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## **An Endeavor to Establish the Subject of Housing Imagination based on Critical Systems Thinking**

JOSEPH KIM-KEUNG HO  
Independent Trainer  
Hong Kong, China

### **Abstract:**

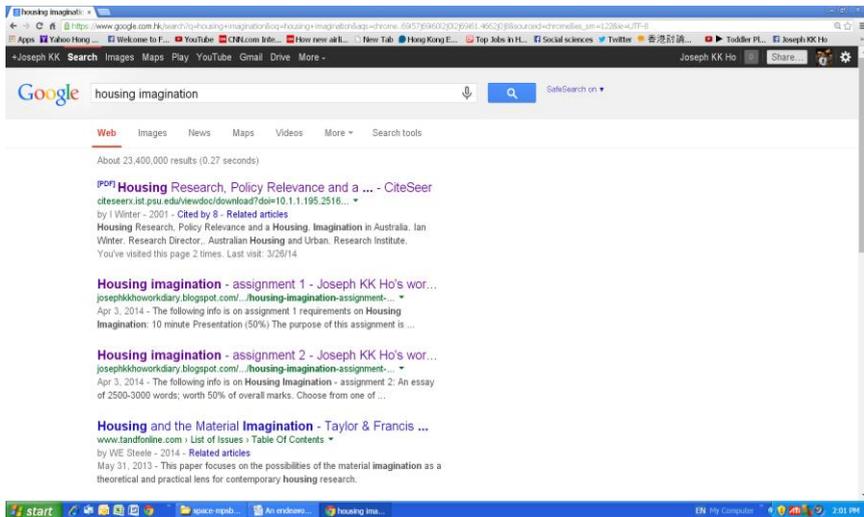
*As a newly conceived subject, Housing Imagination (HI) needs to be examined and clarified in terms of its theoretical root, its scope and methods of study, its source of relevant literature and its overall intellectual landscape. Due to the recent involvement by the writer to teach this subject of HI, the writer makes an endeavor to do just that. Furthermore, this paper also develops a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework, as informed by Critical Systems Thinking, to organize the ideas on HI and relate them to various strands of systems thinking.*

**Key words:** Housing Imagination; Geographical Imagination; Human Geography; Critical Systems Thinking; the Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework

### **Introduction**

This paper examines a new subject called Housing Imagination (HI). Its novelty is reflected via a Google search by the writer with the words “Housing Imagination”. What the writer found is shown in Exhibit 1 below:

**Exhibit 1: Google search result on “housing imagination” on April 17, 2014.**



The first item is indeed an article that briefly describes the subject of Housing Imagination (HI). The next two are the writer’s recently posted teaching materials on Housing Imagination. As the writer is aware of, the BA (Hon) Housing Studies of the Leeds Metropolitan University, UK, has recently established a subject of Housing Imaginations. [Note that, in this paper, the subject is called Housing Imagination, not Housing Imaginations as it is called in the Leeds Metropolitan University’s programme.] If one tries to search for a book on HI in Amazon.com, one will not be able to find a specific one on Housing Imagination. Moreover, there is no academic journal devoted to HI. All in all, the subject of Housing Imagination is newly established, and needs much intellectual effort to clarify its nature, methods and scope of study. The motivation to write this paper comes from the writer’s recent involvement to teach this subject of HI in the near future.

**The theoretical foundations of Housing Imagination**

Housing Imagination mainly draws on the two subjects of

Geographical Imagination (GI) and Housing Studies (HS) (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2014). The subject of Geographical Imagination itself is informed by the subject of Sociological Imagination (Winter and Seeling, 2001). In this regard, HI can be considered as **an intellectual field of study in Social Sciences that makes use of the Geographical Imagination lenses to examine topics in Housing Studies**. Naturally, the subject of HI involves much cross-fertilization/overlapping of ideas between the subjects of GI and HS. For Winter and Seeling (2001), “A housing imagination is at one level an intellectual process, but it is also about outcomes – about linking the ideas developed through theory to policy development to effect social change. The purpose of a housing imagination should be to use theoretically informed housing research to inform policy development, so that government interventions may be more effective at providing lasting housing solutions.” Their discussion offers an explicit view on the purpose of the subject of Housing Imagination that is heavily practice-/ policy-oriented.

