

## **Cultural and Social Issues in Housing Theory and Education: Essay on Dwelling Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

This paper introduces a project developed for college students at a senior level and in a graduate program of architectural design curriculum, taking the Seminar on Housing Theory. The intention of this writing assignment is to provide students with an opportunity to examine and articulate their personal views about dwelling issues, so as to better prepare for future design practice, applying the key relationships between human needs and particular design responses.

Students are asked to recall their personal dwelling experiences as they relate to various stages of their life and development. They are encouraged to think in terms of the environmental character of a place and its significance, illustrated by images, particular events, involved participants, and using other descriptions or questions that evolve as relevant in this process. In order to bring their investigation to conclusion, and with the intention to broaden the awareness of the personal and common attitudes being discussed, students are encouraged to address additional considerations such as: current dwelling experiences and concerns; understanding of important human developmental and dwelling needs characteristic for specific group, family type, or individual case as appropriate; context of physical environmental conditions; social and community issues; personal preferences for particular housing forms and their characteristics, etc. The format of this essay is expected to relate to the nature of the issues and situation students would be describing, incorporating descriptive verbal and graphic information as appropriate. Suggested forms include analytical report, descriptive essay, poem, or a personal letter, selected to best share and articulate personal thoughts.

As an example of phenomenological approach in housing theory, this class assignment may also offer a potential research application strategy for educators who seek to enhance architectural design curricula integrating qualitative research methodologies.

# 1 Introduction

The student project discussed in this paper has evolved over a period of more than ten years. Since it was first conceived during my own graduate studies and few years later introduced as a reflective essay assignment for the students of seminar course that I had been teaching, this project has undergone several modifications.

In order to explain the nature, structure, and purpose of an exercise contained in the project, it is important to first present the issues relevant to the seminar course topics as they have been discussed in selected literature on home and its environment. The curriculum and characteristics of academic program, within which this seminar course has been taught, will be discussed as the context for the process of its development, other related projects in the course, and opportunities for author's future pedagogical directions. In the final section of this paper, the key impacts of the essay assignment will be considered in the light of personal reflections that the students have been willing to share.

## 1.1 Dwelling issues in selected literature

The role and significance of home for human life and wellbeing has been recognized in qualitative studies researching relationships between physical environment and human behavior, discussing the complex meanings of the notion of home. These studies have been based on various viewpoints and conducted through a wide range of approaches -- from those belonging to research traditions of psychology, sociology, and geography, to anthropology and phenomenological philosophy.

The study entitled "Home and Homelessness" by Kimberly Dovey [1] introduces the available literature on dwelling issues and meanings of home. This text offers a thorough and comprehensive literature review, which may provide key conceptual framework for selection of readings for the seminar course by rendering a relevant theoretical context for the topics to be discussed by the students. Dovey's study distinguishes the concepts of 'house' and 'home' within temporal and socio-cultural orders and discusses the aspects of identity, connectedness, dialectics of home, process of becoming-at-home, and the properties of homelessness. Dovey's essay first compares the concepts of 'house' as a physical dwelling form, with a 'home' as an experienced meaning - "an emotionally based and meaningful relationship between dwellers and their dwelling places" (p.34). Then, Dovey describes orders, processes, and conditions of our orientation in and connectedness with the world through home and becoming-at-home, finally contrasting them to the phenomenon of homelessness.

As a spatial order, according to Dovey, home can be described acknowledging the distinction between 'conceptual space' and 'lived space', also discussed by Bollnow [2]. In the 'conceptual space', home is viewed as 'abstract and objective-measurable', and in the 'lived space' home is experienced through our body's triaxial structure (front/back, left/right, up/down), gravity, and our actions in space, phenomenologically expressed as "being-in-the-world" by Heidegger [3] and Merleau-Ponty [4]. As a temporal and socio-cultural order, the home has been studied in relation to the spatial order and described through the sense of familiarity with past experiences, spatial patterns and dichotomy of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' discussed by Relph [5] and Appleyard [6] as well as through occurrence of various patterns and rituals of environmental experience and behavior.

