

Gimme Shelter: the home during the COVID19 lockdown in Mexico City¹

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore the utilization of autoethnographies as a pedagogical instrument, especially in times of heightened stress. Additionally, it seeks to elucidate on the challenges faced by individuals in managing their living spaces and adapting to their altered functionalities during the COVID-19 lockdown. By documenting intimate spaces, this research endeavors to offer insights into home life, a domain often shielded from external observation and challenging to comprehend. The city is usually narrated from its streets, parks, shops, gated communities, historical downtowns or transport, (Borsdorf e Dattwyler, 2004; Giglia, 2008; Khaleghimoghaddam, 2023; Yang e Li, 2024; Zukin, 2010) but rarely from the experience lived in the intimacy of the house (Cruces, 2022; Douglas, 1991; Löfgren, 2014). This paper is based on the photographic and textual documentation gathered by sixty-seven students from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana campus Cuajimalpa (UAM-C) in Mexico City. The UAM-C is a public institution catering to medium or low-income residents mainly living on the outskirts of the city. The students recorded their living spaces and the transformation happening to their domestic lives between February 2020 and May 2022, in the first phase of the COVID19 pandemic. During that period, the city was lived mainly from within: interior spaces and their uses changed and acquired new, unexpected meanings. Dining rooms became offices; kitchens, potted gardens; entrances, sanitizing stations; and bedrooms, classrooms, or gyms. The research takes advantage of a selection of representative stories and testimonies to create a series of vignettes that illustrate how students and their families adapted spaces and their ways of life during confinement.

Keywords: Autoethnography, housing, Mexico City, COVID-19, domestic life, intimacy.

"Ooh, a storm is threatening
My very life today
If I don't get some shelter
Ooh yeah I'm gonna fade away"
The Rolling Stones

The year 2020 will always be the year of the Covid-19 pandemic, a defining parenthesis in our lives. It was a year when the majority of us found ourselves confined to our homes for extended periods. As an academic, it marked the first time I had to adapt and design a course for online teaching. The class subject was City and Urban History, a topic that suddenly took on new relevance as cities began to transform in unprecedented ways.

During this time, city life was redefined as we worked, exercised, and studied from the confines of our homes, embracing telecommuting, and relying heavily on delivery services. The once bustling streets became devoid of traffic, office buildings stood deserted, and stores and restaurants closed their doors. This was the surreal backdrop against which history itself was being rewritten, rendering the study of urban transformation all the more complex and intriguing.

I found myself grappling with fundamental questions. How could one approach urban history when cities were undergoing such radical shifts? How could we effectively document these rapid changes? Perhaps most crucially, how could I engage my students in meaningful discussions when they were confronted with much larger, pressing concerns?

In spite of the numerous challenges we faced in 2020, it also provided a unique opportunity for us to deeply examine the inner workings of our cities and contemplate their evolution in the post-pandemic world. This period prompted us to ponder how we could actively contribute to shaping the future of our cities, equipped with the knowledge and experiences we gathered from this unusual year.

As I sat at my bedroom desk, preparing to virtually enter my students' homes through Zoom, I recognized the profound significance of this act. It symbolized a fundamental recalibration of the traditional boundaries between private and public spaces, as well as a profound reevaluation of the uses of space and their underlying meanings. I aimed to make the concept of "home" a vital presence in our virtual classroom, acknowledging the changes we were all experiencing.

I am a faculty member at the Department of Social Sciences at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana campus Cuajimalpa, a public institution that primarily serves medium and low-income residents, many of whom live on the outskirts of Mexico City. From the initial term of online teaching in the spring of 2020 to the most recent one, two years later, I assigned my students with an autoethnography. This research approach utilizes personal accounts to deepen and illustrate an understanding of a specific context or phenomenon. An autoethnography has been defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). Bloor and Wood (Bloor e Wood, 2011). also characterize it as "reporting of the reporter's own personal and emotional life, explicitly informed by social science concepts

