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The construction of home in high density housing context Magali Paris - 2008



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Sensory Experiences of Home:

the construction of home in high density housing context

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1. Introduction

Our research takes place in the context of the dense city by wondering how is it possible to dwell together—today—in high density housing contexts. More precisely, we wonder how is it possible to reconcile, on the one hand, the willing of having its own “Home-paradise” and, on the other hand, the unavoidable condition of dwelling in cities as close to each other in a “huis-clos”.

In the first part of our paper, we propose to explore briefly the concept of dwelling through a pluridisciplinary literature review (human geography, sociology, environmental psychology and philosophy).

In the second part, we describe the phenomenological and ethnological methodology we have used and consecutive parts of the works we have implemented in situ.

In the results section, we present four different dwelling attitudes more or less oriented to the self or to the outside environment. We propose for each attitude one behavioural and/or material construction that engages one or more senses and satisfy particular motivations. We also describe the consequences of these constructions at the community scale.

Finally, in the last part, we propose critical discussion of the project: its strengths, its limits, and the future direction we can give to these research. The presented study should be regarded as an exploratory project based on interdisciplinary theory and methodology in the field of sensory urbanism.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Martin Heidegger (1954), dwelling is a way to exist in the world by acting on it. Human condition is directed by the vocation of the goddess Cura: we can not exist in the world if we have nothing to take care of, nothing to be devoted to (Harrison, 2007). Day by day, with little gestures that could have—but not necessarily—material impacts, residents make their house become “dwellable” (Breviglieri, 2006).

Following these concepts, we define dwelling as the process of making a place of existence a Home by taking care of the human, natural and built environment that surrounds us. Residents have in common the skill of adorning the surroundings of their house (Raymond, 1984). Gardening empowers the residents to adorn these surroundings and to take care of it in a special way. Gardening is “a close at hand form of leisure ac-

tivity" (Kaplan, 1973). Gardening consists of modelling soil and branches and taking care of flowers, leaves and fruits. It consists of modelling sensorial materials: perfumes, textures, colours and shapes (Laroze 1990). Moreover, Gardening contributes to the modelling and the care of Self and of neighbourhood relationships. Psychologists such as Rachel and Stephen Kaplan (1990) and Clare Cooper Marcus (2005) have demonstrated that gardening and the perception of the garden plays a major role in the construction of the self and the idea of Home. Moreover, according to numerous experiments of community gardens, gardening not only consists of manipulating raw materials but also of modelling human relationships (Lewis, 1924, Bass, 1987; Morton, Harrison, 2007).

Dwelling consists of becoming familiar with a place (Tuan, 1977). The familiarity process takes time. It requires satisfying some psychological primary needs as security, privacy, permanence, control, freedom and self-expression (Gunter, 2000). It permits to create some reciprocal affective bonds with social and physical familiar environment (Seamon, 1980; Prohansky, 1978; Tuan, 1977) and consists of constructing conceptual and material layers of familiarity. These layers of familiarity can be referred to the concentric static shells around the self (Moles, 1992) and also to dynamic distances between Self and the others that shape social interaction (Hall, 1966). In our study, we want to make a one step further by describing, on micro-level, according to the "microspherology" concept of Sloterdijk (1998), different multi-sensorial strategies implemented by people in order to build their layers of familiarity.

Our research focuses on the surroundings of the house, located between the private sphere and the common or public sphere. The surroundings of the house can tell the story of material and conceptual home

construction by sheltering behavioural and material features. According to Jay Appleton (1990), The "house façade" offers prospect and refuge perspective, and these two qualities combined ease the construction of home.

In this sense, therefore, we theorize that residents "construct sensorially" their home in order to protect the integrity of their self and to shape their relationships with neighbours.

3. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to present the importance of senses in everyday experience of Home by investigating different multi-sensorial (or inter-sensorial) strategies implemented by residents. These strategies are different ways, for the residents, to experiment and create their own environment. We claim that dwelling modern cities is a multi-modal experience (Augoyard, 1991; Bromberger, 2007; Sansot, 2006). The multi-modal perception of the dwelling environment, the everyday production and reception of sensorial signals through familiar activities and the sensory modelling of its own environment play a major role in the double movement between the inside and the outside that lead to make a place of existence a home.

To define the empirical frames of the study we assumed that human beings construct sensorially their home in two ways: materially and conceptually. First, residents construct materially the sensory environment they live in through action on and shaping it with their daily activities. Second, residents construct conceptually their home: they have memories, fantasies and expectations of their sensorial experiences that contribute to a subjective representation of their living environment.

