

HOUSES: Lived Spaces, Represented Spaces

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To cite this article: GATO, Maria Assunção – HOUSES: Lived Spaces, Represented Spaces. **Estudo Prévio** 3. Lisboa: CEACTIONAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território da Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2013, p. 25-35. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprévio.net].

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Abstract

This article provides a theoretical and bibliographical review of how, in the field of Anthropology, there are some references considered to be classic and unavoidable dedicated to the study of the object House, which explore it in its multiple dimensions; social, cultural, political, symbolic, emotional, demonstrating that both the House and its material content continue as fundamental pieces that participate in the identity composition of individuals and in the cultural construction of the elements of social differentiation.

Keywords: House, anthropology, house object, domestic space, representations of space

Introduction

In Anthropology there are some references regarded as classical and unavoidable dedicated to the study of the House, that explore its multiple dimensions; social, cultural, political, symbolic, emotional. Among them are the texts of Bachelard (1984) dealing with the domestic space as a shelter, poetic, protector and comforter, as opposed to a hostile exterior. The studies developed by Bourdieu (1972) on the form and function of the Kabyle house is also noteworthy, due to the fact that they introduce the domestic space as representing the social and symbolic relations that structure the society, organizing the inside of the house with the significant elements related to the public and private universe, in conjunction with the male and female gender. Another key example is the approach developed by Lévi-Strauss on *Sociétés à Maison* (1979, 1992), where the House is presented as an institution or moral entity, that not only sets schemes of family organization, but also of political and economical nature.

In fact, the House is a cultural phenomenon rooted in time, in space and in social and organizational logics governing the different status groups who build and inhabit it. Hence it has a psycho-cultural dimension and a symbolic value that is expressed in ideas, desires and feelings. Therefore it results, in each historical moment, of a certain conception of the world and a certain lifestyle (Fernandes, 1992).

Despite the wide recognition of the several aspects that were associated to the House and the long disciplinary tradition in dealing with this theme some wonder about the apparent disinterest of contemporary Anthropology in working the domestic space in Western societies (Cieraad, 1999). Contrasting this reference to the scant attention provided by Anthropology to the domestic space are, for example, the works of Miller and members of his team (1997, 2001a/b; Clarke, 2001; Garvey, 2001; Petridou, 2001), of Wilk (2001), of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (2002), or the texts edited by Cieraad (1999), Hearn and Roseneil (1999), Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1999). In the Portuguese context, the recent study published by Sandra Pereira (2012) is also an important reference.

Given this illustrative list of some analytical works that have explored the meanings related to the domestic space, the family unit and its material objects, it can be said that the House is still an important and vast field of study for Anthropology, which complexity will always follow closely the societies that set the context. Implicit in this assumption is the fact that the domestic space continues to be a privileged “scenario” of many social practices, but also the fact that no other artefact is so clearly multifunctional, simultaneously an utilitarian object of absolute necessity and material culture of high symbolic complexity (Wilk, 2001).

According to Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1999), Lévi-Strauss’ work on *Sociétés à Maison* can be perceived as one of the first anthropological studies of the House and one of the most consistent in terms of theoretical analysis. However, the difficulties in operationalizing a concept that seeks to reconcile social orders based on kinship with a social structure resting on classes, makes them enumerate a number of insufficiencies,¹

which purpose is to provide more proposals of holistic anthropological analysis on the House. From the authors' point of view it is by developing an "alternative language" of the House to escape more conventional analysis and restrictions. Envisioning the Houses in a number of related issues will allow to understand the bonds among its architectural, social and symbolic meanings, but also to confirm them as dynamic entities integrating the inhabitants in the same constitutive process; «What we would stress here is the need to consider the house and its occupants within the same analytical framework.» (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1999: 37).

Following this perspective and according to Miller (2001a), it is in the domestic space that almost everything that truly is of interest to people happens. The House as a demonstrative space of consumer habits, behaviours and tastes that highlights the privileged relationships established with the material culture. This perspective is also advocated by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (2002) who, notwithstanding focus their analysis on the significance of domestic objects, conceive the House as a place that creates a material environment involving what is considered truly meaningful for people. Hence, it is the most important sign of its "self", reflecting its nature and way of life.