and perspectives, through sociological introspection." Autoethnography acknowledges that there is no singular, objective interpretation of reality and that meaning can, and should, be constructed through various perspectives (Ellis e Bochner, 2000). Given the particular circumstances that we faced during the COVID lockdown, an autoethnography was one of the few methodologies that could be used to document domestic spaces. Following Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011); the autoethnographies were understood as process and product. The process of reflecting on the changes in the student's uses of space and life, combining autobiographical and ethnographic strategies to generate fresh insights into self and space. A particularity of this exercise was that it required a strong visual component as will be described below. In terms of product, when writing autoethnographies, the aim is to create rich, expressive narratives that capture personal and interpersonal experiences. It is necessary to identify recurring themes in cultural experiences observed through field notes, interviews, photography, mapping etc. Subsequently, it is needed to depict these themes using elements of storytelling such as character development, plot progression, and the interplay of showing (photos, objects, drawings) and telling, all while adjusting the narrative voice. In doing so, autoethnographers not only strive to imbue personal experiences with significance and cultural experiences with resonance but also, through crafting accessible texts, they broaden their potential audience to include a wider and more diverse range of readers than traditional research typically reaches. This inclusive approach has the potential to catalyze personal and societal transformations for publics beyond academia (Ellis, Adams e Bochner, 2011).

Vivir adentro

The assignment was titled "Vivir adentro," or "Living Inside." It entailed documenting the profound transformations occurring within the student's homes, the evolving utilization of space, and the shifting dynamics of their daily lives.



Figure 1 – Attending Class (photo by Susana)

This assignment required each student to capture images of every room in their homes, whether in panoramic view or close-up shots. They had the freedom to choose whether or not they appeared in these photographs and whether to include anyone or anything that held personal significance. In addition to the visual documentation, students composed detailed descriptions of each space, delving into their prior functions, and how they were currently being used, and reflecting deeply on the impact of these changes on their lives.

I received a substantial collection of over 70 auto-ethnographies. As the terms progressed, a number of students expressed a desire to share these narratives with the class, so we dedicated a portion of our sessions towards the end of each term to this purpose. These sessions turned out to be profoundly significant in our journey of comprehending the full scope of challenges, transformations, losses, discoveries, and moments of joy that individuals experienced during the pandemic. As has been studied by Kiesinger (Kiesinger, 2002) and Poulos (Poulos, 2018) this kind of writing can be therapeutic for both the author and the audience so in addition to the academic learning, students referred to how reflecting on their lives and hearing each other made them understand their situation from new perspectives.

The inclusion of the oral element in these storytelling sessions brought the narratives to life, particularly since many of us had never met in person. On more than one occasion, our discussions brought tears to our eyes, leaving us yearning for the warmth of physical connection. We recorded four of these sessions and later transcribed them.

These auto-ethnographic accounts, presented in various forms—photographic, textual, and oral—offer poignant windows into the worlds that unfolded within the confines of our homes during the pandemic. Even as the narratives emerged independently, through the collaborative process of sharing within the class, the autoethnographies transformed into co-constructed stories shedding light on the profound significance of relational encounters. They particularly delved into how individuals collectively navigated the uncertainties, ambiguities, and contradictions brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaborative engagement fundamentally shaped the perception of the living conditions experienced. Typically, these projects revolve around pivotal moments or realizations. Initially, each participant crafts their own account of the experience. Subsequently, through an exchange and simultaneous response to each other's narratives, a richer tapestry of understanding is woven (Ellis, Adams e Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers advocate for research that encompasses both rigorous, theoretical, and analytical aspects, as well as emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive exploration of personal and social phenomena. They also emphasize the significance of presenting research in evocative, aesthetically pleasing ways (for example, see Ellis (1995; 2004), Ellis, Adams e Bochner (2011) and Pelias, (2000)). One can achieve aesthetic appeal in writing without relying on fiction or possessing formal education in literary or performance studies. Central to the concerns of autoethnographers are questions such as: who engages with the work, how does it impact them, and how does it contribute to ongoing dialogue about the issues explored? (Ellis, Adams e Bochner, 2011).

