

Quality Housing for Women and Children

BY MYRNA MARGULIES BREITBART

Housing, like the built environment in general, is something many take for granted. If you have it, and it's affordable and inhabitable, you rarely think about it. But if you do not, the search for it becomes the central feature of your daily life.

This article describes the experiences of a number of women and children who once had no shelter and now have some or who once had inadequate shelter and now have a decent, secure place in which to live. If examined more closely, however, the collective experiences of their day-to-day struggles and triumphs tell us something more — they tell us how it is that built environments can become complicit with economic and social forces as agents of social control and how, in certain more favourable instances, they can become catalysts for change.

The Women's Development Corporation (WDC) in Providence, Rhode Island (Alma Green, President; Susan Aitcheson, Development Director) began to design and develop rental housing for low-income women and children in 1980. Since then 160 units have been renovated or built anew; another 120 units of new construction are underway. In addition to developing housing, the WDC ran a Women in Construction class under the old Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program and an evening women's maintenance class in conjunction with the local school. A related corporation of the WDC has assumed the property management responsibilities for the completed housing units.

In an effort to inform themselves about the design needs and preferences of single parents, WDC carried out a participatory design process between 1980 and 1981 with twenty low-income female heads-of-household. Participants were of mixed racial backgrounds and learned of the project from Community Action and other poverty-based organizations in Providence. Activities encouraged each woman to draw her existing apartment using her feet as a measurement unit, and to designate activities that took place in those rooms. Women then compared apartments in the group and took abstract blocks for each room, laying them out to create an ideal house design including a "room of your heart," which could

contain any activity. Participants were also asked to discuss neighbourhood qualities and choose among various forms of housing tenure.

Results of these participatory activities were used to select neighbourhoods in Providence and to come up with a prototypical design for apartments. This design, put together by architect Nancy Santagata, was then incorporated, to the extent possible, into each renovation and new construction project that WDC undertook within the targeted neighbourhoods. In order to meet certain official federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) standards, WDC added elements to the program requirement. The primary concern was to have enough square footage to accommodate comfortably a family's daily chores (food preparation, laundry, meals, etc.) and to provide a smaller separate area for more passive activities — the living room — as it seems that "daily chores" never end. Other concerns to emerge from the participatory design process were to provide adequate separation between active and passive activity spaces, to ensure flexibility as household needs change, to define clear boundaries between public and private space, and to contribute to neighbourhood revitalization.

In 1986-87, WDC commissioned me to do a post-occupancy survey to assess how well the housing they had created was meeting the shelter needs of its occupants. Lengthy interviews were conducted in English and Spanish with approximately 25 percent of the residents in WDC housing. Residents represented a diversity of backgrounds including Dominican, Black, Ecuadorian, Puerto Rican, and Cambodian. All were single parents with an average of 2.5 children per household aged 2 to 17. Many of the residents were employed; more than half were in school

and 40 percent in job training. The results summarized here are intended to provide information that can be used to develop further criteria for the production of quality single-parent housing environments.

The Personal Impact of Secure, Affordable Housing on Women's Lives

In the search for very specific data about apartment design and residential satisfaction a number

