



## Family Housing Pathways: An Introduction to the Study of Housing in Poland in Biographical and Historical Perspectives

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***Abstract:** The article describes the approach and method of Family Housing Pathways. This process of gathering and presenting data makes it possible to include the extended family's housing resources, the management of these resources, and the transformations of households within a family. Twenty-eight Family Housing Pathways were gathered and collected as part of an assignment given to students as part of an undergraduate course on housing problems. The exercise shed light on recurring themes in the transformation of the housing system in Poland that influence individual and family management of housing resources. Even a sample of relatively privileged families demonstrates that housing is clearly a crucial dimension, especially in times of transition, e.g. in post-communist Poland after 1989. The Family Housing Pathways approach could be a promising tool as well as an approach that combines biographical and historical housing perspectives, without losing sight of concerns of a practical and ethical nature.*

**Keywords:** Family Housing Pathways; biographical methods; housing careers; Poland.



## Introduction

Concepts of individual time, family time, and historical time have been introduced to the study of families by Tamara Hareven (1977, 2000). These intersecting temporalities can also be studied with a focus on housing (Nilsen 2019). Individual and family housing stories are affected by larger historical developments (labour and housing markets) and by biographical events (e.g. births, deaths, marriages, migration). Families operate within these larger structures which constrain or mobilise them. Not only can families absorb shocks and buffer change, protecting their members from the consequences of rapid changes like the real estate crisis (Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou 2018), they can also become vehicles of change by enabling the realisation of individual preferences.

In modern times there is a much bigger generational overlap than ever before, with more individual and voluntary decisions and emotional support instead of sanctioned mutual obligations. The welfare state, which provides institutional support, has also made relationships more voluntary and individual careers more autonomous. Still, many decisions are made collectively in families rather than individually. The timing of transitions (e.g. marriage, leaving the parental home) is affected by the specific economic and institutional context. Also, individual choices are influenced by convictions about what constitutes a violation of norms (Hareven 2000).

A biographical approach is developing in the study of housing (May 2000). The metaphor of a housing pathway (Fitzpatrick 1997; Clapham 2002; Clapham 2005; Fopp 2009) makes it possible to take into account the temporal dimension as well as at least some of the complex factors that impact choices relating to housing. For instance, individuals and families dealing with homelessness (Casey 2002) or migration (Robinson et al. 2007) are highly dependent on institutional support. Other researchers have shed light on the family context by studying patterns of intergenerational transfers based on large data sets (Blaauboer and Mulder 2010; Mulder and Smits 2013; Gulbrandsen and Langsether 2003).

Hoolachan and McKee (2019) examined intergenerational conflicts arising from differences in access to homeownership among Baby Boomers and Millennials. Family support with regard to housing takes different forms (partnerships, financial contributions, inheritance, co-residence) and thus creates a nexus of relationships (usually between parents and children) and mutual obligations and interdependencies (Druta and Ronald, 2017). However, this approach to the study of housing pathways lacks a wider family context. It remains unclear whether and how these transfers depend not only on the parents' housing resources but also on those of other family members; or how these resources are distributed among siblings. A nuclear family often pools financial resources together to acquire a dwelling, but an extended familial network provides information, lodges its members in spare rooms, and swaps dwellings or sublets them for a below-market price, etc. These internal family resources are managed according to a specific logic that either conforms to or subverts the larger socio-political system. This may go unnoticed in research focused on individual housing pathways, and this may be especially true in contexts where many housing transitions are informal. Hence, the present introduction to the concept of Family Housing Pathways uses the example of Poland, which transitioned from a post-war socialist economy to a free-market, home-owning society.