In this series of autoethnographies, even if the literary form was not developed the combination of text, photographs and oral presentations were very strong. One of the limitations encountered was the reluctance of some students to share their stories with the class. In some cases this hesitant attitude had to do with shame to expose their difficult situation, in others the stories were too painful and lastly some felt ashamed of their relative privilege. But even with this shortcomings the act of reading and listening to these narratives has been among the most enriching experiences in my nearly two decades of teaching.

Reflections on Narration, Affect, and Intimacy

Francisco Cruces (2022, p. 7) asserts that the most significant events in our cities unfold within the walls of our homes. I would further emphasize that the significance of the home reached unprecedented levels during the lockdown. Portraying the essence of home life is, basically, an exploration of individual universes. In the exercise "Vivir adentro," describing the various rooms transcended mere depiction of physical space; it encompassed narratives of daily routines, intimacy, and home matters, providing a deeper insight into the lives lived within those walls.

Therefore, these narratives delved into the realms of emotion, identity, significance, and the passage of time. Through a meticulous examination of the intricate relationship between individuals and their immediate surroundings, the everyday narratives encapsulate the very essence of self-identity, both in the contemporary and historical context, as well as within the imaginative realms (Ochs e Capps, 1996, p. 28).

In this study, I aim to assert that an examination of the experiences of public university students in Mexico City serves to unveil the intricate interplay between the domestic environment, personal narratives, and emotional responses. Moreover, it casts a revealing spotlight on the arduous circumstances that many of these students confronted as they continued their educational pursuits amidst challenges such as inadequate connectivity, limited access to healthcare, precarious study environments, overcrowded living conditions, and financial burdens. In numerous instances, they grappled with severe illness or the loss of family members. In the face of even the most extreme hardships, a glimmer of hope and joy emerged. The students also began to value and savor the newfound time they could spend with their families, the chance to reevaluate their priorities, and the freedom to explore new hobbies or embark on ventures like opening a small business or cultivating a vegetable garden. These personal narratives, inspired by descriptions of every room in their homes, led to profound self-exploration.

The significance of these stories lies in the potential to construct various versions of the history of how homes and cities were experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. They serve as fragmented representations and recollections of a moment that may have passed but has certainly left a lasting imprint, altering the world as we once knew it.

When we delve into the spatial transformations of homes during the pandemic and the underlying reasons behind them, it becomes unmistakable that these spaces have become repositories of memories and profound meaning. Nigel Thrift (2016, p. 57)

contends that emotions and affect permeate the city, and I posit that this sentiment is even more pronounced within our homes. Echoing Bachelard (2014, p. 67), who emphasized, "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space," we're reminded of the intimate connection between the built environment and our emotions. Several studies (Fernandez, 2015; Figueiredo, 2016; Syrjälä e Norrgrann, 2018) have investigated the dynamics of how objects, such as furniture pieces, engage with and become incorporated into interconnected systems of practices, spaces, and other objects. Consequently, these systems, encompassing the relationships between objects and individuals, such as those between a table, bed or sofa and a person, are recognized to exert influence in their interactions (Syrjälä e Norrgrann, 2018; Valtonen e Närvänen, 2015). Moving beyond furniture we find that spaces, such as the kitchen, living room or bedroom also influence and condition interactions. When considered collectively, the diverse elements that contribute to a sense of home, along with the acts of homemaking, are referred to as "home assemblage" (Figueiredo, 2016, p. 81 cited in Syrjälä e Norrgrann, 2018).

Certainly, there have been, for some time now, increasing focus within research on exploring the influence of non-human objects (Borgerson, 2014; Syrjälä, 2016; Syrjälä e Norrgrann, 2018).

Harnessing the concept of affect as dynamic forces and energies, molding both human and nonhuman interactions, these theoretical contemplations regarding the notions of home, affect, and intimacy serve as the foundation for our exploration into the narratives that have surfaced in response to the class assignment, "Vivir adentro." These narratives encompass a spectrum of expression, ranging from visual and written mediums to oral tales.

