

“Mental Health and its Architectural Requirements”

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Mental health situation in Europe

Mental health problems like depression, anxiety disorders, hyperactive behavior, eating disorders and such like are on the increase in Europe¹ to a truly alarming extent. At the same time, though, Europe has enjoyed a long period of peace and relative wealth. Overall, people are healthier and live longer than more or less anywhere in the world. So why do we have so many mental health problems?

Of course, every single depression or anxiety disorder has its own genesis. We call it a neurotic development, starting in childhood and producing symptoms usually in adult life, when the neurotic person is faced with a difficult situation, be it an exam, unemployment, a divorce or a challenging work environment. The already neurotic individual can't cope adequately and develops a depression or another neurotic symptom, such as phobia or eating disorders. This, of course, is a crude simplification of what happens. Were it that easy to grasp, we certainly wouldn't need trained psychoanalysts to slowly untie every neurotic knot. But, for the sake of the following argument, let us bear only the fact in mind that an emotional disorder is the product of a development originating in childhood.

Now, there are many ideas being thrown around as to why mental health problems are on the increase in developed countries. In daily newspapers, e.g., we find theories ranging from too much television to too much performance pressure, from unemployment to video games. All these reasons might or might not contribute to our mental health situation, and we know for certain, that social difficulties like unemployment or mobbing can trigger depression or anxiety. But as the foundation of all neurosis is laid down in childhood, we ultimately have to look at this specific period of life to answer our question.

Having worked as a psychoanalyst for 17 years now, I've come to ask myself what it is that has changed in our ways to bring up children. Again, superficially, findings are positive: Children are beaten and maltreated to a far lesser extent than in centuries past. What is more, children's rights are widely acknowledged and even basic knowledge

¹ WHO Mental Health Report

about children's emotional needs is fairly commonplace compared to earlier times. So, again, why do we still see more and more neurotic developments?

Raising children: Past and Present

Focusing not on parenting in general or the individual's fate, but on the history of the family as such, we can observe one fundamental change that divides life past and present: the rise of the nuclear family. Approximately since World War II, most households consist of only the parents and their children - and in the last decades we see an increasing number of even smaller units, single parents and families with only one child.

In the centuries before – in fact probably since the beginning of mankind – children have been brought up together with at least 4 to 8 other children, and, what is more, they were brought up by a whole group of adults.² In Neolithic times, of course, it was the horde that provided for children and adults; to live in a nuclear family setting would have equaled with death sentence for the hunters and gatherers of the time. But even once people settled down and grew crops manpower was needed to do so. A farm had helping hands of various sorts and so had craftsmen and traders lodged in their houses up to the 20th century. Children were never brought up by their parents alone, and they were themselves a group, not least because contraception didn't exist. And then, of course, there were grandparents, unmarried aunts and uncles belonging to the household as well. In our modern times of mobility you have to be lucky to still live near at least one set of grandparents.

The nuclear family: no exit option

First and foremost, the nuclear family poses a huge organizational difficulty: If only one or two adults are responsible for one or two children, the parents can't enjoy time on

² Philippe Ariès, *Geschichte der Kindheit*, München 1975

their own, without paying a baby-sitter, which is far too expensive for a lot of young families. Not sharing time aside family chores or going out, in turn, can strain the relationship; some parents end up feeling a 'functioning unit' rather than a loving couple after a while. Yet, there is no exit option: they have to cater for the needs of their children, simply because there is no one else around who could take over, not even for a couple of hours. To be the only one in charge therefore puts an enormous responsibility on the parents, decreasing their freedom degrees considerably. Quite a few couples don't survive this pressure: they split up, in doing so creating even smaller living units with even more pressure on each adult.

But what does the nuclear family mean for the children? Let me begin with a look at the very small children that do not yet possess an individual emotional system. Instead, they tie in with the respective system of adults, feeling what they feel and viewing the world according to that person's mood. For example, if the person in charge of the child is afraid, a small child will be afraid, too, if the person is depressed, the child will feel dead and alone, because it can't establish the necessary emotional contact with the adult. If a child has only one or two people to live with, its fate is complete emotional dependence on the persons surrounding it - the fewer persons, the higher the dependency. Should these persons in charge, the parents, quarrel, thereby focusing on each other, the child is left out panicking. Were there another person available, a flat-sharing friend, grandmother or even an elder child, this person might provide comfort and safety from the fighting zone. In short: the third person offers an exit option for the child!

