

# Housing as a Cultural Subsystem: A Unifying Metatheory of Production

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## Abstract

The physical forms of housing and cultural values are interrelated. This study aims to explore the relationship between housing and culture based on the overarching perspective of metatheory to understand the complexities of housing as a whole. Besides the overarching theory of culture as a landscape for the sociological production of housing, symbolic interactionism, material culture and structuration contributed to the unifying metatheory of this process. The housing production metatheory model is presented with three main sections: conditions, agents, and product. This study examines the production of housing as a theoretical process and provides a framework for the further research of housing as a cultural subsystem.

## Keywords

Housing, Theory, Metatheory, Culture, Production

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## 1. Introduction

Housing is a universal human need that transcends social system, location, and ideology. Likewise, housing is a *representation* of all these factors and provides a substantial manifestation of cultural principles. Housing can be as simple a concept as physical shelter or as complex an idea as the representation of social class and status. Clearly the conceptual production of housing provides a window into the culture in which that housing is produced.

The cultural values and norms appear in the design of objects and the physical environment. The physical forms of housing are built based on how it is to be used. The use of space and the layout of housing express cultural values and norms. Although the relationship between housing and culture has been studied a theoretical framework needs to be further established. The purpose of this study is to present this framework in the form of a sociological metatheory and to discuss the relevance of theory development in the field of housing. This work attempts to answer King's [1] call to do

more than just *use* theory in the study of housing, rather engaging in "*theory building*" (p. 48). He asserted that in the past engaging with theories in housing studies has not been focused on the *creation* of theory but the *application* of theory to housing issues. This study seeks to understand housing phenomena by attempting to create metatheory.

## 2. Theory and Metatheory

First we will define and compare theory and metatheory. According to Gove, theory by definition is "the coherent set of hypothetical, conceptual, and pragmatic principles forming a general frame of reference for a field of inquiry" (as cited in [2], p. xx). Put more plainly, "theory requires an understanding of the way that concepts relate together that help us to understand why something is as it is or why something happens" [3] (p. 5). Metatheory on the other hand is much broader and is concerned with the study of individual theories for the purpose of creating a new theory or "an overarching theoretical perspective" [4] (p. 15). That is to say

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that theorists and metatheorists are fundamentally different in their object of study. Theorists look directly at the world and social phenomena while metatheorists study previously established theories [4]. In other words, theorist work from a primary source and metatheorists work from more secondary sources.

Wagner [5] states that the difference between theory (or unit theory) and metatheory is rarely comprehended and that the mistake of assuming a theoretical concept must fall into either one category or the other is often made. Another common mistake that researchers make is to treat life as a set of “discrete social processes” (p. 100) which implies that a distinct theory is needed for each phenomenon. Metatheory, on the other hand, works as a whole body whose individual parts (unit theories) work together and relate to one another [6]. While appreciation of the scholarly value of theory may be assumed, the importance of metatheory is less obvious but perhaps more widespread. Metatheories, also known as “orienting strategies” [5] (p. 27), give a broad view of social phenomena from multiple theoretical perspectives and function more closely to a philosophy or paradigm.

Hamilton [7] spoke of a metatheory for the discipline of clothing and textiles and came to the conclusion that unit theory, while helpful in understanding specific phenomena, can never encompass the entire field of dress. Likewise, housing as a discipline cannot be explained or analyzed by any single theory no matter how complex. Only the overarching perspective of a metatheory can adapt the merits of multiple theories into a means of understanding housing as a whole. In the words of King [1], “if we aggregate all concepts we have somehow understood them” (p. 49).

### 3. Housing

Before discussing theory further it is necessary to define the thing about which we are theorizing. Housing studies have been defined “as the study of the social, political, economic, cultural and other institutions and relationships that constitute the provision and utilization of dwellings” [8] (p. 8). Clapham [9] emphasizes the distinction between houses and homes stating that the first is objectively defined while the second is emotionally based. He warns of the limitations placed on the concept of housing by viewing it solely as a house or a home but promotes a unified approach. This work takes the middle ground suggested by Clapham [9] that balances between defining housing as physical shelter only – a “bricks and mortar” approach [8] (p. 8) – and viewing housing from the highly personal perspective of the household. Here housing is conceptualized as a shared cultural object, the need for which unifies society and the form of which changes over time and space.

## 4. Relevance

Despite the fact that housing is often considered less than a true discipline and therefore unworthy of its own theory, some have taken the opposite position and view housing as having untapped theoretical potential [1, 10]. For example, Clapham [3] states that housing is a worth subject of theoretical research and that the process of housing is an “obvious focus” for the creation of theory (p. 3). He further expresses the “need for theory that enables us to examine the ways in which the built form is made...which is built on the social construction of the institutions and other social relationships involved” [3] (p. 8). Social scientist, Jim Kemeny, identified the study of housing as being “unnecessarily theoretically impoverished” [8] (p. xvii) and stated that it was either atheoretical or ineffective in clearly communicating its theoretical position [11]. This work will demonstrate that housing is a subject about which theorizing is both possible and needed.

