

A Research Note:

REFLECTIONS ON HOME: IMPLICATIONS FOR HOUSING DESIGN FOR ELDERLY PERSONS

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Abstract

A phenomenological investigation was made of older people's experiences and feelings regarding important housing environments across the life span. Qualitative descriptions were gathered from a small sample of retired men and women living in their own homes. This information was collected through in-depth interviews, personal documents, and participant observation. Although individual memories of favorite homes varied, a pattern emerged in the features and areas of the houses that were described. Features of the house coalesced around two qualities, enclosure and openness. Enclosure was associated with centers within the home. Openness expressed connection with the outside world. These findings are discussed within the scope of relevant theories in the literature. Implications are drawn for the design of housing for elderly persons.

Introduction

Identification of self with and differentiation of self from, both human and physical aspects of the environment are continuous life-span processes (Searles, 1960). Physical and spatial attributes of a house embody symbolic messages about the personal and social self (Cooper-Marcus, 1974). In old age the life-space narrows due to changes in sense modalities, modifications in physical functioning, and reductions in social roles. At this time the near environment of the residential setting may take on increased importance in supporting psychological well-being (Birren, 1967; Gelwicks, 1970; Pastalan and Carson, 1970).

Little is known about the older person's identification with place, a relationship which Rowles (1978) terms "shadowy and indistinct" (p. 210). Based on his investigation of the geographical experience of older people, Rowles (1978) hypothesized that heightened feelings for the present place of residence provide support for the older person's personal identity. These are bolstered by selective feelings for environments experienced in the past. A relationship between place attachment and personal history was confirmed in a later study of elderly persons in rural areas (Rowles, 1984).

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world (Ralph, 1976, p. 43).

Research literature is silent about elderly people's emotional identification with their home setting, particularly identification with the home's physical properties. What are the links between sense-of-self and physical aspects of the residential setting in old age? What constitutes the older person's emotional attachment to the residential setting? Is memory of past environments reflected in the extent to which emotional support is gained from the present residence? Is there a pattern in people's emotional response to houses over the course of a lifetime? Is there a connection between the childhood home and most-loved homes in one's life and feelings about the present residence?

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Reminiscence and reflection upon previous life experiences are encouraged by gerontologists for the benefits that accrue to older people and by oral historians for the potential contributions to research (Null and Balkwell, 1987). Bachelard (1969) suggests that our experience of each new residence is flavored by remembrances of previous homes:

An entire past comes to dwell in a new house...Thus the house is not experienced from day to day only...Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives copenetrate and retain the treasures of former days (p. 5).

Just as the "having been" is still part of the present self (Hultgren, 1983), perhaps previous experiences of loved homes are a part of the attachment old people make to the present dwelling.

Changes are an inevitable part of growing older, and changes in housing are often made sometime during the later years. Knowing more about the emotional relationship between person and place may contribute to more suitable home environments for old people and consequently to an improved life-space. A phenomenological investigation was undertaken to identify important feelings and experiences reported by elderly persons regarding their housing environments across the life span.

Methodology

A qualitative research strategy was selected. Qualitative gerontology is an approach to discovering and understanding older people's behaviors, meanings, and values through empirically and theoretically grounded descriptions of everyday experiences (Rowles and Reinharz, 1988). Methods of data collection and analysis were selected to actualize a hermeneutic or phenomenological research philosophy and methodology. Phenomenology is a critical and descriptive science that attempts to understand the meanings which people attribute to their everyday experience, including experience of the designed environment (Seamon, 1982; Seamon, 1987). The phenomenologist gathers qualitative descriptions from informants without benefit of *a priori* theories which might cloud or obscure underlying patterns or structures of the phenomenon being studied.

Descriptions were collected via multiple, in-depth interviews with each subject and, when available, from personal documents such as diaries, photographs, newspaper clippings, and records of family history. A personal journal, kept by the researcher, provided a context within which the interviews were examined and was a source of additional data. Nonverbal cues, such as the participants' facial and body expressions, and aspects of the home and its furnishings were recorded.

