

# Toward A Social Psychology Of Housing

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A social psychology of housing, simply put, concerns how relationships among people are affected by their houses. Man's tendency to compare, evaluate and modify his home, as described by Mead (1934), certainly influences his social relations. The house itself serves as a territorial base for social interaction, and thus, the development of sentiments (Merton, 1948). As an opportunity field, the house provides for the occurrence of activities that may be either congruent or incongruent with the needs and aspirations of the family and its individual members (Michelson, 1977).

Specific problems addressed through a social psychology of housing include: distribution of persons in spatial and social relationships; organization of activity and social control; and communication or the expression of meaning. For consideration of these problems, a typology is proposed (see Table 1) which utilizes concepts borrowed from theories concerning: the functions of architecture and dimensions of space-time (Bachelard, 1964; Bollnow, 1971; Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Rapoport, 1969); elements of social

behavior (Homans, 1950); and fulfillment of personal needs (Ardrey, 1966; Maslow, 1970). Each row of the typology represents a different perspective for viewing the interrelationships among people and their housing, e.g., ecological, structural-functional, and symbolic interactionist. Various scales or levels of analysis, i.e., macro, meso or intermediate, and micro, call attention to diverse problems (Fitch, 1972; Stokols, 1977). Patterns of organization and interpretation of meanings viewed on a macro scale have developed in the community or society, on the meso scale within the subculture of the family, and at the micro scale within the context of a two-person system. The columns, rows and diagonals of the typology indicate interrelationships for study using any of the three scales, or in the style of "Chinese boxes," looking at smaller scales within the constraints of larger ones.

## **The Spatial Context**

Houses, as shelter, setting and symbol, perform three major functions: (1) unification and protection of people and their possessions; (2) specialization and separation of facilities for specific activities; and (3) dissemination of important information concerning the household. The house provides protection from intrusion, that is,

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Table 1. A typology for a social psychology of housing.

PERSPECTIVES and PROCESSES	CONCEPTS		
	Architectural Space	Social Behavior	Personal Needs
Ecological (Spatial distribution)	Shelter	Interaction	Security
Structural-functional (Organization and control)	Setting	Activity	Stimulation
Symbolic Interactionist (Communication of meaning)	Symbol	Sentiment	Identity

privacy and control. However, where family interaction occurs primarily in private, at home rather than in public places, Laslett (1973) pointed out that less social control and social support exists for the performance of familial roles. Increasing reports of family disorders associated with stress related illnesses (Kasl, 1974; Moss, 1973), interpersonal violence (Gelles, 1974), and breakdown in family structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Glick, 1975) support this view.

Role performances tend to be organized according to directions implicit in the arrangement of settings. Inadequate or inappropriate facilities preclude certain behaviors causing embarrassment and diminishing one's sense of competence, thus literally "putting one in his place" (Gross and Stone, 1964). Houses through their design and location express role and status for the occupants (Goffman, 1959; Seeley et al, 1956). Shape, distance and aesthetic details incorporate meanings and convey information as effectively as verbal language. For example, horizontal, vertical and depth dimensions acquire significance, describing status and prescribing behaviors for various positions although specific meanings may vary from one culture to another. We "read" a house and understand a man by being in his home in the same way that we read signs advertising motel, restaurant or variety store chains and know something about the services, the customers and behaviors expected (Bachelard, 1964; Burnette, 1974; Rapoport, 1973).

### Home and Social Behaviors

Little attention has been given to systematic study of the effects of the place called "home" on the development of either intra or extra familial relationships. However, distinctions in space use within family homes appear to be relevant for consideration of social behaviors. For example, social interactions differ in *public* (accessible to all family members) compared to *private* places (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Activities considered as performances appear in *front* regions while preparations occur primarily in *back* regions (Goffman, 1959; Seeley et al, 1956). Sentiments develop through contrasts between special and everyday occasions provided in the use of *formal* and *informal* areas (Riemer, 1960; Suttles, 1968). As Rossi (1972:121) aptly put it, "the house is a many purpose envelope surrounding the space in which much that is the heart of human activity is carried out."