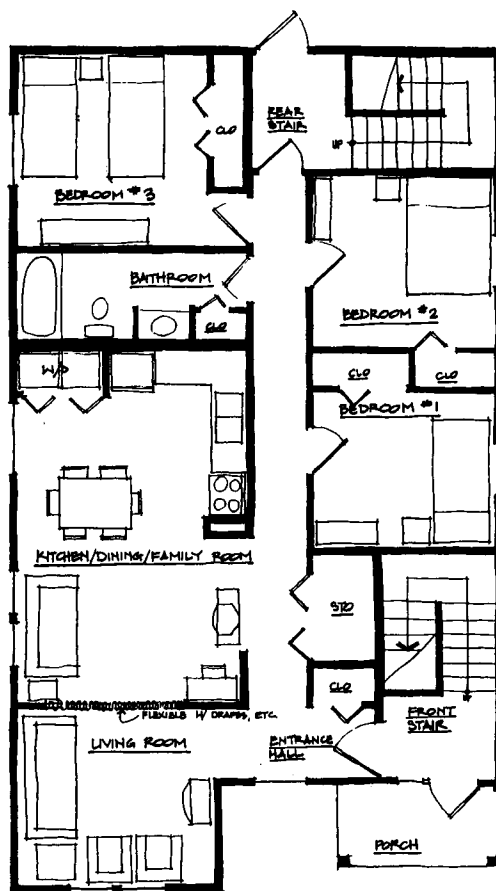


of larger issues concerning the relationship of housing environments to oppression and liberation emerged. For example, early in the interviews discussions of prior housing history revealed the personal manner in which lack of access to affordable, secure housing had dominated and constricted the lives of WDC women. At the time of the survey, residents had lived in WDC apartments for up to three and a half years. Nearly all recount painful sagas of poor and dangerous housing conditions in the past, as well as frequent moves. Twenty-six percent of the women said that they had been homeless at least one time in their lives and that they had no independent housing options where they were. Those who were able to find shelter describe housing searches of three years or more due primarily to the lack of affordable units and the refusal of landlords to rent to households with children.

Once settled in affordable and secure WDC units, women describe feeling a heightened sense of independence and control over their lives. Individual women speak of "having a greater spirit," "a stronger belief in themselves," "more confidence to achieve a better life," and of "no longer expecting other people (especially men) to do things for them." Others describe the re-emergence of a "sense of humour" and the realization "that they are not complacent people." Often these feelings are also tied to the acquisition of practical skills such as financial budgeting and the handling of creditors. The security of tenure and accessibility to services that facilitate household work (e.g., laundry) also provide incentives for residents to personalize their interior space.

In the absence of day-to-day housing struggles, many women describe having more time and money to devote to long-range planning for jobs or education as well as day-to-day activities involving children. Women also appreciate the safety and security of their new apartments and this enables them to increase their involvement in cultural and social activist pursuits. Several residents take classes at night and attend evening meetings in spite of occasional transportation problems or the difficulty of arranging evening child care. One woman currently in school and

active in Latina organizing was especially conscious of the negative ways in which the noise and danger of her past living environments had impinged on her ability to concentrate and to complete assigned school work. It was not until she moved into a quiet and secure apartment that she connected feelings of personal failure and low self-esteem to the conditions produced by her previous physical surroundings. Her "message" to future low-income housing developers was to consider the importance of this larger environment as well as interior layouts and the need which single parents in particular have for a "room of their own."



Identifying the Elements of a Quality Housing Environment

Housing units provide basic shelter but they are also situated in a larger environment within which people try to satisfy a variety of needs. Interviews with WDC residents point to the importance of defining housing as comprised of four integrated environmental levels that include:

- the interiors of apartments and houses

- the larger building within which the unit resides
- the neighbourhood surrounding the apartment building, and
- the city as a whole

When asked to assess their new housing, WDC residents indicate how well the apartment layouts and building designs work to meet their needs. They especially appreciate the concern which was given to design features that affect resident comfort and safety (e.g., large family activity areas, secure locks, good heat and ventilation, storage). There are times, however, when it becomes difficult for

WDC residents to separate the effects or quality of all four levels of environment, and when the thoughtful design of their individual units cannot compensate for the fact that urban neighbourhood space is adult male space with problems of crime, drug dealing, etc. Furthermore, superior layouts and well-constructed buildings simply cannot provide for the range of community facilities and services that need to be part of a single-parent household's life.

Apartment and Building Interiors

In the post-occupancy study, residents of WDC units were asked specific questions about the design features of their apartments — what worked well or functioned poorly and what changes might be made to improve interior space.

The range of response to questions was very large, depending on such factors as cultural differences, the length of tenure in WDC units, past housing experiences, and the stage of the life cycle of mothers and children.

For example, we know from the survey that women with young children express the need for places where their children can play and still be supervised by an adult. They also express the desire not to have teenage-controlled space near their buildings so that the younger children may play outside. In contrast, the mothers of teenagers feel a real need for more community facilities for their children so that there are some alternatives to hanging out in the streets or in playgrounds. Since every WDC building has a grass yard adjacent to the front or back

door and some teenage programs available locally, the question of why and how these facilities may fail to meet some WDC residents' needs should be pursued further.

