



Original research article

# Transitions on the home front: A story of sustainable living beyond eco-efficiency

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## ABSTRACT

The environmental impact associated with modern ways of living is widely recognized and has been increasingly problematized. A prevailing discourse in sustainable housing tends to focus on building performance, along with compelling stories of “green” lifestyles and attractive urban housing concepts, while avoiding storylines that suggest more profound changes in society and everyday life. This paper argues that in order to address the resource-intensity of contemporary ways of living, we need to engage with perspectives of transition that go beyond technical eco-efficient solutions. Other narratives are therefore explored, based in empirical insights from home visits and in-depth interviews with people seeking less impactful and more self-sufficient ways of living in the context of an affluent society as Sweden. The paper looks at how alternative narratives are manifested in (and through) the home as a starting point for transitions to a low-impact society. Highlighting aspects of agency, situated in the everyday and in the existing built fabric, these “home front transitioners” provide another story – one that questions mainstream assumptions of a pre-defined green lifestyle, and contributes to a more diversified perspective on sustainable living.

## 1. Introduction

With a growing sense of urgency, the environmental implications associated with modern society pose significant challenges to political visions for sustainable development. This includes often-highlighted aspects of unsustainable forms and levels of production and consumption, yet in essence revolves around the resource and energy-intensity of contemporary ways of life as such. Interconnected issues of resource depletion, climate change and ensuring an equitable development within planetary boundaries are complex and “wicked”, in that they pose a challenge for planning and policy that goes beyond any single scientific discipline, and to which there are no optimal or definite solutions [1]. However, a prevailing ecological modernization discourse in sustainable building and planning has tended to take a more narrow approach to sustainability, relying on technical solutions rather than social dimensions [2], in creating compelling stories of “green” lifestyles, attractive urban housing concepts, and informed consumer choices promoting an efficient use of resources [3,4].

How we organize societal functions, facilitate everyday practices and social interactions – that is, how we build societies – is inherently linked to both social and environment benefits as well as detriments. The energy, material and land use implied in developing and main-

taining the built environment is significant, and greenhouse gas emissions from buildings are expected to rise, related to increasing wealth, changes in lifestyle and urbanization [5]. This paper argues that transitions to less resource-intensive ways of living, particularly in high-consuming affluent societies, will need to engage in ways of telling different stories of low-impact futures. Stories that challenge dominant techno-optimistic notions of “sustainable housing” or “sustainable living”, and instead place a focus on changing practices and interpretations of home, as a node of everyday life, at the crucible of low-impact transitions.

There is an increasing emphasis on social science perspectives in research on energy use, and the need to explore integrated strategies is more and more commonly recognized [6,7]. Yet such perspectives have previously been rather underexplored in predominantly techno-focused research on energy and buildings [8]. Calls for a narrative turn in energy research however acknowledges the role and responsibility of researchers in telling stories that embrace complexity in a range of human relations and endeavors [9]. This, it is here argued, must include critically examining the adequacy of eco-efficient technical solutions alone in addressing the resource use implied in everyday life, seeking a diversity in narratives and imaginaries.

The research presented here takes its point of departure in exploring

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narratives surrounding low-impact ways of living that shape and are shaped by notions of what the sustainable *home* is and could be. This offers a contrast to the dominant market-led story of eco-efficiency, and provides a basis for discussing potentially more radical reductions in resource use, while at the same time problematizing different understandings of for example the demand of energy, materials and land related to residential development. The paper presents empirical insights from home visits and in-depth interviews with seven households seeking less impactful and more resilient ways of living, in the context of a small municipality in western Sweden. The study places a focus on how interviewees perceive notions of sustainability and transitions towards a low-impact society, and how the various practices engaged in are manifested in (and through) conceptualizations and operationalizations of home.

The next section outlines contemporary interpretations of sustainability in housing and retells the dominant storyline of sustainable living as manifested in new eco-efficient urban developments. A framework of low-impact narratives and movements that are in different ways challenging this mainstream story is then presented, providing another framing for the perspectives explored. A methodological section describes the performative, narrative research approach and study design. The section thereafter presents the results from the empirical study, revolving around understandings of sustainability, and narratives regarding the practices engaged in – primarily related to self-sufficiency and voluntary simplicity. Emerging storylines are then discussed, examining how they contrast mainstream representations but also the potential conflicts that arise. The paper concludes that these “home front transitioners” can be understood as engaging in and/or envisioning profound changes in the everyday and to a large extent within the existing housing stock, in a semi-rural context. This contributes to shaping another narrative, questioning the notion of an urban green lifestyle package that one can buy into, and offering a more diversified perspective on sustainable living.

