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INTRODUCTION

Despite the advent of women's liberation in the 1970s, women's views continue to be ignored in a crucial area influencing social life: the planning of our cities. Whether or not male town planners have deliberately excluded women from having a say in the development of the physical infrastructure of society, or merely failed to recognise the potential women might have for making a positive contribution to the planning of our cities and social spaces, our cities and those who live in them (male and female) have suffered the consequences.

Women have traditionally been the 'carers' in society – those who attend to the needs of the young, the frail, the aged, the poor. This remains substantially true even in the context of the increasing role of women in the paid workforce. As well as their tacit knowledge of family and community needs acquired through their traditional caring role, in recent years women have acquired explicit knowledge through their participation in higher education and their involvement in professions, trades and delivery of community services. Yet, in the designing of housing and urban environments, the expertise arising from this combination of tacit and explicit knowledge has been largely ignored, resulting in houses and urban environments which alienate and divide.

CHAPTER 12

MEN SHOULDN'T DECIDE EVERYTHING

WOMEN AND THE PUBLIC REALM MARDIE TOWNSEND
Having somewhere pleasant to live is important to all of us. But finding housing that meets our needs is often difficult. Family circumstances change, our incomes may fluctuate, neighbourhoods may become more or less congenial. Often we think of housing in terms of the physical structure: houses, roads, schools, shops and so on, yet what makes somewhere pleasant to live is often less tangible: the support of friends and neighbours in good times and bad, recognising familiar faces on the street and in the park, an open view at the end of the street, and feeling safe. Getting this mix of physical and social elements ‘right’ is a challenge that can be met only if city, town and country planners listen to the voices of local communities.1

The importance of housing for health and well-being was recognised in Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, which states:

everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services.2

However, our expectations of housing that is ‘adequate for . . . health and wellbeing’ have changed since the Declaration on Human Rights was penned. For many families, the idea of children sharing a room is anathema, and the thought of having to cope with just one bathroom is incomprehensible.

Changes have also occurred in the ways household members perceive and relate to their local community. In the past, people expected to be part of a community to which they would feel a sense of belonging, and which would meet their needs for services and social engagement. Like the right to housing, the sense of community and the opportunity for people to have their needs for services and social engagement largely met within their own community have been (until recently) taken for granted by many people. Recently, however, for many, the picture of neighbourhoods filled with people who know and care for one another has been replaced by the reality of dormitory suburbs where people no longer know their neighbours, let alone fulfil a mutual support role.

Despite major changes in the factors influencing household and community life, the legacy of the past remains with us: in the physical infrastructure which surrounds us; and in the psychosocial paradigms which influence our expectations and our planning. The need to take account of changes in demographic, economic, environmental, technological, political and social aspects of modern life, at the same time as recognising the constraints and opportunities posed by the physical and psychosocial legacies of the past, creates a challenge for urban designers, planners, developers and policy-makers.

Of particular relevance in this situation are the outcomes of two studies exploring women’s views on housing and neighbourhoods for the future: an initial project undertaken in the UK in 1999,3 and a follow-up study completed in 2001.4 The studies were designed to explore women’s aspirations for housing and neighbourhoods by the year 2020, and to benchmark against those aspirations in assessing a particular urban extension proposal.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO URBAN DESIGN

Jonathan Porritt, in his Foreword to the report on the follow-up study, said:

It is quite astonishing how rarely developers stop to ask . . . questions about whether or not people will want to live there? before starting work on the blueprints. And the construction industry as a whole has been slow to learn from other sectors that have already discovered the real value of consulting their customers, over and above a basic market appraisal of their products.5

Women in particular have come to expect that their needs and views will be, to a large extent, overlooked, ignored or misinterpreted by designers and developers. Wendy Saunders observes that ‘it is only within the past 15 to 20 years . . .’
years... that British town planning has acknowledged its failure to consider women’s position in the production and consumption of urban planning and design. Yet, despite recognition of this problem, male-orientated perceptions and expectations continue to dominate the conceptualisation of space and place, including within the planning and design professions.

