

Housing Habitability: Theoretical Review and Empirical Findings in a Developing Nigerian City

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Abstract

This paper adopts the observational-theoretical approach in addressing the challenge of housing habitability. Aside from attempting a broad theoretical review of habitability concept, effort has been made to invoke empirical knowledge gained from field observation to test the underlying housing habitability assumptions thereby bridging the gap between conceptual discourse and empiricism in habitability studies. More importantly, empirical knowledge gained from the study raises grave concern of significant departure of habitability status of sampled housing from theoretical expectation and established standards thereby recharging the calls for reconstruction, reinforcement and revitalization of housing standards and relevant planning laws in cities of emerging economies.

Keywords: Housing Habitability; Observation-theoretical approach; Empirical; Town planning laws; Nigerian city; Theoretical review.

1. Introduction

The housing quagmire facing cities of developing economies are indeed multifarious ranging from the issue of availability, suitability, affordability, security and habitability. There is an overwhelming need to address these challenges frontally. This paper focuses on one dimension of this problem-Habitability.

Most of the papers written on housing habitability have been largely conceptual. Often times, authors seek to develop and advance their own theoretical position on essential elements and indicators of habitability (Landazuri, Mercado and Teran, 2013; Usobiaga, 2014, Solanas, 2015). Such approaches leave a yawning gap regarding the link between theoretical knowledge and empirical studies of housing habitability especially in third world cities.

The tripartite nature of housing challenge in the Third World Nations namely, availability, affordability and habitability requires a balanced knowledge of both theoretical and empirical propositions. In other words, in our quest to create habitable and sustainable living conditions in the world's emerging cities, empirical test of underlying theoretical models of housing habitability will be indispensable. The lack of marriage between theoretical ideas and empirical observation regarding housing habitability in the Third World Cities have dire consequences for achieving goals number 3,6 and 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals have specific targets of improving health, wellbeing, sanitation and sustainability in the world's most disadvantaged nations (UNDP, 2015).

This paper seeks to link theoretical ideas of housing habitability with empirical findings generated from field survey in a typical Third World City in Nigeria. It sheds light on habitability status from an observational-theoretical perspective by reviewing critically the underlying assumptions of housing habitability and comparing same with insights gained from empirical observation. It is aimed to open new lines of debate on what defines habitability and also stimulates new thinking on how Municipals Legislations could evolve measures of ensuring housing habitability.

2. Theoretical Issues

The UN-Habitat (2006) acknowledged housing as one of the basic human needs with profound health, social and economic consequences on an individual. Housing in this context transcends mere shelter or dwelling. It embraces both the physical and social components of the environment including facilities, amenities and services necessary for human comfort, safety and health (WHO, 2003).

The Human right to adequate housing is well articulated in several international laws including the Universal Declaration of Human Right (1948). Since that time, the right to adequate housing has been elaborated. A key component of this right is habitability of housing. According to WHO (2004), habitable house should comply with health and safety standards; including providing the inhabitants with adequate space, protection from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards and disease vectors.

In recent time, the subject of housing habitability has become an issue of intellectual debate as different scholars seek to explain the phenomenon from different perspectives. On one pole, are those who tend to define housing habitability based on predetermined sets of physical parameters. This school of thought views housing habitability in terms of the physical condition of the dwelling (structurally, internally and externally); the existence of basic amenities and the condition of the environment surrounding the home. In other words,

habitability means housing that provides people, with the needed space to live in dignity and peace, and has protection from the natural elements, structural hazards and disease vectors which threatens their physical well-being (Azuzu, 2002; Shaw, 2004; WHO, 2010; Bonnefoy, 2007; James, 2011). One major assumption underlying this proposition is that the stability of health of occupants is linked to the stability of the physical attributes of the house. Viewed in this light, the Australian Institute of Health and welfare (2001), defines habitability as a dwelling that is fit for human habitation, possessing basic amenities in working order, and not being in substantial disrepair.

This definition raises a number of issues including the choice of indicators or measurable attributes by which an evaluator would adjudge a dwelling fit for human habitation. According to Agabi, and Odekunle (2014), there are no generally acceptable indicators. What is considered as habitability standard are evolved by respective national housing agencies and lacks international applicability.

Furthermore, the specifications of what is termed “basic amenities” vary across cultural and geographical boundaries.

Some authors therefore have criticized the over-reliance on physical parameters to define habitability (Daramola, 2006; Meng, Abdullah and Fern, 2006; Oladapo, 2006; Jiboye, 2010). They argued that what is acceptable as minimum standard and habitability elements in a developed country may not be acceptable in a developing country. For instance, in Oregon state of the USA, the habitability requirement include smoke detectors, heating systems, wood stoves, gas pipelines, household equipment and appliance, chimneys, basement and crawl spaces, as well as weather proofs, hot and cold water (Oregon’s Landlord Renters Act, 1998). These requirements are in sharp contrasts with the Uyo Capital City Building Regulations – an instrument that stipulates minimum standards for housing habitability in Uyo Metropolis, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (James, 2011).

