
Dwelling: an anthropological gaze at the objects and practices of ‘home-making’

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ABSTRACT

Although the house has always been an object of interest and investigation for anthropologists, it is only in the past few decades that it has taken on strategic importance in ethnographic research. Reviewing the origin of these studies, we highlight some of the more recent research aims and how they can help us to understand the world we live in.

KEYWORDS

homes culture, material culture, anthropology, visual ethnography

BIO

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Within the sphere of cultural anthropology, the house has been the object of important analytical efforts. Lewis H. Morgan's 1881 study on traditional architecture and domestic life among Native Americans is one of the earliest examples of this focus in the anthropological field. Morgan reviews the dwelling styles and material culture of Native populations in northern New Mexico, and those of the Aztecs and sedentary populations of ancient Mexico. In reconstructing the marriage alliances of various American populations, Morgan uses the house and the domestic space to trace the origins of the family from an evolutionist perspective, in which the form of the house, and the sedentariness or mobility of peoples, corresponds to evolutive achievements that shape human history. The study influenced Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; the latter dealt with Morgan's studies a few years later in his well-known book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884).

Claude Lévi-Strauss often described the domestic space and the organization of the Bororo village, using it to explain the functioning of a society that establishes divisions based on gender, roles, hierarchies and subjugation:

It is well known that the model Bororo village consists of eight collective huts, each one housing several families and all arranged round an open space, in the center of which stands the men's house (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 37). This was the *baitemannageo* or men's house. The unmarried men all slept there and, in the daytime, when they were not out hunting or fishing, or engaged in some public ceremony on the dancing-ground, all the men of the tribe could be found there. (The dancing-ground was a large oval space immediately to the west of the bachelor's house). Women were strictly forbidden to enter the *baitemannageo*; the perimeter huts were their domain and the men would go back and forth several times a day along the path through the bushwood which led from their club to their conjugal hearth. Seen from the top of a tree, or from a roof, the Bororo village looked like a cart-wheel, with the bachelor's house as the hub, the established paths as the spokes, and the family huts to make up the rim (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 203).

In this frontier of separate, symbolically dense and often complementary spheres, domestic space – indoors and out – is central to understanding the essence of a culture. As Lévi-Strauss further explains:

and yet the men's house has a significance over and above that of its being, as I have described, the center of the social and religious life of the village. The lay-out of the village does not only allow full and delicate play to the institutional system; it summarizes and provides a basis for the relationship between Man and the Universe, between Society and the Supernatural, and between the living and the dead (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 2016).

In *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), Lévi-Strauss separates men and women in a state of nature and culture. The prohibition of women from entering the men's house is here a recognition of the need to separate nature from culture.

The separation between the male and female universes reflected in domestic space was efficaciously described by Pierre Bourdieu in his analysis of the Kabilia house, an ethnological study in which the French sociologist considers the construction of the domestic space from a structuralist point of view:

Thus, the house is organized according to a set of homologous oppositions fire/water, cooked/raw, high/low, light/shade, day/night, male/female, nif/hurma, fertilizing/able to be fertilized. But in fact the same oppositions are established between the house as a whole and the rest of the universe, that is, the male world, the place of assembly, the fields, and the market. It follows that each of these two parts of the house (and, by the same token, each of the objects placed in it and each of the activities carried out in it) is in a sense qualified at two degrees, first as female (nocturnal, dark, etc.) insofar as it partakes of the universe of the house, and secondarily as male or female insofar as it belongs to one or the other of the divisions of that universe (Bourdieu 1972: 90-91).

Bourdieu defines the house as the mirror of Kabilia society which, founded on homologous relations, is concentrated in the male-female dichotomy: the interior of the house is the female space, and the exterior is the place of male dominion and action. Delineated, circumscribed spaces, separate and shared, define roles and tell us about the “worlds” they live in. The woman looks after the domestic world, while the man can observe the outside world; inside is beautiful thanks to the woman, and outside, thanks to the man (Bourdieu 1980). The idea of the house as a reflection of the social universe is very

powerful, and in some cases, the structural opposition between inside and outside also includes spaces like balconies or street entrances, which are considered contaminants of the domestic interior (Scarpellini 2008).

