

## DENSITY AND IDENTITY: THE PLACE OF SHARING AND PRIVACY IN SUSTAINABLE HOUSING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between sharing and models of sustainable housing. It highlights the importance of sharing as an additional method of sustainability and argues that it be given a place in the sustainable debate alongside techno-science solutions. The paper makes the point that sharing is a sustainable practice because it reduces total housing cost (and total construction), provides opportunities for collective use of space, and increases overall quality of life by enhancing chances for social interaction. In this way, sharing can fulfil all three principles of social, economic and environmental sustainability. The paper presents as an exemplar model of shared sustainable housing, the R. M. Schindler Kings Road House. It argues that sustainable housing models such as the Kings Road House can make green design solutions a desirable choice for status conscious home owners. The data for this paper was drawn from a typological study and extensive literature review.

### KEYWORDS

Single-family house; green design; sustainability; R.M Schindler; New Zealand; cultural practices.

### INTRODUCTION

“This looks like a normal house. It’s not made of mud brick and it doesn’t have crystals hanging in the window. They said it was a house built with healthy and safe building materials and planet-friendly solutions, an eco-house as some call it. So why doesn’t it look folksy and frumpy, maybe with grass growing on the roof?”—(Nancy, 2005)

In this paper, we wish to add to the debate on the various pathways to sustainability (Guy & Farmer, 2001). However, rather than mark some approaches as being a darker shade of green than others, we instead wish to ask why some pathways, compared to others, have fallen out of favour in the sustainable housing debate. Taking this as our general frame of investigate, we question why the social practice of sharing—clearly a method of sustainable living—rarely draws comment in the literature on sustainable housing. Apart from public housing models for low income families (Ahrentzen & Franck, 1989), sharing rarely appears in green design.

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, we attempt to locate the position of sharing in the sustainable housing literature. Building on this, in the second part we discuss the social construction of sharing in the New Zealand context. Pakeha New Zealand has a cultural preference for the spacious single-family house and in general Pakeha Europeans avoid shared living space with non-nuclear family members. We argue that to make the sharing of resources and green housing desirable to mainstream middle class home owners, models of modified conventional single family houses are essential. In 2007, Beacon Pathways identified customer demand as a major barrier to the housing industry’s adoption of

sustainable systems. A reason for this slowness in uptake and interest by consumers is that 'green' lacks cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1987). While it is vital to show people the economic sense of adopting sustainable solutions over the long term, it is also essential to present these solutions as having status. Models are one way in which to demonstrate the economic and status value of green houses. Thus in the third part we focus on sharing in design, and give the example of architect Rudolph Schindler's Kings Road house. We chose the Kings Road house because it is an example of a modified single-family house built for a status aspiring middle-class home owning family. By using this model we show that sharing and sustainability is an option for higher income families as well as for families in public or affordable housing.

#### SHARING: A SUSTAINABLE METHOD

Sharing as a concept and practice is inextricably tied to other spatially expressed cultural notions, such as territory and privacy. As a negotiated idea the meaning and performance of sharing changes not only culturally but also through time. In Anglo-Saxon cultures, sharing remains heavily stigmatised; laden with nineteenth images of slums, over-crowding and low income families in tenement blocks. Further still, sharing connotes images of 1960s and 70s communes where often individuals lacked personal space, autonomy and privacy. But divested of these political representations, sharing can be seen as a pragmatic solution to sustainable issues.

In the literature, sharing is defined obliquely as an agreement between two or more persons, where parts or a whole of a building are exchanged or commonly used between parties. Sharing in housing is the agreement that space, services and resources can be used commonly. Thus, because it reduces a household's ecological footprint, sharing can be seen as a method of sustainable practice. The math to this is simple.

Williams (2001) in her significant work on household consumption in Britain, notes that smaller households, especially those with only one person, consume more energy, space and goods than larger households. As household size continues to shrink in Britain (Williams, 2001) as well as in New Zealand (Bates & Kane, 2005; DTZ, 2004), the ecological footprints of households are expected to rise. Coupled with this increase, is the aspiration to own a spacious home; despite the shrinkage in household size, larger houses will continue to be built while demand remains and is encouraged economically (Ingersoll, 2006). Together these factors make sharing practices appear a pragmatic solution that, when accompanied with sustainable systems in the home, can help to reduce a household's ecological footprint.

