

# **East Meets West: Housing for People of Diverse Cultures**

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## **Introduction**

This paper addresses two topics, each dealing with several more specific point. The first briefly considers some aspects of housing research seen as part of Environment-Behavior Studies (EBS). The second looks in somewhat more detail of some implications of the relation between housing and culture. The first topic thus provides a context and draws attention to some general problems facing the field the second tries to go beyond the argument that housing needs to be culture-specific and suggests one approach that might help achieve that goal.

## **Housing and EBS**

Housing/Culture Relationships as a topic is an aspect of the larger field of EBS. All works on this topic, whether explicitly identified as such or not, forms part of EBS. Although the better is not the topic of the present paper, some brief comments about EBS are necessary because they have implication for my discussion of housing /culture relationships.

As I have often argued, EBS is best conceptualized in terms of what I call the three basic questions: The first dealing with human characteristics as they relate to physical environments; the second dealing with how and in what ways environments affect people; the third dealing with the mechanisms that links people and environments all of these are influenced by cultures, as are any other conceptualizations of EBS.

There is, however, one particular characteristic of EBS thus far which I regard as critical, and that is the lack of explanatory theory. This leads to two major problems: (i) there is no compressibility, is no way of concisely and economically, stating principles by condensing empirical findings (some examples will be given). (ii) there is on shared understanding of terms, concepts and the like.

The lack of compressibility presents a particularly serious problem in the case of housing. That probably possesses the largest body of literature in EBS, because housing is the primary setting par "excellence" has the most important meanings for people etc. Thus the thousands of housing studies actually become counterproductive. For example, a housing course, which I will be teaching starting in want three weeks,

makes this clear. The amount of material becomes overwhelming: I cannot have access to read and digest it all, students have even less chance, and practitioners and decision-makers certainly cannot be expected to one tends to “give up”. In research as in teaching, without theory one begins each time with the basics, reinventing the wheel, rather than starting at the “state of the art”, laundering right into the topic, hence advancing it.

The lack of agreement about the meaning of basic concepts and lack of operational definitions is partly a consequence of point (i) above, but also partly independent of it, since such agreement often precedes theory, in fact being essential for it's development. As one example, it becomes necessary to discuss and define the two principal subjects of the conference: culture and housing.

The case of “culture” one finds numerous definitions, but these can be reduced to a few classes, which is helpful; moreover these are not mutually exclusive but complementary, and are also more or less useful depending on the questions being discussed. (This will be developed to some extent, depending on availability of time).

To deal with housing cross-culturally it needs to be defined in a culturally neutral way. Like much in EBS this depends on expanding the evidence used to cover all types of environments, all periods, all cultures and the whole environment. One needs the largest and most diverse body of evidence for leading from precedents and such learning must be “indirect”, at a higher level of conceptualization. (*Fig 1* will be shown here). For purposes of defining housing adequately, it is the last of the above “expansion” of evidence which is critical – the consideration of the whole environment. This is because it makes one realize that the nature of housing is not self-evident. (*Fig 2* will be shown here). Lack of time again prevents me from going through the process whereby one arrives at a definition, and I can only give the outcome. To be culturally “neutral” and thus usable for housing/culture studies, housing needs to be conceptualized as a specific system of settings (embedded in the yet large system of settings which is the environment) within which certain systems of activities take place.

The question is “who does what, where, when, including/excluding whom (and why)”. To answer it one needs to consider from aspects: the activity itself, how it is carried out, how combined with other into system and the meaning of the activity (it's latent aspects). The latter are the most variable (*Fig 3* here) and hence helps explain the extraordinary variety of types of dwellings and possibly (at least partly) the disappearance of this variety. The meaning of activity is also important because it draws attention to wants (as opposed to needs) which are often more important and explain much about the nature of housing, changes in housing including space organization, shape, form, materials, decorations etc (examples will be given). It also helps explain the apparent “irrationality” of housing choices, including at least partly the reduction in variety. This is partly to the difficulty or inability of knowing how to respond

to cultural differences. This, however, brings me to far second (and most important) topic.

### **Achieving culture-specific housing**

Over the years much has been said about culture/environment relationships, and many have even accepted the value of, or need for, culture specific housing. But it is a bit like the well-known quip about the weather: everyone talks about it but no one does anything about it. The question is why that should be the case and I want to suggest one possible way of achieving that goal by making it possible. Thus, instead of once again the case for the need for culture-specific housing, I will accept it, at least assume that it is a worthwhile goal and see how one might go about it despite the more general problems briefly introduced in part one of this paper.

I would suggest that establishing a relationship between culture and environment (or housing) is impossible at that level of generality and abstraction. I have already suggested a way of defining housing operationally, in a way that makes it potentially more useful. More generally, it also helps to conceptualize "environment" as the organization of space, time, meaning and communication: or as a system of settings; or as a cultural landscape with certain attributers (ex. ambience which itself can be defined and operationalized) or... These conceptualizations as these of culture are complementary rather than conflicting, and which one is used depends on the context, the questions being studied etc.