To uncover the theoretical foundation of Housing Imagination, there is a need to clarify what the Geographical Imagination (GI) lenses is all about. **Geographical Imagination (GI), as a subject, studies all kinds of geographical imaginations (gi’s)**. (Likewise, HI, as a subject, studies all kinds of housing imaginations (hi’s).) Giesecking (2007) describes geographical imagination (gi) as a “popular catchphrase in the geographical literature with multiple, often unclear definitions and framings” but also states that the concept was “developed from C.Wright Mill’s (1961) “sociological imagination”, a conceptual tool for use by individuals to compare their personal biographies to larger social structures within their specific historical era”. Moreover, Giesecking explained that “Maps, mapping processes, and images of space are literal and figurative physical representations of the geographical imagination that

portray..... both individual and shared spatial minds' eyes". In the same vein, Gilley (2010) stated that **the geographical imagination (gi) is a way of thinking about the world and considering the relative importance of places and the relationships between "our" places and "other" places.** The term encompasses a variety of meanings, including individual images and socially produced discourses about culture, spaces, and differences.." GI is covered by a broader subject of Human Geography (HG), which, in turn, is a sub-field of the geography discipline. Specifically, HG is "a branch of the social sciences that studies the world, its people, communities, and cultures with an emphasis on relations of and across space and place" (Wikipedia, 2014a). From Aitken and Valentine (2006), we learn that HG covers a broad range of approaches, such as Positivistic geographies, Feminist geographies, Postmodern geographies, Poststructuralist theories, Marxism, Realism and Humanism. These approaches make up an array of theoretical perspectives that inform HG, and consequently also enlighten GI and HI.

The HI definition offered by the writer also includes the subject of HS. Adopting the description from the academic journal of *Housing Studies* (Taylor & Francis), HS explores "a range of academic and policy concerns" such as (Housing Studies, 2014):

- "linkages between housing and other areas of social and economic policy"
- "the role of housing in everyday life and in gender, class and age relationships"
- "the economics of housing expenditure and housing finance"
- "international comparisons and developments" on housing
- "issues of sustainability and housing development"
- "demographic and social trends and the changing role of housing tenures"
- "theoretical and conceptual frameworks for housing

studies.”

In preparing writer’s course materials on Housing Imagination, the writer selected a number of topics from Balchin and Rhoden (2002) as typical ones from Housing Studies for examination with the Geographical Imagination lenses. They are: gender, elderly, ethnic minority, social cohesion, homelessness, social exclusion, housing regeneration, and community support. Besides, informed by (i) the work of Aitken and Valentine (2006) in Human Geography and (ii) Cultural Geography (another sub-field of Human Geography), the writer also includes the topics of class and culture in the course materials of HI. Exhibit 2 provides three pieces of news which can be used for review in HI study:

**Exhibit 2: Three pieces of news that are related to HI study**

*News 1* (re: Wong, S. 2012. “A tale of two cities trying to integrate” August 15. South China Morning Post)

“A young Guangzhou couple trying to buy a flat in Foshan's Wanke Wonderland housing complex soon found out that integration between the two cities goes only so far. 'If you don't have tax proof or social insurance registered in Foshan, forget about buying houses here,' a real estate agent told the couple as he turned them away. The ban on non-locals buying property in Foshan was introduced last March, a year after the Co-operation Agreement on GuangzhouFoshan Integration was signed by the two city governments...”

*News 2* (re: Carney, J. 2013. “Hong Kongers looking for a better lifestyle flock to Shengzhen” June 2. South China Morning Post)

“Hongkongers are looking for second homes across the border for affordable luxury. As friction continues between sections of Hong Kong's indigenous population - if there is such a thing - and the mainlanders they see as taking over their patch, there's another, less well-known migratory pattern taking place. It's in the opposite direction in search of what you might call "perfect otherness". Growing numbers of Hongkongers are putting their eggs in two baskets by securing a holiday or second home on the mainland ...”

*News 3* (re: Gross, D. 2014. "Google Glass targeted as symbol by anti-tech crowd" April 15. CNN)

"Google's high-profile entry into the world of wearable tech, may help launch a revolution if it's released later this year as expected. But test models already on the street have begun playing a more unlikely role -- as symbols in a simmering fight over Silicon Valley's impact on the city of San Francisco.... Russell said..."My love for gadgets makes me look and sound like one of the people whom residents of the city have come to feel oppressed by," he wrote. "The individual who smashed my Google Glass on Friday -- because of political beliefs or a personal impact that has been made by the tech industry -- felt that it was appropriate to destroy my personal property in protest against what I seemed to stand for..".... In recent months, tensions have run high in San Francisco .... Protesters complain that an influx of highly paid tech workers is driving up rents, forcing out longtime residents and robbing the city of its famously eccentric character...."