Our ancestors have by no means been better people – quite the contrary: Today's parents in our region of the world usually are more kind and caring, courtesy of the sharp decrease in the struggle to survive seen in the past decades. And yet, in another respect, today's children do not have the exit option of their mates in former times! Instead, they depend on their parents not only to provide food, love and shelter, but also in terms of good mood, emotional balance, constant attention - in fact they even tend to depend on their parents for companionship, because there are no other kids around.

Now, what about elder children? Once the child has grown up a bit, it is in kindergarten or at school, where it can find companions to play with. But at home, the single child still needs the constant attention from its parents, and its own attention is focused on the grown-ups. Thus children who have no or just one other sibling get involved far more easily into the emotional world of the adults. They start, even as three or five year olds, to feel responsible for every hardship that occurs and start imagining themselves as their parents' "partners", trying to comfort or soothe, busy to reconcile parental fights or intermediate. Thus the child is no longer a child, who goes about its business within a group of other children, whilst the parents have their own business within their peer group of other adults. Instead, children become an integral part of the emotional family system, feeling responsible for the balance and happiness of the parents. The psychological term denominating this development is: the children are "parentified". They are drawn into their parent's emotional life, urged by the circumstances to mistake their own role within the family. This process can show in the behavior of the child, but mainly it takes place in the child's imagination. In fact, usually the parents don't even notice that their child has shifted positions, from being the child to feeling responsible like another adult. And, of course, this new role the children take up is a burden they can't fulfill; it is in fact a burden too much to carry.

Well, slowly but surely I've drifted towards the family as an environment that produces neurosis. This, of course, isn't the case in all nuclear families. In fact most nuclear families are strong and healthy and emotionally balanced. The point I want to make is: The nuclear family of recent decades is a good system **only** if everything is fine and every member of the family is reasonably happy. But in times of trouble and hardship, when a marriage fails, when one parent is an alcoholic or seriously ill, when unemployment leads to tensions, when death strikes or depression settles in - in all these cases the nuclear family offers no exit option for the child. If those periods are short, children will usually recuperate, but if trouble and tension lasts too long, children will suffer psychologically, they will - unconsciously - develop methods to fend off emotional tension they can't yet deal with, and these methods will persevere into adulthood and mark the beginning of a neurotic development. Once the child has matured into an adult and has to deal with another difficult situation, the old, now inappropriate methods will lead to symptoms like depression or anxiety.

Alternatives to the nuclear family

Without necessarily considering mental health issues, it was decided in some communities even very early in the 20th century that living in small units might not be an ideal concept. Usually, the motive was political, like the Kibbuz movement in Israel or left wing communes all over Europe. But not everyone lives in Israel or happens to be left wing enough to want to live in a commune - mainly due to the fact that most things and developments in modern lives and work environments have fostered individualism: the more educated and wealthy people become, the more individual they are, and that means, that they want their own living space and their own decisions; a concept that doesn't suit life in a commune, where sometimes not only the use of the kitchen was shared, but also the incomes or even sexual partners. Socialist ideology has ruled life in those communes, which means that they are not a concept valid for more than a small minority.

Nevertheless, for about two decades now, people start again thinking about alternatives to small-unit-living, not driven by ideology, but rather by practical needs. In Germany, mainly three concepts so far emerged: the shared apartment for old people as an alternative to an old-age home, thus trying to cope with the demographic problem; "mixed-generation-housing" where people move together to live in a mutually helpful neighborhood; and the so called "Baugemeinschaften", assembling people with money enough to build their own houses, deciding, planning and building a town house with separate flats for each party involved. Sometimes the inhabitants share only a garden, sometimes they plan a common room, but the concept of small-unit-living is at least marginally tipped towards communal living.

These concepts are a start. People who come together to plan a house might be more willing to support each other than people in an anonymous setting: if the old lady downstairs can't do her own grocery shopping, e.g., maybe someone will do it for her; if a couple wants to go out, maybe they can give the baby-phone to a neighbor; and should the children want to play in the common garden, they can do so, the garden being big enough and somebody being around to have an eye on them. These arrangements, though, are for the wealthy who can afford a baby-sitter, anyway!

