

The Immobile Mobile Home: Transforming the Character of the Built Environment

SANDY STANNARD
University of Idaho

INTRODUCTION

Mobile Homes.....an unrecognized revolution has occurred.
(Drury, 1990)

In 1998, national mobile home¹ sales represented approximately 30% of the new single family housing market, representing approximately \$14 billion in retail sales (NCSBCS and U.S. Department of Commerce). Due to the fact that mobile homes are a viable competitor in the housing market in addition to becoming established as one of the most successful forms of non-subsidized affordable housing in this country, it is appropriate to consider how this type of housing is affecting the character of the built environment. In particular, it is useful to examine how the values promoted by the non-site specific design, construction, and use of mobile homes contrasts with traditional architectural values associated with site-built housing, principally regarding issues of permanence and place.

Although both influence the built environment, the motivations of the mobile home industry directly contrast with the values typically associated with the making of architecture and the creation of "place." A uniquely American phenomenon, the mobile home is a product of socio-economic forces. This capitalist motivation contrasts sharply with the core values of architecture, which are socially, culturally, and artistically based. Further, the mobile home is a commodity associated with impermanence, particularly when contrasted to the permanence of buildings. Though all mobile homes have wheels at one time or another, this is not necessarily the characteristic that makes them seem impermanent. The physical and sociological attachment to the land is missing in the current use of mobile homes. In contrast, traditional development patterns have generally support attachment to, accountability for, and control over the land, with the resulting creation of the sense of "place," a crucial component that relates to the integrity of cities and towns. Historically, the siting of mobile homes in cities and towns was often restricted or prohibited, resulting in their banishment to designated mobile home parks. Due to the continued perception of impermanence and the fact that the mobile home industry continues its steady growth, it is appropriate to consider how the use of mobile homes as housing reflects not only upon the nature of dwelling but also upon the trend of our cultural values.

Mobile homes are ubiquitous and this housing trend is increasing, particularly as mobile homes provide one of very few affordable housing options for many residents.² Currently, the strongest markets for mobile homes in the United States are in the Southeastern and Western states. The most pronounced growth has occurred in rural areas where manufactured housing accounts for 69 percent of all new dwellings constructed in the last decade, according to census data (Hindman, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, a number of

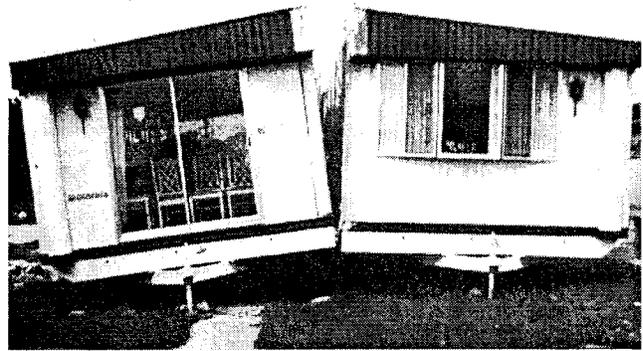


Fig. 1. Source: Wallis.

small American northwestern cities and towns will be used as references for examining the state of mobile homes in these growth areas. In examining the current status of mobile homes, a number of issues will be considered, including cost, societal perceptions, control, siting, place, and community.

COST

...escape from mortgages and the ownership of useless impedimenta — escape from conventionality with so many of its senseless requirements and prohibitions — escape from "keeping up with the Joneses." (Nash, 1937)

Because mobile homes provide a source of affordable housing, a large percentage of working families, students, and retirees choose this form of housing. Interviews with residents and park managers revealed that mobile homes generally represent a temporary step for residents, on their path towards the purchase of a site built, single family home.³

Mobile homes have a number of advantageous characteristics, particularly when compared to other affordable housing options such as apartments. Reasonable costs enable many residents to purchase their units, an option often not available to them in the site built housing market. Nationwide, the average price for a new mobile home is approximately \$27,000 for a "single wide" and \$46,000 for a "double wide," compared to an average \$159,000 for a site built home (Hindman, 1995).⁴

Mobile homes teach us that manufactured housing can be affordable. As an historical reference contrasting mobile homes and site built housing, Operation Breakthrough was instigated in this country

in the 1960s, with architects and planners involved in the process of producing much needed affordable housing:

Between 1969 and 1973, Operation Breakthrough produced approximately 25,000 housing units at a total federal cost of \$72 million. During that same period, the mobile home industry produced almost 2.5 million housing units at no direct cost to the federal government. Inglorious and technologically primitive as it might appear to many, the mobile home again was vindicated as the only affordable unsubsidized form of industrialized housing in the United States (Wallis, 1991).