Twelve volunteer subjects participated. Of these eight were females. Their ages ranged from 60 to 81. All subjects were retired and lived in or near a midwestern city. Subjects were judged to be middle class; all were high-school graduates; seven had college degrees. Nine participants were married; one was single; one divorced; one widowed. Ten participants were owner-occupants of single-family homes; two rented apartments. Tenure in the present home varied from 3 years to 43 years, with a mean of just over 26 years. All interviews were conducted in the subjects' homes and audio-taped. Each subject was interviewed at least twice; five subjects were interviewed five or more times. Each interview lasted between 1 hour and 30 minutes to 3 hours or more. Over 80 hours of recorded interviews were conducted and resulted in over 1,100 pages of typed transcript.

The following questions were used to guide the interviews:

1. When you think back over all the places you have lived in your life, from your childhood home to the present one, are there any that seem to stand out as being more important than others, places you really loved?
2. What memories do you have of that place? those places?
3. Can you describe the place and your memories of living there?

At the conclusion of the interviews a five-step analytical procedure proposed by Giorgi (1985) was followed. Interviews for each respondent were analyzed separately, followed by a cross analysis of all respondents using the same procedure. Initially, all references to house or home were bracketed, then notations were made concerning the feelings or experience expressed. A summary was drawn for each interview, noting in sequence the reference or relationship highlighted. A second summary of themes and subthemes was made for each interview. It was followed by a final, comprehensive summary of themes and subthemes across interviews for each participant, and subsequently, across all twelve participants. Gradually a universal structure of emotional attachment to house began to take form based upon the unique experiences of the participants.

Findings

Although subjects' individual memories of favorite homes varied, a pattern emerged in the features and areas of the houses that figured most prominently in the descriptions. Specific features of the houses coalesced around two qualities, enclosure and openness. Enclosure was associated with centers of meaning within the home, and openness expressed connection with the world outside.

Enclosure: Centers of Meaning Within the Home

References were made by the elderly persons to features of their homes that provided enclosure, or shelter from the outside. The solid presence of walls was mentioned as one man remembered the house in which he grew up:

It was a solid brick house...double thickness brick all the way up, clear up to the eaves....Oh, it's changed hands a couple of times. Again, good, old, solid brick; they can't change it too much because it won't stand changing.

The theme of walls as a separator of inner space from outer space appears in another man's recollection of the basement in his childhood home:

I just loved the basement. The walls were about three foot thick, I guess, made of cobblestone. There was no central heat, of course; but the amazing thing is you'd go down there in the middle of winter and...it'd be like in the 50s there. Coming from the outside, it'd feel real warm...You could sit there and enjoy yourself, winter or summer. (Laughter) That was the best place in the house.

The image of the house as a protective nest for the family is apparent in this woman's comparison of her present home to her childhood home:

The house I grew up in was really a very big house; it sprawled all the way back. And this [house] is quite compact; it just seemed like it fitted the family more...I think probably it was kind of like a nest...I like that feeling of it.

The research subjects often referred to places within the house, to the fireplace, the stove in the corner, the corner of the kitchen, or the dining room table. These places served as foci of the individual- and family-world and became the repository of sentiment and feeling. References made to fireplaces and wood stoves were particularly memorable in terms of feelings of warmth, either the radiation of physical heat to warm the body or emotional interactions that warm the soul:

I loved the fireplace at home. That was one of my favorite spots, on my stomach lying in front of the fireplace watching it crackle and burn and having popcorn and apples. We children would lie there all evening and look at the flames...We told stories...It was a very pleasant and homey kind of time.

Oh, I think all of us in the family have a special feeling about this room because this was the room where we would get together and visit before the days of television...I think all of us loved this room. Then we have a fire in the fireplace, you know. It's very cozy.

I just wanted [a fireplace]. I wanted that as bad as I wanted a house...I'd seen them. And boy: that's what I wanted! It's so cheery, you know, to see a fire there.

One thing we did in growing up, during the winter it was always so cold upstairs, it was extremely cold. There was no heat up there. So we would all run downstairs in the morning. We would try to wake up ahead of each other to get down to the spot in front of the oven. When [my parents] were remodeling, putting in the furnace, we still had the stove and it was still the same thing. We would vie with each other [to] get into that spot where it was warm, and here we were grown up and married. My sister said, "Well, you know, this is something we should try to forget, but it still is the coziest place. This is warm memories having this cozy place behind the stove."

