

CHANGES IN THE HOUSING NORMS

Kenneth R. Tremblay, Jr., HERA 2011 President

Presidential Address

I teach in an interior design program at Colorado State University. On the first day of class when I tell my students that my Ph.D. is in sociology, the question comes up as to why I am teaching housing or interior building codes. I respond by stating that one needs to be adaptable and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. It actually is a little more complicated than that.

When I was doing my graduate work at Washington State University, I had the fortune to be a research assistant for Don Dillman in the sociology department. Don decided to collaborate with his wife Joye, who taught family studies, on a housing project funded by the Agricultural Experiment Station. I was given the job of managing the housing survey with 2,801 respondents and analyzing the data. The project resulted in one of my first articles, "Energy policies directed at the home: Which ones will people accept?" published in 1977 in the *Housing Educators Journal*. We had a second article two years later titled "Influences of housing norms and personal characteristics on stated housing preferences" in the renamed *Housing and Society*. Both of these papers were presented at conferences of the American Association of Housing Educators, now HERA, the Housing Education and Research Association. My dissertation was on housing norms and preferences, so, naturally, when I obtained an assistant professor position it was to teach housing. Over the years I had to learn more about interior design as that field skyrocketed in student numbers.

I have been a member of HERA for over 30 years, attending my first conference at Pennsylvania State University. Since that time, I have served the

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association in a variety of positions, including editor of *Housing and Society*. But being president has been my best experience. When I told my housing class last year that I became president of HERA the students were all impressed, especially when I showed them the gavel. I thanked them and simply said that it was my turn. That is one of the great things about our association—we always have eager volunteers for whatever HERA needs done.

I list my specialty as consumer housing and design issues. Most of us could say something similar. I have been especially interested in the basis of my dissertation—the housing norms. I can summarize this best by an in-class project I give in my housing course at the end of discussing the housing choice model in chapter two of *Introduction to Housing*, produced by HERA: “Based on our discussion and reading on the housing norms, one can understand that housing is not affordable for a growing number of Americans. Can some of these norms be changed or altered, and still be acceptable?” Most of my students say no, so it presents a prime time to discuss changes that are in progress.

The norm relating to *tenure* is homeownership. This norm will never be replaced by renting in the U.S. but we are seeing a growing number of young, urban professionals deciding to rent because of services, amenities, and location in the city. This is the basis for residential property management programs—catering to well-paid, busy professionals who demand quality. An additional change is the growing popularity of condominium ownership. Often this option is less expensive as the homeowner does not own the land.

The norm of *neighborhood/location* has seen changes from a typical suburban or rural setting with a private yard to a number of alternative choices. For example, New Urbanism is becoming a popular movement in which housing and commercial properties are mixed in a densely populated neighborhood. Conservation communities are luring some consumers, especially young retirees, by providing amenities such as parks, water features, walking/biking trails, and golf courses. Yards have seen a decrease in size in many locations due to the rising cost of land. This can be beneficial to the homeowner in the form of lower cost and less yard work.

The *expenditures* norm sets a standard that households should spend about 30% of their income on housing. Many HERA members conduct research on the financial aspects of housing, including discrimination and predatory lending.

A number of housing programs exist that provide financial assistance to lower income households so they do not have to go over the 30% figure, although some end up paying upwards of 50% and of course some cannot afford anything for housing and become homeless. It will be interesting to see what happens when the U.S. emerges from the current housing crisis. Will expenditures increase, decrease, or return to historical levels?

During the 1980s, I was convinced that *structure type* was the weakest of the norms. With advances in the manufactured housing industry, these homes were looking close to the norm of a conventionally-built single-family house. They held potential advantages such as affordability, innovativeness, and lower maintenance. I consulted with manufactured housing associations to determine how negative perceptions could be improved so ultimately more consumers would purchase manufactured homes. We obviously have not seen a major shift toward manufactured homes, but we have seen some changes in this norm. A major change is that more components of a house are being built in a factory and then transported to the site, such as roof trusses, built-ins, and portions of bathrooms. There is a significant number of Americans who do live in manufactured homes, and there is often a need for transportable homes in times of disasters or for temporary work sites. The well-equipped RV as a permanent home has a niche with some retirees.

The U.S. has high standards when it comes to the *space* norm. It is important, of course, to have a large enough housing unit to avoid overcrowding and to have enough bedrooms to meet societal expectations about who can share a bedroom. Given the decline in family size, during the 1990s I thought that the size of homes could be reduced. Less square footage can mean reduced cost, less cleaning and routine maintenance, and higher energy efficiency. While there has been considerable interest in small house designs, the average new house size has continued to increase. However, a growing number of young families buying their first home, busy career persons, and mature adults wanting to downsize are considering smaller homes.

Over the past 10 years I have focused more on the *quality* norm. Americans have high quality expectations, which have at least partially led to higher housing prices. The number of bathrooms has increased. The master bathroom has become a relaxation space, while the kitchen has become the hub

of activities; both are popular remodeling choices. Quality standards are being broadened to include energy efficiency, sustainable design, indoor air quality, and healthy homes. Universal design may become the major shift in quality as the U.S. population ages.

In my opinion, the housing norms are here to stay but will constantly change based on consumer needs, values, and lifestyles. Fortunately, many housing choices will be available in the future to stay abreast of a growing and increasingly diverse population. HERA can play an important role in meeting the teaching, research, and outreach demands regarding the consumer aspects of housing and design. Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your president, and I look forward to continuing my participation in HERA.