However, the affordability of mobile homes is deceptive for a number of reasons. The figures most often cited for the cost of mobile homes often do not include land costs. Typically, land is either privately purchased or sites are rented from a mobile home park owner. For those who rent or lease property, monthly payments are a burden that must be factored into the affordability issue. In the northwestern United States, mobile home park lot rates range from approximately \$150 to \$300 per month. In addition, insurance costs for mobile home homes tend to be higher than for site-built residences. Average costs for conventional homeowners insurance is approximately \$3 for \$1000 of value, compared to \$15 per \$1000 for mobile homes. The affordability of mobile homes is also affected by the type of financing typically available for this type of housing. Mobile homes are most often financed with personal property loans, with a duration of 15 to 25 years (compared to a typical 30 year conventional mortgage) and interest rates running 2 to 3 points higher than most mortgage rates (Smith, 1993).

SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS

There is, however, a strong public prejudice against them... Over the years the educated public, led by architects and urban planners, has drawn up the indictment of the mobile home. It is part aesthetic judgment, part structural critique, with a touch of compassion for those who are unfortunate enough to have to live in one. To begin with, the mobile home is an industrial product, mass-produced, low-cost, and disposable...It has bypassed the craftsman and the architect and the landscape architect, and the owner (or consumer) has no opportunity for self-expression, or even a say in the ordering of the interior or in the outside decorations (Jackson, 1994).

Enduring negative perceptions regarding the quality of construction, lifestyle, and social status are often associated with mobile homes. Echoing the sentiments of many mobile home dwellers, the following account illustrates the persistent misconceptions of the mobile home lifestyle:

Some of them still think that mobile homes are like travel mobile homes. Someone who has never experienced being inside of one, or who has only seen one behind some farmer's place where his field hands live, have no idea that this is a modern normal facilitySome people have just not realized yet that you can build the same type of facilities here as in a conventional home. Often the mobile home communities that you see from the highway are not the best looking ones, and this is what people most often see. (Wallis, 1991)

In many towns residents perceive the phenomena of mobile homes and their associated parks as a threat to conventionality. Similar to many American households, the image of the single family house and yard continues to be an implicit goal for many mobile home residents. Many view mobile homes as tawdry second cousins to this American ideal. One researcher notes: "Concerns over appearance, safety, and mobility often are surrogates for



Fig. 2: Mobile home, circa 1970.

concern about conventionality. In this sense, the mobile home is not a threat because it is ugly, but because it is identifiably different." (Wallis, 1991)

MOBILITY

Mobility is a familiar concept in the scope of American history. From wagon trains traveling westward to the seasonal movement of many Native American cultures, the idea of movable dwellings is not new to American culture. While architectural values argue for connectedness, it may be the very nature of a mobile home's perceived mobility and lack of connectedness that makes this type of housing so popular:

They have become, in fact, so big, in spite of the restrictions to make them mobile, that the average mobile home, it is said, moves with less frequency than the average American family. They generally get to a parking place and stay there for the rest of their lives, have gardens planted around them, and sometimes get skirts and mock foundations to suggest, at one ephemeral level, their permanence; on another level, however, surely a part of their popularity is based on the image of mobility, the possibility of moving on that has excited Americans from the beginning and in some way reduces society's grip, minimizes the vision which has scared so many Americans for so long of the dwelling as manacle (Moore, 1993).

The desire for freedom of movement is also apparent in the conventional housing market. Despite the permanence of these conventional dwellings, Americans routinely move from place to place. However, one notable difference is attributable to the fact that conventional dwellings are *perceived* as permanent, despite the actions of the residents inhabiting them. Regardless of the sense of freedom that some associate with mobile home living, the trappings of permanence are often included and even codified as part of the package. For example, local zoning ordinances often dictate required skirting to conceal the wheel base of mobile homes, thus essentially disguising the mobility of these dwellings.