The home has also been described relative to dimensions of space, time, and society, through human concerns such as 'who' we are and 'how' we are at home, as it reflects on development of our identity and connectedness. However, according to Dovey the view towards the phenomenon of home, presented in terms of above introduced conceptual viewpoints, is weak due to a resulting picture of home's static qualities. He then attempts to make these qualities more "alive" by understanding the home in terms of "dynamic processes through which the order, identity, and connectedness of home come into being" (p. 44). Through presenting research that acknowledges dimensions of home that include 'spatial dialectics', 'social dialectics', and 'dialectics of appropriation', the author brings forward

the examples from the literature that illustrate some cultural manifestations of the process of becoming at home. In the final section, Dovey turns to the problem of homelessness and presents this phenomenon in a contemporary context including the implications and suggestions for future research. This discussion describes the causes of homelessness and research addressing the issues of its emergence and development by following the homelessness's particular properties: rationalism and technology, comodization, bureaucracy, scale and speed, the erosion of communal space, and professionalism. Although this text provides one of the strongest and most thorough overviews into the theoretical and practical issues on this subject, the author closes with the concerns about future relationships between research and housing design. Stressing the importance of experiential understanding of the properties of home and homelessness with the processes of their emergence, Dovey clearly articulates current need for their much closer integration.

Views on notion of home and concerns expressed by Dovey have been shared and addressed by other authors of literature discussing the home and at-home-ness, in the publications by Altman & Werner [7], Korosec-Serfaty [8], Hummon [9], Despres [10], Stefanovic [11], Pallasmaa [12], and others. However, literature on notion of home, or even more general concern with the residential design issues, are not typically included in curricula of mainstream architectural design education in the majority of existing accredited professional architectural design degree programs nation wide. Therefore, the seminar course to be presented here was created with the intention to outline a direction for the students to build their own version of a link necessary for informed and responsive residential design practice.

## 2 Academic curricular issues

As part of the College of Architecture, Planning and Design, undergraduate and graduate academic programs of Department of Architecture offer elective courses to students of related design disciplines including Landscape Architecture, Interior Architecture, and Regional and Community Planning, as well as to the students attending other academic programs at Kansas State University. Majority of required design studios and professional support courses rely on projects that exemplify current commercial trends in community planning, building industry, and typical design practice, attempting to respond to the national accreditation standards per each discipline.

Multidisciplinary college structure is gradually allowing for the individual academic programs to develop their own versions of interdisciplinary collaboration by developing more diverse educational opportunities. Elective seminar courses of the Architectural Design Department are offered in addition to the college programs' core curriculum requirements, developed by faculty members as an opportunity for individual professors to link their course offerings to their own research focus and professional experience. The seminars and other electives are generally recommended by university academic advisors to individual students, and may be selected each semester from offerings that include courses providing professional content material, and range to ones whose focus and format may include cultural, social, and experiential aspects.

While taking such opportunity to develop a seminar course based on personal academic and professional interests, my seminar course **Theory of Housing: A Cross-cultural Perspective** has evolved over the years, attracting very diverse groups of undergraduate and graduate students who were open to non-conventional pedagogical approaches and interpretive design theory investigation. Their participation, feedback and influence on the course structure will be addressed while discussing the stages of its evolution.

## 2.1 Issues in dwelling: course development process

As a designer experienced in multi-family housing design, as a researcher interested in learning about a relationship and process that may develop for an individual or a family while attempting to make their home, and being myself in a similar situation trying to make a home with my family in a foreign country, I have become more aware of characteristics of such human condition. I have also found myself getting more and more involved in that process by learning from various stages and facets of my particular experience. My cultural background, personal aspirations, design profession, research interests, and roles within my family and contemporary society all influenced that process.

They also, however, helped me start thinking about the complexity, importance, and intensity of any homemaking efforts and suggested the necessity in human life to keep learning more about these issues in order to develop ideas and recommendations for improving the quality of human existence at personal, professional, academic, and societal levels [13]. Some key questions that arose from my growing awareness included:

How do people go about finding and making their home in our world?

What do they look for in order to commit to a particular place, and what help do they need and expect from the society?

Can the design professions offer support and solutions to the dwelling needs of a contemporary individual, family, or a group of people?

What can one individual and all of us members of this society do better in order to improve the human condition at this time and in the future?

