GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN HOUSING PREFERENCES: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, housing research has paid increased attention to issues of housing and gender. The existing research in sociology, feminist geography, and urban planning in the U.S. context covers a broad array of questions, from the relationship between gender and tenure status to the problems that particular groups, like single mothers, face in the housing market. However, this rich body of literature has rarely attempted to study housing preferences in relation to gender, or to focus more closely on questions of choice and economic and social constraints based on gender. Further, existing research rarely focuses on the intersection between gender and other forms of difference, such as race, ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, and sexuality, and on the way in which multiple identities shape housing preferences and housing experiences. This study used a qualitative methodology to investigate the influence of gender on housing preferences; the different components that make up the housing preferences of male and female householders; how age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other variables interact with gender to shape housing preferences; and the degree to which householders of both genders and in different types of households are able or not able to choose housing that matches their preferences. Data were collected during in-depth interviews with male and female householders in a diverse sample of
households in which couples with children, couples without children, single householders, and single parents of varying ages and ethnicities were represented. The interviews reveal the very gendered nature of the housing experience, and they demonstrate that gender-related differences in the way housing is experienced translate into gender-specific housing preferences especially with regard to housing type, neighborhood type, and the larger community of which the neighborhood is part. Further, the analyses show that gender cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, the intersection between gender and other variables such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and household composition is what makes housing preferences very diverse. The results confirm some of the existing findings about neighborhood preferences but contradict others, especially with regard to preferences related to the racial composition of neighborhoods and the priorities of householders with high incomes. The conclusion is that more choice and an increased availability of different housing options with regard to housing type and neighborhood type are very important in order to adequately meet the housing needs of an increasingly diverse society.
Dedicated to my parents, Mami and Papi
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM CONCEPTUALIZATION

1.1 Gender and Housing

Although often treated as a separate topic in the planning literature, housing as both a land use form and a policy area is intricately linked to land use patterns, employment, and opportunities available to various groups in a city or metropolitan area.\(^1\)

Generally, various forms of housing exist in response to both demand for housing and to policies that encourage or discourage the different types of housing in different locations. In turn, the housing market and the existing housing stock affect households. This includes affecting decisions households make with regard to employment and the organization of everyday life, and also the constraints that households face when making those decisions.\(^2\)

Since men and women, on average, often have different priorities and/or different kinds of responsibilities and demands on their daily lives, gender can and often does lead to different housing needs and

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housing decisions, and to varying abilities to find the desired housing in the existing market and under the existing constraints.³

As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, the tendency to assume certain lifestyle choices for both women and men in the planning for and the development of housing goes back to at least the 19th century and has evolved over time. These assumptions were promoted by intellectuals and social reformers in the nineteenth century who were very influential in creating social norms that became widely accepted. In the twentieth century, these assumptions were co-opted into public policy, which (beginning in the 1930s) took increased interest in housing issues.⁴ The result, as many scholars have argued, was housing developments that mirror these assumptions, as well as spatial land use patterns which are strongly influenced by assumptions about traditional gender roles and lifestyle expectations. The rapid suburban (and later exurban) growth since World War II reproduced these patterns and reinforced them on a wide scale.⁵

Similar trends applied to other aspects of urban planning and development more generally and not just to housing. A substantial body of literature in planning, geography, and sociology exists that examines the relationship between urban form, gender, and traditional household structure, showing how the spatial organization of

contemporary American cities is strongly rooted in simplistic and stereotyped expectations regarding household composition and the roles and responsibilities of family members.\(^6\) Housing, however, is one of the most important uses that shape American metropolitan areas; additionally, it is a basic human need that takes up a sizable share of the disposable income of most families and households and that often affects mobility and employment decisions in important ways.\(^7\) Housing is therefore not merely another example of how urban areas sometimes do not meet the needs of residents, but perhaps the most important urban planning and policy area where this problem manifests itself. It is this special role that housing plays in men’s and women’s gendered experience of urban areas that motivates this study.

### 1.2 Research Questions

Aside from housing in the conventional suburban setting, viable housing options, defined as different housing situations that vary not just in geographical location but also in design, structure type, and type of neighborhood, are rather limited in American urban and metropolitan areas. This is a situation that faces households at all income levels. While there is no question that low-income households suffer the most from this problem, the situation holds even for households that can reasonably afford market rate housing and that are mobile enough to take advantage of options when they arise. The prevalent U.S. housing policies since the 1930s and especially after

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World War II steered housing investment to the suburbs. It severely constrained the possibilities for investment in construction and renovation in communities and neighborhoods that do not meet standards and criteria that are dominant in suburban development. As a result, most housing opportunities that provide good physical housing conditions in a safe environment are located in suburban communities or suburban-style neighborhoods of central cities. Housing in the central cities of metropolitan areas is often either unattractive or inadequate. This may arise because of disinvestment in the housing itself, in community facilities, or in public services, or because the housing is too expensive, as in the case of neighborhoods that are experiencing or that have experienced significant gentrification.

The affordability issue is especially relevant for family households that need a lot of living space and for which the desire to find adequate living space and physical conditions together with good services can usually only be fulfilled in suburban communities. For low and moderate income households of all sizes, even the suburban option is often not accessible, leaving them with no choice but to live in whatever affordable and low-cost housing they can find in urban neighborhoods that often lack basic standards of services and safety. While experiments abound where new urbanist developments, traditional neighborhood design, and planned unit developments are chosen as alternatives to traditional housing development, the

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9 For the most part, this is true for low-income households that receive housing subsidies as well as for low and moderate income households that pay market-rate prices for housing.
number of housing units provided in these developments is extremely small compared to the size of the housing market, and they are generally rather expensive.

Combined with the persistent gendered nature of housing design and the spatial organization of housing and other uses relative to each other, these fairly limited options, (which in practical terms do not leave much room for individualized choice) stand in stark contrast to the diversity of lifestyles and of personal arrangements that is found in contemporary American society, a diversity partly created because of changing gender roles. Though the traditional gender ideology still prevails in the popular imagination, gender roles are changing, not towards a new system of rigid gender relations but towards more flexibility and a multiplicity of personal choices that do not correspond to any one form of gender expectations (neither the traditional nor any other fixed roles).

Gender differentiates the housing experiences of householders which result from this contradiction. For example, women are still much more likely than men to combine different daily responsibilities, such as being gainfully employed and at the same time acting as the primary caregiver for children or older family members. Housewives and stay at home moms are more likely than other women and than men to suffer from the isolation that is sometimes experienced when living in suburban environments with few opportunities for interaction and involvement. How gender differentiates experiences depends on other characteristics of the individuals and their
households, or in other words, on the intersection of gender with other axes of difference.

The composition as well as the lifecycle stage of the household has a direct impact on the responsibilities of household members and on the social experience of the individual adult, and this impact is likely to influence the experience with any given housing situation. For example, single women without children often have the same concerns as women who have children with regard to safety issues and community assets, but they are much less likely to worry about access to child care, schools, and other children-related concerns than women who have children. In turn, women with young children have differentiated needs depending on whether they are single mothers or whether they have a partner to share responsibilities with. Housing experiences are also greatly influenced by age, which intersects with gender to create complex variations in housing needs. Older single, divorced, or widowed women (who account for a high percentage of senior citizens living alone) are much more likely than younger women to be sensitive to housing location and to the accessibility of services from their residences.10

Ethnicity adds to the complexity of the experiences, as cultural norms, different definitions of the family, and often the experience of ethnic or racial discrimination have a direct influence on housing needs and on housing accessibility. Family size as well as varying definitions of family households (for example, the traditional

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“nuclear” family households, family households that contain more than two family generations, and families in which members are not formally related to each other) vary across cultural and ethnic groups, making conventional housing design unsuitable for many groups. This not only means that housing needs generally vary by ethnic group, but also that gender preferences are likely to differ in different ways depending on ethnicity and/or culture.

Apart from differences in needs due to social and cultural differences, the legacy of residential racial segregation and race-based discrimination in the housing market complicates the housing experiences of minorities. Lack of access to housing in some locations due to discriminatory practices and negative experiences with prejudice and the desire to live in communities where they feel welcomed mean that the gendered housing preferences of minorities are likely to be different than those of white persons. For example, it is very conceivable that older women living by themselves would choose a housing community for seniors that provides them with high quality care and the companionship of others living in the same community if such housing is available and if they can afford it, but that African American or Asian women would not choose the same community because they do not perceive it to be culturally sensitive.11

Some research has looked at residential neighborhood preferences in relationship to different resident characteristics. In a study that looked at how people from different

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socio-economic backgrounds define a neighborhood that is a good place for them to live, Coleman et al showed that upper-class residents prefer a neighborhood that is economically and culturally homogenous, has good schools, and is located in the “right part of town”; that middle-class residents prefer neighborhoods that are outside the city, that have good schools, and that provide good access to transportation, shopping facilities, and churches; and that working-class residents place a high value on cleanliness and safety of the neighborhood, ethnic homogeneity, and good maintenance of the houses in the neighborhood.12 Fried found that working-class residents see proximity to work, access to public transportation, friends and family networks, and ethnic homogeneity as priorities, while middle- and upper-middle class residents are more interested in using the automobile and in having good access to outdoor recreation.13

Yet the literature on housing preferences that considers gender and that accounts for the heterogeneity of both genders is not only scarce, but also ambivalent. Much of what we know about actual, gendered housing preferences, as opposed to existing housing quality, the needs of narrowly defined (and usually exclusively low-income) groups, or tenure preferences, is couched in research and theoretical debates about the meaning of the home, residential satisfaction, and neighborhood satisfaction.

For instance, Madigan et al argue that men and women experience housing consumption differently, and that these differences should be observable with regard to the rights of occupancy, the family conditions under which men and women occupy the home, and the utility of the home as a safe and private place for the occupants. They conclude that most of the literature ignores gender as a factor that differentiates housing experience, that more research is needed to understand how status aspirations “are invested into, and derived from, home occupancy”, and that it is important to study women’s and men’s experiences and accounts separately. Somerville contends that women are particularly interested in the “haven” aspect of housing, while men are more focused on the social status they derive from their housing situation. Others, for example Saunders and Saunders and Williams, disagree with the principle of gendered housing experiences, arguing that their empirical research does not support them and that evidence from their studies contradicts feminist critiques of housing design and housing provision. Based on a survey conducted in three small towns in England, they show that women and men attach different meanings to their homes with the same frequency. Yet others refute Saunders’ findings on methodological and empirical grounds. Citing evidence from qualitative research in which he used episodic ethnographies to study twenty working-class, home-owning households in East Bristol, England, Gurney argues that

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men and women might initially express similar views but then provide much more nuanced, gender-differentiated accounts upon closer enquiry.\textsuperscript{19}

Additionally, some writers have focused on neighborhood and residential satisfaction either in relation to gender or to very specific groups of women. Cook examines low-income single mothers living in urban and suburban Section 8 housing, and concludes that suburban women were more satisfied with their neighborhoods than urban women, with specific housing characteristics being especially important for the neighborhood satisfaction of suburban women and personal background characteristics (such as age, race, and household size) having the most bearing on the neighborhood satisfaction of urban women.\textsuperscript{20} Digregorio and Shlay explore neighborhood desirability in relation to gender and work. Their findings suggest that men generally prefer middle-class suburbs and think of factors related to social status and transportation and travel as especially important. Women’s preferences, on the other hand, vary by marital and employment status. Specifically, housewives prefer suburbs that signify status and at the same time provide access to facilities and public transportation, single women prefer urban neighborhoods that are diverse in household composition, and employed women prefer neighborhoods in inner ring suburbs or in the central city.\textsuperscript{21} Woods discusses the conditions that households in British social housing face, with an emphasis on female households, the reasons they seek relocation, and how satisfied or unsatisfied they are with the allocations system.

Her survey of a sample of tenants from different housing authorities, her interviews with housing management staff, and her analysis of allocation records, waiting lists, tenant files, and repairs reveal that subsidized housing is an important option for low-income women, but that female tenants are concerned about lack of maintenance, safety issues, and the fact that council housing is becoming “ghettoized” by only serving the very poor.22

This literature is important because it demonstrates different ways in which we can approach the study of housing preferences. Moreover, although the different approaches tend to lead to very different conclusions, they nonetheless highlight the importance to individuals and households of the housing experience as an important factor that affects their economic opportunities, financial situations, social networks, access to services, and opportunities for community involvement. This literature, however, also points to the paucity of research regarding gendered housing preferences among individuals and households of all backgrounds. Specifically, four knowledge gaps can be identified in our understanding of housing preferences: Housing preferences of both women and men (not just women) from the householders’ point of view (as opposed to their actual housing experience); how these gendered housing preferences compare across a broad spectrum of households (as opposed to very specific groups, for example low-income single parents, minority women, or households living in subsidized housing in a particular region or country); how age, ethnicity, culture, class/socio-economic background, and other axes of

difference further differentiate these preferences; and the ability of individual households of different compositions and of different demographic, economic, and ethnic characteristics to achieve housing situations that they are satisfied with given their preferences as well as their constraints (as opposed to macro-level knowledge of housing cost, economic and racial housing segregation, and the available housing stock within a metropolitan area).

In conclusion of this discussion, and based on an engagement with the relevant literature, I define the following questions as the research questions that guide my study:

How does gender influence housing preferences within a household and across different household types?

What are the different components that make up the housing preferences of male and female householders?

How do age, ethnicity, class, socio-economic background, sexuality, and other forms of difference lead to differentiated gender-specific housing preferences? How do multiple identities shape housing preferences?

To what degree are householders of both genders and in different types of households able or not able to choose housing that matches their preferences?

In defining the research questions, I intentionally avoid assuming that particular differences exist in order not to ask questions that will always “create” data that fits this assumption. Research questions that make the subject matter itself (whether
gender-specific differences in housing preferences exist and how they exist) a topic of
the study allow me to collect and study data that can show whether gender differences
in housing preferences exist, whether age and ethnicity affect gender-specific
preferences, how gender, age, and ethnicity intersect to create complex preferences,
and the ability or inability of different types of households to find housing that
matches their preferences.²³

I follow the same principle when analyzing and presenting my data. I avoid deciding
from the outset which categories I will use to group households and householders and
to compare data from my interviews with them. Instead, I use the data itself and
trends that I find in the data to determine which categories are especially relevant and
should therefore guide my data analysis and presentation. The categories that I use in
chapter 6 (the different household types) to discuss housing preferences and to
compare them are not a priori categories that I chose before I began to analyze the
data, but categories that emerged as important in the data and, as a result, that I
decided I should use to organize my data analysis.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

Housing concepts are influenced by values and social assumptions and expectations
that drive the choice of design and location when housing is built. Though not the
only social expectations that influence housing design and the planning of residential
uses, expected and assumed gender roles are important in this regard.²⁴ As argued in

²⁴ HAYDEN, Dolores (1981); HAYDEN, Dolores (2002)
the literature, many elements of prevailing housing designs are physical manifestations of widely held assumptions and expectations about gender roles.

The influence of expected gender roles on housing concepts started with the separation of residences from those parts of the metropolitan area where employment, commercial establishments, healthcare, and other facilities and services are located. The trend towards this spatial separation of land uses was born with the first suburbs in the 19th century, which emerged as a reaction to the poor sanitary conditions and the overcrowding in the central cities brought about by industrialization as well as a manifestation of Victorian moral ideals in planning and urban design. It accelerated with the large-scale suburbanization during the 20th century, especially after World War II. The ideology driving these spatial structures was based on values that saw the home as the “proper” place for women and waged work and city life as the domain of men. This gendered division of labor and responsibilities came to be seen as the “normal” structure of any family, and housing development focused on providing homes that cater to households that match this idealized image of the nuclear family. Furthermore, the design of homes as individual buildings assumed that women will perform roles different from those of men, and that houses were to provide a private, nurturing space for the family but no private space for the homemaker, who was expected to provide the labor needed for the family life envisioned for that home.25

25 HAYDEN, Dolores (2002)
Though these ideologies are not as explicitly articulated today as they were in the past, the basic assumptions of housing design remain the same. Jobs and commercial and recreational facilities gradually migrated to the suburbs and are no longer concentrated in the central cities, but a strict separation of residential subdivisions from other uses continues to characterize suburban communities and to reinforce the private realm-public realm dichotomy. Many housing units are built to accommodate families that are assumed to consist of a male wage earner, a female adult who is able and willing to invest substantial time and effort to maintain the home, and small or school-aged children who can depend on the mother for transportation needs.

Social expectations about gender roles influence housing designs and create the above mentioned spatial organization of urban areas, but the resulting structures themselves act to reinforce the expectations that created them. Because they are not designed for people who combine family responsibilities with outside employment, suburban housing today creates major challenges for individuals for whom the traditional male/female division of labor does not apply. Both men and women find it difficult to pursue wage work and at the same time be responsible for housework and other family-related responsibilities, as the cost in time and money is very high due to the separation of residences from other uses and to the labor required to maintain a suburban home. As a result, housing and urban design and planning preserve traditional expectations about gender roles because they make it costly to choose arrangements that deviate from these expectations. Moreover, prevailing housing design marginalizes households that do not fit these gendered expectations and that
are not able to afford and maintain housing that was designed for traditional households. An important example are moderate and low-income single mothers who are relegated to low-quality housing because of their need for housing that is affordable and which at the same time is located within a reasonable distance from places of employment.26

Thus, because these assumptions by no means correspond to the reality of contemporary society, housing is not experienced as equally satisfactory by people regardless of their gender. While there are certainly many people, both women and men, who would still choose their existing housing even if other options existed, many others find that the best housing options available to them often do not meet their needs. Women are especially likely to experience this problem because their roles have changed in more significant ways than men’s roles. Generally speaking, preferences for some housing situations over others (even if some of these housing situations are not widely available) is gender-specific because the different designs vary in their expectations about gender roles. Depending on their gender and their circumstances, householders might prefer those designs that are more favorable to their lifestyle choices. These gendered preferences further vary with age, income, household composition and lifecycle stage, as well as race, ethnicity, and cultural background, as I discuss below in more detail.

26 MULROY, E. (1995); LADNER BIRCH, E. (editor 1985)
Academic interest in these and other problems related to gender and housing has its origins in feminist research and epistemologies, which gained momentum during the women’s movement and have been evolving for the last thirty years. As in other disciplines and sub disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, feminist perspectives emerged in the urban planning and geography literature and engaged with questions concerning the design and planning of urban areas and the implicit gender discrimination that we find in them.\(^{27}\)

The observation that the design and the planning of urban areas affects individuals differently depending on variables like age or socio-economic status was not unique to feminist approaches. Mobility issues and other difficulties that the disabled, the elderly, or the economically disadvantaged face daily in American cities have been the subject of a large number of studies and theoretical debates.\(^{28}\) But beside focusing on gender (a previously neglected research need), and unlike the more traditional frameworks, feminist contributions attempted to develop a theoretical foundation suitable for the study of gender and housing and attempted to experiment with a broader repertoire of research methods.

In housing studies as in the planning field more generally, women remained for a long time the only focus of research that was informed by feminist theory, whether


the approaches were structural or post-structural in nature. Thus, most of the gender-oriented housing research that we find in the literature focuses specifically on women as a disadvantaged group. Examples include Keller’s 1981 edited collection on building for women,29 Greed’s book on women and urban planning,30 and Miranne and Young’s edited collection on the ways in which cities are “gendered”.31 Although feminist contributions focused only on women for some time, attention gradually turned to gender more generally, and to the important influence that socially constructed gender roles have on women’s and men’s responsibilities, attitudes, opportunities, and constraints in daily life. The situation of women and the disadvantage that they face in social and economic life remained at the center of many research contributions that focus on gender; however, approaches emerged that are more comparative in nature and that see both women and men as the subjects of research and as equally important to the goal of understanding how gender affects experiences and needs.32

Some important conceptual contributions have provided a framework for studying the gender-differentiated experience of housing and gender-specific housing needs. The analysis of the gendered values inherent in architectural and urban design as provided by Weisman is a useful lens through which to look at and to understand how gender relations and assumptions about gender roles affect land use and housing concepts at

29 KELLER, Suzanne (editor 1981)
both the neighborhood and the metropolitan level. In Hayden’s “Redesigning the American Dream”, the historical analysis of the evolution of housing design and housing construction and of the ideologies and the value systems that influenced this evolution provides a basis from which contemporary planning for housing and the dominant housing concepts can be seen as a product of social norms and expectations. Further, some attempts to study the meaning of the home have demonstrated that the home is valued differently by men and women and according to different sets of priorities. This suggests that there cannot be one ideal housing situation or concept for everyone regardless of differences such as gender.

One of the important debates emerging from the poststructural feminist literature on methodological issues is that surrounding issues of positionality and reflexivity. Positionality refers to all those things that are relevant to a person’s identity and experience, for example gender, race, socio-economic background, or level of education. Writing in the context of qualitative studies in which the researcher and the subjects belong to different cultures, ethnicities, or educational backgrounds, or in which the power relations between the researcher and the research subjects are otherwise unequal, many feminist researchers have argued that researchers should

33 WEISMAN, L. K. (1992)
always consider their positionality, its implication for the manner in which they conduct research, and how it affects the way in which the research subjects perceive them.  

To achieve this, the writers argue that researchers should be reflexive when conducting research and analyzing data. Reflexivity is a process whereby a researcher constantly scrutinizes himself or herself and the research process in an attempt to understand the social interactions between him or her and the research subjects, and to analyze the influences these interactions might have on the data. Critical reflexivity thus entails the constant questioning of one’s own influence on the data. Doing so not only makes researchers more honest about their research, but also more likely to recognize their subjectivity and its influences on their work, influences that are all the more important to consider when the research involves social interactions.

Together, these theoretical and methodological contributions provide a framework that can be used to study gender-specific differences in housing preference. I understand householders to be affected in their choices and perceptions not only by economic factors, but also by social expectations and beliefs. In this framework, the
planning and design of residential uses is as much dictated by social expectations and assumptions about gender roles as it is by economic forces and constraints. While quantitative data and quantitative analysis are very useful in understanding general patterns, my framework necessitates a qualitative research approach, which has greater potential to uncover some of the processes and the considerations that lead to one housing decision and not another. A better understanding of the reasons behind housing decisions can help to explain why certain decisions are made, to ask whether actual choices match the preferences of the householder(s), and to better explain the priorities and the opportunities as well as the constraints that drive housing decisions. Because we know very little about these questions in the North American context, it is necessary to take advantage of the depth of qualitative data and the flexibility that is characteristic of qualitative methods to gain some basic understanding of these questions before any further research (whether qualitative or quantitative) can take place with regard to these issues. I discuss the appropriateness of qualitative research interviews and the procedures that I followed in more detail in chapter 4.

