

Is Home A Cultural Space? An Exploration of the physical, emotional and socio-political dimensions that define the prevailing concepts of home and cultural space

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Theorists, philosophers and analysts have long grappled with the concept of *home*. Is it a physical structure? Is it a social environment? Is it a state of mind? Or is it all of the above? Whilst there is no definitive description for *home*, there is an overall consensus that it is a notion that surpasses the material and physical entities of a space. For the purpose of this essay, I will explore the various conceptual frameworks that define the home space and evaluate the extent to which we may regard it as a cultural space.

Borrowing from the words of Michel de Certeau, it is “the practice of everyday life” within the three-dimensional material structure of a physical house that turns it into a home space. The web of social relations, ideologies and phenomenological encounters within and around its physical boundaries, create the concept of a home to the human species. As John E. Annison notes, “It is the subjective experience of home that transforms the objective description of a place into a home”.¹ Indeed in 1991, environmental-psychology writer and architect Carole Després identified four models that account for the complex interrelations between the tangible and intangible attributes that define our perception of the *home* space: a territorial model, a psychological model, a socio-psychological model and a phenomenological model.

The territorial model revolves around the notion of marking and personalising one’s life space in a defined material entity; namely the house. The range and repetition of certain behaviours within and around its physical boundaries allows the individual to feel in control of his/her life space. Not only does the physical structure of a home provide the basic need for shelter against external environmental aggressions, it also provides a refuge from the ‘outside’ world. As Annison expounds Després observations, “This relates to the need for privacy and independence; the need to “get away” from external pressures and seek solace or at least be able to control the level and nature of demands upon one”.² We can extrapolate that the territorial framework of defining home relates to the physical boundary/markings between a private inhabited space controlled by the individual and a public one controlled by the system with all its social implications. As Pallasmaa notes, “Homes delineate the realms of intimacy and public life. It is frustrating to be forced to live in a space that we cannot recognise or mark as our personal territory”.³

¹ Annison, John E. 2000. "Towards a Clearer Understanding of the Meaning of "Home"." *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 25 (4): pp. 256

² Annison, pp. 257

³ The activities that people engage in privately differ from those exercised in public. As Pallasmaa explains, “We have private and social personalities and home is the realm of the former. Home is the place where we hide our secrets and express our private selves.” In Pallasmaa, Juhani. 1994. "IDENTITY, INTIMACY AND DOMICILE: Notes on the Phenomenology of Home." *Arkkittehti - Finnish Architectural Review*, pp. 7

The psychological perspective of the home regards it from the emotional needs of an individual. According to Després, this model accounts for two standpoints; a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective in which

the home is a subconscious expression of the self which permits the “definition and maintenance of the three different levels of the self: the ego, the id and the superego” and a Maslowian perspective which “enables individuals to achieve psychological well-being through providing for their physiological and safety need ... and a medium of expression for self-esteem and social respect needs together with a means of meeting the need for growth and achievement.”⁴

Although, I don't agree that home is a subconscious expression of the self since many of its fundamental elements which Pallasmaa refers to in his article are consciously selected by the individual, I agree that it is a medium by which we express our self-identities.⁵ The furniture we actively select, the art we choose to hang, the activities we engage in whether its playing video games, watching television, practicing yoga or praying are all physical manifestation of our personal identities and a reflection of our individual beliefs and values. Naturally, we formulate an emotional bond with the space that allows us to project ourselves; the home, and a sense of belonging and emotional attachment develops.

The socio-psychological model places the emphasis upon one's identity in relation to others within the defined space. Individuals act out certain social roles within the home space: the role of a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a wife, a husband, a host, an entertainer etc. Our prescribed and adopted social identities associated with this particular setting are played out on the home stage. Objects encased within these particular environs trigger images of the social functions we need to play. For example as Pallasmaa observes of the central table in the home, “the table was the stage for eating, sewing, playing, doing homework, socialising with neighbours and strangers etc.”⁶

On a different socio-psychological level, our homes serve as indicators of our social status in society. The material manifestations of our homes from external architecture style to the bed sheets we opt to use serve as signs of our economic status, educational level and social class. Kenneth O. Doyle notes of Cooper's interpretation of house symbolisms the following:

⁴ Annison, pp. 256

⁵ Pallasmaa argues that “home consists of three types of mental or symbolic elements: elements which have their foundation in the deep unconscious bio-cultural level (entry, hearth), elements that are related to the inhabitant's personal life and identity (memorabilia, inherited objects of the family); and social symbols intended to give certain images and messages to outsiders (signs of wealth, education, social identity, etc.)”, pp. 9. Since in modern days, hearth and fire no longer possess the traditional functional and symbolic values, the only other two elements are consciously incorporated into the homes of individuals.