To maintain social interaction, defined as participation in processes of information exchange at both verbal and nonverbal levels, the opportunity to withdraw, either by means of distractions or access to nearby places, is also essential (Goffman, 1963; Madge, 1964; Schwartz, 1968). Furthermore, to develop cohesive social bonds, a variety of differently equipped places in the dwelling are required to insure an adequate flow of communication including trivia, essential information, secrets and intimacies (Weitman, 1973). Appropriate

use of specific settings varying in permeability and formality is learned by children through punishments for behaviors described as "out of place."

Sentiments refer to attitudes and feelings developed through the subjective evaluation of activities and information. In respect to dwelling space, the term "house" concerns physical properties and functions, but the word "home" conveys feelings or sentiments associated with a place (Seeley et al, 1956). Oscillations from everyday routine to ritual celebrations depict rhythms of life which proceed through the stages of the life cycle. The gamut of living experience with periodic fluctuation evokes subjective evaluation and develops sentiments. Within the house, two-fold arrangements, seen for example in formal dining rooms and the informal kitchen table, provide contrasts required to separate special from everyday events.

#### **Territoriality and the Satisfaction of Social Needs**

Behaviors directed toward other persons or places are motivated by unfulfilled needs which Maslow (1970) suggested emerge in an hierarchical fashion beginning with physiological and safety needs, then progressing to needs for belongingness, esteem and finally, self-actualization. Ardrey (1966) claimed that territory is used to satisfy psychological needs for security, stimulation and identity. Protection from social or physical dangers produces feelings of security whereas anxiety is the consequence of inadequate protection. The development of security for a child comes with a sense of belongingness transmitted through family contacts associated with having an unassailable place. Additionally certain forms and dimensions, either through familiarity or ease of surveillance, promote security. Sivadon (1970) suggested that the center of a rectangle promotes security because its shape permits accurate estimates of moves. If natural surveillance provides a sense of control over entry into one's dwelling, many inadequacies are either overlooked or viewed as tolerable (Newman, 1973).

Stimulation, that is, the experience of a state of arousal provoked through contrasts in the social and physical environment, produces either positive or negative expressions of sentiment. Therefore, stimulation can either accelerate growth or produce stress. Some quantitative ratio between harmony and disharmony is required to maintain social structures. According to Simmel (1955), a lack of stimulation as indicated by boredom and indifference tends to have a disintegrating effect on social relationships, whereas conflict even though perceived as negative, often produces reassessment and improvement in the social and physical environment. However, if adaptive physiological responses are induced through stimulation, Selye (1973) described the condition as stress regardless of whether perceptions or evaluations are positive or negative.

Since social relations are spatially distributed and organized, location and characteristics of space emerge as symbols of identity. For example, one belongs where one sleeps (Schwartz, 1970). The exclusive use of a sleeping room and bed, and the position of the sleeping room relative to the rest of the house affect the self-image and identity of an individual. Dimensions of identity experienced in feelings of both uniqueness and continuity find expression in various objects and "markers." One's house stands as a symbol of who one is, and what one can become (Bachelard, 1964; Cooper, 1974; Norberg-Schulz, 1971).

#### **Conclusions**

In this brief paper, I have attempted to introduce the rudiments of a broad conceptual framework integrating empirical findings and theories toward the development of a social psychology of housing. To illustrate how concepts from the proposed typology can be investigated and developed empirically, papers included in this issue report research on aspects of meaning (Hayward), organization and social control (Koob and Fish), and spatial distribution (Graff and Inman). Borden et al consider the inter-relationship of certain life style indicators and

attitudes toward the environment. In the final paper, Miller et al suggest the use of paradigms from two specific theories in social psychology, i.e., the drive theory of social facilitation, and learned helplessness, to attain greater precision in the analysis of problems of control within particular environments.

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