CONTROL

Particularly in the siting of mobile homes in designated parks, one of the most substantial criticisms of the current system concerns the ownership of land and the resulting lack of control for the mobile home resident. In addition to the frequently strict regulations attached to park living, the potential for exploitation is high due to the fact that residents do not own the property under their housing units. One report describes this scenario as "...the worst of two worlds: the insecurity of renting and the enormous financial risk of homeownership." (Knox, 1993). The dependency that results from

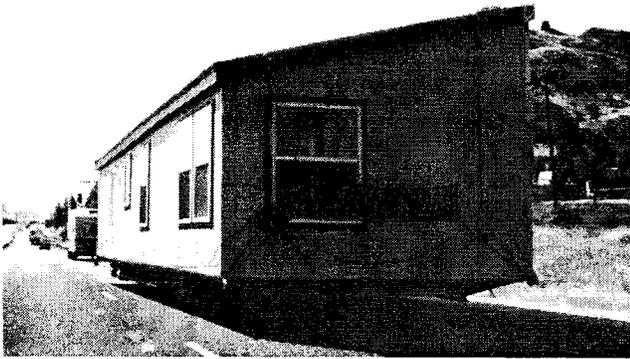


Fig. 3: Transporting a mobile home via the highways.

this system undermines the assertion that mobile homes are a viable form of affordable housing. In this modern form of serfdom, there is little long-term security for residents beholden to a park owner for land use. Lot rents are established by the land owner and thus may be increased beyond a renter's ability to pay. Residents may be trapped by this system as the cost of moving a mobile home to another site may be prohibitive (ranging anywhere from \$1,000 to \$6,000).

Most park owners assert their control over mobile home residents by enforcing a lengthy lists of rules and regulations regarding the use of their land. For instance, at one mobile home court, residents must comply with the following rules, among many:

....**Garbage and grass clippings must not be set out until the morning of pick-up day.**....Any guests staying longer than one week, please notify office....No unnecessary noise or watering of lawns after 10 P.M....**NO PETS**....Children must be under adult supervision at all times, regarding[sic] the rules of the park and for their personal safety. Children must not play or loiter in or around vehicles, or other homes or yards unless invited... (Robinson Mobile Home Court "Rules and Regulations")

SITING

It is in the siting of mobile homes, both in parks and in established neighborhoods, that excites the most visible controversy over this housing type. Previously, municipal zoning codes were often restrictive regarding the siting of mobile homes, although these codes are slowly changing. Mobile homes are often associated with the lower and working classes, providing ammunition for those who wish to exclude this type of housing from middle class neighborhoods (Wallis, 1991). In a sense, past prohibitive zoning ordinances resulted in the establishment a pseudo-ghetto of mobile home dwellers, delineating a distinct zone that confined and separated these residents from middle class neighborhoods.

Traditionally, the rationale behind restrictive zoning is attributable to the general belief that the siting of mobile homes in proximity to site built homes adversely affects the property values of the latter. Nationwide, there have been numerous court cases concerning the nature of mobile homes and their affect on traditional single family neighborhoods. In *Comeau v. Brookside Village*, a 1982 decision handed down by the Texas Supreme Court stated that "...the inherent structural difference in such manufactured housing can make them vulnerable to windstorms and fire damage; and their mobile nature may lead to transience and detrimentally impact property values if scattered through the municipality." (Wallis, 1991) Because the purchase of a home can represent the single largest investment made during a citizen's lifetime, site built housing residents are very

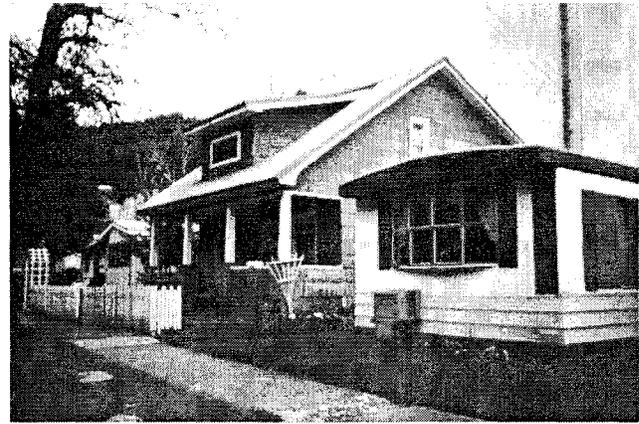


Fig. 4: Main street in Kendrick, Idaho.

sensitive to any action that threatens the value of their homes.