1.4 Review of Relevant Literature and Positioning of the Study

Gender has received attention from housing researchers in recent decades. Several reasons contributed to this trend, chief among them the increased interest in gender in the social sciences more generally and the growing diversity in household composition and the heterogeneity of housing needs that came along with it.40 While

questions that are of concern to researchers interested in gender-related housing issues vary greatly, they all have in common a concern for gender differences in housing conditions and housing attainment and a focus on the relative disadvantage of women in the housing market.41

In the book “The Unsheltered Woman: Women and housing in the 1980s”, the authors emphasize the precarious housing situation of many female-headed households, using the example of New York City to illustrate the extent and the scope of the problem.42 An empirical, participatory study of the housing needs and concerns of low-income women and single mothers is provided by Forrester-Sprague in “More than housing: Lifeboats for women and children”.43 Using a qualitative approach to examine the women’s housing experience and problems, the book provides important insight into the way in which women view their housing situation, the housing crisis many of them face, the housing concepts that they prefer, as well as the manner in which the presence of children in the household influences what is needed for housing to be adequate. Substantial research also exists on the housing situation of older persons and the extent to which elderly households are well or poorly housed, with a special emphasis on the situation of older women.44 In working with women to achieve an in-depth understanding of housing issues that they face, contributions such

42 LADNER BIRCH, E. (editor 1985)
43 FORRESTER SPRAGUE, J. (1991)
as these have helped other housing researchers and also housing practitioners to address housing problems of low-income single mothers and older women in more innovative ways.

Other projects have used a more quantitative approach to produce a cross-comparison between ethnically differentiated groups of women,\textsuperscript{45} to examine the constraints and housing satisfaction among single-parent households\textsuperscript{46} and to study gender-specific differences in housing demand.\textsuperscript{47} At the center of these as well as the above-mentioned qualitative studies are the economic and income differences between men and women and the disadvantages that women face in the housing market. Interest in gender is therefore focused on single women (with or without children) as an economically disadvantaged group, not on gender more generally as a category of analysis that is relevant for both women and men.

Studies that are based on a feminist perspective have attempted to theorize gender more thoroughly, and to ground their analyses in theories of gender that explain the reasons for the different housing experiences of men and women.\textsuperscript{48} Starting off from a structural framework of a gender system that assigns different roles and expectations to men and women, some authors argue that patriarchal gender relations are at the heart of dominant housing concepts, regulations, and even publicly funded housing programs. Moreover, the spatial organization of urban areas and the

\textsuperscript{45} BRUIN, M.J./COOK, C.C. (1994)
\textsuperscript{46} BRUIN, M.J./COOK, C.C. (1986)
\textsuperscript{47} SKABURSKIS, A. (1997): Gender Differences in Housing Demand. \textit{Urban Studies} 2, p. 275-320
separation of residential uses from other land uses act to reinforce traditional gender roles; in doing so, they typically disadvantage women, especially those women who do not conform to traditional lifestyles.

Other authors have taken approaches that put more emphasis on housing design (instead of only broad urban/spatial structures), and on an analysis of housing design that critiques the underlying design principles for their discriminatory effects on women. In “Discrimination by Design: Feminist Critique of a man made environment,” Weisman provides a historical account of housing and how it developed until the present. The author argues that urban space is designed to reinforce gender dichotomies and inequalities, and that the spatial organization of cities is a physical manifestation of inequalities that exist in society along gender, class, and ethnic lines. Housing is especially important in this spatial system because of its role in defining “public” and “private” space. In Weisman’s analysis, housing design concepts are shown to have evolved over the decades to reinforce strict gender roles based on a definition of family life in which men and women are opposites, not equals.49

Similarly, in “Redesigning the American Dream”, Dolores Hayden provides a history of the evolution of American housing design from the eighteenth century until the present.50 Using the designs proposed by influential architects, builders, and social reformers over the years as representations of the ideologies of their times, this

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49 WEISMAN, L. K. (1992)  
contribution provides an in-depth analysis of the philosophies and political ideologies that have shaped housing design over the centuries and a rich account of the historical processes which culminated in the contemporary suburban and exurban housing landscape. An important and recurrent theme in the different stages of that history is the gender ideology that has been at the center of housing design at least since the beginning of the 19th century. Distinct gender roles and a separation of private and public (female and male) spaces became one of the most important social changes brought about both by the industrial revolution as well as the urbanization of large segments of the population and the separation between dwellings and places of work that came along with the industrial revolution. Hayden argues that the design of dwelling units and the laws and regulations governing land use and housing development have failed to react to social change and to changing lifestyles. The results are neighborhoods and communities that do not meet the needs of contemporary families, and that do not provide the choice and the flexibility needed for today’s very diverse society.

To address this problem, Hayden argues that planners and architects should rethink private and public life, and how public and private spheres stand in relationship to each other. Their goal should be to reconstruct spaces that are assigned to public and private use and that are presently constructed and physically designed based on lifestyles and roles that no longer correspond to the reality of contemporary society. Hayden concludes that we need to move beyond an architecture and an urban design that separates genders and uses, and that we need new forms that are flexible enough
to meet the different needs of diverse households. Recent projections estimating that there will be a need for the construction of millions of new housing units in the United States over the next thirty years, for example in the analysis by Nelson, Dawkins, and Sanchez, suggest that there is at present a genuine opportunity to rethink housing concepts and to design and build new housing that is better suited to the needs of contemporary society.

Yet these contributions neither provide much insight into the housing preferences of the research subjects nor into the actual housing experience of individual households. The literature discussed so far examines issues of housing and gender from a variety of different theoretical perspectives using different methodological approaches. Some authors are motivated by an interest in economic aspects of gender-specific differences in housing, especially the disadvantages suffered by many female householders in the housing market due to their lower average incomes. Others are more concerned with housing concepts, the lack of choice that many households are faced with, and the sexism inherent in assumptions that underlie housing design and the planning of residential uses. Most of the studies rely on statistical data available through governmental sources, such as census data, the American Housing Survey, and other data available at the state and local level. Other approaches, especially those that have a stronger focus on gender theory and that are influenced by feminist scholarship, rely on historical evidence and qualitative analysis of policies and

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conditions. But only rarely does research look at households and householders, and at their choices and preferences, as the subject of enquiry.

In “Unsheltered Women: Women and Housing in the 1980s”, a collection of studies and articles on the subject of the housing conditions of women in the 1980s, Saegert, Liebman, and Melting provide one of the rare attempts to study these questions in a project conducted in Denver to determine the preferences of home seekers with regard to the location of a home (suburban vs. downtown housing). As part of a broader study that set out to explore the future of housing development in Denver and the market for downtown housing, the participating researchers were able to interview employees of different companies in downtown Denver to find out what they look for in housing, the factors that influence their decisions, and the housing locations they are attracted to. The results of their in-depth interviews clearly show that there exists a demand for downtown housing and for centrally located housing more generally that was simply not met at that time. Although married couples with children were more likely to prefer suburban housing, there was major interest in centrally located housing among single parent families and other types of households with and without children living at home. Further, many of those who said that they live in suburban housing but would prefer to move downtown or to an urban neighborhood mentioned the unavailability of downtown housing as an obstacle. Single women specifically mentioned that downtown housing attracted them because of qualities such as

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proximity to work, cultural and social opportunities in the central city, and the suitability of urban living for those who do not live in traditional family households.

The focus of this study was on working women. The analysis emphasizes female heads of households who are gainfully employed, and the sample is not designed to represent different household types, ages, or ethnicities. The results therefore allow conclusions exclusively for working women and not for a broad spectrum of household types. While economic factors were important, the affordability of housing was clearly only one of many concerns that working female householders expressed when discussing the desirability of different types of housing locations and housing units.54

Interestingly, the most thorough attempts to study gender-specific differences in preferences are found in the literature on women in cities of the developing world. Housing issues in developing cities that are experiencing rapid growth, environmental deterioration, and a high concentration of poverty attract a lot of research interest. Because of the tendency to view acute housing problems as a special problem of urban areas in the developing world, questions of access to housing and poverty strategies, which encompass strategies to secure housing and to cope with inadequate housing conditions, are more likely to be pursued in the context of the development literature. While the social, economic, and political contexts of (case) studies on housing in developing countries are very different from those in the United States,

especially at the macro-economic level, it is still very useful to take a closer look at the methodological approaches that have been tried in other countries and to examine whether they can be fruitful in the North American context.

Research that puts special emphasis on gender and gender differences is the most important for the purpose of this project. In a study that looks at housing choices of poor households in Guadalajara, Mexico, Miraftab surveyed a random sample of all household types in three different areas of the city that had in common a high poverty rate but varied in terms of their location in relationship to the inner city. The author then used in-depth interviews to focus on female householders more specifically. The findings challenge common conceptions about poor households, the commonly assumed reasons for gender-based differences in housing decisions, and some generalizations that are pervasive in the literature, especially with regard to single women and single mothers. Although the research confirmed that women earn substantially less than men, it also showed that the number of household members who worked for a wage was on average higher in female-headed households than in male-headed households and in households with a male and a female adult. The median income was roughly the same for female and male-headed households, suggesting that the higher number of household members who worked in female-headed households compensated for the earning gaps between men and women.

While female-headed households were much more likely to live in shared and rental housing in the inner city, and male-headed households were more likely to live in owner-occupied houses on the urban fringe (mostly in homes built informally through self-help construction), these differences in housing situations could not be explained by differences in household incomes, since these gender-based differences in household incomes were marginal or nonexistent. The in-depth interviews with female householders provided insight into their housing decisions. Asked why they choose to live in shared rental housing in inner city neighborhoods, the female householders named a number of factors, many of which were not of an economic nature. The reasons for preferring inner city rental housing ranged from the social acceptance that they found in inner city neighborhoods to the need for companionship and the presence of other single mothers in these neighborhoods and in the shared living quarters with whom they could share child care responsibilities. These findings suggest that it is important to look beyond economic constraints and beyond questions of affordability when examining gender-based housing decisions. Even in the absence of significant differences in household incomes (which are more important than individual incomes in the context of housing decisions), male and female householders are likely to value housing characteristics differently because of the different social experiences and the different social needs of men and women.56

Further, the study revealed the importance of life cycle stages and of age in differentiating the experience of female householders and in determining the

56 MIRAFTAB, F. (1998)
resources and constraints that influence their housing decisions. While women of various age groups and at different stages of the domestic lifecycle were likely to experience similar problems (insecure employment, low wages, violence from their former partners, abandonment, and social rejection), their age and the age and the gender of their children were important factors that influenced their housing decisions. Young, single mothers are much more likely to desire inner city housing because of their need for social acceptance and for the support of other families to compensate for the absence of a second adult in their households. In contrast, middle-aged single mothers were less likely to be in need for social support and acceptance, and were more likely to receive emotional and economic support from grown children who can assist in building a home on the outskirts of the city and who can work for a wage. Miraftab concludes that the constraints faced by female householders are not just a factor of their income or their economic resources but rather of the intersection between economic resources and roles and responsibilities that are defined by age and gender.  

More importantly, age, gender, and household composition can also create economic opportunities (or can lead to a lack thereof), and they are therefore not just “add-ons” that are worthy of consideration but rather integral components of the gender-specific experience of housing. A research framework that aims to study gender-based

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57 MIRAFTAB, F. (1998)
differences in housing decisions must therefore consider all of these factors simultaneously and as equally important variables.\textsuperscript{58}

The need for a consideration of different axes of difference simultaneously as argued for in the theoretical literature on gender and gender theory is thus supported by the existing, albeit scarce, empirical evidence. While the existing literature on gender and housing preferences and decisions provides a solid theoretical foundation upon which we can conduct further research on gender-based housing preferences in U.S. urban areas, little research has been done so far that looks at different household types (both male and female-headed) and at gender-based differences in their housing decisions and/or preferences in relationship to age, life cycle, ethnicity, and household composition. Evidence from other countries suggests that it is fruitful to study housing preferences of American households beyond questions of economics and affordability and with special attention to gender and other social and demographic factors.

My research is intended as a small step towards that goal. I understand my thesis to be a contribution to the study of housing preferences using a gender-sensitive framework that considers female and male householders simultaneously. Furthermore, this project aims to build on poststructural feminist, mostly theoretical contributions and (relatively scant) research evidence suggesting that gender is conceptually not separable from other variables of difference and does not influence

\textsuperscript{58} MIRAFTAB, F. (1998)
housing experiences, choices, and preferences independently of age, class, race, ethnicity, or other identities. Finally, in choosing qualitative research interviews as a methodological tool that is appropriate for the purpose of this study and in light of my conceptual framework, I draw on research such as that by Gurney,59 Miraftab,60 and Kozol61 that uses qualitative methodologies to study housing preferences, housing experiences, and perceptions of housing and that demonstrates the potential for qualitative methods to add to our understanding of gender-specific preferences and challenges regarding housing issues.

1.5 Why Qualitative Methods?

The goal of this research is to study the housing preferences of a diverse set of households. Based on existing research and theoretical contributions, I expect to find that housing preferences are diverse, and that the gender of the householder, together with household composition and other socio-economic variables, is important in accounting for this diversity. If this is true, then housing preferences vary depending on a person’s experience and identity, and economic factors are not the only factors that affect preference and choice. The framework and the hypothesis are thus informed by the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism views knowledge not as reflecting objective realities, but rather as socially “constructed”, the result of

60 MIRAFTAB, F. (1998)
61 KOZOL, J. (1988)
perception and social experience. The approach in this study is also of a poststructural nature. While still recognizing broader structures as important to the understanding of many phenomena, this approach emphasizes personal agency as well as difference at the personal and individual level when explaining social processes and relationships.

The constructivist and the poststructural traditions recognize that due to their differentiated and diverse experiences, subjects develop different perspectives, or realities, which are all valid in the sense that none of them is closer to some objective truth than others. Each of them is “true” under certain conditions out of which they are constructed. This non-positivist, poststructural approach necessitates a qualitative methodology that allows the collection of data in which the important constructs are defined from the subjects’ own perspective (as opposed to “pre-defined” in the case of quantitative data) and through which it is possible to consider the social, familial, and economic context of each case. Only a methodology that seeks rich, in-depth data therefore has the potential to successfully capture the answers to the questions that I am interested in. I describe my sample in chapter 3, and I explain my choice of research interviews as a research tool, my sampling method, my interviewing procedures, and my data analysis strategy in chapter 4.

**References**


CHAPTER 2

THE FIELD

The research laboratory for this thesis is Central Ohio. Although this is technically the region that covers the eight counties that together make up the Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area, the research is primarily concerned with Columbus and adjacent suburbs. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the Columbus area and its history, and then focuses on the specific neighborhoods where the sample was recruited. In doing so, it provides the context in which we can better understand the subjects’ housing experiences.

2.1 Columbus and Central Ohio: Land Use Patterns, Transportation Network, and Economy

Despite recent efforts to make it easier to build higher density developments or redevelopments, land use patterns and the spatial organization of residential and commercial uses in Central Ohio remain strongly biased towards dispersal, sprawl, and a strict separation of uses, including a separation of different housing types. This

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66 Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Office of Workforce Development: Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Area Definition in Ohio Based on 2000 Census Designations. Columbus, OH (also available at www.lmi.state.oh.us).
is true not just of the many suburban communities in Central Ohio, but also of communities within the municipal boundaries of the city, which has been continuously expanding through annexation for the last 50-60 years and which now contains many suburban neighborhoods in addition to high density, older urban neighborhoods.

These land use and development patterns are complemented by a sparse public transit network that leaves residents of some parts of the region without reasonable access to public transit.\textsuperscript{67} The Columbus metropolitan area is served with a highway/freeway system that has gradually been expanded to a convenient network of roads that connect the different communities in Central Ohio with each other more directly and that make the automobile even more attractive as a mode of transportation.\textsuperscript{68} Finally, Central Ohio is highly segregated by race and income, with segregation levels that are similar to those of most major Midwestern cities.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{67} KENDA, Loren Lee (2006): The spatial mismatch and skills mismatch hypotheses: A study of the Columbus metropolitan area using spatial interpolation methods. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

\textsuperscript{68} Franklin County Board of Commissioners (2005): Franklin County Ohio Road Atlas and street locator. Columbus, OH: Franklin County Engineers

\textsuperscript{69} CHUNG, Su-Yeul (2005): Intra-urban segregation changes: An evaluation of three segregation frameworks with a case study of Columbus, Ohio MSA, 1990 and 2000. Columbus, OH
Thanks to an aggressive annexation policy, Columbus was able to avoid becoming landlocked by the rapidly growing suburbs, and the city continues to grow spatially to this day. Thus the city is more spread out and less dense than most Midwestern and eastern cities. Unlike most Midwestern cities in general and most Ohio cities in particular, Columbus was never a significant industrial hub, and the regional
economy is largely built on the city’s function as the state capital, as well as on the banking, insurance, and other tertiary sectors. As a result, rapid population growth did not occur in Central Ohio until the second half of the twentieth century, when the financial sector and other service industries grew in economic importance and in their demand for workers.

Due to its economic history, larger sections of Columbus are physically “new” as compared to rust belt cities and other old industrial cities. Further, this atypical pattern of urban and population growth has also led to a regional political scene that is markedly different from, say, that of Cleveland or Cincinnati. Because the industrial sector was never very large in Central Ohio, regional politics have neither been dominated by strong labor unions nor by any single large, politically influential corporation, though the real estate development industry as a whole is politically quite strong. Job growth in the growing financial services and legal services sectors as well as in the low-paying service industries in recent years has spurred further population growth, and Central Ohio is projected to add several hundred thousand new residents over the next twenty years. The very fact that Columbus and its suburbia and exurbia experienced a significant net population gain in the last twenty years, combined with the projected population gain over the coming two decades, makes Central Ohio an exception to the opposite trend that is prevalent in most major urban agglomerations in this part of the country. As later chapters will show, it is

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71 Mid Ohio Regional Planning Commission (2004): Land Use and Demographics Trends and Forecast: A Companion to the MORPC 2030 Transportation Plan. Columbus, OH
important to understand the findings of this study against the backdrop of these social and demographic trends.

2.2 The Selected Neighborhoods

In order to place the experience of the interviewed households within a specific spatial and socio-economic context, it was necessary to recruit subjects from within a few selected communities. Following my conceptual framework and my interest in various forms of difference, three large neighborhoods, each consisting of a number of smaller neighborhoods that share a common history and/or identity, were deliberately chosen to represent different geographical contexts and distinct places in Central Ohio. The contexts of the neighborhoods vary in terms of the ethnic compositions of their residents, socio-economic characteristics, physical densities, land use patterns, housing types, age of housing stock, and neighborhood amenities. Table 2.1 provides some key population and housing figures from the 2000 census for each of the three areas.
### Table 2.1: Population and housing profile of the three study neighborhoods in Census 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Victorian Village/Harrison West</th>
<th>Northeast Columbus</th>
<th>Lewis Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>7,074</td>
<td>15,570</td>
<td>4,592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more races</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Households</td>
<td>4,152</td>
<td>5,623</td>
<td>1,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-person households</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more person households family</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>76.8%</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-family</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$34,954</td>
<td>$45,326</td>
<td>$74,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population 15+</td>
<td>6,489</td>
<td>11,425</td>
<td>3,334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Housing Units</td>
<td>4,473</td>
<td>5,944</td>
<td>1,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-family</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-family</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Occupied</td>
<td>4,152</td>
<td>5,623</td>
<td>1,644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Units</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner occupied</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renter occupied</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median value of owner-occupied units</td>
<td>$188,988</td>
<td>$103,495</td>
<td>$223,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median rent asked</td>
<td>$484.3</td>
<td>$375.1</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

72 Based on Census 2000 data, as provided by American FactFinder at [http://factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov)
2.2.1 Victorian Village/Harrison West: Central City, High Density, and Gentrification

This area has developed over the years into two different neighborhoods with distinct identities and quasi-formal boundaries. Located immediately northwest of downtown and just south of The Ohio State University, Victorian Village is a streetcar suburb that grew mostly between 1870 and 1920 along a streetcar line, which connected downtown Columbus and the campus of what is now The Ohio State University. The community contained (and to this day continues to boast) some substantial examples of Victorian residential architecture. Immediately to the west of this mostly middle to upper middle class area, on land that used to be a farm owned by a wealthy Columbus family, lies a more modest, working class, blue collar community. Known today as Harrison West, this neighborhood of smaller single-family homes housed many of the workers who were employed in the industries alongside the Olentangy River, just to the west of Harrison West.\textsuperscript{73}

In the late 1920s and especially in the period after World War II, as the middle class abandoned older urban neighborhoods in Columbus, both Victorian Village and Harrison West experienced a fundamental demographic shift. Although the community never attracted as many immigrants as Flytown, its neighbor to the south, it did become home to a large number of Appalachian families. But the lack of investment in inner city neighborhoods affected Victorian Village and Harrison West just as it affected other residential urban neighborhoods in the city. Particularly in

\textsuperscript{73} HUNKER, Henry L. (2000): Columbus, Ohio: A personal geography. Columbus, OH
Harrison West, many properties were eventually owned and rented out by Battelle Memorial Institute, an independent research institute that is located immediately north of Harrison West and that bought up the properties in the hope of expanding some day in what it saw as its “backyard”. Battelle, while concerned with property ownership and with controlling development in the area, had little incentive to invest in the upkeep and maintenance of the residential property that it owned. By the late 1960s, most houses in Victorian Village and in Harrison West were dilapidated, run down, and in desperate need of repair. However, they also provided a supply of low-cost, relatively large homes that could accommodate large families with low or moderate incomes.\(^\text{74}\)

Though it is difficult to put an exact date on the start of what became a long process of gentrification in this part of Columbus, it is reasonable to view two separate events as important in that history. The first was the bulldozing and demolition of Flytown, a project that was conceived of and carried out during urban renewal and that set in motion a wave of rehabilitation, displacement of residents, and large-scale
redevelopment that is presently still ongoing. The removal of what was considered a “slum” in a location that borders on Victorian Village and Harrison West made those neighborhoods more attractive to investors and to prospective homebuyers looking for cheap property that held potential for serious appreciation. The second was Battelle Memorial Institute coming under a court order to sell all real estate properties that it owned in the neighborhood. Many buyers, attracted by the Victorian architecture, the relatively large size of the homes, and the proximity to The Ohio State University, purchased the properties at relatively low prices and started a wave of repairs and renovations that transformed the neighborhood over time.

