Inhabitation as a process: Theoretical frameworks for analysing interiors

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ABSTRACT

The process of ‘inhabitation’, the process of appropriating interior, domestic spaces by individuals, is a complex phenomenon that has been studied in different disciplines and relies upon different theoretical frameworks. These frameworks often remain implicit, whereas they nevertheless have a profound impact as to how the economy of the interior is conceptualised. This paper sets out to map three of these frameworks: We discuss phenomenology, critical theory and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). Phenomenology holds that the home is a place deeply needed by all individuals in order to be able to really reach their potential. Critical Theory rather seeks to unravel the hidden meanings of domestic interiors as tied up with the logics of capitalist economy, patriarchy and hetero-normativity. ANT studies home interiors as complex entanglements of objects and people that can only be fully understood when taking these interrelations into account. The paper argues that the choice of a particular framework should correlate with the research questions one is asking and with the motivations that drive particular research projects.

INTRODUCTION

A woman and a room are easily put together – as for instance in Edward Hopper’s painting from 1957 (Figure 1) or in Virginia Woolf’s essay A Room of One’s Own (1929). The latter text states that in order to be able to write, a woman needs her own space, her own room.1 Within the patriarchal domestic economies of the 19th and of the better part of the 20th century this demand was not easily met. Nevertheless it is an underlying assumption of Western modern culture that a room of one’s own, a personal space, is the hallmark of modern people’s capacity to identify and express themselves as individuals. Thus there seems to be an intricate connection between subjectivities and interior spaces. This interconnection is often recognised – in philosophy,2 in architectural theory3 as well as in psycho-analytical theory4.

The interconnection between individuals and interiors is also a focus of studies of inhabitation – studies that intend to read the interior as a reflection of the social needs and aspirations of its inhabitants. Such studies are arising in different disciplinary environments, for the home is a site of overlap between the spheres of human geography, social theory, anthropology of space, archaeology and (interior) architecture – to name only the most relevant domains. In all these domains, researchers have undertaken significant investigations into the meaning of the experience of home.5 These studies, driven by a variety of motives and research techniques, are often informed
by rather different theoretical frameworks. These frameworks give rise to sometimes quite diverging interpretations, as can be gathered from the different comments, below, from the three authors of this paper on one and the same image of an interior.

Fatima Pombo (phenomenology):
What is most remarkable about Western Motel by Edward Hopper, is the absence of any connection between the character and the space. The woman occupies a place on the bed waiting to depart from a room without any traces of her identity. It is a contest of discontinuity, of interruption in the flow of other personal spaces felt as reflection and representation of a self. The stay in a hotel room is far from the experience of home's atmosphere.

A hotel room is not a home as not even a house is a home. Home is the place emotionally adopted by the woman as the starting point in his analysis:

Wouter Benvoets (Actor-Network Theory) doesn’t take the woman as the starting point in his analysis:

Both woman and motel room are embedded in a very complex and dynamic economical network. The motel room is cleaned daily by hired staff, the reading lamp on the bedside table, the luggage in front of the bed.

It is the objective of this paper to elaborate on these three different theoretical frameworks, in order to map them and to highlight how they can be instructive for the study of ‘home cultures’ and dwelling experiences.

PHENOMENOLOGY: THE UNRAVELLING OF LAYERS OF MEANING

Phenomenology, based on the philosophical ideas of Husserl and Heidegger, is the approach to home and belonging that seems to be most widespread among architects and interior architects. It sustains that home is a place deeply needed by all individuals in order to be able to themselves. As Rykwert states:

...almost always home is at the centrifugal hearth, the fire burning at the centre of my awareness, as its light once spread like a stain in the hostile night.

Phenomenology interprets home economy close to the original meaning of oikos. Inhabiting home (oikos) is to develop knowledge of such inhabiting (ecology = oikos-logos) and ability of organising it (economy = oikos+nomos). Inhabiting is not translated by the market value of commodities or by the cycle ‘use-discharge-replacement’, but by the truth of things along the individual story of life. ‘Home economy’ based on this ‘primitive’ concept of oikos is a metaphor for sustainability and therefore a manifestation of eko-design.

