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On the Way to Home
Entry to a houseless dweller

Author(s):
Sinno, Yasmine; Saad, Ameer

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Introduction

When speaking of house and home we often hear the relation individual-collective. It is a matter often discussed in terms of collaboration, negotiation and social and urban transformation valorized by intermediate spaces. In the 20th century, a renewed special attention was given to intermediate spaces, i.e. spaces of transition between public and private, between what is home and what is not. The notion recurred mostly in urban sociology (mainly French) and as a critique to the large social housings as compared to individual housing that inherently contained more of those intermediate spaces. The main statement was that such spaces are mandatory to create a home, a sense of ‘inhabiting’ rather than ‘habitat’. Spaces of transition through the interstice become hence interesting for researchers, then architects. These spaces are moreover considered spaces of dirt, disorder and of a DIY (do-it-yourself) scheme. They are taken by default as places of the collective and require an effort and a capacity from the inhabitants to adapt and transform those spaces. Some are spaces of ‘squat’; they welcome unexpected programs that participate in transforming them into spaces of potential appropriation, spaces of potential homes.

The question is hence how users construct an idea of home in relation to how they deal, or are meant to deal, with their context, its boundaries and borders, and consequently its interstitial or transitional spaces. We are interested in this paper in analyzing how the event of passage defines the relation house and home. We are studying the physical and mental construct of home in the do-it-yourself context of urban interstitial where boundaries, neighbors, activities zones are an ongoing process in space and time, defined by the interstitial inhabitants themselves; those inhabitants being the homeless or rather the ‘houseless’.

In order to do so, we are adopting some case studies of interstitial dwellers, those who appropriate intermediate space as their home. Through the lens of houseless, yet ‘homeful’, dwellers we will seek to understand the processes of creation, appropriation, boundary and passage which are the keystones of the architectural discourse of house and home.

Having taken a class during our architecture studies regarding the specific subject of ‘house and home’, the main topics that came to mention are appropriation, materiality and identification. The three main questions arising are: Is house a simple matter of material belonging? How is privacy valued in relation to home building? Could there be home away from home? These notions are intimately linked and refer ultimately to the same debate: the confinements of home in relation to house. In order to tackle this debate, the primary interest was to approach the subject from the points of view of many theoreticians and analyze how each provide us with new insight on the same question. We have decided in this paper to tackle the issue from the
perspective of one extreme case: the homeless dweller and their relative ‘home’, the interstitial.

We will first take a closer look on the relation between house and home on one side, and private and public on the other, in order to situate the origin of the separation between the homeless and his home. Since the debate is mainly regarding the conception of home in the mind of the dweller, we will be analyzing on a first level the primary relation of man to his home, going thereafter to a more urban understanding the relation house to urban, arriving finally to an analysis of the relation of man to urban. Such a cross-equation is only possible through the examination of some case studies of houseless people. For the sake of this paper we chose three key subjects: the homeless people in the city of Bristol in the UK, the homeless community in the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia and the rebellious homeless in Johannesburg in South Africa.

Relation Home-Dweller: An active appropriation of space in time

In a world where social discussions have as major themes notions such as globalized cultures, melting pots, and virtual connections, it is no wonder that where boundaries, material and abstract, becomes blurred. Architectural and urban notions that appear at first hand clear and separate start to lose their edge: the public, the private, the domestic, the center, the periphery, house, home. They all become intricately linked according to the way users and inhabitants choose to define them; the game is constantly metamorphosed. In these networks of urban and social practices, the idea of constructing an intimate shelter becomes critical. The simple idea of a wholesome unit where one feels at peace with one’s self and one’s identity becomes utopic, a vain attempt to keep a hold on an ever-changing environment.

‘Our house is our corner of the world... it is our first universe’ (Bachelard, 1994). Regardless of its validity, domestic space is certainly part of a language embedded in social practice. It belongs to a continuum of events and emotions that transgress physical boundaries. It is thus a misconception that this feeling of domesticity is restricted to a household. For Michel de Certeau, houses are cultural texts with which to ‘explore the fault lines in a society’s self-representations so that the ways in which that society’s power to construct and control the identities, beliefs, aspirations and desires of its subjects can become explicit’ (de Certeau, Michel, 1984). For phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1984), however, the experience and the memory of domestic space went deeper still. By bringing into play what he referred to as the poetic imagination, he demonstrated how home becomes the seminal influence on our continued experience of the wider world; it actually shapes our universe.