Accompanying these changes and the new residents that they brought was a growing interest in the preservation of the distinctly Victorian residential architecture that gave Victorian Village its name. In 1974, residents successfully lobbied the city to recognize Victorian Village as a historic district. This designation created the Victorian Village Architectural Review Commission, which is required to review and approve all construction and renovation activities in Victorian Village in order to help preserve the neighborhood’s architectural style. The architectural review, however, only applies to the area bounded by Goodale Avenue to the south, Harrison Avenue to the west, High Street to the east, and Fifth Avenue to the north. This effectively meant that Harrison West, the area west of Harrison Avenue and east of the Olentangy River between First and Fifth Avenues, was excluded from the historic

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75 HUNKER, Henry L. (2000)  
district designation. In the years since 1974, Harrison West and Victorian Village underwent different patterns of development. Old houses were much more likely to be preserved and restored in the historic district than in areas outside its boundaries. Gentrification proceeded much faster in Victorian Village than in Harrison West and took on different forms in the different neighborhoods. 78

Today, Victorian Village is already heavily gentrified. Old single family homes and duplexes dominate the housing stock, and property values are much higher than the average across Columbus neighborhoods. It is important to note that due to the location of the neighborhood halfway between downtown and The Ohio State University, it has retained more rental housing than might be expected in a neighborhood with that level of gentrification. In the 2000 census, the neighborhood was populated by a diverse set of households, including singles, opposite sex couples, and same sex couples. The residents represent a wide range of age groups and for the most part are either childless or empty-nesters. 79 Goodale Park, a tract of land that was set aside as early as the 1850s for a public park, continues to be an important focal point of the community.

Renovation and upgrading activities have been increasing dramatically in Harrison West over the last several years. Additionally, a substantial brownfield redevelopment project consisting of high end condominiums and compact single family homes built

78 BRAAM, Sierk H. (1996)
79 Based on Census 2000 data for Franklin County, Columbus City, census tracts 20, 21, and 18.20, as provided by American FactFinder at http://factfinder.census.gov .
according to traditional neighborhood design concepts is under construction in the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{80} The new development, Harrison Park, is expected to attract a significant number of new residents to the neighborhood and to accelerate the trend of gentrification and rising property values in Harrison West.\textsuperscript{81} At the same time, the ethnic composition of the community, especially in and around Harrison West, is changing. Of particular importance is the influx of Hispanic immigrants, many of whom are employed in the gastronomy industry in urban neighborhoods close to Victorian Village and Harrison West and are attracted to this community due to the availability of rental housing.

\textit{2.2.2 Northeast Columbus: Suburbia within City Limits}

The term Northeast Columbus is used here to describe a loosely defined and dispersed community located to the northeast of the central city but still within Columbus city boundaries. The community is comprised of the area north of the Port Columbus International Airport, west of the suburb of Gahanna, south of Morse Road, and east of Cleveland Avenue.

\textsuperscript{80} GEBOLYS, Debbie (2005): A tale of Two Neighborhoods. In: The Columbus Dispatch, 11/7/2005
\textsuperscript{81} GEBOLYS, Debbie (2005): Former Factory Site Sprouts Homes. In: The Columbus Dispatch, 8/6/2005
Due to the availability of vacant land, Northeast Columbus has been attracting a significant amount of new housing construction over the past 10-20 years. As new subdivisions and condominium developments sprang up, some neighborhoods grew from very low-density, almost rural areas to denser suburbs with much heavier vehicular traffic. Northeast Columbus is also in very close proximity to Easton, a
major and expanding development that includes office buildings, big-box retail, restaurants, and a high end shopping, dining, and entertainment mall, as well as luxury apartments and condominiums.

In the 2000 census, this ethnically diverse community also showed a remarkable level of income diversity, a variety of housing tenures, and a wide range of home values. Further, the ethnic composition of residents is becoming more diverse, with many immigrant families moving into newly constructed apartment complexes in Northeast Columbus. One of the results of the changing composition of the community have been ethnic tensions, particularly between the African-American community and the immigrant Somali community, which have become more acute in recent years and which are strongly felt in local schools. Moreover, the general population increase is giving rise to increasing concerns among residents, who doubt that the schools and other facilities, such as youth centers and recreation centers, are able to accommodate and serve the growing population. It is not clear whether these concerns stem from actual problems that the schools and other services and facilities are facing, whether they are the result of some general anti-growth sentiments that exist among some residents of the community, or whether they are the result of prejudice against minorities and immigrants, including Muslim immigrants and other immigrants from the Global South.

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82 Based on Census 2000 data for Franklin County, Columbus City, census tracts 74.24, 75.40, 75.50, and 74.91, as provided by American FactFinder at http://factfinder.census.gov
2.2.3 Lewis Center: Suburban Sprawl

The third and final community is an area that is commonly referred to as Lewis Center. Unincorporated, this Orange Township community in Delaware County directly north of the Franklin/Delaware County line has been growing mostly over the last 20-30 years. At present, it comprises a number of separate subdivisions, consisting of single family homes, as well as some condominium developments. The development patterns in Lewis Center can be described as typical exurban sprawl, with characteristics such as cookie-cutter homes, long distances between developments, and a lack of any type of land use other than housing dominating the landscape.

83 Based on Census 2000 data for Delaware County, Orange Township, census tracts 115.40 and 115.50, as provided by American FactFinder at http://factfinder.census.gov.
It is safe to say that of the three Central Ohio communities from which households were recruited for this study, Lewis Center has the weakest sense of place and the least developed identity. It is also the least ethnically diverse and the most segregated of the three study areas. The community continues to grow, but in a fashion that is very similar to past growth. The area, however, is fairly representative of recently
developed areas and of suburban and exurban communities that have experienced significant growth in the region over the past two decades. These communities, many of which lie in the northeastern and northwestern parts of Central Ohio and are presently attracting significant development, are largely following a conventional, sprawl-friendly pattern of development, with a large number of subdivisions and developments emerging haphazardly and with no regard to land use, infrastructure, or transportation planning considerations.84

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CHAPTER 3

THE HOUSEHOLDS

The empirical focus of this study is on households and on their housing preferences in dependence of the gender of the householder(s) and of other socio-economic and demographic characteristics. As outlined in chapter 1.6, the subjects were not interviewed as households, but rather as individual adults. The goal of the study is to investigate how householders make housing decisions and what their preferences and priorities are, and therefore only adults are of interest to the research. The research questions make it necessary to interview each adult household member separately in order to gauge gender-specific differences in preferences, perceptions, and priorities.

Nevertheless, the households of which the adult householders are part are at the center of this study. Householders develop preferences and make housing decisions in consideration of the needs of their entire households, not just of themselves. The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the interview subjects are strongly determined by the type of household of which they are part. Interview

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subjects were thus purposefully recruited to represent households that are diverse at multiple levels, not to represent a diverse set of individuals.

It is therefore very important to pay attention to the household as housing “consumer” and to the changing trends and the changing household compositions in the United States when discussing housing decisions and preferences. This study looks at households in which the household members are either related by blood or by marriage, or are not technically related but still form a family in the broad sense (as in households with cohabiting couples). Households consisting of roommates who share a housing unit but do not define themselves as a family were excluded in the sampling process, as were group homes, households living in retirement communities/residences, and households living in dormitories and other settings that are not part of the general housing market. The following discussion mirrors the focus on family households, broadly defined.

3.1 Households and Housing Demand

Housing decisions and housing mobility are influenced by a myriad of factors that exist at the household level, but also at the structural, institutional, and macro-economic level.

Over the course of many decades, especially since the urbanization and the rapid urban population growth after the end of the civil war, the effects of economic cycles,
changing government policies, and broad demographic trends have created different housing market contexts and incentives, and have cumulatively led to the geography of housing that we see in American metropolitan areas today. The dominance of single family homes, the high homeownership rates (compared to most western societies), the concentration of residential land uses in suburban and increasingly in exurban areas, as well as the prevailing residential segregation along economic and ethnic lines are all examples of the long-term outcomes of a combination of economic trends, government policies, opportunities, and barriers that have been shaping the housing market for many decades. Although the American housing market is largely viewed as “unregulated” in comparison to housing markets in most western countries, public policy has been and continues to be a major force shaping housing options, housing affordability (or lack thereof), and housing outcomes in the United States.

But equally important to housing preferences and housing decisions are the household’s own circumstances, needs, resources, constraints, and the changes that the household undergoes and that motivate housing mobility. A household’s purchasing power in the housing market determines what housing options the households can choose from, and whether or not the household can achieve an adequate housing situation. Apart from a household’s income level and buying power, the household composition (the number of household members, their ages,

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their relationship to each other) is very relevant to the residential location and the housing space needs of the household, as are the occupations of household members and the location of their places of work, school, and so forth.\(^8\)

Adding to this complexity is the constantly changing nature of household circumstances, which result in changes in housing needs. The relationship between the life course and housing changes, or changes in the housing career, are well-documented in the literature. Beginning with the life cycle analysis and the study of the relationship between life cycle stages and housing changes,\(^9\) housing researchers gradually developed the concept of the life course, which recognizes the importance of life occurrences on housing mobility and housing decisions while at the same time allowing the incorporation of parallel life trajectories and external changes and not requiring a fixed categorization of stages, thus avoiding a major weakness of life cycle analysis.\(^10\)

Life course analysis has contributed a rich body of knowledge on housing mobility, the factors that motivate that mobility, and the patterns of housing space consumption that result from the multidimensional sequence of events in the life course.\(^11\) The


findings of this body of research demonstrate the complexity of housing careers and of the factors that motivate households to prefer (or at least to choose) certain housing types and housing locations over others depending on life course events. They also underline the centrality of the household concept and of household compositions, as opposed to the circumstances of people as individuals, in understanding housing decisions and housing changes. For these reasons, it is critical to pay attention to household composition and the demographic, economic, and social circumstances of the household when studying the housing preferences of householders.

3.2 The Changing Composition and Structure of American Households and Families

One of the themes motivating this thesis is the diversity of American households, and the insufficient ability of the existing housing market to accommodate the increasing diversity in household compositions, lifestyles, family types, and economic and employment situations. A case can be made that households and families have never been as homogenous as they were assumed to be. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the last forty years have witnessed some substantial changes in the organization and composition of American households and families, changes that have brought an unprecedented drop in the average size of households and in the number of traditional
family households as a percentage of the total household population, as I discuss below.  

Post World War II housing policy was geared towards the young, traditional nuclear family, and was based on the assumption of a normative family structure, in which young adults leave the parents’ home, get married, have children, and form a household consisting of a married couple (with only the husband being gainfully employed) and minor children. These households, it was thought, created a substantial portion of the demand for housing. This reflects not only assumptions about social norms, but also the pent up demand for family formation and housing that had built up from the start of the Great Depression in 1929 through World War II. In the period immediately after the end of the war, the major housing shortage in the United States and the high number of newly formed, young families lent impetus to the assembly line process of housing provision, a process that created a large number of housing units and housing developments that were all the same.  

But since the 1950s, the percentage of married couple households has declined from about 80%, to about 60% in 1989, to only about 51% in 2006. Moreover, married couple households with minor children present account today for only about 10% of  

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all households, as compared to 43% in 1950 and 44% in 1960.\textsuperscript{96} This decline in the percentage of married couple households with or without children has been accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of individual, or one member households, which are presently the fastest growing household type, as well as in the number of households consisting of two adults who are not related by blood or marriage.\textsuperscript{97} It is as a result no longer possible to use any concept of a normative family structure when studying housing decisions and preferences and when conceptualizing the housing behavior of households. This is especially true when we consider that the increase in the number of one member households and other non-traditional households can be observed among various age groups, not just among young people who are delaying marriage/cohabitation and family formation.

Finally, the growth of the foreign-born population is important to consider in the context of households and their housing decisions. Immigration reform in the late 1960s spurred an immigration wave that continues to this day. Unlike other periods of high immigration in the history of the United States, the present immigration period has mostly been fueled by immigrants arriving in the United States from regions other than western, central, northern, and southern Europe and China.\textsuperscript{98} New Americans are therefore ethnically and culturally more diverse, and they form household and family structures that are strongly influenced by a much larger number of different native

cultures. This can be seen not just in the different fertility rates found across different ethnic groups, but also in the oftentimes culture-specific definitions of families and households, for example with regard to the extended family and whether or not extended family members are viewed as part of the nuclear family. All these factors contribute to a household population that is constantly evolving and that is very diverse in its needs, resources, and preferences with regard to housing.

3.3 The Study Sample
As noted in chapter 1.6, a total of 34 households formed the sample for this study. Although I interviewed the householders individually, I recruited them based on the overall demographic and ethnic composition of their households, not based on their characteristics as individuals. As I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4.3, the focus of the sampling process was the inclusion of a variety of household types in order to represent the diversity of households discussed above, to allow myself to pursue my research questions as outlined in chapter 1, and to recruit a sample that theoretically fits my conceptual framework. Table 3.1 summarizes the number of households in my sample by type and neighborhood.
Of the 34 households who participated in the study, seven households are families consisting of an opposite sex couple and at least one minor child. Of these seven households, three reside in Victorian Village/Harrison West, two in Lewis Center, and two in Northeast Columbus. The age of the adults in those households ranges from 22 to 51, and the number of children ranges from one to four. These traditional nuclear families, as I will refer to them in this thesis, represent different income levels, ethnicities, and national origins. As subsequent chapters will show, the traditional nuclear families in this sample describe housing priorities that are somewhat similar in principle, but the decisions that they make in order to pursue these priorities vary widely.

Twelve households in the sample are single person households, a term that I use to describe households with one adult householder and no other persons present. The age of these single householders without children ranges from young adults to senior citizens over 70 years of age. White, black, Hispanic, and Asian, native born and
foreign born householders are represented among these households, which are evenly divided among the three different study neighborhoods.

Six female-headed single parent households as well as two male-headed single parent households are represented in the study sample. Of these eight single parent households, three include more than two children or minors. The single parent households are concentrated in two of the three study neighborhoods, Victorian Village/Harrison West and Northeast Columbus. The householders in this sub-sample are white and African American. The seven remaining households are couples, either married or cohabiting, with no children present in the household. As with single person households, these couples without children present represent different age groups, ethnicities, and income levels. Five of these couples are opposite-sex couples; two are same sex-couples. Of these seven couples without children present, two couples have an elderly parent who shares the housing unit with them.\(^{99}\)

As the description of the sample indicates, the 34 householders who participated in this study represent a high level of variation in family/household composition, gender, housing arrangements, and socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. The following chapters will analyze the data collected during in-depth interviews with householders with regard to the research questions discussed in chapter 1.4.

\(^{99}\) The study is designed to interview each adult household in the sample about his or her housing decisions and preferences. Because the elderly parents joined the households after the respective household had moved into their current home, and because the elderly parents are cared for and supported by their adult children, they were not included in the interviews. Nevertheless, the presence of an elderly parent in the household, as well as the special needs that arise when caring for an elderly family member, all figured prominently in the interviews with the householders in these two households and are considered in the following analysis.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study employs a qualitative, interview-based research design. In this chapter, I will outline interviews as research tools in more detail and the specific way in which this study uses them. Following a brief discussion of the different types of interviewing tools available to researchers and of the usefulness of interviews, it will look more closely at semi-structured interviews, which are at the center of this research. The chapter will then go on to discuss the sampling design and the interview procedures. Finally, this chapter will describe the transcription of the interviews, the coding of the data, and the general process for interpreting the data.

4.1 Interviewing: A Family of Research Approaches

We can define any conversation that takes place between two individuals as a research interview if one of the two individuals is a researcher seeking information and meaning from the other individual. The conversation between a researcher and a research subject can proceed verbally or in writing. The broadest definition of interviews would thus include paper surveys as the most structured form of interviews, as well as non-survey structured interviews, semi-structured interviews,
and unstructured interviews, which include autobiographical interviews and oral histories that result from the least structured styles of interviewing.

*Structured interviews* use a set of predetermined questions that the interviewer follows rigidly. In accordance with an interview schedule, all respondents are asked exactly the same questions in the same order and using the same wording, and they often have to choose an answer from a set of answers that are designed as part of the interview schedule. Structured interviews yield descriptive data that are simple to represent in numerical form and that the researcher can statistically analyze and use to test hypotheses. They are “question focused”, because the goal of the interviewer is to solicit responses to very specific and carefully worded questions, not responses that relate to the research topic in a broader sense.

Although an interview schedule is sometimes used in interviews with only open-ended questions, a researcher using *semi-structured interviews* is more likely to use an interview guide rather than interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews are less standardized than structured interviews. Although the topics and themes to be pursued are predetermined, as are some key questions that the interviewer has to include in the interview, the interview guide is still much more flexible than a structured interview schedule. The interviewer is allowed to use follow-up questions and prompts to better

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clarify responses and to encourage respondents to expand on a topic, and respondents decide how they want to approach a question without being limited to a choice of a few specific answers. Semi-structured interviews are therefore often described as “content focused”. While semi-structured interviews are designed and carried out with the goal of covering the same topics in all interviews, the data they collect are of a qualitative kind, because they cannot be summarized and described in numerical form.

Finally, unstructured interviewing describes interviews that are not directed by any kind of interview schedule or interview guide. Unstructured interviews are employed whenever the research focus is on personal perceptions, feelings, or histories. The researcher takes a much more passive role than in structured or semi-structured interviews, and the questions he or she asks are in response to what the informant chooses to talk about and decides is relevant to the topic of the discussion; the questions are never predetermined. Unstructured interviews are thus “informant focused”, because respondents are encouraged to be spontaneous and to guide an unstructured conversation in which the researcher determines only the very general themes in advance. Some of the most common examples of unstructured interviews are oral histories, which seek to gain insight into a respondent’s experiences and recollections with regard to some past events, especially important historical events or

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103 GILLHAM, B. (2000): The research interview. New York, NY
time periods; and life histories, which explore the respondent’s development over his or her entire life with regard to issues that the researcher is interested in.\textsuperscript{107}

Interviews are just one of several different methodological tools that researchers can use in qualitative studies. But there are myriads of reasons to choose interviews, especially semi-structured or unstructured interviews, to collect qualitative data. Interviews are an excellent way to investigate complex constructs, such as those involving complex and interrelated behaviors, goals, and motivations. The context of a situation, a behavior, or a decision that the researcher is interested in are better revealed in interviews than in the application of some of the other qualitative research tools.\textsuperscript{108}

Interviews allow for the respondents’ understandings of the relevant concepts to come to the forefront, thus making the meanings that are at the center of the respondents’ perceptions, actions, and decisions much more accessible. This opportunity for both the researcher and the research subject to flexibly explore the meanings of questions and of responses is not often present when other qualitative tools are used.\textsuperscript{109}

Interviews also allow us to uncover a “diversity of opinion and experiences” within a group that would otherwise be treated as homogenous, as well as to discover whether there is consensus within the group on some aspects of the research topic\textsuperscript{110} (a point that is especially important for this study, as will be discussed in the next section).

\textsuperscript{107} DUNN, K. (2000)


Further, it is important to note that, more so than other research procedures, interviewing can empower research subjects and can value their perspectives and view of the world. As K. Dunn states:

“Interviews are an excellent method of gaining access to information about events, opinions and experiences. While opinions and experiences vary enormously between people of different class, ethnicity, age and sexuality, interviews have allowed me to understand how meanings differ among people. [Researchers] who use interviewing should be careful to resist claims that they have discovered the truth about a series of events, or that they have distilled the public opinion. Interviews are used to gain insight into different opinions. They can also be used to counter the claims of those who have presumed to have discovered the public opinion. This can be done by seeking out the opinions of different groups, often marginalized or subaltern groups, whose opinions are rarely heard.”

Interviews are therefore a powerful research tool that qualitative researchers can apply in a host of different settings and for a large variety of research topics. The purpose of the research and the kind of topics that a study seeks to investigate should ideally guide the choice of the type of interview to be used. The choice of semi-structured interviews as a research method in this study is discussed in the following section.

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4.2 The Choice of an Interview Type: Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews lie in the middle of the interview structure spectrum: They are organized around some main themes or topics that underpin the interview guide and that the researcher believes are the most relevant to the research project, and are thus guided by a well-defined research agenda. At the same time, they are very flexibly structured to allow both the interviewer and the interviewee to expand on some issues and to ask for clarification, and they typically ask open-ended questions that leave substantial leeway for the informants’ own understandings to guide their answers. Although the data that semi-structured interviews yield is much more topic-focused than data collected in unstructured interviews, it is still very qualitative in nature and cannot be summarized in numerical form. Semi-structured interviews are therefore very useful when the researcher seeks qualitative data about complex and individualistic constructs, but when he or she at the same time is still much more interested in content and in covering some key questions and topics than in the actual interaction with interviewees, how interviewees construct their own view of the world, inter-subjectivity, or humanistic research approaches.

Aside from the type of questions that the research pursues or the type of data that it is attempting to collect, the conceptual framework that guides the research should also guide the choice of methodological tools. In chapter 1, I describe my conceptual framework as a poststructural feminist framework, one that rejects homogenizing

assumptions and a focus on fixed structures in favor of a better recognition of multiple categories of difference and of the subjects’ personal agency. Such a framework prompts a field strategy that allows these constructs to come to the fore, that avoids predefined response categories, and that offers the research subjects an opportunity to more actively engage in the research interviews.

Considering this framework, and taking into account that the research questions guiding this research are focused on housing preferences, on the manner in which gender in combination with other socio-economic and cultural characteristics has an influence on housing preferences, and on whether the research subjects are able to realize what they see as their ideal housing situation, it follows from this discussion that semi-structured interviewing is the most appropriate interview method for this study. The unsuitability of structured interviews with closed-ended questions for the research purpose of this study is obvious. Structured interviews would contradict my conceptual framework; moreover, it would be nearly impossible to incorporate the complexity and interrelatedness of the constructs of interest, as well as the subjects’ own definition of the issues, in pre-determined sets of possible answers. Unstructured interviews, though well suited to my conceptual framework, would present the opposite data collection problem, since the focus of the research is still on some main topics that are important to the research questions and on topic-focused content that I seek to extract from the interview data. Semi-structured interviews can be part of the field strategy prompted by my conceptual framework, can provide me

with an opportunity to collect in-depth, qualitative data that captures the diversity of preferences and experiences, and will at the same time allow me to guide the interview such that the main questions and themes are effectively addressed.\textsuperscript{116}

\subsection*{4.3 Sampling and Recruitment of Study Participants}

As already mentioned in chapter 1.5, the sampling process was not designed to select a sample that is statistically representative of the total population of households in Central Ohio. Instead, a sample of households was recruited following a purposive, theoretical sampling process.

