Human Factors and Research Methods - Fall 2005
Kirstyn Freiberg

Typical American housing focuses on the traditional family, or is viewed as a stopping point on your way to or from the traditional family. Statistics however, show us that we are focusing our attentions in the wrong area. 67% of the American housing stock was designed for the nuclear family while only 1/4 of the households fit the traditional model of a married couple with at least one child. Only 10% of American households fit the "Ozzie and Harriet" model – working father, home making mother, children younger than 18. Of families with children 1/5 are headed by single parents, the fastest growing family type in the country (Ahrentzen, Harvard Design Magazine).

Non traditional families have a unique set of needs that are rarely addressed by their living environment. If we are going to start designing for these families we first need to understand who these families are, and what needs they have. Using a literature-based research approach this paper will begin to look at the needs and challenges of four different family types, including: single parents, part time parents, the elderly and grand families.

<u>Single Parents</u>

Today's homes are built for and marketed to the traditional family with two incomes yet single parent families now represent 21% of all families with dependant children at home. For 30 years there have been homes and shelters developed for single mothers. These housing typologies however have primarily been considered transitional housing as single parenthood has traditionally been viewed as a temporary "situation." A growing percentage of single parents however are choosing to remain single and it is time we start to think about housing for single parent families as permanent. Architectural precedents, such as Van Eyck's Mothers Home in Amsterdam, still serve as a valid learning tool as many of the design features of transitional housing for single parents are still desirable for permanent housing.

"Single parent families share some common experiences: reduced family income, a sense of isolation and loneliness, role overload, and inadequate access to public and social resources (Franck, Ahrentzen 143)." In addition solo parenting can have consequences with respect to a parent's ability to find employment (Franck, Ahrentzen 162). The major

identified needs of single parent families can be broken down into three main categories: social support, income related concerns, and mobility.

Social Support

In addition to the need for social services, single parent families often rely on the support of friends, neighbors and family to deal with every day problems. "Single parents are more likely than their married counterparts to eliminate certain household jobs and are twice as likely to get help from outsiders (Franck, Ahrentzen 146)."

Franck and Ahrentzen suggest the following design related solutions with respect to fostering social support among neighbors: 1. Spaces in the neighborhood where neighbors can meet, talk and watch over their children can be created including: laundries, community rooms or buildings, courtyards and play spaces. 2. Design features that minimize maintenance and maximize convenience are useful for these households where time is a precious commodity. 3. Security is another concern for single parents. Opportunities that provide for informal surveillance on site by residents, well-defined play areas close to the residence and a reduced number of entries to the site are some design treatments that can be used to enhance security.

In the summer of 2000 the Journal of Architectural and Planning Research published an article Cohousing in HUD Housing – Problems and Prospects (volume 17, issue #2, pg 133-145). In this article Hasell and Scanzoni discuss the concept of "Fictive Kin" a mutual social network for single mothers. The article looks at incorporating concepts of cohousing, and fictive kin into HUD housing with the intentions that the support would be a means to facilitate their development towards economic self-sufficiency. The research was not completed due to the withdrawal of HUD support; however the preliminary literature-based research is particularly relevant to the understanding of the importance of and history behind one type of social support network for single parent families.

> "*Every child should have a hundred parents,*" reads the ancient proverb, and a number of
> scholars argue that traditions of mutual support characterized the African-American experience

prior to, during, and after slavery (Jewell, 1988; Cheatham and Stewart, 1990; Aschenbrenner, 1975).