## Polish post-war and transformation-era housing

The communist post-war period left Poland with a substantial housing deficit, under-urbanisation, and low-standard dwellings. Freedom of choice was suppressed. Acquiring a dwelling was the principal concern of most Poles, though it was especially crucial for young families, who would use all possible means to find a place to live and would often reside in a small apartment for their entire life (Jarosz 2010). In the 1990s, housing policy was not at the top of the political agenda. Dwellings owned by state enterprises were privatised quickly, while municipal dwellings are currently in the process of privatisation, with only 6% left in the hands of local governments. Since 2006 the government has been promoting homeownership through help-to-buy programmes (Salamon and Muzioł-Węclawowicz 2015). The generation that would come of age at the beginning of the Polish transformation was the first one that would be able to accumulate housing capital and make significant housing careers in terms of tenure, value, floor space, and standards. In the past thirty years, the number of flats per 1,000 inhabitants has risen from 291 to 380. A developing mortgage market, increasing prosperity, and growing aspirations have driven suburbanisation and for-profit construction in metropolitan areas. The private rental sector is hardly institutionalised and there are many accidental landlords.

Homeownership is the chief asset of Polish households (NBP 2017). A large segment of Polish society has experienced upward social mobility. Still, there are no studies discussing the role of housing in fostering mobility in the case of individuals or families, especially with regards to education and professional careers. It has been established that 26% of households acquired their home through an inheritance or gift (most likely from their parents). This was more common among wealthier households (NBP 2017), but no causal relations can be derived from these data.

The housing transformation in Poland has been described from the perspective of planning, suburbanisation (Kajdanek 2012), gated communities (Gądecki 2009), and mortgage markets (Lewicki 2019). On the individual level, there are ethnographical studies of shared housing (Łukasiuk and Jewdokimow 2014). Nevertheless, there clearly exists a research gap in that no one has as yet considered the family as the central element of the housing transformation.

## Family Housing Pathways

Housing transitions or simply moving house is invariably a significant event. People usually undertake it when facing important biographical events like death, marriage, or birth. They plan their move carefully and consider its various aspects. All these individual choices ultimately create collective outcomes (for instance, segregation). In housing studies and in housing policy the basic unit is usually considered to consist of a household. Nevertheless, if this term means a group of people living under one roof, the internal dynamics of the family are left unaccounted for. The creation and dissolution of a household, as well as interactions between different interrelated households, thus should also surely be taken into account.

We have introduced the concept of the Family Housing Pathway (FHP) elsewhere (Mostowska and Dębska 2019) in the context of homelessness and the gendered management of family housing resources. Our respondents had been excluded from housing that belonged to their extended families, in part because these families had very limited resources, and in part because



many of them embraced traditional gender relations. This article, on the other hand, focuses on the concept of FHP and an accompanying method that helps obtain a better understanding of the changes occurring in larger societal structures, which can be revealed by studying family housing histories.

Thus, this article has two aims. First, it means to elaborate on the methods of identifying FHPs and illustrating them visually. Second, it attempts to point to several themes in Polish post-war housing history that appeared in the collected FHPs.

## Methods and data

This article builds on experiences from previous studies on migrants' and women's homelessness that employed concepts of housing pathways and Family Housing Pathways (Mostowska and Dębska 2019). However, the data used here were collected by a group of twenty-eight undergraduate students taking part in a Housing Problems course at the University of Warsaw. They were asked to collect material regarding the FHP of one extended and at least three-generational family, and they were free to employ any visual method they saw appropriate to illustrate it. Students would also submit a written account, but were encouraged to make the diagram as clear and understandable as possible without the text. Each student was separately consulted after they collected their material and were preparing the visualisation. We worked together to make it clearer and in some cases to refocus the story on the single most apparent aspect of the family's pathway. I analysed all the collected FHPs and searched for recurring patterns that would go beyond individual social mobility or structural constraints on the labour or housing markets. Emphasis was also laid on elements that reveal how the family would mediate the transformation of the housing system in Poland.

## The method of collecting FHPs

Collecting materials for an FHP requires knowledge of usually more than one person in the family (depending on how extended the visualisation ought to be). While younger people usually have little knowledge of their grandparents' housing story, the older generation also often does not know exactly how their grandchildren acquired their housing. Creating an exhaustive FHP may thus require repeated interviews. Respondents could be notified beforehand and gather the information ahead of the interview. Sketching a diagram during an interview could help respondents recollect and organise their memories. Depending on the approach and aim of the research, collective interviews could be performed with multiple members of the family. A whole range of possibilities open up when research combines a housing story with a biographical narrative, involving a discussion of the meaning of home, space, transitions, family relations, etc. A more structured approach focused on collecting facts, on the other hand, would make the data easier to collect and compare quantitatively.