The sampling design has direct bearing on the generalizability of the data obtained from the sample of respondents who are interviewed, and so it is important to briefly discuss purposive and theoretical sampling. Probability samples, such as simple random samples, are nearly impossible to obtain in many qualitative research contexts, because a comprehensive list of all population elements often does not exist for the population that the qualitative research study is interested in.\textsuperscript{117} Seeking a statistically representative sample is therefore often neither desirable nor practical in research with a strong qualitative focus. Instead of trying to sample cases in as “randomized” a way as possible, it is often more promising to devise a strategy to choose and recruit study participants that will result in a sample that meets the needs

\textsuperscript{116} ARLSEY, H./KNIGHT, P. (1999)

\textsuperscript{117} For a discussion of probability and nonprobability sampling, see HOYLE, R./HARRIS, M./JUDD, C. (2002): Research Methods in Social Relations. New York, NY
of the research with regard to the research questions and the theoretically developed purpose of the research.\textsuperscript{118}

But more importantly than practical and technical considerations, the selection of cases to include in the sample should follow a strategy that is inspired by the conceptual framework and that seeks to ensure that the research is conducted in a manner that is consistent with that framework. As I discuss in previous chapters, my conceptual framework deliberately avoids a focus on general patterns that are generalizable to the total population, and instead seeks to understand processes and causes that lead to certain housing preferences and that enable householders to, or prevent them from, achieving housing situations that match their preferences. Further, my framework is interested in gendered differences, and in the interaction between gender and other forms of difference, and it thus calls for a sample that is diverse enough to allow the research to examine these concepts, regardless of whether or not this degree of diversity reflects the composition of the total population of households. As a result, the most appropriate sampling method in the context of my research would be a strategy that is designed to recruit such a sample, not to select a randomized sample. Purposive sampling, also called theoretical sampling, is a strategy that I use to achieve this goal.

As the name suggests, purposive sampling is the choice of case or cases (be they a sample of informants from the total population or specific case studies out of all potential case studies) because they exhibit characteristics or qualities that the researcher is interested in.\textsuperscript{119} While some social scientists define this narrowly to mean the choice of cases that are “typical” of the study population (as the next best alternative to random sampling when random sampling is not workable),\textsuperscript{120} purposive sampling can also mean critically examining the population that is the focus of the research, taking the research framework into account, deciding what parameters we would need to see represented in the sample, and choosing cases to achieve a sample that allows for the investigation of the research questions and in this way fits the purpose of the research.\textsuperscript{121} Because the research purpose (defined broadly as the conceptual framework and the research questions that the study is pursuing using that framework) should be theoretically defined, this sampling design is sometimes referred to as theoretical sampling:\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{quote}
“Theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position…and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample…which is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory and explanation.”\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120} HOYLE, R./HARRIS, M./JUDD, C. (2002)
Theoretical sampling thus entails the selection of a sample that is consistent with the conceptual framework and that is relevant to the processes and the categories at the center of the research questions.124

Applied in the context of my study, theoretical sampling meant the purposive selection of study neighborhoods based on housing types, demographic characteristics, and geographical settings found in those neighborhoods. It also led to the purposive recruitment of households that represent different types, or categories, of households that have to be included in the sample if I am to fully pursue my research questions, rather than the recruitment of any individuals and the inclusion of whichever households they happen to belong to in the sample by default. Further, in consideration of my poststructural framework, the theoretically guided sampling process necessitated going to some lengths to include different age groups and ethnicities in the sample, irrespective of their numerical proportions among the population of households in Central Ohio or within the selected neighborhoods. Finally, because theoretical sampling allows the researcher to expand and to manipulate the sample during the research process and not just at the beginning of the study,125 I continuously added new “cases”, or households, to my sample in response to the level of diversity I was seeing in the data until the addition of new households to the sample was not yielding any new or significantly different accounts, perceptions, or “stories”, broadly defined. This is consistent with the goal of

125 MASON, J. (1996)
exhausting as many broad accounts as possible, which is called for in the qualitative research literature.\textsuperscript{126}

After obtaining Internal Review Board approval, I used several different tools to recruit households. Flyers were posted in some strategic public places (such as recreation centers and public libraries) and in some private spaces (such as popular coffee shops and other venues in the three neighborhoods). I used my social and professional network by communicating with individuals who live in these communities about their social circles and their acquaintances, and by asking them to introduce me to some families or single individuals whenever I thought that this might bring me in contact with households who would complement my sample. In the case of the Victorian Village/ Harrison West neighborhoods, where I have lived for several years and where I routinely frequent various places and businesses, I was also able to directly approach residents about the possibility of their participation in my research. “Opportunistic” or “snowball” sampling, whereby informants are asked to introduce the researcher to other potential informants,\textsuperscript{127} was only limitedly useful, because the sampling sought to include diverse household types rather than households that are similar in socio-economic background, ethnic background, circumstances, interests, or identities.


While I tried as best as possible to include different household types from the three study neighborhoods in my sample, I did not set a goal of recruiting an exact number of each household type from each neighborhood, mainly due to the general difficulty of recruiting households who are willing to participate. Instead, I included every household that I was able to recruit from any of the three neighborhoods, and the distribution of respondents by household type across the three neighborhoods resulted from this process. Before collecting any of the data that forms the basis of the analysis in subsequent chapters, I interviewed householders from four different households to test my interview guide and to develop some prompts that I could use to encourage informants to expand on or cover some topics.\textsuperscript{128} This helped refine the interview guide and determine the approximate time it would take to conduct each interview.\textsuperscript{129} I then proceeded with data collection.

Starting with an initial sample of 17 households, I interviewed householders and I started to transcribe the data and to look for broad themes as well as for different accounts that emerge in the data. Following the principle described above, I continued to recruit participants and to interview householders, and concurrently to scan the interview data, until I stopped observing significantly different accounts, or” stories”, in the data. By then, a total of 34 households had been included in the study. This by no means suggests that I believe that there would be no new, different accounts to discover if I were to continue to add new cases to the sample indefinitely; however, the repetition of broad themes and the lack of substantially new accounts indicate that

\textsuperscript{128} The data from these “pre-test” households are not included in the analysis.
\textsuperscript{129} For a more detailed discussion of the benefits of pilot interviews, see GILLHAM, B. (2000)
the sample has exhausted a reasonably broad spectrum of housing experiences in the study area.

Although 34 households is a very small sample relative to the total number of households in the three selected neighborhoods or in Central Ohio more generally, this sample size is indeed relatively large when compared to samples used in interview-based qualitative studies in which the interviews are of a comparable depth. Examples of such sample sizes can be found in Miraftab’s study of the housing options of the urban poor in Mexico, in Gurney’s research on the meaning of the home, and in Saegert, Liebman, and Melting’s study of the housing location preferences of working women in downtown Denver. The small sample sizes in this literature are necessary due to the theoretical sampling logic mentioned above, the focus on generating rich qualitative data and not on quantifiable data, as well as some important practical considerations regarding the time resources needed to conduct the interviews, to transcribe the interviews, and to qualitatively analyze the data. Issues of validity and reliability, and how these were enhanced in the research, are discussed in chapter 4.5.4.

After each initial contact, the prospective interviewees received a written letter explaining the purpose of the study and how their participation will remain

132 SAEGERT, LIEBMAN, MELTING (1985)
anonymous and their responses confidential. In keeping with the guidelines of the Internal Review Board, the letter disclosed that the general focus of the research is to study gender-specific differences in housing preferences. This could potentially have led to somewhat biased responses, as the letter alerted the interviewees to my interest in gender and gender roles. However, I believe that the care I took to guide the interviews in a manner that did not encourage the subjects to think specifically about gender differences has adequately compensated for this bias. The letter also informed the interviewees of the expected length of time that each interview will take, and explained that each householder will be interviewed separately (if applicable). The letter concluded by asking them to contact me if they wish to participate and would like to schedule the interview(s). I then obtained written consent before the start of each interview. The letter and the consent form are included in Appendix B.

4.4 Interviewing the Subjects: Procedures and Management of Interviews

All interviews took place in public places that were chosen because they were familiar to the interview subjects. The informants knew the general topics I am interested in ahead of the interview. In the case of households that include a couple, the two adults were interviewed separately. In some cases, both interviews took place on the same day. In cases where this could not be arranged, I met with each adult on separate days. During each interview, I used the interview guide (provided in Appendix A) and a digital voice recorder, in addition to a pen and some paper for note taking.
Establishing rapport and trust is essential to successful interviewing. To develop trust, I followed the advice of many qualitative researchers and used some degree of researcher self-disclosure, or the disclosure of my own life, interests, and experience to interviewees. While I did not follow the example of some feminist researchers who call for researchers and interviewees to talk in-depth about experiences and points of view, I did disclose enough information about myself to make the respondents feel comfortable and to establish a professional but friendly rapport with them.

As the description of the sample in chapter 3 shows, 14 of the 34 sample households include couples. The question of how best to interview couples and the methodological and ethical issues involved in interviewing couples are the subjects of a sizable body of literature, and so a brief discussion of my decision to interview each partner separately is in order. Whenever couples are interviewed for a research study, attention should be paid to interpersonal dynamics, power relations, and the effect that the interview can have in raising issues of conflict in the partners’ shared

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lives. In feminist approaches, “consciousness raising”, or the prospect of one partner becoming intentionally or unintentionally more conscious of unequal relations within the relationship as a result of the interview conversation, is often of concern, because of both the manner in which it can influence the research and the ethical issues that consciousness raising can bring up for the researcher.

It is not possible to avoid these issues or to exclude them altogether from the interviewing process; rather, the researcher has to be aware of them and to take them into consideration during the interviewing phase and later on when interpreting and analyzing the data. As G. Valentine concludes in a paper on household research, there is no single method of interviewing couples that is superior to all other alternative methods, and ethical and methodological issues always have to be considered depending on the focus of the research.

Closely related is the question of whether to interview couples together or separately. This is an unresolved debate, particularly in the area of family studies, where interviewing couples is necessary in many research projects. But there is consensus that the more the interview questions focus on inequities or issues that broadly pertain to power relations, the more necessary it becomes to interview

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142 AITKEN, S. (2001)
couples separately and to ensure privacy and confidentiality in order to allow for candid and useful responses.\textsuperscript{143}

My research interviews focused on housing preferences, the priorities that householders have when making housing decisions, and the reasons they are able or unable to achieve a preferred housing situation. During the interviews, I worded the questions such that they encouraged the respondents to talk about many different considerations related to housing preference and to their housing situation. Married and cohabiting respondents were not asked to talk about their partners and how they negotiate housing decisions with their partners per se, although unsurprisingly, most couples mentioned each other’s needs and how they accommodate their different needs during the interviews. Thus, the nature of the interview topics in itself did not necessitate separate interviews, because the interviews did not focus on sensitive subjects. I was, however, very interested in collecting separate accounts of men and of women, and not joint accounts that represent compromise responses. I therefore chose to interview couples separately.

\textsuperscript{143} Separate interviews in these contexts are still fraught with problems, however. For a detailed discussion, see VALENTINE, G. (1999), AITKEN, S. (2001), and HERTZ, R. (1995).
4.5 Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data

4.5.1 Transcribing the Data

To make the most of the rich amount of data collected in the interviews, it was necessary to transcribe each audio file and to produce a written transcript for each interview. This extremely time-consuming process yields the best possible and the most complete written record of an interview.\(^\text{144}\) I transcribed the interview conversations as thoroughly as possible, and written notes taken during the interviews helped to complete the transcripts and served as a loose outline of the conversation that took place.

It is important to remember that a transcript is only one possible interpretation or representation of an interview, and that it is a representation only of the verbal conversation, not of the total context of the interview. The transcription of research interviews should therefore be understood as a well thought out process that attempts to produce one representation of the interview.\(^\text{145}\)

4.5.2 Coding the Data

The first step towards qualitative data analysis is to code the data. To accomplish this, I developed a list of categories, which are themes, ideas, and meanings that I used to code paragraphs in the transcripts based on the content of the paragraphs. The initial

list of categories was derived from the theoretical and empirical literature, as well as from the theoretically developed purpose of the study. The list was then extensively expanded to include new categories that emerged from the data as I began to transcribe the interviews and to read the text. New data continuously led to new categories, and some categories were eventually split in sub-categories when it became apparent that they were too broad. This coding process follows the tradition of content analysis in qualitative social research.146

4.5.3 Interpreting the Data

By its very nature, the interpretation of qualitative data is a process that starts with the conceptualization of the study and that continues through the research design, the data collection phase, and data analysis.147 The purpose of the research always guides data interpretation.148 After coding the text, the researcher must review the data in detail in order to find meanings, commonalities, and recurrent accounts contained in the data.149

While interpreting the data, I constantly looked for patterns, themes, and related categories; relationships between variables (such as gender, age, income, or household composition); as well as for variables that the data show to be important

149 Seidman, I. (1998)
but that I had not thought of before. Very importantly, I looked for evidence that confirms my initial hypotheses as well as evidence that “disconfirms” them. This helped in further developing the theories that underlie my research questions and in generating new insights into housing preferences and housing decisions.

4.5.4 Validity and Reliability of the Data

“Valid” research is research that accurately measures or investigates the constructs that it is designed to investigate. Threats to validity exist in all research approaches. In quantitative analysis of statistical data, one common threat is “spurious” correlation; a variable that seems significant might in fact be insignificant but correlated to other variables that are significant. In survey research, some subgroups of the study population might be more or less inclined to respond than others, thus compromising validity. In qualitative research, such as that which uses qualitative interviews, there are the potential problems of “anecdotalism”, interpersonal dynamics influencing a respondent’s answers, or other issues that influence the interview situation.

Validity, and alternative conceptualizations of validity that are better suited to qualitative research, are discussed at length in the literature on qualitative

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150 For a discussion of strategies to generate meaning, see HUBERMAN, A.M./MILES, M.B. (editors 1994): The Qualitative Research Companion. London
151 ALRKSEY, H./KNIGHT, P. (1999
methodologies. Some steps were taken to enhance validity in this study. In collecting data, I used an interview guide with questions that I developed from the literature and from pilot interviews that I conducted (see chapter 4.3). I also used a study sample that fits the purpose of the research (see chapter 4.3), and I chose the interviewing method that best captures the topics and issues that I wanted the data to cover (see chapter 4.2). Finally, I took enough time to conduct each interview, thus allowing for the most comprehensive responses that I could obtain from informants. In following these steps, qualitative researchers ensure that the data is “true” and that they are investigating those constructs that they intend to investigate.

Reliability refers to the consistency of research instruments; that is, whether or not the research instruments will always produce the same data or measurements for the same set of conditions. The terms consistency and authenticity are often used in qualitative research in lieu of reliability, but they refer to the same concerns. While some qualitative researchers dismiss the goal of achieving reliability as irrelevant for qualitative research, I take the position that the consistency of my methods is important to consider if the research findings are to be relevant to policy and to the larger housing literature.

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156 HOYLE, R./HARRIS, M./JUDD, C. (2002); Silvermann, d. (2001); ALRKSEY, H./KNIGHT, P. (1999);
To enhance reliability, I pre-tested my interview guide with diverse householders to observe whether the guide was adequate and whether it will serve its purpose.\textsuperscript{160} I describe the research procedure and the decisions that I made in detail (see above). In my data analysis, I describe my findings, and I account for and attempt to explain inconsistencies in the data. Finally, to account for a certain level of subjectivity that is always present in data collection and data analysis, and in recognition of the relevance of my positionality to my research approach and to the ways in which the research subjects will perceive me, I take care in my analysis to consider my influence as a researcher. This involves considering how my background, gender, perceptions, language, and actions might contribute to my representation and account of the data, as well as how they might have affected the interviewees and their responses.\textsuperscript{161} These steps aim to ensure “consistency” and “truth value”,\textsuperscript{162} which are key to conducting reliable qualitative research.

\textsuperscript{160} SILVERMAN, D. (2001)
\textsuperscript{161} ALRKSEY, H./KNIGHT, P. (1999)
\textsuperscript{162} ALRKSEY, H./KNIGHT, P. (1999)
CHAPTER 5

HOUSING PREFERENCES – AN OVERVIEW

5.1 The Range of Housing Preferences and Choices: Diversity and Complexity

The data shows two important and basic trends that I briefly discuss below. Firstly, the interviews reveal a rich diversity in the subjects’ description of their preferred housing situation, including components such as dwelling type, location within the metropolitan spatial context, and type of neighborhood. This diversity emerges not only when comparing male and female householders or householders from different types of households (for example single parents to married householders without children), but often also among householders who share similar household characteristics.

Furthermore, the data shows a tendency for respondents to give many different reasons and to include many different factors when explaining their preference and, very importantly, the salience of gender as a variable that often determines how these complex and varied considerations translate into a particular preference that a householder would ideally realize given the choice. This “complexity” of housing preferences and decisions, as I shall call it, supports the hypothesis that personal and
household incomes by themselves do not fully explain differences in housing preferences between female and male householders of different ethnicities, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Secondly, the interviews also shed light on the manner in which these stated housing preferences combine with practical constraints, financial constraints, the (un)availability of options, and other considerations to produce the actual housing situations that the householder(s) opt(s) for. As with housing preferences, a high degree of complexity is revealed in housing decision making, but the degree to which householders are able to reconcile their desired housing situation with the actual choices available and accessible to them varies by gender and by income at the same time, and especially so among minority householders, elderly householders, and low to moderate income householders. Analyzing the diversity of housing preferences and the gender-, age-, and race-specific abilities/inabilities to achieve a desired housing situation is the focus of chapter 6.

5.2 The Different Components of Gendered Housing Preferences: Residential Unit Type, Neighborhood, and the Metropolitan Geographical/Spatial Context

The housing unit as a physical structure – a single family home, a duplex, a condo, an apartment – is the first thing that comes to mind when we think of housing choice, housing cost, and preference for a particular “kind” of housing. It is thus not surprising that the physical characteristics of housing emerge as a dominant theme in
the semi-structured interviews, and that this is true to some extent regardless of gender, household composition, age, life-cycle stage, socio-economic background, or ethnic background. The housing unit’s type, size, and other physical characteristics are often the first concerns that the interviewees choose to address. In many cases, the interviewees use their preference for a particular type of house or multifamily unit as the starting point for describing their housing preferences, and they build on that to further refine their idea of an ideal housing situation that encompasses not just the housing unit itself but also a neighborhood, a community, and a particular geographical and spatial context.

The latter factors, specifically the type of community, its geographical location, and its perceived symbolic status within the metropolitan spatial, economic, and social context thus figure as prominently in the interviewees’ accounts of their housing preferences as the more simple preference for a particular housing unit type. While I left the exact definitions of constructs such as “neighborhood” and “community” up to the interviewees, who each use idiosyncratic ideas of what constitutes a neighborhood or a community to talk about it, the interview subjects (with very few exceptions) tend to view the community in which the housing is located as an inextricable component of housing. At the very small neighborhood scale of which the housing is part, as in a well-defined suburban subdivision or a block or two blocks in an urban neighborhood, characteristics such as lot sizes, general density, the average size of the houses in a neighborhood, housing and street design, land uses that are present in close proximity to the home, and socio-economic characteristics of
residents are all seen as factors that determine neighborhood character and what type of neighborhood that a given housing unit is located in. This is true even when the terminology that the subjects use to describe these characteristics varies widely, and even when these considerations are implied only indirectly.

But this small neighborhood scale is not the only geographical scale that the householders apply when describing their preferences for some housing situations over others. In addition to the more narrowly defined neighborhood, the interviewees also consider the larger community with which a neighborhood is identified, be it a suburb, a city, or a particular area of a city, when they describe where they would like or would not like to live. Here, their interest tends to shift from the actual home as a physical structure surrounded by a set of neighboring uses, buildings, and streets to other questions that relate the housing location and housing characteristics to the larger metropolitan context. These include the general location relative to the center of the Columbus region; the municipality of which the neighborhood is part and the perceived quality of public services in that municipality; crime levels in the larger community (whether real or imagined); access to the freeway system and the length of commute to a person’s place of work or other places that he or she frequents on a regular basis; property taxes and how high or low they are compared to taxes in other communities; the quality of the school district; social and cultural characteristics that the subjects associate with particular communities; longtime residency in a particular area and/or the presence of family members in that area; and last but not least, subjective ideas about why certain parts of the Central Ohio metropolitan area are
more desirable than others as residential locations, as well as considerations related to social status and a household’s position within a perceived social and economic hierarchy.

Both scholarly research and popular writing tell us that given a choice, the vast majority of Americans would choose to own the biggest detached single family homes with private yards and garages that they can afford, in the most exclusive suburban or increasingly exurban communities that they can afford, over all other housing forms and housing tenures. In principal, this strong preference for what is perceived as the most independent, individualistic, and status-signifying housing situation does become apparent in the data, as does the tendency of some householders to view other housing forms, such as units in multifamily structures and/or in older urban neighborhoods, as less desirable or inferior housing solutions, to be chosen only when the suburban or exurban single family home is beyond financial reach, or during periods of transition.

The data, however, also reveal that men and women often arrive at this preference for very different reasons and as a result of very different motivations, sometimes in dependence of factors such as household composition, certain life course events, and cultural norms and perspectives. Central to the argument of this thesis, the interviews also point to the importance of other housing options to many householders of both genders, some of whom expressly say that they presently do not wish to live in
prototypical single family units, in suburban or exurban communities, or in large homes, due to their personal circumstances, lifestyle choices, or life course stages.

Finally, the interview data reveal a certain level of frustration on the part of some householders with regard to the choices available to them. Most notable is the finding that some householders express preferences that they characterize as merely theoretical and that they do not attempt to pursue due to their perception that this type of housing is either beyond their means or very unpractical for someone with their very specific household situation; as well as the perception of some householders that the housing market is not effectively catering to their needs, a feeling that is often expressed in gendered terms.