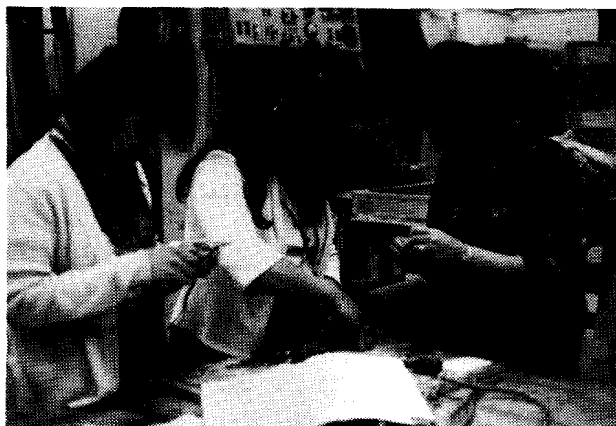
How long residents have lived in WDC housing and are removed from their prior housing experiences also affects their assessment of the new units. The longer women have lived in secure and affordable units, the more ready they are to express opinions about the specific design elements. For women who have recently left an oppressive housing situation, the fact that WDC units are both affordable and secure is sufficient. Speculating about future housing needs or desires or even responding to questions about the adequacy of the design and layout of their unit is not a priority and is exceedingly difficult.

Apart from the overall size of the units and layout, the design features residents find most desirable are those that relate to security and safety. They also clearly appreciate the newness and cleanliness of the apartments and the ease of maintenance. Design features that make it easier for residents to "feel private" include the placement of boys and girls in separate rooms, having master bedrooms in the back of the unit and the provision of more rooms in general.

Kitchens and dining rooms are used the most — not unexpectedly, given the results of the participatory design exercises. These rooms and others are used creatively to serve multiple purposes depending on the composition of the household and job or school demands. For example, kitchens are frequently used for visiting, studying, reading, sewing or watching TV. In addition to eating areas, dining rooms are often playrooms for young children, entertainment centres if there are teenagers, or studies and libraries. This puts the person completing household chores in close proximity to where family activities are carried out. Pieces of movable furniture are sometimes used to divide up space — for example, a bookshelf may divide a kitchen from the dining area. The living room is then decorated as a neat passive area — primarily for adults. It often becomes an important mother's room — a place she can call hers and control. Children who use this room read

or do homework there. All of these patterns of use were intended by WDC's original design and have obviously been applied with great success.

Residents unanimously support the need for children's bedrooms to be enlarged although current bedroom sizes range from 100 to 140 square feet. Though they were not asked which room(s) they would take square footage away from in order to enlarge children's space or whether they would be willing to wait a longer time for larger bedroom units to become available, they do express a clear desire to add to children's space in future development projects. This is often to minimize the



incentive for young children to extend their play space into public hallways.

The desire for larger children's rooms may be due to the need for a larger number of bedrooms in some units. Often two to four children are placed in one bedroom if larger apartments are not available or a family's housing situation is considered too urgent to wait. However, this desire for larger children's rooms also relates to such factors as the character of the neighbourhood and city (see below). Many WDC parents restrict their children's access to the street because they consider the neighbourhood a "bad influence." They worry about the security of their children on city streets. This fact alone places more pressure on the individual apartment unit and the building in fulfilling the space needs of the household.



With regard to the overall building, WDC residents mention the availability of on-site services, responsive maintenance and parking as those factors that contribute in an important way to the quality of their day-to-day lives. They also appreciate the sense of security that their buildings provide via locks and fire alarm systems. However, fears of crime affect residents deeply as they continue to search for more elaborate means of guarding against entry to buildings and individual units.

Many WDC residents currently share stairwells, laundry facilities, parking and yard areas. Despite precarious financial situations and single-parent status, few express an interest in sharing private household space with a non-relative or adding communal space to buildings beyond a recreation room (provided on-site) or on-site day care (as opposed to neighbourhood day care, which is available). Strong desires for privacy as well as the cultural and ethnic differences of residents present barriers to social interaction. Furthermore, many women recall the financial and emotional strain of having to support family or friends in the past. The only exceptions are formerly battered women

and women in peer counselling who express a desire to help other women overcome housing problems through temporary sharing arrangements.

