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BEYOND WALLS: EXPLORING SUBJECTIVE HOUSING SATISFACTION THROUGH THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SELF-HELP HOUSING RESIDENTS IN BENIN CITY

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of residents in Benin City's self-help housing settlements, examining how subjective meanings and daily practices shape housing satisfaction. Through in-depth interviews with 10 purposively selected residents and observational field notes, the research employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to uncover five key themes: housing as autonomy and identity, cultural anchors of satisfaction, contextual definitions of adequacy, place-ballets of daily routines, and community embeddedness. The findings challenge conventional housing assessment metrics by demonstrating how residents derive satisfaction from incremental construction processes, cultural continuity, and social networks rather than formal infrastructure standards. Grounded in David Seamon's place-ballet theory and Kim Dovey's concept of home as paradox, the study argues for housing policies that recognize the phenomenological dimensions of dwelling. The research contributes to urban studies literature by centering resident experiences in informal settlement discourse and suggests new directions for culturally attuned housing policy in Nigeria's rapidly urbanizing context.

Keywords: self-help housing, phenomenology, place-ballets, housing satisfaction, urban informality, Benin City

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Introduction

In Nigeria's rapidly urbanizing landscape, self-help housing has emerged as a dominant strategy for meeting shelter needs, particularly among low- and middle-income groups excluded from formal housing markets (Adedire, 2017; Nwachukwu,2023). As cities like Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, and Benin City sprawl outward in often uncoordinated patterns, urban expansion is increasingly driven not by government-led planning but by individual efforts to build incrementally, using personal resources, informal labour networks, and community ties (Makinde,2014). This phenomenon, known as urban sprawl, has reshaped the edges of Nigerian cities into vast, low-density peri-urban zones marked by informal housing clusters, limited infrastructure, and evolving neighbourhood identities. Against this backdrop, understanding housing satisfaction within self-help settlements becomes critical, not only for evaluating the effectiveness of grassroots housing production but also for informing policies that align with lived realities. Housing satisfaction transcends physical adequacy; it is a deeply experiential and subjective construct, shaped by residents' emotional, cultural, and practical relationships with their homes (Makinde, 2014; Saleem & Alchalabi, 2025). Elements like thermal comfort, privacy, and neighborhood cohesion often weigh more heavily than objective housing standards (Mohit & Nazyddah, 2011; Gocer et al., 2023).

As Nigerian cities struggle with poor housing supply, the self-help model fills the gap left by weak public housing delivery and an overstretched formal housing sector (Isiwele et al., 2024). Civil servants, artisans, traders, and other working-class individuals often depend on cooperative savings schemes and informal construction methods to build incrementally over several years, starting with basic shelter and adding rooms or amenities as finances allow. This process affords a high degree of control over design, layout, and materials, factors that directly influence residents' satisfaction by allowing them to align the home with their daily routines, family dynamics, and cultural values (Ahadzie & Amoa-Mensah, 2010).

Phenomenology, both as a philosophical lens and methodological approach, emphasizes the primacy of lived experience in understanding how individuals relate to their world. Rooted in the foundational works of Edmund Husserl and later developed by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology foregrounds the subjective dimensions of meaning-making (Viik,2016). It seeks to uncover how people perceive, interpret, and emotionally inhabit their environments, thus offering a deeply human-centered way of exploring social realities.

In the realm of housing research, this approach invites a shift from conventional assessments of dwellings (often focused on structural soundness, size, and amenities) to more nuanced inquiries into how individuals experience and ascribe meaning to their

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living spaces. This is particularly pertinent in self-help housing contexts, where residents often construct their homes incrementally and without adherence to formal planning or architectural standards. In such cases, what matters most is not compliance with technical norms, but the emotional resonance and experiential quality of the home. Phenomenology, therefore, enables scholars to explore how residents feel about their homes, how they inhabit and relate to them, rather than simply what their homes consist of (Seamon, 2012; Dovey, 2010).