In Western societies, the populating of the landscape by spacious single-family houses has been widely criticised as a product of the culture of privatism and architectural gluttony (Hayden, 1984; Ingersoll, 2001, 2006; Russell, 2000; Schwarzer, 2000). The finger is often pointed at the buyer's longing for a lost paradise (Slater, 1995) and on consumer capitalism, which has commodified the house and reduced it to being a receptacle for modern conveniences, "new homes are bloated and domestic interiors are now galaxies unto themselves" (Schwarzer 2000:78). Sharing is often pitted against privacy, but sharing can not happen successfully without some level of privacy whether personal or familial (Stewart-Pollack & Maconi, 2005; Hashim, 2006).

Privacy maybe expressed differently in different cultures (Hashim, 2006; Ozaki, 2002) but the common element is the control of unwanted interpersonal interaction and communication

(Kent, 1993). Privacy is about the freedom to control or not control the flow of interaction; it relies on the governing of access. Attributed to privacy then are the leitmotifs of liberal democracy: choice, access and the freedom to express individuality, which together makes the acquiring of privacy a potent ideal and valuable commodity (Reimer & Lindsay, 2003). For this reason, privacy is more marketable than sharing and as such social status has been attached to the quantity and quality of it. In Western housing, this is represented in the number of bedrooms offered to buyers (whether three, four or five); number of ensuites; size of garage (double); and overall square footage of the house (Chui, 2004). The tight layout and functional determinism of the single-family house reflects how highly valued privacy and control is in the West. It also demonstrates the reason for its ongoing popularity and its appearance in non-Western countries that have rising middle-classes (Munch, 2004; Ozaki, 2002). Chui (2004) in a critique on the socio-cultural reasons for unsustainable housing aptly notes that the culture of maxima promotes the seeking of bigger homes, and that we "seldom ask ourselves whether we need all the space in our homes (e.g. the lounge rooms in Western houses), and whether we need the sizes of the rooms as they are" (2004: 70). As Chui (2004) remarks demonstrate, it is not privacy that is the villain behind unsustainable housing as much as it is the 'culture of maxima'.

### SHARING & DENSITY IN NZ

In New Zealand, the Pakeha culture of spatial excess which prevents sharing and the smart use of resources, elides green criticism and scrutiny. Yet the propensity to seek private spacious houses has come with a price: sprawl and resource consumption. Privacy is not a biological necessity like warmth. But like other cultural constructs such as territory, it is presumed to be an innate and fixed (see Hillier, 1973; Newman, 1973). While it is true that the need for privacy in the house exists universally for ontological reasons (King, 2004; Kent, 1993), the levels and the means of finding privacy are culturally crafted and are to a certain degree malleable (Kent, 1993). In New Zealand, the Pakeha culture of spatial excess which draws on privatism as its rationale is not a generic global type. It has evolved from our national sense of belonging and identity building as a 'green' nation of 'quarter-acre dream' home owners (see Bell, 1996).

Similar to Australia, New Zealand's sense of nationhood is also tied to being outdoors and close to nature (Bell, 1996; Dominy, 2000). It is an identity constructed out of a number of historical factors particular to the representation of land in settler colonies as *Terra Nullius* (Park, 2002). The idea that the land is without people, implies a wilderness, spacious and green. It is a representation that directly affects the houses Pakeha Europeans' choose to own and live in (Bates & Kane, 2005). From this mixture of idealism, eurocentrism and state intervention was born the New Zealand dream to own a single-family house on a quarter acre section; a dream that was easily realisable up until the 1960s (Dixon & Dupius, 2001). As Bell (1996) comments on the relationship between sustainability and nationalism, the home owning aspiration makes individuals a participant in New Zealand society. Dixon and Dupius (2001) write of early Auckland, "The resulting vast tracts of detached bungalows sprawling across new suburbs represented dominant beliefs about the meanings of home, family life, child-rearing, privacy and the separation of work and home" (2001: 355).

