Home Making: An Architectural Perspective

This essay is a contribution to the interdisciplinary rethinking of the home from an architectural perspective that was presented at the conference in Cambridge to clarify for nonspecialists in architecture how architects understand and use the concept of home and related terms, such as the house, dwelling, and domestic space. In this essay I want to provide a critical account of these concepts, drawing out relationships between architectural language, space, and social dynamics in order to consider how ideas and assumptions about social relations around gender, class, and “race” get translated into domestic space, embodied in the home, and represented in its spatiality. To give a sense of the historical and cultural specificity of domestic space—concepts and representations of home differ and change over time and place—I will consider briefly the Victorian home, the modernist house, and the postmodern dwelling.

Architectural language and thinking about domestic space are partly structured around a series of gendered binaries in which the preferred term privileges the dominant forces within architecture and society and has masculine connotations: designer/design, architect/occupants, production/consumption, and so on. Domestic space is, moreover, the lesser, disadvantaged term in another series of gendered binaries that also structure and inform architectural thinking and building. For example, architects traditionally value the design of public buildings over private homes, the design of the building’s exterior to its interior, and the building’s structure to its decoration. Susanna Torre’s Women in American Architecture (1976) and Dolores Hayden’s The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities (1981) were among the earliest and most powerful subversions of these oppositional categories. Their work and further feminist analysis, intertwined with Derridean deconstruction, has “broken open the hierarchical orderings” (Beckett and Cherry 1992, 2; see also Hughes 1996; Rendell, Penner, and Borden 2000). As Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry point out, feminist analysis has shaped engagement with material and “popular culture as sites for the contestation of meanings, arenas where new identities are forged, contesting subjectivities
formed. Fashion, design, architecture are intermeshed, interconnected in an analysis of the material relations between production and consumption, the social spaces where goods and desires are produced and consumed” (Beckett and Cherry 1992, 2).

It is at just these intersections of things and spaces, of form and culture, and of design and use that some of the most important work on the home is currently being conducted in the burgeoning, interdisciplinary area of material culture, which is closely related to architecture and architectural history. Developing theorized models of gender and architecture, studies in material culture offer “home history” (Schlereth and Foy 1992) and mine the rich veins of everyday architecture that encompass housing, the home, and its objects and occupants. The discipline of material culture favors a more inclusive, fluid approach than conventional academic architectural history in terms of ethnicity, gender, and class, investigating issues and themes such as slave housing, gendered spaces, and decoration and identity (Cromley and Hudgins 1995; Grier 1996; Martinez and Ames 1997).

However, architectural history, especially when allied with social history, has provided substantial research resources for interdisciplinary scholarship. The discussion here concentrates on those aspects of nineteenth-century house design and planning, first studied by architectural historians, that most readily reveal how dominant middle-class beliefs about “proper” social relationships and the different roles and capacities of men and women in culture and society were coded (architecturally and linguistically) and built into the fabric of the home through the two essential elements of Victorian planning, segregation and specialization. Bear Wood, a vast house designed and built between 1865 and 1874 (fig. 1) by the English architect Robert Kerr, illustrates the way in which the doctrine of separate spheres, with its assumptions about woman’s nature and role, as well as dominant ideas about correct social relations, was inscribed in domestic architecture. Kerr also wrote a book about planning houses that instructed architects on how to install architectural and social propriety according to the gendered ideals of public and private that associated women with the home and its limited, private world while privileging, in spatial and cultural terms, the male as head of the house and actor in the wider world ([1864] 1871). Kerr, like other Victorian architects, (re)produced spatial and social hierarchies by shaping material boundaries and laying out spatial divisions according to the status, role, and (asymmetrically) perceived needs of the home’s occupants and visitors—the husband, wife, guests, children, and servants, in that order.