The dichotomy of house and home is according to both Freud and Lacan intimately linked to the dichotomy of the Symbolic and the Imaginaire; the “Symbolic” being the realm of culture and the outside world, hence the public, while the Imaginaire being the realm of the private and the body, hence the private. In this division, we can draw a parallel between public and private on
one side, and house and home on the other. This dichotomy is one that is acquired through time and through the pre-oedipal period denominated by Lacan as the ‘Mirror phase’, where one first identifies with his body through his first conscious recognition in the mirror, therefore, as Lacan describes, his first identification with his home and thereafter his initial initiation into the social world, i.e. the first phase where one unconsciously shifts realms from the Imaginaire realm reaching out to the Symbolic. It is in this moment that the self is detached from the other, and that notions of private and public are created in the mind of the infant. It is thus important to keep in mind the origins of this division private-public in one’s mind in order to understand the urban dynamics consequent to such a separation.

Therefore, the dichotomy house and home is one primary step to understand the dichotomy private and public. In this dichotomy Symbolic-Imaginaire, and its effect on the mind, as primarily described by Lacan, the relation of representation and physical space is a primary characteristic of the bond between man and his home. In the relation man-house, it is important to notify that a house is not mainly physical; it exists mostly in the minds of those who dwell in it. Therefore representation and physical space also exist in the minds of inhabitants. And sometimes in the relation house-home, displaying home renders it inescapably a meager house in the psyche of the person and an object belonging to the Symbolic, if the person is not consciously aware of his/her status regarding public-private, i.e. a home becomes a mere house if the person is not immersed actively within the house.

Hence, we are interested primarily in this paper in the making of home through activity and the active appropriation of space. Secondly, through this active role, we aim to project towards an understanding of the active role of dwellers on the dichotomy of public and private. As a strategy, we are taking the extreme case of houseless people in order to analyze the delicate boundary between house and home and between private and public on a larger scope.

Living houselessness: Some Case Studies

This section will discuss the homeless communities through three case studies in different parts of the globe (the city of Bristol in the UK, the city of Yogyakarta in Indonesia and Johannesburg in South Africa). This discussion will target the typologies of shelters created by homeless communities and the representations of meanings within their private space as well as the public space.

However in order to do this we must first examine briefly the characteristics of homeless communities: their common behaviors, their daily worries and their prime interests. These aspects are what drive a houseless fellow to choose among alternatives and create his routine journey.

First, houseless communities have defined places that are "nice", places that are "ok" and places that are "desperate options". While this can be addressed to localities of dwelling, the same aspects mentioned above define also the routes of the houseless within the city and its prime urban spaces. We can
hence detect that houseless communities have sub-cultures; houseless people have in fact defined classes among them. Although obviously not based upon financial status, sub-communities, who come together through sharing activities, create these classes. These houseless communities also vary. They can include people who had their own homes but could not keep up with its expenses. They can also include people who shift between houselessness and being housed or even couch-surfed (moving between houses of friends and families).

Analyzing certain case studies, we came upon the conclusion that getting access to services is what makes the houseless choose specific localities to dwell. Usually this drives them towards urban centers where they can use public toilets and drinking water among other regulated services. A key point in this type of houseless journeying is Invisibility, which becomes a principal requirement to the houseless communities squatting close to the center of the city. This is to avoid constant purges by the police whose aim is to clear and maintain the image of the city center and its prime urban spaces. These spaces constitute a source of income and more importantly a space for chilling out to the houseless; that makes avoidance of purge raids, and therefore invisibility, of higher importance. Invisibility comes even at the highest urgency for houseless females at night in order to avoid any possible kind of street violence. It becomes less of an important character as the settlement gets further from the prime urban spaces of the city. However in such cases, the homeless maintain locating themselves around other less central axes of service provision.

