

Implications

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Culturally Sensitive Housing: Considering Difference

Imagine for a moment that you have no name, no family, no language, no history, no country, no property. Imagine also that you have no books, no music, no foods or clothes you like, no traditions, no religion. Who would you be then? Perhaps this is how your great-great-grandparents felt when they first came to America. Or, you could be one of the thousands of new immigrants joining our communities in search of a better life (Masnick, 2002).

Leaving behind war-torn countries, poverty, and lack of opportunity they come here unprepared to face the many challenges of their new circumstances. Likewise, their host communities struggle to define ways that will ease the newcomers' transition and enable them to become Americans in their own way—without having to abandon their own cultural traditions (see Figure 1).

Our changing socio-cultural environment has tremendous implications for the design discipline, presenting both challenges and opportunities. One of these challenges is the increasing demand for housing—especially affordable housing that can accommodate diverse values and ways of living, com-

monly referred to as *culturally sensitive housing*. As design professionals, many of us focus on the aesthetic qualities of the built environment and we tend to lack specificity in our treatment of particular social and cultural values (Pavlidis & Sutton, 1994-95). Often, we find ourselves with little knowledge when designing building types that lack a variety of precedents, like housing for immigrant and minority households.

Acknowledging and responding to what makes us different from each other is the first step in the process of designing culturally sensitive housing. This issue of *Implications* describes a way designers can begin to work toward providing residences that support cultural identity.



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Figure 1. The American flag and the traditional musical instrument “qeej” (far right side) are proudly displayed in this Hmong home



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The Case for Culturally Sensitive Housing

Research indicates that culturally insensitive housing with the accompanying loss of traditions and severed ties to community can lead to mental, emotional, and physical health problems along with crime, abuse, and even death (Adler, 1995). On the other hand, research also indicates that retaining cultural connections eases immigrant families' assimilation to the host country's cultural landscape.

As many of these cultural connections, evidenced through social, cultural, and religious traditions are often practiced in the home, the design of residential environments can support or suppress the practices that define our cultural identities. For example, by enabling us to continue to cook our traditional foods and establish our sense of difference, our homes can become vehicles through which we construct our identity, thus impacting who we might become (Hall, 2000).

It is also imperative to acknowledge the economic and environmental benefits that culturally sensitive housing can provide. Designs that accommodate diverse activities can have a greater appeal to a larger market share, can be occupied for longer periods of time, and can minimize environmentally and financially costly renovations—conserving resources in the process. Along these lines, sustaining cultural identity through the built environment benefits the overall population as it helps raise cultural sensitivity and awareness, helping to preserve the diversity of cultural heritage that enriches our communities and lives.

Challenges and Opportunities

With an understanding of the role design plays in supporting or suppressing cultural identity, culturally-minded designers can create spaces that sustain culture, the re-sale value of the home, and the envi-

ronment. Following the steps in Figure 2, you can begin to work toward culturally sensitive housing:

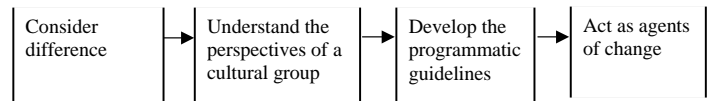


Figure 2. Working towards culturally sensitive housing

Consider difference

The first barrier to creating residential designs that sustain cultural identity lies in our willingness to acknowledge the existence of cultural differences and to devote the time, funds, and energy needed to uncover them. Practicing under the globalization umbrella when western ways of living are widely adopted, we can easily be fooled into thinking that we are all the same. After all, people around the world eat McDonald's, drink Coca-Cola, and wear Levis jeans.

However, in our daily interactions from shopping at the mall to visiting our children's schools, we encounter people dressing differently, speaking differently, praying differently, eating differently, and living differently. We cannot help but ask: "How different are we really from each other?" and "How long will these differences last?" Answers to these questions will help us determine if a design response is 'culturally sensitive' versus 'western.'

Exploring avenues to address this dilemma, we must first talk about cultural identity—one of the many facets that makes-up our sense-of-self. Cultural identity relates to elements such as our religion, food, music, arts, crafts, traditions, clothing, language, writing, and of course architecture and interior design (see Figure 3). Like other identity facets, cultural identity is an adaptable organism, varying both within individuals and communities. In other words, not all of us associate to the same degree with the various elements that comprise our cultural self.



Figure 3. Hmong doll of mother and child in traditional dress

A simple way to think of cultural identity and to overcome stereotypical accounts of what belonging to a particular cultural group entails is to represent it using a set of spheres. These spheres begin at the core and they get bigger as we move away from the core. Think of the core as those people

who strongly associate with all the elements that describe their culture. That association diminishes as we move away from the core. For example, a person might associate more with a job than with a religion (Hadjiyanni, 2002).