## 5. Culture as a Unifying Paradigm

Thus far we have spoken in general terms about the attributes of theory and metatheory. Now we shall move to a discussion that is more focused and constructive. To present a metatheory of housing production one must first introduce the realm in which the process occurs; that landscape is culture. Culture “is the broadest unit of analysis” [7] (p. 2) in the world of sociological study. It can be said to encompass all other elements of human interaction with each other and with their environment. Culture serves as “a unifying paradigm for inquiry” [7] (p. 2) into sociological matters such as the current study.

Three basic needs make up the body of culture: material needs, social needs, and ideological needs [7, 12]. Human behavior is driven by attempting to meet these three needs. Housing can be called a cultural subsystem because it addresses all three needs. First material needs are met by the physical shelter housing provides. Second, social needs are met by housemates or neighbors as well as by the social distinction housing conveys. Lastly, ideological needs are met by housing design that coincides with the values and norms of a society. These cultural needs do not operate in a vacuum but are instead interactive. For example, ideological and social needs can be met at the same time by producing housing that is considered attractive within a culture. Ideological needs are met because the housing is following the norms of society. At the same time social needs are met because the positive response or admiration received from others.

In addition to the three categories of needs, culture is also made up of “mechanisms for adaptation” [7] (p. 4). According to Hamilton [7], there are seven such mechanisms that organize a culture and allow humans to adapt to their material, social, and ideological environments. These mechanisms include the following:

- Economic Organization
- Political Organization
- Family and Kinship Organization
- Socialization
- Ideological Organization
- Arts and Aesthetics
- Communications

These seven components of culture are “dynamic (not static) and systemic (the parts are interrelated, dependent on, and interactive with one another)” [7] (p. 5).

Besides the overarching theory of culture as a landscape for the sociological production of housing, several other theories of smaller, narrower scope contribute to the unifying metatheory of this process. Symbolic interactionism is one unit theory closely related to housing as it is concerned in part with the interaction between people and their environment. This theory deals with the meaning of day to day living that emerges from social interaction [13]. Humans function as “social actors” within these interactions and work to express their beliefs and ideals through their environment [14] (p. 57). The negotiation of relationships among people is achieved using objects as props. These props may be utilized by social actors in two different ways: physically or symbolically [15]. For example, one could use props to convey the desire for privacy in a physical manner by building a gate about their neighborhood. Likewise, the same meaning could be expressed symbolically by designing a home with the front entrance facing away from the street. Although the symbolic meaning of such a complex prop as housing is extremely nuance, several common dimensions of housing symbolism exist. They include social organization (interaction of behavior and built environment, social status (conveyance of impressions of wealth and family roles), and economic/legal status (possession of citizenship in a community or family) [16].

A second relevant theoretical perspective that demonstrates the dynamic and interrelated properties of cultural components is material culture. This theory states that the artifacts a society produces are both reflective of the group’s culture as well as being instrumental in maintaining or altering that culture through social interaction. Like symbolic interactionism, material culture emphasizes the

interrelationship of social actors and physical props known as artifacts. Unique to the theory of material culture is the idea that “we could neither be ourselves nor know ourselves” without our artifacts [17] (p. 61). Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands, and Spyer [17] highlight the fact that our artifacts not only define who we are as living beings but also tell our story after we are gone. Therefore material culture is not only a theory of the culture being created today but of that which will exist tomorrow and in years to come.

Lastly, structuration is another theory that informs the housing production process and is a sub-theory of material culture. According to Tilley et al. [17], structuration is concerned with the ongoing “process of *becoming*” that relates to culture and the built environment (p. 306). Friction between agents (people) and structure (architecture) is caused by changes in each and perpetuates the becoming or restructuring of culture as a whole [17]. Giddens [18] described “the study of social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, [as] social practices ordered across timespace” (p. 2). Pred [19] specifically emphasizes that within structuration there is the need to modify not only one’s architecture to meet new demands of ever-changing culture but also the need to add or eliminate certain activities from one’s schedule. This adjustment of time and space can be applied to housing in the relatively recent appearance of family rooms in American homes and the disappearance or repurposing of dining rooms [20]. As the priorities of a culture change so do people’s habits and by extension their living arrangements.

## 6. A Model of Housing Metatheory

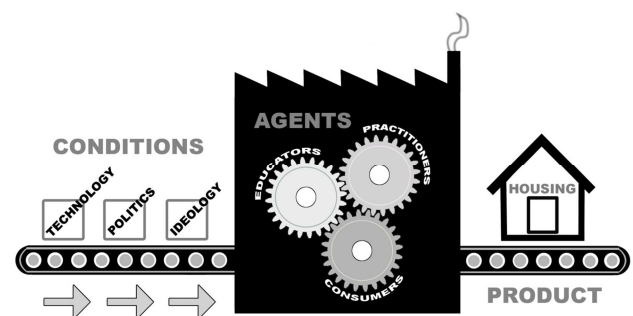


Figure 1. Housing production metatheory model.