Sarah Pink maintains that studies on domestic life have great appeal among social science scholars because they allow us to analyze and understand meanings of daily life, pleasures and routines which are generally hidden to outsiders (Pink 2012: 49). She also notes that for a long time – as exemplified by the interpretations of Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu – a semiotic and structuralist reading of domestic space was prevalent, leading us to read the house as a “text.” In reality, it is more often an agglomeration that is difficult to reduce solely to normative activities, but which also comprises relations between different identities, agencies, resources and relationships within it, which connect the present with biographical selections from the past (Pink 2004: 64).

The house is a locus of private life, clearly separate from public life. It is a protected space in which the family takes refuge, sheltering from the weather and from attacks by animals or by other men (Roche 1997). It is thus a place of internal retreat, but also of opening towards the outside. An environment where we feel welcomed and defended, and a place where we construct social relations and attribute roles, separating zones we can use from those that must not be intruded upon. The house is, furthermore, a porous, permeable container. Contrary to what it habitually thought, the house constantly allows itself to be penetrated by the outside world; it protects us but does not isolate us. Windows are openings onto the world, and at the same time, wounds that the house cannot heal and that let the outside look in, and snoop – curtains are the “bandages” that people use to temporarily protect themselves from the indiscreet gazes of passersby. Windows are also an extension of the domestic space: for many people, the view they enjoy from a window or from a balcony is an integral part of the house (Forino 2014). Thus, the house is an enclosed place, but it cannot be conceived of without the outside space that surrounds it.

The separation between inside and outside is symbolic and ritual. Arnold van Gennep (1909) defined the threshold, the door and the porch as liminal zones, to which rituals of protection, caution and welcoming are dedicated. Passing through the door of a house is effectively a rite of passage, or of admittance, that sanctions the entry of a stranger into the protected space of those who receive him. Splashing the threshold with blood or water, as well as sprinkling blood or perfume on the doorframe, are practices that acknowledge the door as the boundary between the outside world and the domestic one.

The study of the house, then, allows us to investigate private, intimation relationships that are part of an experience that combines aspects of religion, routinized activities, cultural conceptions and everyday habits. Not only sacred and profound spaces, or spaces designated for men or for women, but also technical evolutions of objects, adaptations of or to their use, arrangements that comment on a family’s social status. Studying domestic furnishings (Meloni 2011), design (Pink 2017; Clarke 2018), banal objects like Tupperware (Clarke 1999) or Ikea furniture (Murphy 2015; Garvey 2017) is a way to understand the functions of the house and the ways in which people view themselves and the world they live in.

The house is a container of history: it holds layers of the lives and memories of various generations and, from the past to the present, its walls preserve the family impulse, reproduced over time. When they are passed down, reminders of parents or prior owners can be reassuring, or they can be cumbersome: they comfort us with the idea of family continuity, or disturb us as the intrusion and intransience of something unknown and dangerous (Lipman 2016). This happens in part because the house, as Daniel Roche writes (1997), is also the expression of a fossilized moment in time, which condenses the past and projects itself into the future.

In recent decades, with the development of a few important international lines of study that link consumption and material culture, a bona fide field of research on domestic cultures has opened up.

Daniel Miller, for example, is an author who had contributed greatly to the reinvigoration of material culture studies, making the house one of his preferred objects of investigation. In *Home Possessions* (2001), Miller tries to move beyond the theoretical-methodological perspective of structuralism to focus on micro-ethnographies of domestic space, in which negotiations, bonds and conditioning work on two levels: people model their houses according to their own tastes and wishes, and the house acts on people by establishing rules, imposing choices and limiting spaces of action. It is both a reflection of social relations and a means by which they are constructed. Mary Douglas’ study on the tyranny of the house

(1991) is a good example of this relationship leading to the construction of a discursive order (Foucault 1971) in which “non-human social actors” (Latour 2005) play an active role in defining human actions. Douglas’ analysis reveals how the house, the result of an attempt by its inhabitants to fulfill their own ideas, often tends to be presented as an active subject that interacts and sets limits, structuring the family’s actions. It is a particular space, localizable but not fixed, in which there is a sort of distributive justice that makes it something different from a hotel or other spaces that resemble houses but are not:

For these reasons a home is a model for kinds of distributive justice. The reference to morality points a major difference between a home and a hotel. Both plan for the future, but the planning of the hotel follows criteria of cost efficiency. The reason why the home cannot use market reasoning is, to extend Suzanne Langer's term, that it is a virtual community. It is not a monetary economy, though a household could be. Suppose a group of people sharing the rent of a house, each with his or her own timed access to the cooker and corner of the larder, each coming and going independently of the others, each autonomously making plans and keeping careful check of requital for services rendered by the others—that would be a household. They would settle conflicts over scarce resources by bargaining on semimarket principles. They would argue about their claims in terms of functional priorities or in terms of relative contributions. Inputs would be measured against outputs. This is the kind of institution which the "human capital" theorists can analyze with ease. At the other end of the scale from market to nonmarket is the home, with its laughably complex, tyrannical rules, unpredictably waived and unpredictably honored, and never quite amenable to rational justification. The question for the theory of collective choice is how a home manages to demand and to get sacrifices from its members, how it creates the collectivity which is more than the sum of parts. In what follows the word "home" is treated as a collective good, and focus will be on how contributions are exacted (Douglas 1991: 297-298).

The house is thus a complex world, capable of creating rules that serve to establish an equilibrium that reigns over family members’ various subjectivities – different needs, desires, levels of imagination. The devotion and love that Miller (1998) saw in daily food shopping practices are closely tied to the house. Food shopping ensures that the refrigerator is supplied with all the items the family needs; that the kitchen shelves hold biscuits and other foods that children can rely on finding when they get hungry. Love for one’s family encompasses rules negotiated between humans and non-humans. A child’s entry into adolescence corresponds to a demand for privacy that may take the form of the need for a room to himself, or the need to spend more time using the bathroom, or a request for greater freedom than in the past. These requests cannot be granted by the family alone: it is the house that establishes how much time a family member can occupy the bathroom in the morning without creating problems for the rest of the family. Coming home later in the evening may bring changes in terms of the habit of eating at a certain hour, and this could compromise the delicate equilibrium the family has constructed in close collaboration with the house. Turning the volume of music too high is not just an action that disturbs parents, brothers and sisters; it also appears inopportune from the point of view of the unwritten rules that shape domestic life.

Entering a house, speaking with its inhabitants, observing the furnishings, noticing whether it is clean and analyzing roles and hierarchies gives us an often-faithful picture of society and, along with it, the imagination and desires of the people who live in it.

In one of his various studies on domestic culture, Miller (2008) collaborating with Fiona Parrot, analyzed about a hundred houses in a street in South London over a period of about 17 months. Here the author presents very heterogenic family portraits that allow us to view the house through a kaleidoscopic lens, as a place where different styles, tastes and desires give shape to a completely new type of domestic universe. In his studies, Miller has cogently explained how the study of material objects allows us to investigate and understand practices of self-construction, relationships with the past, and the need to anchor ourselves to tradition in order to convey what we are, often following the development of a society in which consumer goods are becoming increasingly easily accessible (Miller 1995: 149). Miller also proposes the practice of ethnography as an instrument capable of capturing the subjectivity of social actors. Ethnography allows us to peer inside people’s lives and observe how the house becomes a container of forms of consumption. Ethnography should be the true objective of anthropology (Miller 2017), because it is by comparing different stories that we can read and then analyze the complexity of the contemporary world.

The house is not a self-contained object of study, but is, rather, opaque and liquid. In the house we study the people who live there, the objects of which it is composed, and the relationships among people, spaces and things. Studying the house also means studying its absence, the desire to possess something on the part of those who do not have it, and thus the political actions of those seeking to obtain a domestic space as well.

The articles we present in this issue of Visual Ethnography seek to deal with the complexity of the house in the contemporary world, making use of visual and ethnographic tools to talk about spaces, anxieties, desires, relationships, objects and political actions. The essays by Cacciotti and Mazzarino discuss forms of occupation in two different contexts: urban Rome and the Harbour of Copenhagen. Sbardella's essay focuses on the relationship between the sacred and objects in the domestic space, while the piece by Grilli and Meloni presents an autoethnography of the house in the time of Covid-19. Tosi Cambini reflects on Rom habitation. The photo essays (by Marrazzo, Ferrara, Camilli) that accompany the articles refer to domestic and urban spaces, interweaving outdoors with indoors. Giacomelli's report on the house in Italy and Paggi's extensive account of Rom habitations in Europe conclude the monographic section of the issue.

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