From this standpoint, housing satisfaction transcends mere physical adequacy. While traditional models of assessment tend to prioritize quantifiable indicators such as room size, building materials, and access to infrastructure, phenomenological perspectives suggest that true satisfaction lies in the quality of everyday life the home enables. It is not merely about what the house provides, but how it feels to dwell within it; whether it nurtures personal rhythms, supports social interactions, and aligns with cultural values. In this view, housing satisfaction emerges as a lived, relational experience, influenced by the interplay between the physical environment and the subjective interpretations of the occupants (Amerigo & Aragones, 1997).

Several experiential dimensions are central to this understanding. The sense of privacy and control, for example, shapes feelings of autonomy and psychological comfort (Kearns & Parkes, 2003). Emotional attachment and the formation of personal or familial identity within the space also enhance a sense of belonging (Ukoha & Beamish, 1997). Familiarity and cultural congruence (how well a home reflects local norms, traditions, or lifestyles) contribute to a sense of "fit" between place and person (Dovey, 2010). Moreover, comfort and security are vital, not just in a physical sense but also in terms of mental and emotional stability (Mouratidis, 2020). These aspects, although difficult to quantify, are deeply embedded in the lived experience and significantly shape how satisfied residents feel with their housing.

Empirical studies further underscore the value of phenomenology in understanding housing realities, particularly in self-help and low-income settlements. For instance, Fakere's (2017) research on public housing in Akure, Nigeria, revealed that residents who had participated in designing their homes reported higher levels of satisfaction, even in the absence of modern conveniences. This finding lends empirical support to Turner's (1976) seminal argument that user control over the housing process enhances both the functional and symbolic value of a dwelling.

Similarly, Uji and Okechukwu (2001), in their study of self-built housing in Jos, Nigeria, found that residents derived greater satisfaction from homes they had personalized. This personalization of space (embedding one's identity and preferences into the physical environment) emerged as a powerful contributor to a positive housing experience.

Seamon (2012) conceptualized this phenomenon through the lens of "place-ballets," referring to the patterned, habitual routines that individuals develop within familiar settings. When homes support these routines, they foster a sense of harmony between daily life and spatial setting, thereby deepening satisfaction.

Mouratidis (2020) further established a strong link between psychological well-being and housing satisfaction, particularly in contexts where the home environment contributes to a feeling of safety and control. Even in economically constrained settings, when homes support emotional security and affirm individual agency, they become spaces of contentment and well-being. Taken together, these empirical insights reinforce the central phenomenological claim: that the meaning and value of housing are rooted in lived experience. Especially in self-help housing scenarios, where formal standards may fall short, it is the subjective quality of life; how people feel, act, and belong within their homes, that ultimately determines housing satisfaction.

Indeed, a phenomenological lens offers a more holistic understanding of housing satisfaction in self-help contexts. It reveals that what matters most to residents is not just what a house has, but how it supports their lifestyles, reflects their values, and nurtures a sense of place. In these terms, satisfaction is less about architectural perfection and more about alignment with lived realities, a crucial insight for both urban planners and policymakers. In sum, urban sprawl in Nigeria is not simply a problem of expansion but a reflection of unmet housing needs and adaptive responses by marginalized populations(Oyalowo,2022). Self-help housing thrives in this context, offering autonomy and cultural resonance even amid infrastructural deficiencies. This study, therefore, explores the subjective dimensions of housing satisfaction among residents of self-built homes in urban fringe areas; probing how space, identity, and experience converge to shape perceptions of shelter in Nigeria's sprawling cities.

Statement of the Problem

Conventional housing studies have often evaluated satisfaction through standardized metrics such as dwelling size, material quality, access to infrastructure, and compliance with planning regulations. While these indicators offer useful insights into the physical adequacy of housing, they tend to overlook the lived experiences of residents; how they actually perceive, inhabit, and assign meaning to their homes. This objectivist approach assumes a universal standard for satisfaction, yet emerging evidence suggests that what constitutes a "satisfactory" home is not static, but highly subjective and context-dependent. In many self-help housing settings, particularly in low-income or informally developed urban areas, residents frequently express high levels of satisfaction despite living in what might be classified by technical standards as "inadequate" housing. This

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paradox raises critical questions: Why do residents report feeling satisfied with homes that lack formal amenities? What dimensions of experience are being captured, (or missed) by conventional evaluation frameworks? These questions underscore a crucial gap in current housing research: the need to understand housing satisfaction not as a fixed outcome of physical attributes, but as a relational and dynamic experience rooted in personal, social, cultural, and emotional dimensions. Satisfaction, therefore, is not a universal construct. What is valued in a home (privacy, cultural familiarity, sense of control, emotional attachment, or security) varies significantly across different socio-economic, cultural, and geographic contexts. A house built incrementally through personal effort may carry a sense of pride and identity that outweighs its lack of modern facilities. Conversely, a formally built apartment with all technical amenities may still fail to support a resident's cultural practices, daily routines, or sense of belonging.