## Recurring patterns in managing family housing resources

Recurring patterns have been identified in the ways that families manage their housing resources. The visual presentation of FHPs made them clearly visible. Consequently, it became possible to account for familial relations that were either supporting or suppressing the housing careers of family members in their individual housing pathways.

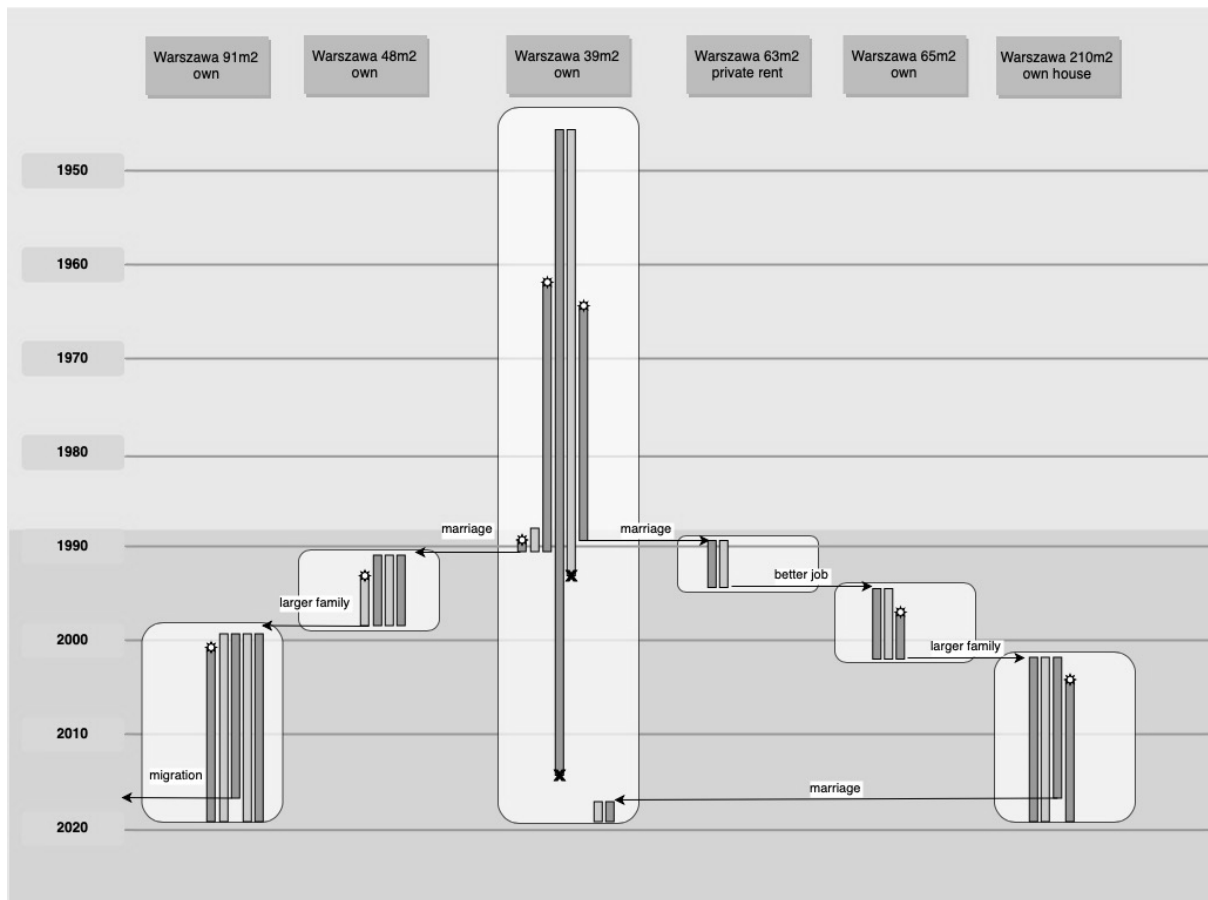
Three of these patterns are described below. The actual diagrams have been simplified for the sake of clarity and to ensure the anonymity of discussed families. The aim is to show how the FHP diagrams enable us to discern housing transfers and transitions within families and contextualise them historically. Vertical lines indicate the life course of an individual along a timeline (darker shade for females, a star for a birth, a cross for a death); the boxes represent dwellings, while arrows indicate movement. Additional information can be added depending on the focus of research, particular interests, or comments from interviewees: biographical events, tenure, the quality and location of dwelling, etc. The diagrams can be adjusted according to the level of detail required.