A couple described the dining room in their home as the family center. It had been the scene of many Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners; their sons had studied there. Several of their grandsons would bring their dates over and sit at the dining table and look through the family photograph albums. An 81-year old woman mentioned a "very cozy spot" in the corner of the kitchen in the house she and her husband had built and lived in for 43 years.

An 80-year old man gave a detailed description of the family dining room in his childhood home. He sketched a plan of the room as he described the seating pattern which had prevailed at each meal, the ritual of setting and clearing the table:

The old man would sit here. Now, in the dining room, that would be at this point. Never in my life did I see my uncle sit anyplace but here, the old man's left. It was my unfortune [sic] to be here where he could reach over and swat me, and then, I was the one that required swatting. There'd be three or four of us over here and my mother always down here. Here's the pass-through here, so she could serve dinner. She'd cook it on the stove, put it on the table and put it through there. Then the last thing, always the last item, whether it was lima beans in cream or what not, she'd carry in. Then say the blessing and start the meal.

References in the literature that refer to physical and spatial aspects of home highlight the importance of enclosure as a fundamental characteristic. Enclosure is defined by edges, or walls, that create private space, a separation of inner space from outer space (Bollnow, 1967). Enclosure reinforces feelings of security and privacy by creating a place to withdraw, to curl up and seek refuge from the world. In demarcating inner space from outer space, the home nurtures both private and public aspects of identity (Norberg-Schulz, 1971).

Enclosure is also defined through centers of meaning within the house. Home is a "bounded center of meaning" (Tuan, 1975b, p. 155). Centers are the level of the home which human beings experience most fully, the places which can evoke the strongest feelings at the level of everyday experience (Eliade, 1959; Bollnow, 1967; Tuan 1975a,b).

Tuan (1975b) refers to the hearth as the center of man's lived space. The hearth recalls basic life-sustaining elements: fire for warmth and preparation of food. He refers to the dining table as having an element of warmth. This element is related to the consumption of food which releases calories to warm the body and to the warmth associated with loved ones and friends. Norberg-Schulz (1971) notes that since ancient times, the fireplace has been the center of the dwelling, and the table has been the place where "the family joined to form a ring" (p. 32).

Openness: Connection to the World Outside the Home

Windows figured prominently in descriptions of favorite homes. Doors were mentioned, too, but to a lesser extent. Porches were another feature of the house that were referred to frequently in conversations.

Mention of windows usually led to descriptions of what lay beyond. Sometimes discussion of what was outside implied the existence of a window through which the scene could be viewed. Examples of specific memories follow:

I had a big kitchen that had lovely windows in it, all across, over the sink; one at each end of the stove. There was a window at each end and you just felt that you were right out in the orchard when you were in the kitchen...That's one thing I like about this place--there's a window in the kitchen.

I had a room in the front of the house. It was kind of small and all by itself, and I could shut the door. I could lie in bed and look out on the lake in two directions...the window was low, the sill was low so that your bed was right beside the window.

I do remember looking out from the front window and sitting on my grandmother's lap and my father's lap. You see these front windows, this living room. There was a window here, too, so you could look up in this direction. I'd sit there and look out and we could watch the racing, we could hear sleigh bells; the sleighs were beautiful...That was fun to watch. I always enjoyed that.

I think that windows give you a feeling of spaciousness. Plus the ventilation. (Laughter) I tend to be warm blooded and that's one reason I've stayed in this apartment because of the cross ventilation. It's so much cooler than the ones that don't have cross ventilation.

The bay windows, we especially like the bay windows. We have one in the dining room also. And we like the French doors here to get outdoors. On hot, summer nights we can open the bay windows wide, and those two windows and the French doors can open wide and by ten o'clock we are so cool that we start closing things, even on the hottest summer days. So, it's been a liveable house.

References to doors reveal their significance in defining and separating spaces or directing and orienting passage from inside to outside. While sketching a rough plan of her childhood home, a woman said:

And those doors were made out of cherry and they were so pretty. They were all varnished. That door was to close it off from the back. So you'd walk through the house from the front and go through this door, this cherry door, and then you were in the back halls.