These findings suggest that the mere provision of a physical space for shared public activities at the building level (e.g. cooking or socializing), an important component of many progressive feminist architectural plans, does not ensure the intended consequences. Fostering social environments that enable the use of shared facilities must therefore accompany efforts to design such spaces. In a recent study of women's housing cooperatives in Canada, Gerda Wekerle notes certain conditions that foster community. These include a territorial base that resi-

dents control, some shared space and activities, as well as control of the social composition of the co-operative through the selection of new members. Another aspect of the physical design of the Canadian projects that fosters community is the provision of private space (e.g., balconies or out door gardens, separate entryways and private parking) for individual households and the clear separation of public and private space.¹ New WDC housing in Providence has designed many of these features into the units.

Future research into the possibilities for shared resources among single-parent households should consider carefully which shared facilities are best provided for at the building level and which might be better provided for within the neighbourhood or by the city. It may also be important to consider incorporating some commercial space into multi-family projects (e.g., a grocery or a pharmacy) especially for families with young children and for elderly residents. It is very clear that zoning regulations that compartmentalize activities and do not allow adequate integration of residential, work, retail and recreational space vastly complicate the lives of single parents and impose enormous costs in terms of the time, money and energy that must be expended to accomplish the practical tasks of daily life.

The Neighbourhood and the City

Social and physical characteristics of surrounding neighbourhoods are critical features to consider in the design of new or renovated housing and in the provision of non-design amenities and services to meet the needs of diverse single-parent households.

Those residents of WDC units who talk positively of their neighbourhoods generally do so because of the proximity of family and friends and in spite of local drug dealing or street noise. They speak positively of the roles that some adults living nearby play in their lives (e.g., babysitting, helping out in the apartment, care when sick or support in general). They also mention the presence of friendly people, a quiet atmosphere and access to

amenities such as good schools, jobs and shops. Unfavourable neighbourhood assessments focus on the presence of drugs, crime, prostitution, "men" and heavy traffic.

Whether positive or negative, perceptions of the larger neighbourhood help to fashion the way women and their children use interior as well as exterior space. For example, in those instances when poor neighbourhood conditions encourage residents to spend more time at home, activities tend to converge in the kitchen-dining room area — one feature of the design layout given a great deal of attention by WDC architects. The effects of a hostile neighbourhood also encourage



residents to restrict their young children's access to the street with less favourable consequences, as play is concentrated within apartment interiors or the public spaces of buildings (e.g., halls and stairwells).

Much of the recent child development literature suggests that the free exploration of an environment is crucial for a child's development and independence.² Many forces influence the range of urban children's exploration. Most important, however, is a parent's assessment of the surrounding neighbourhood. In this survey, WDC parents are very cautious about allowing their children to play in the street or venture far from home. They do not choose to restrict their children's freedom to explore because of cultural or class biases but rather see themselves making rational decisions to keep their children away from what are perceived to be dangerous street environments. This leads WDC residents to request more privatized activities for children — including clubs and supervised after-school activi-

ties — responses which in fact mirror those of middle-class urbanites who also limit the time and space of their children's unsupervised exploration and play.

From an adult perspective, women living in WDC housing value the city for the access it provides to varied services and amenities. They feel that urban centres are "alive with people" and that they at least provide job opportunities to outweigh such negative features as pollution, the lack of open space and overcrowding. Since moving to WDC housing, nearly half of the residents interviewed also mention using a variety of city services, including the high school Graduate Equivalency Diploma and language programs, informal women's support groups, social workers and job training programs. Over half of these services either were not available to the women prior to moving to the WDC units or were available but not used due to the intensity of time and effort that had to be devoted to dealing with housing related problems.

Visions of a Preferred Living Environment

WDC residents' visions of an "ideal" housing situation reveal a

lot about how environments have become gendered and culturally specific while providing information about design elements that might enhance the quality of life for single parents.

