

Book Review

The Unsheltered Woman

Eugenie Ladner Birch

The Unsheltered Woman: Women and Housing in the 80's, edited by Eugenie Ladner Birch, New Brunswick, N.J.: Center for Urban Policy Research, (1985).

Gender related planning problems seldom receive the attention they deserve. Recent changes in demographic patterns have created a growing interest in the relationships of women to housing, planning and public policy. A new book entitled **The Unsheltered Woman** moves these relationships to the forefront of housing and planning policy. **The Unsheltered Woman** is a result of the Seminar on Women and Housing sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Hunter College between 1981 and 1983. This collection of essays serves as an insightful contribution to the literature on gender related housing issues.

Authored by professionals from a variety of backgrounds and specializations, the twenty essays in this book provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the unique housing circumstances that affect today's women. Contributors "include architectural historians Dolores Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright, housing analyst Michael A. Stegman, architects Judith Edelman, Michael Mostoller, and Theodore Liebman, developers Lynda Simmons, Clara Fox, and Carol Lamberg, environmental psychologist Susan Saegert, community organizer Jan Peterson, South Bronx Development Office Project Director Rebecca Lee, and planner Jacqueline

Leavitt."

Part I focuses on identifying the unsheltered woman and her needs. Demographic patterns are analyzed, and housing preferences are elucidated in terms of age, marital status, income group, and household composition. More than forty percent of the nation's ill-housed population are female heads of households. As more women enter the labor force, and as the number of female heads of households increase, housing policies must be re-examined to address the unique requirements of these women. Single parents and elderly single women constitute the two population groups most severely affected by poor quality housing. Part one discusses the experiences of Denver and New York City in reviewing their housing programs in light of women's needs. The concerns of single working women and working wives are also identified as groups who have special housing interests.

Part II of **The Unsheltered Woman** offers housing alternatives that may be more responsive to the general housing requirements of female heads of households whether they are single, single parents, working wives, or elderly. A "checklist" identifies the special requirements of these groups of unsheltered women: safe, well serviced neighborhoods, proximity to safe, reasonably priced transportation, accessibility to shopping and other services, flexibility in design of living spaces and efficiency in terms of housekeeping. Women with children have

Jamie Englund is a Master's Candidate in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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other requirements such as the presence of child-oriented services in neighborhoods, housing located near to work places, dwellings with work spaces designed for more than one worker, and private space for parent(s). Single women similarly have special interests: housing that is safe and secure, and architectural designs which accommodate sharing of living space. Essays discuss the potential of various forms of housing to meet these needs of unsheltered women. Suggested solutions include cooperative and intergenerational housing, shared living arrangements, boarding houses, rooming houses, mini-dwelling units, and the renovation and rehabilitation of existing buildings to promote flexibility in use and community support. Shared housing is advocated as a positive way of providing affordable units in urban areas. Mini-dwelling units, which do not currently conform to the housing code, combine the advantages of both multifamily and private dwelling through private living/kitchen space, and shared bath and communal areas. Practicality in terms of affordability, physical design and service provision are the focus of this section.

These themes of affordability and practicality are also applied to the design of implementation strategies addressed in Part III. Planning for a more equitable provision of adequate housing will be accomplished through the skillful administration and design of programs targeted towards needy population groups. Innovative ideas for implementing housing strategies in light of economic and political realities are discussed, with specific examples from New York City. A two-part appendix summarizes gender-related housing problems in America, and in New York City.

Although a disproportionate share of cases in *The Unsheltered Woman* are concerned with the specific housing problems of New York City, the basic innovative concepts and techniques described are universally useful. They serve as a means of broadening the scope of traditional housing policy, design and planning to include the special day-to-day needs of women who are often neglected by planners and architects. Gender conscious policy planning has the potential to help women improve their quality of life. This practical and contemporary collection of essays responds to changing demographic currents, and contributes to action-oriented research in planning for those who face severe obstacles in obtaining adequate, appropriate housing and urban services. □

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