The theories of structuration and material culture as well as the metatheory of culture serve to inform the authors’ perspective on the conceptual production of housing. The resulting metatheory of housing is illustrated in Figure 1. The figure is divided into three main sections: conditions, agents, and product. The sociological process of housing production is represented in the form of an assembly line with raw

materials (conditions) being carried into the factory (agents) which produces the final product (housing). Within the “Conditions” section, three of Hamilton’s [7, 12] mechanisms are listed as examples of cultural aspects that could make up the “raw materials” of housing. The “Agents” section harkens back to the theory of structuration and depicts three distinct “gears” that process cultural conditions making them into the final product. These agents are educators, practitioners, and consumers. Educating agents could be university professors, textbook publishers, magazine editors or other people involved in the dissemination of knowledge about housing. Practitioner agents include architects, interior designers, decorators or other people involved in creating housing products. Finally, consuming agents include the common person who buys, builds, and/or lives in the produced housing.

Lastly, the “Product” section relates to the theory of material culture and its assertion that artifacts (such as housing) are products of the culture in which they were created. This metatheoretical model could be altered to show a circular relationship among the three elements. That is to say that previously produced housing becomes a cultural condition and in turn affects the entire sociological process of new housing production. If one will recall, the dynamic and perpetual nature of this cultural metatheory was evident in its underlying theories as well.

With the presentation of this model it is important to remember that *culture* is the environment in which the process of housing production is said to take place, not politics as is the case in the work of some theorists such as Jim Kemeny [21]. Here politics are considered “Conditions” within the larger atmosphere of culture. Therefore while this metatheory takes into account the influence of political forces, such aspects are not the sole focus of this model. One will remember that we are discussing housing as a *cultural* subsystem not a political one, although the vast majority of previous theories of housing have been policy-based [1].

## 7. Application

The application of this metatheory of housing as a cultural subsystem is nearly as broad and varied as the study of culture itself. In designing subsequent studies one could focus on the “Conditions” of the metatheory by studying any of the three cultural needs individually or in interaction with each other as well as any of the individual or interacting mechanisms of culture. For example, the material need could be viewed exclusively and over time in a review of changing technologies in housing production. The social and ideological needs could also be added into such a review by including the analysis of what changes in housing technology

illustrate about societal values and cultural norms.

Likewise, one could just as easily focus on one or more of the “Agents” involved in the sociological production of housing. Entire industries are built on the observation of consumer behavior and its effect on the production of housing. Trend forecasting is achieved in this manner by attending to both consumer buying patterns as well as the most up-to-date work of practitioners such as interior designers and from this information forming educated guesses as to what housing production will look like in the future. This kind of study would meet O’Neill’s [21] criterion for effective theory that assumes “work as housing scholars *must* intersect with public discourse, and therefore must expose how public discourse is constructed, and how public attitudes and ideologies are formed” (p. 175, emphasis in original).

Finally, one could, like Thompsen [20], design a study viewing all three sections of housing metatheory in concert while looking at changes in the “Product” evidenced over time. By choosing to look at the “Product” as a manifestation of theoretical principles, the author chose the “bottom up way” of theorizing suggested by Clapham [3] (p. 5) and King [1]. This type of theorizing does not merely apply existing theories to housing but looks at the phenomenon of housing to create new theory [3, 1]. Thompsen (unpublished data) also emphasized the importance of time and culture as universal backdrops for any study. It is impossible to view housing production in a vacuum without the influence of historical era and cultural values. Such an assertion is indicative of metatheory.

## 8. Conclusion

Housing is a cultural constant which transcends time and space making it ideally suited for theoretical research. However, housing studies have been previously limited to applying theory to housing issues, rather than building theory. Additionally, the concentration has been primarily on the policy of housing. Housing production as a sociological process is appropriate for the creation of metatheory as it is a vast, overarching construct with many potential sub-levels of theoretical inquiry. By illustrating the conceptual production of housing, the authors sought to simplify the advanced principle of a metatheory and provide a resource for other researchers. Similarly, it was the authors’ aim to create greater attention to and discussion about the production of housing as a theoretical process, an area of research that is lacking.

The most obvious value of the metatheory discussed in this work is that it provides a solid framework for further research. The value of this metatheory can also be seen in its



visual representation. This process can be divided into three distinct phases or parts: conditions, agents, and products. The conditions of technology, politics and ideology serve as raw materials for housing and influence housing as a cultural system. Educating agents, practitioner agents and consuming agents apply cultural conditions in the production of housing. Housing as product relates to the culture in which it is created. Each of these parts can be studied individually or in concert and all rely on the underpinning of culture for their structure. Thus it can be said that housing itself is a cultural subsystem.

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