

## Housing Norms and Standards: The Design of Everyday Life

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### Abstract

This editorial introduces the articles in this thematic issue, which bridge the gap between technical housing standards, design practices, and socio-cultural norms.

### Keywords

everyday practices; home; housing design; technical standards

The way we live and our quality of life significantly depend on the lived experience of our homes and the type and quality of space they offer. Housing equality, security, and quality are important for the health and well-being of everyone. In countries with an advanced economy, people often spend most of their time at home. For instance, in Great Britain in 2023, adults spent on average 18 hours and 43 minutes at home every day (IPA, 2023). Housing design is therefore greatly informed by generalisations related to social and cultural norms or expectations around home use and lifestyles, especially in housing that tends to be designed to minimum standards and requirements such as social, public, and affordable housing.

Housing reflects both the socio-cultural expectations and norms around what a home should look like and provide, as well as the technical standards meant to ensure homes are safe, usable, sustainable, and decent. Housing is where socio-technical concerns become standardised and spatialised, but also where they are challenged by everyday routines and changing lifestyles.

This thematic issue of *Urban Planning* aims to bridge the commonly found separations between studies of technical housing standards, design practice, and socio-cultural norms, acknowledging that they are deeply entangled. Decent housing is the outcome of appropriate design standards and maintenance as well as the different perceptions of housing quality by diverse housing stakeholders and economic or political constraints.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare some of the immediate effects of poor housing quality, with two-thirds of social housing tenants in England having experienced a mental health deterioration (Mind, 2020) and almost 40% of households suffering from overcrowding reporting psychological distress (Tinson & Clair, 2020). The pandemic has also revealed how the lived experience of homes and housing needs can substantially differ from that envisioned by normative design standards and the assumptions on home use and useability they are based on (Jacoby & Alonso, 2022).

This thematic issue provides a wide range of discussions on how socio-technical discourses shape housing concepts and realities. In “The Lifestyles of Space Standards: Concepts and Design Problems,” Alvaro Arancibia reviews the theoretical basis and changing interpretations of space standards. His analysis, framed by a study of Georges Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological* (1978) and Karel Teige’s *The Minimum Dwelling* (1932), explores fundamental concepts, historical approaches, and specific applications of space standards in England and Chile. Based on this, Arancibia argues for a more architectural practice-based understanding that can address the evolving needs of diverse households and create more inclusive and adaptable living spaces.

Related to this conceptual reevaluation of space standards, several articles focus on specific drivers or aspects of housing design guides and standards. Lucia Alonso Aranda examines the development of housing standards in “The Influence of Space Standards on Housing Typologies: The Evolution of the Nuclear Family Dwelling in England.” The study investigates how a state-led promotion of the nuclear family since the nineteenth century has shaped housing policy, regulations, and standards. This promotion is especially evident in key housing reports such as the *Tudor Walters Report* (1918), the *Dudley Report* (1944), and the *Parker Morris Report* (1961) in England. The article analyses how these reports and standards have fostered typological shifts and layout preferences in response to changes in personal and social interactions at home, and how they relate to the spatial hierarchies and family dynamics of nuclear families. Given recent demographic and societal changes, she posits the need for more innovative design solutions and evidence-based space standards that can address contemporary transformations in housing demand and use.

In “Handbook, Standard, Room: The Prescription of Residential Room Types in Sweden Between 1942 and 2023,” Daniel Movilla Vega and Lluís Juan Liñán provide a detailed study of how residential room types, rather than unit layouts, became the focus of housing design handbooks in Sweden. Reflecting changes in housing policy and a broader national modernisation project, these room types employ standards in a way that productively challenges housing norms and invites their reinterpretation by designers. The recent disaggregation of the room into its functional, separable parts in design manuals indicates to the authors a further shift in the conceptualisation and implementation of regulations. This shift represents a move from prescriptive to performance-based regulations, which can overcome the limitations of dimensional or layout requirements and abstract the function-specific room to an idea.

Savia Palate, in “Heating Standards and Obsolescence in Post-War Britain’s *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*,” examines how *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* (1961), the basis of the so-called Parker Morris Standards in England, advocated for a future-proof “adaptable home,” and how this required the provision of larger homes and modern heating systems. However, the promise of flexible, comfortable, and healthy homes through a transition from the traditional open fireplace to smokeless central heating was complicated by its dependence on wider socio-economic and environmental changes. As Palate argues, raising heating

standards and efficiency came with the introduction of new domestic appliances that promoted consumerism and increased waste production. This shift also raised questions about the equitable distribution of infrastructures and housing investments, as well as efforts in modernisation, environmental concerns, and class-related housing inequalities.

