Home as Paradox

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In assessing all that we have learnt in recent decades about the concept and experience of 'home' one of the key insights is surely what a tantalizing concept it is; how little we know and how far we are from getting to the 'bottom' of it. While there remains a certain frustration at the ambiguities that persist, at the slippages of meaning, my sense is that this is the nature of home and the source of its great interest. If we examine the literature base on theories of 'home' as reflected in this volume we find that it begins primarily in phenomenological geography in the 1970s (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; Buttimer 1980) and then expands into environmental psychology and 'environment-behaviour' research from the mid-1980s after the publication of Altman and Werner's (1985) edited volume 'Home Environments'. A fine review article by Despres (1991) summed up the work of the 1980s and a great deal more has been published since (Benjamin et al 1995; Groat 1995). Over this time we have learnt a great deal about the meaning of 'home' as a place of security and order, an order that is at once spatial and social. The experience of 'home' is also a form of ontological security with a crucial connection to constructions of 'self' and the question of 'spirit' (Marcus 1996). It is a mirror or symbol of the self, a place where social and cultural identities become expressed and stabilized. The experience of 'home' is largely unselfconscious and unrecognised until threatened; distinguished in this regard from the much more conscious 'sense of place'. It is a mode of dwelling that Heidegger terms *zuhanden*, the world of everyday engagement, contrasted with the *vorhanden* mode of detached contemplation (Heidegger 1962). The meanings of home are established by repetition and memory; in a marvellous phrase by Freya Stark it is: "…a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it" (quoted in Tuan 1977: 144). Home is an experience that repeats, a 'refrain' that gains depth over time and may become more intense as we age.

A common thread in this research is the attempt to explore the experiential dimensions of 'home' through qualitative research techniques where the semi-structured interview has been the most fruitful of methods. Yet one thing that has become clear is that the experience of home is largely unselfconscious; indeed it is in part defined by a profound sense of familiarity that we take for granted until it is threatened. While interviews may unearth the 'taken for granted' and sub-conscious, they may not. To what degree does the interview privilege the conscious effects of dislocation rather than the 'taken for granted' experience? In William James' terms, to what degree is one studying the 'me' ('my home') rather than the 'I' ('I am at home'). The danger lies in reducing the topic to its researchable aspects and then find we may have missed the point. This is not to suggest that interviews are not an appropriate method, merely that they may not be enough. Research on 'home' opens up a philosophical abyss for which there can be no easy solution. This is linked to the slippages in meaning between 'house' and 'home'; between home as spatial and social; between home as house, neighbourhood, landscape, city and nation.

Stories

One of the lessons evident in many of the chapters of this volume lies in the value of particular stories or narratives which emerge from interviews. Stories open windows onto particularities and

contingencies in the experience of home. While they are not dependable or reliable in terms of building a knowledge base, they often generate insights to further work and expose ambiguities. Stories often have a potent capacity, not just to move us, but to unsettle assumptions and to provoke a re-thinking. One that sticks in my mind is about the man in Kansas who wanted to claim and move a public boulder (which saved his father's life) as a memento, before discovering that the boulder had the same significance for others (Baker & Scheidt, this volume). This story reminds us of the role of seemingly insignificant places and landmarks as cognitive 'hooks' for potent memories, and that such meanings often do not surface until threatened. It raises questions about the possibility of transferring the meanings of home from place to place as it exposes one of the key ambiguities of 'home' as a conception that is at once both private and public. And in doing so it raises the most important question of all—what happens when conflicting conceptions of home intersect in the same place?

In a rather different story, the 2003 film 'House of Sand and Fog' explores such a theme through a narrative wherein two quite different conceptions of home compete for the same house.[i] A Californian woman is evicted from the house she inherited from her father due to a bureaucratic mistake. The new owner is a former Iranian military leader in exile, desperate to re-create a new sense of home in the same house. The power of the film derives in part from a reversed allegory with the situation in Israel/Palestine – the home is at once a house and a world, both local and global; and any resolution is uneasy. These local/global tensions are also apparent in the 2004 film 'Goodbye Lenin', a comic story which portrays an ageing woman whose familiar sense of 'home' in East Berlin has collapsed along with the Berlin Wall while she was in a coma.[ii] In the attempt to protect her from the shock of capitalism, her loving son constructs her apartment as an illusion of the ideal socialist state—an illusion she plays along with when she realizes that his desires are also being met. To what degree is the treatment of the aged, the desire to give them or place them in a 'home', based on illusion, stereotype, paternalism and a need to see the elders safely contained? This film also illustrates what Bachelard (1969) calls 'intimate immensity' – the potent ways in which small and intimate spaces can evoke a whole world or a life. And this is rarely more apparent than in the intimate spaces of the elderly.