Houseless communities also vary in characters, yet the grouping character and the need for invisibility remain intact. These characters include "straight headed" groups, alcohol addict groups and the drug communities (comprising addicts and dealers) which is the most dangerous of the three and is always avoided by the others. Within these sectors, complex social networks can be found even involving peer group co-operation. In some cases leadership and management of the settlement exists for the sake of defense and resistance against eviction or even for the sake of regulation.

Tenancy to cope with their hardships is the common culture through making use of whatever available. Only individual capability and creativity draw the limits of adaptation. The houseless community re-inscribes the areas that construct "their city" by actions similar to marking their places of gathering, graffiti and locating needle bins around injection zones.

Home of the houseless

The notions of home, private, public and boundary will be examined through the following cases of houseless people and communities and what defines these meanings in the houseless city. It is sure that for the houseless there is no place for luxury and spatial choices directly follow the rules of practicality; however a minimum of the social needs of being “at home” is generated. How does the houseless construct the boundaries between their private space and public space? What drives their shelter preference among the alternatives of
houselessness? In the following text, these questions will be tackled through a selection of three case studies that reflect various levels of houselessness: once as individual dwelling, once as a collective and once as a particular case of social grouping.

**Bristol, UK**

Image 1 - St. Jude’s and St. Paul’s areas near the center of Bristol. Google Map

Squatting abandoned buildings in the city of Bristol represents one main alternative to rough sleeping. Squatting buildings brings the houseless a shelter place away from the streets and therefore ensuring a great deal of invisibility. The study by Paul Cloke, Sarah Johnsen and Jon May discusses the different localities chosen by the houseless in Bristol for sleeping. As a basic feature of houseless communities, centers of services works as a magnet anchor to their choices of sleeping and movement. The area of St. Jude’s/St. Paul’s area is located very close to the downtown of Bristol and supported with four drop-in centers and a number of soup-runs. This explains the phenomena of multiple squatting camps spreading in the same area.

‘It’s a disused building that used to be two houses – it’s been knocked into one and it’s quite a nice squat. ... The second window from the top is the entry point. They’ve got a ladder – bring it out and in you go. There’s a lot of prostitution goes on in there. Clients get taken there, ladder n’ all – they’re sorted out with a different room’ (Patrick in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.16).

Noting the fact that he actually called it ‘quite a nice squat’ leaves an impression of positive emotions attached to that place. The behavior of the squatters explained by the interviewees represented actions of some sort of ownership as well. They control the entry of the squat by holding the ladder in. They did not even arrange an entry point at the street level but they used ‘the second window from the top’ as the entry point. They did not leave the ladder in the outside; they maintained keeping it towards the inside to control the incoming flux. It is clear also that it works as a source of income for some of the squatters and then again the clients get ‘sorted out with a different room’ indicating the existence of a ‘guests zone’.

These actions, behaviors and orders reflect care about the place. It is an indication of a sense of homeliness accompanied with the squat camp. Through this squat camp we can find the effect of having a strong physical border acting as the boundary between the public space and the semi-private within the squat. That is not all that makes it a preferable squat but also being in a marginal area of the city (invisibility) and yet with no massive presence of drug groups (safety). This case represents a fragile urban margin (the urban boundary) that can be dissolved easily by police raids or drug gangs’ infiltration, and consequently the preference of the shelter degrades. This will be obvious through the following case study.

Hostels in marginal spaces of the city are normally the official place for the houseless although principally intended as a temporary solution. The study mentioned above considered the hostels in St. Jude’s/ St. Paul’s area. In spite of being in the same area where the squat mentioned above stands, the area very
close to the city center and has got a concentration of services, the hostels there are considered places of ‘last resort’ by multiplicity of houseless people.

‘I preferred prison to this. (There) you get three meals a day, and bedding, and at least the staff come around the cells and make sure everything is all right. They found someone here who’d been seriously ill for three days in his room before they found him and took him to hospital. … This is my first hostel in my life I’ve been in. Never again. This is a nightmare. I hate it’ (Stewart in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.14).