Phenomenology asks: does a space as a personal domain mean necessarily a space owned by the individual as property? No. It’s a kind of space that ‘organises’ the individual while he or she ‘says’: Now, I want to be alone or I want to be at my own with my thoughts, my emotions, my dreams, my nightmares, my rhythm, my nerves… my life. It asks, therefore, for an attitude of caring instead of waste, abandonment or replacement. Let’s look symbolically, at a room of one’s own.

The human presence in one’s own room reveals a certain distancing from the reality of the exterior, even from the house which means shelter and implies edges, walls, doors and roofs. Is it related with loneliness? Much can be said about loneliness, but perhaps more than loneliness, the individual is interested in moments free of noise, free of the agitation of daily life, moments potentially more introspective and runninit. A room is a refuge. It is also a territory of freedom. What does it mean to be, to feel at home? Gaston Bachelard, in his book La Poétique de l’Espace (The Poetics of the Space) defends home as a privileged domain to understand the phenomenology of the intimacy of the space which is also a phenomenological time.

Home is meaningful, according to Bachelard, because it is where the individual finds the resonance of his own intimate life. This intimacy can be found in a room, in the attic, in a closet, in a simple drawer, in a window… More important than the property of things, so relevant in a society based upon the value of possession, Bachelard cherishes the relevance of dreams, memories, thoughts (rêverie) to define identity and happiness. Home is the interior space celebrated to stimulate those experiences and at the same time to protect them. Home sustains the continuity of the intimate life of the individual; it shelters at the same time past, present and future through memories and dreams. Similarly Rykwalski states:

... homesiness is not neatness. Otherwise everyone would live in replicas of the kinds of sterile and impersonal homes that appear in interior design and architectural magazines. (…) Many personal mementos, photographs and objects – reliquaries of family, friends, and career – fill my study. A small gouache of a man – myself – seated in a Formentera doorway. (…) My writing desk is an old one. Although it is not a particularly valuable antique, its elegance recalls a time when letter writing was a leisure art, carefully performed with pen and ink and blotter. (…) Home interiors, from the point of view of phenomenology have to do with an economy of frugality, of long duration of appropriation – which is the opposite of commodification, alienation, mass production and consequently material wastefulness. Fashion, functions and fractions are the opposite of a phenomenological home economy, which is rather personal, poetic and long-lasting. Consequently, reflecting on the intriguing expression being at home, we are interested in highlighting the importance of the objects with which the individual surrounds himself or herself. How much do these objects participate in the making of a dwelling’s space into one’s home? Which stories do objects tell?

Home is the place of the mystery of the things, the resonance they evoke in the life of individuals. Home is where the objects are silent and meaningful at the same time. Home is where daydreaming is awake by the presence of objects. Home is the emotions related with the room, the attic, the basement… (…) Many personal mementos, photographs and objects which are silent and meaningful at the same time. Home is the emotions related with the room, the attic, the basement… (…) Many personal mementos, photographs and objects which are silent and meaningful at the same time. Home is the emotions related with the room, the attic, the basement… (…) Many personal mementos, photographs and objects which are silent and meaningful at the same time.
We may say then, that occupying a room (and by extension a home) is, in the view of phenomenology, being immersed in a kind of ecology of symbols, signs, images, stories and daydreaming (réveir). Therefore, the thing that appears in private space is not merely an object that can be described through words. It evokes what we like to call a blank meaning. The blank meaning of a thing is a space for inscribing the impact that a thing possibly has in an individual’s life, besides all eventual functions it might allow or represent. The blank meaning is the key to reading the role of each thing for its subjectivity – it is the blank meaning of the physical and the making of the sense. The individual defines his distinctiveness while asserting his condition of being: the individual becomes himself or herself. The meaning given to the things by each individual participates in the construction of his or her own self. The same happens with other inhabited spaces. Maurizio Vitta devotes his book Del’Altraire to a reflection about the experience of dwelling through four central topics – bodies, spaces, objects, images – which he considers the protagonists of that experience. The author is interested in the representation of the phenomenon of dwelling within its importance for daily life. Hobson ergo sum (I dwell so I am) states Vitta, insisting that dwelling tells about the individual that dwells in a space. And in that telling (resonance), the process is expressed by the way in which the individual inhabits the space and is inhabited by it.