Given these complexities, a phenomenological approach is both timely and justified. Phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals experience and interpret their housing environments, prioritizing subjective meanings over objective measurements. It enables researchers to move beyond surface-level indicators to uncover the emotional and symbolic dimensions of housing that shape satisfaction. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology brings to light the often-invisible factors that contribute to how people define, engage with, and derive value from their homes, especially in contexts where conventional housing standards do not fully apply. Thus, this study adopts a phenomenological lens to interrogate housing satisfaction as a lived, contextually grounded phenomenon. In doing so, it aims to produce insights that are not only academically enriching but also relevant to policy makers, urban planners, and housing providers seeking to understand and improve housing outcomes from the perspective of those who live in them.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the lived experiences and subjective meanings residents attach to self-help housing in low-income urban contexts.
2. To understand how emotional, cultural, social, and contextual factors shape residents' perceptions of housing satisfaction and adequacy.

Justification for the Study

Rapid urbanization in Nigeria has led to a surge in self-help housing, where low- and middle-income residents construct their own homes incrementally, often without formal planning or state support. While prior research has assessed such housing through quantitative metrics (e.g., infrastructure access, building materials), few studies have

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explored how residents themselves perceive and derive meaning from their living environments. This gap is critical because standardized evaluations often overlook the emotional, cultural, and experiential dimensions that define housing satisfaction in informal settlements. Traditional housing assessments prioritize objective criteria (Sinha et al., 2017), yet residents in Benin City report high satisfaction despite "substandard" conditions. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience, uncovers why this disparity exists; revealing values like autonomy, cultural identity, and social ties that formal metrics miss. Understanding subjective satisfaction can inform inclusive urban policies. For instance, if residents value incremental construction (Turner, 1976), policies could support secure land tenure or community-driven infrastructure rather than imposing rigid formal housing models. By integrating Seamon's place-ballet and Dovey's home as paradox, the study advances a human-centered framework for housing research in the Global South, where informal solutions dominate.

Theoretical Review: Understanding Housing Satisfaction through a Phenomenological Lens

Housing satisfaction has traditionally been assessed through objective indicators such as the size of dwellings, material quality, and access to amenities and infrastructure(Sinha et al,2017). These metrics, while useful in policy and planning, often fall short of capturing the complexity of how individuals and families experience and evaluate their living environments. The assumption that certain physical standards universally equate to satisfaction overlooks the deeply personal, emotional, and context-dependent nature of what it means to be "satisfied" with one's home. To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological framework, supported by insights from environmental psychology and place attachment theory, to reconceptualize housing satisfaction as a lived and subjective experience.

Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical tradition established by Edmund Husserl and expanded by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, prioritizes individual consciousness and the ways in which people give meaning to their lived world (Macann,2005) . Rather than focusing on empirical measurement or detached observation, phenomenology seeks to understand how people perceive, feel, and interpret their environment. At its core, phenomenology invites researchers to suspend preconceived assumptions, what Husserl calls epoché, and instead attend to the meanings that emerge from individuals' own descriptions of their experiences. In the context of housing, this means looking beyond structural adequacy to explore how residents emotionally and symbolically engage with their homes (Butler,2016).

From this standpoint, housing satisfaction is not simply the result of meeting a checklist of features. Instead, it is shaped by how well a dwelling supports the resident's sense of comfort, identity, familiarity, control, and security. For instance, a home may be technically inadequate by conventional standards (lacking piped water, formal building permits, or standard materials) but may nonetheless be experienced as deeply satisfactory by its inhabitants. This satisfaction may stem from factors such as personal involvement in its design or construction, alignment with cultural practices, or the ability to maintain family routines within the space.