Taking into account these assumptions, our research has been implemented through an interdisciplinary phenomenological perspective. In reference to Seamon (1980), the notion of immersion into the world and of world experience are crucial concepts for this study as a researcher's attitude questioning the in situ and as a way to understand residents' experience.

We have adopted the grounded theory approach to work on the topic (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that consists to extract hypothesis from the collected research material and permits to work toward a dynamical approach. Our evolutive methodology proposition consisted of more than one in situ visit and of constant feedback between data collection and analytical work in order to find the best fitting tools to work on multi-sensorial, everyday experience of Home.

We have proposed tools and techniques issued from social sciences. These tools and techniques could be suitable for the observation and the description of Home construction process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on each site. During our first visit, the interviews were focused on general features of the place and on the relations that residents have developed with their place. During second and further visits, the interviews were oriented towards description of multi-sensorial strategies of Home construction, their motivations and their impacts at the community scale. We assumed residents may have difficulties in speaking about daily life, expressing feelings and fantasies about their place, therefore we have used some techniques referring to the projective mechanism in order to facilitate this type of discourse. These projective techniques were oriented first to in situ perception (commented garden tours), second to spatial place representation (mental mapping, seasonal sensory images of the garden, visual reactivation upon pictures of the place) and social place representation

(sociability circles).

Then we proceeded with a content qualitative analysis of the gathered materials by using Nvivo 7.0 software.

4. Results

We revealed, throughout our analysis, different inter-sensory strategies of home construction. In high-density housing contexts, we observed that building home consists of shaping it and behaving within it according to the way we would like to be related to neighbours. We organized these inter-sensory strategies in 4 groups: 4 dwelling attitudes more or less oriented to Self or to the world: first "Turned on to Self", second "Opened to the world", third "Within the community" and last "On the limits..."

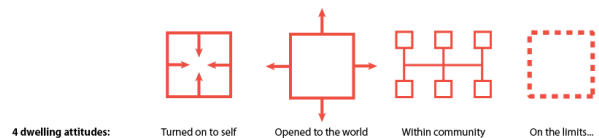


Figure 1: Dwelling attitudes.

Shapes of the house surroundings and behaviours adopted by residents within it constitute a living and unstable landscape, a "sensoryscape", where sensorial signals—produced and received—are circulating. We present 4 situations involving the senses, each one is related to one of the four dwelling attitudes. Either the situation was observed or/and it has been told to us by the residents. We describe them answering the following questions: which senses do the residents involve while acting? Why did they act this way, what motivates them to act this way? What are the consequences of their action at the community scale, how neighbours perceive their action and how do they act back?

By answering these questions, we de-

scribe design process of home construction implemented by residents through their behaviours and the manner they shape their house surroundings. This manner of talking about how residents dwell sensorially could be the sketch of an interdisciplinary tool that get disciplines oriented to the individual and disciplines oriented to the space to enter into dialogue. We show that senses are mobilised by residents in order to satisfy basic psychological needs. Moreover the reception and the production of senses are embedded in the management of neighbourhood relationships. Finally, the sensory way residents feel, act and interact transforms the common conception of a place, far beyond its spatiality.

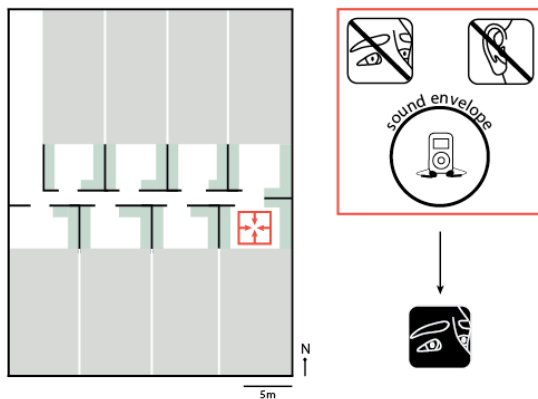


Figure 2: Being "turned on to self".

The dwelling attitude of being "Turned on to Self" could be illustrated with closure to outer sensorialities. Sometimes, Arnaud is staying alone and according to him in tranquillity in the middle of his terrace whereas every neighbour could come to him as there is no door closing his terrace and every neighbour could partially see him as gardens are separated from each other's with semi-permeable bamboo hedges. He could be there in tranquillity since he is listening to his iPod. Therefore, he is less receptive to sound and visual signals and show to the others by wearing his headphones that he does not want to communicate with them, that he wants to be outside the social world for a while. During this intimate

time, anchored in the middle of his terrace, sensorially isolated from his environment, Arnaud creates his own soundscape. Each member of the community understands the code "iPod listening" that Arnaud created to mean he want to be alone. Residents could also isolate themselves by avoiding to come into visual contact or by adopting a "not to get caught" behaviour by hiding behind and remaining silent. The shaping of the garden could also be the support of different closure process that involve touch and sight and sometimes smell sense.

