

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1.1 Introduction

Housing is becoming less affordable every year. People earning below the median wage for their area are finding it more difficult to find homes to rent or own. Manufactured housing is an affordable alternative to site-built housing with units selling as low as \$20,000 in many areas. (Clayton Homes) But locating this housing within municipalities is difficult. Using local zoning codes, building codes and public hearings, proponents of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) have managed to outlaw manufactured housing developments in many towns and cities, relegating them to agricultural areas far from available jobs and public transportation.

Many of the objections stated by those opposed to manufactured housing concern aesthetics and fear for their own property values. If the main objection is aesthetics (Ross, 2001) then good site design may be the answer to increasing acceptability. Can Landscape Architecture help overcome community opposition to manufactured housing developments?

In order to answer that question, several factors must be examined. This paper starts with an examination of the need for affordable or low-cost housing in America and how manufactured housing can fulfill that need. It then examines the NIMBY

syndrome: what NIMBY is and how it affects low-income housing. Since the history of manufactured housing plays a role in its present and persistent image, Chapter Two begins with an overview of manufactured housing history. Then the paper investigates the sociological and psychological basis' for NIMBY. This provides an understanding of the factors behind NIMBY and gives direction for a design-based answer to the dilemma. The final two sections of Chapter Two examine the aesthetic preferences of the general public and the needs of residents of low-cost housing in relation to exterior spaces.

Chapter Three begins with a case study on manufactured housing developments across the United States. The second section consists of a case study of the local codes regulating manufactured housing developments in Virginia. The chapter concludes with typologies examining site planning considerations for manufactured housing developments. Chapter Four lays out the methodology that is used in testing the value of Landscape Architecture in the design of low-cost manufactured housing developments. The process outlined is used in Chapter Six to produce three different designs of a manufactured housing development in Blacksburg, Virginia that fulfill the needs of the residents and promote community acceptance.

Chapter Five examines the results of three studies conducted in the Blacksburg area

to discover local standards for housing developments. The first part is a preference study that produced a set of criteria for siting a house on a lot. The second study looks at complaints against local manufactured housing developments. The third study is a visual survey of four neighborhoods surrounding the chosen site, Clayton Estates. The chapter concludes with a survey of the site chosen for the three designs, noting positive and negative attributes. Chapter Six is the practical application of the ideas presented in this paper. Three designs demonstrate the viability of the theories and criteria developed in the paper. Conclusions and evaluations are contained in Chapter Seven.

## 1.2 The Need for Low-Cost Housing in the United States

The price of housing in the United States has skyrocketed in the past thirty years. The national median price of a house in 1970 was just under \$20,000. By 1990 the cost had risen to over \$80,000 (Clark and Dieleman, 1996). By the year 1999 the national median cost of a new house had increased to \$163,000 (HUD PD&R, 2000). Unfortunately, wages have not kept pace. The Federal government has determined that families should spend no more than 30% of the family income on housing (Jones, Pettus and Pyatok, 1995). But in the last four years there has been a 30% increase in the number of working families

spending over 50% on housing. The National Housing Conference defines working families as those holding the equivalent of a full time job, earning between \$10,712 and 120% of the local median income. In 1997 roughly 3 million families paid over 50% of their income for housing that was deemed substandard. By 2001, this total had risen to 4.8 million families. The total numbers of people in America living in substandard housing and paying more than 50% of their income in 2001 was 14.4 million. That was equal to approximately one in every seven Americans (National Housing Conference, 2002).

In November of 2002 no worker making the minimum wage could afford to pay the Fair Market Rent. In thirty-three states, no one working two jobs at minimum wage could afford to pay the Fair Market Rent. A worker had to be making \$13.87/ hour in order to afford a two bedroom apartment at the median Fair Market Rent. In some markets, two wage earners working two minimum wage jobs each could not afford to rent an apartment together (Apartment Rents are Out of Reach for Many, 2001).

Who are the people in need of low-cost housing? They are the people who earn less than 80% of the median income for their locality. They are teachers, librarians, nurses, entry-level firemen and policemen, restaurant workers, farm workers and those working in service industries. They are families, young couples, singles and

seniors. Single parent families are the fastest growing segment of families in need of low-cost housing. Caucasians make up the largest group in the low-income segment of the population. African Americans and Hispanics have larger percentages of their populations in this group than do other American groups (Jones, Pettus and Pyatok, 1995; US Census Bureau).