The sprawling landscape of Auckland is a result, in part, of the State's forging of a nascent New Zealand identity. In addition to these authors' points about nationalism and housing, when a single-family house is purchased, one can engage in quotidian discussions with others about the Nation's housing market, economy, politics and the latest home renovation techniques and goods. Thus by being part of the home owning discourse, an individual can

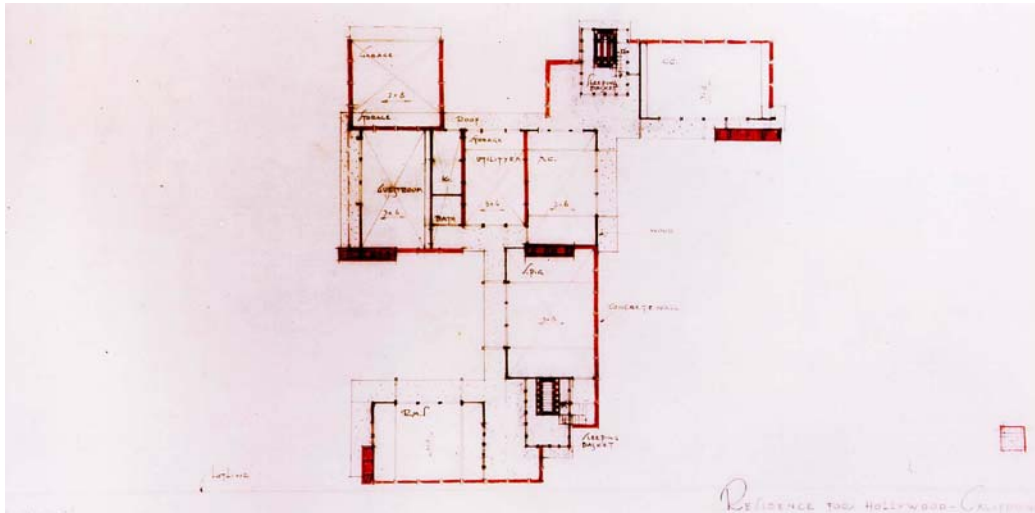
feel part of a status-rising group whom with each new housing purchase climbs further up the housing hierarchy (see Grimes et al, 2006). For this reason, models that only demonstrate the economic sense behind turning green are not enough. To persuade consumers that they want green houses, models that lead and show the cultural capital and worth in sustainable solutions are also needed.

### **THE KINGS ROAD HOUSE: A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE SHARED HOUSING**

Situated in the fringe of West Hollywood, Los Angeles is the Kings Road House (see Fig. 1; 2). Built in 1921, by architect Rudolph Schindler (1887-1957), the house exemplifies how sharing as a sustainable method can work for class conscious middle class home-owners. It is a model that inspires and gives status in turning green.

The house was explicitly designed for two families to live under one roof: the Schindlers and Chaces. Apart from the kitchen which separates the wings, the courtyard outdoor area was also used communally for the children to play in, relaxation and evening dinner parties. Prior to occupation the couples agreed to "join in a cooperative enterprise to own land and build a house that on completion the parties could live in separate portions" (Schindler quoted in Smith & Darling, 2004:125). The separate guest apartment could be used by either party for their guest or friends. The Kings Road house successfully embodied Schindler's ideas about flexible use and spatial integration and throughout the life of the house it absorbed the habitation and routines of many different individuals and families.

From the street, the house frontage does not give the passer-by clues to the less than conventional layout of its interior; to most it appears anonymous and the same as any other suburban dwelling. Made of untreated redwood, concrete slabs and exposed timber the interior consists of two wings, connected by a communal kitchen and a guest room. Schindler designed the house according to his space philosophy; where space as an architectural raw material could be manipulated to create an array of interlinking rooms from which together formed an organism (Smith & Darling, 2004; Ho-Park 2006). The rooms were intended to act as parts of a whole. But unlike the house-as-machine analogy of Le Corbusier, rooms in Schindler's Kings Road House were not reduced to a modernist function. Schindler's focus was on the interplay of spaces, and of the fluid relationship between interior and exterior, "Our rooms will become an integral part of the house. The distinction between the indoors and outdoors will disappear. All rooms will become part of an organic unit, instead of small separate boxes with peepholes" (R. Schindler quoted in Smith & Darling, 2004: 124).



