

TRACING RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES OF SOLO-LIVING. THE FINNISH PERSPECTIVE IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The functionalist housing innovation – the organization of space around the model of a nuclear family – still defines the spatial organization of today's dwellings in Finland¹. Meanwhile, households and domestic life have changed drastically. Living alone has increased significantly in the last decades along with socio-economic changes, such as urbanisation, rise in standard of living and population ageing. In a way, living alone is a global social experiment – all around the world people live alone more than ever before². The most common household type in the EU is the single person living alone³. In Finland – a country of five million inhabitants with over one million one-person-households⁴, and one of the highest levels of solo-living amongst the EU – the amount of one-person-households is going to be rising up to almost half till the year 2025⁵.

Architectural studies on the field of solo-living often focus on special housing designed for the phases of living regarded transitional, such as senior or student housing. However, living alone at working-age – more conventionally associated with living with a partner and children – has increased in the 'western' countries in the last decades, often dramatically⁶. DeKa⁷ emphasizes focusing on the solo-living working adults for the the potential impact on the economic wellbeing they provide of cities today and in the future. Also my research focuses on trend of living alone among the urban working-aged population.

In this paper, I use the term 'solo-living' for defining the distinct social and spatial arrangement of home environment. Jamieson et al.⁸ have defined solo-living as analytically separate from 'being single'. Klinenberg⁹ emphasizes that 'singles' may or may not live alone – some live with romantic partner, roommates or children. Furthermore, 'solo-living' lacks the potentially negative connotations of being 'alone' referred as being lonely. Nevertheless, in my study I consider 'living alone' as a neutral term, as well as 'one-person household', and use them as synonyms for solo-living.

My aim in this paper is to trace out and understand Finnish solo-living of working-age adults in urban settings in European and in broader international contexts. My aim is to capture the current discussions and questions about solo-living through literature review by using the most topical scientific periodicals and existing statistics. I search for the residential preferences of solo-dwellers through re-reading existing preference studies from the viewpoint of solo-living. Likewise, I take into consideration recent studies on solo-living from the viewpoint of residential preferences. Regarding these preferences of living alone, there are both similarities with other residential groups and distinct features.

In my study I have overall emancipatory interest of aiming to improve the solo-housing in practice. In this paper my aim is to lay out the foundation for scenarios as to meet the preferences and needs of solo-dwellers in light of existing references. In this regard my research will involve developing design concepts by using research-by-design approach. The design concepts will be studied in iterative

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processes together with the group of solo-dwellers. The intention is to improve the socio-spatial quality of solo-living environments and architectural quality of solo dwellings.

URBANITY ATTRACTS SOLO-LIVING

The concept of 'residential preference' made a debut in Finnish intellectual discussion and research on housing in the early 2000's: studies based on extensive quantitative surveys draw a picture of a preference monoculture, where living close to nature, peacefulness and detached single-family housing repeatedly occurred as the salient residential preferences regardless of residents' education, income level or professional background¹⁰¹¹¹². On the other hand, qualitative approach and dweller interviews have revealed a more complex and varied scenery on Finnish housing preferences¹³.

In economics, preferences are variables behind the consumer's behaviour. According to urban economists Loikkanen et al., residential preferences describe consumer's valuations on housing and depend on household size, the number and the age of children, income level and the way of life. Preferences affect both on the proportion of household income the consumer is willing to spend on housing costs and on the combination of housing attributes the consumer chooses, such as location, size and quality of the home¹⁴. However, the viewpoint of urban economics is mostly on quantitative contents and in an architectural approach and design process also the qualitative aspects would be valuable. A preference is an optimal and potential choice – both the objectives and the realized actions can be considered as residential preferences. Nevertheless, every choice is not a realized preference; therefore more careful inspection of preferences is needed because realized choices give too narrow overall picture of solo-dwellers' penchants.

Residential preferences of solo-dwellers diverge from the preferences of population groups in other life phases and situations. According to Strandell¹⁵, all residential groups in other life phases value peacefulness as the most important comfort factor in a residential area, except people living alone – among whom location, transport connections and the availability of services are the most important comfort factors. The preferred location is urban: living alone in Finland is more common in cities than small towns or rural municipalities¹⁶. Solo-living favours urban residential locations similarly in other western countries¹⁷. Inside the cities, living alone concentrates on the inner city and other central and high density areas. For example, the eastern parts of inner Helsinki have the highest population density in Finland, along with the highest ratio of solo-living: in the neighbourhood of Alppiharju, three-quarters of households are of one person¹⁸. Apparently, people living alone seem to prefer living in the urban centres, regardless of higher housing costs or housing shortage.