In all these cases the process is one of dismantling, and it is critical in the case of "culture", which is an ideational form, a concept, a definition referring to most (or all?) of what people do (and one coined as recently as 1881 by Tyler). No one will ever "see" culture, only its outcomes.

As it stands even designing housing for a specific group is impossible. (As an aside I would raise the question of what is a valid, useful or relevant definition of "group" (another big gap in EBS). My usual answer is that lifestyle and activity systems are extremely useful, as I will try to show shortly).

How might one tackle the excessive abstractness and generality of "culture"? It is useful to think of these as being along two axes. The problem of excessive generality can be handled by the following dismantling (the link to housing being via the mechanisms of supportiveness, meaning etc). (*Fig 4* will be shown here).

The problem of excessive abstractness can be dealt with by dismantling along the other axis in terms of social variable. Thus one no longer speaks of socio-cultural variable but considers culture as an ideational concept (by analogy like a blueprint or DNA) which results in more specific, and observable, social expressions. (*Fig 5* will be shown here).

These two can then be combined into a single diagram (*Fig 6* here).

If I had the time to develop this further, my initial examples would be not of groups but of the variables in above diagrams and only then of specific groups. In this connection it is useful to borrow (from the biological sciences) the idea of a model system. In those, the effect or pole of the specific variables can be seen more clearly (in black and white as if were, rather than shades of gray). Such systems are provided by "extreme" situations (ex. developing countries) which are not simpler but easier to identify and study before proceeding to more difficult situations. These model systems provide not only "reduced competence" or higher criticality (no do other "special user groups", ex. The elderly") but also clear and striking examples of rapid changes in values, lifestyles, activity systems, roles, institutions, family structure, social networks, meanings (and hence wants) etc. There are always changing, but more slowly and less clearly. One consequence of this change (as well as of other variables) is the need for open-endedness in housing; another is that a major goal of housing researchers, educators and practitioners should be to increase the range of alternatives among which people can choose.

One other point, which is also a caution in dealing with culture/housing (or environment) relations one, tends to emphasize differences (ex. In anthropology culture relativity has long been orthodoxy). One tends to forget or ignore the possible existence of constancies or human universals. This is beginning to change, even in anthropology, but mainly through new fields such as evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, gene culture convolution etc. One implication is that it becomes easier to deal with differences, because they comprise a smaller percentage. Also, it is important to know that even if specific expressions differ, they stem from underlying constancies. (*Fig 7 here*)

This may also suggest possible convergence to certain images or types. Clearly this is another topic which I cannot develop here. But there seems to be a tendency for housing to become "suburban" when resources increase, as can be seen in many places (some examples will be given). This image of the detached home, greenery and low perceived density although, again, not universal (co-housing, communal housing, apartments etc-hence need to increase diversity) can be interpreted in terms of environmental quality which, in turn can be dismantled and made operational (and even diagrammed) through what I can environmental quality profiles.

One interesting example, with which to finish shows this shows this (and also implicitly the system of settings and role of meaning also suggested by analyzing advertisements) the Australian Green Streets Project posters (which try to make "densification" more acceptable). In fact studies done as part of this project have begun to identify which specific aspects of densification are acceptable and which are

not acceptable minima etc. (ignoring for the moment the question of whether densification is a valid policy in the first instance). (Slides will be shown).

## Conclusion

I have rather briefly and superficially dealt with a large number of issues in order to suggest at least one approach, one way of thinking and working that might help achieve culture-specific housing (assuming that is a worthwhile goal). Many of these issues I have both written and talked about previously. In fact, I seem to repeat them frequently (although in different orders which does make a difference). This is another illustration of the result of the lack of agreement about basics, about concepts, about the meaning of terms and the lack of theory. Thus my final point is that it might be time to begin to analyze and synthesize the many housing studies in many places. Cultures and periods already in existence and to begin to develop and clarify concepts and emphasize “lateral linkages” and theory development – both in our own research and in teaching. In connection with the latter we should encourage students (and institutions) also to work on topics such as these, rather than always doing ever more empirical studies.

## Biography

Amos Rapoport is one of the founders of the new field of environment-behavior studies. His work concerns the role of cultural variables, cross-cultural studies, lessons of traditional design, synthesis and theory development, urban design, and Third World design. He is currently Distinguished Professor of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He has been a teacher, visiting professor, and lecturer at universities and conferences in American and many other countries, including Israel, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea etc. His research is widely published and translated, and books he has written include *House, form, and Culture*; *Human Aspects of Urban Form*; *The Meaning of the Built Environment*; and *History and Resident in Environmental Design*. Rapoport was editor-in-chief of *Urban Ecology* and is on the editorial boards of a number of other journals, in addition to having acted as consultants to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the United Nations, and Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. During 1982-83 and again in 1985 he was a Visiting Fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge, of which he is a life member. He has edited a number of books and is the author of over 200 pages, chapters etc.