*Fig. 1: Floor plan of Kings Road House, West Hollywood, California.*

As testament to the flexibility of the design layout of the house, after the Chaces left two years later in 1932, another couple moved into the wing. The Nuetras remained for five years during which Schindler's wife left for a few years to only later return. In the last years of the house as a home, in the seventies, Schindler occupied one wing and his wife the other. Undoubtedly, during the course of its active use, from 1921 to 1977, the spatial layout of the house adapted to the different needs of its occupants and facilitated social integration and sharing (Smith & Darling 2004; Noever 2003). The design gave the occupants the choice to either retreat into their private areas or to enter the communal areas—it provided both security and openness. As Pauline Schindler once said of Kings Road house, it was a “meeting house” (Smith & Darling, 2004). The house gave both privacy and the option to interact, thus facilitating social as well as environmental sustainability through the sharing of resources.



*Fig. 2: Model of Kings Road House.*

The Kings Road House fits into the description of what we have defined elsewhere as conjoined housing (Maher & McIntosh, 2007). This housing type is a Western version of the vernacular compound house and is when two or more households come together to share common facilities<sup>1</sup>. As well as being purpose built, such as is the Kings Road house, a conjoined house is formed from two or more detached dwelling that have been joined together, or by the interior modification of one single-family house. The common element in these three variations to the conventional house is the creation of spaces that facilitate sharing, flexible use over time and most crucially, the construction of areas that safeguard personal and familial privacy<sup>2</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

“Crucially, in this relatively immature period in the transition to a more sustainable design it is vital that we recognize alternative visions of ‘green’ futures, and that we hold open the possibility for a wider dialogue and debate about the future of sustainable architecture” (Guy & Farmer, 2002).

Outward discussions about the sustainability of sharing practices in domestic settings are effectively sidelined in the debates about sustainable. Its ‘granola’ edged image is part of the reason for its marginalization today. As a result—in an earnest effort to mainstream environmental issues—sharing and other “alternative visions of green” that too easily connote images of the counter-cultural 1960s and 1970s, are often either ridiculed or ignored

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<sup>1</sup> For Australian examples of contemporary conjoined and compound houses see Grieve and Hon (2005).

<sup>2</sup> In our preliminary research, we carried out a nationwide survey and found twenty examples of this type of housing in the private market. All the examples are built or are still in the design process.

in the discussions about sustainability. Instead, research concentrates on what solutions technology and science can provide. Guy and Farmer (2001, 2002, 2005) call this dominance in sustainable debate by science a type of techno-centrism. The dominance they suggest has come about because too much emphasis has been placed on reaching a global consensus. They argue that this myopia will negatively affect the viability of realising sustainability in the future because it neglects social contexts and the insights gained from examining alternative solutions. The Kings Road House and conjoined housing are examples of such alternative pathways to going green.

Houses that facilitate sharing should be given room in the sustainable debate. In this paper we have highlighted the R.M. Schindler house to show how a single-family house can be modified into flexible spaces for non-traditional household structures. The R.M Schindler is not an ordinary house, it is a house that inspires and leads. It demonstrates how sharing, status, ownership and sustainability are complementary. Sharing, in short, can be seen as a viable sustainable method for middle class housing: single-family houses can be renovated (or purposely-built) and modified to accommodate flexible living and sharing practices. The societal barriers to this are not impregnable and impervious to change. What is needed is first the recognition of the potential of sharing, and the inclusion of it and other alternative methods and solutions in the sustainable debate. Taking this as a starting point, regulations that would inhibit the realisation of mainstream shared houses could be challenged. Sharing as a concept and practice does not mean living in 1960s-like communes with little private space or control; rather sharing is about acknowledging that humans are social beings and require the culturally calibrated optimization of both private and public spaces within their immediate domestic environment. Sustainable housing solutions should capitalise on this human necessity.

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