The relevance of phenomenology to housing research has been underscored by scholars such as David Seamon, who introduced the concept of "place-ballets", the habitual movements and routines people develop within their homes and neighborhoods (Seamon,2023). These patterns contribute to a sense of environmental fit and continuity. When housing supports these lived rhythms, it becomes more than shelter; it becomes home. Similarly, Kim Dovey emphasizes the symbolic and cultural dimensions of housing, arguing that meaning-making is central to how residents relate to their built environment. These views underscore the phenomenological insight that meaning arises in use, homes are lived spaces, not just physical containers (Dovey,2005).

Complementing this is the perspective from environmental psychology, particularly the work of Amerigo and Aragones (1997), who conceptualize housing satisfaction as a multidimensional construct rooted in the interaction between people and their environment. Their work highlights the importance of cognitive and affective appraisals, suggesting that satisfaction is derived from both how a space functions and how it makes people feel. This aligns with phenomenology's attention to perception and emotion, bridging experiential insight with behavioral science. Closely related is place attachment theory, which further enriches this conceptualization. Studies by Ukoha and Beamish (1997) and Kearns and Parkes (2003) have demonstrated that satisfaction is deeply influenced by the degree to which residents feel a sense of belonging, emotional security, and control over their living space. These attachments are often rooted in cultural identity, personal history, and community networks. In self-help housing, where residents often actively participate in the building or customization of their homes, these emotional bonds may be especially strong. The act of building or modifying one's own home can produce a profound sense of ownership and identity, contributing to satisfaction regardless of external evaluation metrics. This study adopts phenomenology as the central theoretical lens, arguing that housing satisfaction is a subjective, contextually embedded, and meaning-driven experience. This approach enables a deeper engagement with residents' narratives and perceptions, uncovering dimensions of satisfaction that standard survey instruments might miss. By integrating insights from environmental

psychology and place attachment theory, the study further situates lived experience within broader environmental and social contexts. This theoretical foundation is especially well-suited to understanding self-help housing, where the meanings and values associated with "home" often diverge from formal architectural norms but are no less real or important to those who live there.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how residents of self-help housing in Benin City experience and interpret their living environments. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this study because it seeks to uncover the subjective meanings and lived experiences associated with housing satisfaction, focusing on how residents perceive, feel, and relate to their homes beyond measurable physical attributes.

Study Area

The research is situated in Benin City, the capital of Edo State in southern Nigeria. Benin City has experienced significant urban growth, accompanied by housing challenges that have led many low- and middle-income residents to adopt self-help housing strategies. These are informal or semi-formal housing solutions where residents construct or significantly modify their dwellings without complete reliance on formal planning or professional builders. Areas such as Ugbowo, Oghede, Ekenwan, Egor, and Upper Sakponba have notable concentrations of self-help housing and will be the primary focus of the study.

Population of the Study

The population comprises adult residents (18 years and older) living in self-help housing units within selected neighborhoods in Benin City. These individuals have either participated in the construction of their homes or have lived in customized, informally developed housing over time.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who can richly describe their housing experiences. Participants will be selected based on:

- Length of residency (minimum of 2 years),
- Direct involvement in house construction or modification,
- Willingness to participate in in-depth interviews.

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A sample of 15–20 participants was recruited. In phenomenological studies, the focus is on depth, not breadth, and this sample size is considered sufficient to reach data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge.

In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, allowing for flexibility while maintaining focus on core themes such as:

- Perceptions of comfort, security, and privacy;
- Emotional attachment to the home;
- Cultural relevance of housing design;
- Daily routines and spatial use;
- Challenges and satisfiers within the home environment.

An interview guide was developed, drawing from the theoretical framework and refined after pilot testing with two participants. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, conducted in English, Pidgin, or local languages (e.g., Edo), depending on participants' preference. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Observational Field Notes

The researcher also took observational notes on the housing structure, surroundings, and signs of customization or adaptation. These notes helped contextualize the interview data and support thick description in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The steps include:

1. Reading and re-reading transcripts to become immersed in the data.
2. Initial noting: Making exploratory comments about language, emotions, and meaning.
3. Developing emergent themes from each transcript.
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes.
5. Looking for patterns across all cases to construct a composite understanding of residents' lived experiences.