The Afro-American kinship system is not now (nor has it ever been) governed by the bourgeois family norm. The various forms of Afro-American kinship all over the Americas reveal a pattern which has been governed in its formation and development by the rules of collectivity and mutuality. The adoption of the nuclear family is itself the product of proletarianization, upward mobility and urbanization. The majority of Afro-American families however do not fit this norm (Perkins, 1981:17)

Mutual support patterns meant attending to the emotional as well as the material needs of both children and adults living in a number of physically proximate households, sometimes linked by blood but sometimes not. Stack's research showed that as recently as the late 1960's, some poor urban black women in a Midwestern city were participating in mutual support networks they themselves had constructed over time. Stack labeled the networks as "fictive kin" because they typically consisted of both friends and relative (Stack, 1974). The importance typically assigned to blood ties was subordinated to the overarching obligation shared by all group members to give when one could, and receive when one must. Significantly, Stack reported that spatial nearness played a crucial role in facilitating ongoing network exchanges. She noted that when house holds were located in the same or adjoining buildings, or on the same block, the fact of their physical proximity greatly enhanced the discharge of their obligations to give and receive. A more recent study, carried out in a small southern town in the early 1990's, confirmed Stack's research by providing evidence for the salutary consequences of a fictive kin network among less advantaged blacks (Rivers and Scanzoni, 1997). Nerveless, in spite of their apparent benefits, the consensus is that throughout black society, mutual support networks have in recent years, become relatively less common (Jewell, 1998). This quote was taken from - Hasell, Scanzoni 134-135

Income-related concerns

The search for family housing with only one income to support it is a real problem for single parents. "Children in single parent families are more likely to live in poverty and suffer negative outcomes associated with poverty (Green 1)."

Lori Green suggests in "New Directions in Work and Family Policy" the following supportive services to combat the negative effects of poverty: Health care, Parenting classes, Food stamps, Job training, Psychological services, Housing, Transportation, and Child care - "Child care is the top reason why women fail to stay off

welfare. Oftentimes, they cannot get children to child care before work starts or a child gets sick and they lose their job (Green 2)."

Mobility

Frank and Ahrentzen believe that when analyzing the needs of a single parent family it is more helpful to look at precedents for senior housing than housing for the nuclear family. There reasoning being that both single parent families and the elderly face limited mobility (mobility being defined as the access to or ability to operate a motor vehicle). Due to limited income single parents are less likely to own a car. "In 1982 only 57 percent of female single parents had access to a car, compared to 89 percent of two parent families (Franck, Ahrentzen 145)." One of the most significant challenges single mothers living without a vehicle face is getting their children to and from day care or school on public transportation in coordination with their work schedule. As stated above child care is the top reason why women fail to stay off of welfare.

Frank and Ahrentzen suggest that housing designed for single parent families (with reduced mobility) are placed in neighborhoods that provide the following services: Retail services (every day needs), Places of appropriate employment, Health Care, Day Care, Schools, Parks,
Play Centers and Community Centers

Part Time Parents

Part time parents or parents with a visitation schedule face, in my opinion, the most difficult housing challenge. Their life style vacillates between that of a single person and single parent on a weekly basis. Often times they are making child support payments, while they also need to provide an adequate environment (physically, spatially, and socially) for themselves and the child. Part time parents face all the same challenges of a single parent with the added challenge of an ever changing schedule. Both physically and socially their housing needs to be flexible and efficient. As with single parents, safety is also of primary concern.

Elderly

Households with members over 65 years of age and without children are classified as elderly households. With life spans increasing our concept of the elderly is changing. We now tend to categorize the elderly into three groups: young old, old old and frail old (Franck, Ahrentzen 162). The needs of the elderly can be divided into 4 categories: income related concerns, health related concerns, social support, mobility, and accessibility.

Income-related concerns

Often times the elderly live in homes that they own, but due to a reduced income the homes fall into disrepair. Proportionally more of their finances go into housing leaving them less funds for other needs such as food (Franck, Ahrentzen 162).

Health-related concerns

Income-related concerns increase in intensity with age while at the same time personal health declines. As the elderly progress from the young old category to the frail old category they will require additional help with daily activities as well as medical care. Often times it becomes necessary for the elderly to move into supportive housing with on site services (Popkin, Cunningham, and Burt 6).

Social Support

In addition to the physical needs of the elderly there are also emotional needs that need to be addressed. The process of losing their sense of independence can cause some elderly to fall into depression. At this point in their lives a strong social network is important to maintain a healthy mental state.

