

Chapter 42

Lifeboats, More than Housing

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Joan Forrester Sprague has lectured at many universities and conferences in the United States and abroad in the Netherlands, the People's Republic of China, and the former Soviet Union. Her grassroots technical assistance publications have been used nationally and she has contributed chapters in several edited works. Her book, More Than Housing: Lifeboats for Women and Children, received a 1991 Citation of Excellence from the International Book Awards of the AIA. With an architecture degree from Cornell and a Master of Education in Organization Development from Harvard, she is a registered architect in Massachusetts and with NCARB. She cofounded a number of feminist initiatives, which include the Open Design Office, the Women's School of Planning and Architecture (WSPA), the Women's Development Corporation in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1978, and the Women's Institute of Housing and Economic Development in Boston in 1981, where she was president and executive director until 1988.

We know that households of single mothers and children will determine the future of the planet and that more and more women and children worldwide are in need of housing and stable lives. We have seen that many kinds of sponsors in the U.S. have developed new models of housing that include sharing and services and that many more are needed. These models are at the leading edge of redefinitions of home. What is yet to be discovered is how living in these diverse models affects personal experience. This is the area of the writer's current work, using the six zones of use to chart personal experience in housing for single mothers and children and for a wider mixed population. Others are asked to contribute and participate in this work to enlarge its usefulness.

From the writer's perspective, poor women and children, out of their critical and particular needs, are beginning to change the face of housing from the idea of the isolated "castle of man," sheltering dependent and/or abused women and children, to home spaces that include sharing and support. The writer suggests future expansion of these concepts through feminist leadership in development, which can change the face of architecture from monuments-as-usual to more conserving and pluralistic building characteristics and approaches.

The combination of decrease in affordable housing for the poor with the rise of single-mother households as a primary poverty population in the U.S. has brought new issues to public attention. A crisis was necessary before the problem of housing for single mothers, long hidden within the problem of affordable housing, became acknowledged, or has almost become acknowledged. Demographics affirm the need to take a new look at changes in family life and housing. The percentage of American households composed of married couples was about 75 percent in 1960; by 1991 it was only 48.9 percent and only half of the married couples represented by that figure had minor children living at home (U.S. Census Report quoted in *USA Today*, 1992).

The Census in '89 documented a 19 percent decrease in affordable housing for the poor between '78 and '85, a trend that continues (U.S. Census, 1989). This is only one among a number of trends that impact on housing for women and children. Single mothers now head roughly a quarter of all households with minor children in the U.S. From 1970 to 1988, the number of single-mother households more than doubled. In 1988, over 8,000,000 single women were rearing 13,500,000 children. Although divorce rates have stabilized, births to unmarried women have risen: the percentage of single mothers who were never married increased from

4.2 percent in 1960 to 32.4 percent in 1989. Some of these are middle- and upper-class women who have careers and made a choice to have children before their time clock ran out (Sprague, 1991). But there are over 8,000,000 poor white and over 4,000,000 poor black children in this country, and more than half of these 12,000,000 poor children are reared in single-mother households (Edelman, 1987). Close to half of all single mothers, 44.6 percent, are poor. An additional 14.8 percent are near poor. Yet over two-thirds of single mothers are employed (Pearce, 1990). Without others to turn to, crisis often forces these mothers and children into homelessness. When asked, most homeless women cited their social worker or their children as their only supportive relationship (Bassuk *et al.*, 1986). Single mothers and children are estimated as 40 percent of the homeless population. They often have been cited as the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless. Surveys in cities showed 90 percent of all homeless families were headed by women. In 1987 there were 11,000 children in New York City's emergency shelter system, more than the total number of single homeless adults in the city (Dumpson, 1987).

This crisis has had an effect on policy. With the Stewart B. McKinney Act of 1987, HUD's focus for the homeless became innovation: linking services with housing. This new federal approach reinforces the perceptions and actions of a very diverse group of development sponsors: grassroots women's organizations, century-old nonprofit institutions, religious groups, colleges, corporations, and concerned individuals. Together these sponsors have created a new housing type that I call lifeboats, because they rescue and transform the lives of women and children (Sprague, 1991). This support allows single mothers to work toward economic self-sufficiency. This can make a great difference to all Americans. A South African proverb seems apropos: "When the women move, the nation moves."