## 2. A mainstream narrative of efficiency and consumption

The conceptualization of environment and nature, and the discourse surrounding environmental issues has changed dramatically during the last century [10]. While early environmentalist concerns were based in an ecocentric and “deep green” perspective [11], later discourses under the umbrella of sustainable development have taken a more anthropocentric turn. Representations of environmental issues are entangled with debates on societal development, where different discourses are closely connected to political power as well as material realities [10].

The mainstreaming of sustainable development in various sectors and policy areas during the last decades, particularly in the context of affluent nations such as Sweden, has been dominated by an ecological modernization discourse [12,13], outlining a belief in the compatibility of economic growth and ecological preservation in the transformation of industrial society [14,15]. In a perspective of internalizing environmental care within an eco-modern framework, climate change action is for example represented as endogenous to market strategies through the monetarization of mitigation activities [16]. In the context of Sweden, an eco-modern policy focus, particularly with regards to urban development – as exemplified in the formulation and government funding of the Swedish Trade Council platform “SymbioCity” and the now concluded Delegation for Sustainable Cities – has emphasized public-private cooperation in the development of Swedish clean-tech solutions, best planning practices, and entire urban districts as an export commodity [17,18]. This can further be seen in the alignment of political and industry ambitions in showcasing new eco-profiled urban districts throughout Scandinavia, merging urban attractiveness and technological innovation to make it easier to “live sustainably” as part of a “green” urban lifestyle [3].

Narratives of sustainability in relation to housing and the role of residents have also shifted over the last decades [12,19]. The deep

ecological movement in the 1970s and 1980s built upon self-organized grassroots projects, often manifested in for example participatory building processes, while the current framing of “green” housing has come to emphasize the resident primarily as a consumer [20]. This has further coincided with changing conditions in a de-regulated marketization of housing in Sweden since the 1990s [21]. In this context households are assumed to make informed purchasing and residential choices that promote more efficient resource use, driven by market mechanisms of associating consumption with an estimated price of the environmental harms caused [22]. In line with this perspective, a measure used in assessing residents’ preferences and interest in less environmentally harmful solutions is thus their willingness to pay for “green” products and services.

In terms of the built environment, this techno-economic discourse is generally translated into eco-efficient buildings or eco-districts [4,23]. Eco-efficiency can be seen as encompassing two aspects Xue [24]: First, it relates to measures to improve the material and energy efficiency of buildings, primarily with regards to “sustainable building technologies” (including renewable energy solutions, “smart” technology and improvements in building performance). Secondly, it is linked to strategies of “urban densification”, meaning that new construction is primarily located to former brown field sites or already appropriated urban land in connection to existing infrastructure (with the idea that a compact mixed urban environment will among other things reduce car use). The two aspects are commonly formed around an integrated infrastructure, providing efficiency in scale (for example district heating or waste management) and offering “finished” systems that can be plugged into [25].

These types of strategies and technologies shape the physical premises for everyday life, but also the narrative of sustainable living as part of what Hobson calls our “changing relationships with domestic materialities” [26; p. 318]. It reproduces certain understandings of sustainability, including the notion that technological advances, enabling incremental adjustments, can achieve both a reduced environmental impact and enable a maintained (or even increased) standard of living. The framing of housing as a commodity or as a speculative investment is moreover contingent on upholding mortgage structures and financial systems. Beyond the real estate value, however, this speculative development also links to narratives and imageries of home and consumer lifestyles as expressing identity [27–29], where consumption of residential space, along with material standards and practices of for example home decorating shape assumptions of an attractive home. In a story of consumption and efficiency, the home thus remains a place for self-actualization, where the narrative of a more *sustainable* way of living is centered on shifting the type of consumption to more efficient products and promoting an *urban* lifestyle.

## 3. Narratives of transitions to low-impact ways of living

While the above outlined mainstream narrative is prevalent in policy and sustainable building and planning discourse, a growing body of both research and activism questions the underlying reliance on measures of efficiency and technological innovation, and whether this will be adequate for meeting challenges of keeping within planetary boundaries [30,31]. A main critique of the ecological modernization approach is that a decoupling of continued economic growth from further environmental pressure is unattainable [32]. Such critical perspectives indicate that more radical approaches are needed, calling for a rethinking of progress that implies larger changes in how we organize society, the economy and everyday life [31,33].

Several studies have shown how sustainable living tends to be translated to symbolic actions, such as changing light bulbs, buying organic food and choosing green products [34–36]. Problematizing discourses of sustainable consumption as representations of individual lifestyle choices, Hobson [37] points towards the need for a larger

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