These different components will emerge as common threads in the following analysis of interview data. Because household composition is the factor that most strongly connects with gender to produce varied housing preferences in my study sample, the discussion will begin by focusing on preferences among householders from each household type separately in chapter 6. Chapter 7 will then draw the findings together, and it will attempt to address the research questions outlined in chapter 1 in light of these findings.
CHAPTER 6

UNDERSTANDING HOUSING PREFERENCES AND HOUSING DECISIONS

6.1 Traditional Nuclear Families

6.1.1 Overview

My sample included seven households that fit the traditional definition of nuclear families. These households consist of a female adult, a male adult, and one or more dependent children who are each either the biological child of at least one of the two adults or the adopted child of both adults.

This sub-sample is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, as I argued previously, the traditional nuclear family was for a long time at the center of federal housing policy and of local housing and land use regulations. It would thus be instructive to know what their housing preferences really are and how they make housing decisions. Secondly, traditional nuclear families represent a household composition that still receives major attention from policy makers and housing developers alike, but which

has declined sharply in the last decade relative to the number of other household types.\textsuperscript{164} Thirdly, because traditional nuclear families include adults of both genders who together are engaged in childrearing, housekeeping, and gainful employment simultaneously, their experience is especially interesting to my research questions and in light of my focus on gendered housing preferences.

The householders I interviewed who were part of a household consisting of them, an opposite-sex partner, and a child or several children show commonalities as well as important differences in housing preference. More so than among householders in other household types, their preferences are shaped by multiple dimensions of their personal lives and familial circumstances. Individual preferences, concern for the welfare of their children (which most of them define very broadly to include everything from safety, to the presence of other children in the vicinity of the neighborhood, to the perceived “niceness” of the community in which they are raising their children), a priority placed on the size of their living space and a desire to provide a generous amount of space for the children, financial considerations and financial tradeoffs implied by the choice of a housing situation, and logistical constraints are factors that combine to shape their housing preferences to a degree not observed among householders in other household contexts. Indeed, interviewees who are part of a traditional nuclear family find it very difficult to disentangle all these different factors that influence their housing preferences, and to distinguish between

personal preference, constraints arising from the presence of young or school-aged children in the household, their household budget, and the (often limited) options available to them. Table 6.1 summarizes the factors that my interviews show to be important among householders who live with a partner and minor children, by gender and general income level.
At a very basic level, householders in this group describe preferences that are motivated by similar priorities. Most of them, including interviewees from all three of...
the study neighborhoods, express a strong preference for a single family house as the ideal housing unit for themselves and their families. They also place a priority on the spatial context of the neighborhood, a context which encompasses social relations, an identity ascribed to the neighborhood by its residents, and a sense of place that they wish to find in the neighborhood. Using their own individual and unique definitions of “family-friendliness” or “children-friendliness”, these householders further express a preference for neighborhoods that they judge to be accommodating of children’s needs and of the needs of relatively young families.

Yet these generally similar priorities take on very different meanings among the householders depending on gender; further, and as table 6.1 shows, these gender-specific preferences vary depending on socio-economic characteristics. Among low-to-moderate income nuclear families, both men and women are especially concerned with housing cost; however, women see social support networks and access to public transit as much more important than men see them, and men are more interested than women in the location of housing relative to their work. By contrast, more affluent nuclear families mention other factors as important to them, such as the size of the living space, the quality of public schools, and neighborhood type, and these factors are equally important to women and men. Yet in these more affluent nuclear families, women place a higher priority on neighbors, the social and ethnic composition of the neighborhood, and the social function of the home than men do. To illustrate these points, I use as examples in the following section householders from three very different traditional nuclear families that participated in the study.
6.1.2 The Families

The first set of householders is an upper middle class married couple that I will refer to as Jennifer and Mike. The couple has three children aged two to nine. Jennifer is 36, Caucasian, holds a four-year college degree, and presently works part-time as an administrative assistant in a law office. Mike is 41, Caucasian, holds a bachelor’s degree, works full-time for an insurance company, and is enrolled part-time in a professional master’s program at a local university. The family lives in a four-bedroom, single family house in the Lewis Center area. The subdivision, completed about four years ago and built by one of the major housing developers in the region, is fairly typical of recent housing development in this suburb. It was built on a greenfield site, with little connection to other existing neighborhoods; all streets have sidewalks, but there is little to no opportunity to walk to any place beyond the subdivision; and all the houses are similar in size and style, with a few generic floor plans and exterior facades repeated throughout the subdivision. Jennifer’s and Mike’s house is very representative of houses in their neighborhood. Having bought the house and moved in soon after construction was completed, they are among the first households to ever live in this neighborhood.

As with all other couples in my sample, I scheduled separate interviews with Jennifer and Mike. The conversations I had with them indicate that they both prefer a spacious single family home in a suburban or exurban neighborhood that is economically
homogenous, and that they are both concerned with the needs of their children and with the desire to find a home that can accommodate the family in the long term. But at the same time, the interviews also show that some of the other reasons that lead them to prefer this specific housing arrangement are quite different. As Table 6.1 shows, these differences between male and female householders were common, especially among householders who are relatively affluent.

Jennifer’s concerns center around the size and functionality of the living space as well as around the concept of neighborhood. She starts by simply saying that she wants “a home that is big enough for us and the kids” and that the home should be in a “nice neighborhood”. When I prompt her to expand on the question of space and size and on what she would consider adequate space, Jennifer explains that while the number of bedrooms is paramount, the size of other shared rooms is also of importance. The reasons she gives demonstrate a keen interest in the social use of living space and some limitations she sees in this regard:

“You know, most of the time, you only think about how many bedrooms and how many bathrooms the house has. It’s nice if each child has his own room and it’s nice to have two bathrooms, at least, or even three. When you have kids, you know, that’s important. But I also like a big living room and a big dining area, and a decent family room. I want to have room when I have family or friends over or whatever. Mike’s family’s big too, and we like to invite friends over with their kids and stuff. And I like to make it cozy, especially for holidays and birthdays (…..). Last year we made Thanksgiving dinner for my family, it was the first time we do it since we moved here. We were….like…..maybe thirty people? And there are many kids. It was fun, but everything was crowded. The kids can play upstairs, but we want to have everyone together for dinner and sometimes I wish downstairs was bigger. Not that I’m complaining. I like it here, I’m telling you…..”
Jennifer’s preference is thus for a home that not only has a certain number of rooms, but also enough space to allow for entertaining and socializing with guests. She goes on to emphasize that it’s important for her to be able to do those things comfortably at home, since inviting people and being invited by them is the most common way that the family gets together with relatives and friends. “With many young children, it’s not like we can go and hang out somewhere together on Friday night. It’s hard to go out, and so I like to do it at home, and I like a place that has room for that”. For Jennifer, a middle class woman who is a native of the Columbus area and who has three children, a husband, a large extended family, many in-laws, and a large circle of friends, housing is not just a matter of adequate, functional shelter for herself and her family. Housing also serves a social function, one that she sees as an important and integral part of her daily life. Her view of her home as a place where her personal life, her family life, and her social life take place partly shapes her housing preference and the characteristics of the housing situation that she would see as ideal.

But Jennifer also places an importance on neighborhood and community. She describes neighborhoods in which the houses have only small yards and are very close to one another as lacking privacy, and she explains that she likes her own present neighborhood much better because the houses are farther apart. But she also stresses that she likes to be friendly with her neighbors, and that it is important to her that the neighbors be friendly and relatively social. Asked why she thinks this is important, she responds that she feels safer when she knows the neighbors, and also
that she lets her children play with other children on the street, sometimes in neighbors’ backyards, and that she would not be as comfortable allowing this if she did not know the neighbors. Jennifer then concludes that she prefers neighborhoods where residents share her desire to maintain good relations with one another, where “things are nice and peaceful”, and where her neighbors would be people who “want what I want from the neighborhood”. She is, however, careful to say that this does not mean that she dislikes neighborhoods that are racially or culturally more diverse than the neighborhood where she currently lives:

“I’ve had several different places in the past, when I was renting after college and then when we moved in together and had our first house. I didn’t always live out here (…….), they were in different areas, and I’ve had neighbors from all walks of life, you know, African-Americans, Asians, different ethnicities. That’s not an issue. But I just like it when people have a sense of community and are interested in what goes on, that’s what matters (…….). So I don’t want to live somewhere where I never see the neighbors or where weird stuff goes on and people don’t care what the neighborhood looks like and trash everything, that’s terrible. I also don’t like it when everyone is uppity and buying fancy new cars all the time and stuff like that. We’re normal folks.”

What is unmistakable is Jennifer’s clear preference for socio-economically homogenous neighborhoods. She repeatedly states that “not all people are good as neighbors and want to know their neighbors and are able to interact with them”; that “below a certain income, a street starts to look different”; that she does not wish to feel pressure “to keep up with the Joneses all the time”; and that “a neighborhood is what people make it”. Jennifer’s preference for economically homogenous, middle income residential communities is thus a result of a priority she places on both the physical appearance of a neighborhood and the social relations that are possible, or
not possible, in that neighborhood, priorities that she cannot imagine would be possible to realize in an economically more integrated housing situation.

Mike’s interview echoes some of his wife’s priorities. He raises the issue of space and the number of rooms that a home has, and he says that as someone who has children, he strongly prefers multiple bathrooms and a spacious house. Similar to Jennifer, he also elaborates on neighborhood characteristics as housing qualities, and he understands the neighborhood context to be an important factor that contributes to the housing experience. Yet these similar preferences are motivated by reasons that are different from Jennifer’s:

“I wouldn’t want a house that’s too crowded. We worked hard to be able to afford a nice place, and there are so many new big homes, so it’s not something that we have to compromise. We’re a growing family. Like the last time we moved.....we had two kids, and we wanted to have one or two more in the next few years. So the number of rooms is important. I know Jennifer would insist on enough bedrooms, especially when the kids grow up and want their own room and things. Moving is a hassle. It’s better to just find a big enough place from the beginning and stay in it for as long as we like the area. I don’t want to have to move every few years. It’s ok if the house appreciates. But it’s expensive to buy and sell a house. I mean, unless the value goes really up, it’s not worth it to move a lot. So I want a place that can accommodate changes.”

While Mike agrees with Jennifer that space is an important factor, he approaches the issue with his own set of practical concerns. His preference for a “big house” does stem from a desire to afford the children enough room, but he is also motivated by the wish to avoid multiple moves and the financial and logistical costs associated with
moving house, and to find a housing situation that can meet more long-term housing needs.

Mike further explains that the location of housing is important to him. But unlike his wife, whose focus is on a relatively small neighborhood scale and on issues of neighborliness and social relations within the small-scale neighborhood, Mike is more interested in the general area, or the larger suburban community of which the neighborhood is part. He explains this both as a practical issue and as a matter of identifying with some parts of the Columbus area more than with others:

“Our friends live in different neighborhoods. Two of my buddies ended up moving to Canal Winchester [during] the last few years and they like it down there. But I’ll always want something north of the city, like in Delaware County or in the northeastern area, Westerville or something. It’s closer to everything, and my commute would be longer if we lived in……like……Pickerington, for example. Besides, I’ve always been on the north side, and I like it better. We know more people around here……….other areas are just different.”

For Mike, housing location takes on two different meanings that are equally important. The strictly physical, geographical location within the larger Columbus area and the distance to various places that he wants access to are important for practical reasons, but they are not the only locational aspects that matter to him. Equally crucial is the suburban context as a unique place that encompasses a set of social and economic relations, an emotional association, and an identity that set it apart from other places. His responses do not point to any particular interest in his immediate neighbors, in who they are, or in his interactions with them; indeed, he
chooses not to talk about this aspect at all throughout the interview. But Mike is still very interested in the socio-spatial context of housing, albeit with a definition of community that is different from the one Jennifer uses. That definition leads him to prefer some housing locations over others based on identities and social contexts that he associates with different suburbs, and using a different geographical scale.

The second household that I will use as an example of traditional nuclear families in my sample is a family with one child living in the Harrison West area. I use the pseudonyms Beth and Tom to refer to the couple, who has been cohabiting for about three years. Beth is 29 years of age, biracial, holds a 2-year associate’s degree, and works in retail. Tom is 27, African-American, holds a high school diploma, and is employed by a local construction contracting company. This working class couple rents a small two-bedroom apartment in a multifamily house on the southern edge of Harrison West. At the time of the interviews, they had been living in this apartment for about six months, and their daughter was 14 months old. Their fairly modest home is located very close to a new, upscale single family and condominium community called Harrison Park that was constructed as a brownfield redevelopment project in Harrison West. With regard to their housing preferences, Beth and Tom mirror the trends that I saw among low to moderate income nuclear families and that can be seen in Table 6.1.1. They are both concerned with the cost of housing, but their priorities are otherwise different. For Beth, support networks are especially important, as is access to public transit. For Tom, living closer to work and living in a more affordable and more spacious dwelling has higher priority.
Tom’s dissatisfaction with his present housing arrangement becomes evident during my interview with him. After complaining about some issues he and Beth are having with the landlord regarding some repairs that are needed in the apartment, he goes on to explain that they chose this apartment only because it was available in this neighborhood and close to where they previously lived, and that it is not what he would have normally wanted:

“We were living a couple [of] blocks away and had to get out. It was cheaper to move close. The same bus also stops close by……Beth takes the bus to work and to her sister [who takes care] of the baby, and that ain’t available [everywhere]. But I’d like one of those apartments that have two levels, like a townhouse. I also want to be closer to my work, the jobs we get are not right here in Columbus and I drive a lot. The rents are cheaper in other neighborhoods, but Beth needs the bus. And they aren’t getting cheaper here soon, this neighborhood is [becoming] more expensive all the time. Lots of fancy places going up, nice renovations, soon there won’t be much left……”

Tom’s foremost considerations are cost, access to his job, and the availability of public transit, on which his partner depends. In my conversation with him, he stresses that he prefers neighborhoods where rents are cheaper and where he and Beth would be more likely to find a larger apartment at the same price or even at a lower rent. He also believes that some of these more affordable neighborhoods would better meet his own transportation needs, since they are closer to I-270 (the outer belt forming a loop around Columbus and the inner suburbs) and thus provide faster access to the construction sites where he typically works. Tom is highly aware of the changes that the Harrison West community is undergoing. He is apprehensive about the rising cost
of housing in the neighborhood, and his general impression is that the new housing development and redevelopment that is taking place will not help him and his family; indeed, he points to Harrison Park as a project which will cause all house prices in the area to appreciate and that will drive him and his family out of the neighborhood in the medium term. Tom goes on to explain that he would rather live in a neighborhood that is more accommodating of a low to moderate income family, “where there’s place for normal working folks”.

Tom’s partner Beth is more ambivalent about her housing situation. She talks about housing cost, and like Tom, she complains that they are “not getting much for the money”. Although she is vague about how much she thinks they would save if they lived in a different neighborhood and where these more affordable neighborhoods are, she firmly believes that it is possible to find more affordable rental housing in other parts of the Columbus area. But Beth does not necessarily see housing cost as her first priority. She places an importance on the social and familial networks that she and Tom depend on, especially as far as child care is concerned, and she indicates that she would not want a housing location that would make it more difficult to rely on that network for support:

“I have to work, I can’t be a stay-at-home mom. And someone has to look after Tracy, we can’t afford child care, it costs……maybe more than I make in my job. My sister helps us, and sometimes my grandmother helps. I take the bus with Tracy and take her [to them], and then I get on the bus again and go to work. So I don’t want to live far. Tom wants to move someplace else. We could save some money, and maybe have a bigger place, that’d be cool. But this is where everybody is, right in the city. What will we do if we move?
I don’t know…..I don’t care if other apartments are new or if we’d pay a bit less. I just don’t want to be too far, I don’t even have a car everyday………..”

Unlike Tom, housing cost is only one of several factors that shape Beth’s preferences, and other factors are at least as important as cost. Both of them have a child that they feel responsible for, and they both rely on support from Beth’s extended family to take care of the child. But while he acknowledges that access to public transit and to Beth’s relatives is an important issue, Tom still prefers a bigger, cheaper townhouse apartment on the outskirts of the city, and he agrees to live in their current apartment only reluctantly. Beth, on the other hand, is concerned with her social network above everything else, and she is much more willing than Tom to sacrifice some housing space and some money in order to continue receiving the support that she feels is necessary. Further, her perspective as someone who has to rely on public transportation makes her much more sensitive to transportation issues and to her ability or inability to use the bus system depending on where she lives.

It is also important to note that Beth chooses not to talk about housing unit types, and about which type of unit she would choose if she had more options. She expresses her housing preferences solely as a question of location and, to a more limited extent, of cost; the challenge of organizing her day to day life as a moderate income working mother is so great that she does not allow herself to think of her housing preferences beyond these two aspects. Finally, although Tom does state that he prefers neighborhoods that are not experiencing as much gentrification, neither he nor Beth
put any detailed emphasis on the question of community, immediate neighbors, or the physical layout of a neighborhood. Instead, my interviews with them indicate a preoccupation with more basic housing-related matters, a preoccupation that stems from the difficulty they find in affording housing and other basic needs and in raising a child on a low to moderate household income.

The third and final example that I use is a couple that I will call Jane and Dennis. Jane is 44, Asian-American, holds an advanced degree, and works in the financial sector. Dennis is 40, Caucasian, holds a bachelor’s degree, and owns a small business. Originally from the East Coast, Jane relocated to Columbus after she met Dennis. The couple, which has been living in a small single-family home in Victorian Village for about five years, has adopted two infants over the past four years. At the time of the interview, the children were aged 3 and 1. Like other couples with children and with household incomes that are above average (see Table 6.1.1), Jane and Dennis agree that the quality of schools is very important once their oldest child reaches school age and that this consideration is more important than anything else. Yet their preferences are different when they include other considerations. Jane would ideally choose an older house in an old and established, socially diverse urban neighborhood. Dennis is open to his wife’s idea of a good housing situation, but he still prefers a suburban setting and a less dense neighborhood.

When I interview her, Jane jokes about herself and her husband being an interesting case for a researcher studying housing preferences. As a native of New Jersey who
moved to Philadelphia as an adult for career-related reasons, Jane was planning to remain on the East Coast in the long term when she met her husband, who had already been living in Columbus for a number of years. After some debate and after taking various considerations into account, including the cost of living, the two decided that Jane would relocate to Columbus, and that they would decide later on whether or not to remain in Columbus, depending on Jane’s satisfaction/dissatisfaction with her new job and her general experience living in Columbus.

Jane tells me that they clearly made a decision to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. But she explains that she initially found that she had to get accustomed to a new place and a regional culture which, as compared to other places where she formerly lived, were more “different” than she had anticipated. Among the issues which required some adjustment in her expectations, Jane says, were the housing options. She stresses that house prices and rents have risen so dramatically in East Coast cities in recent years that housing in Columbus, including high end housing, seems affordable by comparison. Her concern, however, has more to do with the options available to her and Dennis, specifically with regard to the type of neighborhoods they could live in, as well as with the flexibility that she had to show in order for them to be able to find a compromise between their different expectations and priorities:
“Housing is so much cheaper here and there’s a lot that’s on the market. It’s easy to find different places that you can choose from. That’s [another] thing about moving out here, it was like a luxury. My problem is that I like…..how should I say…. mature neighborhoods? I just prefer neighborhoods that have been around for a long time and I like…..kind of older houses. There are some areas in Columbus that are like that, but with the crime in some places, they’re just not always safe. You just can’t compromise on that. But I still didn’t just want to move to the suburbs and that’s it. Dennis lived in Worthington before I moved here, and when we decided to sell his place and move I didn’t want to stay out there. (…………) But he wasn’t really the city type, [you] know what I mean, and it was hard for him to like some of the places we looked at. So there aren’t that many neighborhoods to choose from, you know…..unless you’re just looking for an apartment, but of course we want a house. Victorian Village is nice, but there aren’t many places in the city where we could find this.”

In the course of the interview, Jane identifies several areas of concern that shape her housing preferences. She expresses a strong desire to live in a relatively old structure as opposed to a new home, which she takes to mean an average new suburban home in a relatively recent subdivision development and which she describes as “unimaginative” and “without character”. Her preference is clearly for a single family home, a preference that she understands to be self-evident and in no need of explanation or further elaboration. She implies during our conversation that urban residential neighborhoods, located in the urban center, are generally more appealing to her than are suburban communities, a preference that became even stronger after the time she spent living in the older, historic neighborhood in the central city in Philadelphia. Finally, Jane is very concerned about the safety of the neighborhood, and she perceives this priority (whether objectively or subjectively) to be easier to satisfy in the suburbs than in the central city, where she prefers to live. As a result, she believes that there are only limited options regarding housing location that would
match her preferences, though she also adds that she believes that she has found one of these limited options in her present housing situation.

Yet there is a second, very different aspect to Jane’s preferences and perceptions of housing options. When considering her preferences with an eye to the future, she talks about her housing preferences from the perspective of a parent who has young children and who expects their needs to change as they grow up. She complains that Columbus public schools “are not even a remote option” for her children, and she explains that unless she and Dennis can find a suitable private school that they can afford, they will have to move to a different school district once their oldest child reaches school age. In talking about the quality of schools and how important this issue is for her family, Jane’s shifts her focus from her preference for certain housing types and neighborhood types to questions about the larger community in which that neighborhood is located, and what she believes she can realistically expect if her children’s education is a priority that trumps all other considerations:

“Like I [was] saying, I like this place much better than any place we could get in Hilliard or Dublin or the other places. But once schools become an issue, the decision is made for you. Sophie will start going to school in a couple of years and I don’t want her going to school here in Columbus. (…….) We have to choose between moving and private schools, it depends what’s available. Many private schools are affordable, but I’m not sure if we’re comfortable with parochial schools or whatever…….it’s a tough decision. (…….) In many suburbs, this isn’t a problem [and] the normal schools are fine. And you know that they’re going to stay that way as long the people who have their kids [in these schools] are parents who insist that the schools be good. It’s different down here……you know, you’re on your own trying to find something good. (…….) I didn’t become a parent very young and I’m not like those very young mothers who all want to live in the same places and do
things the same way. We’re a bi-cultural family too………..people are not used to that in [some] places. I feel I have a different perspective on things. But that’s not really a question here, if we have to choose, of course we’ll go where we’ll find good schools for our children.”

Jane is clearly conflicted in her housing decisions. She prefers to live in an urban neighborhood in the city, provided some basic qualifications (such as a low crime rate and a perception that the neighborhood is safe) are met. She has strong opinions regarding what she sees as advantages that older neighborhoods with a longer history and with an older and more diverse housing stock have over most suburban residential neighborhoods. She identifies as a “non-traditional mother”, and although parenthood and the needs of her children are presently an important focus in her and Dennis’ lives, she distances herself from what she calls the prototypical, “young suburban mom lifestyle”, and she rejects certain gendered expectations that she associates with that lifestyle. Further, her ethnic and cultural identity, as well as those of her two daughters (who are international adoptees), causes her to be cautious about suburban communities in Central Ohio, places that she perceives to be ethnically homogenous and socially conservative.