Lifeboat Housing Types

My examples of lifeboat housing include emergency, transitional, and permanent housing. These definitions are most meaningful in understanding how projects are financed and what the sources of their development and operating funds are.

Emergency

This type of housing serves to mitigate the crisis of homelessness using federal and state shelter funds for those who cannot afford to pay any rent. This is the

money that has been used to pay welfare hotels in cities like New York. It has been more than the cost of building or buying housing. But until very recently, for special instances, narrow bureaucratic definitions have restricted the use of these emergency funds.

Transitional Housing

For some this is a temporary solution until permanent housing is found. For others, it is a transition to the objective of self-sufficiency: education, a job, a career. It is funded through combinations of private and public (including McKinney) funds. Residents pay a percentage of their incomes for rent.

Permanent Housing

This may be achieved through a rental or an ownership program. If it is designed to encourage a community of support and includes services, the homeless cycle can be broken. The housing concept and design helps single mothers to achieve stability in their lives. Combinations of funding make permanent housing possible; state or federal rent subsidies enable it.

In actuality, the three categories are blurred. Some programs take emergency residents and call themselves transitional. Some transitional housing has a residency period that lasts two or more years, a more permanent period than a household may have ever experienced. Some transitional housing is planned to evolve into permanent cooperative home ownership. I therefore have used these categories to show the diversity of characteristics in the choices of how space is allocated in unique settings and circumstances.

In a futurist book I read recently, *Creative Work*, seven laws of ecology were described. The first six were familiar to me: everything is connected to everything else; there is no such thing as a free lunch; nature knows best; everything must go somewhere; continuous growth leads to disasters; competing species cannot exist indefinitely. It was the seventh that was of special interest, called the law of the retarding lead. "Adaptive changes come not from the species dominant in their niche but from species and individuals existing on the fringe and forced to be more resourceful." (Harman & Hormann, 1990) I was fascinated to find a concept so applicable to my experience in analyzing housing derived from the needs of single mothers and their children, who clearly exist on the fringe of our society and who have inspired a resourceful approach to housing.

Zones of Lifeboat Housing

Through studying these lifeboat models I found an expansion from four common zones to six zones of use in what I call "lifeboat" housing. In addition to the four basic familiar zones: the personal zone, the household zone, the community zone (for all those who live in the same development or building), and the neighborhood zone (which is the larger setting), two new zones have been introduced: a zone between household and community and another zone between the community and the neighborhood. Each of these zones has more or less importance depending on each person's life and capacity to be self-sufficient, economically and personally. Their relative dominance depends on the design of the development, which reflects the values and attitude of the sponsors, and on the characteristics of the neighborhood in which the housing is set.

The fixed personal zone is the center of a private world. It has decorations with personal meanings that we have placed there as reflections of ourselves in addition to our bed and storage for clothing and other possessions. Particularly in emergency housing, single mothers may share this zone with their child or children, similar to the way coupled adults share the personal zone.

The personal zone exists within the household zone, generally a cluster of rooms only used by those in a single household, or by people who are sharing to form new kinds of extended households. The household zone is also used temporarily by invited guests. In a typical housing unit, we are accustomed to a household zone that includes the bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen and dining area, living room, storage, and circulation space. Bedrooms are typically the personal places within the household zone. The bathroom in use is commonly serially claimed as a personal zone by self-sufficient adults. Typical dwelling units in the household zone are designed for nuclear families. But single parents in this kind of unit can experience isolation in a world of children unless there is easy access to other adults offering a community of support. There is also a parent need for respite from children. In a thesis video by Wendy Garber, "Housing Ideals and Disappointments: Alternative Housing Options for Single Parent Families," a single parent says she cared less about having a large living room than having a large bedroom, a private space for retreat. For children without siblings, the typical household unit can also mean isolation from other children.