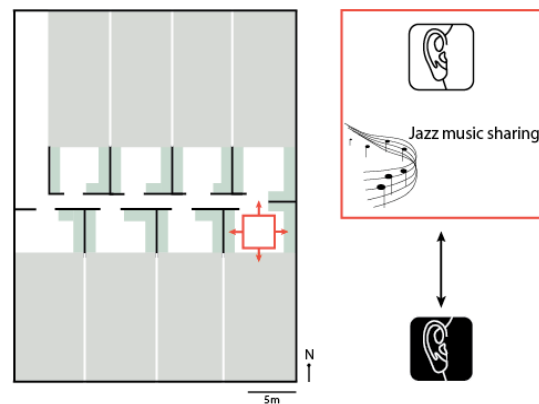


Figure 3: Being "opened to the world".

At a different time, Arnaud adopts another dwelling attitude: he is "Opened to the world". Being "Opened to the world" consists of being sensorially receptive to neighbours and willing to get caught by them. Arnaud is very fond of jazz music, in common with 2 of his neighbours. A jazz drummer lives and practices there. When Arnaud is in the mood of exchanging with neighbours, he puts jazz music on, quite loud so as it to be understood, to invite neighbours to share it with him and to come to see him. Reciprocally, Arnaud could be sound receptive for listening to jazz music. Arnaud described his dwelling place as a place where personal worlds circulate. This circulation leads to the construction of common preferences. To make its music being heard is often a feature of the spatially introverted places we studied. The residents want to

show their preferences and share them with neighbours. The house surroundings shelter limits very permeable to senses. On the façade of the house—through curtains, windows and doors—and through different spatial sequences of the garden, residents could adopt behavioural codes mainly related to sound and sight in order to communicate and to share moments.

By learning how to dwell together, the residents build community rules based on the behaviours that should be adopted and shape their personal gardens and the common spaces according to a community spirit. The attitude of being “Within the community” consists of influencing each other’s on lifestyle and garden shaping, of taking common decisions and of acting together according to common motivations. Arnaud and his wife decided to light their garden, mainly composed of 3 bamboo hedges on each of its sides, with hangings—called PodLens—hooked in the bamboo. PodLens are quite expensive hangings, created by a famous designer. They make reference in the socio-professional world of Arnaud’s community. Seeing the lighting in the bamboo that the PodLens created and after talking together about it, 5 others neighbours chose to buy the same hangings. Therefore, 6 neighbours out of 8 have set up the same garden lighting. According to them, this lighting is important as a part of community identity, it creates a kind of continuity between the different houses visually and mentally as it is a shared choice. For the residents, the bamboo and its lighting is the main sensory feature of their dwelling place. The spatial common choices often concern the garden separation and therefore often conditioned the closure and the opening of the garden.

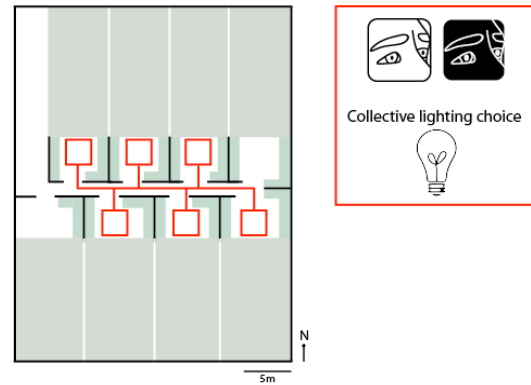


Figure 4: Being “Within the Community”.

The behavioural codes are adopted in order to avoid to trouble. Behavioural codes are a set of rules adopted for the community comfort.

Finally, we bring to the fore the dwelling attitude that is “On the limits...”. In some contexts, behavioural codes are not systematically understood and private and common surroundings could be more or less definite. Furthermore, having control over the home limits is a psychological basic need. Therefore, residents could focus their attention in-between their home and outside by shaping its limits.