Nevertheless it is necessary to keep in mind two facts related to domestic spaces. The first is that it is not simply a space reserved for the private sphere and separated from the public. The two realities interfere and influence each other. The second is that, although the House is the family space, this does not mean the absence of rules, constraints or negotiations. A multiplicity of relationships coexist in domestic places that directly interfere in the actions of its residents and are both promoted by the family, and by "others", as by the House itself as a physical entity (Miller, 2001a).

On the morphology of the house – its functional composition and logical structure and hierarchy of its interior - Pereira (2012) refers that it directly relates to the ideologies of private life, family and its social class. Observing the changes in that morphology over time allows not only to confirm some changes occurred in Portuguese society, but also to understand how some of these social changes reflect in the household and the way of living the House.

Thus and in a time that is characterized by the development of housing areas, depersonalized and standardized, we witness the emergence of new issues connected to the House and its relationship with it, involving its choice, structure, decoration, renovations, objects and personal investment that is put into all these factors of procedural nature. In an apparent paradox it can be said that the standardized production of housing has contributed to emphasize the House as a privileged place to build and expression of self-identity, which is, a way through which people reflect their nature and way of life, establishing negotiations and social representations for inner circles and exteriorizing through their consumption. It is a privileged way of going against the assumption of social homogeneity implicit in the housing standardization.

The location of the house

In Portugal and essentially in the 1980's, the major changes in the Portuguese financial system allowed many families to have access to housing loans and own their home, with the more deprived families showing also a high appreciation for their own property (Campos, 2004). Several factors contributed for this scenario, for instance: the accession of Portugal to the European Economic Community and entry of EU funds; the reduction of interest rates; the reappearance of private banks and the consequent liberalization of credit for housing; the increase of average wages of workers and reduction of unemployment, two factors that would lead to an improvement in the standard of living of its population (Lopes, 1996; Pereira, 2012).

In view of an unattractive and less dynamic rental market, home ownership became almost a mandatory and widespread option, especially in more urban territorial contexts². This was undoubtedly crucial to the great development that the construction industry experienced in recent decades, for the renewal of the Portuguese housing stock and the consequent expansion of many urban neighbourhoods close to large, medium and small cities. It also has contributed to the strengthening of personal investment in the House as an object of mass consumption, on one hand, and as aesthetics, identity and statutory entity, on the other, as evidenced by numerous studies that have been made around these issues (Saunders, 1990; Dolan, 1999; Gurney, 1999; Miller, 2001; Clarke, 2001; Pereira, 2012).

Regardless of the size of the cities, the location is, admittedly, a key factor in the complex process of choosing the House (Shove, 1999). Numerous factors will enter in this selection process, such as: family structure; employment status and location of employment; everyday life routines; school systems; comfort or economic situation. But in addition to these practical factors are others more symbolic and socially representative. Consequently and more than the House itself, it is often its location that reveals the status and social prestige. Hence the processes of upward social mobility are often linked to the most prestigious locations, to bigger houses and new social contexts.

The House has always been inseparable from its spatial surrounding. But currently and as a more trivialized object of consumption, can be regarded in the same way that "we are what we buy", also and increasingly, "we are where we live" recovering the definition of Douglas (1991) for whom the house is, firstly, a "kind of space"³ or a "localizable idea"⁴, but meets what Petridou proposed for the House as a "kind of place"⁵; «Paraphrasing Mary Douglas, home is rather 'a kind of place', which acquires its meaning through practice; and as such, it forms part of the everyday process of the creation of the self.» (Petridou, 2001: 88).

Contextualizing this perspective is also the contribution made by Wilk (2001) referring to the House and the domestic environment as a commodity product or as a choice of products and standardized and pondered decisions, that are due to personal and individual motivations and conditioned by multiple social and cultural factors. The author believes that housing is, conceptually, the product of several decisions related to factors as varied as: professional changes, social mobility or changes in perspective, marriage

stability, children and their ages, cars, clothes or furniture. Whatever the approach adopted, the emphasis always belongs to the individual, the processes by which they make their decisions and the factors that affect them.