Most of us need little, if any, intervention from others within the personal or household zone. But for children, the elderly, and others in times of illness and recovery, care-taking by others providing food or assistance with shopping, cleaning, or personal support may be necessary. This kind of help is ordinarily provided by others in the household. But for single adults and especially for single parents, others in the community or neighborhood can offer needed assistance when household connections are lacking. Friends living nearby can help with food, shopping, or informal child care. Without this kind of support, single mothers experience the kind of crises which, compounded, cause homelessness.

A developed zone between household and community contributes to the support network that is important to lifeboat housing. It encourages adults' and children's friendships, informal child care, and an extended family experience. This zone can include laundry units shared by several households, or kitchens, or a place to watch television, or a table for sharing meals, or a place for children to play. This zone is a subpart of a community zone that is divided and dispersed in close proximity to private household places.

Households are also linked in the larger community zone, which exists in most multi-family housing that has common building entries and mailrooms, elevators and staircases, lobbies, hallways, and sometimes laundries, yards, and roof-decks. Depending on design and individual preference, all these can be places to make social connections.

The community zone is largely undeveloped in traditional single family houses, where it is typically only the street or a shared back alley that gives access to a series of houses. A dead-end street is more of a community zone than a through street which is used by strangers in transit. Adjacent outdoor household zones may be unfenced and joined to create a visual community zone. But this is not a place that a group can choose to use without the participation or permission of the householder.

For affluent homeowners the community zone can be a jointly owned recreational area, a dock, a clubhouse, or a golf course. Condominium and cooperative homeowners, members of a land trust, or a co-housing development may have community, social, or workshop rooms or land in common. In housing for single mothers, most of whom are poor, a community zone

connecting residents requires a critical number to support on-site services such as child care and social services. A critical number is also necessary in co-housing for guest, hobby, and exercise rooms, large entertaining spaces, or group cooking and dining space. Small-group privacy is an asset in a community zone, particularly if it includes functions that create a zone between the community and the neighborhood.

In the zone between community and neighborhood, lifeboat housing often offers space in a child-care center to children living in the neighborhood. It may offer social services or invitations for meals as part of a neighborhood eating club, or extend use of laundry, workshop, exercise, gardening, or play space to others in the neighborhood. This offering to a neighborhood can make the difference between welcome for a lifeboat project or its being shut out when NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) is a neighborhood issue. The zone between community and neighborhood is a social bridge creating a neighborhood center. It can foster connections between generations and is designed as protected place, safe from strangers, vandalism, and crime.

Communities, households, and single people without communities, and strangers, who may be benign or threatening, all meet in the neighborhood. Group connection and awareness in the social bridge between community and neighborhood can expand safety by sponsoring crime-watches and marches to take back the streets.

The six zones and their characteristics differ in the examples I researched for my book, *More Than Housing: Lifeboats for Women and Children*. The differences are the result of the development sponsor's values and choices. For some, small-scale development is a priority in creating an intimate domestic approach. For some, large-scale development responds to the magnitude of need. The difference between small and large and the characteristics of residents influence the way zones are planned.

Particularly for more than 50 households, and where men, women, and children are housed, private apartments are typical and the zone between household and community may be minimal or nonexistent. When communities include women and children only, functions that are typically private to a household, such as a kitchen, dining, or living room, may be shared, creating an active zone between household and community.

Accent on the zone between community and neighborhood is inversely affected by scale. A larger number of residents makes a development more prominent in the neighborhood and makes the incorporation of services and spaces that can be shared with the neighborhood more economically feasible. But there are also small sites that invite neighborhood residents, particularly children, into their community spaces. Examples from around the U.S. include a progression of household space sizes in former houses, apartment buildings, hospitals, and schools that have been renovated for use as lifeboat housing. Some of the examples are newly constructed, some planned and/or built using modular prefabricated systems of concrete or wood. The spatial organization often separates service spaces from residential areas. In others, spaces for counseling and informal living are used interchangeably.