The NVivo software was used to manage and code transcripts, ensuring a systematic and organized analytic process.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, the following measures were taken; Participants were given the opportunity to review and verify their transcripts or summaries, there was triangulation using both interviews and observations to deepen understanding. The researcher maintained an audit trail were detailed documentation of all research decisions, processes, and materials. Lastly, there was reflexivity as the researcher kept a reflexive journal to examine personal biases and assumptions throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data, Cultural sensitivity was observed, especially when engaging with participants in local communities.

Participant Profile Description

The participants in this study comprised ten residents of self-help housing communities in Benin City, Nigeria, selected purposively to reflect a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, life stages, and lived experiences. The group included both male and female participants, aged between 38 and 68 years, all of whom had resided in their current self-built or self-modified homes for a minimum of six years. Among the participants were retirees such as *Mr. Godwin*, a 66-year-old former civil servant, and *Mr. Musa*, a 68-year-old retired schoolteacher, both of whom had built their homes gradually after retirement using savings and cooperative loans. These older participants emphasized the sense of dignity and accomplishment their homes gave them, viewing self-help housing as a testament to years of labor. Middle-aged participants like *Mr. Emmanuel*, a 47-year-old welder, and *Mr. Festus*, a 59-year-old timber dealer, shared similar sentiments. They spoke of building their homes in stages, often with limited income, drawing on family labor and informal support networks. Their housing stories were intertwined with their professional identities and a strong sense of place rooted in Benin City's urban sprawl. Female participants also contributed rich insights. *Mrs. Janet*, a 54-year-old market trader, and *Mrs. Esther*, a 50-year-old seamstress, discussed the emotional investments they had made in customizing their homes to reflect their families' needs. Both had experienced flooding and made structural adaptations—like raising foundations or constructing shaded verandas—to improve livability. *Mrs. Roseline*, a 45-year-old primary school teacher, described how she incorporated culturally resonant features such as compound

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space to support multigenerational living. Younger participants, like *Mrs. Joy*, a 38-year-old food vendor, and *Mr. Lucky*, a 53-year-old motorcycle mechanic, represented households still in the process of expanding or completing their homes. Despite financial challenges, they expressed satisfaction grounded in the control and ownership self-help housing afforded them—something they considered superior to renting. All participants had lived in their current homes for at least six years, with some having resided there for two decades. Their experiences reflected a common narrative: the home was not simply a shelter, but a product of personal effort, cultural adaptation, and community resilience. Across the board, residents viewed their housing not in terms of formal standards, but through the lens of emotional meaning, autonomy, and social connection.

Table 1: Showing the profile of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Length of Residency	Housing Involvement
Mr. Godwin	Male	66	Retired Civil Servant	15 years	Built house incrementally after retirement
Mrs. Janet	Female	54	Market Trader	12 years	Designed and expanded family house with husband
Mr. Musa	Male	68	Retired Schoolteacher	20 years	Constructed home with pension and cooperative loan
Mr. Emmanuel	Male	47	Welder	10 years	Modified inherited home; active in street repairs
Mr. Festus	Male	59	Trader (Timber dealer)	17 years	Built with personal savings; values open compound
Mrs. Esther	Female	50	Seamstress	9 years	Self-constructed home; raised structure after flood
Mr. Thomas	Male	62	Carpenter	13 years	Built in phases; added shaded veranda for cooling
Mrs. Roseline	Female	45	Primary School Teacher	11 years	Designed space for family compound living
Mr. Lucky	Male	53	Motorcycle Mechanic	8 years	Built incrementally; constructed outdoor kitchen
Mrs. Joy	Female	38	Food Vendor	6 years	Occupies partially completed structure; no title

Findings from the interview

The findings from qualitative interviews with residents of self-help housing in Benin City. The analysis, rooted in a phenomenological framework, is organized under five major

themes that emerged from the lived experiences shared by participants. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

Theme 1: Housing as a Symbol of Autonomy and Identity

Participants consistently described their homes as achievements that represent independence, dignity, and personal history. The process of gradually constructing their homes, despite economic constraints, was a source of pride.