### Family housing careers at the time of transition

As mentioned earlier, the average standard of living in Poland has substantially improved in the past thirty years. The housing careers of family members, however, have depended on resources acquired by the post-war generation. FHP no 1. (fig. 1) begins right after the war with a young couple moving to Warsaw from a smaller city and obtaining a two-room flat of thirty-nine square metres. The couple lived there all their life (such immobility in the post-war period is characteristic for people born in the 1920s and 1930s). Their children reached adulthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The collapsing system of state-funded and state-allocated dwellings was transforming at that time into a quasi-free market, where dwellings could be bought with hard currency (US dollars), informally rented, or otherwise ‘obtained’ with the help of ‘connections’. The children both had a model housing career: they moved from the parental home into a rented dwelling and then into their own apartment (though with financial support from their parents), and eventually they moved into a larger place of their own (possibly a single-family house) in the 1990s as their families grew bigger. The grandparents would stay behind in the empty nest – the same small apartment in the centre of Warsaw – and the grandchildren would transition from their parents’ home in the 2000s. This, the youngest generation would be leaving the parental home in new socio-economic circumstances and their transition would not usually be tied to marriage anymore. The first step in their housing career would be to rent a private apartment, often sharing with other students, for example. Some of them would take advantage of their grandparents’ dwellings after their death. In the Polish context, small flats (privatised cooperative or communal dwellings from the 1960s-1980s), which would belong to grandparents, have proved to be a good starting point for a housing career in the twenty-first century. The visualisation of this type of FHP career takes the shape of a stepped and expanding set of dwellings subsequently exchanged for larger and more luxurious homes.