As one example of slowly changing ordinances, new legislation passed by the Idaho State Legislature dictates some significant changes for local zoning ordinances, particularly in the siting of mobile homes. As of July 1, 1996, the law states that "...each governing board shall amend its comprehensive plan and land use regulations for all land zoned for single-family residential uses to allow for siting of manufactured homes...." (State of Idaho Planning Act, 1996) Some jurisdictions have gone so far as to amend their codes such that a "dwelling" is now defined as a "detached building or manufactured home." (Moscow City Code Amendment, 1996). However, this significant change is accompanied with a strict list of aesthetic principles for the manufactured (previously mobile) home. A comparative example of an older mobile home sited in a small rural town highlights the significant changes that are recommended by the new code. In this Kendrick, Idaho example, mobile homes are sited next to site built homes on the town's main street. If the town were to adopt the Idaho State code as written, the siting illustrated in Figure 4 would not be allowed. For example, the new code states that to be sited in a traditional neighborhood, the mobile home shall be multi-sectional and not less than 1000 square feet (not including a garage). The Kendrick mobile home illustrated is less than 1000 square feet and is a "single wide." The Idaho code states that the perimeter foundation or skirting of the home must be less than or equal to 12 inches. The skirting on the Kendrick home is greater than 12 inches. Further, the Idaho State Code includes aesthetic attributes as well, stating that "the manufactured home shall have exterior siding and roofing which in color, material and appearance is similar to the exterior siding and roofing material commonly used on residential dwellings within the community..." (State of Idaho Local Planning Act, 1996). Clearly, such codified aesthetics would require some subjective judgment by the local planning board.

The message inherent in the Idaho State code example is that mobile homes that look like site built homes may be sited in traditional neighborhoods.⁵ However, while the new code is directed at larger mobile homes placed on individual lots, the prohibition of smaller, more affordable mobile homes from being sited in traditional neighborhoods continues. Thus, while seemingly more inclusive, the new code restrictions continue to preserve and protect the property values of site built homes in traditional neighborhoods. For mobile home residents requiring a more affordable housing option, they continue to be constricted to the separately zoned mobile home park.

PLACE AND COMMUNITY

Figure 5 shows a view of a mobile home court in a Northwest town. The park currently holds nearly 300 mobile homes, with room

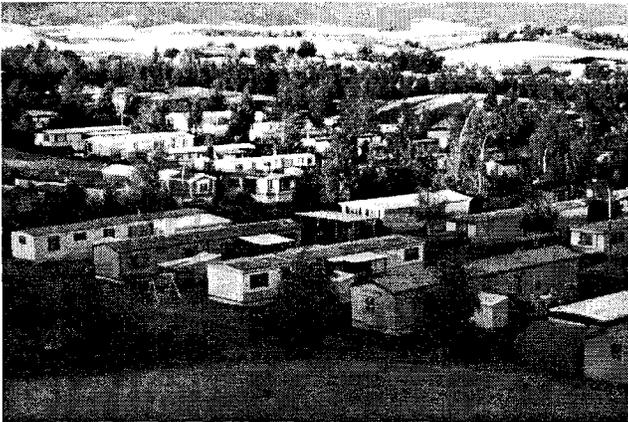


Fig. 5: Mobile home court.

for growth. Clearly, developments of this type and size have a tremendous affect on the man-made landscape. With Moscow's continued growth, mobile homes may become increasingly attractive to buyers excluded from the inflated site built housing market. This growing trend reveals the current nature of contemporary American housing, with market forces directly challenging traditional values of dwelling and community.