In fact and in the course of the several transformations that characterize our times there has been a change of attitude towards the House. This change resulted mainly from the increasing trivialization of its consumption and the relevance it acquired as an object of personal and social identification of its population, in a constant rearrangement context. However, it is important to point out that this attitude is clearly dependent on economic and social circumstances that affect individual choices with regard to Houses they can or can not buy and the places they wish to live in, as well as the expectations of achieving their idealized models of domestic space.

On these implicit issues in the choice of a House and establishing a parallel with the standards of “superior” and “popular” tastes of Bourdieu (1979), Shove (1999) refers that while buyers with more economic resources tend to look for the right House, guided by factors such as “character”, and “personality” and other emotional empathy towards the House, those with fewer resources adopt a more pragmatic approach, much determined by the location and cost.

According to Ærø (2004), there are several factors and resources that go into the equation of the choice and purchase of the House, and if the economic optimum and rational choices may explain the behaviour of many consumers, lifestyles can explain other mechanisms also present in choosing the House. Based on Douglas and Bourdieu’s contributions relating to lifestyles, the author seeks to understand how they are reflected in the search for a House, on the assumption that people are guided in all their choices by looking for a specific type of lifestyle, that is, an identity code that guides choices. Thus and influenced by terms used by Bourdieu (*habitus*, position and distinction), the author presents three important guidelines or situations related to the process of choosing a House: 1) disposition, where people tend to choose a house mainly based on traditions that dictate where they should live and where they feel comfortable; 2) position, where the choice of the House is mainly influenced by thought and consideration around the career choice and the economic and social situation that one has or wants to achieve; 3) positioning, in which the process of choosing a house is more flexible, mobile and unstable in terms of values, social references between groups or places or more distinctive lifestyles.

Regardless of the burden that each of these guidelines may have on an individual, the housing choice often ends up resulting in compromise between locations that require social roots and emotional connections to space and locations that, objectively, imply opportunities to achieve a certain lifestyle. This way, the choice of the House can be seen as an opportunity of positioning or social differentiation with the surrounding community. A determinant factor needs to be added to this equation which is the economic condition and their constraints in accessing the housing market.

The constitutive process of the House

Besides the location, Houses are socially identifiable physical entities, both externally as internally, both equally permeable to the surrounding sociocultural contexts. Alongside the external differences identifying residents of various socio-economic groups it is also important to understand how the material content of each House is made, since the relationships that are established with them reveal much about the identity and social representation of their residents. This means that the materiality of the House can impose on their practices, leading to negotiations of what is intended to show and what is actually shown.

Thus and among the various interactions that are developed between house, objects and residents, two main points are worth highlighting: the active role that residents have in establishing and transforming their house and the “agent”⁶ ability or transformation which the House itself has on those who live in it (Gell, 1998; Giddens, 2000; Miller 2001a, 2001b).

Regarding the first point – establishing the House – it is a continuous and complex process, subjected to the constraints and negotiations arising from the relationships between residents, the residents’ relationships with the outside world and the residents with their own House as a physical structure. The truth is the development of housing areas in the last decades imposed trivialized architectural solutions, as well as standardized finishes and functional distributions. As a result, residents eventually are drawn to a set of conventional requirements in terms of physical and material characteristics, where they reproduce predefined occupying models.

On the decisions concerning the construction of housing and interior design solutions from realtors, Shove (1999) refers that they are justified by using a mythical and fossilized notion of “market” and the weak economic risk that small realtors are willing to take in slightly innovating their work. Also within the Portuguese context, Pereira (2012) emphasizes the conservative sector, in which realtors rely on competitiveness by repeatedly imitating successful solutions, not investing in knowing the demand or planning the supply according to the diversity of the public target.

In contrast and over the past decades, the Portuguese society has been reflecting on a series of transformations – from family structures to lifestyles and social fragmentation, undergoing significant changes in terms of consumption and taste patterns – which are much more visible through the complex and different ways of living than the diversity of houses that the market has to offer.

With a study that aims to show the changes in Portuguese society through the House, Pereira concludes, precisely, that the structural component is more lasting, with a slower and even evolution, where innovation and social diversity have more difficulty in penetrating (2012: 315). Even though part of this responsibility falls upon the realtors, the fact is the demand has also not known how to stimulate the sector through less conventional expectations and capable of new challenges for Architecture.