Solo-living is retrofitted in the city; the dwellings once designed for families are to be occupied by one person only. The rise of one-person households and thus the rise in average housing area per person leads to smaller population density, even when the dwelling density stays the same. Question arises on the impacts of solo-living on the city and its' service structure. However, solo-dwellers socially meet friends, relatives and colleagues more than people living with others¹⁹ and use more local services²⁰. Consequently, the social interactions taken place in the urban fabric seem to have a pronounced role in the case of solo-dwellers. Whether the lower population density of solo-living has a potentially negative effect on the local services, or if the more outgoing lifestyle and preference for using services within a walking distance has a potential to liven up inner cities, would be interesting to study together with the social scientists. The awareness of both dwelling density and person density is by all means important for architects and planners when designing urban infill for solo-living.

CONTRADICTIONARY HOUSING TYPE PREFERENCE

In survey on Helsinki inner city habitants, half of 'singles' and 'dinks' (childless couples) chose block of flats as their preferred type of housing²¹. What Tuominen finds surprising is that nearly half of this residential group – in the most urban habitat in Finland – found detached house as their preference. A national survey 'Residents' barometer 2010' gave similar results; approximately one third of solo-dwellers under 65 years old chose detached single-family house as their favourite type of residence, whereas almost as many preferred block of flats²². The preference for detached housing among the one-person households is not just a Finnish phenomenon²³. An interesting question is, whether urban solo-dwellers really want to live in detached houses – generally perceived as a housing solution for families with children, or is this due to the lack of more suitable alternatives.

Part of the results can be explained by the factor that younger solo-dwellers have a tendency to choose single-family house as their preference based on the expected future stage of life²⁴, not necessarily for their prevailing conditions. A solo-dweller may be content with living in a block of flats in an urban setting, but wish for a family life in different residential conditions²⁵. As Klinenberg states, many young adults who live alone see it as a stage, not an end point, and expect to find a partner eventually²⁶. Those who live alone after separation may have children residing elsewhere, thus accommodating their preferences accordingly. Solo-dwellers' preference for the detached housing decreases with age: two thirds of under 25-year-olds who live alone prefer detached housing, whereas from over 65-year-olds only one-fifth prefer the detached house²⁷.

It is worth noting that people living alone prefer housing block as their favourite housing type almost as often as the detached house – the ratio being significantly higher than in other residential groups, where the preference for the detached house is notably more dominant. However, the existence of solo-dwellers who would prefer to live in a detached house is unexpectedly high. Wulff et al. suggests that in Australia the preference for a free-standing dwelling is associated with the preference for home ownership, as the medium or high density housing is more likely rented²⁸. In Finland, the dwellers in blocks of flats experience less ability to influence on their residential conditions than dwellers in detached houses²⁹, which likely is associated with the detached house preference.

Despite the common preference for detached housing type, it is unlikely that the residential neighbourhoods of detached houses would be ideal for solo-living. There seems to be a contradiction between the preferred urban intensity and the suburban structure the preferred detached housing generates. Further research and analyze is needed to define the particular qualities or contents – whether it is the spatial versatility of the home, surrounding garden, the autonomy of living, the distance from neighbours, the accompanying family life or some other aspect – that cause many solo-dwellers' preference for detached housing type. From the viewpoint of housing design it would be valuable to find the forms of manifestation for the preferred qualities in other, more urban, types of housing.

ECONOMY OF SOLO

The social and economic status of living alone vary globally. DeKa's analysis shows that higher education, a middle-class income and central-city residence are positively associated with the likelihood of living alone in US³⁰, whereas in Nordic countries – countries with the most one-person households – living alone is common on all income levels, also (and especially) in the lower end. Living alone and low income level are strongly interconnected in Finland³¹. However, when only ages 35-64 are regarded, living alone is quite evenly common among all income levels.