Those who allow themselves the luxury of dreaming, describe homes and neighbourhoods that exist already for many middle-class Americans. Though one woman summed up her fantasy by saying she wants "a palace," the actual descriptions are not lavish at all. The main characteristics of these preferred living environments are privacy, peace and quiet. Beyond that, women seek home ownership, clean air and a general feeling of security. Images are also shared of safe places for children to play and of "white houses" with wall-to-wall carpeting, upstairs bedrooms, extra TVs, two or more bathrooms, eat-in kitchens and big living rooms. Some women also express a desire for houses with extra bedrooms or two- and three- family houses so that space can be rented out to others at an affordable price.

Most WDC residents believe that they will find their "ideal" environment in stereotypical suburban settings. Reflecting media images, one resident justified her desire for the suburbs by describing it as a place where "everybody... is smiling, everything is clean and people have to be good to live there." A few women depart from this image, however, and see small town life as the setting where they are most likely to find contentment. Still others see themselves as "more realistic" and opt for a small city "like Providence," believing it to be affordable, convenient, and most important, "the place where family and friends are."

Anti-suburban critiques fill much of the recent feminist literature that assesses living environments.³ Yet many culturally diverse low-income women living in WDC housing perceive suburban settings as abundant rather than isolating or constraining. A closer examination of the ideal environments that WDC residents describe underscores the premium placed on privacy, solitude and access to conveniences. Because most believe these qualities are available in the suburbs, the attraction for this environment comes more from the perceived differences in the quality of life between central cities and the outskirts than from desires for social status or the actual experience of having lived in a suburban setting.

Affordability, security, and size are the qualities WDC residents say they would look for in a future housing unit. These are qualities provided by their current housing units. Good neighbours, community feeling and accessibility are the desired features of a future neighbourhood. The characteristics most cherished are no different from those sought by most American households.

A Future Agenda

The post-occupancy survey points out the important contribution that WDC housing has made to the lives of low-income women and their families in Providence. Responses reinforce the need to continue to incorporate women's desire for privacy, security and convenience into the

design of affordable rental housing while perhaps exploring increasingly elusive models for low-income home ownership in the future.

Many practical conclusions can also be drawn. For example, whenever possible financially, the design of new multi-family units should minimize the number of households using single entryways and



incorporate even small amounts of outdoor space for individual household use, as WDC has done with their new townhouse-style duplexes. The design of future affordable rental units might also be informed by detailed assessments of the neighbourhoods and cities within which the units are to be sited. Building and unit designs can then better address prevailing conditions in the surrounding environment. Non-profit housing developers cannot, however, absorb the burden for change in these surrounding environments. Future improvements to the lives

of single-parent households depend upon large initiatives taken by public planning agencies and social activist organizations to improve the quality of economic and social life within each neighbourhood and the city as a whole.

A number of additional topics related to construction technology and design ought to be given further consideration. How, for example, might existing construction technologies be more creatively and appropriately employed to enhance the comfort of low-income households in a small space and to address the needs of these varied households for flexibility and ease of maintenance? How might moveable partitions, more effective noise barriers and more durable yet inexpensive building materials be employed toward these ends? With regard to design, what imaginative means can be used to strike a balance between the need of each household for both privacy and community? This last question suggests the need to design common space in buildings with the characteristics of the larger neighbourhood in mind. It also requires a clear definition of private and public space once shared facilities are built, and some serious consideration of the personalities and cultural differences of the specific population groups that will be moving in. The WDC clearly acknowledges the diversity of opinion and living styles that characterize the low-income women who occupy their units. This understanding is critical to appropriate planning.

In general, more effective methods also need to be devised for assessing the likely impact of different neighbourhood locations on the design of new or renovated multi-family housing. How, for example, might the interior layout of a private unit and multi-unit buildings help ameliorate some of the deficiencies or take advantage of some of the opportunities presented by surrounding neighbourhoods and the city? Addressing this question is complex, as the WDC experience suggests. For example, residents may wish to trade off location in a neighbourhood with better physical amenities and fewer social problems for

proximity to friends and relatives in a less desirable part of the city. This is often the case with single parents who depend upon social contacts for support. Trade offs will also be made between the needs of parents for access to central city services and jobs and the diverse space needs of children of different ages (e.g., the need of young children for open spaces and exploration safe from automobiles).

