with young children, with an employed husband and a homemaker wife—that characterized the 1950s and 1960s does not match today's demographic realities. Other types account for nearly 79 percent of the households created since 1980, whereas the traditional married-couple family accounts for only 21 percent (United States Bureau of Census 1985). The fastest-growing household type is the single person living alone; persons living alone comprise 24 percent of all households. Single-parent families account for 12 percent. America's 86.8 million households are still dominated by the 50.3 million families maintained by married couples. Yet even within the conjugal family, lifestyle changes have occurred. Over 60 percent of married women with dependent children are in the paid labor force, compared to 18 percent in 1950. Nearly 53 percent of married women with children under 6 years of age are employed (Oxford Analytica 1986). Only 10 percent of households consist of an employed father, a homemaker mother, and children younger than 18.

In addition to these changes, the financial prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s has dissipated for many American households. Only one-quarter of Americans age 15 and older have a personal income of \$20,000 or more per year, while one-half earn less than \$10,000 a year (Russell 1987). During the past decade the income distribution of American households has reflected less a nor-

mal, or bell-shaped, distribution and more a skewed distribution with the peak at the low-income end (Rose 1986).

NEW HOUSING

As the traditional economic "middle class" begins to shrink and household composition becomes more diverse, housing providers must develop new housing forms to accommodate these changes. The majority of housing built today consists of two standard types: the single-family house and the medium-density, multiunit building or housing complex. But at other times in history, societies provided a number of different types of housing to accommodate their varied populations. For example, in medieval times, although many peasant houses were designed for conjugal families, some were designed for single women and others for extended families with a large number of children and relatives. Since it was common for transient single men to roam from town to town, roofed shelters were provided for these vagabonds as well as for expelled university students, elderly men and women, and servants not lodged in their masters' homes. Castles, palaces, large urban hotels, university dormitories, and monasteries were among those residences that provided communal living models. Variety of population as well as housing was certainly a character of the medieval urban fabric (Barthelemy and Contamin 1988).

But we do not have to go as far back as the Middle Ages to witness a variety of housing types being provided for a diverse population. Developed during World War II, Vanport City in Oregon, which Hayden (1984) describes, had affordable housing for single persons, single-parent families, conjugal families with children, and nonfamily households. Several day-care centers were scattered throughout the development. Even before the war there were alternative housing types, as well as proposals for more. Ford (1936), for instance, after an assessment of the 1930 Census of New York City, proposed a comprehensive policy that would promote new housing types—such as special housing for working mothers with young children, residences for

older women, and lodging houses with a mix of social facilities for the poor—and would increase the existing stock of housekeeping apartments for single women and nonfamily groups.

Nevertheless, the residential landscape we inhabit today is largely the product of post-World War II prosperity and values. In the 1950s the single-family house was built and marketed in cities, suburbs, and towns across the country. While the single-family house effectively answers a number of needs for many Americans—space, sanitation, security, status, and privacy—today's demographics and household economics call into question the relevance of these cultural values, and in particular the means of achieving them, for *all* households. There is a new recognition and acceptance of the pluralistic character of American society. Television, the great portrayer of American normative, and idealized, family life, reveals an eclectic array of households: for several years two single-parent families shared a residence in "Kate & Allie"; four older women share a home in "The Golden Girls"; a widower and his two male friends raise three children in "Full House"; and "thirtysomething" has only one traditional family featured among a number of separated parents and singles.

This book presents a number of examples of alternative forms of housing that were developed to address the needs of those households whose daily lives are not sufficiently accommodated by conventional housing. It is true that no marketing survey has yet revealed a high demand for housing with features such as on-site day care or shared dining areas. However, such housing innovations are so rare in the United States that people would be unable to express a positive opinion of them since they have never seen or experienced such housing. We want to present these innovations to designers, developers, housing officials, and households who have never considered alternative forms of housing and to those who have thought of them in the abstract but have not been aware that such housing now exists.

We certainly are not the first to expound and promote this perspective. A number of architectural and social critics have recently challenged the ubiquity of the single-family house: Dolores Hayden (1984), for example, maintains that today

the detached suburban house is generally too expensive for many households. In addition, the diverse character and needs of today's household population cannot be met by a single standard form that lacks flexibility and variety. She calls for redesigning the American dream.

NEW HOUSEHOLDS, NEW HOUSING

Actions to provide more housing options are already being taken by a number of architects and legislators. And many residents are directing their own efforts toward establishing new forms of housing. Across the country, homeowners are building accessory apartments and echo houses, many times illegally. These small attached (accessory) and detached (echo) units typically are occupied by relatives of the people who live in the main, larger home. Between 1970 and 1980, the Census Bureau estimates that 2.5 million conversions of single-family houses were made to create accessory apartments (Hare 1981). Shared housing is another grassroots movement reflecting a desire for new housing options. Sharing a home is no longer seen as suitable for only those in unstable living situations. Today there are over 400 shared housing programs nationwide that match nonrelated persons who wish to share one residence.

The New American House competition held in 1984 reflects the architecture community's acknowledgment of and concern for developing new housing forms for new household types. In universities studio design projects have included housing for single parents and for collective living arrangements. In 1987 the American Institute of Architects sponsored a student design competition for housing for the homeless.