The fact remains: if people with an average income want to rent a space big enough to move in with several parties, they will find this to be nearly impossible to find, at least not within cities. Normal housing provides units for 1 to 4 people. Having a family of five or six already poses a real problem, and social housing for a group of more than six individuals does hardly exist at all!

Living space for communal living in the cities

So the question is: What sort of living space is required to allow people to live together, without losing their autonomy? How can a house with several parties provide common space especially for children, in order to allow them to grow up together, thus being less involved with the emotional life of their parents? How can we lower the threshold for the children by still providing separate space for the adults? And how can we do all this within the scheme of public housing, so that people with low income can profit from it?

I'm raising these questions, not as an architect, but as a psychoanalyst.

Nevertheless, I can imagine, say, flats for 2, 3, or even 4 single parents: always on the ground floor with a door to an enclosed garden; every adult with his or her own bathroom, but a huge common kitchen and a children's playroom. A flat like that would not take up more space than 2 to 4 separate units, but each parent would be able to have individual time away from his or her children, as long as one of them stays at home. The kitchen would provide some common ground, to eat together, to sit and talk, so there would be less need to involve their children into the adults' problems. And if one person happens to face grave problems, the others will be able to offer an exit option for the child. If every social housing project provided at least one or two huge flats designed to cater for a set of single parents, we would create living units where a group of adults can support each other, and a group of children would have the opportunity to live with other children: emotional dependency would be reduced considerably! In order to make these concepts attractive, one only has to offer enough separate space for the adults - no shared bathrooms and maybe even a small separate kitchen - and enough common space for the children.

The same principle could apply for nuclear families: The task would be to build houses, where the parents have their own individual space, but the children share as much common space as possible. For instance, one could imagine flats, where parents have their separate normal setting, whilst the children's rooms can be opened to each other by sliding doors, thus offering the possibility of a common room for the kids. Even the planning of common rooms, roof gardens or enclosed gardens with no outside access would help to foster more communal living, especially for children. I am sure there are numerous other solutions architects will come up with, once they've set their mind to tackling the main issue: how to build living spaces where the parents can enjoy as much separation as they want, whilst at the same time the children have as much communal space as possible.

We are living in times when extended families, all living together in one house, are nearly extinct. People move to the cities, their jobs require them to be mobile, to change cities or even countries during their professional career. Individualism has become the norm and has all but replaced thinking in terms of clan needs. Therefore family ties loosen, individual freedom is valued much higher than ever before. Conservative politicians tend to lament this development. But I don't think it is a bad development at all. We just have to adjust our living spaces in order to allow people to enjoy their freedom to make individual decisions, by at the same time offering the option of communal life.

One might argue that individualism is so predominant that people won't want to move into more communal dwellings. And this might be true for quite a few of us. But if you were a single parent, all on your own responsible for the well being of your child: are you sure you wouldn't chose a place like the one I described, with space for yourself and support from others nearby? And what is even more important: if you were a child alone with one or two adults: would you not want to live with other children in a bigger community, able to find somebody to play with, in case your mom is down with a migraine?

Another argument against the concept of communal living is that people might not want to move in with strangers. But if the living space allows enough separation for the

adults, this concept is more like intense neighborhood than it is about eating up your freedom. It's the children who would share most of the common space, and children are usually quite willing to make friends with other children, provided they have time and space. Children adapt themselves easily to a group of children and they profit enormously, especially when there is a wider range of ages. People like me who are old enough to have been brought up roaming the streets will remember that.

This paper is not a scientific study and it doesn't claim to be one. Rather it's a plea from my profession to your profession to please consider, should yourself or one of your colleagues happen to be involved in a social housing project planning, the argument I put forward and include at least one or two big flats able to house 2 to 4 single parents, designed to offer separate space for the adults and communal space for their children.

I am aware that housing adhering to those principles would certainly not eliminate mental health problems, but I am convinced it will at least help to reduce them, by providing support for the adults, and, even more importantly, by providing exit options and a children's own community. This is, of course, a long term project, but if these ideas settle in starting a development of more communal living, maybe in 50 years our mental health statistics will show a positive effect.