Housing and health

by Dr Roderick J. Lawrence
Centre for Human Ecology and Environmental Sciences of the University of Geneva, Switzerland

The meaning of housing, like the meaning of home, varies from person to person, between social groups and across cultures. Houses are commonly accorded an economic value, an exchange value, an aesthetic value and a use value — whereas, in addition to these, a home is usually given a sentimental and a symbolic value.

All these values, as well as domestic roles, routines and rituals, are not simply expressed by individuals; they are acquired, nurtured, transmitted, reinforced, or modified by interpersonal communication (for instance, between parents and children, or between members of the same social or professional group).

From this perspective, the interrelations between housing and health are very different when viewed from the resident’s point of view. Trying to understand those viewpoints requires an approach that may be in conflict with arbitrarily defined solutions drawn up and applied by national governments or by international agencies. During this century, the practice of prescribing minimum standards for the quality of a wide range of environmental entities — air, water supply, and building materials, for instance — has led to a significant improvement in site planning, building construction and housing design in both industrialized and developing countries. Yet when these standards are examined in terms of their rationale and objectives, it becomes clear that they have commonly been drawn up with economic, technological and political priorities in mind, whereas the life-style, domestic economy, opinions and well-being of local populations have been largely undervalued or else ignored.

Studies of the housing conditions in large cities of both industrialized and developing countries today show that those people who do not have regular employment, who cannot afford to pay high rents or mortgage payments, and who need to live in urban neighbourhoods readily accessible to the job market, have the most unfavourable housing conditions. Although slum clearance has meant that vast numbers of unfavourable dwellings have been demolished, overcrowding has often increased, not by choice as some claim, but through economic necessity. These processes and their consequences are the crux of housing and health problems in many cities. In essence, the presence of substandard housing is not merely an architectural or technical planning problem but also, basically, an economic and political one explicitly related to the equitable and ecological use of natural resources.

Housing units built in Melbourne, Australia, in the 1950s. At that date, residents were given no opportunity to express their needs and aspirations when the houses were planned.

Few public or private institutions today bother to identify and monitor the costs and benefits of development policies, or the specific changes that may be brought about by projects for housing sites, communities or larger ecosystems, so that informed decisions can be made, costs and benefits correctly assigned, and negative impacts reduced or overcome. Most housing built during this century, and especially since the Second World War, did not benefit from this kind of approach, and the legacy for current and future generations is a grim one. For example, many housing units have been found to contain toxic building materials. Outside walls have inadequate thermal insulation, so they are hard to heat, and condensation and dampness favour the growth of mould or fungus. The indoor air quality often cannot be adequately regulated by cross-ventilation, and sound insulation may be lacking altogether.

Is it any wonder that respiratory illnesses and allergies have become a primary cause of morbidity and mortality in some European countries? Furthermore, new (or formerly unknown) diseases such as Legionnaires’ disease have been identified. Room humidifiers, air ventilation systems and cooling towers, as well as hot and cold water supply ducts, have been found to nurture Legionella bacteria and transmit them throughout the indoor environment, or discharge them into the immediate vicinity of the building. An ecological perspective raises some fundamental issues. We could begin by asking why the water supply has become prone to bacteria, or ask whether it is necessary to install mechanical ventilation and air-conditioning systems in high-rise housing when it might be simpler to avoid constructing internal rooms that are devoid of both daylight and natural ventilation? Are there not alternative principles and practices for building construction and housing design even when high-density housing is unavoidable?

Man and environment

The ecological perspective not only raises fundamental questions of this kind, but it also enables us to draw up and apply alternatives. Some 2600 years ago, Hippocrates, a Greek physician who taught at a medical school on the island of Cos, maintained that human health and well-being are associated with a desirable state of equilibrium between the human organism and its surroundings. He illustrated this view by describing the living conditions of some populations in Asia and Europe. In order to better understand the health and life-styles of specific populations, Hippocrates refuted the commonly held beliefs in divine afflication and providence, and instead proposed an ecological perspective. He called for an examination of the impact of micro-climatic factors, biological organisms (both animals and plants) and inorganic entities (namely...
Housing and health

Air, soil, sun and water) on human health and well-being. Also he looked at different cultural and societal settings, especially in relation to food, leisure and work, in order to explain why people in various regions have different patterns of disease, health and well-being. In other words, Hippocrates maintained that it was not only the health of individuals or their immediate surroundings that needed to be considered, but also a thorough understanding of their daily circumstances.

Hippocrates’ approach is appropriate for an understanding of the interrelations between housing and health. It can be complemented and enriched if the architect, the housing administrator or the public health officer ceases to be a passive observer and assumes the active role of an “enabler” who, in contrast to an “expert”, is willing to integrate his or her explicit professional knowledge with the tacit know-how and experiences of lay people.

Public participation in the definition and management of housing is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, only by involving the community is it possible to establish a real understanding of the customs and values of people in their domestic setting. Where participation has been adopted, it often happens that certain basic institutional assumptions about housing and health have been proved incorrect. Secondly, public participation can be a useful form of public health education by increasing the awareness of lay people about the complex range of social, economic and political factors that are involved if we want to improve unhealthy housing and reduce homelessness.

Housing policies and public health rarely figure today in the manifestos of governments or political parties. It is not surprising, therefore, that we see many indications that all is not well, such as new human illnesses, increasing homelessness, and a declining quality of housing and human settlements in many countries. A fundamental change in human values and behaviour is necessary. This change can be promoted by a much better dissemination of knowledge, know-how and experience between professionals and lay people, and between the public and private sectors. The current worsening situation in the largest cities of both industrialized and developing countries must be seen as a challenge to the planners, because housing and health are fundamental anthropological concepts as well as basic human rights.

Chess playing in a Geneva park in Switzerland. The health and well-being of people depend to a large extent on the equilibrium they can maintain with their surroundings.