To move to a more local and factual drama, I recently attended a public meeting about urban development in my own neighbourhood in suburban Melbourne. Led by actor Geoffrey Rush, a number of mostly middle-aged and elderly residents added their voices of opposition to what was perceived as 'inappropriate development'. They each spoke with passion of how long they had lived in a neighbourhood where the sense of 'home' and 'character' was now under threat. Yet there was no clear development proposal and this threat remained vaguely defined by terms like 'inappropriate, 'high-density' and 'overdevelopment'. While these threats may become real, this self-conscious proclamation of home as neighbourhood character and community was based on an imagined threat. I was also struck by the paradox that as residents age—as household size shrinks along with the capacity to drive and to look after a large garden—their best chance of remaining in the neighbourhood lies in the development of new and denser housing types. Walkable access to community facilities and public transport are keys to a sense of community for the elderly and they depend on at least medium urban densities. The paradox is that some of the changes necessary to provide a sense of 'home' in later life may be subject to fierce resistance in the name of preserving a sense of 'home'.

Finally, to an ancient story. Tantalus of Greek myth was accused by the gods of acquiring knowledge

humans should not have; he was punished by standing to his neck in water with fruit hanging above. Every time he tried to eat or drink, the fruit blew away or the water level sank. To be 'tantalized' is to see what we seek only to have it vanish when we seek it. Bauman (2001) uses this story as a window onto the burgeoning desire for an experience of 'community'. 'Community', like 'home', is taken for granted. The quest for 'community' tantalizes, suggests Bauman, because the experience cannot survive the moment of selfconsciousness.

> "Once it starts to praise its unique valour, wax lyrical about its a pristine beauty and stick on
> nearby fences wordy manifestos calling its members to appreciate its wonders and telling all
> the others to admire them or shut up—one can be sure the community is no more... a
> community speaking of itself is a contradiction in terms." (Bauman 2001: 12)

From this view the quest for 'community' and 'home' are after effects of their vulnerability and loss. The quest creates what Bauman terms 'peg communities', 'homes' as places for hanging provisional identities. The paradox of community is the paradox of home; both home and community are the 'doxa' of everyday life which become something else ('para-dox') when we turn them into subjects of research and contemplation. As our faith in the protection of the state declines, safety is sought in home, neighbourhood and community as a stranger-proof voluntary ghetto (Bauman 2001: 114).

Theories
Stories have a capacity to open up the ambiguities and contradictions of the experience of home but the task remains to research and to re-think it. My sense is that this task is best served by a broadening of the theoretical frameworks within which research questions are developed, to include a range of theorists whose work remains largely outside the current literature on 'home'. I want to start with the suggestion that the concept of 'home' has been wrongly conflated with the idea of 'essence'. The search for deeper meaning can easily embody the premise of a closure of meaning and identity as somehow fixed and immutable. Alternatively the experience of 'home' can be approached dialectically, as the product of conflict, contradiction and the play of difference. What if the tantalizing ambiguities of home are linked to its authenticities? As Berger (1992: 216) puts it: "Authenticity comes from a single faithfulness, that to the ambiguity of experience...". The ambiguities of home, the experiences that won't stabilize, can be where one finds authenticity. The paradox here is that the idea of home as a quest for essential, deep and unchanging meaning can have a conservative, stabilizing and even paralysing effect on formations of identity.

One of the fundamental dialectics of home is the inside/outside dialectic, founded on the distinction between 'home' and its 'other'. This can be linked to what Douglas (1966) long ago theorized as an opposition between purity and danger; a place of purity, strongly identified with the human body and the social body, is defended by socially mediated (yet universally prevalent) spatial rituals. Key examples are the symbolic rituals associated with bodily orifices and passage across them—food, sex and ablution. Such rituals identify a zone of purity and order while ritually defending the body against the perceived dangers of difference. This dialectic is embodied in the built environment which mediates the penetrations of 'otherness' into our lives; it keeps 'difference' and 'dis-ease' at bay. The inside/outside dialectic becomes ordered along the lines of closed and open, safety and danger, home and journey, familiar and strange, self and other, private and public. Practices of 'entering' bodies and buildings are universally given ritual

meanings about social identity and threats to it. The inside/outside dialectic structures the lifeworld with boundaries and thresholds, all strongly linked to the construction and protection of identity—it structures social relations between insiders and outsiders; between identities and differences.