‘When I had just got out of Gloucester Prison, they got me a place in the (names a hostel). But by the third day I’d had enough of the place. I knew that if I stayed there I’d end up flat in trouble – bang on the gear again’ (Ray in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.15).

The reason behind that is the presence of heavy drug dealing and prostitution in the urban spaces where the hostels are located. The experience of moving through the square where the hostel is located and reaching its entrance is plagued with feelings of danger, anxiety and insecurity.

‘First of all, you’ve got to walk through the square where you’ve got a lot of prostitution. Then once you have got through the square you’ve got a few little corners where drug dealers are standing, then you’ve still got to go round the other corner right in front of the _____ [pub] (where the big drug problem is) to get into the shelter’ (Mike in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.14).

However, in such a stigmatized environment, mass groups of Somalis dwell together in one of the hostels.

‘There’s loads of Somalis there – just the women and the babies – no idea where their men are’ (Patrick in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.16).

Interviewing one of the hostel users:

‘The Somalis in the hostel tend to stick together, partly because they have little in common with the druggies, but more importantly because of a Somali proverb which basically states that you are who you hang out with’ (Fuad in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.16).

In such case it is clear that being in groups reinforces social ties of the Somali houseless and compensates for living within such stigmatized geography. Partial sense of homeliness can only be found through maintaining to live within the same ethnic group. In this case boundaries between the public and private, homeliness and homelessness are defined by the presence of companions.

Negotiating car parks is another strategy for houseless people. It is an option for rough sleeping which accommodates a regulatory regime of journeying in the morning and sleeping in the park at night after the cars are gone. In this case the features of shelter such as sleeping space, invisibility and sleeping safety only exist in a specific time frame of the day. Accordingly time defines the boundary that separates the private from the public.

‘Spider told us: “I spend many a night there. We used to stay on the third floor. There was a crowd of us. But the security people used to wake us up about five in the morning. … Get out! … Banging gates about an all that. And it was freezing, bitter cold in there”.’ (Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.15).
Although car parks surround the downtown yet houseless people cannot just squat there as they do in the abandoned buildings. Security personnel force their rules on those who would like to use the park as seen from the quote above. In other cases:

'We used to use the car parks there, but then they got pretty funny about using the car park. And it’s pretty cold and impersonal and horrible in the car park anyway. They spread the steps with tar and stuff and all sorts of black gooey horrible stuff [to keep us out]' (Carolyn in Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.18).

However when there is a possibility to open social channels with the security personnel, the behavior of the houseless users show distinctive actions.

'Carolyn continues: “But in the NCP (National Car Parks) at ____, the staff are lovely there, they’re real nice. They tell us where to sleep and where to put your stuff. But only if you’ve got their respect and you keep the place tidy. I always instigate a tidy up where we’ve stayed. I won’t let people leave a mess”.' (Cloke and Johnsen, 2002, p.18).

Positive emotions, co-operative behavior and care about the place emerge as signs of appreciation of the parking place. These are representations of a degree of homeliness generated towards the mentioned National Car Park while in the preceding quote the car park is seen just as a shelter, a place where the homeless just spend the night. Actually in that case they do not hold any social ties to the park or the security personnel. But rather feelings of sarcasm and protest against both the park and the security staff actions. So when Carolyn was denied from using the park she did only express a loss of a shelter, a lower profile dwelling alternative for a houseless person.

Yogyakarta, Indonesia

[Image 2] - Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Google Maps

The cultural perspective in Indonesia gives the houseless communities another level of hardship complexity. Here it has got a gender oriented resistance theme. Streets are considered a no place for girls to stay for a long time. It is even considered to be ethically unacceptable for girls to live on the streets. Moreover, the street culture is a male dominated one. Females would then face difficulties fitting in the street community. They have to negotiate their resources and struggle for their spaces.


‘Despite their stigmatization, however, street girls have managed to carve out their own niches in the city... One way in which they have done this is by constructing their own gendered gathering-space at the park (Taman) -a female dominated space, to which they can retreat if they have had enough of the outside male world. ...These girls slept and kept their possessions in a small house at the gates of the park’ (Beazley, 2002, p.11).