In view of the ambiguity and lack of uniformity in the choice of indicators of habitability across international space, and the non-inclusion of social elements in determining habitability, a new perspective of habitability focusing on the human, socio-cultural and psychological considerations emerged. The proponents of this theory assumes habitable housing as a function of the ratings of the individual tenant’s level of satisfaction with his dwelling unit in relation to his neighbourhood (Agabi and Odekunle, 2014; Landazuri, and Mercado, 2004; Avaloz, 2003). In other words, assessing habitability would mean evaluating the social and cultural elements operating within the residential environment upon which satisfaction is based. Contextually, Mercado and Gonzalez (1991) define habitability as the quality of spaces to provide satisfaction and to allow a healthy biological, psychological and social development of the residents. It has been argued that habitability can be measured by the level of satisfaction expressed by the inhabitants of houses, which in turn is a function of their needs and expectancies.

Meng, et. al. (2006), asserted that physical parameters alone cannot gauge habitability and that the socio-cultural attributes in terms of norm, culture, shared expression, and a sense of belonging at the family unit, neighbourhood and the entire community are indispensable variable for a subjective evaluation of a house by its inhabitants. As Landazuri, Mercado and Teran (2013) puts it, “the psychoanalytic perspective of habitability measures the emotional experiences aroused by the social environment in which people live in”. It is clear that the human or socio-cultural perspective of habitability was developed to measure residential satisfaction by involving both the environmental, cultural and psycho social factors and relating same to the well-being of inhabitants

The consideration of the social and Psycho-logical aspect in habitability studies is worthwhile. This is because, by probing the dwellers inner response on the structural, spatial and other attributes of the residential building and environment, a new perspective is habitability in generated to guide policy enactment and interventions. However, the major drawback to this approach lies in the transient nature of emotional response, its non-replicability, subjectivity and lacking in normative status (Diogu, 2002; Fagbohun, 2003). Therefore, the use of human model of habitability alone in defining habitability requires caution. Rather, a mixed approach that strives to marry the physical attributes with the human factors that examine the needs and response of the people would enhance the pursuit of habitability of housing. The consequently, position of this paper is that the debate on what constitutes housing habitability is still open and new thinking and insights are expected to emerge in the near future.

3. Empirical Consideration

The empirical component of this paper is an off shoot of a housing habitability survey carried out by the authors in Uyo Metropolis, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Uyo Metropolis is one of the fastest growing cities in Nigeria. Uyo is situated in the Niger-Delta, (South-south) Region, Nigeria. Its locational latitudes and longitudes are between 7° 47' and 8° 03' North and between 4° 52' and 5° 07' East respectively. Politically, Uyo is the capital of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria.

Demographically, Uyo is a home to about 380183 people (based on NPC 1991-2018 projected figure) with

steady influx of people from neighboring states the sub-equatorial South climatic condition of the area affords it a mean annual temperature of 27°C.

The urbanization process in Uyo has been quite informal- characterized by rural – urban drift and inter-state migration with attendant pressure on available infrastructure including housing.

To assess the housing habitability status in Uyo, a checklist of housing habitability studies covering eight broad habitability elements and their indicators as contain in the habitability standards of the Uyo Capital City Development Authority Building Regulations (UCCDA), 1998 was developed.

Under section 23 of the UCCDA Edict, 1998 as amended, the UCCDA has the statutory mandate to issue the certificate of habitability in respect of every house in Uyo Metropolis based on the UCCDA habitability standards.

The UCCDA habitability standard covers nine broad elements including:

- i. Structure and Material
- ii. Access
- iii. Space and Security
- iv. Illumination and electricity
- v. Thermal environment (indoor temperature)
- vi. Interior Air Quality (ventilation)
- vii. Water supply
- viii. Sanitation Facilities
- ix. Fire safety

The above elements are also core parameters of measuring habitability by the World Health Organization (2003) and that of the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (Housing Habitability Standard Inspection Checklist, 1978).

Our observation at Uyo metropolis covers Four Hundred housing units spread across forty residential areas in the city. Data obtained from the checklist operation were collated and analysed using simple percentage to reveal the proportion of housing unit approved and those found to be deficient. Table 1 displays the summary of data analysis.

The observation in Uyo Metropolis confirms the assertion by Meng et. al. (2006) that Habitability factor remains the most intractable problem of housing in the Third World Cities. It was observed from the study that most housing units in the sample remain inhabitable in spite of the existing Regulatory Standards and Institutional arrangements to guarantee housing Habitability. The findings in Uyo Metropolis reveals gross violation of Habitability Standards by property developers and Landlords.