> "Even though my house is not fine like those ones in GRA, I'm proud of it because it is my effort. I didn't wait for government. I started small and built it up," said Mr. Godwin, a retired civil servant.

The sense of ownership and active involvement in housing creation contributed more to satisfaction than technical adequacy or appearance. A prominent thread across participant narratives was the liberating experience of escaping landlord control and rental stress. For many, the move into self-help housing symbolized not just a transition in space, but in status; from tenant to owner, from dependency to independence. This change brought emotional relief, freedom of decision-making, and a deeper sense of dignity.

> *"I don't have to beg landlord for anything again. Even though my house is not fine, it is mine. I built it little by little from my salary,"* said *Mr. Godwin*, a retired civil servant.

Participants viewed self-help housing not merely as shelter, but as freedom from rules, restrictions, and anxieties often associated with tenancy; such as fear of eviction, arbitrary rent hikes, or limited use of space. In many cases, this freedom was described as more valuable than formal housing quality or infrastructural availability.

> *"Even if rain is leaking small, I am free. Nobody will come and knock or tell me to move out,"* explained *Mrs. Janet*, who recalled the tension of living under landlords in her earlier years.

This theme underscores that housing satisfaction is not only about presence (what the house has) but absence (what it frees you from) namely, surveillance, instability, and dependence on others. It also reflects the broader socio-economic struggle of the urban poor to reclaim control over their lives, starting with the very ground they sleep on.

Theme 2: Emotional and Cultural Anchors of Satisfaction

Homes provided not only physical shelter but also emotional comfort and cultural continuity. Participants frequently highlighted traditional features like open compounds and shaded verandas that enabled familiar social practices.

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> "I planted grasses around the house because that's how my father's house was. It gives me peace, especially when I sit there in the evening," shared Mr. Festus, a trader.

These elements fostered emotional attachment and were central to how residents assessed the livability of their homes.

Theme 3: Contextual Realities Shape Definitions of Adequacy

Many participants acknowledged that their homes lacked modern amenities but emphasized that their understanding of "adequacy" was shaped by realistic expectations based on income levels and local conditions.

> "I know this is not a standard house by government rules, but I sleep well at night. I don't pay rent. I have peace of mind," said Mr. Musa, a retired schoolteacher.

This theme reflects the flexibility with which residents redefine adequacy to suit their socio-economic realities.

Theme 4: The Role of Daily Routines and "Place-Ballets"

Housing that supported participants' daily routines and rhythms of life contributed significantly to satisfaction. Spaces that facilitated communal sitting, food preparation, and child supervision were especially valued.

> "The small veranda is where we gather in the evening to gist. Even if the house inside is hot, that place is our relief," explained Mrs. Janet, a market woman.

When homes disrupted these routines (due to poor drainage or limited space) residents expressed dissatisfaction, even if the structure itself was intact.

Theme 5: Social Embeddedness and Community Relationships

Participants noted that a strong sense of neighborhood solidarity and mutual assistance added to their satisfaction, particularly in the face of challenges such as flooding.

> "Our road is bad, yes, but when rain comes, we all come out to help. That makes me feel safe here. These are my people," noted Mr. Emmanuel, a welder.

Social connectedness helped mitigate the stress of infrastructural shortcomings and reinforced feelings of belonging.

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Discussion of findings

This study set out with two key objectives: to explore the lived experiences and subjective meanings residents attach to self-help housing and to understand how emotional, cultural, and contextual factors shape their perceptions of housing satisfaction. The findings reveal a profound interplay between personal agency, cultural identity, and the rhythms of daily life, concepts that resonate deeply with phenomenological theories of place and dwelling. At the heart of residents' satisfaction lies the symbolic value of autonomy. For participants like Mr. Godwin, a retired civil servant, the incremental process of building a home "little by little from my salary" was not just a practical endeavor but a narrative of self-reliance and dignity. This echoes John Turner's (1976) seminal argument that user control over housing processes enhances both functional and emotional value. When residents shape their own environments, they imbue them with personal significance, transforming mere shelter into a testament of perseverance. David Seamon's concept of "place-ballets"; the habitual movements and routines that anchor people to their spaces, further illuminates this dynamic. In Benin City, the slow, self-directed construction of homes mirrors Seamon's idea of dwelling as an active, ongoing performance, where each addition or modification reinforces a sense of ownership and belonging.