Reasons behind the variability of cultural identity range from individual characteristics (e.g., gender) to global forces (e.g., increased availability of the Internet as a way of learning about cultural events that allow us to position our identity and sense of difference) (Hadjiyanni, 2002). Given the evolving nature of cultural identity, designers must be able to take a stand and differentiate aspects of a culture that are:

- likely to survive modernization,
- likely to change, or
- might disappear altogether.

This warrants an understanding of the *logic* (Fischer, 1999) embedded within a cultural identity—the glue that holds a culture together. Following this logic, members of cultural groups adopt western practices selectively. They choose those elements of their culture they wish to change. For example, a person might be more likely to drink Coca-Cola than to change religion (Pilkington, Omel'chenko, Flynn, Bliudina, & Starkova, 2002).

Understand the perspectives of a cultural group

Designers cannot assume to know the cultural ideas of others. They must be trained to search for answers to questions they encounter using social science research methods, such as interviews with members from a cultural group (Zeisel, 1991). By asking questions such as, “Which elements of their culture do Mexican-Americans value and wish to maintain and pass-on to their children?” and “How do Native American cultural practices interact with existing American cultural practices?,” designers can begin to identify the logic inherent in a culture and the practices that must be supported through housing design. They can also acknowledge characteristics of ‘typical’ American house designs that suppress a group’s identity.

Develop the programmatic guidelines

Current design responses to the challenge of supporting cultural identity are often limited to the exterior of buildings, the replication of architectural elements (e.g., roofs, columns), and decorative features from that group’s past or place of origin (i.e., Chinatown). This approach fails to account for the complex and multi-dimensional facets of identity and perpetuates stereotypes of what it means to be a member of a culture. Expanding design responses to the interior of the home and emphasizing the support of cultural practices (e.g., practicing one’s religion, cooking traditional foods, and gathering with friends and family), are ways cultural identity can be sustained (see Figures 4 & 5).

The knowledge generated from research gathered about cultural perspectives (Step 2 in the process) can help determine the traditions/activities to be supported; the spaces in a home needed to support these traditions; and the characteristics of these spaces, such as room adjacencies, number of occupants to be accommodated, types of storage, furniture, and lighting needed.

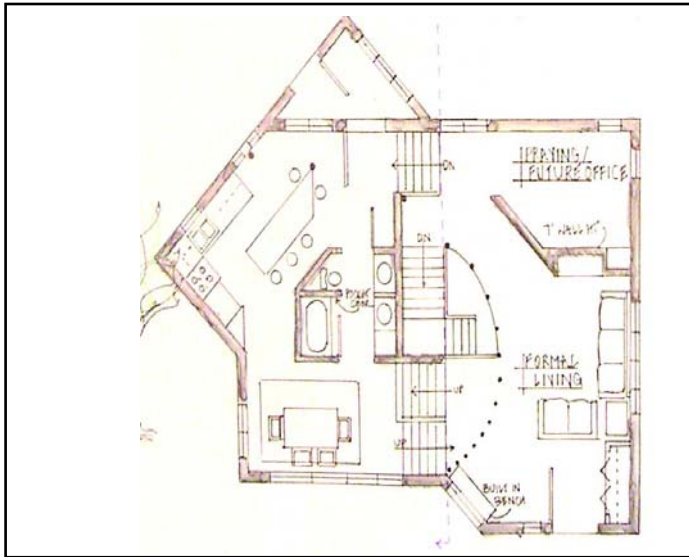


Figure 4. Floor plan of Somali residential interior. Columned wall enables Somali veiled women to safely cook uncovered (without a veil) while hosting male visitors. Designer: Joanna Carroll

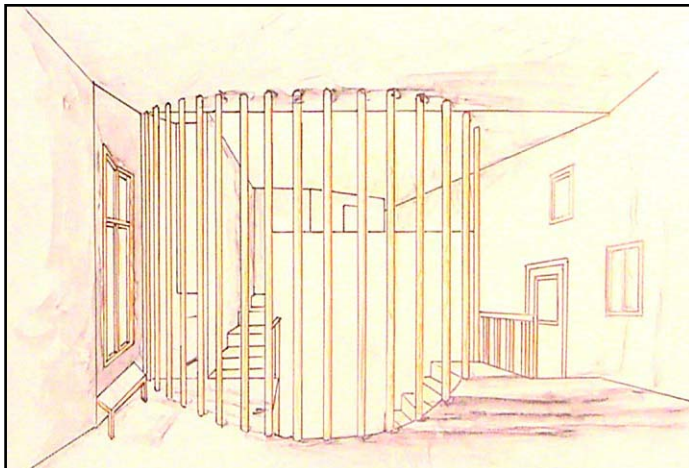


Figure 5. Perspective of Somali living space from screened kitchen. Designer: Joanna Carroll

Also, due to the number of diverse cultural groups in need of affordable housing, it is important to design culturally sensitive housing that is affordable and that maintains re-sale value, without compromising its appeal to the typical American consumer. Designs should allow for spaces that are adaptable and flexible, accommodating multiple uses and users as well as future modifications—*transcultural* residential design.