In keeping with “proper” social relations and gendered architectural
Figure 1  Ground plan, Bear Wood, Berkshire, England, 1865–74, Robert Kerr, architect. Used with kind permission of RIBA Library Photographs Collection
theory, rooms and their use were identified according to the gender and rank of their occupants, with women’s rooms placed at the back or, as at Bear Wood, on the garden side of the house, protected from the street and the gaze of strangers. The rooms of the male head of household were near the front of the house, off circulation spaces or near publicly accessible entrances that had connections to or contact with the more diverse public world. These gendered distinctions between (masculine) public and (feminine) private, and the use of gender as an organizing principle in architecture, have been the tools of architects since antiquity (Vitruvius 1960; Wigley 1992). Nurseries were the exception as the most common domestic space that was not divided according to gender into male and female territories, and a few rooms and auxiliary spaces, such as the late Victorian living hall, were gender-neutral zones. However, most rooms in the home were considered the territory of one gender or the other, “to be used on occasion by the other, but with permission rather than as of right” (Franklin 1981, 43; see also Kerr [1864] 1871; Girouard 1971).

Essential to the concept of the Victorian home was the presence and work of woman’s body, which both produced and was partly produced by the home and its special atmosphere of domesticity, characterized by family life, cozy intimacy, and a sense of comfort and well-being, a middle-class ideal that affected all social groups (Forty 1986, 94–119; Rybzynski 1987, 74–75). The Victorian home itself was associated with the female body and its enclosed interior (Adams 1996; Gordon 1996; Garber 2000, 48–99). Woman in her role as wife and mother was the keystone of the “moral” Victorian home; her position there was considered essential to the maintenance of social and even political order, the starting point of the moral regeneration of the family whose children were taught, among other things, the necessity of adapting their demeanor, tempering their behavior, and developing a sense of duty and cordiality to their social “inferiors” in order to adapt and survive the turbulent social and political changes of the Victorian era.

Although the Victorian home was feminized and endlessly depicted as “woman’s place,” it was nevertheless heavily patriarchal in terms of territory, control, and meaning. The largest proportion of overall space and accommodation, the prime public rooms, and the most convenient position were all allocated to the male head of household. Manliness and social status were embodied and constituted, in part, through spatial boundaries that produced and upheld dominant gender definitions and relations and provided privacy for the family and guests. Rooms identified with and for the (male) owner included office or business room, cloakroom, billiard room, smoking room, study, gun room, gentleman’s work-
room, dressing room, gentleman’s bedroom, and the dining room. In a separate spatial sphere, not in direct communication with the male suite, the lady’s quarters consisted normally of the drawing room, morning room, boudoir, and lady’s bedroom. In addition to spatial zones, sexual and social differences were formed and structured through furnishings, decoration, and ornament that were gendered in terms of color, style, and detailing (Kinchin 1996; Bryden and Floyd 1999).

Gender and class were also organizing principles in the design of the servants’ quarters, although privacy, the central aim of the Victorian home, was not an option for servants. Particular attention was paid to the segregation of servants and to the surveillance of sleeping arrangements through the separation and placement of lavatories and the assignment by sex of workrooms, ideally involving different staircases and corridors. Servants worked and slept in an architecturally separate sphere within the household, typically in a service wing or in marginal spaces in the basement and attics as well as in outbuildings and in the grounds.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of the home as nation, a representation of national identity, and a site of social and moral regeneration was not lost on architects, residents, or observers (Mutthesius [1904] 1979). But modernist architects, most importantly Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius, strongly rejected the homey values, national character, and decorative aesthetic of the Victorian period and defined modernism against domesticity. The modern home was reconceived as a machine—a “machine for living in”: standardized, impersonal, and scientific (Le Corbusier [1927] 1998). Modernist architectural language was itself “objective,” stripped of any lingering Victorian sentimentality or domesticity. In contrast to common usage, home was not a term generally used in mainstream architectural discourse in the twentieth century. Its scientific (“male”) terminology and “rational” spatial and material practices were considered more appropriate for the modern house than the idea of home with its connotations of femininity, emotionality, and decoration. Like the words that architects used to describe them, modernist houses, such as Le Corbusier’s canonical Villa Savoye of 1929, near Paris (fig. 2), were also stripped of ornament and domesticity. In the so-called new architecture, decoration, traditionally associated with the feminine, became a hallmark of bad design. Although purportedly gender neutral and universalist in its values, modernist domestic space was implicitly masculine, defining, and controlling, operating through surveillance and the “domination of the gaze” (Colomina 1992, 112; Forty 2000). At the Villa Savoye, a pristine boxlike house is elevated above the ground on piers (pilotis). Here, the traditional symbiotic relationship be-
Figure 2  Villa Savoye, Poissy, France, 1928–30, Le Corbusier, architect. Used with kind permission of RIBA Library Photographs Collection
tween house and garden is finessed for a selective view of landscape in which the site becomes a sight. In Beatriz Colomina’s influential reading, the mobile viewer defines space and place by looking out to the landscape, which is framed by the house and screened like a camera image by horizontal windows. Nature is overpowered and placed in the house, domesticated by the defining gaze (Colomina 1992, 98–128). Thus, the traditional sense of domestic space is disrupted and displaced, and domesticity is suppressed.