Josette (figure 5) is dwelling in a ground floor apartment totally different spatially and socially from Arnaud’s one. The 15-storey building is opened to the public space. Josette reaches her home through a little garden she set up on her doorstep and stairs and on a small public path that reaches the street. Her garden is accessible from the public space and more or less respected by the passer-by. Josette sets up a “to be seen garden” that is always changing according to seasons and special events as Christmas, and she has to pay an everyday attention, she has to be there, to control that what she did is not being damaged by people and domestic animals. By coupling sight and touch senses, Josette try to signal her presence and

to give intimacy to her home surroundings. Her “on the limits...” dwelling attitude consists of distancing others from her home by investing continuously the space. Even if limits are more defined, like they are in Arnaud’s dwelling place, limits are always prospect places from where it is possible to observe and control. Private places could always be invaded, with glances, objects, sounds and smells, even if their limits are impassable. Limits are places of tension. Each resident shapes their limits and behaves around them in a very personal way, that’s there, on the limits, that the affordances of a place are strongly revealed.

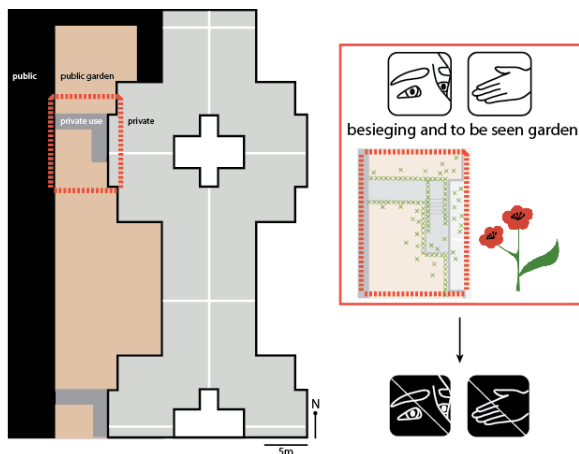


Figure 5: Josette’s Apartment.

5 Discussion

The present results describe the process of multi-sensory construction of Home. We have assumed that residents construct sensorially their Home to protect the integrity of their self while shaping their relationships with neighbours. Therefore our research has been focused on the interactions between residents and their dwelling environment to make their place a Home. We have described 4 dwelling attitudes illustrated by behavioural and place shaping actions. These actions involve different senses, they are led by personal and collective motivations and they have consequences on the community scale, on inter-personal relationships and on

the community organization.

We presented each dwelling attitude through one example. Each dwelling attitude could be incarnated in very different situation according to the space organization, to the sensory properties of the dwelling place, to the social composition and to the dwelling times. The described dwelling attitudes characterise the affordances of a place, a scope of possibilities that the residents can seize to build their Home.

The evolving methodology, we proposed for the study, permits to follow the changes of places and people and to define some stakes of the conception based on evidences of usage. We have demonstrated that a process of home construction goes beyond the construction of the building. Residents make their place a Home by adaptive and creative actions. This is the way they produce unique, multi-sensory ambiances in their dwelling place. These studies reveal the competencies developed by the residents through dwelling and permits to think space as an evolving place.

By making the sensorialities the key concept of our study, we gathered and described very subtle, often ephemeral, strategies that facilitate the relations with and to the world. These strategies, observed on very different, individual or community level, provide the feeling of security, control over the environment and continuity, therefore permit to call a place Home.

The results demonstrate also that the management of “dwelling together” in the dense, urban housing context pass more by multi-sensory strategies of coping than is based on static space limitations proposed at the beginning of the project. Therefore for further dense buildings, it should be worthy of investigation, with observation of inhabitants actions in order to learn from the process.

We hope some of the presented evidences

may serve to reconsider some assumptions of conception. Moreover, these results lead us to think about the positive consequences of the residents' actions. By giving residents control over their place and giving them freedom of "project's expression", attachment to place could be facilitated.

The main limits of the present study are due to its exploratory character and time limitation. The budget and the duration of the study on intimacy (one year) only made possible punctual meetings with residents, the lack of feedback from residents resulted in the need and the danger of the subjective interpretation of the data abuse. The long-term, qualitative evaluation of housing operations could make possible to follow the experience of home construction through a long-term immersion within the community.

We are also conscious that there is a need for further work to make these results useful for design. The language of usages and the evolving way of thinking about the project is still unusual. Therefore there is a need for an interdisciplinary work over the vocabulary to make it understandable and useful for architects. A more comparative and collaborative approach can lead us to more useful and universal results, that might be used as a tool for designers.

In this paper we propose an exploratory study on the sensory experience in a pluridisciplinary context. We think that getting the user-centred disciplines (psychology, anthropology, sociology) and the site-centred disciplines (architecture, landscape, urbanism) can be an effective way to work on the ambiances field and place shaping problematic.

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