**Figure 1: Family Housing Pathway no. 1 – expanding careers**



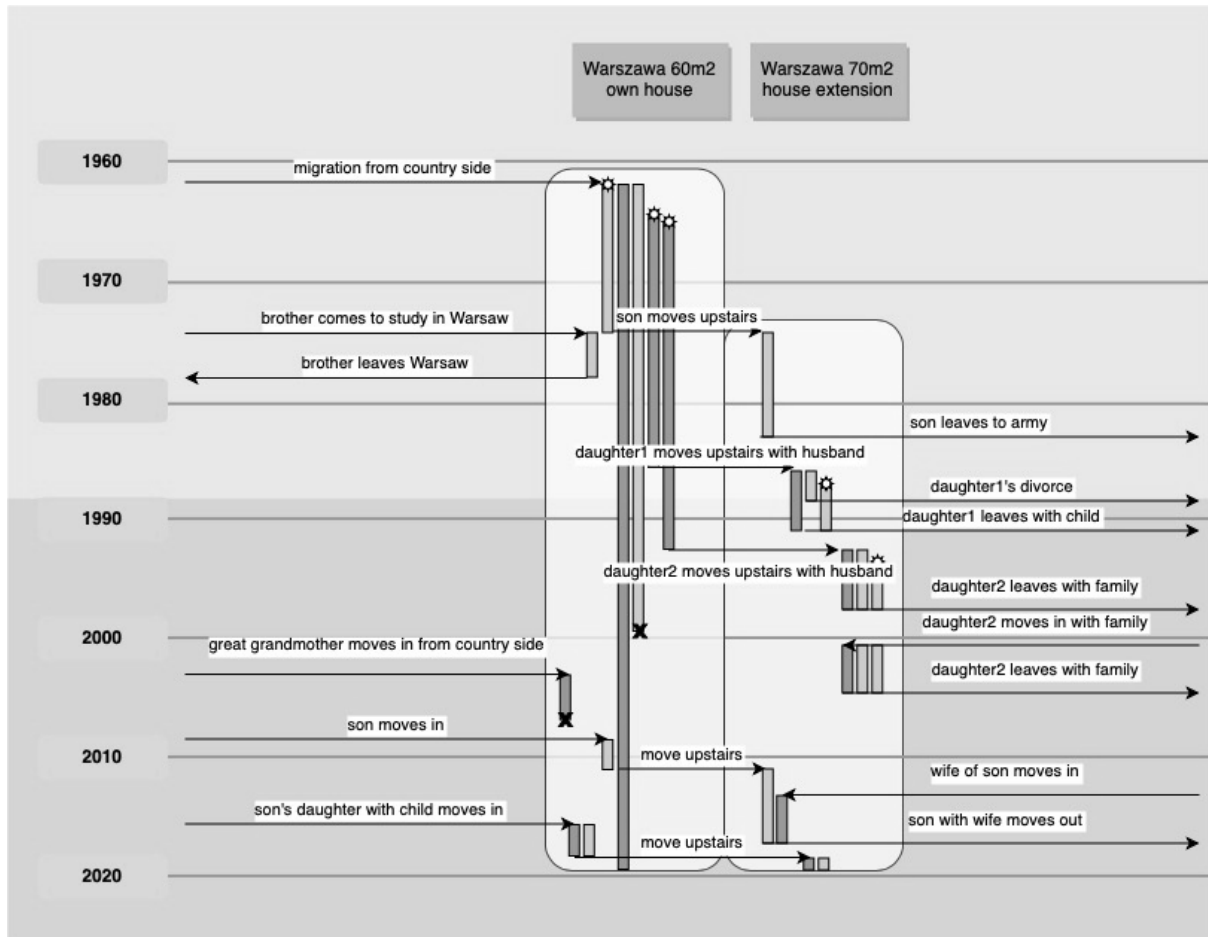
### Falling back on the parents' house

Private construction was severely limited in the centrally-planned economy. Nevertheless, Poles were building single-family houses in suburban areas and in the countryside throughout the communist period. Financial resources were often less important than having 'connections'. These houses became a huge asset after 1990. FHP no. 2 (fig. 2) revolves around one house, which became the focal point of stories recounted by many family members. The grandparents were born during the Second World War and moved to Warsaw in the early 1960s, where they built (without proper permits) a small, three-room house on the outskirts of the city. The house was subsequently enlarged, refurbished, and renovated. The first floor was added, which was eventually turned into a separate apartment with a separate entrance. This allowed family members to migrate within the house. The upper floor became a stepping stone for the children transitioning to their own flats, but also a place they could fall back on if their professional careers or other problems drove them back to Warsaw. Other family members also lived there temporarily, such as the elderly great-grandmother who moved in from the countryside when she needed care and lived with the family until her death. It is apparent from the diagram that it was only when the extra space in the house became available that some other member of the family could move in. The housing and life choices of the three siblings were thus interconnected in the house of their parents. Diagrams of this type of FHPs show the transitions as clustered around one dwelling. This kind of central house is a recurring pattern in less affluent families. It seems to be a crucial resource for large families from rural regions, and, at



least in the case of some of the children, helps them to further their housing careers (like FHP no. 1).