Most subsidized housing in the U.S. will continue to be built or renovated in neighbourhoods that do not necessarily provide ideal settings for either women or children. They contain a number of dangerous abandoned buildings where drug trafficking may occur, have streets in poor repair, few and costly shops, overtaxed police and fire departments. Non-profit housing developers can attempt interim responses to problem neighbourhoods through a responsive interior structuring of space — for example, larger rooms for family activities (as in WDC units) or the incorporation of play facilities and courtyards that have no non-resident access and can be visually monitored by parents (as in many Canadian single-parent co-operatives). However, the long-term goal of reviving the streets and neighbourhoods of our cities articulated thirty years ago by urban planning critic Jane Jacobs still needs to be given precedence.⁴ Children require a variety of places in which to play. Streets that are safe and vital, that combine commercial and residential space, and are used for a variety of purposes by many local people who can watch over them, should become the logical urban equivalents of a rural child's natural realm of exploration.⁵ Numerous European examples indicate that dense urban environments can provide positive settings for children and adults alike. Cul-de-sacs in urban neighbourhoods in Holland currently enable adults to assume psychological control over space, allowing better surveillance of children. Urban European re-creations of "wilderness" environments that involve children directly in their creation and maintenance and are staffed for security by "play animators" provide additional alternatives to sterile American playgrounds. These kinds of planning initiatives could only be introduced effectively in the U.S., however, if they were accompanied by efforts to address the root causes of urban poverty. Cosmetic enhancements and "people"

removal (gentrification) only serve to constrict further the lives of low-income urban households.

Many political and economic barriers need to be overcome to enable the diverse housing and environmental needs of heterogeneous single-parent households to be addressed most effectively. Public planning and zoning regulations that reinforce gender divisions and present barriers to women's independence must be challenged. These include housing codes that prescribe density levels that are too low or restrict the size and placement of rooms as well as the mixed use of residential and commercial space. Factors that determine budgetary allocations for city-wide social services and amenities must also be challenged to include consideration of their likely effects on low-income households.

Non-profit developers like the WDC will continue to struggle for public policies that support their efforts to integrate and improve women's lives and will continue to engage city planning officials in a dialogue about which environmental levels (the individual housing unit, the building, the neighbourhood or the city) are the most appropriate places for addressing specific affordable housing needs. We might also consider expanding the criteria for judging the impact of future housing and community development proposals on whole neighbourhoods and to weigh far more heavily the needs of children and adults to explore and socialize freely within residential settings.⁶ The choice of scattered site versus geographically concentrated affordable housing development by community development corporations and other non-profit developers should be influenced by these broader neighbourhood considerations and by the need to promote more concentrated economic and social change within one or a few targeted neighbourhoods.

At present, there is an abundance of material to document the worsening housing plight of single women and children. Less exists to document the higher levels of independence and self-confidence that result for women and their children once they attain secure and affordable rental housing. This survey of the work of the WDC in Providence underscores the fact that good design can make a difference. But, more importantly, it points to the agency of a diverse group of low-income

women who have begun to create the space for change in their own lives and have begun to attach new meaning to and transform their own environments once the acquisition of basic shelter is no longer the all-consuming focus of daily struggle.

¹ Gerda Wekerle, *Women's Housing Projects in Eight Canadian Cities*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (April 1988).

² Carol Baldassari, et. al., eds., "Participation 2: A Survey of Projects, Programs and Organizations" in *Childhood City Newsletter* #23 (Spring 1981); Roger Hart and Louise Chawla, "The Development of Children's Concern for the Environment," Paper prepared for the Institute for Environment and Society (Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, 1980); Carol Simon Weinstein and Thomas G. David, eds., *Spaces for Children: the Built Environment and Child Development* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987).

³ Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984); Susan Saegert and Gary Winkel, "The Home: A Critical Problem for Changing Sex Roles," in Gerda Wekerle, Rebecca Peterson and David Morley, eds., *New Spaces for Women* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1980).

⁴ Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961).

⁵ Clare Cooper Marcus and Wendy Sarkissian, *Housing As if People Mattered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

⁶ Margaret Mead, "Neighbourhoods and Human Needs," in Robin C. Moore and Wendy J. Miller, eds. *Children's Environments Quarterly*, Vol. 1, #4 (Winter 1984-1985).

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