At the same time, the quality of the education that her children can receive in a neighborhood is a very important criterion, one which will become relevant to Jane and her family in the medium term and which, considering the poor performance of Columbus public schools relative to other schools districts, is in direct conflict with her preference for urban neighborhoods close to the urban core. The importance of school quality and her strong preference for non-suburban neighborhoods are
opposing values that she does not believe she can reconcile unless she finds and gains access to private schools that meet her family’s needs. But there is no question as to Jane’s priorities. Presented with a choice between her preferred neighborhood type and a good education for her children, she would without doubt choose the good education.

In this context, the larger community of which a neighborhood is part becomes very important to Jane. She understands the school issue as a question of how well the public schools are presently performing in a particular district as well as a question of how reliable she can expect the quality of schools to be in the future. The socio-economic composition of the residents of the school district, or of the community associated with that district, is the factor that she sees as the most important in this regard, as she is convinced that the presence of many well-educated, professional, relatively affluent parents among residents will always guarantee good performance in the schools. Jane does not seek to avoid socio-economic and income diversity in principle, but she nonetheless uses socio-economic characteristics as an indicator of school quality, and she wishes to take advantage of the ability of affluent suburbanites to insist on and push for well performing public schools in order to secure a good public education for her children. Class is relevant to her future housing preferences not so much because she is suspicious of lower income households or uncomfortable with mixed-income neighborhoods. Rather, it is relevant because she believes that if she and her husband have to rely on public schools for their children’s education, then they would have to pay attention to the substantial differences in the quality of
schools across different school districts, differences that she understands to be strongly tied to the socio-economic composition of residents.

Dennis, by contrast, finds it easier to identify his housing preferences. He tells me that he agreed to move to Victorian Village and to “give it a try” because Jane liked the house when they saw it and because she wanted to live in the city. He is satisfied with their current housing situation, and he explains that after living in suburban communities all his life, residing in a different type of neighborhood is an interesting experience and a choice that he does not regret making. But when they decided to become parents, Dennis immediately concluded that while they could continue to live in this house for several more years, they would most probably have to move eventually, mainly due to the schools and their need to relocate to a better school district. However, he does not necessarily see this as a problem or a sacrifice:

“There are many nice places to live around this town. I liked the area where I lived before we bought this place, but selling my old house and buying a new place made sense as far as money was concerned, and Jane likes it better in the city, and I also think that [Victorian Village] is nice. But of course the schools are important, and I think that we’ll end up moving and not using private schools. We like this house, but we’ll move on in a couple of years. I think that would be better. (………) It’ll also be good to have a bigger place when the kids are a little older. My wife doesn’t really care about the house itself, but I want some work space, a garage or a bigger basement or something. I’m not saying that all I care [about] is guy stuff or anything, and I know where Jane is coming from. (………) Don’t get me wrong, I like city living, but it will make sense for us to move. The schools alone are a big factor.”
I sense that some of Dennis’ statements are intended to avoid leaving any impression that he does not quite appreciate urban neighborhoods, an impression that the listener might get from his answers, and to make abundantly clear that he is considerate of his wife’s perspective and wishes. I mentioned that I live in the Victorian Village area when I introduced myself to Jane and Dennis, and it is not unlikely that my presence as a female interviewer, as a stranger, and as a person who lives in the Victorian Village area encourages him to stress or even to exaggerate these points, and I am aware that I should take this into account when I approach the data from my interview with him. Nonetheless, there is no question that his housing preferences are simpler, and less ambiguous, than those of his wife. Jane and Dennis agree on their preference for a single family home, and on the priority that their children’s education should take in their housing choices. But unlike Jane, Dennis is not very concerned about neighborhood specifics, social context, and the effects that these have on lifestyle, identities, and housing experiences. Their different backgrounds and the different environments in which they previously lived partly explain their different perceptions of housing and of the different housing options that are available.

6.1.3 Gender, Household Characteristics, and the Housing Preferences of Two-Parent Families with Children

The three household examples discussed in the previous section demonstrate some key insights that the data from my interviews with traditional nuclear families show to be very important. As individuals living with a partner and children, householders
in traditional nuclear families still have individualized housing preferences that they understand as separate from those of their partners. Although most of these householders occasionally refer to their partners and to the necessity of taking their partners’ needs into consideration, they nevertheless view these preferences as their own personal preferences, and they understand the family’s housing decision as a resulting from the layering of, or the compromise between, these individual preferences. We should thus understand the housing preferences that are inferred from the residential choices of families with children as complex choices that these families make in response to the needs and preferences of two adults, not as simple preferences that both adults share equally and that always lead to an obvious housing choice.

Very importantly, there are discernable, gender-specific differences in the housing preferences of male and female householders in traditional nuclear families, as well as age-, race-, and class-specific differences that do not exist separately, but should rather be understood as arising from the subjects’ multiple, simultaneous identities. Even though their general priorities and concerns are very similar to those of their partners, female and male householders in traditional nuclear families understand these priorities and wish to pursue them in different terms. Mike and Jennifer agree on a preference for a single family suburban home and a location within a middle class, suburban, low-density community, but they each pursue somewhat different goals when they choose this option. Beth and Tom are both concerned with transportation to and from their places of work, with taking care of
their child, and with making ends meet, but they still construct different individual preferences based on these priorities. Jane and Dennis are both very focused on the quality of schools and are very intent on making housing decisions that would give their children access to the best education possible, but their actual housing preferences are in fact quite different, and their consensus on the desirability of a suburban community in the future is brought about only by the equal importance they place on school quality.

The experience of these three couples is echoed in my interviews with the other four traditional nuclear families in my sample, which, like the three households that I used as examples, cover a wide range of household incomes. In all of these households, the differences in preferences within the household are at least partly the result of gendered responsibilities, gendered roles, the gendered experience of place, gendered-specific interests, and in some cases, unequal access to transportation.

But a closer look, especially across different households, reveals that the subjects’ multiple identities influence their housing preferences, not gender alone. Age, ethnicity, income, and class all interact with gender to produce very diverse housing preferences, preferences that are therefore not consistent if we compare them along gender, ethnic, or class lines alone. Class, as approximated by household income, is especially important; for this reason, Table 6.1.1 shows the preferences and the different factors that women and men describe for low to moderate income households and for median and above median income households separately. But
class is not the only relevant variable in addition to gender. Beth and Tom have a young child, as do Jane and Dennis. But while Jane and Dennis are very concerned about schools and highly sensitive to differences in the quality of schools across different school districts, Beth and Tom do not mention the schools at all, a difference in priorities and perceptions that is most probably due to the very different socio-economic backgrounds of these two families. Similarly, Mike and Jennifer, and Jane and Dennis, are two couples with similar household incomes and with young children. Yet the nature of the gender-specific differences in preferences within each of these two households is very different due to the different ages of the householders, the different ethnic compositions of the families, and the different life course histories and past housing experiences of the householders in each household.

Although households of varying incomes exhibit these differences in housing preferences within the household, the ability of a couple with children to achieve a housing situation that corresponds to both partners’ preferences, or that is at least a fair compromise between their preferences, is greatly dependent on the family’s socio-economic characteristics. Of the four additional nuclear families in my sample, two households are low to moderate income households; one household has a household income that is moderately above the median household income in Central Ohio; and one household is an upper middle class family with a household income that greatly exceeds the median household income in their community. My interviews with householders from all of these families point to the greater ability of more affluent households to negotiate a housing situation that is attractive to both partners.
Because they severely limit their options, financial constraints make it difficult for low to moderate income couples with children to find housing that is affordable, that can accommodate a family with children, and that is well-located with regard to their child care arrangements while still meeting the needs of both parents. In other words, although differences in housing preferences clearly exist beyond those differences that can be attributed to income differences alone, gender-specific differences in preferences are more likely to lead to a less-than-optimal housing solution for at least one of the partners the lower the household income of a nuclear family.

It is important to note that my data do not support a simple conclusion that women’s preferences are more likely to be ignored or suppressed than their male partners’ preferences when a couple with children is unable to find a housing situation that satisfies both partners. Rather, the interviews reveal that among couples with children, especially those with low incomes, both men and women sometimes accept suboptimal housing arrangements in order to accommodate the needs of their partners and children. The data, however, show that more so than men, women in these households have multifaceted needs, and that there are multiple and conflicting considerations that make up their housing preferences as a result of the multiple and competing demands on their time.
6.2 Couples Without Children

6.2.1 Overview

My study sample included seven households consisting of a couple with either no children or grown children who no longer live at home. As might be expected, the age range of householders in these households is much wider than among householders with young children. The youngest couple I interviewed is in their early twenties; the oldest is in their late sixties and early seventies.

Perhaps with the exception of research on gentrification and the new trend in upscale housing development in central cities, as well as some research on the housing needs of elderly households, couples without children or with grown children do not receive much attention in the housing literature. Researchers take the absence of young dependents and the fact that household members are living with a partner to mean that these households have no special needs, are not vulnerable, and should easily be able to find adequate housing that meets their needs and that they can afford. We therefore know fairly little about the housing experience of these households.

I was curious about my interviews with couples that have no children living with them for two reasons. Firstly, it is interesting to explore whether gender-specific housing preferences would still be prevalent when children and childrearing are not part of the householders’ daily lives and general housing-related concerns. Secondly, I was fortunate to be able to recruit, among others, two households in which a couple
shares the housing unit with an elderly parent of one of the two partners. With the aging of the population and longer life expectancies, housing arrangements of the elderly are becoming more diverse, and an increasing number of people are choosing to share a housing unit with their elderly parents or their adult children, either as two independent households living in two independent units in the same house, or as one multigenerational household living in one unit. These housing arrangements are relatively recent, emerging (or re-emerging) demographic trends, and the housing needs of householders who are caring for, or at least sharing housing with, an elderly relative are not yet well studied. The two couples in my sample that live with an elderly parent provide me with an (admittedly limited) opportunity to shed some light on the housing preferences of these householders, on the role of gender in shaping these preferences, on the way housing space is negotiated in this particular type of multigenerational families, and on the manner in which their household composition influences their housing decisions.

Due to their widely varying ages and their more diverse lifestyles, couples without children that are part of my sample do not share common priorities beyond the very basic issues of affordability, access, and safety, broadly understood. But the interview data nevertheless point to gender-specific perspectives among almost all of the householders who live with a partner and without children. Table 6.2 shows the housing preferences and the housing–related concerns of women and men below 45 years of age and above 45 years of age who live with a partner and without any children present in the household.
Table 6.2: The housing preferences and priorities of householders living with a partner and without children present in the household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>below 45 years of age</th>
<th>above 45 years of age</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>type of neighborhood</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>cultural amenities</td>
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The table shows that in this group of households, the nature of the gender-specific differences in housing preferences varies depending on the age (and the life course
stage) of the couple. Among younger couples, we can observe a higher level of diversity in their tenure preferences, and generally more interest in cultural aspects of the neighborhood. Moreover, men are more interested than women in the long-term investment decisions surrounding housing, while women seem to be more concerned than men with finding housing that suits their everyday needs. Among middle aged and older couples, homeownership is the preferred tenure choice, and the focus of the householders shifts to issues related to maintenance, long term strategies (especially with an eye to their needs in old age), and whether or not to stay in a neighborhood where they have resided for a long time. Further, in this group of households, men are more likely than women to focus on technical issues related to their home, while women are generally more concerned with longtime neighbors, maintaining ownership of a single-family home, and in some cases, taking care of elderly parents. I discuss three examples of these couples in the following section.

### 6.2.2 The Couples

I will refer to the first couple as Kate and Joe. Kate and Joe are in their mid thirties, are natives of Korea, and have been living in the United States for eight years. Both came to the United States to attend graduate school. After graduation, they relocated from Texas to Columbus to take advantage of career opportunities in the area. At the time of the interview, Kate and Joe were renting a townhouse in an apartment and condominium community in the Lewis Center area and in relative proximity to both of their jobs. Both of them are equally satisfied with their housing situation, but the
priorities that motivate them to like their housing arrangement are different. Joe is almost exclusively interested in living in a neighborhood or development that is recommended by friends and acquaintances and is located close to where the couple’s social and church networks are concentrated, while Kate is also focused on choosing a housing option that is practical, comfortable, and close to places that she frequents on a regular basis.

Joe remarks that he sees their living arrangement as temporary, and that he would not want to own a home for the time being. He explains that he prefers to own a home in the long term, whether the home is a single family home or part of a multifamily unit, but that he does not believe it is the right time to make such a commitment. Asked to elaborate more on his preference for renting, Joe responds that he and Kate are not sure how long they will stay in Columbus. He would like to be able to change jobs after gaining some experience and to be able to move at short notice, and he expects that future employment opportunities might encourage them to relocate to other cities: “We might take jobs in a new city, and we just have an apartment, and we can move fast”.

Joe also talks about the search for housing, and how he prefers to ask friends or acquaintances who already reside in the region for advice when deciding where to live. When the couple decided to move to Columbus, they were able to use the network of the church that they attended while living in Texas to get in touch with some Korean families that live in Columbus and surrounding suburbs. Those families
helped familiarize them with the geography of the Columbus area, and they recommended some apartment communities based on their location relative to Joe’s and Kate’s places of employment and based on past experience with different apartment complexes. Joe indicates that this kind of advice is important to him. When I prompt him to talk more about the neighborhood in which they live and the type of neighborhood he generally prefers, he couches his answer in terms related to other people’s experience and to where friends or acquaintances live, not in terms of neighborhood characteristics per se:

“It’s better to live where other people we know lived. It’s not easy to look for an apartment when you don’t [know] the city. We don’t know if it’s a nice place or not. Here in Columbus, some friends of our friends told us to look here and to look at other apartments on Morse Road. They said it’s safe. Some people from our church live nearby. We like to live close.”

Two important considerations are central to Joe’s housing preferences. The presently transient nature of his and his wife’s lives lead him to desire flexibility in tenure, and to prefer housing that would allow them to relocate quickly and without incurring the usual costs associated with buying and selling a home. Homeownership is a goal, but it is one that he qualifies. Unless he is more certain about their long-term employment situation and about the general region where they will settle down for a longer period of time, Joe sees homeownership as a burden, or an obstacle that could make it more difficult for him and Kate to take advantage of career opportunities whenever and wherever they present themselves.
Further, social networks and the spatial manifestation of these networks are important to Joe’s housing preferences. He does not expressly mention race or ethnic background when he talks about his desire to live in housing close to friends or acquaintances or about the importance of their advice. But throughout the interview, he consistently implies that the social network he is interested in is that of Korean families that live in the region and are connected through various institutions, most notably the Korean churches that they belong to. Whether or not a neighborhood is a desirable housing location depends to a large extent on this social network and the housing experience of other households of his ethnicity and/or religion. In fact, the only neighborhood characteristics that he mentions in our conversation are the location of the neighborhood relative to where friends and acquaintances live, and whether or not the development is known and recommended among friends and acquaintances. Joe is not interested in questions of density, types of housing, neighborhood layout, or even the exact size of a housing unit. His foremost concern is the position of the neighborhood in a socio-spatial network that he identifies with.

Joe’s wife Kate agrees with him on the question of housing tenure. She expresses a strong desire to not be potentially “tied down” by a house, and she explains that this is important because of the priority that she and Joe place on their careers. To that she adds that she would also strongly prefer to save a substantial amount of money before considering purchasing a home. This would allow the couple to make a large down payment and to reduce their mortgage debt, something that she identifies as an important personal priority:
“In America, people take mortgages to buy [homes]. But I don’t want to [be] in debt. In my country, we are not used to a lot of debt. It’s good that we can buy a house here even if we don’t have a lot of money in cash. But I don’t want to have a lot of debt and to make payments for many years. I feel bad when I spend [money] and don’t pay it.”

How to finance a home is therefore an important question for Kate. The idea of going into debt to purchase a home does not appeal to her, and it is a consideration that contributes to her preference for delaying homeownership. In this regard, she does not reject this tenure choice because she is opposed to homeownership in principle, but rather because of culturally acquired values and attitudes regarding personal finances, spending, and what constitutes an acceptable amount of financial debt.

Similar to her husband, Kate sees housing location as a priority, and she mentions that they chose their townhouse with the help of people who were more familiar with Columbus. But unlike Joe, she does not couch her neighborhood preference only in terms of the residential choice and the experience of people they know:

“I don’t like it when neighbors make noise. I lived before in [an apartment] where neighbors had lots of parties. I didn’t like it. I want a place more quiet. When the neighbors are families, they are more quiet. So I always want to live where families live and not very young people. I asked our friends when we were coming to Columbus. They told us that this apartment [complex] is nice. They know because one family lived here before. I also like to [be close to a] big grocery store…..Korean stores……Target…..”

Kate is happy to rely on the advice of people that she knows for information on good housing options. But as repeatedly becomes evident in her responses, she does so
with the goal of finding housing that matches her preferences and meets her needs. While Joe is adamant about living in a place close to and similar to where people that they know live, Kate does not see this as a goal in and of itself. More important to her are convenience, quiet, and feeling comfortable at home.

The second example is a couple to whom I assigned the pseudonyms Sharon and Peter. Sharon is 61, Caucasian, and has been a homemaker most of her life, with occasional part-time employment in retail. Peter is 64, Caucasian, and works as a plumber. The couple resides in a three bedroom single family home in Northeast Columbus in which they have been living for many years. They have a total of four children, the oldest of whom is Sharon’s son from a previous relationship. All their children are grown and have moved out of the parents’ home. When Peter’s mother, who is in her mid eighties, became too frail to live on her own and started to need more care, she moved in with her son and daughter-in-law. At the time of the interview, she had been living with Sharon and Peter for about two years. The family identifies itself as a hard-working, blue collar, middle class family.

At the same time, Peter and Sharon express some concern regarding their financial future, retirement, and how long Peter will have to work in order for them to be financially secure. Their house is located in a neighborhood in which home values have been relatively stagnant for years, especially when compared to the rising house prices in many communities in and around Columbus. Both Sharon and Peter believe that the modest value of their home and the rising cost of housing in many other
neighborhoods have limited their housing options. The couple’s housing preferences are a typical example of the housing preferences of couples without children living at home as shown in Table 6.2. Both of them see little flexibility in their housing choice, and their concerns center around maintaining homeownership and ensuring that they have adequate housing when they are older. But while Sharon is especially interested in remaining in the neighborhood that she is familiar with and making sure that their housing situation is adequate considering that they are caring for an elderly parent, Peter is more concerned about the physical effort that it takes to maintain the house and whether or not they will be able to make that effort indefinitely.

Sharon is eager to explain that she would never give up her house to live in multifamily housing, whether it is rented or owner-occupied. Though she is dissatisfied with some aspects of her current housing situation and feels that she and Peter will not be able to take advantage of better options due to financial issues, she is emotionally attached to her house and to the idea of fully owning her home:

“The neighborhood is different from when we first moved here, but it’s our house……it took us years to pay for it, now it’s ours. All those nice new houses they are building, they’re so fancy. But we couldn’t afford a new place. If we sold the house, the money [would not be] enough. Who wants that? It’s better to stay where we are and not risk anything.”

Sharon’s explanation of the reasons that encourage her to stay in the same house and neighborhood sounds defensive, almost apologetic, as if staying in her neighborhood required a good excuse. Moreover, in the course of our conversation, I sense that she
feels a need to explain a situation that she does not expect me to be able to understand very well or to empathize with. She believes (rightly or not) that I am of a different socio-economic background, that I have a higher income, or that I am otherwise economically and/or socially privileged relative to her, and this affects her responses to my questions and the way she chooses to frame those responses. Still, the point to take is that while she is to some extent disappointed with the conditions in her neighborhood and with her inability to gain access to more attractive housing, Sharon nevertheless is committed to her neighborhood and prefers the single family home that she owns to other housing options that from her perspective, might come with less security.

Sharon also sees the single-family house as a crucial requirement for a household that includes an elderly relative. When I ask her about her potential interest in a change in their housing arrangement and whether she would consider downsizing (for example to a smaller unit such as a condominium) in order to increase their options, her immediate response is that her mother-in-law lives with them. Even if Sharon was receptive to the idea of multifamily housing, which she is not, she believes that they would still need a house, “so that everybody has enough room […] and we can take care of mom”.

Further, Sharon talks about the location of their house, and the neighborhood of which they are part. She states that she has younger relatives who live in suburban communities outside Columbus, and that they pay high property taxes. According to
her, these families were motivated by larger houses and “nice schools” when they decided to move to these neighborhoods. But as empty nesters, she and Peter are not concerned with the quality of the school district, and she prefers to be in Columbus where she believes property taxes are lower. Finally, Sharon places a high value on longtime neighbors that she has come to know well over the years, and she is hesitant to give up the familiar neighbors and surroundings for a neighborhood that she does not know:

“When you live in a place for so many years, you get to know many people. Some people have moved and it’s a different place now, but there are still some of the old neighbors, and some children have kept the houses [of their parents]. Who knows what kind of neighbors you get if you move?”

For Sharon, the neighborhood is not just a physical space that has identifiable boundaries and that contains her house and other houses, but also a distinct place, with social relations being a crucial part of what makes up this place. She understands these social relations to be such an important part of a housing arrangement that she would be reluctant to consider a move that involves giving up those relations and familiar neighbors for new and unfamiliar surroundings.

When I interview Peter, he reiterates that he has a clear preference for a single family home, and that living in such a home is an important part of his and his wife’s independence. Moreover, he makes it a point to say that he cannot really imagine living in any other housing type. But he brings up issues and considerations that Sharon does not mention. Their house was built in the early 1960s, and he has done
all the repairs and the renovations himself since they moved into the house some 29 years ago. Peter explains that he does not know how they are going to be able to maintain the house should he some day be too old to work on the house, since they cannot afford hired labor. Ideally, he said, they would live in a place that requires less maintenance when they are older, but this is not an option that he expects to be able to afford:

“There’s always work that needs to be done. Who’ll do it when we’re old? Our children can help, but [it will be] a burden. So it could be better if we have a place that is new, or in a place where you can get help with repairs and all that stuff. But all of that is so expensive……..we’ll just stay put, I guess….”