Amy Rose suggests in "Innovative Designs for Nontraditional Households in Rural Areas" the importance of common rooms and community centers for encouraging activity and socialization among the elderly *(It is important for common spaces to be flexible in their uses. Potential features for common spaces are as follows: card tables, fire places, TV, small quiet areas with writing desks, library, and billiards room).* These findings are from two senior housing projects for low income residents.

<u>Mobility</u>

As discussed under the Single Parents heading Frank and Ahrentzen believe that the issues of mobility are of prime importance for the elderly as well as single parents.

<u>Accessibility</u>

While people across all family types and age range may require an accessible environment, there is a greater percentage of the elderly population that requires an accessible unit. Issues of accessibility extend far beyond a five foot turning radius. Grab bars and hand rails become of significant importance in passage ways and restrooms. Door sizes, weight and hardware are of importance for the frail. Clear walk ways without protrusions such as light fixtures and bright primary colors on the walls are important for the visually impaired while visually distinctive corridors can help with way finding for those suffering from dementia. These examples are just a sampling of the accessibility issues that need to be addressed in senior living projects.

Historically the nuclear family remained more closely knit together with children caring for elderly parents. It was not uncommon in many cultures to find either a wing of the house or a small apartment within the home dedicated to the Grandparents. This traditional family structure on a base level addressed many of the needs listed above. However with the role of the nuclear family changing these living arrangements are no longer common place and Senior Living Facilities have become the latest solution to housing the elderly.

Amy Rose suggests in "Innovative Designs for Nontraditional Households in Rural Areas" the following design guidelines when designing with the elderly in mind. *(These findings are from two senior housing projects for low income residents)*:Residential spaces that extend and maximize independent living, In a 1995 survey of 605 residents from 38 different facilities: 94% of those surveyed rated having a private room and bath as 1 or 2 from a list of 11 features including a safe place to live, access to medical care and good food, While expenditures on furniture and landscaping may seem to be frivolous research

has shown that attention to these details is actually critical to the physical and mental health of people who are aging.

<u>Grand Families</u>

Grand families are defined as households with a single elderly adult who is the primary caregiver for one or more child (Popkin, Cunningham, and Burt 7). Currently 2.1 million children are being raised by their grandparents (Green 2). These family types share the needs of the elderly as well as the needs of single parent families. Often times requiring accessible units with multiple bedrooms, these families face a very difficult time securing housing. In "Public Housing Transformation and the Hard –to-House" Popkin, Cunningham and Burt state the following: "House holds particularly where the custodial grandparent is getting ready for senior housing are in need of more supportive environments than are available in traditional public housing or the private market. However, senior housing is inappropriate."

The above paragraphs discussed the needs of single parents, part time parents, the elderly and grand families, all of which are non-traditional family types. While the needs of each of these family typologies differ there are many areas in which their needs overlap. Franck and Ahrentzen discuss in their book <u>New House Holds New Housing</u>: "housing designed to meet the needs of particular kinds of households, while also accommodating diversity allows for a level of exchange and support between resident that is a benefit to all". So the question remains is it possible to develop an urban housing community that while socially supportive is also affordable for a diverse group of people? Can means for reducing unit costs also serve as means for encouraging a more socially sustainable environment?

Works Cited

Franck, Karen and Sherry Ahrentzen. New Households New Housing. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991.

Hasell, Mary Joyce and Scanzoni, John. "Cohousing in HUD Housing – Problems and Prospects"
Journal of Architectural and Planning Research 17:2 (summer, 2000):133-145

Ahrentzen, Sherry B. "Choice in Housing, Promoting Diversity."
Harvard Design Magazine (summer, 1999): 62-67.

Green, Lori Valencia. "New Directions in Work and Family Policy." American Psychological Association. February 2004. 11/6/05
<http:www.apa.org/ppo/issues/workandfam.html

Rose, Amy L. "Innovative Designs for Nontraditional Households in Rural Areas."
Housing Assistance Council. October 2001. 11/6/05 <http://www.ruralhome.org

Popkin, Susan J., Cunningham, Mary K. and Burt, Martha. "Public Housing Transformation and the Hard –to-House"
Housing Policy Debate 16:1 (2005): 1-24