Toward culturally sensitive housing –
Implications of health disparities for research, policy, and practice

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Over 54 million people in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home

- 439,000 in MN
Health disparities and living conditions

Minnesota is one of the healthiest states in the nation.

But, it also has some of the greatest disparities in health status and incidence of chronic disease between Populations of Color / American Indians and Whites.

The Eliminating Health Disparities Initiative – 2001

- Individual factors
- Social determinants and environmental factors
  - Living conditions
- Systems factors

MDH – 2009 report
The underlying philosophy of the EHDI is that health improvement and elimination of health disparities emanate from the social, cultural, and human assets that are already present in these communities. The principles of the EHDI are based on respect for the healthy values, beliefs, and traditions of Minnesota’s diverse populations, and engaging communities to reclaim their health.
An interdisciplinary endeavor

Understanding the discourse between design, culture & identity

Does wearing a mohawk make one an American Indian?

“Identity is constructed through, not outside difference”

Stuart Hall

Debunking the myth of ‘culture’ – *Move beyond stereotyping as there are many ways to belong*

People have dynamic and complex identities, they vary and change as they interact with each other—both within and across groups.

Study’s findings – Manifestations of culture both unify and differentiate us

- smell
- color
- food
- family
- religion
- community
- texture
- objects
- dress
- language

CULTURAL IDENTITY
Typical design responses – need to account for social justice

Adding decorative elements

Signage

Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Onamia, MN

Minneapolis Public Library
Culturally sensitive housing –
Housing that supports various ways of living

Benefits
• Ease families’ adjustment and sense of belonging
• Improve the health and well-being of immigrant and minority groups as well as the mainstream
• Enhance the economic and cultural vitality of our communities—Richard Florida’s *The Creative Class*
• Environmental sustainability
Toward culturally sensitive housing

Consider difference

Understand the perspectives of a cultural group

Develop programmatic guidelines

Act as agents of change

Step #1: Consider difference

- How different are we from each other?
- How long will these differences last?
- What is cultural and what is due to other factors?
- Which practices to support architecturally and which not to support?
- How do we avoid stereotyping the people we are trying to serve?
- How do we make sure that what we design will survive the test of time and market changes?
- How do we answer these questions?

Walk through typical houses and rooms and explore different ways of living
Step #2 - Understand difference
A cross-cultural study of differences in housing needs

- **Six cultural groups:** Hmong, Somali, Mexicans, Native Americans, African-Americans, and mainstream Americans of European descent.

- **Data collected through interviews** in the homes of members of the cultural groups under study (diversity of ages, incomes, years in the US, marital status, number of children, educational levels, and accommodations).
  - Verbal narratives
  - House floor plans
  - Photographs

- **The purpose is:**
  - *Theoretical:* Explore the discourse between design, culture, and identity.
  - *Practical:* Identify the programmatic and conceptual basis of culturally sensitive housing.

- **Teaching implications:** Findings inform the students’ house designs.

- **Outreach implications:** Culturally sensitive housing designs are exhibited at the Hennepin History Museum to help shape policy.
Three cultural groups - Backgrounds

‘Hmong’
A mountain tribe from Laos

‘Somali’
Refugees of civil war

‘Ojibwe’
Forced assimilation and acculturation
Living spaces

Strings

Hmong

8 want an altar

"Only in the house your dead ancestors live."
56 year-old man

- Lots of people gather in the house for celebrations—crowded conditions

Somali

"God, do not isolate me from my community."

- Women and men can gather separately, translating into stress for women and children if there is no place to go

Ojibwe

"I burn sage everyday to cleanse my house. With my bowl and my feather, I get all smoky and get rid of all the bad spirits, illness, superstition, unwanted visitors."
55 year-old woman
A preferred aesthetic

Hmong

Somali

Ojibwe

Lack of access to nature, mold, limited air circulation, inappropriate ventilation, too dark for MN winters
Constructing identity through objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hmong</th>
<th>Somali</th>
<th>Ojibwe</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridging identities—the American flag and the jeep illustrate the challenges faced by different generations</td>
<td>Traditional objects help keep connections alive</td>
<td>Prints and objects with Native images aim to reconnect the youth with their past—one of the highest suicide rates among youth</td>
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Sleeping spaces

- Hmong: Double beds for comfort and safety also mean playing and studying often take place in the public zones of the home.


- Ojibwe: Hosting extended family members.

"They used to say that if you traveled, you should leave your door open for other travelers to stop by. And not only that, but leave food for them too!"

55 year-old woman
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<tr>
<td>Cooking for celebrations can mean cooking for over 200 people. Often, propane gas is used which can be dangerous. Hygiene issues also for when chopping meat into bite-size pieces.</td>
<td>Cooking when veiled is both dangerous and uncomfortable in open kitchens. Also, smells can permeate the house.</td>
<td>Small, inconvenient cooking areas can mean people resort to eating fast foods or ready-made foods.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eating spaces

Hmong

During celebrations men typically eat around long tables—women wherever they find

Somali

During gatherings, men usually eat on the floor, the traditional way, constructing community – women can find themselves eating in the bedrooms

Ojibwe

Lack of suitable eating areas contributes to obesity and diabetes concerns. Research shows that eating together promotes healthy eating habits and behaviors
Hygiene spaces

Devoted Muslims often pray five times a day and have to wash before praying. This can lead to splashing water which can contribute to mold.

“My friends tell me, why do you live with so many people? They will ruin your house. It is just material things. They don’t matter! When you die, you can’t take it with you!”

Celebration needs can mean using the bathtub to wash oversized pots and pans.
Celebrations and large numbers of people living in the house can result in ‘stuff’ all over the place. This creates a hazard in terms of dust mites, risk of tripping, mental health, etc.

Consumerism and large numbers of people

Craftmaking – a way to re/claim the past puts stresses on the house in terms of storage for the materials and work-in-progress as well as all the gifts received
Design responses with policy implications

A room above the store can be used for large gatherings or it can be rented out by families hosting visitors and out-of-town family members or for large gatherings.

The corner store provides a common space where residents can interact with each other and with neighbors, fostering understanding and togetherness.

Creating community versus segregation

The shared courtyard can be used for outdoor gardening, children play areas, and social gatherings.

Single-family homes create a sense of attachment and a feeling of ownership.

Design by Sarah Castelyn and Erin Knutie
Is supporting gender separation and religion politically correct?
Step #3: Developing programmatic guidelines

- Interviews with 20 designers, affordable housing providers, policy makers, funders, etc.
  - Identifying best practices

- Home is more than housing – expand into other arenas
  - Interviews with 20 organizations, institutions, etc: ethnic markets, museums, parks, post office, airport, schools, health care, etc.

- Need to collaborate with providers and policy makers
  - Challenge where and how affordable housing is designed
  - Build culturally sensitive housing
  - Evaluate it

- Other ideas?
Step #4: Acting as agents of change

- How do you develop processes that engage historically marginalized populations?
- What kind of spaces can meet diverse needs and nudge people toward a healthy lifestyle?
- Could and should designers be life coaches when it comes to health?
- How do you raise awareness among decision makers like funders, policy makers, and city officials about the benefits of culturally sensitive housing to the social, economic, and cultural vitality of our communities?
  - Web site?
  - Book?
  - Brochures?
  - Set of Culturally Sensitive Guidelines?
Thank you for the opportunity to share my work on Culturally Sensitive Housing with you!

For more information email:

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