

## Sheep-Shape:

### A Tragedy of the Commons Reading of the Problem of Affordable Housing

Darla Lindberg and Michael Rios

Pennsylvania State University

#### Abstract

“Affordable” may unwittingly promote the cultural and professional expectation that architects be creative with minimums and approach the conceptual paradigms of “good design” as managing what is left over. “Affordable housing” as an acceptable standard might possibly be the dire consequence of simply not approaching “ethical housing” – *for all of humankind* – as a finite market resource governed by fierce competition and riddled with conflicting self-interests, i.e., political, economic, and individual. This paper will explore ethical housing against the backdrop of an intellectual tool not frequently accessed by traditional architectural investigations, that of Game Theory and the principle of cooperation (managing shared material and non-material finite resources) and competition (striving to leverage our own self-interest). Of particular interest will be the opportunity to shift the value of housing as a commodity (exchange value) to housing as an ethical responsibility (relational value) in a time = value paradigm.

Garrett Hardin in his breakthrough *Science* article, “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968) explored the degradation of any limited resource (portrayed as the shared pasture; two herders each grazing two sheep) whenever many individuals use scarce resources in common. Viewed as managing what’s left over, affordable housing quite possibly enables the dilemma of allowing the depletion of a finite resource. Economies, ecologies and other non-linear human systems have all devised two opposing methods of regulating the Commons, that of various versions of the Leviathan (centralized control by external governance) and privatization (avoids the bureaucracy of management but imposes individual maintenance, monitoring and sanctioning to enforce division). Hardin would advocate a third solution to managing any Commons to include working from the presumption that the worst anyone will do is operate from their own optimal strategy – to look out for ourselves, or “defection”. The primary lesson learned from effective self-regulating systems is how to program in the mechanism individuals may use to extricate themselves (defect) from commons dilemmas. Aligning self-interest (ownership) with a concept of ethical housing we encourage the production of a commons resource as a restorative act in a value relation.

Considering example projects such as the “grow home” (finish rooms as you can), design for disassembly (adaptability through disassembly and reassembly), and other equity/value inducing approaches (built to last, sustainable community), this paper presents ethical housing design such that people manage their self-interest through time – staying, adapting, increasing equity and building community. From a macroscopic point of view the development of political, social, or cultural systems of value are not only the sum of single intentions as much as the collective result of non-linear interactions of self-interest. Effectively framing this self-interest is an essential part of any successful paradigm for constructing systems of cooperation within sustainable ecologies of finite socio-cultural resources of the future. Such paradigmatic thinking would shift away from affordable house as an inferior commodity, toward an architecture of ethical housing that builds relational value.