Act as agents of change

Designers are change agents. Designers, who use the built environment to challenge our assumptions and create a dialogue, can raise awareness about the problems faced by new immigrants and cultural minority groups. They can also help us celebrate the richness in our lives that results from such cross-cultural encounters.

An Example: The Hmong Culture

Following the withdrawal of American troops from Laos after the Vietnam war, members of the Hmong tribe were persecuted by the communist Laotian government for their role in assisting the Americans. In the 1980s, many Hmong came to this country, with Saint Paul, Minnesota, hosting one of the largest concentrations. Interviews with Hmong community members revealed that living in typical American housing limited their ability to abide by their religious traditions, creating stress in their lives.

Challenges

Much of the disparity between what the Hmong need culturally and what their housing provided was due to their Shamanist beliefs in spirits and ancestor worship. As the most important spirits live in the house, the Hmong must carry out their religious ceremonies in their homes. This dictates the need for an altar in the house so that they can communicate with their ancestors in cases of death, disease, marriage, and birth (see Figure 6). The altar however, needs to be placed across from the entry door so that the spirits can easily find it and this was not always possible. In one living room, the family had to place strings on the ceiling to help the spirits find the altar in their split-level home.



Figure 6. Hmong Altar

Additional constraints were due to the elaborate cooking and eating that followed celebrations. Having to invite everyone, including children, meant that families often refrained from hosting celebrations in the winter as their small social areas got overcrowded and uncomfortable with up to 200 guests.



Figure 7. Washing oversized kitchen utensils

Women also had difficulties cooking their traditional foods in open American kitchens as the smells from frying and using spices would permeate the rest of the house. Instead, they used propane gas down in the basement or outside which is neither safe nor comfortable in the frigid Minnesota winters. Washing oversized cooking utensils in

standard kitchen sinks was also difficult and in many cases the bathtub was used for this purpose (see Figure 7). Storage problems were also tied to celebrations because of the vast quantity of food, the serving utensils needed to feed 200 people, as well as the 5 ft freezer where the meat from sacrificed animals was stored.

Solutions

Design solutions that integrate the needs of Hmong families with the mainstream housing market's expectations include:

- a porch where Hmong guests can leave their shoes and coats while American families can socialize with neighbors;
- an altar wall close to the front entry; a large open space that Hmong families can use for celebrations while American families can use for living and dining;

- a kitchen that can be closed-off by a Hmong family but kept open by an American family;
 - a patio that can be covered to be used as an outdoor cooking area by Hmong families; and a shed where celebration items can be stored.
- These design responses are achievable and support *transcultural* residential design goals.

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Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Interior Design program at the University of Minnesota. With a background in both architecture and the social sciences, Dr. Hadjiyanni focuses her work on exploring how residential designs relate to identity definition. Her book, *The Making of a Refugee—Children Adopting Refugee Identity in Cyprus*, grounded her interest in the discourse between architecture, culture, and identity, which she continues to investigate with immigrant and minority groups in the US.



Related Research Summaries

InformDesign has many Research Summaries about culture, housing, neighborhoods, and related, pertinent topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Creating Ethnic Communities”
—*Journal of Environmental Psychology*

“Elderly Households and Socio-Economic Problems”
—*Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*

“Focus Group is Effective Data Gathering Tool”
—*Housing and Society*

“Home Influences Asthma Among Hispanic Children”
—*Journal of Exposure Analysis and Environmental Epidemiology*

“Housing and Family Size in Florida”
—*Population and Environment*

“Mobility Influences in Poor and Nonpoor Neighborhoods” —*American Journal of Sociology*

“Place Attachment in All-Black Towns”
—*Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*

“Environment Influences Adjustment to Migration”
—*Environment and Behavior*

“Community Cohesiveness Impacts Disorder and Crime” —*American Journal of Sociology*

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Dave Hansen, Ag Experiment Station, University of Minnesota (p. 1)

Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, University of Minnesota (remainder)

Hmong altar from the Hmong House, Science Museum of Minnesota



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