Therefore it is up to the owners and residents of Houses to intervene more in terms of experience, in order to convert a standardized house into a unique and coherent space with personal and social identities of its inhabitant. That said, and on the transformation ability of the House itself, it is done by the structure as a material, but also for its history and biography. This means that the house does not only affect the daily lives of those who inhabit it. Going further, it may also influence a number of decisions that integrate the dynamic process implicit in its construction – from the decoration to the preservation or refurbishing – considering, at the limit, the impositions by the municipal authorities in the name of a heritage preservation architectural site.

According to Gurney (1999), more attention was paid to the interior of the Houses when a connection was established between the social stratification and the access of middle-classes to real estate. While ownership became a general norm an industry of decoration and good taste was developed around it that follows its owners according to their degree of economic success and combining several lifestyles. Consequently the tastes and housing consumption patterns were normalized, while owners compare and measure their economic abilities and status, holding in their houses identities and cultural meanings that is worth mentioning.

Beyond the “agency” abilities recognized in the House and in addition to the many meanings given to the material culture therein, the homeowners are the ones responsible for converting a dwelling into a House or a “home”. This mainly happens through the ownership and customization of the House by refurbishments, minor renovations and decoration.

In the foreground the decoration can be seen as a result of the tripartite agency from house, objects and homeowners. However and in a more detailed plan, the decoration effect is revealed as a complex tangle of negotiations between homeowners and objects and which can be summarized in four variations: 1) adapting objects to tastes, needs or priorities of different family members; 2) combining objects of different types, origins, natures and meanings; 3) combining several aesthetic influences, internal and external; 4) stating and projecting a certain social status or lifestyle.

Thus we can observe the growing importance of the domestic space as a social projection scenario, guided by a vast market of products, of aesthetic solutions and media programmes that foster in people a certain interest in decorating their houses, making them yearn for constant re-decorations (Clarke, 2001).

Through an ethnographic research concerning domestic consumption and provisioning of households in North London, Clarke (2001) proposes an understanding of the House not as an act of individual expression, but as a process of negotiation between past and future trajectories, fantasy and action, between external abstractions such as “class” and social projections. «(...) this ethnographic example shows how the ideal home, as used to influence the construction of the actual home, becomes an internalized vision of what other people might think of one. Far from being a site of crude emulation, the house itself actually becomes the ‘others’. The house objectifies the vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of the others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to» (Clarke, 2001: 42).

With these arguments presented two ideas are clear. The first is to confirm the material culture of the House and its decoration as an expression of identity, customized and appropriating a space that is private and familiar. The second is the understanding of the whole housing as a reflection of a broader negotiation process, which bases are inseparable from the consumer culture that contextualizes contemporary Western societies, namely the social codes which involve objects in general and how individuals use those objects to “signify” before others.

The representative role of objects

In contrast to the “action abilities” of the House are the “action abilities of objects”. At this level of analysis we observe the complexity of the role of objects, both as elements of meaning that enter the constructive identity of individuals, and as intermediaries in negotiating family and social relationships, of memories or personal values. From Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s perspective (2002), the House is a world where the material environment is created involving what is considered significant for those living in it. In other words, the House gathers the special objects, which were selected and become permanent in people’s lives. Hence the objects participate in defining the identities of their owners and users, imposing the need to understand more about their meaning.

Focusing their attention on the objects of the House, the authors seek to list and explore a range of symbolic meanings that are often made by objects as expressions of identity. It is the case of status and its recognition through various forms (such as rarity, price, age, fashion or style), of objects as symbols of individual differentiation towards social integration or as symbols of identity affirmation, following individuals throughout the various stages of their lives. In this sense, objects are stored as memories, experiences, personal or family references.

As well as the Houses, objects can also have a cultural biography (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 2001) consisting of the history of their journeys, owners, status, and other aspects deemed interesting to understand the object as a cultural entity. From this process can also result uniqueness and even the sacredness of the objects, conferring statutory values and variable and subjective exchange.

In general, these valued objects tend to assume prominent positions and high visibility in the social and public domestic space – such as living rooms or entrance halls – in order to perform other functions as well, such as to “impress” visitors or show a certain status, whether purchased or just desired. The objects that make the material culture of the house are, at the same time, a reflection of each individual’s identity and the product of a game produced to show the exterior.

