

The Science of a Happy Home Industry Perspective

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Note to reader:

This document is a supplement to Resi's 2020 report 'The Science of a Happy Home' and has been developed for Built Environment and Design Professions. The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

Those interested in this perspective may want to read our briefing for policymakers in tandem - which can be found [here](#).

A Literature Scan Summary, Briefing for Policymakers Methodology, and a copy of the national data set used to develop these findings can be found [here](#).

Research Context

Key Context

The Science of a Happy Home is a project about how the design and the use of our homes influences our wellbeing. It has been spearheaded by Resi, the UK's leading architecture practice for everyday homeowners. Resi's ambition is for this body of research and insight to grow over time.

In the built environment professions, there is increasing attention on how our streets, neighbourhoods, towns and cities shape our wellbeing, but a focus behind our front doors is conspicuous in its absence. The evidence regarding how our environment affects us also needs to be contextualised within the intimate setting of our homes. Neither the industry leaders nor the design vocations are making this central enough to their work or to the education of future design professionals.

As a first step, Resi commissioned an independent¹, exploratory enquiry to highlight credible evidence on how the design and use of our homes relates to our happiness and wellbeing.

¹ The research was undertaken between August and September 2019 by the Underdog Collective - a diverse group of researchers, strategists and designers who bring rich local and international perspectives to their specialist domains of architecture, statistics, wellbeing and geography. A breakdown of contributors can be found in the main report.

The Science of a Happy Home Industry Perspective

The Science of a Happy Home synthesises and summarises existing evidence and, combined with original findings based on subjective survey data, we suggest insights to apply to the diverse practices of how we build and improve our homes.

A national survey of 4000 UK adults was administered by Populus in August 2019, building a dataset that links to established benchmarks such as the English Housing Survey, as well as providing new correlates for subjective wellbeing at home.

As part of this survey, the public were asked to describe their homes using the OCEAN framework, a personality framework widely used by psychologists. We presented people with ten home personality traits through which to describe their homes. From this we learnt that how we describe our home correlates significantly with how happy we feel at home. These findings underpin our six qualities to define a happy home.

Our Aims – Why Resi are focused on Happy Homes

To make architecture and design accessible. This isn't about aesthetics, it's about the real benefits you can get from applying a different way of thinking to your home. This challenges some of our cultural tendencies to accept things the way they are. We discuss changes big and small to broaden the conversation.

To further our understanding of the changes people can make to create happier homes. Lots of research demonstrates what we should not do to our homes, establishing causality between poor design and ill health, or negative social and environmental outcomes. By contrast, evidence on what we might aspire to is under explored: homes that make us happy.

To look behind the front door, rather than focus beyond the front door. There has been significant research to understand how our neighbourhoods, streets, towns and cities shape our wellbeing. At this scale there is more data available and interactions are easily observable. It is more difficult, but equally important, to look at the private and intimate ways we use our homes.

Research Summary

Our research suggests that we aren't paying enough attention to how the design and use of space impacts how we feel. Where we are doing so, the scope is too narrow - we are often focused on avoiding negative outcomes rather than pro-actively pursuing positive ones.

We define home happiness through an understanding of wellbeing - our personal resources and external conditions. Wellbeing is both individual and collective (meaning it is influenced by relationships), therefore to understand wellbeing we need to talk about households. Yet - too often - an understanding of our social interactions is distant or absent from the processes for how homes are designed and lived in.

As a nation, we have a language for our houses. We talk about the number of bedrooms we have or the style of layout we prefer. We don't have an equivalent language for our homes. We need a language to describe what we do in those physical spaces and how this is shaped by our relationships and the interactions that take place at home.

Our findings centre on six qualities to focus our attention on how to create happy homes by putting greater emphasis on the residents and the social interactions that take place in them. These six qualities give us a focus around which we can, for the first time, have a national conversation about how our homes perform for our wellbeing.

The six qualities of the Happy Home

SECURE provides shelter, safety and stability

NOURISHING provides healthy conditions

ADAPTABLE can meet changing needs

RELAXED makes us feel at home

CONNECTED provides space to interact

MIRRORS reflect who we are

The full report can be downloaded [here](#).