From issues of property ownership, to the essence of "place," to issues of community, a fundamental philosophical conflict that arises between the current use and siting of mobile homes and traditional development patterns concerns the relationship of mobile homes to the land and to people. Respect for the relationship between a piece of architecture and the land is a near-sacred tenet held by the architectural profession:

The existing structure of the land is a resultant of unseen natural process[es] operating over a long period of time. We must respect this structure and work to have our constructions be a continuation of that process, letting the present landscape play an evident role in the determination of suitable form for each place, respecting the impact that any structures have on the land. Similarly, the existing structure of a community is a result of many, often conflicting, processes, and is analogous to organic growth....Whatever we build significantly affects neighboring structures and the overall sense of place (Lyndon, 1962).

The current use and siting of mobile homes is antithetical to this philosophy. Though housing in general has become a commodity in this country, this fact is overwhelmingly apparent in the mobile home industry. A buyer can pick a mobile home out of a catalog, and his mobile home is wheeled to him in one, two, or three pieces. J.B. Jackson further notes: "And then, coming as it does off an assembly line, the mobile home ignores local architectural traditions and environmental constraints....Literally as well as figuratively, the mobile home has no real attachment to place." (Jackson, 1994).

Despite the lack of control over the land and unlike many affordable housing alternatives such as apartments, mobile homes offers residents a direct connection to the outdoors. Residents thus have the opportunity to appreciate an amenity associated with site built housing: the proverbial yard. Similar to most conventional housing, living in a mobile home offers residents autonomy and relative privacy, particularly compared to apartment living. Reflecting the sentiments of many park residents, one resident's experience is described below:

One of the things that Helen likes most about her mobile home, is that, despite its size, it has privacy. She can walk around the outside of this home, and the walls are all hers. There is privacy from neighbors, yet they are close enough



Fig. 6. Source: Wallis.

that if she hasn't come out by midmorning to retrieve her paper, someone will be concerned enough to call on her (Wallis, 1991).

For mobile home park dwellers, the close association with others of their own kind often results in a spirit of community that is frequently missing in traditional neighborhoods. The development of community can often be attributed to the fact that residents share a common bond: they live in mobile homes. Previously prohibitive zoning codes resulted in residents sharing the common treatment of banishment from traditional site built neighborhoods. Now prohibitive codes may be replaced by prohibitive costs as fewer residents will be able to afford to overcome the restrictions that would allow them into the traditional neighborhoods. National trends support this prediction, as the percentage of manufactured housing sited on leased land continues to rise.

CONCLUSIONS

To a house-hungry nation, this idea of buying our dwellings as we buy our clothes is not merely appealing....it is exciting! Why build a house when you can buy one just as good ready-made? Why not buy a house as you buy a car, and replace it with a new one whenever fancy dictates? (Graff, 1947)

The essence of consumerism and disposability are persistently associated with the mobile home industry. Nonetheless, mobile homes are a popular consumer item. Yet the motivations of the mobile home industry contrast directly with traditionally held values of place and permanence in American cities and towns. Similar to the production home industry, the bottomline interest of the mobile home industry is profitability. The industry focuses primarily on the production and sale of individual pieces, with little or no concern for the resulting environment created by these pieces. In contrast, quintessential architectural values typically focus on social, cultural, and artistic themes and include concern for such vital issues as community, quality, and the relationship between structure, people, and place.

Mobile homes and their siting do not encourage permanence, a quality that helps support community building and one that supports the development of vital socio-cultural values. The perceived lack of permanence may be attributed to a number of mobile home characteristics, such as their mobility, the lack of individual land ownership of residents living in parks, and the half way nature of this

housing for residents striving for the ownership of site built housing. Permanence, especially in housing, is associated with security:

There is a reason that human beings long for a sense of permanence.... We know not where we come from, still less where we are going, and to keep from going crazy while we are here, we want to feel that we truly belong to a specific part of the world. (Kunstler, 1993)

In a zone somewhere between nomadism and landownership, mobile home park residents lack any sense of relationship to or control over the land immediately around them. Thus, the current mobile home park system essentially prohibits rootedness. In contrast, traditional development patterns support a more rooted set of values. The qualities that characterize these dwelling patterns support attachment to, accountability for, and control over the land, with the resulting creation of the sense of "place."