Since different agencies use different definitions to describe social and economic classes, in this paper, I will use the term “working class” to describe families with at least one full-time wage earner, earning at least the minimum wage and at most, eighty percent of the median income for their area.

Local, state and national government agencies have been involved in providing housing for the poor in varying degrees since the Great Depression. Among these are programs that provide housing vouchers for a limited number of the working class. Tax credits are available for builders who build or include a percentage of low-income units in their developments. Some state and local governments have existing programs, often supported in part by Federal monies, to build or rehab houses for working class families. Non-profits groups such as Habitat for Humanity build new housing units or rehabilitate existing units for low-income families. But these measures have not been enough to

relieve, yet alone solve the housing crisis in America.

### **1.3 Manufactured Housing as a Solution to the Low-Cost Housing Shortage**

Manufactured homes are being investigated as a possible solution to the affordable housing shortage for the working class.(League of Women Voters, 2002). New technologies have allowed for houses that look even more like site-built houses than before. Noji Gardens in Seattle and The Mills of Carthage in Cincinnati are two examples of this type of affordable housing. Yet in this instance “affordable housing” means housing close to the median price of housing for that area, well above what most working class families can afford. In 2001, the manufactured homes in Noji Gardens were valued at \$215,000 to \$240,000 each. With creative financing by the sponsoring non-profit that created the development, the houses are available to qualified buyers for \$125,000 to \$145,000 (Jensen, 2001).

The majority of working class families cannot afford the new style homes, but many can afford the older style manufactured homes. In fact, the traditional manufactured house is the most affordable form of single family detached housing available (Carroll, 1997). In 1999, the national average cost of a new singlewide unit was \$31,300. The average price of a new doublewide unit was

\$49,300 (Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 2002). The national median price for a new site-built home was \$163,000. The most expensive part of a manufactured home can be the land upon which it is installed. The Federal Census estimates that 68% of new manufactured homes purchased in 1999 were placed on land purchased by the homeowner. The AARP estimates that around 50% of manufactured houses in 1999 were in lend/lease communities (AARP, 2003). Lend/lease communities are publicly or privately owned communities that rent lots to manufactured homeowners for their homes. Lot rents vary widely depending upon location, community age, owner, amenities and market. They can range from \$150 a month to over \$400 a month (Bean Case Study 1, 2003; Owens, 1996).

But manufactured houses are not welcome neighbors in most municipalities, suburban and rural areas (Link, 1998). Many local governments have zoned them out completely while others have allowed them only in designated manufactured housing development zones (Bean Case Study 2, 2003). These zones are usually in the least desirable locations, often near industrial sites. Other governments allow them to be sited only in agricultural zones, far from jobs and public transportation (Hart, Fraser, Rhodes and Morgan, 2002).

There are several reasons why communities view manufactured homes

and their residents with suspicion. Some of the prejudice has been attributed to:

- A general prejudice against all low-cost housing (Beamish and Goss, 2000).
- The idea that manufactured home residents are transients, with no ties or responsibilities to the local community (Atilas, 1995, Beamish and Goss, 2000). In reality, less than 5% of manufactured homes are ever moved from their initial setup site.
- A major factor in the way that manufactured homes have been zoned has been the low aesthetic appeal of the traditional trailer park design (Gann, 2001). The old utilitarian style of trailer park tended to cram as many units onto as little land as possible, resulting in row after row of closely spaced, metal-clad, shoebox shaped homes. (Figure 1.1)
- The use of mobile homes as rental units. Rental units have a negative perception of being poorly kept by both renter and owner (Beamish and Goss, 2000, Hart and Fraser et al, 2002). This is reinforced by news stories of mobile home “slums” for migrant farm workers.
- Negative images portrayed and perpetrated in the news and entertainment media. News stories



**Figure 1.1** The traditional utilitarian manufactured home development. (Bean)

of natural disasters and fires focus on the fact that the victims lived in mobile homes, not just homes. Stories of criminal activity mention that the crime was committed by someone who lives in a mobile home, even though that fact is not elemental to the story. Stereotyped images of stupidity and interfamily marriages among manufactured homeowners abound in the entertainment media.