**Figure 2: Family Housing Pathway no. 2 – anchored to the parents’ home**



**Countryside house, migrations and care work**

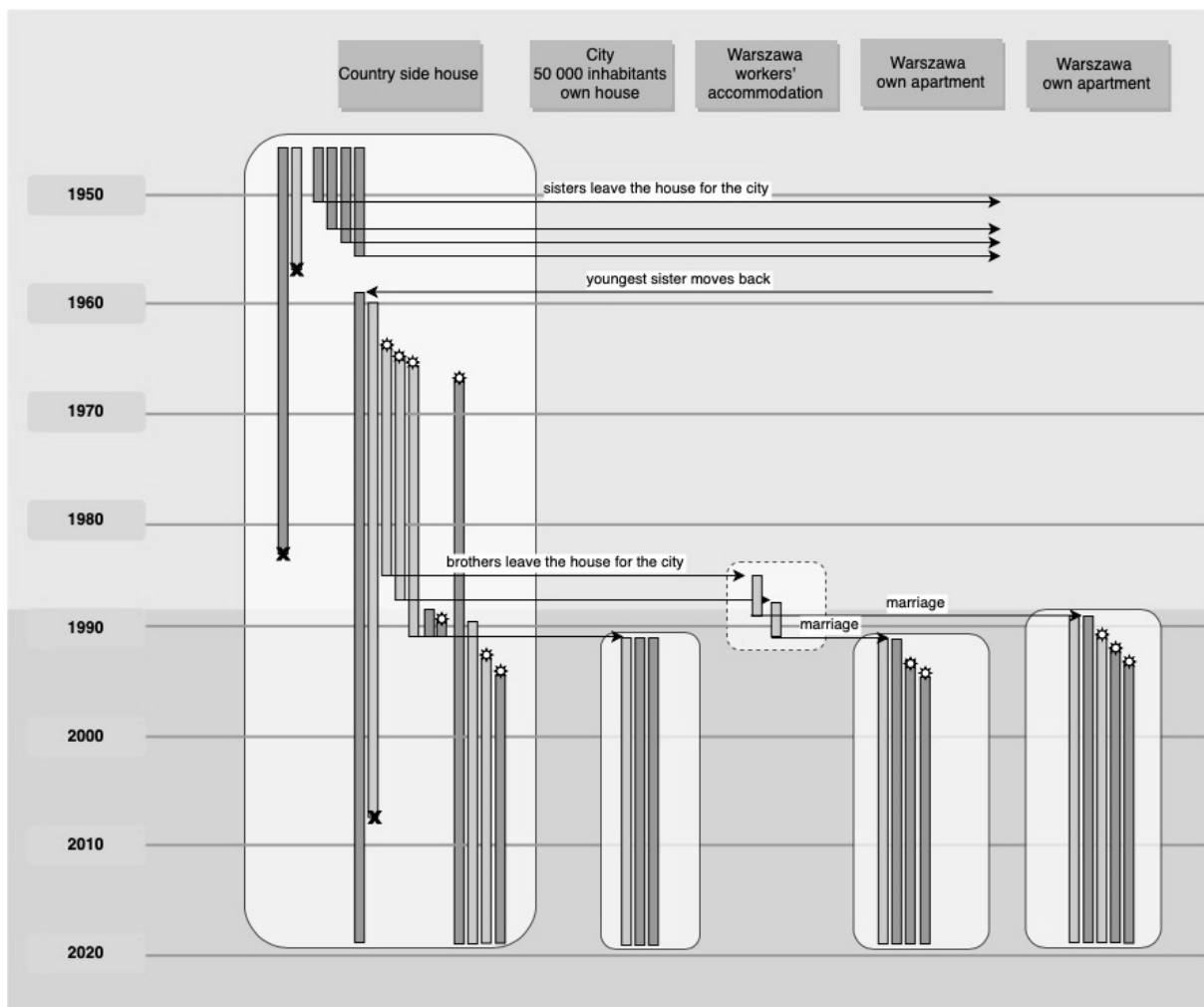
The post-war industrialisation of Poland made it possible for people to migrate from overpopulated rural regions to cities. Under communism, however, the supply of housing in cities usually lagged behind the demand for the labour force in industry. For many workers this meant long-distance commuting and living in substandard workers’ quarters. The family farm was an important source of food for the entire family. As in the case of FHP no. 3 (fig. 3), the grandmother left her parents’ house in the countryside in the 1950s and moved to a larger city like her sisters. As she was the only one without her own family at one point, she had to move back in with her ageing mother after the mother’s husband died in order to help run the farm. Eventually, she married a local man who moved in with her. They had four children: three sons and a daughter, who was the youngest family member.