Another criticism concerns the siting of mobile homes and their mimicry of suburban development patterns, a development that may assist in the erosion of cities and towns and a topic that merits reconsideration in relation to lifestyle and sustainability issues. Voicing the concern of many architects, Dolores Hayden notes that "...the manufactured box exploits the assembly line to prolong the problems of inadequate architectural programming and inadequate neighborhood planning that the housing crisis should force us to solve." The individual nature of mobile homes and their siting that permits yard access makes it appear as though the American dream has been achieved. In reality, the lack of control over the land, the absence of long-term security, and the potential for exploitative park owners makes this scenario anything but a dream.

Clearly, the mobile home industry is not only firmly established but is rapidly expanding. The market-driven nature of the mobile home industry has little understanding or patience for the nurturing of essential socio-cultural values. Unintentionally, the mobile home industry affects these values, particularly in how mobile homes are used in the mobile home parks. In a triumph of capitalism, the lack of permanence, accountability, and control associated with typical park developments reflects our priorities as a culture:

Now that environmentalism has become accepted Establishment philosophy, the values we stress are stability and permanence and the putting down of roots and holding on to our architectural heritage; and no doubt this is as it should be. Still we cannot help but be reminded, whenever we look at our rapidly changing landscape and study our changing attitudes toward the home, that we have a second architectural tradition, a tradition of mobility and short-term occupancy that is stronger and more visible than ever....all of us who think about architecture and its many bewildering manifestations are in a sense duty bound to try to understand the new kind of home we are all making in America. (Jackson, 1984).

Inaction will result in the continuation of the status quo. Unless architects, planners, and others provide a viable alternative, the deceptive affordability of mobile home homes will seduce new buyers in ever greater numbers, without regard for the resulting environments and lifestyles that are created. However, this trend is not irreversible. Capitalizing on the mobile home's strengths of affordability and mobility, design professionals and planners can

take advantage of this already established industry and improve upon it not only by becoming involved in mobile home design and technology, but also by ensuring the sensitive use and siting of mobile homes to promote permanence and the creation of place.

NOTES

- ¹ For simplicity, the broader term of "mobile home" will be used throughout this paper, despite the industry preferred term of "manufactured housing."
- ² It is noteworthy to recognize that mobile homes, modular housing, and panelized housing combine to capture approximately 60% of the new housing market, with traditional site built homes to capturing the remaining 40%. (Automated Builder, 1/93)
- ³ Soaring single family home prices are affecting this trend. One park owner remarked that increasing numbers of mobile home owners cannot afford to purchase site built homes in the current market. Instead, these residents are moving from smaller to larger mobile homes, often within the same park. Resident interviews revealed the same phenomenon.
- ⁴ The cost for the site built home includes the cost of land at an average of \$40,000.
- ⁵ In spite of the new code, some believe that the legislation will have little affect, as protective covenants can be adopted to restrict the types of dwellings that may be sited in a particular area.

REFERENCES

- Graff, Raymond, et. al. *The Prefabricated House*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1947.
- Hayden, Dolores. *Redesigning the American Dream*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984.
- Hindman, Michael. "Manufactured Housing Continues to Build Momentum," *Independent Banker* (March 1995).
- Jackson, J.B. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Jackson, J.B. *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Knox, Margaret L. "Home Sweet Mobile Home," *Mother Jones* (Jan/Feb. 1993).
- Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.
- Lyndon, Donlyn, et. al. "Toward Making Places," *Landscape* (Autumn 1962).
- Moore, Charles W. "Mobile hWaomes," in Charles Moore, et. al, ed., *Home Sweet Home: American Domestic Vernacular Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1983.
- Moscow City Code Amendment, Ordinance Nol 96-09, 4/15/96.
- Nash, Charles Edgar. *Mobile home Ahoy!* (1937), as quoted in Thornburg, David A. *Galloping Bungalows*. Hamden: Archon Book, 1991.
- Robinson Mobile Home Court Inc. "Rules and Regulations."
- Smith, Anne Kates. "Hardly a Mobile home Park," *U.S. News & World Report* (April 5, 1993).
- State of Idaho Government and State Affairs: Local Planning, Section 67-6509A (4) (a)-(e).
- Wallis, Allan D. *Wheel Estate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.