



BOOK REVIEWS

NEW HOUSEHOLDS, NEW HOUSING

Karen A. Franck and Sherry Ahrentzen, editors. Toronto: Nelson Canada, 1989

Ellen Vera Allen

I am not quite sure I had any definite expectations when I first picked up this book. Excitement certainly, that somehow I would find there the tale of a utopian dream come true.

Well, it does contain utopian dreams for sure, hundreds of them. A central premise is that changing demographics are making the nuclear family in the suburbs a less common condition, and therefore we, housers, should become aware of the options that have been suggested or tried. One is soon moving between the needs of single mothers, affluent new-agers and recovering alcoholics on Skid Row. None of these people fit the nuclear family mold and all of them are found in this wide ranging book.

Broadly, the book is divided into three sections: "Collective Housing," "Housing for Single-Parent Households" and "Single Room Occupancy Housing." Each section in turn begins with an overview by one of the editors, followed by a selection of essays on related topics. Scattered among the essays are some delightful excursions into design theory.

The first section is the most general and provides a generic background as well as specific examples, beginning with an overview of collective and shared housing.

The second section focuses on a few experiments, loosely grouped by having single parents or women as a primary client group.

The third section deals with an even more particular solution/client base, i.e., single-room occupancy housing. Starting from an overview, it leaps to single room and furniture design for a residential hotel, broadens out to management and design recommendations and concludes by looking again at the client group and

the housing type as a viable alternative housing form.

The first section is confusing, but includes a lovely wealth of information; the second provides particular solutions, interesting to trace from design concept through to practical and compromised resolution; and the third is probably closer to what I had expected from the book — philosophy, details and possibilities.

Some of my dissatisfaction with the book is based on this basic format. As an anthology of the different experiences in different countries, it lacks cohesion and a unifying message. Undoubtedly there is knowledge in Denmark of the Swedish kollektivhus, but what exchanges take place or what political and cultural differences generate differing solutions is not addressed, simply because there is no essay on that topic. There is a whole library of things left unsaid. Nowhere is there an inkling that Canadian co-op organizers borrowed from the Danish concept of index-linked mortgages in an attempt to develop a politically acceptable program for CMHC (the federal housing body). Nowhere does the lack of political will come out clearly as a hindrance to "new housing." The fact that our options are severely limited, and that we cannot as a society afford the nuclear family dream of a single family house, is a political reality not addressed in the book.

The article on "Co-housing in Denmark" provides an example of the book's tendency to dodge political realities. It argues that

Today co-housing is a viable and accepted housing option in Denmark. Given the demographic, economic and domestic changes affecting American society, co-housing appears to be both appropriate and applicable in the United States as well.

With the exception of communal dinners and a different government policy it sounds as though there are many similarities between the Danish and the Canadian co-op experience. But the political differences are huge from Denmark to Canada and even more so to the United

States, and "viable and accepted" are clearly subjective opinions.

Therefore, I take exception to the upbeat tone of most of these articles. They are all great ideas and I am fascinated and encouraged to hear about all these dedicated and interesting people finding better ways to house themselves. But socially and politically we are a long way from universal acceptance of these ideas, and the differences in societies and politics in different countries are going to lead to different solutions.

The strongest impression I was left with was of the vast number of people doing housing, trying new things every day. This is not a guide to achieve particular aims. Every one of the case studies makes clear that although the philosophy informing them may be similar, the circumstances were particular and led to a unique solution. Whether in the historical references or discussing these particulars, the circumstances mold the methods, the acceptability and the results of all experiments into alternative housing forms. In Canada, a paternalistic government for the past two decades has guaranteed loans and doled out subsidy money as long as the development conformed substantially to their rules. In the U.S., different factors apply. In the social democracies of Scandinavia the idea of people being housed by the state is too commonplace for paternalism and the housing sector seems able to critically evaluate itself more easily than in North America.

Altogether, there is an incredible amount of information in this book although much is only touched upon or implied. Indeed, the book's purpose is to create these sorts of connections — to encourage the ideas, experiments, successes and failures, to include bibliographies and make everyone aware of what has been thought of and tried. Some are utopias recalled from a musty past and some still glow brightly.

But the book's stated objective has been achieved: to make us, the community of housers and activists, aware of each other and through that to provide us with encouragement and energy.