⁶ Pallasmaa, pp. 11

The house façade and the interior design seem often to be selected so that they reflect how a person views himself both as an individual psyche, and in relation to the outside world, and how he wishes to present his self to family and friends.⁷

Perhaps Sir John Soane's home is one of the best examples to articulate the above. His displayed collection of worldly artefacts, literature and art that his guests would have encountered during their visits, served as indicators of his wealth, power and wide knowledge of global cultures (*see Fig. 1*).



Figure 1 Soane Museum, formerly home to architect Sir. John Soane displaying his Ancient Greek and Roman artefact collection

The final perceptual model of the home space according to Després observations, suggests that it is the dynamic process of dwelling that changes over time which creates the home experience. From basic physiological activities like eating, sleeping and copulating to more formative and developmental ones like cooking, parenting and home-making; the true essence of the home lies in its

phenomenological dimension as Pallasmaa notes, "A home is also a set of rituals, personal rhythms and routines of everyday life. Home cannot be produced all at once; it has its time dimension and continuum and is a gradual product of the family's individual's adaptation to the world".⁸

After defining the home space from a material, emotional and social perspective, we need to review our understanding of a cultural space. Social anthropologist Mary Douglas states that "any culture is a series of related structures which comprise social forms, values, cosmology, the whole of knowledge and through which all experience is mediated".⁹ In short, we may regard culture as the way of life of a set people.¹⁰ This implies that culture is continuously produced. In fact, culture is daily created and its collective tangible and intangible (language, beliefs, values, rules etc.) produce as well as its consumption over time is what we acknowledge to be culture. Although, we may not actively register this fact, as de Certeau observes, we certainly are makers of culture.

⁷ Doyle, Kenneth O. 1992. "The Symbolic Meaning of House and Home: An Exploration in the Psychology of Goods." *American Behavioural Scientist* 35 (6): pp. 790-791

⁸ Pallasmaa, pp. 3

⁹ Douglas, Mary. 1988. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Ark Paperbacks, pp.

¹⁰ Elvin Hatch states in Adam and Jessica Keeper's *The Social Science Encyclopaedia* that culture "consists of conventional patterns of thought and behaviour including values, beliefs, rules of conduct, political organisation, economic activity and the like which are passed on one generation to the next by learning ... the concept of culture provides a set of principles for explaining and understanding human behaviour".

The 'making' in question is a production, a poiesis – but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of 'production' (television, urban development, commerce etc.) and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves 'consumers' any place in which they can indicate what they make or do with the products of these systems. To a rationalised, expansionist ... spectacular production corresponds another production, called 'consumption'. The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.¹¹

If this is the case, then all space occupied by humans can be deemed cultural. The streets we walk through on our way to work, the classrooms we sit in acquiring new knowledge, the parks we play at, the pubs we socialise in etc. all are spaces in which culture is produced and consumed.

However, my observation of the spaces we deem to be cultural reveals certain key characteristics that discounts many spaces including the above examples. It is important to note that these traits are based on observation of universal practices and thoughts and should not be regarded as concrete criteria.

First, a cultural space needs to be materially defined. It cannot be an imperceptible mental or emotional space, but rather a physically outlined place.¹² This maybe a result of its second key characteristic; namely that it must be a publicly accessible space. It is not a space that is shared only by one or two people (like intimate and personal spaces), but accessed by a collective public. This allows the space to harbour shared emotions, activities, thoughts and sensations; another crucial feature of cultural spaces. As noted earlier, public spaces are controlled by systems rather than individuals since they need to accommodate multiple individual needs, individual thoughts and individual actions.

Traditionally, these shared emotions and activities revolved around the arts and creativity. In fact until today, a large number of people believe it to be so. For example, the official government website of the city of Seattle in Washington, USA, defines a cultural space as, "all spaces whose primary purpose is to present or support artists and their art ... these include but are not limited to museums and galleries, live theatres and cinemas, bookstores and record stores, live music venues, and multidisciplinary arts spaces. These spaces are typically open to the public".¹³ This collective and shared quality of cultural spaces provides an opportunity for cultural and social heritage reflection which culminates into its most celebrated feature; the ability to preserve and exhibit culture.