For instance, 58 percent of housing units in the sample population were observed to be structurally deficient posing serious threat to safety of occupants. As Olanrewaju and Adesanya (2013) documented, the wanton collapse of residential buildings in some Nigeria cities are attributable to structural and material defects. It was also observed that more than 55 percent of the sampled population lacked adequate accessibility and temperature control facilities; 51 percent were deficient in facilities necessary for high sanitary condition while 56 percent failed short of illumination and electricity requirements. The purpose of the Habitability study in Uyo Metropolis was to sensitize the Resident to avoid housing defects that may be harmful to their health and safety. Essentially, findings in Uyo metropolis raises important questions on the safety and health of the occupants of inhabitable housing and the integrity of the municipal agencies and institutions saddled with the responsibility of guaranteeing compliance.

Findings have also provided sufficient evidence for accepting the hypothesis that theoretical postulation on housing Habitability and empirical observations are by far two poles apart and thereby opening new lines of debate on whether socio-economic factors alone could explain the incidence of massive in habitability of housing in third world cities. In the proceeding section, attempt has been made to set the tempo for this debate by advocating for reconsideration and reinforcement of Habitability Standards to reflect cultural and political underpinnings in third world nations.

4. Need for Reconstruction and Reinforcement of Habitability in Cities of Emerging Economies

Some authors have attempted to offer explanation on the large-scale violation of habitability standards in the Third World Cities based on socio-economic factors. They argued that low purchasing power, poverty and low level of social engineering characteristics of the Third World population contribute to the preponderance of sub-standard housing in the Third World Cities (Dunn and Hayes, 2000; UN Habitat, 2003; Omole, 2010; Aluko, 2012; Olarewaju and Adesanya, 2013). In as much as socio-economic factors remain inalienably tied to the Third World Cities Housing Issues, this paper posits that cultural and institutional factors are also important. Our review of habitability concept have shown that the construction of habitability models based on predetermined quantitative variables alone is in itself inadequate because habitability has been proven to possess some elements of cultural colouration. In other words, habitability means different things to different people. Habitability on its

own is not an end. Humans are the direct beneficiary of habitability. Accordingly, there is the need to evolve habitability standards that reflect the perceptions, expectation, and satisfaction of humans in line with their unique multi-cultural residential landscape. It is believed that the large-scale non-conformity of housing in Uyo Metropolis is a reflection of the people rejection of the top-bottom approach to habitability. Of course, this makes it difficult for the relevant authorities to enforce such standards. A bottom-top approach should be utilized to construct habitability standards that are people-centered and culturally enforceable.

The political orientation of institutions saddled with the burden of enforcing compliance to habitability standards is another reason for preponderance of inhabitable housing in the Third World Cities. There is the lack of political will to enforce habitability. Compromises are made to friends, relatives and political partners by staff and authority of regulatory agencies that have corrupt and questionable character. There is need to strengthen the integrity of housing regulatory institutions if substantial level of enforcement. Must be achieved.

Apart from initial certification of housing by the Uyo Capital City Development Authority, before habitation, Municipal legislation should ensure the continuous monitoring of housing to ensure conformity to the habitability. Standards Routine housing checks by the UCCDA would help reduce the menace of collapse of buildings evident in most Third World Cities, particularly in Nigeria and also ensure high level of hygiene and sanitation.

5. Conclusion

This paper represents a milestone in an attempt to deconstruct housing habitability concept and proposes new paradigm of habitability planning. The main thesis of the paper is that habitability is not an end but a means to an end which is human comfort and satisfaction. There is essentially a strong advocacy in this paper for planners, policy makers and stakeholders interested in coming to grip with the challenge of habitability to incorporate both the “hard component” of habitability attributes and the “soft components” of human perceptions to evolve habitability models that have practical relevance. In other words, in this paper, the idea of habitability has been elaborated along physical and cultural factors. The paper emphasized the need for town planning authorities to propose legislations that include regular habitability checks on all housing components to ensure the pursuit of habitability is on the right track.

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Table 1: Housing Habitability Status in Uyo Metropolis, Nigeria (n= 400)

Habitability Element	Specific Requirements	% of Housing Units Approved	% of Housing Units Deficient
Structure and Material	The structures must be sound and quality materials used to enhance health and safety of occupants.	42	58
Space and Security	Adequate space for living/bedroom 3.00m, car park, kitchen, burglary proof, security gate is required to ensure security of occupants	71.25	28.75
Water supply	Water supply > 120 litres per capital per day, borehole or municipal water sources is required	62	38
Access	The housing unit must be accessible, structures must emergency exit	44.75	55.25
Sanitation Facilities	Functional sewage, water facility, toilet, bathroom suitable and adequate for high sanitary condition is required.	49	51
Indoor Temperature	Every house must have adequate cooling facilities –AC/Fan, ceilings, wall and floor tiles	33	67
Interior Quality (Ventilation)	Air To promote natural ventilation, fence height- < 1.8m, double windows for each room, adequate distance between building is required	62	38
Illumination and Electricity	Adequate natural and artificial illumination; sufficient electrical source is required	44	56
Fire Safety	Fire extinguishers, fire alarm, fire hydrant is required	7.50	92.50

Source: Field Survey by the Authors.