As Christopher Reed observed, root and branch modernist architectural theory and practice have been “anti-bourgeois” as well as “anti-domestic,” embodied most fully in the heroic, peripatetic male figure of twentieth-century architectural masters, such as Le Corbusier, who railed “against the ‘sentimental hysteria’ surrounding the ‘cult of the house’” (Reed 1996, 9). Nevertheless, as Gwendolyn Wright has observed, “Domestic architecture, whether mass-housing or single-family house, has been, it seems, the favorite design problem of 20th century American architects. Here they can explore personal visions, proposing formal innovations, and often as not, symbolic expressions about concepts like the family” (Wright 1987, 13). However, most architects remained less concerned with lived-in everyday spaces than with architecture’s imaging codes of photography and architectural drawings that represent in a reductive and abstract way physical delineation manifest in measurable dimensions and boundaries. Architectural discourse was and continues to be skewed self-referentially toward the words and buildings of architects who are generally indifferent to issues of gender and domesticity in spite of their work on houses.

Whereas traditional architectural discourse focused primarily on form and style (Leach 1997, xiv), space is the central concept of modernist architecture and architectural theory. Modernist architects developed as axiomatic the nineteenth-century notion that architectural form should represent interior spaces and therefore generate a building’s external appearance. In modernist architecture, space, not mass, is the structuring principle, while open plans without dividing walls give full play to the dynamic spectacle of “flowing space” or, in more recent terms, achieve “transparency.” In fact, architectural space is thought of as the medium for artistic expression, the site of architectural statement, and both the means and the justification of the status of the architect and the basis of architecture as an art. Most significantly, the unspoken role of space is that it tells people where they can and cannot be, which, in part, defines what people feel about who they are and how they feel about each other. It is not surprising, therefore, that this cultural power, linked to the design of spaces both domestic and public, is the most valued, most jealously
guarded activity of architects, although, as Henri Lefebvre made clear, architects are not acting independently but participate in “the dominant discourse of power” that serves the interests of “modern capitalist societies” (Lefebvre 1991, 360, 286, 370; Forty 2000, 275).