These questions eventually became the base for the development of more clear ideas about another academic effort -- a development of a course, which would focus on forms and issues of dwelling. The intention of that course would be in providing an opportunity for undergraduate students in the program of architecture to focus on these human experiences and related societal and professional issues.

The course content was initially proposed as an attempt towards understanding the meaning of the notion of home, its essential dimensions, and processes that take place in it, within the context of contemporary human environment and society. In order to facilitate the students' mastery over the subject matter, the course would also offer several learning and feedback opportunities as required assignments including: projects, reading reports, group discussions, and presentations of individual students' research attempts. The course content and requirements were laid out in the outline with a tentative list of main themes and topics of the course, in order of their eventual presentation; a set of assignments and requirements for completion of the course; and in a tentative selection of sources for discussion of themes, issues, and topics in dwelling.

The order, through which the themes and topics of the course would be discussed, evolved from the intention to integrate and link societal, experiential, and aesthetic aspects of dwelling with the students' own experiences and provide them with a theoretical basis for understanding of the dwelling issues of the current human condition. These topics included:

### MEANINGS OF HOUSE, HOME & DWELLING

Individual, family, and group situations

Home, society, and homelessness

### CULTURAL INFLUENCES & DWELLING TRADITIONS

North American variations and commonalities

Other diverse regional forms

### HOME AS EXPERIENCE

Finding a place: needs, taste, reality

Making a commitment to a place: a decision  
Making a home: building, moving, remodeling  
Settling within a home-place: getting to know and belong  
Celebrations within a home  
Home as a workplace  
Maintaining a home  
Leaving one's home  
Revisiting old home: memory & imagination  
Symbolism: literature, art & architecture  
Home as identity

#### RESIDENTIAL DESIGN ISSUES AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Essential needs  
Current trends  
Future opportunities

#### DWELLING AND ENVIRONMENT PRESERVATION

Renovation, adaptation, restoration and conservation

### **2.2 Assignments and requirements**

This selection of exercises was developed in order to provide four effective vehicles for each individual student to understand the main issues of dwelling and master related readings. The assignments are listed with their evaluative weight in points:

#### 1 INTRODUCTORY ESSAY ASSIGNMENT (10pts)

Study Interests and Intentions.

#### 2 & 3 ASSIGNMENT OPTIONS (20pts x 2)

Reading Reports on Literature in Issues on Dwelling  
Residential Design or Mixed Use Design Project Proposal  
Presentation of Students' Research on Dwelling Forms  
Personal Residential Experience Report  
Essay on Cultural Issues in Dwelling  
Dwelling Meanings, Home Environments, etc.

#### 4 NOTEBOOK ASSIGNMENT (10pts)

Individual Learning Record and Conclusion.

The total value of all completed assignments would be 60 points of the total number of 100 points necessary for completing the course requirements. The 40 remaining points would be assigned for student attendance and class participation.

### **2.3 Current seminar description**

Above presented seminar structure allowed me to approach every new semester with enough flexibility to integrate individual students questions, interests, and preferences as proposals for course content adjustments and format modifications. Such attitude also supported a participatory process in the course development, and following is the description in most recent version:

## **Theory of Housing: A Cross-cultural Perspective**

### **COURSE CONTENT**

This seminar will review historical and contemporary housing issues by examining meaningful dimensions and physical aspects of dwelling. The exploration will include single and multi-unit housing examples from various cultures, focusing on:

- Dwelling forms and their evolution
- Physical context, cultural interpretations, and related societal factors
- Design issues and experience of a dwelling process
- Expression of symbolic and universal meanings
- Principles of responsive and supportive housing design.

### **STRUCTURE**

The course topics will be introduced through illustrated presentations by the instructor, group discussion sessions, course textbooks, class readings and handouts, various library materials, and/or community presentations. The students are expected to prepare and complete required readings and written assignments as scheduled, so that the meaningful discussions may be conducted in class.

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Reports: Students will produce four reflective essays responding to the key issues addressed in the course.

Oral presentations of individual research: Students will be encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of particular topics of their choice, i.e. case study analysis of a particular dwelling form; exploration of professional practice issues, programming, and design process; human science research on meanings of 'Home' as a relationship, etc. In addition to the course materials and recommended research materials, the information from the college AVA collection including video documentation and digital media will be available for particular research topics.