When I ask him if they ever looked into other options to find out what the cost would be, Peter responds that “he just knows” that they cannot afford to move.

Peter is less interested than Sharon in questions regarding the neighborhood, the community, as well as the size of the housing unit. His concerns center around the need to maintain the home, and his preference for a different housing situation is primarily shaped by this practical consideration in view of impending old age. It is also interesting to note that unlike Sharon, he does not elaborate on his mother, her needs, and the kind of housing situation that would enable him and Sharon to share housing with her and to look after her.
The third example is a couple that I will call Seth and Will. Seth is 42, Hispanic, holds an advanced degree, and works full-time as a staff member at The Ohio State University. Will is 49, Caucasian, and works in healthcare. The couple owns a house in Victorian Village that contains three separate housing units. Seth and Will bought the house about five years ago, moved into the largest unit, and rented the other two units to different tenants. The couple’s housing preferences mirror those of couples described in Table 6.2 as younger than 45 years. Will prefers an urban neighborhood and is willing to accept some tradeoffs in order to be able to live in Victorian Village, and he understands his housing choice as an investment decision among other things. Seth, on the other hand, is more ambivalent about the type of housing that he prefers, but he is also especially drawn to the social and cultural diversity of the neighborhood in which they currently live.

Will tells me how he prefers urban living, and that after living in different suburban locations for quite a number of years, he decided to make a change. He complains that some of the neighborhoods in the central city in Columbus have become very expensive places to live, but he adds that he still believes that the high cost is worth it and that he is flexible enough to be able to find reasonable housing options in these neighborhoods:

“The house we lived in before was a cookie-cutter kind of place in your typical subdivision. We had more space and a bigger garage. When we looked in this area, we decided that it’s a better deal to buy a house like this and rent out the extra apartments. The rent covers most of our mortgage payments. I had to get rid of some things I had or put it in storage, because there’s not as
much room as before. It’s been great here, though. I can’t say I miss the ‘burbs (…..). And I definitely like the events that they have down here, and all the activity that goes on (…..). You can also walk to the grocery store and to the park and whatever. I would also live a few blocks down, east of High Street if there is a good opportunity. Or in Clintonville……someplace like that.”

Will prefers an older, more traditional, high density, walkable neighborhood, and is willing to make some adjustments in order to be able to live in such a neighborhood. Far from just serving as an adequate shelter, he understands his housing choice as a choice of a housing unit, a neighborhood, and a set of amenities that the neighborhood offers and that are intricately tied to the land use and density patterns of that neighborhood. But Will is also very sensitive to the financial side of a housing decision, and he views his housing choice as an investment decision, among other things. Although he has a clear preference for older neighborhoods similar to the one where he lives now, he is also quick to point out that he would not choose these options if he did not believe he was making a sound investment.

Seth, by contrast, points to tradeoffs that he has to make when choosing a neighborhood, and he explains that both older urban neighborhoods and conventional suburbs have their advantages. He tells me that he is satisfied with their present housing situation, but that he is uncertain about his general neighborhood preference. However, he stresses that the stronger presence of the gay community in Victorian Village as compared with other neighborhoods is a factor that sways him in favor of staying in Victorian Village:
“We were the only openly gay couple in our old neighborhood. We were not having any specific problems, but this neighborhood is more welcoming. There’s more diversity and all kinds of people live here....”

Seth’s perception of the social and economic diversity of the residents of Victorian Village might be somewhat exaggerated. But whether his assessment of the socio-economic and cultural makeup of Victorian Village is accurate or not, he clearly places an importance on the neighborhood as a social and cultural environment, an environment which (depending on the neighborhood) can either be welcoming or hostile to his lifestyle, personal choices, and sexual orientation. Instead of talking about housing in more narrow terms or discussing the housing type that he prefers, Seth’s main concern is for the social, demographic, and cultural characteristics of a neighborhood.

6.2.3 Gender and the Housing Preferences of Couples with no Children

Present

The literature on housing and gender has traditionally not paid much attention to couples living without children. Because sex and gender are often conceptualized as characteristics that are relevant for housing studies only in the context of domestic roles, the division of labor within the household, and household income, couples without children are not often regarded as a potentially interesting focus of research. But as the preceding examples demonstrate, the housing preferences of couples whose households do not include children can be gender-specific, albeit in a way that
is very different from the gendered housing experience that we can observe among householders who live with children.

The mechanisms through which gender influences preferences in these households are very specific to the couple’s social, economic, and familial circumstances. In the case of Kate and Joe, their preferences are very similar, but motivated by different personal attitudes and interests. Sharon and Peter approach the question from very different perspectives that we can trace to the different responsibilities and roles that each of them has assumed over the years; while Peter worries about the physical maintenance of their house or any other hypothetical home, Sharon is more concerned about their social network and their ability to care for Peter’s ailing mother in a comfortable setting. As a somewhat more affluent couple with no young or elderly dependents that has been living in the region for a longer period of time, Will and Seth prefer to pursue a housing situation that is socially and culturally fulfilling while at the same time offering them a pleasant neighborhood, a comfortable home, and a potentially lucrative investment value.

But not unlike householders in nuclear families, the effect of gender on housing preferences of householders who live with a partner and without children cannot be understood as independent of other variables and as divorced from other forms of difference. Gendered identities, expectations, and priorities combine with factors such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic background, and other variables that are all part of a subject’s identity to create strongly differentiated housing preferences.
Kate and Joe, and Will and Seth, are both relatively young, professional, well-educated couples with no dependents, but their housing preferences and choices are vastly different as a result of their different ethnicities, national origins, sexual identities, and the degree to which they identify with Columbus as their long-term home. Like the other two household examples, Sharon and Peter are a couple that does not have children present in the household and that we can theoretically expect to be able to choose from different housing options. Yet their relatively advanced age, combined with the limited value of their assets, their lower future earning potential, and their responsibility with regard to Peter’s elderly mother strongly limit their options relative to other couples without children.

The analysis of all the data from interviews with couples in my sample consistently supports the conclusion that housing preferences are gendered, but that gender intersects with other socio-economic, demographic, ethnic, and cultural factors to produce these preferences. Couples with no dependents find it easier to reach a compromise that meets both partners’ needs, something that nevertheless is more true for those couples that are relatively affluent than for those with more limited financial means. Difference along economic, social, ethnic, and demographic axes significantly adds to the diversity of housing preferences among these households.
6.3 Single Parent Households

6.3.1 Overview

I interviewed six single mothers and two single fathers as part of this study. There is an extensive literature on the housing needs of single mothers, their housing situation across the country or in specific cities, and the challenges they face in finding adequate housing. This body of research emerged with the increased interest in gender among social scientists, including housing researchers, and also as part of the literature on the feminization of poverty in American metropolises.

Single fathers, however, are not nearly as well studied. Although all data sources point to their increasing numbers, they are not yet regarded as householders who deserve special attention in housing research. As a result, we know little about their housing experience. Even more limited is our knowledge of how single mothers compare to single fathers, and whether single parenthood always creates the same challenges, irrespective of gender.

Due to the small size of the sub-samples, the data I collected represent only a small step towards a better understanding of the role of gender for the housing preferences

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of single parents. But the interviews nevertheless point to some interesting themes.

Table 6.3 shows the housing preferences and the factors that single parents mention as relevant to their housing preferences, in dependence of their general income level.

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<th>Low to moderate income</th>
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Table 6.3: The housing preferences and priorities of single parents
As can be concluded from the table, single parents show very few gender-specific differences in their housing preferences, but household income is a major factor that differentiates their preferences. I use the example of three different single parent households to illustrate these themes in the next section.

6.3.2 The Single Parents

The first example is a single mother whom I will refer to as Anna. Anna is an African-American woman in her late thirties who has two children, aged 13 and 15. After her divorce about nine years ago, she was able to keep the family house, located in Northeast Columbus, as part of the divorce settlement. She has full custody of her two children, who visit their father on an irregular basis. Anna has two part-time jobs, one in an office, another in retail. Like other low to moderate income single parents in my sample, Anna is especially concerned with the cost of housing, the location of housing relative to her places of work and her children’s school, and the quality of the schools that her children attend, yet she is not quite able to achieve a housing situation that reflects these priorities.

Anna explains that although her household income dropped significantly after the divorce, she made a decision not to give up her house, no matter how financially challenging this goal became. She says that she was motivated in her decision by a desire not to force her children to move unnecessarily, and by her concern that moving into rental housing will decrease the family’s security and might turn out to
be more expensive in the long term. But Anna wishes that she could live with her children in a different housing situation that would better suit her family’s circumstances:

“To get paid as much as I can, I work wherever the job pays more. I have to drive a lot to work and from place to place, and this leaves me with little time to take care of the house and of repairs. I also can’t drive the kids a lot, and it’s difficult to have them in [sports] teams and in all these activities. It would be better [if we could live] closer to the places where I work and in a better school district and closer to the schools. But a house like that would be too expensive”.

Anna would clearly prefer a different housing location, one that would make it easier for her to manage day to day responsibilities and would give her children access to better opportunities. I ask her why she is not satisfied with Columbus public schools, and why she believes her children would have a better high school experience if the family were to relocate to a different school district. Her response indicates that she is vaguely aware that her children’s schools were never performing very well and that public schools in some of the other school districts are providing a better education for their students, but that she does not fully understand why this is the case, how to judge the schools’ performance, and how to assess whether a particular school district would serve her children better or provide them with a better learning environment.

It is important to note that some of Anna’s statements also leave me with the impression that she sees me as the person who should know the answers to some of these questions. I introduced myself as a researcher who is affiliated with The Ohio
State University and who is carrying out a study about housing preferences. This was necessary from an ethical and procedural standpoint. I certainly realize, however, that identifying myself as such can potentially cause some of the interview subjects to perceive me as a person who is better educated than they are, as a person who has privileged access to knowledge, or even as someone who is privy to information that is not made available to a wider public, and as a result to assume that I somehow already know and understand all the relevant issues. But while I recognize this problem as a factor in my interview with Anna, I nevertheless believe that her inability to describe why and how she expects the schools to be better in other communities and to say where exactly she would find better schools is genuine. She is aware that there are school districts in Central Ohio where the schools are much better than in the Columbus school district, but she has limited access to information and to knowledge that would enable her to find out more about these issues and possibly to explore new options.

Regardless of her ability to assess the school situation (or the lack of thereof), Anna’s moderate income severely restricts her choices. When I ask her if she has considered different housing types, or downsizing in order to be able to afford housing in a different location, she tells me that she prefers a single family home, and that she does not believe that an apartment or a multifamily unit is an acceptable choice considering that they would be giving up a single family home. But she also says that she does not really know what options are available in some of the areas that she thinks would be better locations. Her refusal to consider other housing types is thus as
much a matter of her preference for a single family home as it is a general opinion that other viable and attractive options cannot possibly be available.

Complicating Anna’s housing preference is the support network that she has built over time. When her children were younger, Anna tried to share childcare responsibilities with other families, many of which are headed by single mothers. Even though her children are now older, she still regards this very informal network as very important, and she wishes to remain part of it. Although this does not confine her to only one neighborhood, Anna still wants the geographical proximity to friends and relatives that she has come to depend on. The neighborhood she wishes to live in is one that provides her with access to better schools and good employment opportunities closer to home without forcing her to sacrifice her ability to continue to participate in and to be part of her social network, a network that is strongly embedded in the African-American community and in the neighborhoods where African-Americans are well represented.

The second example of single parents is a single father that I will call Ben. Ben is 24, Caucasian, and works as a store manager. He has a four-year-old daughter and has been a single father since his daughter was about two years old. The family lives in a small house in the Harrison West neighborhood that Ben has been renting since he separated from his wife. My interview with Ben echoes the trends for moderate income single-parents that are summarized in Table 6.3.1. Specifically, he is concerned with housing cost and with living at a location close to his job, and he
considers his support network to be an important factor that is likely to affect his future housing decisions.

Ben regards his present housing arrangement as temporary. While the location is close to his work and to the daycare center where he takes his daughter, he says that he plans to move once his daughter reaches school age, because he would like her to attend school in a different school district. He explains that although he is not sure if he is going to be living in rental or in owner-occupied housing, the location will be more important to him than the housing type, at least in the short to medium term:

“I don’t really care if we have to live in a smaller apartment for a while, as long as Amy can go to a nice school. In a couple of years, we’ll get a bigger place. I don’t mind living here and I [never had] any problems with the landlord, but they say those Columbus schools are a mess………..”

Ben’s focus is on his child and her needs. During my conversation with him, he does not indicate any obvious preference for a particular housing type, though it becomes clear that homeownership is an important goal for him. Beyond the ability to find a new job close to the neighborhood that he chooses, Ben also does not elaborate on his preference for neighborhood characteristics beyond the quality of the schools and the general safety of the neighborhood. He does, however, hint that he is thinking of moving closer to his mother and siblings, who are concentrated mostly in Lancaster and other communities south of Columbus. Ben states that this could be a very practical arrangement when he needs help with childcare. Although his situation is different, Ben’s main concerns that shape his housing preference and what he sees as
his ideal housing choice are not much different from Anna’s. Because he expects his income to increase as he gains more experience in his job, Ben does not understand his options to be as restricted as Anna does. Their priorities, however, are very similar.

The third and final example is a mother to whom I assigned the pseudonym Courtney. Courtney is 36, Caucasian, and a single mother of two children, who were aged 8 and 6 at the time of the interview. She holds a law degree and has been employed by a private law firm for a number of years. After she separated from her partner almost four years prior to my interview with her, Courtney decided to look for a new house in the northern suburbs of Columbus, and she chose a three bedroom single family house in the Lewis Center area in Delaware County. Courtney has full custody of her children, who presently do not visit their father often because he is temporarily living out of state. Both of her children attend a small private elementary school that is affiliated with their church. Courtney’s family is one of the more affluent single-parent households in my sample. Not unlike other single-parent householders with above average incomes, Courtney has a strong preference for a single-family home, places a high priority on access to good schools and on neighborhood characteristics that she prefers, and is less concerned with proximity to support networks than low to moderate income single parents in my sample.

Courtney tells me that because of her very limited time, she prefers a relatively new, “hassle-free” home, at least for as long as her children are young. She describes her
most recent housing choice as a decision that was primarily guided by the goal of moving into a house that will require less maintenance than her former home for some time to come, in a neighborhood that she “felt comfortable with”. Courtney stresses that these are practical considerations that she views as necessary for someone with her obligations and time commitments, not absolute preferences that she believes she will always have:

“Our previous house was actually nice, and I generally like more mature landscaping and houses that are a little older, like we had in Worthington. But the house was kind of big, and I worried that I wouldn’t be able to invest the time [needed] to maintain everything. It’s something that I enjoy, but I just can’t worry about it right now. So this place works better for us, for the time being. We’ll see how things work out [in the future]. We have plenty of room here, even for when my parents come down [from Cleveland] to visit.”

Courtney’s concern are her limited time resources, and how she can find a housing situation that is comfortable as well as efficient to maintain. Her first priorities are her children and her job. She explains that she would always insist on keeping her full time job, and that she would much rather spend her free time with her children than spend it taking care of a house and managing what she calls “the never-ending house stuff”. She adds that she would not want her children to have to attend a school that is too far from their home, and that she was happy to find a suitable school that is within a 15-minute drive from her house. As a single mother with a high level of education, a well-paying job, and an upper middle class background, Courtney’s options are not very limited, and she is able (at least in theory) to consider different housing opportunities and to make decisions that best fit her priorities and her family’s needs.
When I ask her whether she has considered other housing types in light of her concern about the time it takes to physically maintain a single-family home, she responds that when it comes to the type of housing unit, she does not believe that other viable and desirable options really exist for a household that includes children:

“I mean, of course I [will] always want a house. What are the options otherwise? (…….) Of course condos are less work and there are so many of them now, even close to downtown and in other places. But that would be a very small space, no yard of our own, nothing like that. Why would anyone want to raise kids in this kind of housing?”

Courtney’s preference for a single-family home is shaped by her desire to offer her children what she perceives to be a nice home in which to grow up. She strongly feels that nothing short of a single-family home can meet that goal. It is also worth noting that Courtney’s view of other housing options is relatively narrow. She discusses flat condominiums, including those in denser, urban neighborhoods, as the only alternative type of owner-occupied housing. Other housing concepts, such as relatively compact, single-family townhouses in similar neighborhoods are not part of her frame of reference.

### 6.3.3 Gender, Single Parenthood, and Housing Preferences

Though childrearing is a major responsibility for anyone who has children, single parenthood is widely recognized as especially challenging due to the limits it places on household income and on the time that a parent can devote to his or her children.
The housing preferences and choices of single parents are therefore important to consider in research that focuses on households and their housing experience.

But single parenthood is not unique to women. Without question, the number of single mothers is significantly higher than the number of single fathers, a fact that is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. Yet this is not a reason to understand single parenthood, and the challenges that single parents face in securing adequate housing, as an exclusively female experience. The in-depth interviews with single parents reveal that although single mothers pay more attention to social relations and are more likely to use them as support mechanisms, single parents of both genders have housing preferences that are shaped by similar priorities and constraints. Interestingly, of the four basic types of households that I included in my sample, single parent households display fewer gender-specific preferences than any of the other three household types.

While gender alone does not emerge as a factor that strongly influences the housing preferences of single parents, my data suggests that the overlapping and multiple effects of gender, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic background are very relevant in shaping the housing preferences of the single parents I interviewed. Anna and Courtney are both single mothers who are each raising more than one child without any significant involvement from a partner or from a former partner. But Courtney’s housing preferences, and her ability to pursue her preferred housing situation, are noticeably different from those of Anna, and the differentiation is the result of their
different financial situations, their ethnic identities, and their cultural preferences. Just like Courtney, Ben is a single parent who places a high priority on providing and caring for his child while at the same time trying to advance professionally and to plan for long term career and housing decisions. Yet Ben and Courtney have very different housing preferences and find themselves in very different housing situations as a result of their different levels of education, their different socio-economic characteristics, and gendered attitudes regarding childrearing and the degree to which they have to rely on grandparents or other members of the extended family for assistance with childcare responsibilities.

Finally, single parents of both genders face serious challenges in finding housing that meets their needs and is affordable at the same time. While adequate housing that matches their preferences is undoubtedly easier to find the higher the income of a single parent, single parents still face greater challenges as compared to other households with similar household incomes but of different household compositions. The more complex set of financial and logistical constraints facing single parents is a factor that significantly contributes to the difficulty of achieving a desired housing situation.
6.4 Single Person Households

6.4.1 Overview

Like two-adult households without children, persons living alone are very diverse in age and life course stage, in addition to other variables. As I noted in chapter 3.3, the seven female and five male householders that I interviewed in this category range in age from the early twenties to the mid seventies and represent four different, broadly defined ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, they represent different income levels, educational levels, and life course histories.

Housing research rarely pays particular attention to persons living alone. Notable exceptions are studies focusing on the housing experience of the elderly. As part of the very large literature on aging, research on housing and the elderly often investigates the special housing needs of elderly persons, their household composition choices, their residential mobility, strategies that older persons employ to retain their independence, as well as issues of housing affordability for low-income older persons. Because a substantial percentage of senior citizens, especially senior women, live alone, this research has provided important contributions to our understanding of the housing choices of older individuals who live alone.166

A comparable body of research findings does not exist on the housing preferences and choices of younger single, widowed, and divorced persons living alone, much less on the role of gender in shaping the housing needs and the housing preferences of these single householders. Although the proportion of single person households continues to grow, this sharp increase in the number of persons living alone has not translated into more research on the housing preferences and decisions of this very diverse group of households.

Table 6.4 summarizes the trends among single-person householders in my sample by broad age group.
<table>
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<tr>
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Table 6.4: The housing preferences and priorities of single householders

As the table shows, “young” single householders, defined as those aged 35 and younger, have preferences and priorities that are different from those of single householders who are above 35 years of age. Because the twelve householders that I
interviewed do not share many common characteristics beyond the fact that they each live alone, in the following discussion I use data from different interviews instead of specific household examples to examine whether gender influences the preferences of men and women living alone, as well as the degree to which the householders are able to achieve a housing situation that corresponds to these preferences.

6.4.2 The Single Person Householders

Age and life course stages are important factors that differentiate persons living alone and their housing situations. The reasons persons choose to live alone (or, in some cases, are forced to live alone) and the length of time for which they choose this arrangement are largely dependent on their age, life course events, and their plans and expectations for the future. For this reason, it is useful to pay special attention to the relationship between age, life course, and gender when discussing the housing preferences of single householders living alone.

Of the twelve householders I interviewed, three women and two men are between 22 and 35 years of age. The interviews consistently show that because of their young age, the early career stages they are in, and the fact that they do not have long-term partners or children, these householders do not yet fully identify with specific income brackets. They each have some expectations regarding their future income that are based on their career plans and the opportunities they believe they will have, but they still have an inclination to regard themselves as young people who are still exploring
different options and are not yet sure what courses their professional, personal, and family lives will take. Their housing preferences are diverse, but the reasons they give for preferring some housing situations over others reflect this general attitude as well as the belief that their lives are in a state of flux and that their professional and personal circumstances are likely to change. All of these householders understand themselves to be “still starting out”, “trying new jobs”, “fresh out of school” or “not settled down yet”, each in the context of his or her own unique background and circumstances.

This is not to say that socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds have no bearing on the housing plans and expectations of the householders. A young single lawyer I interviewed confidently talked about how her career is progressing and how she is excited about future opportunities that might allow her to move to a major East Coast city and to afford at least a small place in the centre of that city; at the same time, a young man who has completed about two years of college and who works as a sales representative on a commission basis emphasized that he does not expect to be able to choose more attractive housing in the near future, and indicated that Central Ohio is where he assumes he will always live and work. Similarly, a young man of East Indian descent who moved with his family to the United States as a teenager and who has a strong ethnic identity talked about starting a family as something that he is certain he will do in the coming years and that will cause him to be interested in a much larger home; however, householders of other ethnic backgrounds seemed much less certain about how long they expected to live alone, about whether starting a
family is a priority to them, and consequently about what their housing preferences are for the medium to long term. Thus ethnicity, cultural identity, as well as socio-economic background differentiate their housing preferences, their expectations, and the specific strategies they follow when they make housing decisions.