In the process of investigating the subject of Housing Imagination (HI), the writer identifies a number of academic journals with articles that are directly relevant for HI research and study. These are:

- *AREA* (Wiley)
- *City & Community* (Wiley)
- *City & Society* (Wiley)
- *Cultural Geographies* (SAGE)
- *Housing Studies* (Taylor & Francis)
- *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Wiley)
- *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* (Kluwer Academic Publishers)
- *Progress in Human Geography* (SAGE)
- *Space and Culture* (SAGE)
- *Theory, Culture & Society* (SAGE)
- *Urban Studies* (SAGE)

Besides these relevant academic journals, there are others in sociology, discourse analysis, gender studies, cultural studies, feminist theory, etc., that can offer useful insights to the subject of HI. A few core concepts are shared by the various HI topics; these are the notions of (i) space, (ii) place, (iii) home, (iv) house and (v) household. Illustrative works related to them are as follows:

- a. *Related to space and place*: Harvey (1990), Cresswell (2009), Elden (2009), Kitchin, (2009), Raffaetà and Duff (2013), Merriman (2004), Williams (2008), Larkin (2010).
- b. *Related to home, house and household*: Dohmen (2004), Parsell (2012), de Jonge *et al.* (2011), Cox (2013), Easthope (2004), Mallett (2004).

Overall, the literature on HI is quite scattered among a number of academic sources. Besides, some of the readings on GI, e.g. Gregory (1994), are intellectually sophisticated, thus not quite comprehensible to Housing Professionals who are not well-versed in these academically sophisticated works in Social Sciences and writing style.

### **A typical HI exercise**

Having described the intellectual root, the theoretical foundation of HI and its scope study, it is useful to offer an example of a typical HI exercise. (Note: this exercise has adopted some of the ideas from the HI assignment of the BA (Hon) Housing Studies of the Leeds Metropolitan University, UK.). For such an illustrative exercise, the following tasks should be done:

*Task 1*: Select an artifact, e.g. a photo, a newspaper article or a book, etc., and bring out the ‘housing imaginaries’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Imaginary* (sociology) is “the set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols common to a particular social group and the corresponding society” (Wikipedia, 2014b). *Housing imaginaries* are Housing Studies-related

or ‘housing imaginations (hi’s)<sup>2</sup> from the artifact.

*Task 2:* Discuss the various Housing Studies-related gi’s (i.e. hi’s) as associated to this artifact, based on the GI lenses.

*Task 3:* Examine these Housing Studies-related gi’s<sup>3</sup> (hi’s) in terms of place, space, and the meanings of home.

*Task 4:* Examine a few “socially produced discourses” as related to your discussion in Tasks 2 and 3.

*Task 5:* Come up with some Housing Studies-related viewpoints and findings that have actionable value for certain stakeholders, out of your study outcomes from Tasks 1 to 4.

For task 1, let’s consider a photo (re: Exhibit 3) taken from the writer’s study room in his house apartment as an illustration.

**Exhibit 3: A photo on the writer’s study room in his house apartment**



The photo indicates a specific meaning of home to the writer as a home-place that offers comfort, security, as well as a private environment for the writer, as a freelance trainer, to achieve

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imaginaries. They can also be considered as Housing-related cognitive images held by a particular group of people.

<sup>2</sup> A housing imagination (hi) is a Housing Studies-related *gi*.

<sup>3</sup> A *geographical imagination* (gi) is “a way of thinking about the world and considering the relative importance of places and the relationships between “our” places and “other” places” (Gilley, 2010).

reasonable work-life balance via his everyday habitual routines. The purchase of the house by the writer more than ten years ago can be described as a narrative which reveals the personal and external socio-economic situations, including the housing market condition, around that time in Hong Kong. Such a narrative offers some evaluative viewpoints from the writer on (i) what people with similar profiles of the writer could do as related to their housing arrangements as well as (ii) what the Hong Kong government's housing policy could be and should be in order to take care of the social group that the writer belongs to, e.g. the middle-class. There have always been socially produced discourses on housing affordability by various social classes, among various socially produced discourses as related to HS. The whole exercise, in this example with Exhibit 3, amounts to a phenomenological approach (Seamon, 2000) to study the writer's home-place, based on an HI perspective. As Seamon (2000) makes clear: "The ultimate aim of phenomenological research...is not idiosyncratic descriptions of the phenomenon... Rather, the aim is to use these descriptions as a groundstone from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark the essential core of the phenomenon.". It is not the intention of the writer to provide a sample of HI assignment report for readers; thus the discussion is brief here.

