



“Three lessons 21st century housing policy could learn from ‘Little Women’ ”

By Jenny Schuetz, Brookings’ *The Avenue*, February 5, 2020

“It may just be the meticulous recreation of 19th century New England in Greta Gerwig’s “[Little Women](#)” that has the most to say about American homes, even offering some bold yet sensible lessons to improve our own 21st century housing policy.

### **“1: Middle-class homes do not drag down property values of nearby mansions**

“A primary goal of modern zoning codes is to maintain [homogeneous residential neighborhoods](#): New homes must be the same size, architectural style, and price as their neighbors [etc.]. ...

“If 19th century Concord, Mass., had such limitations, the main characters in ‘Little Women’ might never have found true love. ... The budding romance ... depends on the adjacency of their homes, despite clear differences in their economic and social status.

### **“2: Waiving quality standards allows low-income families to live in expensive communities**

“Houses today must meet minimum quality standards, detailed in [building codes](#) ... [which] also [raise the cost](#) of constructing new housing.

“The house occupied by the March family’s impoverished neighbors, the Hummels, does not appear to satisfy minimum quality standards. ... There is no separate kitchen, no running water, and only a single fireplace for heat and cooking.

“Today, these sorts of standards — even if well-intentioned — [effectively bar poor families](#) from living in [high-opportunity communities](#).

### **“3: Bring back the urban boarding house!**

“When Jo March decides to follow her literary ambitions to New York City, she lives where most urban singletons of the 19th century did: a [boarding house](#).

“Most importantly, boarding houses were inexpensive. Boarders paid fees for a private bedroom, with access to some shared common space (parlor, bathroom) rather than a fully equipped apartment.

“Second, because of the communal aspects, boarding houses offered some introductory social life to newly arrived migrants.

“The concept behind boarding houses ... is making something of a comeback under the new



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brand of ‘[co-living](#).’ But these new purpose-built facilities are substantially [more expensive](#)  
than their progenitors.

### **“Less zoning equals more social equity — and more romance**

“Can we imagine a return to communities where mansions, middle-class homes, boarding houses, and low-income housing can co-exist without legal restrictions or social prejudice?”

Read the complete, delightful, and short article [here](#).