Majority of Finnish working-age adults who live alone do not yet live in a dwelling they would consider to be the 'goal-dwelling', which is distinctly fewer contented than of adults same age living

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with partner, or partner and children³². Households with two income have more potential to realize their preferences. According to Finnish Residents' barometer 2010, solo-dwellers are one of the residential groups whose residential preferences on housing type have realized the least³³. Presumably the often preferred detached house is not a realizable option for many solo-dwellers neither financially – nor for practical reasons like maintenance. Home ownership is another often unrealized preference of Finnish people living alone, although one-person households do prefer renting more often than people living with others³⁴.

Is a solo-dwelling considered to be small? According to Tiihonen, less than half of Finnish one-person households live in one-bedroom apartments, one-third in bedsits and almost as many in apartments with two bedrooms or more³⁵. In Finland, the average housing area per person in all kinds of households is distinctly lower than in western Europe³⁶. Small dwelling is usually not a preference: residents prefer larger dwellings if they can afford it³⁷. However, as most Finnish solo-living working-age adults find the size of their current dwelling to be just right³⁸, the architectural quality of solo-dwellings ought to be improved by other means than up-sizing apartments. One-person households already spend a larger proportion of their income on housing expenses than people living in two-income households³⁹.

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES OF SOLO-LIVING

The rise of living alone is not only a social change, but a change in consumption patterns. A body of research suggests that the increase in small households has led in grown environmental impacts⁴⁰. The average housing area per habitant in one-person households is larger compared to multiple-person households, and goods like household appliances are allocated to one person only. However, in the light of commuting – which constitutes roughly as large part of the material footprint of an average Finnish person as housing⁴¹ – solo-living appears more sustainable compared to the way of living in multiple-person households. The preferences for good transport connections and the availability of local services seem to lead in more sustainable commuting and consumption patterns: people living alone tend to use more services located near home, as they live in central locations and do not own cars⁴²⁴³. The phenomenon of people living alone being more likely to use public transit and walk, being less likely to use personal vehicles, and commuting shorter distances and times compared to people living with others is consistent in many car-dependent societies⁴⁴⁴⁵. The residential location placed to the urban inner city has potential to act as the foundation for sustainable solo-living. As the suburban sprawl is a current problem both in Finland and in cities globally, some features of urban solo-living, like mobility patterns, could set an example of a sustainable urban way of life.

Deka⁴⁶ states that the environmentally sustainable travel patterns of people living alone are due to the lower level of living in detached houses and the higher level of renting, which enables moving for job proximity. If this is also the case in Finland, it means that the unrealized residential preferences of many solo-dwellers – detached housing and owner-occupancy – are potentially in conflict with sustainability. Moreover, the more sustainable travel patterns of solo-living are not to be taken for granted in the future, as a mild trend for longer commuting distances and times and reduce in the use of public transport can be found within the one-person households in US⁴⁷. It is all the more important to develop novel housing concepts that both meet the preferences of solo-living and maintain the environmentally sustainable travel patterns.

One-person households are easily scapegoated in the issues of unsustainability; however, the household income level and the individual consumption patterns play a more significant part in the material footprint than the size of a household⁴⁸. Furthermore, a recent Finnish study states that a sustainable level of natural resource use cannot be achieved in Finnish society merely by changing

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individual consumption patterns, but that it requires institutional changes, as the material footprint of the studied low-income one-person households was in the most cases considerably lower than the Finnish average, but exceeded the level estimated as ecologically sustainable at least by a half⁴⁹. Awareness of the ongoing shift from multiple- to one-person-households is needed when outlining institutional actions in order to reach sustainability, such as regulation for resource efficient housing, and planning of urban structure that supports efficient public transport and local services.

Juntto⁵⁰ suggests that in the expensive urban central locations the quality of housing could be improved in the future by investing in services, thus 'outsourcing' segments of domestic life. Novel concepts of shared commodities like shared spaces and goods could affect on the size of dwellings and help to reduce material footprint of solo-living, improving both affordability and social and environmental sustainability of living alone. Virtual spaces and smart services ought to be taken into consideration too when outlining novel concepts for sustainable solo-living. Tervo proposes creating a satisfying home environment by collecting a combination of spaces and services around the private apartment, granting further resonance with changes in life situations⁵¹. Improving the social and spatial quality of solo-living environment requires interdisciplinary study of both the actual and virtual home in order to build a comprehensive view of urban solo-living.