- Perceptions that manufactured homes are poorly built firetraps. These perceptions are perpetrated by some public officials who want to keep manufactured housing out of their jurisdictions (Advisory Commission on Regulatory Barriers to Affordable Housing, hereafter ACRBAH.).
- The general public has not kept up with improved building standards either. Given a list of seven types of alternative housing (not traditional single family detached) 43.3% ranked manufactured housing as their last choice (Day, Lentner, Beamish, Crisco and Dyer, 1982).
- The claim that houses built in a factory “somewhere else” take jobs away from local construction workers and do not contribute to the local economy (Personal conversation, 2002).

- Perceptions that the residents are undesirable and undeserving. “The people that usually live in them are fat and sloppy, with the exception of a few that are skinny, and they do not have much common sense. They especially do not have any morals. In this area, quite a few military people live in them. The majority are ignorant fat people with no morals or respect for other people.” (quoted in Atilas, 1995, p.183).  
“...having low-income housing in a middle-class neighborhood is very unsettling to a lot of people...I’m a firm believer you get what you earn. I don’t believe that low-income people should be mixed in with middle- and high-income people just to satisfy the social engineers.” (City Councilman quoted in The NIMBY Report).

The perceptions above feed into the phenomenon known as the NIMBY syndrome.



**Figure 1.2** this internet image portrays almost all of the negative stereotypes about manufactured housing and the people who live in this type of home. (drbutikk)

## 1.4 The NIMBY Syndrome

NIMBY is an acronym that stands for Not In My Back Yard. It began as a civic movement to prevent the construction of noxious or dangerous industries near home sites. Now it is often used to prevent the construction of low-income housing near existing residential neighborhoods (Ross, 2001).

The causes for NIMBY vary from the fear of change to the known, comfortable physical environment, to the fear of change in the demographic makeup of a community. These fears are often expressed in terms of concern for declining property values, preserving neighborhood character, maintaining service levels and reducing fiscal impacts. Sometimes these are legitimate worries and sometimes they are socially acceptable excuses for racial, ethnic and class prejudices (ACRBAH, 1991).

The most common argument against manufactured housing is "It will make our property values go down." The majority of studies that have been done on the effect of manufactured housing on nearby properties have shown that this is not true. In a few cases, property values have actually risen when such housing was introduced into the neighborhood (ACRBAH, 1991, Guoqiang and Stephenson; League of Women Voters).

Another argument is that the increased density of a manufactured home development will increase the load on services and utilities. Since the owners of manufactured homes in a land lease community do not pay real estate property tax, opponents claim that schools will be serving more children with less money and the quality of their children's education will be degraded. What they ignore is that the owners of the community pay taxes on the land and on the lot rents. And the homeowners pay personal property taxes. It has been suggested that communities change their way of classifying manufactured houses for taxing purposes, but the idea is slow to catch on.

Prejudice is still one of the core reasons behind NIMBY (ARCBAH, 1991). There is a real bias against those who are less affluent, renters, minorities or just "different from us". Renters are seen as less stable and a threat to the middle-class way of life. Manufactured homeowners are seen as less than desirable residents (Jones, Pettus and Pyatok, 1995, Meeks, 1995, Thomas-Lester). Others put it less subtly using words like ignorant, lazy, fat, mentally deficient and trailer trash (Atiles, 1995). Because of the lasting images of public housing failures such as Pruitt Igoe and Cabrini Greens, people earning low incomes have been associated with increases in neighborhood crime (Jones, Pettus and Pyatok, 1995). Lower density housing and cluster housing developments

are distrusted by occupants of suburban, single family detached dwellings. Often newcomers themselves, they are afraid that lower density housing will bring in the very people from whom they escaped by moving (Whyte, 1964).

NIMBYs have been successful in putting up barriers to low-cost housing through elections and public meetings. Local public officials are likely to pay attention when large blocks of influential, middle- and upper-class voters voice their objections. There are few willing to speak for segments of the population with low incomes (Whyte, 1964, ARCBAH, 1991, League of Women Voters). The zoning laws that result from this type of situation either outlaw, restrict or relegate manufactured housing to special and usually undesirable locations.