Sheila Scraton and Beccy Watson note: ‘Traditionally, urban geography located men in the public city spaces and women in the private, domestic spaces, usually on the outskirts or in suburbs. However, in the context of recent economic and social changes, including women’s increased participation in the workforce, such a dichotomy is no longer appropriate.’ Day notes that ‘[the] assumption that women will stay home in the suburbs, caring for children and home’ and the ‘separation of home from jobs’ would be changed. ‘Women’s particular housing needs, such as adequate space, play areas for children, access to shopping and transportation, and security, are rarely taken into consideration in the design of urban structures and neighbourhoods.’

Why is this so? The feminist movement has been influential since the early 1970s, yet still urban planners do not take adequate heed of the voices of women when planning our cities. Could this be because men as urban planners are not only clinging to past realities and outdated paradigms of the roles of men and women in society, but also that women see spaces and places differently from men? Evidence from a recent Australian study indicates that there are gender-related differences in the ways people interact within social spaces. It seems likely that there may be corresponding gender-related differences in perceptions of social spaces. Lefebvre notes that ‘social space is neither object nor subject, but appears as the intangible outcome of history, society and culture’. In light of the differences between the social and cultural experiences of women and men over the past century, it would not be surprising if there were gender differences in perceptions of social spaces.

Catherine Hakim proposes another explanation for the failure of these in authority to listen to the views of women. She says: “The main reason is that they want to treat women as a single-issue constituency.”

Whatever the cause, the reality of the mismatch between the views of so-called ‘ordinary women’ and the views of planning and urban design ‘experts’ was plainly evident in the first of the ‘Women and Housing Towards 2020’ studies. Interestingly, in the ‘Women and Housing Towards 2020’ studies, diversity of views within the group has been seen as a strength rather than a problem. While there were diverse views expressed, the participants demonstrated an amazing capacity to come to a consensus view which reflected the experiences of them all.

PUTTING WOMEN’S VIEWS ON THE DESIGN AND PLANNING AGENDA

A review of the literature and consultations with ‘experts’ as part of the first of the ‘Women and Housing Towards 2020’ studies indicated two main drivers for future change in respect of housing: the rapid development of information and communications technology, and the change in social structures related to increased life expectancy and changes in household size and composition, marriage and divorce rates.

Most ‘experts’ argued that lifestyles reflecting the knowledge-based economy would account for the majority of households by 2020, and some considered that this would be the case much sooner - by perhaps 2005. In general, experts’ views of future homes implied a concept of home as a multifunctional space, providing:

- an office for home-based working;
- a substitute for short-term hospital and long-stay care;
- a centre for learning and substitute school room;
- a virtual global shopping mall;
- a virtual community centre;
- a venue for technology-based home entertainment.

The women in this study, in contrast to the ‘technological determinism’ view put forward by the ‘experts’, defined housing issues and the drivers for future change much more broadly. Though they acknowledged the importance of developments in technology and of changing demographic profiles and household structures, they also highlighted the influence of:

- pressures to achieve ‘ecological sustainability’;
- growing Europeanisation of Britain;
- changes in employment patterns and arrangements;
- the nature and condition of existing housing stock;
- government policies in the areas of housing, health, education, welfare/social security;
- changing community attitudes and expectations.

In contrast to the views put forward in the literature and through many of the key informant interviews, women in our focus groups argued for a rather different concept of home and neighbourhood. From their perspective, many of the homes we will live in by 2020 are not well suited for multi-functional housing. Moreover, even where they are suitable, the women in this study questioned whether or not living, working, caring or being cared for, shopping, being educated and entertained in the same space would be a congenial lifestyle for many. Rather than having multi-functional houses, the women involved in this program expressed a preference for housing within multi-functional neighbourhoods.

Ideally, in the view of women in this study, homes would be set in neighbourhoods characterised by community cohesion, social inclusion, equity, safety and security. They would possess the physical infrastructure to support community-oriented lifestyles, and would provide:

- places for ‘home’ working;
- centres for local shopping and markets;
- facilities for childcare and other services;
- alternative ‘public’ transport options;
12.3 Focus group discussion. Why is there such a gulf between the aspirations of women and proposals for new planning developments?