CONCLUSIONS

When drawing conclusions on the residential preferences of solo-living, it is crucial not to mix locational preference with dwelling type preference. The preference for urban central location does not automatically include housing block as preferred dwelling, nor does a preference for detached house necessarily mean that a solo-dweller would be interested in living alone in low-density suburban location. However, urban location is usually the realized preference with solo-living. Choosing a home is a complex decision making process of finding the right combination of housing attributes such as location, size and quality of the home. In further study I aim at searching for the qualities the detached housing type represents for solo-dwellers, in order to use research by design methods to develop housing concepts that meet the preferred qualities without compromising the preference for urban intensity nor the environmentally sustainable travel patterns.

Solo-home concepts

While the organization of dwellings is still much dependent on the functionalist tradition of a family home, under one-fourth of Finnish households are nuclear families. The urgent demand for dwellings suitable for small households is clear for the housing developers, and most of the new apartments in urban central locations are targeted accordingly. Challenge is the lack of true innovation; the layouts of apartments are simply scaled down to minimum, instead of taking the design solutions especially suitable for small households as the starting point⁵². The excess demand of small dwellings has not urged the developers for product development. Perhaps, the mindset of seeing living alone as a temporary stage of living affects on the eagerness to elaborate novel architectural layouts and concepts. Relatively little is known on the solo-living preferences and needs, especially concerning more detailed qualities of the home. Re-thinking contents of solo-living may also involve requirements for urban design and planning.

In the last decades the greatest leaps in the quality of Finnish housing have happened in detached houses, much due to the customer-centered design processes. Perhaps participatory strategies with dwellers in study and design of living alone could be helpful in tracing out the complex, sometimes contradictory, preferences and housing decisions of one-person households, in order to develop novel concepts for solo-living.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See: Kirsi Saarikangas. *Asumuksen muodonmuutoksia. Puhtauden estetiikka ja sukupuoli modernissa arkkitehtuurissa.* (Helsinki: SKS, 2002.)

² See: Eric Klinenberg. *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal Of Living Alone.* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012.)

[3] European Commission

³ [3] European Commission. *European Social Statistics – 2013 edition. Eurostat. Theme: Population and Social Conditions.* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2013.), 65.

⁴ Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT). *Asunnot ja asuinolot* [verkkojulkaisu]. (Helsinki: Statistics Finland, 2011). Accessed: 27.10.2014. http://www.stat.fi/til/asas/2011/asas_2011_2012-05-22_tie_001_fi.html

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⁶ Lynn Jamieson, Fran Wasoff, Roona Simpson. "Solo-Living, Demographic and Family Change: The Need to Know More about Men," *University of Edinburgh. Sociological Research Online* 14, no.2 (2009):1-2. doi:10.5153/sro.188.

⁷ Devajyoti Deka. "The Living, Moving and Travel Behaviour of the Growing American Solo: Implications for Cities," *Urban Studies* 51, no. 4 (2014): 2. DOI: 10.1177/0042098013492233).

⁸ Jamieson et al, *Solo-Living, Demographic and Family Change*, 1.

⁹ Klinenberg, *Going Solo*, 4.

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¹¹ Anneli Juntto. *Suomalaisten asumistoiveet ja mahdollisuudet. Tulot ja kulutus 2007.* (Helsinki: Tilastokeskus, 2007).

¹² Martti Tuominen, Martti, Mari Vaattovaara, Matti Kortteinen. *Kaikki eivät halua asua pientalossa.* Kvartti 2/2005. (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus, 2005), 33.

¹³ Eija Hasu and Kimmo Lapintie. *Asumisen monet kulttuurit.* In Juntto, Anneli (Ed.) *Asumisen unelmat ja arki.* Suomalainen asuminen muutoksessa. (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2010.),151-176.

¹⁴ Heikki A. Loikkanen, Seppo Laakso. *Kaupunkitalous. Johdatus kaupungistumiseen, kaupunkien maankäyttöön sekä yritysten ja kotitalouksien sijoittumiseen.* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2004), 155, 254.

¹⁵ Anna Strandell. *Asukasbarometri 2010. Asukaskysely suomalaisista asuinympäristöistä.* Suomen ympäristö 31/2011. (Helsinki: Suomen ympäristökeskus, 2011), 10.

¹⁶ Timo M Kauppinen, Tuija Martelin, Katri Hannikainen-Ingman, Esa Virtala. *Yksin asuvien hyvinvointi - Mitä tällä hetkellä tiedetään?* (Työpaperi: 2014_027, THL, 2014), 11.

¹⁷ Deka. *The Living, Moving and Travel Behaviour of the Growing American Solo*, 6-7.

