

*From a Mere Sleeping Place to a Birth-Right: Trajectory
of Housing Perspectives*

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Overview

Essentially, housing is one of the most basic needs of man from creation (Nurdini & Belgawan Harun, 2012; Kurian & Thampuran, 2001). According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, shelter is the first need Man thinks of after satisfying his need for food and clothing. Satisfying this basic need of shelter has seen several interventions for centuries spanning from individual initiatives, community self-help, corporate organizations, NGOs, and governments. The efforts to satisfy the housing need have hugely been influenced by the nature of the requirement, geographic location, ethnicity, colonial impact, and national policy direction. In the Palaeolithic era, man sought to satisfy this need in the form of caves, makeshift tents, nomadic artifacts, traditional mud houses, wooden houses among others (Kwofie, et al., 2011). Thus, housing in this era was seen as merely a place to lay a head and pass the night. Later in the history of man in his development and civilization, housing was looked at as a place for living and comfort beyond what was previously seen as simply providing shelter and protection. As population increases in cities, social and public health problems began to increase. The industrial revolution in the western world drew attention to these health problems which housing has a great role to play spanning numerous studies on housing and health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2006).

In the 19th century, words such as tenement and slum would emerge to be used regarding

housing. The use of these words suggests the view of housing as an economic commodity (see: Patillo, 2013; Nwuba & Umeh, 2015). 'Slum' was used to refer to the dwelling of the lowest members of society. By the mid-20th century, housing issues such as inadequate housing, unhealthy housing, and unaffordability of housing would become obvious occasioning governments' introduction of social and public housing in 1936 to house everyone including the poor (see: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2006:1-6; Balchin, Isaac & Chen, 2000).

In the mid-20th century, the global view of housing took different dimensions with the advent of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (See: UN, 2015) and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Thus, housing in its adequacy was seen as part of the right to a standard of living. The Cocoyoc Declaration that redefined the idea of development explicitly stated housing among the basic needs whose unfulfillment by any developmental effort is considered "a travesty to the idea, Development". Towards the end of the century, many international human rights treaties would advocate this same view of adequate housing as a right or some elements of it such as the protection of one's home and privacy (UN-Habitat, 2009). Although not categorically stated in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the combined effect of articles 14, 15, and 18(1) echoes into the charter as a right to shelter or housing. Therefore, "adequate housing is a fundamental human need for survival and protection from the environment" (Biddle & Yap, 2010). Consequently, "housing is seen as a national responsibility" (Hegedüs & Horváth, 2015).

The above laws have introduced the global world to the adequate housing paradigm. For which reason the UN-Habitat in the Habitat Agenda defines it in terms of adequate shelter to mean:

"adequate privacy; adequate space; physical accessibility; adequate security; security of tenure; structural stability and durability; adequate lighting, heating and ventilation; adequate basic infrastructure, such as water supply, sanitation, and waste management facilities; suitable environmental quality and health-related factors; and adequate and accessible location with regard to work and basic facilities: all of which should be available at an affordable cost" (UN-Habitat, 2010).

This definition attracted a lot of attacks from academics and stakeholders in transnational housing debates (Senayah, 2015). According to her, the majority of those who argue against this definition argued on the basis that the definition is too decorated and untenable. This is because, if housing were made to possess all these features, the cost of housing would invariably be very high and unaffordable, and given the income level of the middle and low-

income households, housing would literally be impossible for them. Those who stand in opposition to such definitions, tend to share John Turner's (1972) view that housing is more than a noun but a verb.

John Turner's definition of housing covered the dwelling unit and its processes including maintenance, and human values, and any housing activity. He suggests, "What is important about housing is not what it is but rather what it does" (Turner, 1977). Thus, his emphasis was on the functional role of housing other than material qualification of housing that includes the standards/regulations of housing. He further claimed that the definition of housing problems by material standards from the planners, designers, and officials' viewpoint to be ridiculous for those who see housing as an activity. At this juncture, it seems Turner would advocate for people to set up squatters as housing if they wished. However, Turner (1972) does not preach for people to build their own houses like the squatters. In his words, "households should be free to choose their own housing, to build or direct its construction, and to use and manage it in their own ways", he suggests, households should have the choice to develop their house based on what suit their needs not necessarily based on standardized material regulations or any restriction or prescriptions (Senayah, 2015).

Perhaps Turner was unaware of the essence of these regulations; perhaps unaware of how risky it is to just build without any regulations or standards. In 2003 in Bam, Iran, an earthquake killed 30,000 people, and the majority of them were in their homes. The reason for this disaster was largely attributed to the construction and material aspect of the houses. Also in the same year in France, a heatwave killed about 15,000 people due to the lack of climate control systems in their houses (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2006). Perhaps it is important that we have these standards and regulations to guide the understanding of housing issues such as housing quality, safety, and health among others to inform decisions.

The discussion in this paper reveals how housing moved to be seen as a right and necessitating the provision of adequate housing. The adoption and definition of the word, adequate housing, not only suggest housing in the right quantity but also exerts housing in the right quality. It is why the opponents of the definition of adequate housing argued that the definition seems to make housing untenable. In other words, the quality of what should be called housing is far too high for middle and low-income households to afford. It can thus be noted that the definition of adequate housing contains features that can be used to determine the quality level of housing. Also, the use of standards in housing which John Turner thinks the proponents of housing as an activity are against; also suggests laid-down criteria for measuring and determining housing quality.

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