Cultural identity emerged as another cornerstone of housing satisfaction. Traditional features like open compounds and shaded verandas were not merely architectural choices but vessels of memory and social practice. Mr. Festus, a timber trader, spoke of planting grasses around his home to replicate his father's house, a gesture that tied his present dwelling to a lineage of familial and cultural continuity. Kim Dovey (2010) describes this phenomenon as the "paradox of home", where physical imperfections are eclipsed by emotional and symbolic resonance. Similarly, Ukoha and Beamish (1997) found that housing designs reflecting local traditions foster deeper attachment, a pattern evident in Benin City's preference for communal spaces that host evening gatherings and multigenerational interactions. Yet, the study also uncovers a pragmatic recalibration of what constitutes "adequate" housing. Residents like Mr. Musa, a retired teacher, acknowledged their homes' divergence from formal standards but emphasized intangible comforts: "I sleep well at night. I don't pay rent. I have peace of mind." This aligns with Amerigo and Aragones' (1997) assertion that satisfaction is a subjective negotiation between aspirations and realities. In contexts of scarcity, the absence of eviction threats or landlord intrusions can outweigh material deficiencies, a theme also noted by Mohit and Nazyddah (2011) in low-income Malaysian communities. The rhythm of daily life further crystallized the meaning of home. Mrs. Janet, a market trader, cherished her veranda as a stage for evening storytelling ("where we gather to gist"), illustrating

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Seamon's place-ballet in action. These repetitive, embodied routines; cooking in outdoor kitchens, supervising children in courtyards, turn abstract space into lived place. Mouratidis (2020) links such spatial harmony to psychological well-being, particularly in informal settlements where adaptability is key. The study's participants, by molding their homes to fit daily rituals, exemplify this principle. Finally, the social fabric of the neighborhood emerged as a critical satisfier. Faced with shared challenges like flooding, residents like Mr. Emmanuel, a welder, drew strength from collective action: "We all come out to help." This communal resilience mirrors Kearns and Parkes' (2003) findings on the role of neighborly support in mitigating housing inadequacies. In Benin City, the interdependence of residents transforms individual dwellings into nodes of a larger, cohesive habitat, a concept central to Seamon's broader framework of "lived emplacement."

Implications and Reflections

These findings challenge rigid, policy-centric definitions of housing adequacy. Instead, they advocate for a phenomenological understanding of home one that prioritizes resident agency, cultural continuity, and the quiet choreography of daily life. Future research could expand this lens by examining generational shifts (e.g., younger residents' mobility aspirations) or evaluating policy interventions that formalize self-help practices without eroding their organic strengths. In sum, this study reveals that the essence of housing satisfaction lies not in bricks and mortar, but in the stories, routines, and relationships they shelter—a truth as enduring as the concept of home itself.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study illuminates how residents of Benin City's self-help housing derive profound satisfaction from their homes despite infrastructural deficiencies. Through the lenses of place-ballets, cultural identity, and lived experience, we see that housing adequacy is fundamentally relational rather than absolute. The findings challenge conventional housing assessment paradigms by demonstrating how autonomy, incremental construction, and community bonds transform physical structures into meaningful homes. These insights reveal a critical disconnect between formal housing standards and the actual values of urban residents in Nigeria's informal settlements.

Recommendations for Further Research

Intergenerational Studies: Investigate housing perceptions across age groups, particularly comparing older residents with younger generations who may have different housing aspirations and mobility patterns.

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Comparative Urban Analysis: Expand research to other Nigerian cities (e.g., Kano, Port Harcourt) to examine regional variations in self-help housing experiences and cultural meanings of home.

Longitudinal Approaches: Track how housing satisfaction evolves over time as residents complete construction phases or face new urban challenges like climate change impacts.

Policy Impact Studies: Evaluate existing housing interventions to determine how well they accommodate the phenomenological dimensions of housing satisfaction identified in this study.

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