

Sunday
March 21, 2021

Public Comment

Just How "Racist" Is Single-Family Zoning?

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Ever since non-Black Berkeley City Councilmembers led the way in contending that single-family (R-1) zoning is inherently "racist" and "exclusionary," I vowed to do a little research on Americans' actual housing preferences by ethnic group. I clicked through a collection of Google search hits, and found two pertinent articles. These provide some interesting data, excerpted below. Here are the highlights:

- Purchasers of all four ethnicities overwhelmingly chose a detached, single-family house, with preferences ranging from 76% to 82%. (NAR report just below, based on 2019-20 purchases/sales).
- The slight variation in those percentages is directly proportional to the (discouragingly familiar) variation in groups' median household incomes. Since these are purchase data, it's logical to assume that *preferences* for detached single-family homes were similar across all groups, while the small variations in behavior reflects purchasers' settling for what they could afford.
- Actual 2013 *preference* data, from actual *and* prospective buyers (NAHB 2014 report further below), gets even more interesting. Desired home floor area was inversely proportional to whiteness: White buyers wanted a median of 2,197 sq. ft.; Asian buyers wanted 2,280 sq. ft.; Hispanic buyers wanted 2,347 sq. ft.; and Black buyers wanted 2,664 sq. ft.
- In the same 2013 survey's "most unwanted" dwelling features, "High density community" ranked #3 worst among white respondents, #7 among Asians, #3 among Hispanics, and #4 among Black respondents. (The only consistently less-desirable housing features were "Elevator" and "Golf course community," which ranked #1 and #2 worst across all groups.)

These data validate my anecdotal evidence from talking and interacting with people from all backgrounds: People overwhelmingly aspire to live in a detached dwelling, of varying size corresponding to their household size and budget. So that they don't have to (hypothetically) hear their white neighbors blaring Michael Bubl  albums, PBS cooking shows, or HGTV aspirational reno shows through adjoining walls. And to give themselves, and their kids or pets, a chance to enjoy a yard, with some grass and a tree or two.

If Berkeley elected officials really wanted to meaningfully improve access to housing, they'd be looking for ways to improve the affordability of the housing types people really want. Not recklessly hollowing out the city's zoning, to promote automatic approval of more eyesores like the ginormous "[Buy Right house](#)."

Such monster structures, built out to property lines, threaten basic public goods like sunlight access and views for everyone. Preventing such abusive tragedies of the commons is why zoning laws were first developed. As Joni warned all of us in 1970, amid a previous building boom: Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone.

Also: Please hold off on encouraging any "golf course community" housing, especially with elevators.

[2021 Snapshot of Race and Home Buying in America](#)

(National Association of Realtors)

Based on NAR's *Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers* 2020 data, an annual survey of home buyers and sellers from July 2019 to June 2020.

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Home Characteristics **Purchased** by Race/Ethnicity



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| | Black/African American | Asian/Pacific Islander | Hispanic/Latino White/Caucasian | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|----------|
| Detached single family | 76% | 82% | 79% | 82% |
| Median household income | \$84,200 | \$112,500 | \$88,300 | \$97,000 |

What Home Buyers Really Want: Ethnic Preferences

National Association of Home Builders, April 1, 2014

(Based on a 2013 nationwide survey of recent and prospective home buyers.)

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Differences in Housing **Preferences** Due to Race/Ethnicity

| | Black/African American | Asian/Pacific Islander | Hispanic/Latino White/Caucasian | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------|
| Floor area desired (square feet) | 2,664 | 2,280 | 2,347 | 2,197 |

(White buyers want a median of 2,197 square feet, about 14 percent more than they have in their current home; African-Americans want 2,664 square feet, 49 percent more; Hispanics want 2,347, 32 percent more; and Asians want 2,280 square feet of finished space in their next home, about 25 percent more than they currently have.)

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Most "Unwanted" Features Across Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds

| | Black/African American | Asian/Pacific Islander | Hispanic/Latino White/Caucasian | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------|
| Elevator | #1 | #1 | #1 | #1 |
| Golf course community | #2 | #2 | #2 | #2 |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |
| High density community | #4 | #7 | #3 | #3 |