

Introduction:

Towards a phenomenology of the home

*Gilles Barbey
School of Architecture
Federal Institute of Technology
12, avenue de l'Eglise-Anglaise
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland*

It is true that a symposium¹ entitled "Phenomenological aspects of the home" could not have been other than a pooling of acquired experiences and of priorities determined by individual paths of research. A shared awareness of the often reductive tendency of traditional empirical research makes one feel the need for a deeper understanding of the nature of the affective ties which bind man to his dwelling. Although the main difficulty for phenomenologists is precisely to go beyond theoretical knowledge to discovery of useful applications, we should not lose sight of the value of individual experience, as it is expressed in a page of an intimate diary, for example. The opportunity given us to collectively undertake a preliminary exploration of the significance and scope of domestic attachment makes possible a general outline of the question, which is the object of the present issue.

This outline makes it apparent that rather than work towards systematic knowledge of an area of research that is necessarily diffuse, we should identify the ways in which phenomena having to do with the domestic sphere interrelate, and reveal the congruence or mutually supporting effects of individually formulated theories. Commonly shared themes are limited in number and are agreed upon without discussion. Moreover, mistrust of all forms of positivist and schematic thinking nourishes the conviction that importance must be given to details and to nuances which, from a different perspective, might appear of secondary interest, or quite simply insignificant. In addition, a permanent return to basic options clearly emphasizes the significance of an existential line of thought which, as the theme of this conference suggests, implies constant reference to the past and the future.

The inherent meanings of "home" convey, among other things, the image of oneself and of one's family (Sauzet), references to notions of identity and ipseity (Villela-Petit), the conjunction of personal space and paradoxical time (Amphoux & Mondada), the burden of effort associated with a perpetual reconquering of the domestic sphere (Graumann) and the preservation of a zone for secrets (Korosec-Serfaty & Con-

¹ The Symposium took place on July 7, 1988, in Delft (Holland) during the 10th Conference of the International Association for the Study of People and their Physical Surroundings (IASP). The contributions of the participants have been partially published in the Proceedings of the Conference: CAN HOOGDALEN, H., PRAK, N., VAN DER VOORDT, T. & VAN WEGEN, H., (Eds.) (1988), "Looking back to the future / Se retourner vers l'avenir", Vol. II: Symposia and Papers (Delft University Press, Delft). The papers have been revised by the authors for this publication.

dello). The complexity of such a reading of the word certainly bears witness to the inexhaustible nature of man's relationship to his own dwelling, which deserves to be constantly reevaluated and redefined.

The constitution of a home seems to us to be a particular aspect of the problem of place, which has been treated in the perspective, among others, of its identity (place identity). The home is therefore a place permeated with meanings, among which the affirmation of personality and social status are central. In the intimate correspondence of certain writers - R. M. Rilke's, for instance - the dwelling is seen as a microcosme, a place-as-symbol-of-all-places, arranged according to the episodes of the day, yet never ceasing to be the personification of the literary work. It is also the seat of memory, where the past is recalled with indulgence and nostalgia. The home remains a place of ubiquity and of dialogue with partners real and fictitious, benevolent and necessary. This special awareness of living in an altogether appropriate place seems to correspond to the dimension of "superinhabitation" suggested by Sauzet, a sort of exacerbated feeling of belonging to a chosen place of residence.

Observation of the modalities of involvement in the home appears to be fundamental for an understanding of the importance of the intemporal. Myths associated with the dwelling try to institute a durable time, to reassure man in the face of time's inexorable passage. The myths of eternal recurrence and of the centre of the world reflect that suspension of time in a known place, the dwelling place. Exalting the home's cosmic dimension makes it possible to regard it as sacred in accordance with moral codes based on sober and sedentary ways of life. The social history of housing clearly shows how urgent it was to root households in their domestic life, after industrial revolutions had drawn large new populations into towns, reputed until then to harbour evil influences.

The kaleidoscopic view of man's relationship to the home which has been obtained might give the impression that everything has now been said on the subject, although the resulting bundle of certitudes does not seem to make research efforts any easier. This only shows to what extent the question of the home is by nature immeasurable and inexhaustible. Phenomenological analysis, which, better than any other, makes it possible to approach the unsaid and the implicit, helps us to relate our experience of a given place in the form of a narrative or of sensory observation.

On an even more operational level, the testing of personal experience of space and time within the four walls of a dwelling can inform the architectural project, by revealing the traces of sedimentation of everyday activities while, at the same time, making room once again for symbolic thought.

In the first invitation addressed to the symposium's participants, we limited our questions concerning man's relationship to his domestic world to the following:

- How can we gain an in-depth view of our affective relationship to the home? What effects does the familiarity of a dwelling place have upon us?
- What forms of personal development does experience of the home offer us? How does it continually involve us?
- What roles do we attribute to our surroundings and how universal are our ties to the home?
- What are the effects of habituation to one's dwelling?

These questions, it seemed to us, followed from an implied acceptance of the following postulates:

- Attachment to one's dwelling is dependent upon a satisfied recognition of a kind of partner to be coexisted with. As a place of ubiquity the dwelling accepts affective relationships inasmuch as they are positive and ego-building.
- The home is a place of synthesis, the only one able to simultaneously link together the places and episodes of life. Personal involvement in the home is "cosmogonic" in its essence, and therefore capable of reconciling the near and the infinite, the momentary and the eternal.
- An intimate relationship with one's home needs to be continually re-asserted, in other words rethought and reelaborated. The most frequently used images for the home are often metaphors - like the forest or the prison - used to ward off the ephemeral and to plead for eternal life, without, however, sacrificing familiarity.

These questions and propositions certainly do not come near to exhausting our phenomenological knowledge of the home. However, this incomplete report on its present state is enriched here by the observations of the geographer Anne Buttimer, who broadens our view of the question to include philosophy and the history of science.

Illustrations: The inclusion of experienced space in architectural projects

Since the time of the Second Empire in France 'anatomic' sections of residential buildings were drawn. They allowed their architectural design to be visualized and they also showed the different scenes simultaneously taking place within the various rooms of the same building.

This very suggestive method appears to be adequate for showing how *experienced space* may be included in collective housing. Fragments of rooms, photographed as they are being occupied by their inhabitants are inserted in a drawing depicting a 1 to 10 section of the building. The 'experiential' and phenomenological dimensions of dwelling are thus underlined. This provides architectural projects with a more tangible reference, taking away the schematic character which usually characterizes them.

These anatomic sections must, however, be completed by an analysis of the interior plan, together with longitudinal and vertical sections, in order to show more precisely how inside space is being utilised within the accepted scenario of domestic life. It is useful to add to this graphic procedure some text and literary quotations, or even some testimonies collected during interviews with the inhabitants. Together, they will show the manner in which people experience their contact with residential spaces.

(The text has been translated by D. Lott)

Fig. 3 Maison d'habitation à la place du Tunnel, Lausanne: coupe anatomique, 1988. Atelier Barbey/Diener (EPFL): P. A. Mottier, P. Depres, X. De Blonay, P. de Almeida, H. Buri.
Residential building, place du Tunnel, Lausanne: anatomic section, 1988. Workshop Barbey/Diener (EPFL): P.A. Mottier, P. Depres, X. De Blonay, P. de Almeida, H. Buri.