Memories, besides being a link with the past felt as longing (Bachelard), or as identity of a vital conscience (Vitta), are also an element of homemaking that continues throughout the lifetime cycle of the individuals (Ceraud). The parents’ home, (when being brought), the first independent home, the home made through marriage (or living together), the home broken by divorce, the remaking of a new home … bring with them a concentration of materials (objects and the practices related to them) and projections of emotions. Home economy is then the expression of the processes of reusing, restoring and recycling that are characteristic for these connections. It appeals to frugality rather than consumerism, to understanding the holistic relation among ‘things’, to awareness of optimising both available resources and practical performances.

CRITICAL THEORY: QUESTIONING THE CONSTRUCTION OF DOMESTICITY

Critical theory – encompassing the theories informed by the work of the Frankfurt School as later developments such as gender studies, queer theory or postcolonial theory – seeks to unravel the hidden meanings of the domestic interior as linked with the logics of capitalist economy, patriarchy and heteronormativity. Its relevance to the study of interiors is based upon its questioning of the concept of domesticity. Domesticity, states critical theory, is not something that naturally emanates from some essential human need. It is rather an ideological construct, the emergence of which can be traced in history.

Walter Benjamin, the famous philosopher of the Frankfurt School, observed that the private individual makes his entry in history during the early 19th century at the moment that, for the first time, his home becomes separate from his place of work. Indeed until then the house was not a private shelter for the members of a small family, but rather a large structure that comprised workshops as well as residential accommodation. It not only housed husband, wife and children, but also members of the extended family, protectés and servants. Domesticity is thus a construction of the 19th century. When men left their places of work within the house in order to establish workshops, factories and offices as the main sites of economic production, a whole ideology came into being which justified the gender division between breadwinners on the one hand and caretakers on the other. This ideology is articulated in terms of gender, space, work and power: it prescribes rather precise (albeit changing) norms regarding the essential requirements of family life, the needs of children, the proper ways of arranging food, clothes and furniture, the care of body and health; the best ways to balance work, leisure and family activities, and the need for cleanliness and hygiene.

In his analysis of ‘the bourgeois interior’, Benjamin formulated some intriguing and influential reflections on the notion of dwelling as the ‘leaving of traces’. At the same time, he was convinced that the bourgeois interior was intimately linked with the capitalist values of property, ownership and ostentation. The traces inhabitants leave on their interiors result in the message to visitors: ‘There is nothing here for you, you are a stranger in this house.’ Following Benjamin’s reasoning, stuffy bourgeois interiors in the 19th, 20th or 21st century are not just reflections of the inhabitants’ cherished objects because they embody dear memories, but also demonstrations that a capitalist economy has managed to convince people that they should buy things for the home. Not surprisingly, feminist and gender studies have devoted quite some attention to the topic of domesticity and interiors. There is a long tradition, starting with Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 19th century America, which sees the ideology of domesticity as the reason for the oppression of women. Nevertheless attempts to simply do away with domesticity have proven rather fruitless. Notwithstanding critical and feminist reasoning unmasking the complicity of domesticity and oppression, the phenomenon itself of people devoting time, energy and money to the making of their interiors has only become more important and more central to contemporary economy and culture. Feminists nowadays advocate a ‘recycling’ of domesticity rather than its annihilation. They argue that domestic arrangements should be re-negotiated in order to eradicate inequalities between men and women.

Studies of the interior informed by postcolonial theories are attentive towards the background of imperialist and colonialist practices that informed ‘good taste’ and ‘proper housekeeping’. As Karen Hansen and Anne McClintock have pointed out, in the 19th and early 20th century domesticity was often considered as part of the civilising mission that motivated many Europeans in the colonial encounter. In the current postcolonial condition, this genealogy is not completely eradicated. Indeed ideal domesticities of today often disguise the racial economies upon which they rely – in how many households is housekeeping work not performed by immigrant workers who might have trouble combining domestic labour with their own family life? This situation continues a long, held tradition of servants being drawn from other classes and other ethnicities and of the representation of domesticity as a predominantly white prerogative. Postcolonial domesticities can also be seen in the hybridised interiors of migrants’ homes, who negotiate their identity through combining elements from home with those of the host country.

A last branch on the tree of critical studies could be discussed in this respect is that of ‘queer theory’. Sapiro states that queer theory encompasses a wide range of critical practices and priorities which mobilise ‘queer’ as a verb to unsettle assumptions about sexual/sexual doing and being. Queer theory thus questions the ‘hetero-normativity’ that is implied in most societal representations as well as in the built environment, asking why it is that the pattern of heterosexual family life is so explicitly and persistently inscribed in the conventional lay-out of homes and in the images depicting ideals of domesticity. Opening up towards the possibilities of other sexual identities being inscribed in specific interiors might contribute towards a better understanding of the interaction between social norms, consumptive patterns, architectural models and the individual’s construction of identity.

ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY: THE ENTANGLEMENT OF MATERIAL AND MEANING

Less established than Phenomenology or Critical Theory, Actor Network Theory (ANT) is today gaining ground in social sciences and architectural theory alike. The theory originated in the field of science studies, developed by Science and Technology Studies scholars Michel Callon and Bruno Latour; the sociologist John Law, and others. ANT was developed to describe how facts and artefacts are constructed, configured and reconfigured through negotiations between different human and non-human actors. Where theories usually try to explain ‘why’ something happens, ANT rather explains how the relations between objects, people and concepts are formed, hold themselves together, or fall apart. ANT offers us a methodological stance to analyse the relational aspect of home interiors and interior economies.

ANT operates by effacing the analytic divisions between agency and structure, material and meaning the macro and the micro, and thus also between global and interior economies. Global economies influence interior economies and vice versa; they are entangled. Home interiors are not only sites of economic, social and cultural exchanges, they are also embedded in these exchanges. In line with ANT, home interiors must be seen as a networked environment where all actors influence each other. A choice for low maintenance ceramic tiles instead of wooden...
the home interior must be reinvented. The home interior as a tight
network of relations is each time unravelled to be
reconsolidated in a new network of relations. In the economic
system the sequence of these network processes – unravelling
and reconsolidation – only seems to accelerate.

ANT sees technical artefacts as highly moral and as highly social
actors that deserve careful consideration. It is by inscribing
program of actions into a piece of technology that the technology
becomes an actor imposing its inscribed program of action on
its users. A famous example is Latour’s description of an automatic
door closer, but a suburban tract house could be analysed in the
same way. Developed by building companies, sold as ‘turnkey’
projects and designed with the nuclear family in mind, these
houses are inscribed with a very specific program imposing itself
on the inhabitants. Imagine a single family house with a living room
and kitchen, a large master bedroom with ensuite bathroom and
three smaller bedrooms sharing a second bathroom. In theory
nothing prevents the use of this house in a different way, but in
reality the majority of these single family houses are inhabited by
nuclear families with the parents occupying the master bedroom
and the children the other bedrooms. Also the objects in the
home interior are inscribed with programs of actions. If we take
for example the fridge-freezer we can see how they have certain
expectations of the networks around them: frozen-food stores
must be relatively nearby, electricity supply should be constant,
there should be space for the freezer in the kitchen. It also makes
demands of the people that use it: they would have to learn
which kinds of foods can be frozen and maybe even have to
adapt their eating patterns. By exploring the agency of objects,
ANT helps us to tackle the taken-for-granted character of
consumer products within the average home interior.

Home interiors and interior economies are produced, maintained
and constantly reinvented through heterogeneous networks. All
the different actors composing the home interior are active in
orchestrating certain regimes; home interiors can promote or
constrain certain types of lifestyles and meaning, and certain
kinds of patterns of use. Through ANT the specific inscriptions,
knowledge, information, alliances and actions of home interiors
that too often remain invisible can be unravelled.

CONCLUSION
This interpretative mapping of Phenomenology, Critical Theory,
or Actor-Network Theory shows how these different theoretical
frameworks are based upon different conceptualisations of
home interior economies. Each of these frameworks is coherent
in itself, but that doesn’t mean that they are immune to criticism.

Phenomenology takes the individual biography as a continuity of
experiences that are ‘dragged through life’ and that one hardly
can get rid of. Home, where space and time are a factor of
identity formation with intense emotional appropriations, thus
tends to anchor the individual to his or her past. Romanticised
feelings of nostalgia is present in such relations between
home, past, present, and future, possibly blocking any awareness
of radical ruptures with the past which might be emancipating
rather than oppressive. Phenomenology has been criticised
because its focus on roots and belonging might give rise to
a logic of exclusion, favouring the local over the universal or
the rural over the urban. The ‘other’ might be seen in such a
logic as belonging to a collective that doesn’t have the right
to occupy ‘my territory’, ‘my ground’, ‘my environment’. So, a
certain oblique interpretation of phenomenology may mask
economic, political and social statements with serious human
consequences.