- a wide range of leisure opportunities;
- access to non-monetary exchange market places.

These would be vibrant, mixed use, multifunctional neighbourhoods where the focus would be on social capital, human capital, physical capital and natural capital, rather than on financial capital.

Increasingly, in industrialised nations, we have moved to a more privatised and individualised lifestyle, and this is reflected in the ‘expert’ views on housing for the future. Yet this is the opposite of what the women in these studies wanted—a greater sense community. They wanted a future in which the loneliness and isolation experienced by many at present are replaced by a greater sense of community and social cohesion, and by better links between those within the community in different age groups. In contrast to the recent trend towards viewing public open space as ‘a waste of potential development opportunities’, these women recognised the need both for community facilities and for public open space within residential areas. Without these features, they considered that it would be difficult to promote the community-oriented lifestyles which underpin community cohesion and create a sense of safety and security, which they saw as a very high priority.

The literature suggests that the path we are taking currently is one that undermines civil society and social capital, and that has detrimental effects on individual and community health and well-being. Moreover, it is a downward spiral: as we reduce activities in the public realm (by encouraging ‘virtual’ rather than ‘real’ communities), we reduce people’s sense of safety and comfort in public spaces, and this leads to a further reduction in the use of public open spaces.

According to Brian Furnass, well-being includes: satisfactory human relationships, meaningful occupation, opportunities for contact with nature, creative expression, and making a positive contribution to human society. Well-designed public spaces will facilitate and encourage these features, and if they are designed in an inclusive manner, they will be meeting the fifth of these requirements before they are even physically in place. The ‘Women and Housing Towards 2020’ Stage 1 study indicates that those in charge of urban planning and design need to adopt a more inclusive approach by listening to the voices of the people concerned and understanding what makes a place liveable to them. This includes the views of women, who make up more than 50 per cent of the population, live longer than their male counterparts, and play a major role in the care and nurture of the young, elderly and those with disabilities (i.e., those who may not be able to speak for themselves). Only by engaging women in the ‘public process’ of planning both ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces can we ensure that the vision of housing and neighbourhoods expressed in the introduction to this chapter is realized.

ENGAGING WOMEN IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

A follow-up study was undertaken during 2001 involving women from the Stage 1 study in a series of structured focus groups to consider proposals for a large urban extension in north Swindon (UK). The Stage 2 focus groups compared the aspirations of women in the Stage 1 study with the proposals for the development, to identify the extent to which the proposals (if enacted) would fulfil or fall short of these aspirations. The key research questions for the Stage 2 study were:

- Is the layout likely to result in the kind of neighbourhood envisaged for 2020?
- Do the proposed facilities and services match the requirements anticipated for 2020?
- Are the designs for the homes like those expected for 2020?

The Stage 2 study found important gaps between the women’s aspirations and the proposals for these new neighbourhoods. Given that the women involved in this study were ‘ordinary’ women, drawn from a range of different contexts, it is reasonable to assume that the views they were expressing would be similar to the views held by many women. Likewise, given that the...
 plans for the developments being reviewed comply with current planning guidance and reflect current 'good practice', it is likely that they also are fairly typical. Why, then, is there such a gulf between the aspirations of women and the proposals for new planning developments?

**UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM**

The explanation for this disjunction can be found in a combination of legacies of the past and expectations of the future. Recent decades have seen changes in the aspirations and expectations of many people in terms of their housing and their neighbourhoods which have not been matched by the reality. We have, in effect, a situation of 'past', 'present' and 'future', both in terms of the physical structures of housing and neighbourhoods and of the psychosocial lenses through which we look at them.

Existing housing stock (a legacy of the past) is often inadequate to meet the demands of the present, with inappropriate space standards, a high level of inflexibility, and infrastructure inadequate to support the technologies of the modern era. New housing is often modelled on former housing styles, and while it may have more up-to-date features such as multiple living spaces, it still often fails to meet the needs of modern lifestyles, let alone those of the future. As one woman in the first UK study put it: 'I have a broom cupboard in my house; they call it a bedroom!' Imagine how different it would be if houses were designed with in-built flexibility: modular construction with some walls that could be moved as household needs change! The women involved in the first study expressed a strong view that appropriate flexible housing designs would be more likely to occur if women were involved in the design process. Instead of women's experience as the housekeepers, cleaners, counsellors and social organisers in households being something which consigns them to a position of limited influence, planners and designers should use them as 'expert consultants'. After all, where would most households be without 'Mum - the problem solver'?