Conclusions

This statement from a single mother in a Red Cross emergency-transitional shelter in New York is compelling and persuasive:

We want to achieve something in our lives, you know. We have children. We don't have no men taking care of us. We're doing this on our own. We need somebody to push us and this place has. We don't want to be on welfare the rest of our lives, we don't. But we can't afford condominiums and co-ops.... We want someone to be behind us, [to say] "hey, you can make it. I trust you. I believe in you. Believe in us, you know, 'cause we can do it.... Just because we are homeless doesn't mean we don't have a future. We have a future. (Sprague, 1991)

We know these families are a large part of the future of the world. If they are helped to have decent lives, they can contribute to better futures for all of us on this planet. What else do we know? We know that more and more women and children worldwide are in need of housing and stable lives. We know that many kinds of sponsors have developed new models of housing that include sharing and services. We know many more are needed.

The new lifeboat models described here are the leading edge of redefinitions of home. But what I don't know and what I am working on now is the discovery of how living in these diverse models affects personal experience. Are experiences tied to differences in physical space or personal backgrounds? How do differences in

the experiences of those in lifeboat designs compare with experiences of those who have more stable lives and who live in conventional housing? I am pleased to be able to investigate these "Consequences of Design Choices" in a study I have recently begun, supported by an National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. I am working with the diagram of concentric zones of use to ask residents of lifeboat housing and others concerned with home to map the locations of experiences such as: friendship, conflict, safety, learning, success, trust, rejection, difficulty, help, celebration, and other new, good, or bad experiences.

I have some information from the first site visit I made where residents mapped the experiences I have listed. I discovered from three women in a domestic violence shelter that the location of their friendships in the personal and household zone and the location of their conflicts in the outside neighborhood, where their abusers were located, were both also the locations of their learning. I discovered that their limited household space in a single room encouraged them to join others in community spaces to form friendships and learn to trust, experiences from which they had been isolated living with their abuser. The close space fit is an antidote to isolation. I also discovered in discussion with a service manager of transitional housing that conflict within the expanded housing setting was embraced as an opportunity to teach and learn conflict resolution. For those to whom conflict has been associated with abuse, becoming adept and aware of how to negotiate conflict is particularly important.

I am using the same diagram with a study group in Boston. We are members of IONS, the Institute of Noetic Sciences, an organization founded by astronaut Edgar Mitchell to become a vehicle for exploring human consciousness. This work is part of a larger study I am doing called Finding Home, exploring social, psychic, and physical qualities. The zones I have identified for a diverse population of women, men, and couples living in more conventional settings include the personal, household, community, neighborhood, town or city, region, the nation, the planet, and the universe. The greatest variations and dilemmas have emerged in the community zone, which, for some, does not exist or which may be located at work.

I have tried to show that poor women and children, out of their critical and particular needs, are beginning to change the face of housing from the idea of the isolated "castle of man," sheltering dependent and/or abused women and children to home spaces that include sharing

and support. More women and children need this opportunity. How can this happen? The projects I have shown were created as if by magic. But the magic was and is the result of the vision and commitment of groups deciding to take action. There is latent magic at this conference. The magic rests in creating a goal. Money supports the magic, but need not be there at the outset. All development, private and nonprofit, uses OPM (Other People's Money). Greedy private developers working with savings and loan institutions around the U.S. used all our money for their commercial ventures. We are paying for it now and will be paying for it for years out of our taxes.

For innovative ventures, how and where to access money becomes clearer as the details of the goal emerge. There is no one way to do it, but money can always be found to deal with crisis. Crisis money can fatten the *status quo* coffers but it can also create a wider base of self-sufficiency for our world. The clarity of the goal, which is helped by having a site and/or architectural drawings, makes access to money easier. That may be the most important lesson we can adopt from our capitalist patriarchal traditions of development. We are only at the beginnings of feminist leadership in development that can change the face of architecture from monuments-as-usual to more conserving and pluralistic building characteristics and approaches. Patriarchal control and assumptions are still embedded in policy, education, and the leadership of form-making, zoning, housing regulations, business, economics, banking, real estate, and development.

Can more advocates for women chip away at the edges of outmoded traditions by becoming developers? Can these new developers bring a new morality to a planet choking on pollution, much of it caused in the U.S. by commuting from suburbs designed to isolate women and children? What can we do with all the unaffordable and deteriorating single family houses that are vulnerable to or which have already faced foreclosure? The big question is: Can an army of new nontraditional developers, an army of Eves, recreate the garden we have lost through centuries of patriarchal domination of building and land development?

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