### **Making sense of the subject of HI from a Critical Systems Thinking perspective**

Given the diverse theoretical perspectives and affiliated research approaches/ theories considered in Human Geography, which can be employed in GI and, subsequently on HI, it is useful to organize the intellectual landscape of HI to make the subject more comprehensible to people who are interested in studying HI. This is done with Table 1.

**Table 1: A synthesis of concepts and theories in HI/ GI based on Critical Systems Thinking**

<i>Strands of systems thinking (Jackson, 1991)</i>	<b>Hard Systems Thinking</b>	<b>Soft Systems Thinking</b>	<b>Emancipatory Systems Thinking</b>
<i>Types of human cognitive interests from Habermas (Aber, 2014)</i>	Technical interests ["Orientation toward technical control" (Aber, 2014)]	Practical interests [Orientation "toward mutual understanding in the conduct of life" (Aber, 2014)]	Emancipatory interests [Orientation "toward emancipation from seemingly 'natural' constraint" (Aber, 2014)]
<i>Related Human Geography approaches</i>	Positivistic Geographies and Spatial Science (Kitchin, 2006)	Humanism (Entrikin and Tepple, 2006)	Feminist geography (Dixon and Jones, 2006) Marxism (Henderson and Sheppard, 2006)
<i>Related views on space and place</i>	"Location refers to an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations" (Creswell, 2009) "The conception of order was... at the very center of spatial science.." (Gregory, 1994) "Descartes... what defines space ... was its extension – or stretch – in three dimensions: length, breadth, and depth.." (Elden, 2009)	"Sense of place refers to the more nebulous meanings associated with a place" (Creswell, 2009) "Duncan argues that landscape "is one of the central elements in a cultural system... it acts as a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Gregory, 1994) "..place is the more experienced, lived form of our encounter with our environment..." (Elden, 2009)	"...critical human geographers ...explore how places and their associated meanings have been implicated in the process of exclusion" (Creswell, 2009)
<i>Related views on home</i>	"home = house + x, that is, by separating the idea	"To the humanistic geographers home is a particularly	"...the most obdurate features of our current gender

	<p>of home into, on the one hand, the physical structure of the house... and on the other, the 'x factor'... the x factor represents the social, psychological, and cultural values which a physical structure acquires through the use as a home" (Fox, 2002)</p>	<p>ideal kind of place – the location where meanings and attachments are most intense" (Creswell, 2009)</p>	<p>system, such as the household division of labor, the sex segregation of jobs, or gender differences in status and authority are overdetermined in the gender system..." (Ridgeway, 2004)</p>
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Table 1 groups the various HI/HG notions and approaches into three systems perspectives, making up a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework<sup>4</sup> (Ho, 1995):

*Perspective 1:* The Hard Systems Thinking perspective “exemplifies the main features of systemic modernism and rests “upon a belief in an orderly world in which history is unilinear and the future is susceptible to forecast” (Jackson, 1991). This perspective endorses the technical interest of mankind (Aber, 2014; Jackson, 1991).

*Perspective 2:* The Soft Systems Thinking perspective focuses on “securing and expanding the possibility of mutual understanding among individuals in social systems” and facilitating “a social process in which the essential elements of the status quo are reproduced..” (Jackson, 1991). This perspective supports the practical interest of mankind (Aber, 2014; Jackson 1991).

*Perspective 3:* The Emancipatory Systems Thinking perspective pays attention to the question of “what we ought to do” rather than “how to do things” (Jackson, 1991) and to the intellectual effort of “reflecting upon the presuppositions that

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<sup>4</sup> An *MPSB Framework* is a knowledge structure of management discipline that is generated as a result of the review of the management discipline based on Critical Systems Thinking (Ho, 2013). It is the first time that an *MPSB Framework* is applied in Housing Studies, a non-business management subject.

enter into both the search for knowledge and rational action” (Jackson, 1991). This perspective embraces the emancipatory interest of mankind (Aber, 2014; Jackson, 1991).