In conversation with a gentleman, the formality of the front door was alluded to:

But they had frosted glass; they were oak doors, and heavy, heavy enough to go into the Capitol. (Laughter) But we very seldom used this front entrance...we went out the back door to our school because it was over here; it was just across the street on this corner here. But this would be our main entrance.

Many memories associated with porches were shared by the elderly participants. One woman remembered:

You almost stood in line to get to go to grandma's house...We never went in the front door; we always went to the side door. And yet we went out to the front porch.

The cohorts of this study grew up at a time when porches were common. Before central heating and air conditioning, porches provided an outdoor living space that was sheltered, though usually exposed to any breeze on a hot, summer day. These people also grew up in a time when life moved at a slower pace. There was no radio or television; visiting on the porch was a form of family entertainment and a way of interacting with neighbors. Respondents described their memories of porches as follow:

We had dances on the front porch. It was a great big porch. My father and mother had dances [there] before me, and when I got old enough I had dance parties out there. It was a fun house.

I've always wanted a back porch, a screened back porch. Several

times we've had one; but that [house], that had one. It's so convenient to sit outside, without being bitten by mosquitoes and look at the beautiful surroundings. We should have had one here, because it's just beautiful here in the summer.

There were always porches on the house that I remember well, growing up. It's like I miss it here in winter time. You feel so kind of closed in; and, of course, the mosquitoes are bad. So, just as soon as it gets good weather here, even when it's cold out on the porch, we put on jackets and go out. It's just the idea that we can't go out and walk anymore; and you watch the people going by, and the cars and the traffic. You have a feeling of life around you. I think that's what it is, its a continuance, you know.

One man remembered his sister sleeping on the "sun porch" when she was ill. Other subjects related memories of sleeping porches on their childhood homes and described their recollections with apparent delight:

That place had a sleeping porch. That was one of my favorite spots. I don't know how old I was when we moved there--maybe third or fourth grade. We used to love to sleep out there when it rained. We could hear the rain on the roof of the porch. You just felt as if you were outdoors.

And then the sleeping porch on the rear. All the time I was a little kid, I was out there. We had a double bed out there, just big enough for a double bed. It didn't have windows on it; it only had screens. So, it got pretty cold in the fall and early winter. One of the memories that I have--I was telling [my wife] the other noon when they had the siren test here in town--reminds me of a fire bell at home. Down on the main street there was a big tower in the city hall and they had a bell in there, a tremendous bell. You'd hear that and then you'd hear the gong on the firetruck, horses pulling it up the street next to us. We could get up in our bed and kneel and look out and see it, you know, that sort of thing. In the summer it was really delightful; we could get the sun very nicely.

It had sliding windows on it. While we were all young, we slept out there a great deal of the time. In the winter we slept out there; I remember that we had flannel sheets on the bed, always we had flannel sheets, top and bottom, and of course, lots of covers. We wore flannel nightgowns. My sister and I would sleep in the double bed and (laughter) the two oldest boys would be in the other one. It was really good sleeping, but we really got down under those covers (laughter). The girl would bring up bricks, wrapped in flannel because you didn't have enough hot water bottles to go around. They'd stick those in the bottom of the bed before you got into bed. And believe me, you didn't linger when you got out on that porch, you just leaped into bed!

Again, references are found in the literature that theorize about the importance of a connection between the inside of the house and the outside world. When the house clearly demarcates inner space from outer space, it nurtures both private and public aspects of identity (Tuan, 1975b). Openings in the boundaries separating home from community, the personal domain from the social or public, presume the "place where those worlds communicate" (Eliade, 1959, p. 25). The threshold both separates and unites two distinct worlds.

Bollnow (1967) expresses the importance of house as a connector:

[One] must go out into the world to transact his business and to fulfill his role in life...Therefore he needs a link between the spaces within and without, an opening in the wall of the house which surrounds him. He needs a door by which he can leave and a window through which he can at least see the world outside (p. 182).

Windows offer a view to the outside and provide connections to the world of others and to nature. Doors denote passage and orientation. They are also a means for opening up and uniting separate but adjoining spaces. They may be used to close them off to insure separation and privacy, thus shielding the self from revelation (Lang, 1985).

