Philanthropy Briefs

BUILDINGS

Building sufficiency

a series by Active Philanthropy

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Sufficiency is a sustainability strategy that questions the need of today's extensive resource consumption. Unlike efficiency that seeks to optimise resource use, sufficiency aims to lower demand for resources at the source and to establish alternatives to consumption. In the building sector, sufficiency calls for a change in how buildings are planned, built, and utilised.[1] A sufficiency approach to the built environment prioritises occupants' well-being while curtailing energy and material demands over the entire lifecycle of buildings.

3 FAST FACTS

6 %

The average drop in carbon emissions per head for every person added to an existing household.[2]

15 million

The number of new homes built in Europe every year, even though more than half of the existing stock is either unoccupied (16 %) or under-occupied (35 %).[3]

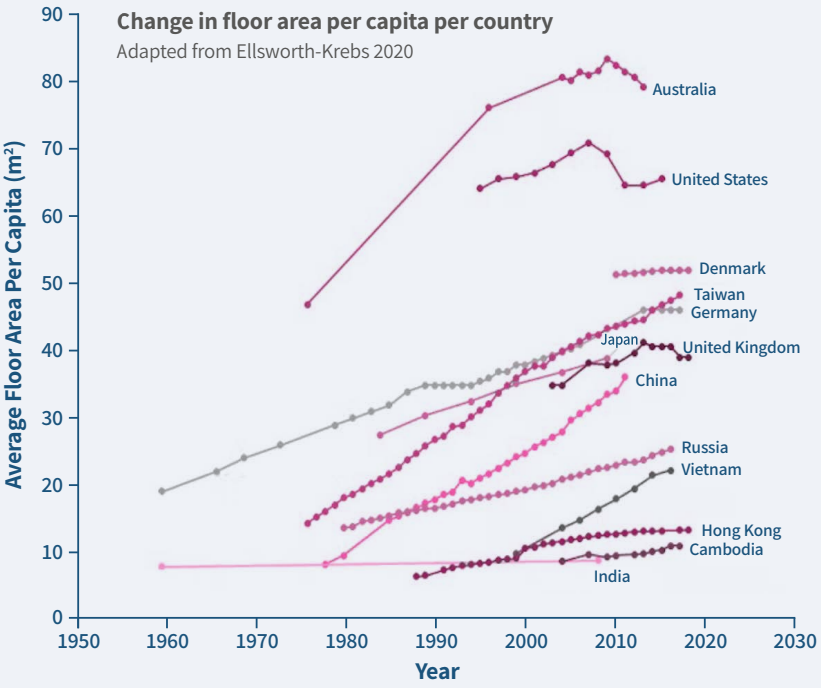
3x

The factor by which the average American house has grown in size since the 1950s, while the number of people per household has shrunk by 25 %.[4,5]

WHY IS BUILDING SUFFICIENCY IMPORTANT FOR OUR CLIMATE?

Buildings consume extensive amounts of resources. This is caused by the energy consumed during construction, operation (e.g. heating, cooling, and electricity), and eventual demolition of buildings. Another important factor is the extraction and manufacturing of building materials like concrete or steel.

Despite some efficiency gains in these areas, buildings remain a major contributor to climate change, responsible for over a third of global emissions.[6]



An often unrecognised reason for buildings' continuously high resource intensity is the increase in floor area per capita in developed nations.[7] Root causes of this trajectory are shrinking household sizes, growing numbers of households and a trend towards living in bigger homes.[3] This pattern amplifies the demand for new buildings and, hence, for emission-intensive construction materials.[8] Moreover, smaller households use more energy per capita because appliances like refrigerators are not shared, and heating needs are higher.[3]

[1] EEB 2021, [2] Ellsworth-Krebs 2020, [3] EEB 2023, [4] Peters 2020, [5] Statista 2023, [6] SBTi 2022, [7] Saheb 2022, [8] Ness 2023

A sufficiency approach to these challenges encompasses the following principles that can be applied across the whole lifecycle of buildings:[9]

- Preserving, renewing and extending existing buildings before constructing new ones.
- Optimising how space in buildings is used to reduce per capita space requirements.
- Ensuring new buildings are adaptable to changing needs and conditions.
- Minimising technical complexity to streamline the operation, maintenance and remodelling of buildings.
- Encouraging behaviour change regarding overconsumptions of energy for heating or electricity.

WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO

Optimising use of existing buildings: By embracing space-optimisation, funders can, even with relatively small budgets, help to alleviate the persistent demand for new houses. One option is to support research and case development for concepts like co-living, home swapping and housing cooperatives, showcasing their feasibility and co-benefits. Another one is to fund advocacy for updated local regulation in support of space-optimised housing. Zurich's rules for public housing, which limit the number of rooms to one more than the number of occupants, provide a successful example.

Redefining the narrative of 'bigger is better': Funders have the power to reframe the dominant discourse. Through public campaigns, they can highlight the advantages of compact, well-designed homes over larger ones, including such benefits as lower costs and more disposable income, closer community ties, and greater proximity to amenities such as health care and public transport. This can be complemented by investing in research and development of innovative architectural designs that increase the appeal of living in smaller spaces and encourage a cultural shift towards greater acceptance of a smaller per capita floor area.

There are many different strategies to engage in climate philanthropy. See our Spotlight on Climate Funding Strategies to learn more.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN FOCUSING ON BUILDING SUFFICIENCY

- **Avoiding a narrative of renunciation:** While sufficiency often carries a message of sacrifice, funders are in a unique position to emphasise its importance in achieving equity. Sufficiency sets an upper limit based on the remaining carbon budget and ensures an equitable distribution of resources, while maintaining a decent standard of living for all. This approach prioritises needs over wants, striving to meet societal needs with minimal resource use. Proactively communicating this perspective can help funders to garner vital public support.
- **Geographical priorities:** In regions of the Global North, where there is an extensive stock of buildings alongside high vacancy rates, it is imperative to avoid new construction by making existing buildings "work harder"[10]. This includes occupying empty buildings, adapting them to new needs, and fostering sharing initiatives. Conversely, in the Global South, where the demand for new, decent housing is huge, planning for new buildings needs to optimise space and incorporate adaptable, flexible designs from the start to meet evolving needs and circumstances. This approach not only increases resource productivity but also yields cost-effective investments and improved resilience.
- **Reflecting on your position as a funder:** Sufficiency approaches implicitly question prevailing paradigms of growth and consumption. Especially in the building sector, which has contributed significantly to the wealth creation that underpins philanthropy, funders are challenged to reflect their historical role in creating property markets that prioritise shareholder yield over social needs and planetary boundaries. By embracing this self-reflection, philanthropy can truly act as an honest broker for a more equitable and sustainable building sector.

Looking for funding opportunities? Explore our Climate Solutions Hub!

Link to bibliography

[9] Zimmermann et al. 2023, [10] Ness 2022