Bearing in mind the huge literature in Human Geography, the notions and approaches inserted in the cells of Table 1 are mainly illustrative, not comprehensive. In Table 1, the various HI/HG notions and approaches cover: (a) HG approaches, (b) views on space and place, and (c) views on home. These notions and approaches are shown with referencing so that further details of these notions and approaches can be traced back to their academic sources. Given the huge and theoretically rich literature in Human Geography and Housing Studies, it is quite a simplification to portray ideas from these disciplines in terms of a simple framework as is done in Table 1. Besides, there are certain HG theories that cannot be clearly located into specific cells of Table 1, e.g. actor-network theory (Bosco, 2006) and postmodern geographies (Clarke, 2006). Table 1 is based on Critical Systems Thinking<sup>5</sup> as it supports “complementarism at the theoretical level” and “complementarism at the level of methodology” (Jackson, 1991). This essentially means that it endorses also pluralism (Midgley, 1992). In terms of the MPSB Framework of Table 1, the HI/GI lenses is anchored mainly in the Emancipatory Systems Thinking. This is reflected in Harvey (1990)’s work on GI, which also influences the theoretical orientation of HI: “each social formation constructs objective conceptions of space and time sufficient unto its own needs and purposes of material and social reproduction and organizes its material practices in accordance with those concepts” and “the class, gender, cultural, religious and political differentiation in conceptions of time and space frequently become arenas of social conflict. New

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<sup>5</sup> *Critical Systems Thinking* is a systems approach “for putting all the different systems methodologies, methods and models to work, in a coherent way, according to their strengths and weaknesses, and the social conditions prevailing, in the service of a general project of improving complex organizational and societal systems” (Jackson, 2000).

definitions of what is the correct time and space for everything as well as of the proper objective qualities of space and time can arise out of such struggles”. The concerns reflected in Harvey’s writing are clearly affiliated with the Emancipatory Systems Thinking perspective. Table 1, being a Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Framework (Ho, 1995; 2013), endorses the following viewpoints:

- a. HI, as a subject of practice, should be able to serve various human cognitive interests as explained by Habermas (Aber, 2014).
- b. Specific HI theories and research methods should be clearly anchored into an explicit theoretical perspective. This is called “perspective anchoring” in the MPSB Research (Ho, 2013).
- c. Based on Critical Systems Thinking (CST) (Jackson, 1991) and Pluralism (Midgley, 1992), it is a good idea to be able to consider multiple theoretical perspectives when examining a housing phenomenon or a housing concern. This will promote effective problem-solving in housing issues and housing policy formulation when HI study is conducted based on CST. For instance, the three pieces of news on housing issues in Exhibit 2 indicate situations of soft complexity, which should be handled with an approach that endorses critical systems thinking and creative holism (Jackson, 2003).

It is possible to apply the MPSB Framework (re: Table 1), together with other key MPSB concepts, e.g. perspective anchoring, a migration of perspective and a perspective switch (Ho, 2013), etc., to examine a specific HI theory or approach. This research topic is not dealt with here. As a teaching tool to introduce the subject of HI to students at the Undergraduate Degree level, Table 1 should be able to facilitate students to more quickly grasp the overall intellectual landscape of HI. In due course, as they become more knowledgeable with HI, these

students will develop a more sophisticated intellectual view on HI. At that stage, they may feel that the MPSB Framework of Table 1 is relatively crude. This does not mean they will be interested in constructing a more sophisticated conceptual table or diagram of their own on HI. Maybe, some of them will find it useful to construct various forms of diagram, e.g. mindmaps or multiple cause diagrams (Open University, 2014), to serve different purposes of learning.

## **Conclusions**

Due to the newness of the HI subject, it is useful to (a) clarify its theoretical foundation, (b) describe the scope and methods of study, (c) identify the sources of relevant HI literature and (d) portray in an organized way the intellectual landscape of the subject. In this regard, the paper is a pioneering, albeit brief, exercise. It is expected that more academic and professional works will be carried out on HI by the HG and HS academicians and professionals, leading to more publications on this HI subject. Naturally, the views of these HI academicians and professionals may differ from that offered in this paper.

Finally, given the rich literature of Human Geography (HG), Human Studies (HS) and Critical Systems Thinking, any cross-fertilization of ideas between the HI field and the Critical Systems Thinking field is laudable and should be encouraged. So far, this kind of cross-fertilization exercise has been rarely done.

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