

The way we like it

Architects and planners are re-discovering the fact that man in the natural state moves around on the ground. So low-rise housing is back in favour. People like to live together in a neighbourly way. So the street is back in favour too, and high density layouts of courtyards and alleyways are planned to create friendly little clusters of homes. People also need different kinds of homes at different stages in their lives. Left to themselves, families develop and extend their homes over the years. To start with they usually want something small and cheap. Architects have been applying their minds to low-income housing. Another sign of the return to a human scale is the revolt against motorways and against traffic in towns. People are organising themselves – Britain has led the way with its thousands of amenity societies and protest groups.

John Hall

Who knows what people want?

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To unrequited passion, the longest distance in the world is the distance between two single beds. "I don't care whether it's six inches or six feet," complains the poet rebuffed. "It's the psychological distance that matters." Architects and planners, working with spacial relationships, sometimes seem to forget about psychological distances, and about what makes people miserable or happy.

Sizeable financial and technical resources have been used in the 1970s to look for a scientific answer to the question "What is happiness?"

Attention to the needs of the ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed is now turning to the needs of equity, respect, challenge, and personal fulfilment.

Governments accept that it is insufficient to consider only those aspects of society which are most easily counted or most easily measured in money values. It is frustrating to provide "better" housing and "better" environments if the people who live in them do not feel happier or more satisfied.

The failure to take account of the life-styles of the intended inhabitants has resulted in lunatic decisions to build high-rise blocks, and in less obvious but equally idiotic design decisions, such as equipping flats in tower-blocks with solid fuel fires, or building houses with small kitchens and large dining-lounges for families accustomed to eating main meals in a large kitchen and keeping "the parlour" as something special.

It's not that no research was done; some good research was carried out by the old Building Research Station into housing and estate layout. This included satisfaction ratings by the inhabitants and the findings were no doubt incorporated into housing design. The old Ministry of Housing and Local Government did some research on London housing estates, again using subjective assessments, and by complicated statistical analysis showed that the "general appearance" of an estate was very important in determining satisfaction with living there. One lady claimed to like an estate "because it doesn't look like a council estate."

This is the nub of the matter, and this is where the architects and planners often miss the social significance of their own research findings. An integrated approach to housing and environmental research must take account of *social* factors.

Middle class planners designing environments for working class families tend to think of the environment in physical terms – they have to because of statutory provisions they are required by law to make. Most working class people tend to think of their environment in social terms.

When asked what they like or dislike about the district they live in, they will refer first to the people who live there.

A factor rarely taken into account by policy-makers is the reputation of a particular district or estate; the GLC has recently been forced to offer to first-comers a large number of dwellings which people on their waiting lists have refused because of their reputation.

Many local authorities have been forced to take another look at their housing policies as the social results do not match the original expectations. The classic policy of piece-meal rehousing by "need" has, for some urban authorities, had consequences for employment and social services which were not foreseen, largely because no account was taken of social processes of human nature.

For the past five years the survey unit of the Social Science Research Council has been trying to develop subjective measures of the quality of life. These are complementary to the official economic and social statistics by which the state of the nation has been judged hitherto. Such measurements can be repeated from time to time to reveal trends of a different kind, so that changes in values and attitudes can be related to more objective changes.

Surveys of electors in urban areas of Britain in 1973 and 1975 contained questions on housing and the local district, and also on specific aspects of each. Satisfaction-ratings were obtained using a scale ranging from nought ("completely dissatisfied") to ten ("completely satisfied"). Some more general measures of well-being and outlook were also taken. These covered feelings of happiness and sense of achievement in life, of personal competence and disposition to trust in other people, and general physical and mental health. Objective data for housing provision were collected, and in Sunderland aggregated census statistics were available for the wards in which people lived. It is thus possible to relate differences in satisfaction-ratings to differences in actual circumstances.

We find differences in quality of housing and environment are clearly related to differences in satisfaction. Not surprising, but some differences are much bigger than others and these may have implications for policy. For instance, sharing a kitchen is associated with dissatisfaction as great as not having a proper kitchen at all, but sharing a bathroom is nowhere near as dissatisfying as not having a properly equipped bathroom. Equally great differences in satisfaction with housing are associated with reported levels of nuisance from various sources such as noise, damp, or smells. While information on bathrooms and kitchens is collected as standard in housing research and censuses, information on nuisances is rarely, if ever, used.

There is, however, a limit to increasing satisfaction with housing by improving bathrooms and kitchens. If increasing the level of satisfaction is the aim of housing or any other policy, there appear to be other aspects, less tangible, less easily measured, and therefore less easily managed, to attend to. These include "privacy from neighbours" and "being near your family".

None of this takes account of differences in personality in the occupiers — such as tendencies to be outgoing rather than inward looking, to be of a trusting nature or to be neurotic. Nor does it allow for age differences, nor for differences in values or expectations. All these could account for differences in satisfaction. So, it is not unusual to find people — especially the elderly — who express satisfaction with what by other standards would be regarded as poor provision.

What can planners do, pulled this way and that? They can get some guidance from these subjective social indicators. To take one example, they can try to avoid too big a concentration of large households or households with very young children in the same area. This, we have learned, can lead to dissatisfaction. People living in a broader mix of age groups and family sizes are more satisfied.

Then there is the value judgement on "the sort of people who live round here". That too has been measured and found to be a major element in deciding whether or not people are satisfied with their neighbourhood. But how many planners and policy-makers take that into their calculations?

What is lacking is an integrated approach to social and environmental research, especially in the local community and physical environment. Research has tended to be fragmented, and while it may have been interdisciplinary in intent, there has been little spill-over into technique.

Integrated environmental research needs fewer liaison committees and more people to guide the skills of old specialists into new specialisms. Funds should be diverted for this purpose. A joint approach to social policy requires a joint approach to social research. Current cutbacks in research expenditure will defer real solutions to environmental policy problems for decades.

[John Hall has written an article on subjective measures of the quality of life in Britain for Social Trends No 7 (HMSO) to be published at the end of 1976.]