Grouping again appears in this context as a tool to create boundaries and develop a sense of belonging to a specific place. Yet again grouping provide a power to defend and resist against the violence on the street. Changes of behavior are spotted in that place informally labeled to be belonging to the
female groups. Girls act more open and more confident in their group and in their place.

‘When they were in this space, their behavior was very different from when they were in the street boy spaces, as they were far more vocal, gregarious and confident’ (Beazley, 2002, p.11).

Johannesburg, South Africa

Squatting as a preferable choice to formal housing is a recorded phenomenon in South Africa. The residents of the agglomeration suffer overcrowding and lack of private space. The townships they reside in are located far from the city center in addition to housing expenses in these townships that are hardly affordable to those who resort to squatting. As an alternative they abandon the formal housing and resort to building a shake of poor or recycled material to make something ‘more suitable’.

‘The shacks are generally poorly equipped and sparsely furnished (Houssay-Holzschuch, 1999). Their internal organization is designed along rationalized lines to optimize the use of the little available space. The few rooms can generally boast only a few mattresses, clothes hanging on walls covered with recycled wrapping paper: Campbell soups, Cadbury’s or Liebig, emblems of a consumer society, ornament the walls of the very poor. In a corner, pots and pans indicate the kitchen’ (Guillaume and Houssay, 2001, p.6).

This images of poverty did not prevent the squatters from adding elements and characters representing the family and inviting guests to visit the household of the shack. It is a common culture to hang pictures of graduating children in the guest area as sources of pride. Family ties are the key to find space in squatting camps. It is the family ties that guide the extension of shacks over the plot they occupy and the nearby areas.

Some of the characters of home may become very crucial to the extent that it can cause a house to be intolerable if they are absent. In our case here the poorly built shacks induced the meanings of homelessness in a far greater sense than the formal housing despite the fact the formal housing had access to all services and the shacks did not have access to most of the urban services. Overcrowding in the formal townships eliminated the virtual boundaries between residents causing a problem of privacy. Restoration of the eliminated boundaries was then one main driver towards abandoning the formal housing along with its facilities and creating it in a squat camp.

Relation Home-City: Transitional journeys through Interstitials

We conclude from the earlier sections that the relation of a person to his home is mostly a delicate affair in the realm of the psyche. It is a matter of a changing feeling through transitions in time, defined by previous experiences and current aspirations. We are mainly interested in this paper in examining the time element of the dichotomy house and home. We see in this approach a way to cross a section through the various debates involved. Since home is mainly a matter of appropriation and action, it is an ever-changing creation of time and
practices. It becomes hence apparent how the notion of home is not necessarily materialistic and not necessarily bound to one place; a self-understandable statement that holds still important consequences. Yet, this immateriality has only one very material element that are borders; borders between private public, who’s me and who’s out, what's intimate and so forth. Peg Rawes, quoting Luce Irigaray, puts the psychic behind border making into an architectural metaphor:

Thus we can imagine the subject building his house, room by room. And the house is virtually complete: firm foundation, clear title, cellar, stairs, dining room, dressing room, den, study, corridors, doors, windows, attic [...] The fact that it is divided up into different parts in this way is of smaller matter, provided that each part is subordinated to the whole and never lays claim to being a whole itself, for that would not allow man to give a distinct shape to the mystery – or the mystery – that is walled up in the harmonious domestic structure’ (Ferguson, 1993, quoting Luce Irigaray in The Man Question, pp.1-3).

The boundary is thus the material with which we define our identities, our individualities, and consequently who’s the other. Regarding the houseless, the main point becomes a matter of how these people define their home through drawing these boundaries and creating a materiality to a rather abstract notion of belonging.

At this point in the analysis, it becomes necessary to introduce the idea of interstitiality. Interstitials are the spaces in-between; they define through their dividing character the different spaces they separate. On an urban level, interstitials become the liminal moments, the thresholds, the terrains vagues; the only places in the city that have boundaries that still need to be defined. It is this blurred character that makes them the perfect potential homes for the houseless. The latter find in these spaces possibilities away from the normative city to build boundaries for themselves and to create new identities, i.e. the opportunity to create their home within the public.

