

RESEARCH INTO HOUSING AND HOUSING SERVICE SYSTEMS

G Beacon - Sept 1973

0.0 - PREFACES

For some time now I have thought that housing and associated service systems were, as a whole, much neglected and have been frustrated at the thought that there was little chance of many good ideas for improving housing ever getting put into practice. There seemed to be many ideas that were talked about but nothing much beyond that. Meeting others that felt the same and had the will to do something about it (mainly Norman Fellows and Heimir Salt) and given the opportunity to do some research into housing this year I was prompted to start writing what follows which is meant to explain our objectives.

One of the first things we did was to approach Bob Jefferies of the Dept of Town Planning and discuss it with him. He has given much valuable critical comment and has made us see the significance of what we want to do and put it in its context.

With limited resources it is unlikely that we ourselves shall achieve much but at least we can hope to influence thinking on the subject so that others may be able to.

1.0 - INTRODUCTION

Although there is a general awareness that there are radical changes occurring in our society, (and it is not clear whether these are really social economic, political or ecological) and although there are many professionals and academics saying that to cope with these changes interdisciplinary barriers must be broken down, these barriers seem as high as ever.

A very necessary ingredient to a meaningful analysis of the present situation is an appreciation of the ranges of applicability of the different conceptual frameworks. For example, we would like to have an idea of what relative weights to give to, say, an economic argument and a sociological argument in a given situation. For this to happen there must be more than a meeting and exchange of views between disciplines each one must learn the essence of the others so that a common body of public knowledge may be built up.

(The idea of creating a body of public knowledge is that within a sphere of influence the aim should be that all reasoning should be available for public comment; not necessarily for the now famous man on the Clapham omnibus to make an instant judgement on any technical detail, but available in such a form that he may, if he has the requisite mental powers, form a judgement through a process of diligent study of the public knowledge available.)

We feel that the development of a body of public knowledge within the field of housing is worthwhile for two reasons.

Firstly it is a meeting point for the conceptual frameworks of several disciplines and perhaps thorough research into housing could help the development of these conceptual frameworks. Secondly, it is one of the starting points for many larger scale problems, most journeys start there; a large proportion of natural resources is used there; most social problems begin there; and most of the demand that keeps the nation employed is generated there. A concern with the whole sphere of activities in the home could perhaps give a better understanding of the larger problems as well as suggesting improvements that might be made in housing itself.

The notion of choice is central to the field of housing. Many planners believe that it is not their place (or anyone else's) to interfere with the process of choice – merely to predict and cater for it. Against this view one can point out that people do not always understand the consequences of their choices. Is there then, a role to be filled in

helping people to evaluate the alternatives open to them, so that they can make the best choices to meet their needs(1)? Choice can, of course, operate at different levels and the restriction of choice at one level can expand it at another – The package deal (in holidays, cars, etc.) can restrict choice but can make available opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. Perhaps, in certain cases, there is a place for more strongly designed lifestyles that by giving people the opportunity of choosing them would expand choice a higher level?

These questions must be very relevant at a time when the increasing complexity of society requires more experts to make it function yet the public are demanding more of their own choice since they are beginning to distrust these very experts(2).

2.0 – SERVICE SYSTEMS AND THE HOUSING TEAMS

At present there are many services associated with housing over which the designers have only limited control: social services, transport, mains services, leisure services, etc. It may well be that this is, by and large, the correct balance but an investigation of the possibilities for increasing the responsibility of the designer with respect to these services should at least increase understanding of the problem. Increase responsibility will of course require new techniques to be applied at the design stage (e.g. those of operational research or social administration) and it may well be better to think in terms of a housing design and administration team which has a continuing responsibility to its schemes.

The systems that service housing are provided by a collection of bodies: statutory authorities, entrepreneurs, residents, etc. Thus we believe there should be more investigation into the housing team having more say in the setting up of these systems and discover where it might be appropriate to set up the service systems themselves. (There are already, within the cooperative housing movement, groups which fulfil this function to a limited extent)(4).

One object of the housing team taking more responsibility over service systems might be to improve them by nationalising them and providing facilities for them at the design stage. This might also make it possible to run service systems that would not normally be viable.

If housing teams had extra power to shape the way in which their schemes are used, could they enrich the range of choice available to the public by housing actually built or feasibility studies to assess public reaction? An important question that raises itself here is: How is it possible to escape the restrictions placed on the range of choice by the difficulties of funding experimental housing?

Much public evaluation of housing will, of course, depend on precedent which is not present in the case of innovation. The situations in which innovations can be introduced will, therefore, have to be carefully selected or possibly deliberately created as experiments. For innovations that need considerable investment or “tight” design, new housing is probably the best situation because the design itself will tend to select those people that are suited to it.

3.0 – NATIONAL PROBLEMS

There are many questions that are in the minds of those concerned with the built environment like: “Can more efficient use of water at the local level have a significant impact on national usage?”, “Can local food production or dietary advice help this country to be less dependant on world markets?”, “Can designed changes in local transport systems and local changes in the cause of mobility help national transport problems?”, “Can a degree of designed self-sufficiency at the local level help the problems of unemployment?”, etc. Usually the answer to this sort of question eventually causes changes in the practice of the disciplines involved. However many of these questions involve several disciplines and this causes a slow realisation and response to the problem. Perhaps what we need is a new marking out of areas of

interest (in our case it would be one concerned with activities centred on the home) so that the questions may be resolved within our field.

Defining new areas of interest would, probably, entail the explication of problems expressed in different ways in other areas. How, for example, do problems that are expressed in the terms of national economics translate themselves into problems at the local level. In what way would the following anomaly posed by Sir Geoffrey Vickers affect the designer of service systems on housing schemes.