Research Perspectives

Building a nation of happy homes will require focus from across the design, built environment and wider consumer industries. In the sections below we outline the implications of our findings for these sectors.

The Built Environment Sector

As the public increasingly pay attention to wellbeing within the home, organisations in the built environment sector will have a commercial imperative to adapt and respond. To be successful, this will require closer collaboration across disciplines and industries.

Our advice at the corporate level is to:

Embed well-being into corporate strategy

Consider how Research and Development (R&D) and Customer Experience teams might support your organisation to deliver higher wellbeing in the home as an outcome.

Assess your organisation's products and/or services by how relevant they are to helping people achieve one or all of the six key qualities of the happy home.

Map how the decisions about what you design and build are affected by the wider supply chain that you draw on to make your business possible, and the value chain you feed into, which ends with people ultimately living in their homes.

Baseline spatial and social quality

To set realistic targets and timeframes for improving well-being in the homes, consider how to embed and enhance Building Performance Evaluation (BPE) methods so as to evaluate both the spatial and social performance of new, old and renovated homes. Extended physical performance evaluation, for example through Materials Testing, is also key. Fionn Stevenson's '[Housing Fit For Purpose](#)' provides a detailed overview and framework for BPE.

This will require a challenging discussion about how legal accountabilities fall between the occupier, the client and the range of professionals, firms and regulatory bodies involved in the housing sector.

Consider wellbeing cost of Design Decisions

At all scales, but particularly large scales, design decisions are commercial decisions made under time and budget pressures. These decisions ought to have the differential wellbeing impact built into

them. This could be achieved by an upfront analysis of where – all things being equal – you may be best saving or investing up front.

For example, our evidence suggests strongly that balconies are a feature that should not be compromised upon for example and that open plan (commercially attractive) need to be designed in a way that means they are flexible for multiple uses in the future.

When preparing Building Contracts and/or Health and Safety Packages (which act as a brief for the contractor), greater information relating to future resident needs could be specified to provide additional information in relation to design decisions. A clearer understanding between contractor and client may reduce the risk of delays and additional cost.

The Design Professions

For designers to put into practice the evidence of what makes a happy home, it makes more sense to think of good design as a process rather than an outcome.

This means asking more questions of and ultimately being in a more equal dialogue with home occupants. It also requires a sensitivity to the relations that influence how we use and experience our homes. Designers should proactively work to understand households. Ideally this happens through conversation, but on a larger scale alternative methods may be needed. This does not mean that professionals cannot apply their deep industry expertise and knowledge, they will just do this in a more informed way.

Our advice to the design professions is to:

Embed 'Design as a Process'

Consider the ways you are engaging with existing or future residents to understand how the six qualities take form in the context of the homes you are working on.

The design process should accommodate feedback loops which assess emerging design outcomes against the values and priorities expressed by the known or likely end users, including their emotional experience of the home.

Ideally this happens through conversation, but on a larger scale alternative methods may be needed. We have designed simple questions that can be used to encourage better conversations:

1. How do you and other household members best relax? What do you like to do alone?
2. How often do you host people at home? What do you like to do when you host?
3. What about your home feels most special to you? How often are you reminded of that?
4. Have you ever been to someone's home and felt it was 'just like them'? What about their home made you think that?

At a larger scale, the ethnographic methods used by DWELL and The University of Sheffield are a best practice reference point.

Evaluate for spatial and social quality

Pre and Post occupancy evaluation (POE) must consider the social dimension of the home. Where applicable, post occupancy evaluation could take place in the snagging period. In many cases, a longer-term evaluation plan will be appropriate.

Even where professionals are already engaging with their clients' needs as part of the design process, this research points to the need for greater measurement of clients' wellbeing as part of this journey. We advocate for measuring wellbeing before the process begins to create a baseline, as well as throughout and into the future to benchmark wellbeing changes.

Educate the next generation

We need to integrate a well-being perspective into design education, to develop skills for socially informed design that promotes well-being. This should be a priority for educational and professional institutions as well as design firms where much of the applied learning takes place every day.

The London School of Architecture's Inter Practice Year and Birmingham City School of Architecture's Design For Future Living courses are pushing boundaries by looking at alternative ways to combine modern practice with education.

Start by identifying what skills and capability gaps you have within your organisation in terms of designing for well-being outcomes.