Yet this creation is not separate from the urban power relations inherent to the city. As a matter of fact, the case of homeless interstitiality is a perfect example to describe how power relations shape the definition of home within the urban fabric. When a limit such as the desolate transport lines creates liminal moments of desolate lots, governmental organizations are keen on concealing such spaces behind large borders, making out the figurative containment their main attention. Their aim is usually to ‘hide the ugly’ and prevent bad publicity from spreading due to lack of maintenance. The outcome of such reactions towards public desolates spaces is reflected on those who happen to go through such areas. The event of passage becomes transgression. The unwelcomed inhabitants of such spaces such as homeless people become transgressors. Some organizations become even specialized dealing with such unwanted guests. In France for example, politics have been thus created behind the search for urban requalification in the city of Paris. Those have been interested in working on the intermediary spaces and spaces on the edge, both happen to be very similar in this scenario.
The interstitial spaces are spaces where also programs change. Working on the interstitial is a critique of the operational idea of process in architecture. Transitional spaces between what is house and what is outer surface are according to Tama Leaver: ‘new spaces of resistance populated by those people that cannot or will not easily fit into the blank urbanized world surrounding them’ (Leaver, 2003, p. 122). Ephemerality becomes the negotiator element for the houseless in their appropriation of the interstitial regardless of the power struggle against them. Ephemerality helps build, rebuild, un-build within the terrain vague without compromising the true essence of what these spaces are. Hence projects and interventions on the interstitial moment are valued for their ephemerality. It is a characteristic and maybe a quality. Since such moments are temporal, users change, new users who flee the rest of the ordered city come to be in these areas, people such as the outcast, the unwanted, the deliberate homeless, and the chaotic. Ephemerality in this context is coupled with improvisation. Depending on what is available to provide them shelter, service, safety, food, homeless people modify their routine and their habits. Yet it is not a mere ‘follow the flow’ attitude, it is a decision-making process depending on homeliness attribution to spaces. For example, a homeless person would opt to sleep in a colder public place if this provides him or her with more freedom of movement and less restrictive laws to follow as would happen sometimes in a hostel. Cartographies of homeless dwellers are defined by service provision, yet the production behind those maps is not as fragile as we think, choices are intently made.

We notice through the case studies that the liminal phase of home creation of houseless people is intricately linked with a process of movement and displacement, both time related elements, both mental and physical. It is also a phase vague by nature: “The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous” (Turner, 1969, p. 80). On more concrete terms, homeless people tend to revolve their routine around three main space types: public spaces, interstitial spaces and hostels. The liminal character of this home production is not merely incidental, it is the experience realized by a movement from private to interstitial to public, through the dimensions of time and movement. It allows for moments of possibility, awakening, and change. It is a celebration of the limit, threshold of the experience of movement and transition through such spaces, and all the connotations of vagueness and blurriness of such an experience. The notion of blurriness rises again. In this definition, home belongs to a larger entity, as if part of one organism, which is the city. Mainstream society defines social value attached to city elements while for homeless people there is a continuum from prime to marginal space (Duncan, 1996, pp.14-16). The fragility of boundaries is reflected in the way homeless people use these boundaries to infiltrate the prime spaces of the city. They provide them with the required invisibility to move about between prime and interstitial without being scrutinized by the public eye. It is simply a matter of time management and performative practice: come at the right timing, be respectful of the guardians, and a car parking will
become your home, for a night or few. Home can be thus created from prime
spaces but through marginal times (Knowles, 2000).

These experiences of home through movement and transition are powered
by the creation of homeless people of repetitive performative routines. Home
in this sense becomes the performance of habit through time. This definition of
home transcends the homeless, it becomes an alternative equation of home:
performative time maneuvers = home. Performativity in this equation is the
equivalent of an on-going creation of affects (Cloke and Johnsen, 2002). Id est,
working on emotional relationships with the people you meet in order to
provide yourself with a sense of home, sometimes inclusive and sometimes
exclusive of these people. The perspective in this sense makes of life a journey
whose routine becomes home.

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