Student's Narratives

The domestic space unfolds as a narrative intertwined with an individual's life. Within the classroom, unforeseen events offered glimpses into the students' personal worlds. A sudden appearance of a cat leaping in front of the screen introduced us to Morris, eliciting laughter. The persistent construction noises emanating from the neighboring apartment led to a chorus of apologies and complaints directed at the noisy neighbor. Amidst the chaos, the clash of familial voices engaged in spirited arguments revealed a mother and sister vying for use of the dining room table for their respective activities. The background sounds of a tamales vendor's enthusiastic calls of "tamales oaxaqueños" and the intrusive doorbell ringing, accompanied by the untimely barking of a dog, further contributed to the lively soundscape. These moments rendered remote learning remarkably intimate, transcending the conventional dynamics of in-person teaching, prompting a reevaluation of the boundaries between the private and public spheres and inspiring reflections on their significance within our altered reality.

To fully unravel the intricate influence of the domestic environment on individual lives, I will illustrate this dynamic by sharing some student experiences. These experiences serve as examples of how physical spaces and the emotions and memories they hold intertwine.

Exploring the complex relationship between the architectural aspects of the home and their profound effects on individuals, a novel feature that emerged in most descriptions was the "sanitizing station." This station featured essential anti-Covid products, such as antibacterial gel, face masks, and disinfectant spray, strategically placed near the main entrance.

The initial alterations in these living spaces primarily revolved around subtle rearrangements and addressing technical issues.

Javier tells us:

-My hometown has no internet, only GSM signal... the UAM gave me a scholarship which consisted of a Tablet with a chip that would include 10 GB monthly. With this resource, I was able to do the class activities. Sometimes I had to limit Zoom sessions due to the consumption of megabytes...I had to build a small table to take classes, and a bookcase using recycled wood, the chair was purchased at a small market of used goods (Javier, personal communication).

In the case of Ilse:

-The internet they sold us turned out to be useless, my computer wasn't modern enough for all the software... my window became the enemy because the noise came in... even if it was closed (Ilse, personal communication, December 14, 2021).

Iván says:

I adapted a small room as my office using an ironing board and a dining room chair (Iván, personal communication, January 17, 2022).



Figure 2 – Ironing board adapted as desk (photo by Iván)

The dining room was one of the areas more commonly used for different activities. It was extensively adapted as a working space. An important challenge came from sharing it with other household members, the lack of sound isolation, and the constant rearrangements needed to work, eat, etc.

-Verónica says: The dining room is adapted to be used as an "office" by my dad and his girlfriend. It is only disassembled for lunchtime and put back at the end of the meal. (Verónica, personal communication, May 13, 2021)

-Anahí stated: We use the dining room table but when we all have class the sounds are so loud that we can't concentrate, so we go to our rooms, but they are not suitable since we don't have desks. (Anahí, personal communication, January 27, 2021).



Figure 3 – Adapted “office station” (photo by Anahí).



Figure 4 – In Zoom classes (photo by Anahí).

After some time the lockdown started to take a toll. In many cases extended family moved in and the need for bigger spaces, sound isolation, and more rooms became evident. Being trapped inside prompted feelings of frustration, anxiety, and depression:

Fernanda explains:

-Everything flowed well in the first month (April) and then the space of the house became small, it seemed that the square meters were not enough because many activities had to coexist (Fernanda, personal communication, December 14, 2021).

In the case of Ilse, she observes: My room went from being my sanctuary to a place I hated because I didn't go out for 6 months (Ilse, personal communication, December 14, 2021).

Diego's kitchen was radically reduced, he explains -This area was part of the kitchen, but now it is the bedroom of my brothers and my little niece... This is where I sleep although sometimes I also study and read since there is too much noise in the living room (Diego, personal communication, December 14, 2021).