The modernist approach that proposed the architect as a manipulator of seemingly neutral, abstract space also pursued the “home as laboratory,” a site of social and formal experimentation that failed most significantly and visibly in the large-scale, socially disastrous superblocks of postwar public housing but succeeded most fully in tailored private houses, such as the Eames House in California (1949–50). Planned as a civilized home and workplace for its designers, Charles and Ray Eames, the Eames House marked the return of domesticity to the modern house. Domesticity, playful and productive, made a comeback in the Eames House, which introduced decoration through marks of human habitation and character, like the artful accumulation of a collection of folk toys, but it is postmodernism in architecture that has most recently and most fully accomplished the return of domesticity in two competing versions (Foster 1985, ix–x; Haar and Reed 1996, 269–73; Kirkham 1998). First, and perhaps most familiarly, the home is portrayed as a symbol and vehicle of traditional values and nostalgia, a quest for comfort and security, accompanied by a return to conservative Victorian values. Domesticity, tradition, and convention become conflated in the nostalgic postmodern dwelling, manifested on a large scale in Disney’s new town in Florida. In Celebration, Florida, cultural continuity is built into Disney’s private homes through the revival of historical styles and the use of traditional images and materials, such as the use of simplified classical “colonial” forms and the provision of all modern conveniences, thus borrowing from the past to invent a traditional, unthreatening present, glossed by modernity. Second, it has been argued by both feminists and others that the postmodern house can be viewed in another light—as a potentially politically and socially subversive site (Robbins 1994; Reed 1996, 16; Friedman 1998, 184–211). Provocatively, even the “unhomely” embedded in the domestic, “the uneasy sense of the unfamiliar within the familiar” (Wigley 1993, 108), which is linked to art and literature, has been identified as a site for readdressing political and social issues (Vidler 1992).

Since the 1980s, the architectural implications of the needs and voices of a culturally, ethnically, and sexually diverse population have been recognized by architects, curators, and the varied occupants themselves. These departures from the nuclear family norm, which are often developed around the typical suburban house (Haar and Reed 1996), range from single-parent households to extended families, from older women’s hous-
ing to queer space. They respond to and constitute new ways of living, such as teleworking and home shopping, complicating the relationships of public and private worlds. In postmodern culture, architectural approaches that link theory to practice have also flourished within the conditions of urban domesticity. In a housing project in gritty Hackney in London (fig. 3), the all-black women’s practice, Elsie Owusu Architects, addressed issues of cultural identity, race, and architecture in a housing project of 1997, built for and with Kush, a black housing association (Lokko 2000). Their “cultural approach” produced a “hybrid” (interview with Elsie Owusu, October 2, 2000) that signaled the multiethnicity of their clients, architects, and eventual users through pattern making, choice of colors, and the use of traditional materials with imagery inspired by African textile design but modeled on the conventional individual terraced house with its own front and back garden, the “ideal home” of English culture. Within the severe constraints of space for public housing, and through the cunning of the designers, the kitchens were “fattened” into flexible family rooms, making it “possible for people to compose themselves within the house around either a garden view or a courtyard view” (Owusu interview, October 2, 2000).

As a strategy and central project, feminist architects and historians of architecture and design have considered, and consequently reevaluated, the importance of the home and its occupants, with particular attention to women’s experience, identity, and role in consumption and production (Hayden 1981; Matrix 1984; Attfield and Kirkham 1995), while increasing attention is paid to the relationship of the home and “the world outside” (Adams 1996, 5; Walker 1992, 2001). Subverting computer and media technologies that provide models and means for the avant-garde “un-private home” (Riley 1999), the feminist possibilities of technology are interrogated for domesticity and elaborated through the half-human, half-machine figure of the cyborg (Haraway 1991; Bloomer 1996). Most significantly, since Beatriz Colomina’s groundbreaking Sexuality and Space in 1992, interdisciplinarity has transformed discourses of gender and space, bringing into architecture theoretical issues, debates, and practices from other disciplines that draw on a wider range of cultural theory and often focus on the problematic of the house (Wigley 1995; McLeod 1996; Ruedi, Wigglesworth, and McCorquodale 1996). Investigating the home from an architectural perspective, it is clear that it is no longer possible to speak of architects’ understanding of the home without reference to interdisciplinary approaches and discourses outside architecture. By the same token, the concept of the home, produced at intersections of language, space, and social dynamics, is not fixed but changing over time. As this essay has shown,
Figure 3  Bird’s eye view, Rendlesham Road housing scheme, Hackney, London, 1997, Elsie Owusu Architects. Used with kind permission of Elsie Owusu Architects.
at different historical moments, the home has been considered a regenerative and adaptive moral and political force by the Victorian upper classes, an antidomestic modernist polemic by modernist architects, and a site of cultural regeneration and a potential force for positive social and political change from a position of postmodern diversity and difference.

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References