Palate's historical enquiry into heating is complemented by Yaneira Wilson and Yankel Fijalkow's "Energy Renovation and Inhabitants' Health Literacy: Three Housing Buildings in Paris," a study of why, in current social housing in need of retrofitting and modernisation, the ability by residents to control their environment through heating becomes a fundamental element of care and housing inequality. The article develops a methodology for assessing housing quality in relation to "health literacy in housing," taking into consideration "building monographs," collective memories, "inhabited surveys" or cartographies of homes, and individual decisions on trade-offs between prohibitive heating costs and health and wellbeing benefits. According to Wilson and Fijalkow, physiological experience and lived knowledge of housing are essential to negotiating daily life in substandard housing and improving physical and mental health outcomes.

Like Wilson and Fijalkow, Raül Avilla-Royo and Ibon Bilbao focus on lived experiences and mapping home uses and layouts to analyse the actual occupation of homes in "Domestic Cartographies: A Post-Occupancy Ethnographic Assessment of Barcelona's Social Housing Strategies, 2015–2023." The article provides an in-depth analysis of recently completed social housing, using a novel user-centred and qualitative approach to assess public housing policies in relation to housing procurement strategies. The qualitative review of housing projects planned and completed in the last eight years is complemented by quantitative data. Based on this analysis, the article concludes with policy evaluations and recommendations at the scale of the neighbourhood, building, and dwelling.

Another article that reevaluates subsidised housing projects using a mixed-methods approach is "Compact Housing for Incremental Growth: The K206 RDP Project in Alexandra, Johannesburg" by Afua Wilcox, Nelson Mota, Marietta Haffner, and Marja Elsinga. Completed in 2010 as part of the South African Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the K206 scheme is used as a case to discuss the importance of establishing and integrating both appropriate technical standards and context-specific design solutions while considering the long-term social, economic, and spatial needs of residents. In particular, the article reflects on the challenges and opportunities of incremental housing and the phenomenon of the backyard room as a spatial solution to socio-economic demands in low-income housing.

In contrast to these post-occupancy evaluations, Ayşe Zeynep Aydemir and Tomris Akın consider in "Adaptive Reuse of High-Rise Buildings for Housing: A Study of Istanbul Central Business District" how adaptive reuse offers opportunities for speculative housing design in a studio-work-as-research context. Based on an in-depth analysis of real-life urban and economic conditions and a range of speculative design propositions focusing on sustainable, affordable housing, they explore potential new spatial norms and standards and how these are culturally and typologically contextual to the site. The design speculations and analysis result in a series of local but also transferable insights about adaptive reuse and the increasingly important relationship between housing standards and environmental concerns.

While the question of lived housing experience is evident in many of the articles and integral to their research methodology, in several contributions, it is the main concern. Oliver Moss and Adele Irving, in

“Manifesting the Imagined Homeless Body: A Case Study of the Men’s Social Services Centre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK,” use the case of the Salvation Army’s Men’s Social Services Centre in Newcastle, designed by the architects Ryder & Yates (1975), to examine how architectural intentions shape lived experiences of the homeless. Based on a 10-year study, the article discusses how conceptions and imaginations of the homeless body are instrumentalised by a person-centred architectural design that is empathetic, moralising, and pedagogical. It further explores how the experience of the hostel is influenced by the tensions between a simultaneously caring and institutional architecture, highlighting the contingent relationship that exists between lived experiences and design intentions.

Sophie Johnson, in “Domesticity as Nation Building in the United Arab Emirates,” investigates how intangible cultural heritage is produced by collective lived experiences of homes. Studying the Emirati villa, she analyses how its provision and design are part of a nation-building and modernisation effort through imagining and constructing a shared history and future. National identity is simultaneously spatialised and enculturated through domestic architecture, the social norms that inform it, and everyday cultural practices around hospitality. The compression of housing histories and cultural production in the UAE, therefore, challenges the conventional distinction between “authentic” and “invented” heritage.

Whereas Johnson studies contemporary domesticity, Francesca Romana Forlini, in “The Cultural Construction of the Domestic Space in France: Women’s Lived Experience and the Materialization of Customs,” asks similar questions about the history of domesticity as a cultural construct in France. The article scrutinises the lived experience and social or individual identities of women as shaped by domestic interiors, societal norms, gender stereotypes, and the regulatory power exerted by the French state through mass housing design. It further analyses how female resistance to social norms and normative cultural systems emerges through the subversion of codified behaviours and aesthetics, resulting in incremental transformations of domestic interiors and emancipation from the strictures of the “art of living.”

The articles in this thematic issue discuss housing typologies and technical standards across different geographies, times, and cultures. They demonstrate how interactions between norms and standards are contextual, leading to different technical requirements and socio-cultural expectations. However, common to the projects studied in the articles is a focus on subsidised forms of housing, whether social, public, affordable, or emergency homes. Subsidised housing developments often share social, economic, and political agendas as well as extensive standardisation of their design and are the housing sector in which minimum standards often matter most (Ozer & Jacoby, 2022). As evident from the range of contributions, socio-technical discourses tend to be interdisciplinary and consider often both the technical housing standards and the lived experience or changes in socio-cultural norms that challenge them.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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