Also, we need to do away with the idealised vision of 'home as a haven from the outside world', which remains dominant in the minds of planners and designers, as well as those who live in those homes. This vision was based in the 1950s when the workforce was predominantly male, and where women stayed home to care for children and to 'keep the home fires burning'. It does not take account of the modern realities of family structures, with an increasing proportion of single-parent households, and of economic participation, with many households now dual income. For many women especially, home is simply another work setting imposed at the beginning and end of every day. Unless people revise the psychosocial lenses through which they view the functioning of their homes, the gulf between the legacy of the idealised vision and the modern reality will undermine their sense of well-being. The women in this study recognised that new visions of home are needed - visions that incorporate relevant elements of the vision of the past but which also take account of the realities of daily life. Recognition of the increasing role of women in the workforce and the need for community-based systems for meeting some of the needs previously met by stay-at-home Mums would be a good start. Perhaps planners could facilitate the establishment of community non-monetary exchange schemes in neighbourhoods, through which skills could be exchanged (for example, where the supervision of and help with children's homework, which normally forms yet another pressure point for working single parents at the end of a long day, could be taken on by another community member with the appropriate skills).

In the neighbourhoods in which people live, the legacy of the past remains with us too. The physical layouts and service provision of many existing and emerging housing developments are designed on the assumption that every household will have at least one car, so that those without vehicles are isolated from schools, shops and services. Moreover, the idealised notion of cohesive, self-sustaining communities, which contrasts starkly with the reality in many neighbourhoods, has become a myth that fosters a sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction with modern spatial aggregations. Again, it is obvious that the inappropriateness of past physical layouts...
and service provision that are evident in the face of present needs will be even more problematic in the future. While there is no way that the clock can be turned back to retrieve the cohesive communities of the past, and to dream of such is foolhardy, our focus groups recognised the need and the opportunity for developing new notions and models of community which reflect cohesiveness built around the realities of modern life. The establishment of non-monetary exchange schemes noted above is one way of building community cohesion.

Perhaps even more crucially in terms of future housing and neighbourhoods, the legacies of traditionalism and specialization among planners, developers and policy-makers are ensuring that the present is constrained by the past, and that the future is approached through incremental change rather than a radical new vision. Many planners see themselves as regulators rather than facilitators of change. With some notable exceptions (for example, the Beddington Zero Energy Development – BedZED – and the Sherwood Energy Village), this results in an inappropriate and unsustainable approach to addressing the needs for housing and neighbourhoods of the future. The Women and Housing Stage 1 project identified energy-efficient housing, alternative energy sources and recycling of water and household waste as strong preferences for future housing. Yet the Stage 2 project found that, apart from meeting basic building regulations, energy efficiency and sustainability issues had not been taken into account in the proposed development. Imagine if the views of the so-called ‘ordinary women’ involved in the Women and Housing Towards 2020 studies were taken seriously by planners and developers – perhaps quality of life would not only be improved for this generation but for generations to come, through averting potential disasters such as climate change.

The Women and Housing Stage 2 project, by contrast to the majority of housing developments, engaged ‘grassroots’ people in the process of envisioning for the future and has provided a forum for such people to interact with the planners, developers and policy-makers in charge of a large urban redevelopment project. Perhaps because of the ‘naïvety’ of the women involved, the planners, developers and policy-makers were confronted with questions about the rationale for adopting particular strategies or approaches to the development. In the discussion that ensued, new possibilities for overcoming the legacies of the past and for addressing the needs of the future were developed. Judging by the reactions of all involved, it was a process that merits more widespread use.

Notes
3 Andrews and Townsend, Women @ 2020: Living.
5 Ibid., p. 3.
17 Andrews and Townsend, Women @ 2020: Living, p. 9.