State and federal legislation is starting to pave the way for new types of housing to be built (Leavitt 1988). California's proposed Family Housing Demonstration Program will offer incentives to private developers to build multiunit rental or cooperative housing with job-training and child-care services. Joseph Kennedy II has introduced into the House of Representatives the Community Housing Partnership Act, which provides, in part, \$500 million in grants to subsidize the development of affordable rental hous-

ing and homeownership. Another proposed federal legislation package would provide \$10 billion for building affordable housing with child-care and job-training services and for strengthening existing public housing.

But the most encouraging signs of change are the subject of this text—the numerous efforts in the United States and elsewhere to build housing to accommodate nontraditional households. This book focuses on housing designed for shared and collective living, for single-parent families, and for low-income single people. Accordingly the book is divided into three sections: the first on collective housing, the second on housing for single-parent households, and the third on single room occupancy housing. Each section begins with an overview of the types of households and housing discussed in that section, includes descriptions of a few historical and contemporary cases of such housing, and provides a short summary of the content of the chapters in that section.

Most of the cases described in these chapters have been built or are presently under construction. The few proposed but unbuilt projects were nonetheless designed to be built. Funding sources for construction and operation are diverse and include government agencies, non-profit organizations, private developers, financial institutions, private donors, and residents themselves. Often a complex mixture of private financing and public subsidy made a project possible.

There are several themes that recur throughout the book. One is the integration of different types of households. Despite the book's division into three sections, many of the contributors describe and advocate housing that integrates different types of households, including single-parent families with single persons and couples, the elderly with younger people, and individuals with physical or mental handicaps or other vulnerabilities with more able-bodied residents. Housing designed to meet the needs of particular kinds of households, while also accommodating diversity, allows for a level of exchange and support between residents that is a benefit to all.

Another theme is the integration of housing with other uses, one being social services. On-site child care is strongly advocated in housing

for single parents and in some collective housing communities. Spaces for counseling, job training, or other support services are provided in some single-parent housing and in some single room occupancy housing. Locating housing in proximity to social services is another solution, as is locating it close to public transit stations or bus stops. In a few cases, living space is integrated with work space; in other cases, workshops or photography studios are incorporated into the housing. And the integration of commercial spaces occurs in some single room occupancy housing as well as in housing for single parents. In many projects described in this book, housing is designed with a recognition of the interrelationship of the many activities of daily life and with a desire to see those interconnections enhanced by housing design.

Another common theme is the participation of residents in the planning, design, and management of their homes. This may mean managing the entry desk in a single room occupancy hotel or fully participating in all aspects of housing management and maintenance. Participation also may mean that residents initiate a housing project and direct its design and financing, or residents may participate in the construction. As demonstrated in many chapters, residents are empowered by their participation in the creation and ongoing management of their homes.

A particularly pervasive theme is the accommodation and balance of privacy and sharing. The dialectics between privacy and community, or sharing, is a particularly salient topic for housing in general (e.g., Chermayeff and Alexander 1963; Altman and Gauvain 1981). But for the households and housing described here, sharing is a much more central and prevalent concern than in standard housing. And sharing takes many forms. The type of shared relationship varies considerably among the housing developments described. Sharing can be simply co-presence: occupying the same room or space without any spoken acknowledgment of the other's presence. The necessity of this more passive form of sharing among residents must be recognized and accepted by architects and housing sponsors. As is frequently seen in the cases of shared housing, simply knowing that others are around and can

be found in times of emergency can enhance residents' feelings of security.

Sharing also can display an affiliative nature. Residents in Danish cohousing, for instance, use the communal dining room to sit and chat with neighbors as well as to hold occasional celebrations. And sharing also can have an instrumental aspect: the maintenance and nurturance of one's home and household can benefit from sharing resources, activities, and space with other residents. Such sharing can save money, time, and effort for individual residents while enhancing their quality of life. On-site child care in housing for single parents or a wood-working shop in a Danish cohousing community contributes to the ease and enjoyment of everyday life.

Achieving the delicate balance between privacy and sharing demands that housing sponsors and architects understand the type of sharing that is to occur and the reasons for it. A "shared" space can take on different forms depending on the type of sharing and the desired balance with privacy. Many residents may cook their own separate meals in a shared kitchen without coordinating their efforts with one another, as occurs among some single room occupancy residents; or a small group of residents may talk and socialize as they work as a team, preparing a dinner in a community kitchen for a large group of families, as happens in the cohousing communities in Denmark. In both cases residents later seek privacy: eating in their own rooms, as in SRO housing, or preparing tomorrow's breakfast in one's private kitchen, as in Danish cohousing. Providing options for the appropriate level and type of sharing and balancing these with sufficient options for household privacy has been the task of the many architects and sponsors of the housing described in this book.

Although we recognize and document the empirical fact of demographic diversity and financial distress among many households today, we realize that demographics and financial need alone do not dictate housing design and practice. Urban form ultimately rests on the visions, values, choices, and interests of powerful groups. We hope to show those persons and organizations responsible for providing and building housing that alternative types of housing can,

and do, exist in concert with more conventional housing. We also hope that the cases presented here encourage individuals and families to place demands on the building professions and financial institutions to provide a more diverse and flexible housing stock. With a greater variety of housing options available, residents will no longer have to resign themselves to accepting a single standard type of house but will be able to choose and even create for themselves more suitable, and meaningful, places to live.

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