Critical Theory focusing on societal mechanisms that have to do
with power and oppression, is often not well equipped to make
sense of individual experiences. Indeed, the individual’s opinions
and choices are often explained away as being merely instances
of broader social, political and economic patterns, rather than
authentic manifestations of an autonomous self. This criticism is
for instance at the basis of Daniel Miller’s farewell to Marxism
as an all-encompassing and all-explaining theory, because Marxism
isn’t really capable of recognising all the choices people make
in home consumption. Critical Theory also has difficulties in
accepting the agency of material objects and constellations. For
many critical theorists, the world as we know it is the result
of social processes, and they have no tools to understand how
the material (and especially spatial) patterns that resulted from
previous social processes inevitably influence the current ones
because they accommodate certain behaviours and connections
while prohibiting others.

In case of the Actor-Network Theory, architectural analysis
would simply be reduced to network analysis. We can doubt
that such a simplified methodology is really sufficient ground
for such an analysis. ANT is indeed highly controversial, as the
major criticisms outlined by Law make very clear. Star, for example,
argues that ANT studies are often centred and managerialist,
attending to the powerful in a sometimes functionalist and
masculinist mode. Lee and Brown suggest the ANT approach
fails wherever can’t be translated into network terms, so
failing to recognise its own role as an intellectual technology of
Othering. Haraway argues that the theory is not very aware
of its own politics, and in particular of the political agendas of
its own stories. These severe criticisms on ANT make it a
controversial method for the study of interior economies.

How then to develop an appropriate, theoretically sound
methodology for analysing interior economies? We, as academics
who have worked with these different theories, are convinced
that they each offer valuable insights. Each of them however
also implies a certain world view – an encompassing way of
understanding how social reality works from a philosophical
and epistemological point of view, these theories are therefore
in conflict with one another, and some would argue they are
even incompatible (see Adorno’s and Heynen’s critique on
phenomenology, Latour’s dislike of Hessege’s Hoogsteyns’
concerns on combining Miller’s approach and ANT). Without
denying this incompatibility, we would nevertheless argue that
the choice for a particular framework might be informed by the
cases one investigates and by the research questions that one
wants to pose. If a project were to research how elderly people
experience the transition from their own home to a care facility,
phenomenology might be most helpful because it would highlight
the importance of their memories as embodied in objects and
furniture. If however the research was about home interiors in
socially deprived surroundings, an Actor-Network Theory
approach might be of help because it could reveal the
powerful interests and the ways in which these interests
are linked to the home interior. If the research was
primarily interested in how the home interior connected
people in a particular community, a Phenomenological
approach might be more helpful. If however the
research was about the home interior and its
social consequences, a Critical Theory approach
might be more helpful. Thus, the choice of
theory is always culture-specific and
contextualised.

In conclusion, the home interior is
a complex network of human and
non-human actors. When one of these actors is removed
or replaced, the home interior as the resulting network might
look completely different. All these human and non-human
actors should thus be considered together in a network, and that
is exactly what the term actor-network accomplishes. ANT
holds that the relational view on space is also very much interconnected.

The theoretical frameworks that are frequently used in
home consumption. Phenomenology, Critical Theory
or Actor-Network Theory are based on different
conceptualisations of home interior economies. Each of these theories is coherent
in itself, but that doesn’t mean that they are immune to criticism.
in suburban houses, where parents continue to live after their grown up children have left. ANT might offer valuable clues as to how these interiors are nodes in many different interacting networks, including those making connections with distant places such as where those children live now.

All three of these frameworks conceptualise interior economies in a different way, allowing researchers to ask different questions and to highlight interconnections in divergent ways. Aspects of them might be combined in any given research or design project, but we think it is prudent in these cases to think through them might be combined in any given research or design project, and to highlight interconnections in divergent ways. Aspects of all three of these frameworks conceptualise interior economies as networks, including those making connections with distant places in suburban houses, where parents continue to live after their grown up children have left.

NOTES

2. e.g. Theodor W. Adorno, Kriegslegende: Construction of the Aesthetic (Patterson: University of Minnesota Press, 1989 [1933]).
5. e.g. Martin Chrischer, The Emergence of the Interior Architecture, Modern Domesticity (London: Routledge, 2007).
7. e.g. Martha C. Brown, Designing the Modern Interior. From the Victorians to Today (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 119-130.

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