The entryway reinforces feelings of separation, separate identity between person and community or family and community (Bloomer and Moore, 1977). The front door is often embellished in some way to set it apart in the facade, to draw attention and to give added importance to its function of gate to the private world within. A threshold denotes transition from one state to another or passage from one space to another. A porch is a prime example of threshold as it provides shelter and attachment to the house and, at the same time, allows a person to be outside. From the vantage of a porch, one can experience nature directly, can privately observe the surrounding domain, and can feel both a part of and separate from the community of which the house is a part.

Implications

Research on home has emphasized sociocultural and behavioral issues to the detriment of physical and spatial relationships (Tognoli, 1987). The findings from this study reveal the close integration between physical or spatial dimensions of the home and issues of attachment, centrality, and self identity as experienced by a group of elderly people. This suggests that separation of the meaning of home from actual physical features of the house may be an artificial dichotomy that disrupts a crucial and valuable wholeness of human experience.

Heidegger (1971) shows the unification of self with space by tracing the origins of the words being and building to a common root, *baun*, meaning "to dwell." Housing, then, becomes a dwelling place or a home, when the space inside is clearly defined from the space outside (Norberg-Schulz, 1971) and when the duality of secrecy and visibility are ensured (Korosec-Serfaty, 1985). The dialectics of "enclosure from" and "connectedness to" the outside world foster dual avenues for self-maintenance and self-understanding across the life span. Centers of meaning provide privacy and security. They satisfy a need for belonging to an identifiable place. Thresholds facilitate access to the exterior world for orientation and for activity.

Identification of self with the home setting is partly made through experiences over a period of time. The sense of "being at home" is enhanced by familiar things and places familiarly felt. Relocation requires the forging, in part, of a new identity. Repetition of particular qualities in the house that trigger familiar feelings may ease the older person's transition to a new location. When elements and features of the house articulate the qualities of enclosure and openness, the feeling of belonging or being at home is reinforced.

The feeling of enclosure is enhanced when there is space for gathering family and friends around a fireplace, a dining table, or on the porch. The dining table may have to fulfill this need because, as Bloomer and Moore (1977) point out, in contemporary housing the source of heat is commonly integral with the building and is therefore invisible. To what extent might old people who recall such features as a fireplace or wood stove in previous home settings miss these foci in their retirement homes?

For elderly persons who move from single-family homes to apartments, the definition of entry and exit to the residence is a major change. A house has a front and a back door, each with specific functions. Although one entrance or exit can satisfy the same functions, the symbolic aspect of front entry can be lost in an apartment. Entries that open directly into a living unit ignore the need for a transition from public to private space. Small alcoves or changes in direction help to demarcate the entry from the rest of the habitat and give the resident control over visual and physical intrusion into the home.

Within the home, separation of private from public spaces require design attention. For example, elderly people prefer that bedrooms be separated from living areas with walls and doors, rather than sleeping-L's and alcoves that are not considered private enough (Howell, 1980). These designs do not provide adequate enclosure.

Passive, as well as active, access to the outside world deserves design consideration in retirement housing. Windows placed so residents can see out when seated not only provide a sense of orientation but give a view to activities around the home and to nature. Porches and sheltered, outdoor areas provide enclosure yet enable people to closely observe life about them.

To what extent does retirement housing facilitate access to sounds of the world outside: hearing rain, wind, or birds? One participant commented that in her new home she would only know if it were raining by looking outside. This comment indicates how well housing protects us from the weather. However, the sounds of nature may also be a source of pleasure. How important might this aspect be to elderly residents? In retirement housing how far must a resident walk to reach the out-of-doors?

Conclusions

This study sought to understand emotional attachment to home as an important element in sustaining identity in old age. Though the findings are based on the experiences of a few older people, they provide a point of departure for more intensive investigation. In opening doors to access inner feelings and meanings about loved homes, this study has added new elements and details to the landscape of knowledge about the elderly person's experience of self in relation to the home setting. Are the feelings and experiences described in this study universal among elderly people, among other age groups, other cultures? With one exception, the elderly people who participated in this study were living independently in private housing. How might the experiences of congregate care or nursing-home residents compare?

The transition from private home to retirement home may be eased when design of the physical setting reinforces the process of identification with place. Is the need for housing to clearly articulate the qualities of enclosure and openness a life-span phenomenon? If it is, providing concrete expression of these qualities in the design of retirement housing will reinforce that identification process.

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