

Project on Values and Models of Habitat to Publish Research Plan

The nature of American habitation, the structure of American society, and value questions included in both of these areas are the subjects of a research agenda recently completed for the AAAS Division of Public Sector Programs. The 6-week project, funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities, was undertaken by 14 scholars representing a wide disciplinary and geographic range.

An initial section on "critical issues" contains essential questions on which much of the agenda is based: What forces are acting to promote both justice and inequity in the allocation of resources—esthetic and social as well as physical and economic—in America today? Who controls the major decisions which affect American habitat, and why? What is the impact of major institutions such as the media, government, and large corporations?

In addressing institutional impact on habitat, the report discusses and defines

the institution and related concepts. Specific questions relate to whether an esthetically pleasing environment is a universal right, and to the impact of advertising and the media on public opinion, children, and the American home.

The concept of human rights is central in the research agenda. The development of a "theory of rights" is one suggestion. Particular issues for research include the right of the individual to decide where he or she wants to live and political and economic restrictions (such as zoning ordinances) on that right; the right to privacy (in relation to judicial and investigatory activities of government); and the right of future generations to a livable earth.

One chapter is devoted solely to theoretical issues and calls for exploration into the theory of value from a number of different perspectives, including connections among the value languages of law, economics, and ethics; the concepts of stability and continuity with the past; and the value concepts of "quality of life," religion, and self-image.

In considering the effects of social, political, and economic forces on current trends in patterns of habitation in America, the report recommends study of private automobile use, changing sex roles, and the "back to nature" movement. Particular attention is given to population mobility and to the need for research into the social and psychological impact of moving on the individual and on the community.

A discussion of human "images of habitat" develops a matrix for approaching important issues in order to bring to light perspectives which might not otherwise be apparent to the disciplinary researcher. For example, the single-family house as a dwelling model is subjected to this analysis to introduce such concepts as the use of land as a status indicator, and the "trading-off" of privacy for social control (or vice versa).

The concept of "trade-offs," the choosing or imposing of a particular habitat value at the expense of another, is examined in such questions as: What psychological processes are involved in making decisions about which values have priority and which can be "traded off"? How do individuals and institutions weigh these options? The design group calls for development of techniques for assessing not only environmental but economic, psychological, social, and esthetic impacts of such decisions.

Some thought has been given, finally, to the research community—how this research should be done, and by whom. The report concludes:

- Case studies and evaluations must be done of existing programs to assess how they have succeeded or failed and why.
- Effective information dissemination networks must be developed to avoid duplication of effort in research.
- Those involved in the outcome of a research project must be involved in its design and implementation as well.
- Research must not be limited to a single discipline in areas where an interdisciplinary approach would be more valuable.

The research agenda will be published by AAAS, Division of Public Sector Programs, in late fall, and will be available upon request, free of charge.

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Photo by John Ware Vermilye

Participating in the "American Values and Models of Human Habitation" project were: (front row, left to right) William A. Blanpied, project director; Margaret Mead, chairman, AAAS Board of Directors; Curtis Carter, Marquette University, project chairman. (Back row, left to right) Donnie Self, Old Dominion University; Dudley Burton, University of California, Santa Cruz; Joanne Pratt, consultant in chemistry, Dallas; Anatole Beck, University of Wisconsin, Madison; Tunney Lee, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; David Stea, University of California, Los Angeles; W. Russ Ellis, University of California, Berkeley; Ruth S. Cowan, State University of New York, Stony Brook; Joachim Wohlwill, Pennsylvania State University; Peter Bearse, Princeton University; Herman Berkman, New York University; Sylvia D. Fries, University of Maine.