¹⁸ Pekka, Tea Tikkanen, Päivi Selander (Ed.). *Helsinki alueittain / Helsingfors områdesvis / Helsinki by District 2008.* (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus, 2008), 25.

¹⁹ Jamieson et al, *Solo-Living, Demographic and Family Change*, 13.

²⁰ Strandell, *Asukasbarometri*, 34.

²¹ Tuominen et al. *Kaikki eivät halua asua pientalossa*, 37.

²² Strandell, *Asukasbarometri*, 75.

²³ Maryann Wulff, Ernest Healey, Margaret Reynolds, "Why Don't Small Households Live in Small Dwellings? - Disentangling Planning Dilemma," *People and Place* 12, no. 1, 2004), 59-61.

²⁴ Strandell, *Asukasbarometri*, 76.

²⁵ Hasu and Lapintie, *Asumisen monet kulttuurit*, 151-176.

²⁶ Klinenberg, *Going Solo*, 60.

²⁷ Juntto, *Suomalaisten asumistoiveet ja mahdollisuudet*, 88.

²⁸ Wulff et al., *Why Don't Small Households Live in Small Dwellings?*, 59-61.

²⁹ Juntto, *Suomalaisten asumistoiveet ja mahdollisuudet*.

³⁰ Deka. *The Living, Moving and Travel Behaviour of the Growing American Solo*, 11.

³¹ Kauppinen et al., *Yksin asuvien hyvinvointi*, 11.

³² Juntto, *Suomalaisten asumistoiveet ja mahdollisuudet*, 141.

³³ Strandell, *Asukasbarometri*, 76.

³⁴ Juntto, *Suomalaisten asumistoiveet ja mahdollisuudet*.

³⁵ Arja Tiihonen. *Asumisväljyyks kasvaa hitaasti.* (Helsinki: Tilastokeskus, 2011). Accessed: 27.10.2014. http://www.stat.fi/tup/vl2010/art_2011-10-18_001.html

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³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Wulff et al., *Why Don't Small Households Live in Small Dwellings?*, 58.

³⁸ Juntto, *Suomalaisten asumistavoitteet ja mahdollisuudet*, 125.

³⁹ Suomen virallinen tilasto (SVT). *Tulonjakotilasto. Tulot, asuminen ja asumismenot 2012, 2. Asumiskustannusten tulo-osuudet ja tulotaso asumiskustannusten jälkeen*. (Helsinki: Tilastokeskus, 2012.)

⁴⁰ See: Tuuli Hirvilampi, Senja Laakso, Michael Lettenmeier. *Kohtuuden rajat? Yksin asuvien perusturvan saajien elintaso ja materiaalijalanjälki*. Sosiaali- ja terveysturvan tutkimuksia 132. Helsinki: Kelan tutkimusosasto, 2014.

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⁴² Strandell, *Asukasbarometri*, 34.

⁴³ Darren M. Scott and Mark W. Horner. *The role of urban form in shaping access to opportunities: an exploratory spatial data analysis* (Journal of Transport and Land Use, 1(2), 2008.), 113.

⁴⁴ Deka. *The Living, Moving and Travel Behaviour of the Growing American Solo*, 11.

⁴⁵ Jamieson, Lynn, Roona Simpson. *Living alone : globalization, identity, and belonging*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 123.

⁴⁶ Deka. *The Living, Moving and Travel Behaviour of the Growing American Solo*, 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁸ Kotakorpi et al., *KotiMIPS*, 62-64.

⁴⁹ Hirvilampi et al., *Kohtuuden rajat?*, 84-90.

⁵⁰ Anneli Juntto. *Suhdanteet ja trendit muovaavat asumisen tulevaisuutta*. Teoksessa Juntto, Anneli (Ed.). 2010. *Asumisen unelmat ja arki. Suomalainen asuminen muutoksessa*. (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2010.), 265, 285.

⁵¹ Anne Tervo. *Solo living extending towards the urban fabric*. (In Herneoja et al. (Ed.) Arkkitehtuuritutkimuksen päivät 2011. Tutkimus ja käytäntö. Proceedings of the 3rd Symposium. Oulun yliopiston arkkitehtuurin osaston julkaisuja A58, 2013), 203.

⁵² Anneli Juntto. *Suhdanteet ja trendit muovaavat asumisen tulevaisuutta*, 292.

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