Residential design project: Several design workshops/discussions will be scheduled with the members of the community in order to explore the issues of participatory design and potential for community service project of a downtown housing development. Additional housing design projects, proposed by individual students, will also be considered for group exploration.

### **EVALUATION**

The students are required to submit all assignments completed individually and on time. Collaborative work will be approved when necessary. Specific formatting suggestions, requirements, and evaluation criteria will be announced for each assignment. Evaluation of student performance will be based on demonstrated ability to:

- Analyze and synthesize information discussed in class
- Interpret design examples based on the criteria proposed in the readings
- Communicate ideas in written and oral form effectively, and
- Demonstrate preparedness to participate fully in class meetings.

## **3 Essay on dwelling experience**

The early attempts to develop this project conceived of it as a 'residential experience report' where the students would be expected to record and interpret personal dwelling experiences using human-science research approaches. They would explore the experiential dimensions of residential environments by revisiting their past homes, or by gathering accounts of similar experiences from other people, who at some point revisited their previous places of residence.

In order to help students understand and interpret their research findings, the instructor would introduce several human science research methodologies relevant to the purpose of their assignments,

including approaches related to environmental aesthetics theories and methods of phenomenology. In their study process students would need to focus on several general aspects and steps in order to develop their particular research design strategies.

First, the students would record in a written and graphic form their most vivid memories of individually significant residential environments and events that took place there. Next, they would be asked to identify and interpret the relationships to be found in the gathered accounts between participants and associated spatial qualities and meanings of home. A content of the individual student's study would depend on the personal sensitivities and preferences for particular context and aspects, which would be involved in their study case. In the end, the students would be encouraged to share their findings with the classmates in order to discuss any commonalities or differences, which could be recognized in the class joint collection of experiential accounts and descriptions.

The educational value of this assignment would be based on its focus on meanings related to the lived experience as important source for understanding of the development of various theoretical and aesthetic considerations that may be encountered in architectural design of dwelling forms. Evaluation criteria included data gathering skills and thoroughness of interpretation.

### **3.1 Learning with the students**

Although it was first intended as one in a sequence of the course research projects, this exercise gradually transformed into more than a vehicle for student learning. It offered an opportunity for me to understand individual students' background as well as their personal aspirations. It then occurred to me that if introduced early in a semester this project could provide the students with possibilities for examining and articulating their personal views about dwelling issues, so as to better prepare for learning through focused and intentional participation in the seminar, in order to inform the development of their future design practice, applying the key relationships between human needs and particular design responses.

As the students were asked to recall their personal dwelling experiences and the ways in which they relate to various stages of their life and development, students have also been encouraged to think and communicate in terms of the environmental character of a place and its significance, illustrated by particular events, involved participants, available images, and using other descriptions or questions that evolve as relevant in this process. In order to bring their investigation to conclusion, and with the intention to broaden the awareness of personal, shared, and common attitudes being discussed, students have been encouraged to address additional considerations such as: current dwelling experiences and concerns; understanding of important human developmental and dwelling needs characteristic for specific group, family type, or individual case as appropriate; context of physical environmental conditions; social and community issues; personal preferences for particular housing forms and their characteristics, etc. The students are expected to propose a format of this essay as rational and creative attempt to relate the modus of communication to the nature of the issues and situation they would be describing. Suggested forms include, but are not limited to analytical report, descriptive essay, poem, or a personal letter, to best express and articulate personal thoughts, while also incorporating descriptive verbal and graphic information as appropriate.

### **3.2 Future directions**

This class assignment has brought to me a treasure of diverse creative insights that the students' young minds were inspired to share. The thoughts, memories, emotions, questions, hopes, desires and aspirations they were willing to share, helped me realize that educational vocation provides us with an multiple learning opportunities.

As my next step I hope to analyze and develop a qualitative interpretation project from the themes that arose in these essays, as they may offer an opportunity to understand the generational issues manifested in cohorts represented by the student groups I worked with.

Another hope for the work presented here is that, as an example of phenomenological approach in housing theory, intended to help better orient and inform pedagogical and architectural design practice, projects like the essay presented here may offer a potential research application strategy for educators who seek to enhance architectural design curricula integrating qualitative research methodologies.

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