The theories of Deleuze and Guattari are interesting in this regard since they generally involve a privileging of the journey, the 'flow of desire', the 'line of flight' and 'nomadic' modes of dwelling over a stable sense of home. Their interest is in identity formation, in 'becoming' rather than 'being'. Within this conception the experience of 'home' is like a 'refrain':

> I. A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath... Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a... calm and stable center in the heart of chaos. ...
> II. Now we are at home. But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space... The forces of chaos are kept outside as much as possible ...
> III . Finally one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself... One ventures from home on the thread of a tune...(Deleuze & Guattari 1987:313)

This passage outlines a process of establishing the sense of home as a "calm and stable center" which keeps the forces of chaos at bay. Yet this circle finally cracks open in a way "created by the circle itself". This is the dialectic of inside and outside, of home and journey, of identity and difference. Without a secure ontological centre there is no journey, no acceptance of difference. While the subject here is a child in the process of identity formation, how different is this at the other end of the lifecycle? Has the refrain of home become fixed and determined to repeat endlessly until death? Or does one continue to venture forth 'on the thread of a tune'? The usefulness of such theory lies in its focus on flows of 'desire' as the flows of life itself.

The work of Giddens on constructions of identity is interesting in this regard. Based in Heideggerian notions of being-in-the-world coupled with Erikson's theories of ego-identity, Giddens (1990: 92) argues the importance of 'ontological security' in identity formation. Closely linked to the phenomenology of 'home', ontological security is a confidence in the continuity of self-identity, strongly linked to the built environment as the place where such identities are produced and performed. The home is a protective cocoon, a way of seeing as much as an enclosure, which brackets out aspects of our world which would otherwise engulf us and cause paralysis of the will (Giddens 1991: 40). Giddens suggests that globalization and modernity have transformed the very tissue of everyday experience—the home is infused to its core with local/global tensions. This does not signal a loss of 'home', rather it is the end of the closed local home-place where singular identities are linked to semantic and spatial enclosure (Giddens 1990: 108). The creation of mock-historic 'homes' based on a retreat to a false history, a synthetic 'past' of the harmonious community, is not so much a creation of home as a nostalgic symptom of homelessness.

The concept of 'home' as unselfconscious experience, as everyday practice and as ontological security has a strong congruence with Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*. As Bourdieu (2000: 142-3) puts it:

> The agent engaged in practice knows the world... without objectifying distance, takes it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it, bound up with it; he inhabits it like a garment (*un habit*) or a familiar habitat. He feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of habitus...

This sense of home as *habitus* suggests that the experience of home is strongly enmeshed in practices of social power; the *habitus* conflates a 'sense of place' with a 'sense of one's place'. The *habitus* as home is an ideological formation where practices of power are driven underground in a kind of 'silent complicity' where: "The most successful ideological effects are those that have no words, and ask no more than complicitous silence" (Bourdieu 1977: 188). Bourdieu is also well known for his conceptions of social and symbolic capital. Social capital is popularly known through the ways that cohesive social networks with high levels of trust are linked to a strong sense of 'community' and high levels of engagement in public life (Putnam 1995; Portes 1998). Networks of social capital are often spatially embedded in pedestrian networks, social settings and valued places. Yet for Bourdieu the production of social capital is also the reproduction of social class. The sense of home as a retreat to a community of like-minded people is not necessarily benign. The home place also becomes what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic capital'— a form of symbolic distinction that establishes and stabilizes social distinctions between people (Bourdieu 1984). The real estate market refuses to use the word 'house' because it doesn't carry the symbolic capital of 'home'. The meanings of 'home' are thus formed in discourse and one of the opportunities for research would seem to be in combining discourse analysis with more traditional methods of research. These two dimensions of home, as symbolic and social capital, are not separate. All places establish forms of both social cohesion and of social distinction.

To conclude here with any sense of closure would undermine my purpose. Yet in the sense that the idea of home is identified with the return or the refrain, I will return to the idea that the desire for home, like the desire for community and authenticity, cannot approach closure without destroying what it seeks. At one level the quest for home is often driven by an essentialist desire to stabilize identity and exclude difference. Yet it does not follow that this quest can be conflated with such exclusion. The dialectic is always two sided—constructions of home are equally a product of homelessness and the unhomely. There are no roots without journeys. As the role of memory increases and that of the journey declines with age, to what degree do we acquiesce in the idea that the identity of the elders is fixed and finished? To what degree do we accept the idea of home as a closure of place experience and to what degree are we institutionalising the closure of life? The elders who are most alive are those whose sense of home is neither fixed nor finished.

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[i] Directed by Vadim Perelman; based on the novel by Andre Dubus III; Dreamworks, 2003.

[ii] Directed by Wolfgang Becker; written by Wolfgang Becker & Bernd Lichtenberg; Ocean Films, 2004.