Young householders who live alone prefer some housing forms over others based on different strategies that they believe best accommodate their young age and a certain level of uncertainty about their future plans. Gender emerges in the interview data as a salient factor that differentiates these strategies. For example, homeownership is seen by some as a good investment that they wish to make as soon as they can in order to start accumulating equity, and by others as something that they prefer to postpone and that is not ideal in light of their young age and the potential for fast and substantial changes in their employment and personal circumstances. A close look at the interview data reveals that it is women who are generally less sure about the desirability of owner-occupied housing in their present situation. Although young women who live alone do not categorically rule out this option, they have more doubts than men about the practicality of purchasing a home and whether it is a step that they should take for the time being.

It is worth noting that this finding holds regardless of the type of housing they talk about (regardless of whether the home is a single family house, a condominium, or any other type of multifamily housing unit). This is important, because it suggests that the reason for young women’s weaker preference for homeownership is not a
lack of skills that are required to physically maintain, renovate, and repair a home, or any other stereotypical and gendered assumptions about physical abilities. Rather, my interviews reveal that young women approach the idea of homeownership more cautiously, and that they are more reluctant than men to choose this housing tenure because they place a higher value on flexibility and on avoiding commitments that could conceivably restrict their career options and/or residential mobility in the future. Gender-specific differences that I found among these householders in their attitudes towards homeownership are not the result of gender-related economic or other disadvantages, but rather of some positive considerations and motivations that are causing these young women to show less interest in homeownership.

The interviews further show that in all three study neighborhood, young householders who live alone are also concerned with the question of neighborhood and community. They express a desire to be reasonably close to their places of work while at the same time not isolating themselves physically from their social circles and the places that they visit for social, leisure, or entertainment activities or events. Unlike other types of households, for example some households with children, the focus of young single householders on the social and the geographical context of a neighborhood is borne out of a choice to place an importance on those social factors and on consumption, not out of a necessity due to special needs or financial or logistical constraints. Here, gender shapes neighborhood preferences through the gender-differentiated interest in some spaces of consumption and not others. Since the absence of any dependents, the willingness to move often, and the relative ease with which they can relocate are all
characteristics that enable these householders to choose housing that matches their geographical preferences to a great extent and to take advantage of new housing opportunities when they arise, these gendered recreational and leisurely interests figure prominently not just in the preferences, but also the actual housing decisions of young householders who live alone.

The analyses of data from interviews with older persons who live alone reveal a very different picture. I interviewed seven householders ranging in age from 46 to 74 and representing different ethnicities and income levels. Whether they are in their forties, fifties, sixties or seventies, the housing preferences of these householders are much more influenced by financial constraints, long-term concerns, special needs, or more stable employment arrangements than those of younger householders. Especially for householders who are in their forties and fifties, gender, and the intersection of gendered preferences with socio-economic and ethnic characteristics, shape and influence housing preferences in ways that are very similar to householders who live with a partner and without children present in the household. One notable difference is housing tenure, as middle-aged and elderly women and men in my sample who live alone all express a strong preference for owner occupied housing, irrespective of their current tenure status. Moreover, although they objectively have somewhat more leeway than, for example, householders who are at a similar income level but who have children, these older single householders do not necessarily view their housing arrangements and options as flexibly as do younger single householders.
Among others, I interviewed one female and one male elderly householder who live alone and are over 70 years old. These elderly householders, both of whom live in houses that they have owned for many years, indicated that while they would consider selling their houses and moving into smaller units should they find that they can no longer manage by themselves in the future, they would much prefer not to move and to maintain their present housing arrangements. My conversations with them point to a very strong preference for familiar surroundings, as well as an emotional attachment to their homes. Their preference is therefore not so much a matter of preferring any particular housing type or neighborhood, but rather of preferring what they already have over any other potential housing arrangements. More so than all other householders in my sample, elderly householders understand housing experience to be a very important factor in their well being, and they wish to avoid changes in their housing situation as much as possible.

6.4.3 Gender, Age, and the Housing Preferences of Persons Living Alone

Considering the sharp and rapid increase in their numbers, single person households have received surprisingly scant attention from housing researchers. The data in this study demonstrate the diversity of these households, of their housing preferences, and of the priorities that motivate their housing decisions.

Very importantly, my analysis shows that gender influences the housing preferences of persons living alone in varying ways that are strongly dependent not just on
economic characteristics, but also on ethnicity, cultural preferences, and most notably, on age. Gender affects the housing preferences of young single householders, often through its influence on their social interests and the spaces that they wish to have access to. But ethnically differentiated and culture-specific expectations regarding career paths, family formation, and other life course events further add to the diversity in their preferences, as do different levels of social and geographical mobility. The special needs and vulnerabilities of elderly persons can be such overwhelming factors in their housing experiences that gender-specific differences in preferences and in perceptions of housing are more difficult to discern among them than among younger single householders or householders in other household compositions.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter, I presented an analysis of my data that I designed to address the research questions as I outlined them in chapter 1. I used housing type, a variable that emerged as one of the most important differentiating factors in the data, to organize my analysis and to compare householders. Using both specific case examples and findings drawn from all interviews, I specifically sought to highlight findings regarding the influence of gender on the housing preferences of householders that I interviewed; the role of other forms of difference such as race, ethnicity, age, and income level in shaping and differentiating gendered preferences; the different factors, or components, that householders consider when defining their preferences or
making housing decisions; and the varying degrees to which diverse householders are able or not able to find housing that reasonably corresponds to their preferences. My findings can be summarized as follows:

- Householders consider different aspects of a housing option when making housing decisions or describing what they see as their ideal housing situation. Dwelling unit type, type of neighborhood, and the larger municipality of which the neighborhood is part are all important aspects that contribute to their preference for certain housing options over others.

- Men and women often prefer very similar housing options, but the factors that motivate them to have any specific preference are often quite different. This is especially the case when comparing married and cohabiting householders to their opposite sex partners.

- Women tend to be more interested than men in social networks and how the home meets their personal and family needs. They also tend to make a stronger connection between their housing preferences and their lifestyle choices, and in the case of older householders, to be more influenced by emotional attachment to the home than men. Men are more likely to see practical and logistical considerations as their priorities when making housing decisions or describing their housing preferences.

- Gender is not the only important variable that differentiates housing preferences. Socio-economic background, household composition, age, and ethnicity are further important factors. These variables or characteristics not
only influence the housing preferences of householders in my sample, but they also change the nature of gender-specific differences between women and men.

- The ability of householders to choose their preferred housing situation varies widely. In addition to household income, which we always expect to determine the options available to a household, age and household composition can make it more or less difficult for householders to make a housing decision that matches their preferences.

- We can observe a lack of information about different housing options and unwillingness to research information among the householders in the study sample. This is true for householders of different income levels and education levels.

- These findings confirm some of the findings by Coleman,167 Fried,168 and Digregorio and Shlay169 about differences in neighborhood preferences by socio-economic characteristics and gender, for example that women place a higher value on social networks, that men place a higher value on closeness to work, and that women’s preferences vary depending on their family situation and lifestyle. But they contradict Fried’s finding that car use and access to outdoor activities and to the country are the only important priorities of residents with high incomes, and that a preference for ethnic homogeneity can

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be observed only among working-class householders. They also contradict Digregorio’s and Shlay’s finding that men are more concerned than women with the racial composition of a neighborhood, and that only women (and not men) have preferences that vary by employment situation and household composition.

The findings provide some important insights pertaining to the research questions, but they also reveal a need for more research on these issues, and further, a need for some policy adjustments to better meet the housing needs of an increasingly diverse population. A discussion of my study conclusions, the policy implications that I draw from these conclusions, and my suggestions for future research are all the subjects of the next and final chapter.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Conclusion

The existing literature on gender and housing includes many important contributions on the relationship between housing concepts and assumed gender roles in the nuclear family, on the gendered experience of the city, and on the disadvantage that women, especially those who have children, have historically experienced as a result of outdated housing concepts and flawed planning and public policies.

The qualitative data that I collected during my semi-structured, in-depth interviews with male and female householders and that I analyzed in chapter 5 and chapter 6 point to the gendered nature of the housing experience. They demonstrate that gender influences the expectations that householders attach to housing; the way they choose to define their “neighborhood” or “community”, as well as the social or other benefits that they expect to receive (or not to receive) by being part of that community; the goals that householders try to pursue when they make housing decisions; and the manner in which different demands or needs are prioritized, at least in the abstract. These differences in the way adult household members experience housing translate
into different preferences with regard to three important components that I define broadly as housing type, or type and physical characteristics of the dwelling unit; neighborhood type, including density, urban or suburban character, and socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of residents; and the larger community, suburb, or municipality that the neighborhood is located in, specifically as it relates to places of employment, quality of the schools, social and familial networks, and social and cultural characteristics that the householders associate with a particular community.

In the case of households that include two adults, it follows that the housing preferences that householders describe sometimes do not match the housing in which they live. My data show that the actual housing decision that a two-adult household makes is an attempt at a compromise between these different preferences, a compromise that is further complicated by a unique set of financial, logistical, and social constraints that each household faces. Couples or families with relatively high household incomes might be able to make housing choices that accommodate the priorities and preferences of both partners at a price that they can afford, but less affluent households are much more likely to be forced to choose between the different needs and preferences of the two adults.

Conflicting housing preferences are naturally not present in households that include only one adult. But while the absence of a second householder makes for less complex preferences and priorities, this should not be taken to mean that most single
householders are reasonably able to find housing that matches their preferences, that meets their practical needs, and that is affordable. In fact, their ability to do so varies greatly not just in dependence of socio-economic background or income, but also as a result of the very diverse circumstances that single persons can find themselves in and that lead some of them to face far greater challenges than others in securing adequate housing. Single parenthood, old age, and other characteristics can seriously affect both the housing preferences and the housing options for both male and female single householders, who thus are often very constrained in their housing decisions.

The argument about the relevance of variables or characteristics other than gender to housing preferences and to the differentiation of gender-specific preferences and of housing experiences is not limited to single person households or to very specific characteristics such as age or household composition. Rather, it applies to the rest of my sample and to my findings more generally. For my data also reveal that we neither can nor should view differences caused by gender as completely separate from, or independent of, those caused by age, class, ethnic background, or sexuality. Instead, we need to understand gender as one form or one aspect of identity that shapes housing preferences and that does so in the context of other forms of difference, all of which contribute to a householder’s preferences and experiences and lead to very diverse preferences among both men and women.

Household composition emerges as an especially important, differentiating factor in the data, and it is for this reason that I chose to organize my data analysis around
household types. But the types of households to which the householders I interviewed belong do not alone account for all the differences in housing preferences among women and among men, something that becomes apparent when we look at each group of households more closely. Even when the household composition is the same, different ethnic identities can lead to very different forms of gendered preferences, as ethnicity can influence neighborhood preferences, the social networks that a householder identifies with, personal biases, and personal values regarding lifestyle choices, financial issues, and expectations related to future life course events. Socio-economic background and related characteristics, such as level of education, income, future earning potential, and profession further differentiate housing preferences through their effect on purchasing power, social and geographical mobility, personal priorities, and past housing experiences.

Because it strongly affects a householder’s physical needs, his or her willingness to move, expectations regarding the future, and often the length of time for which a householder has lived in a home and the degree to which they are attached, emotionally or otherwise, to a particular home or neighborhood, age emerges as a very important factor that adds to the diversity among male householders and female householders in households of the same type. Sexuality, cultural preference, life course history, and other forms of difference are further elements that prove to be very relevant in shaping gendered housing preferences. Far from supporting the notion that women and men are two internally homogenous groups, or that we need only control for household income to predict the housing preferences of women
and/or of men, my data show a diversity of identities and a heterogeneity in housing preferences that we can attribute to the multiple effects of, and the intersection between, gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual identity, and other axes of difference.

7.2 Policy Implications

The findings discussed in chapters 5 and 6 and concluded in the previous section are for a small but diverse sample of households in Central Ohio. As outlined in chapter 6.5, they confirm some previous findings, but they also contradict others.

To the degree that these findings prove stable in future research, policy implications include four different recommendations. Firstly, the data demonstrate that it is very important for individuals and households to have a choice between different housing options if they are to be able to live in housing that meets their needs, fits their lifestyle, and is affordable given their respective income level. Policies that promote one housing type over all others or are even designed to directly discourage certain housing types clearly do not help towards that end. More promising policies would recognize not merely the ethnic, but also the social and demographic diversity of American households, as well as the diversity of the lifestyles that Americans are choosing today. These policies would avoid simplistic assumptions based on gender stereotypes and gender-related expectations, the notion of a “typical” life course, and
supposedly homogeneous or “typical” American preferences for certain types of housing in favor of approaches that are based on a more in-depth engagement with housing needs and a better understanding of the complex set of factors that shape housing preferences.

Secondly, the findings suggest that in addition to the question of housing type, very different households can also have very different preferences with regard to the type of place and the spatial context in which they want to live or would choose to live if given the option, thus confirming Brower’s findings that different types of neighborhoods and housing settings suit different people. Instead of treating some types of neighborhoods or communities as either niche markets or a choice of last resort, planners and policy makers should allow for and should encourage affordable housing development and housing rehabilitation in different kinds of neighborhoods. This approach would seek to accommodate both prospective residents who would choose these neighborhoods if adequate housing is available and existing residents who are interested in remaining in their communities but may face hindrances as a result of dilapidation, gentrification, or other issues that can threaten either the livability or the affordability of some neighborhoods. This is especially important in the context of the relationship between housing preferences, gender, and changing roles and lifestyle choices when we consider that neighborhood context is often a crucial factor that makes this diversity of housing arrangements possible in the first place, or that allows householders to take advantage of social and cultural

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opportunities, support networks, or services that they require to be able to maintain their personal and employment arrangements while at the same time providing for the needs of other household members.

Thirdly, the findings point to the effect of what has been termed the housing affordability crisis on the ability of households from all income levels to find housing that matches their preferences and is affordable at the same time. My interviews show that for households with low to moderate household incomes, affordable and adequate housing simply does not exist in a range of options that would be sufficient to allow householders to make housing decisions based on their particular preferences and needs, not just on where they can find or can maintain any type of housing that is within their means.

Programs and initiatives that promote affordable rental and owner-occupied housing, and that do so in a variety of spatial contexts and neighborhoods, are strongly needed to increase the housing options of low and moderate income householders, to give them and other household members better access to opportunity, and to better enable them to adjust their housing situations in response to life course events, changing household compositions, and changing personal needs. The absence of such varied, affordable housing opportunities severely constrains many householders in their personal and lifestyle choices and in their efforts to achieve some important goals (either for themselves or for their dependents) on limited incomes. Thus, it makes these households even more vulnerable, helping to reinforce stereotypes about the
“undesirability” of some household arrangements or personal choices (for example single parenthood among the poor or among those of modest incomes) and to further marginalize these households.

Finally, the interviews reveal that many householders are not well-informed about housing options and are not taking steps to better inform themselves about available options, resources, and strategies that they can choose to improve their housing situation. Policies that increase access to housing-related information and that increase awareness of the availability of some options, including policies at the local level, would help householders make better-informed decisions and would create a more efficient housing market.

Because my sample is not representative and the methodology does not allow us to generalize from the findings, I recommend that planners evaluate the results of these policies to see how effective they are and whether they are achieving the desired outcomes.
7.3 Directions for Future Research

This project attempted to examine housing preferences and housing constraints in relation to gender, using a framework that recognizes multiple forms of difference, that focuses on the subjects’ own experiences and perceptions, and that considers qualitative methodology to be a tool that can be used fruitfully to study these questions. I understand my findings to be a small glimpse into a wide set of important research questions that are not yet explored and that my study can only begin to address, and I thus believe that there are many important issues related to housing preferences, housing choices, gender, and other variables that should be the focus of future research. My results, as well as limitations of my research, can offer some suggestions regarding possible directions for future studies.

In designing this study, I had to contend myself with a sample size that was large enough to allow me to pursue my research questions but that I could still cover with the limited resources available to me. By using a larger sample in which all different household compositions, ethnicities, income levels, and age groups are better represented, future research projects would have the potential to collect more data and to present more specific examples of the ways in which households make housing decisions and their ability to reconcile their housing preferences with the actual options that they can realistically choose from. I argued in chapters 1 and 4 that qualitative research should not seek to select statistically representative samples; instead, it is more appropriate in qualitatively oriented projects to use sampling strategies that are driven by the purpose of the research. The purpose of basing future
qualitative studies on larger samples would therefore not be to increase
generalizability, but rather to offer an even richer set of data that we can use to study
housing preferences and to better understand how diverse identities and
circumstances lead to very diverse preferences and priorities.

Additionally, it would be promising to devote more research to householders in those
types of households which have traditionally not gained much attention from housing
researchers but among which gender, especially in combination with other differences
such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, appears to be a relevant factor
in differentiating preferences. As I discussed in chapter 6, both single person
households and couples without children are household groups that are not well
studied in the housing literature and that my data show to be very diverse in their
housing preferences, in their housing needs, and in their ability to secure adequate
housing. A focus on these households could shed more light on the housing
preferences and on the housing related priorities of steadily growing segments of the
population.

But perhaps most important would be research that addresses these questions in
different urban or metropolitan settings. My research used Central Ohio, or more
specifically, three different neighborhoods in that region, as a case study. In chapter
2, I argued that the ethnic composition of the population of Columbus is fairly
representative of the ethnic composition of the country as a whole. But while this
might make Columbus an “average” city in some ways, it does not solve the problem
of context, which varies greatly from metropolitan area to metropolitan area. Most minority groups are not equally represented in all urban areas. To the contrary, they typically have a much stronger presence in some cities than in others. While we can calculate the average presence of each group as a percentage of the total population of the United States, the fact remains that the different sizes of each group in different regions will always be very relevant to the housing context and to housing experiences in each respective region. Metropolitan context is further dependent on total population size, economic conditions, housing costs, the political climate of a city or region, historical trends, and other elements that make each metropolitan area and each metropolitan housing market unique.

It is therefore critical that future projects examine similar questions in different cities and in different metropolitan contexts. Especially interesting would be urban areas with varying degrees of economic prosperity, of different sizes, and with very different demographic trends, as well as those cities where the rapid rise in housing costs and the shortage of affordable housing opportunities have been especially acute. Conducting this and similar research in different urban contexts would not only generate a wealth of relevant data, but would also enable us to start examining whether or not similar householders will have very different preferences and priorities depending on the specific contexts of the different urban areas, and how different housing market contexts work to either constrain or to free householders in their housing decisions.


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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Ohio State University
Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture
City and Regional Planning

Gender-specific differences in housing preferences: A qualitative approach

Interviewer: Hoda Shawki

Interview Guide

1. Preliminary questions:
   - How long have you been living in your current home?
   - Do you rent or own your home?
   - What is the composition of your household (who else lives in your home)?
   - Gender
   - How old are you?
   - What is your ethnic background?
   - What is your profession, educational background, income?
   - Other questions possible as a follow-up, depending on the interviewee’s responses

2. Housing Preferences:
What type of housing situation do you prefer?
   i. Possible prompts to encourage the interviewee to expand on his/her answer: Questions about type of physical unit; tenure; neighborhood context; type of neighborhood; larger community/municipality; age of housing unit

3. What are the reasons that you have these particular preferences? What do you think makes the housing situation that you describe attractive or desirable to you? What are your priorities that lead you to these preferences?

4. How do you judge your present housing situation relative to what you describe as your preferences? In what aspects does it match what you were looking for, in what aspects does it not?

5. If your present housing situation does not match your preferences, what do you think prevented you from choosing housing that meets the criteria that you look for?

6. If the reasons under question 6 are mostly economic/financial: Why was the desired housing not affordable? Was it to be found only in neighborhoods where all homes were too expensive?

7. If the reasons under question 5 are not economic: What are these other reasons (in more depth)? The needs of other household members? Issues related to neighborhood context, social networks, identity, opportunities, etc.?

8. Have you considered if other housing types or housing situations (other than what the interviewee describes as the most desirable) might actually meet your needs better and might be more accessible to you? (Specifics of the question will depend on the interviewee’s responses during the interview and the particular preferences, circumstances, and constraints that he or she describes)

9. What do you expect long-term in terms of housing decisions? Do you have long-term goals? Do you expect your housing situation to change? Are your preferences strongly related to or attached to your present circumstances, and do you expect your preferences or priorities to change?
My name is Hoda Shawki, and I am writing to invite you to participate in a housing study that I am conducting in affiliation with The Ohio State University. I am working on my Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning, and one of the major requirements in my program is to write a dissertation thesis and to conduct research for the dissertation. I have chosen to write my dissertation about housing preferences, and the relationship between housing preference and the gender of the householder. In order to collect the data that I need to examine these questions, I have to conduct interviews with a number of different households that are diverse with regard to household composition, ethnicity, age, and income. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Professor Hazel Morrow-Jones, Department of City and Regional Planning, The Ohio State University.

The purpose of the research is to find out if men and women have different preferences with regard to housing. I am interested in preferences related to type of housing, for example single family home or condo, and I am also interested in preferences related to the type of community or neighborhood in which the housing is located, for example a suburban neighborhood or an urban neighborhood. The interview questions are designed to collect data about housing decisions and preferences, and to collect some basic information about the composition and the demographics of each household. This information will make it possible to compare results across the different household types.
Participation in this study is voluntary, and you can refuse to participate if you are not interested. If you agree to participate in the study, I will interview each adult member of the household (over 18 years of age) separately. Each interview should last about 60 – 90 minutes. Even if you decide to participate, you can refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer, and you can withdraw from the study at any time and without any penalty or repercussion.

All data collected will be kept confidential. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign an alias to each person I interview, and I will address the interviewee by his/her alias during the interview. When analyzing the interview data and writing the thesis, I will use the same aliases to refer to the different interviewees. The audiotapes will be destroyed once the research project is completed.

If you have any questions about the study, you can reach me by phone at 614-221-1398, and by email at shawki.1@osu.edu. I will be happy to explain the study further or to answer any questions that you might have.

I hope that you will seriously consider participating in this research project, and I look forward to the opportunity to meet you.

Sincerely,

Hoda Shawki
Ph.D. Candidate, City and Regional Planning
The Ohio State University
275 West Woodruff Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I consent to participating in (or my child's participation in) research entitled: Gender-related Differences in Housing Preferences: A Qualitative Approach.

Hazel Morrow-Jones, Principal Investigator, or his/her authorized representative Hoda Shawki has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my (my child’s) participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am (my child is) free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me (my child).

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: __________________________ Signed: __________________________

(Participant)

Signed: __________________________

(Principal Investigator or his/her authorized representative)

Signed: __________________________

(Person authorized to consent for participant, if required)

Witness: __________________________