Figure 5 – The former kitchen converted into a sleeping space (photo by Diego)

Anahí narrates an extreme situation of overcrowding:

In my house, from March to October, there were 10 family members in 70 square meters. The rooms do not have doors, so when I stay up late doing homework they can't rest because they hear me browsing, typing or when I go to the bathroom, etc. (Anahí, personal communication, January 27, 2021)

For Diego, stress set in: The pandemic brought me symptoms of anxiety and depression, I don't feel comfortable at home, but for now I don't have a better option. (Diego, personal communication, December 14, 2021)

Problems were aggravated when someone in the household was infected with Covid, for it was especially difficult to find a room with good ventilation and proper isolation.

After my mom was infected with Covid, recounts Ximena, she was isolated in my room. My sister and I slept in the living room. I would come in every hour to check her oxygenation, temperature, and pressure, give her the medication and leave her food. In case I needed to ask her something, I would just peek through a small part of the door or we would make a video call (Ximena, personal communication, March 17, 2022).

In the case of Anahí, extreme overcrowding was further complicated she tells us: This morning my 24-year-old sister (mother of two of my nephews) tested positive for COVID. So now my two nephews will sleep with me and my dad in our room. And my sister will be totally isolated in her room (Anahí, personal communication, January 27, 2021).

In the following quote, Ximena tells us how her kitchen was so charged with memories that it could not be used to cook anymore, at least for some time.

My dad passed away [from Covid] and, well, now we don't occupy the kitchen, it is full of memories... that is, the kitchen is completely empty. Empty. (Ximena, personal communication, March 17, 2022).



Figure 6 – Day of the Dead Altar (photo by Ximena)

Ximena's account highlights the profound impact of memories within a specific space. As she shares her story, Ximena reveals that her kitchen, once charged with cherished memories, now stands as a reminder of loss and emptiness.

But at the same time, space can also be healing. Modifying, cleaning, painting, or rearranging spaces can signal a way to move forward—a way to leave the difficult past behind.

After my dad's death, we were very, very sad and my mom said well, we can't be like this forever. So one day she woke us up, very early, and we started to make changes in the house. The first thing we did was to paint the living room (Ximena, personal communication, March 17, 2022).

This act of modification becomes a therapeutic gesture, signaling a transformative journey for the family.

Conclusions

The stories granted me an intimate glimpse into the lives of my students, unveiling the challenging circumstances that many of them grappled with. Most importantly the students kept attending class, doing homework and reflecting upon their experiences, in many cases highlighting the good that came despite this trying experience. It was truly awe-inspiring to observe their remarkable resourcefulness, deftly navigating the intricate challenges of both earning a livelihood and caring for vulnerable family members, all while graciously accommodating extended family members under a single roof. Amidst these demanding responsibilities, they managed to find profound joy in life's most modest pleasures.

However, autoethnography goes beyond merely recording personal experiences, offering an insider's viewpoint, or evoking emotions. Its goal, as Anderson (2006, pp. 386–387) explains, is to delve into deeper societal patterns. We're not just recounting tales of our homes and the impact of the pandemic in our everyday lives; rather, we're striving to understand the cultural dynamics at play within home environments in a particular moment in time, examining how both animate and inanimate elements contribute to the overall agency within these settings.

Besides the lessons learned in regard to the exacerbated inequalities and the urgent need to improve housing conditions in Mexico City, these testimonies shed light on how the built environment, affect, and emotion are braided with memory and meaning. They demonstrate that the home transcends mere shelter, showcasing its multifaceted role in our lives. Moreover, the testimonies highlight how, during lockdown conditions where the home became the sole inhabitable space, the constant interactions with family members, the accommodation of simultaneous activities create a feeling of constrain and complicate our relationship with the space of the home. When the house besides the domestic becomes the space of labor, education, leisure, study and so on, it becomes oppressive. This underscores the crucial relationship between the home and the city where affect in both places is dependent upon the possibility of going out and coming back, leaving and returning.

Note

¹ I want to thank all my students at UAM C for generously sharing with me their life stories during the COVID-19 lockdown. This work is dedicated to them.

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