The transformation to a free-market service economy caused a new kind of increased urbanisation. The collected FHPs reveal how housing has been a crucial element in the choices faced by people trying to balance professional aspirations (migration to the city) and care work.



Like in previous generation, the youngest sibling, would often stay behind or return to the parental home to take care of her ageing parent(s). In the 1990s, this was usually necessary due to the lack of supported housing and/or institutionalised care for the elderly, especially in smaller towns. In the past decade, country houses have become a significant asset. The standard of living has substantially improved. Moreover, the perception of distance has changed. People usually work or study in larger towns and commute by car. This has been confirmed by the fate of the next generation (in FHP no. 3), in which, around 1989, the older sons left the parental home, started to live in workers' accommodation in the city, and then moved to their own flats. The youngest daughter also aspired to move to the city. However, even though the farmland had been sold and the household no longer produced any foodstuffs, the daughter stayed behind, with her husband and family, to take care of her parents. The countryside house is the stable element in pathways similar to FHP no. 3. It is handed down to the representative of the next generation, while other members of the family move away. The importance and meaning of the house changes with every generation, and in many families it eventually becomes a summer house.

**Figure 3: Family Housing Pathway no. 3 – countryside house**







## Contribution to housing studies

The three case studies described above illustrate how the study of FHPs helps to capture crucial aspects of housing pathways: class (housing resources, educational aspirations), family composition (number of children, their gender), and space (where housing is located, its floor space and layout). They are all intertwined at a given point in history. Diagrams help to visualise the housing transitions of multiple family members and to grasp the nature of the family management of housing resources – for instance, an FHP can expand, in several bigger steps, into multiple dwellings, or it can remain continuous, i.e. clustered around one house where family members are anchored. The analysis of collected FHPs helped to identify families as vital intermediaries in the process of the transformation of Polish housing. The temporal-spatial dimension of individual housing pathways seems incomplete without taking into consideration wider family networks and their resources, which can either constrain or expand the scope of opportunities open before individuals insofar as access to housing has to be orchestrated, in time and space, among different members of the family.

## Discussion of the FHP method

There are several problems that arise from the initial application of FHPs. First, there is the question of the scope of each FHP. The family extends almost endlessly in horizontal terms, as well as back in time; thus, the more one tries to understand a story, the larger the familial network that needs to be taken into account. A detailed case study of a single family could be insightful in its own right. However, it seems that if FHPs are gathered for comparative or cumulative purposes, they should be limited and focus on a single theme: tenure, migrations, intergenerational transfers, etc. Second, obtaining data is not just a practical matter of interviewing many family members or gathering archive materials. As in any other type of research that deals with sensitive data, serious ethical issues are involved: biographies, data concerning family relations, and financial resources. Disclosing certain information, for instance about non-heteronormative families, family conflicts or financial disputes between children and parents or among siblings raise many questions on the part of both interviewees and researchers. Finally, aggregating and analysing FHPs seems to pose a challenge that could be approached in a number of ways, from strictly qualitative to certain kinds of quantitative approaches. Each diagram is in fact a database of the numerous transitions within a family. Including the temporal and spatial dimensions means that each housing transition could also be analysed according to the situation in the housing market, household composition, tenure, the number of siblings in an extended family, the reason for the transition, etc. This information could supplement studies conducted by housing researchers on large data sets such as the EU-SILC, Generations & Gender Programme, the Household Finance and Consumption Survey, British Household Panel Survey, etc. Analysing FHPs could serve as a way of exploring the processes involved in the informal management of family housing resources and of obtaining the kinds of information that would otherwise be impossible to acquire through the survey method or studies of individual housing pathways.

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