In fact the most representative objects that each family has in their House may be classified according to multiple categories and values, not being feasible to standardize its meaning through fixed categories and applicable to all societies and socio-economic contexts. However, and given the socio-economic, cultural and spatial specificity of small groups, it is easy to understand the logical relationships that people develop with their favourite domestic objects, namely how they classify and value them.



In an ethnographic study by interviewing twenty families residing in Parque das Nações, in Lisbon (Gato, 2009), was it possible to define four categories of value and allocation that each one pointed out about their favourite objects: 1) the lack of emotional connection (neutral objects); 2) the appreciation for aesthetic features (beautiful and nice objects that look good in the decoration); 3) the attachment of evocative nature, the value of the objects comes from the experiences and evoking memories, such as people, places or meaningful dates; 4) appropriation by affective nature, a double value connected to antiquities or personal biography and the fact that they belonged to relatives or friends.

In these four categories it was notorious the unique and sacredness processes of old objects with family references – small pieces of furniture, decorative pieces, books, small memorabilia – which are exhibited in domestic spaces with more visibility, such as living rooms or entrance halls. It was also notorious that when some of these objects were given a more personal and emotional value, not only did they become unique and “sacred”, as they lost the possibility of being sold or associated with a monetary value exchange.

When comparing the favourite objects with those of higher monetary value it was noticeable that the first did not coincide with the latter. Assuming that there is not an indifference towards a certain modesty in practicing a determine consumer choice – not only in using more selective and expensive objects but also more mass-produced and accessible – it was confirmed that the material culture of the House involves several classifications and that they overlap. Truly, this material culture is subjected to significant expressions that often transcend their material conditions, to be revealed as memories, experiences, emotions and many other meanings that make objects unique and sacred.

Final notes

Considering that in Western societies still prevails the conviction that “we are what we buy and where we live”, not only the House but also its material content pursue key pieces that are part of individuals’ identities and the cultural construction of elements of social differentiation.

Firstly, the location is presented as a key factor when choosing a House. A process which complexity ranges between objective factors – related to economic and family situations – and subjective factors related to social representations. For this reason and especially for the gradual importance that those subjective factors have had when dealing with choice, the growing access of the Portuguese society to the real estate market has contributed greatly, as well as the quantity and variety of real estate products that the market has to offer. Thus, not only did the house become an object of mass consumption, but also a personal investment while being aesthetics and statutory entities.

Besides the agency abilities or transformation that the Houses are able to exert over their residents, these are the ones who have ownership and customize their Houses, by their tastes more or less “manipulated”, the choice of objects that they hold and the social images they wish to project. In this sense, the house with its decorative process goes

through a complex negotiation among various factors such as: I) tastes, needs and priorities of the different family members; II) combining objects with different meanings, styles and origins; III) combining several internal and external aesthetic influences; IIII) statement or projection of a certain social condition.

Thus the house can be understood – structure, action and content – as an identity space quintessentially, as a space of social representation, even with a controlled accessibility as a space to state the lifestyle of its residents, through consumer needs and their meanings associated with it. Alongside all of this we should not over look that the Houses are also, in most cases, a strong and long financial burden for Portuguese families.

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¹ Among the various short comings pointed out, if the negligence of the House as a physical entity and its relevance in family and social units structures, as well as excessive rigidity that is underlying the structure of the House (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1999).

² Despite a slight decrease in 2001 (75%), in 2011, 73% of accommodation of habitual residence are occupied by the owner. The leased houses have remained relatively constant between 2001 and 2011, showing values that are around 20%. (INE, Censos 2011).

³ *A Kind of space*.

⁴ *A Localizable idea*.

⁵ *A Kind of place*.

⁶ Synthesizing a conceptual building as something complex inspired by Giddens (2000) human action and its spatial, temporal and social contexts, Gell (1998) assigns the concept of "agency" to persons and things whose action capabilities arising out of causal relationships of varied order. As to concerns, this concept allows you to highlight very special capabilities while artefacts and that, among other features, makes visible the ability of exercising some influence in the lives of those who inhabit them. Sustained in these contributions Miller (2001a, 2001b) considers that the "agency" of the House does not go only by their size as a material object, since they are inseparable from the history and biographical factors integrated into its structure.