¹¹ de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *General Introduction To The Practice of Everyday Life [1980]*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkley, California: University of California Press, pp. 65

¹² New age media gave birth to the digital space which although is not tangibly defined, the allocation of dedicated URLs in effect plays the same role as the physical boundaries in the material world.

¹³ Seattle.gov., 'Office of Arts & Culture | Seattle – Cultural Space – A Definition of Cultural Space'. N.p. 2015. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

In light of the above, the home space falls short in two of our perceived cultural space defining criteria; public accessibility and the preservation & exhibition ability. As indicated earlier, home is a private space. It is accessed by the home keeper (owner, tenant or whoever claims legal rights over the place) and those he/she/they wilfully grants access to. Whereas cultural spaces should be accessible by members of the public even if certain restrictions are applied.¹⁴ In fact, we give more weight to this feature since many homes were turned into cultural spaces once they ceased to be private entities. For example, the Leighton House Museum in Holland Park, London, was a private home for the painter and sculptor Sir Frederic Leighton from 1869-1896 (*see Fig. 2*). During his lifetime, this private property was not regarded as a cultural space despite the fact that it was occupied by an artist in which he practiced his art and sheltered numerous treasures and artefacts. However, once the house was opened to the public in 1929 and officially listed in 1961 as an English heritage site, it became a cultural space.¹⁵

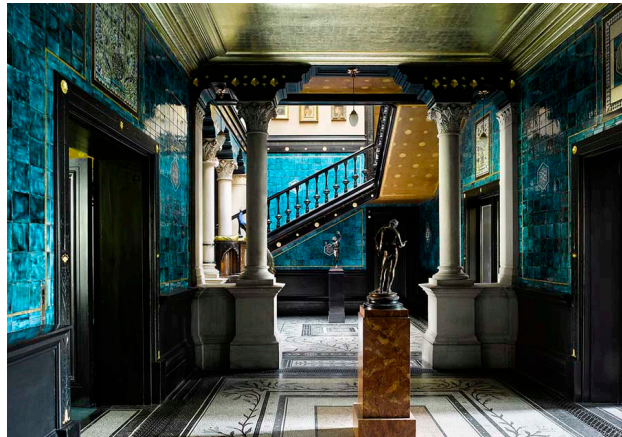


Figure 2 Leighton House Museum Entrance Hall, Holland Park, London

We also came to believe that the primary role of a cultural space is to preserve and exhibit the remains of a culture. Evidently, this belief was brought about by the birth of the museum, but it is important to note that the preserved and exhibited cultures do not have to be ancient. Traditional cultural spaces like the theatre and opera houses exhibit through live performance. Many galleries exhibit contemporary art and design in their outlets. In short, it is the functional role of preservation and exhibitionism rather than the actual materials preserved/exhibited that deems a place as a cultural space.

This is best exemplified by the growing number of 'unusual tourist destinations'. For example, decommissioned prisons like the Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, USA became a cultural place where visitors are toured around the prison cells. The zebra crossing on Abbey Road, London where the Beatles band shot the cover photo for their album Abbey Road in 1969 became a modern cultural destination (*see Fig. 3*). The Churchill War Rooms; the former underground bunker that sheltered the

¹⁴ Public access restrictions can take various forms: economic, so that an individual is granted access after paying a certain fee; social, so that an individual is granted access if he/she belongs to a certain group (groups can be defined by nationality, sex, age, ethnic origin etc.),

¹⁵ Historic England Organisation. 2015. *The National Heritage List - Leighton House*. April 12. Accessed April 12, 2015. <http://list.historicengland.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1191541>. It appears that cultural spaces need to be officially acknowledged by the system, in this case, the Historic England Organisation; the official English Heritage authority body. The same is true of the Freud Museum, Dr. Johnson's House, Soane's Museum and many others.

British government during WWII is one of London's official tourist sites. All of the above cited examples are deemed to be cultural places because of their preservation and exhibition role.



Figure 3 During the 45 years celebration anniversary since the photo was captured for the Beatles album cover. Abbey Road zebra crossing became a tourist cultural destination

Home on the other hand, is not a place where culture is preserved or exhibited. It is a place in which we dwell and thus is a place in which we create and consume culture.¹⁶ But, must a cultural space be only a place for culture preservation and exhibition? Can we not regard this culturally dynamic form in which we daily exist physically, mentally and spiritually, a cultural place! Is culture a one dimensional entity that is expressed solely

through its preservation and exhibition! If culture is "a set of principles for understanding and explaining human behaviour", then surely the place where these principles are set and where humans interact is cultural.

Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago argue that "museums [the ultimate cultural spaces] are essential sites for the fabrication and perpetuation of our conception of ourselves as autonomous individuals with unique subjectivities."¹⁷ Such definition applies just as well to the home space. Although we may not be actively propagating our *poetic habitation* to a mass public in our home spaces, we undiscerningly affirm our individuality and *Being* in the surrounding social landscape.¹⁸ Perkins and Thorn state that "homes (dwellings) and the way they are used (dwelling) are significant places for the creation of transformation, tranquillity, complacency, stability, meaning, conventional behaviour, sociability and privacy. They are also at the centre of experiences of desire, fear, anxiety and loss."¹⁹ In short, homes are place where we come to be.

Culture is created through the formulation of our individual identities and expression of our beliefs and value system. This takes place in the home, in the street, at school, at work and every place we

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger argues that "human beings dwell in that they stay (are at home) on the earth, under the sky, before the divinities, and among the mortals." He regards these living dimensions as "phenomena that stand out from an underlying unity" which he refers to as *fourfold*. His description of these phenomena indicates his interpretation of the notion of dwelling as a *poetic habitation*. See Wheeler, Michael, "Martin Heidegger", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/heidegger/>>

¹⁷ Preziosi, Donald, and Claire Farago. 2004. *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp. 3

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger defines the concept of Being by introducing the notion of Dasein, "That entity in its being which we know as human life; this entity in the specificity of its being, the entity that we each ourselves are, which each of us finds in the fundamental assertion: I am". As such, *Being* accounts for the human entity in all its forms of being taking into consideration the priori conditions (which we may regard as culture). See Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Chapter 7 from *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*, edited by Chris Kul-Want, Columbia UP, 2010, pp. 118 - 148

¹⁹ Perkins, Harvey C., and David C. Thomas. 2012. "Houses and Homes." In *Place, Identity and Everyday Life in a Globalizing World*, by Harvey C. Perkins and David C. Thomas, 72-89. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 82

inhabit. However, homes are one of the most essential sites in which we reap the benefits of our cultural creations; it is the space in which the concept of consumer culture is in full operation.²⁰ As Pallasmaa notes, “Home is structured around a few foci consisting of distinct functions and objects. The ... types of elements may function as foci of behaviour and symbolisation”.²¹

We consume the material traits (goods and services) of consumer culture in our homes. From the food we eat to the leisure activities we engage in, our consumption patterns that are usually informed by our surrounding culture as Perkins and Thorn note, “Household members are influenced in their consumption choices by a globalised network of popular print and electronic media ... Residents seek and receive advice from these media about the appropriate way to live and make their homes”²² are what create our very individuality and being.

In establishing the crucial role that the home space plays in the formation of culture; namely its production and consumption, I argue that it should be regarded as a cultural space. Indeed it lacks public access, but this simply turns it into a private cultural space. In fact, we recognise our homes to be cultural spaces since we started initiatives like OpenHouse in major cities across the world from London to Perth. The aim is to learn about the “urban fabric of our community [since it] has a strong impact on us on an everyday basis, but we never learn about it in schools”.²³ The OpenHouse not only breaks the accessibility barrier of this private cultural space, it also lends it an exhibitionist role like that of the museum, since we openly invite people to view how we come to be (*see Fig. 4*).

Culture, like the home is a concept loaded with ideology and inundated with theories. There are no definitive descriptions for either and hence our perceptions of them are malleable and can continue to evolve. Home may not be regarded as a traditional cultural space, but neither is a zebra crossing nor a virtual chat room. Our views continue to evolve as we progress with our culture.



Figure 4 179 Goldhawk Road residence in West London was one of the highlighted buildings in OpenHouse 2014. Members of the public were allowed to visit the interiors of this private home on a first come basis.

²⁰ Consumer culture regards the act of buying and selling goods not only from their economic perspective, but also from the social and psychological motivations.

²¹ Pallasmaa, pp. 9

²² Perkins and Thorn, pp. 79

²³ Open-City Architecture Education Organisation. 2015. *About Open House*. April 13. Accessed April 13, 2015. <http://www.openhouselondon.org.uk/about/>

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