“The two main features of the situation are that technology breeds, I believe inescapably, mounting unemployment; and also that it creates extraordinary disparity between what those in the technological industries can generate and what others can generate. The result of this is that all the labour-intensive industries are starved. All the services are starved, when the service is rendered to a human by a human without the aid of a machine, so that we move rapidly to a situation in which the only abundant resource, which will be human beings, becomes the only one that is too expensive to be used. This is a nonsense but it is nonetheless the nonsense that we live with, is it not?”

4.0 – STRATEGY OF RESEARCH

At present we have not the resources to do justice to the approach outlined above which would require a sophisticated research program. However, there is a considerable amount of information available throughout the world on service systems and one task that can be undertaken at this early stage is the collection and evaluation of information about the use of service systems that could be designed into simple housing schemes. Some design at an early stage will at least enable superficial evaluations of the systems to be made in their context and show the most valuable course to follow. The appendices give an indication of some of the service systems we are currently interested in.

As a first step towards building up a body of public knowledge on this subject we shall hope to involve a wider group of people in our activities. Of course, the more people that are willing to contribute in a creative way the better, but what we will be mainly looking to this wider group for is a critical capacity from a wide range of disciplines. To bring this about we would like to send our working papers with plenty of room for comments. We are currently looking at the possibility of using computing machinery to help with printing and editing.

APPENDIX 1 – RETAIL SERVICES

Retail services are usually provided by entrepreneurs in response to demand. The housing designer's responsibility, if any, is usually confined to the provision of shop premises. We wish to investigate the possibility of the housing team expanding its responsibility to providing other facilities at the design stage and having a supervisory role over the operation of local retail services.

We would like to understand what the following questions entail: "Could the employment of a shopkeeper on behalf of residents resolve the dilemma of service to the customer and, at the same time, wanting to persuade them to spend as much as possible?", "Can the rationalisation of and the provision of facilities for retail deliveries (like, say, providing automatic debit transfer facilities or secure delivery cupboards) improve and extend their operation?"

An important ingredient in attempting to answer these questions will be the application of the techniques of operational research. In studying efficiency of operation of retail services however, we must remember externalities such as the social value of the local shopkeeper or delivery man. It may well be that, in some cases, the part of their job that is, in its way, social work should be explicitly recognised and suitable training and remuneration given.

APPENDIX 2 – PLANT CULTIVATION

Plants are cultivated for many reasons: food for humans; as a recreation or to provide a setting for recreation; to support animal life (wild and domestic); for aesthetic reasons; etc. Sometimes the plants are grown for one purpose only – as with commercial vegetable production, playing fields or municipal flower beds. In the case of the plant cultivation associated with housing, however, the reasons are, more often than not, mixed garden cultivation nearly always has a recreational value as well as the value of the produce; grass on minor open space facilities recreation as well as having aesthetic value; and reasons for planting trees may be a mixture of shelter, produce and aesthetics.

Apart from some initial planting at the time of construction, the residents are usually the only agents for plant cultivation. We wish to investigate the possibilities of providing extra plant cultivation services. These could involve services like the following: information services (e.g. like an extension of services given by allotment associations); allotment hire (designing allotments into housing could increase their convenience yet retain the advantages they have over gardens); professional cultivation of gardens and allotments with residents harvesting the produce (taking vegetable production as an example, a rough estimate of the present cost of cultivating one hundredth of an acre in a purpose designed scheme is ten pounds per year. This could produce 100kgs of fresh vegetables per year); the maintenance of open space, etc.

The possible value of a particular service will depend on design parameters like planning densities, the expected type of resident and even the expected states of the world commodities markets. With food shortages predicted for the future should we be designing housing with the capability for efficiently utilising recreational labour in food production?

APPENDIX 3 – TRANSPORT

Here the main problem is the private motor car. The large amounts of space required by them; the danger (especially to children with consequent strain on parents); and the nuisance and pollution they cause must be set against their admittedly considerable advantages. It is not, therefore, surprising that doubts are now being expressed about the feasibility of full motorisation (3). However, it is still planning practice that all housing should accommodate at least one car per dwelling. This means that those not wishing to own a car or those unable to have one for reasons of age, disability, cost, etc., must live in an environment for which they are not properly equipped.

Also, at current levels of car ownership, the reduced number of non-motorists in any given area will not only suffer the nuisance of a large number of cars but will not be able to create enough demand to support services appropriate for them. They not only suffer worse public transport but probably also worsened local retail services.

We wish to investigate what possibilities would arise if the housing team had the power to design transport systems into housing (like improved bus services, local hire car and taxi facilities, electric trolleys for deliveries on site, etc.) and to control the forms of transport on their schemes.

APPENDIX 4 – SOCIAL SERVICES

Many of the people working in the social services at the local level (GP, teacher, social worker, policeman, health visitor, etc.) have overlapping functions. A common criticism made of the social services is that they lack co-ordination in these areas of divided responsibility.

In certain areas this is being corrected – There already is some contact between housing management and social workers. We wish to find out in what way the

housing team could help to improve the co-ordination of the social services on a local level and help local residents to participate in them (perhaps by informing them how they can become school governors or members of hospital management boards, etc).

APPENDIX 5 – RESOURCE USE

There is much interest at present in methods for the efficient domestic use of resources: total energy systems, WC's that use a minimum of water, solar heating, methods of refuse recycling, etc. This also interests us but we feel that practical solutions will not simply depend on the selection of efficient appliances: it will require the integrated design of the different systems that use resources. For example, the efficient recycling of refuse may well require control of retail packaging as well as the designing of refuse collection systems that can conveniently cope with, say, the separate collection of different categories of recyclable refuse.

(1) This is a question that has been raised by several different people over the past few years. See for example the report of the work by Donald Appleyard at Berkley in *The Architects Journal* 5th September 1973.