

Sacred Domesticities: The Ontology of Home

Thomas Barrie
NC State University
tom_barrie@ncsu.edu

The need for home lies deep in the human heart: when our homeland is threatened we go into action to defend it, and when our family house is violated we are profoundly offended. We spend our lives trying to “make a home” -- building, buying, renting, borrowing houses, staying in the old family homestead or moving from house to house according to the winds of fate. Few things are more important than finding a home and working at it constantly to make it resonate with deep memories and fulfill deep longings.¹

Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*

Abstract

This paper will address the ontological significance of home. In particular, it will examine home and domesticity both physically and metaphysically, as a sensual, material place and a rich receptacle of symbolism. A broad range of sources – mythology, literature, phenomenology, and depth psychology – will introduce the diversity of issues germane to the ontological context of home and domesticity. There will be a particular emphasis on the scholarship of the contemporary philosopher Thomas Moore to argue that deeper and broader understandings of home, of being at home, can productively inform the housing of the psyche and the incorporation of sacrality in the places we design.

Background

In Vitruvius' mythical account of the origins of the first “dwelling house” the creation of the house is conflated with the establishment of language, political discourse and civilization. Home and house are not mere shelter, but both emblematic and catalytic of culture. Vitruvius' brief exposition illustrates the enduring symbolism of home as the center from which civilization was conceived and born – and even as a symbol of civilization itself. (One of the root meanings of “citizen” is “member of a household.”) The primitive hut has enjoyed a lengthy lineage as a place of birth and renewal, perhaps most provocatively (and famously) in the 18th century *An Essay on Architecture*, by the Jesuit Priest Marc-Antoine Laugier, who extols the virtues of the “little rustic hut.” This interest, according to Joseph Rykwert, is “displayed by practically all peoples at all times,”² and he postulates that “Adam's house in paradise” was an “exposition of the paradisaic plan, and therefore established him at the center of it.”³

All of our lives we inhabit and pass through a number of houses, beginning with the first metaphorical house of the womb. We live in the house or houses of our parents or guardians, and eventually move out (but never completely) to live with roommates or alone as we first find our way in the world. Finding and creating our first home we can truly call our own is typically an important milestone. Then there are the houses we rent or own and the homes we make as we move to new jobs or opportunities, cohabit with a partner, marry or divorce, raise or adopt children, and eventually grow old in. At some point we may live with our children or move to continuing care facilities, before the inevitable death of our bodies. All are temporary and impermanent, and indeed humans are distinguished from most other animals in that we occupy the dwellings of others, but all, throughout our lives, are “home.”

Home is a place that we appropriate and express ourselves through. As in the Burt Bacharach and Diane Warwick song, “A house is not a home, when there is no one there to hold you tight,” we may rent or buy a house or housing unit, but it is through our occupation and personalization that the house becomes our home. Karsten Harries reminds us that in contemporary Western culture “home has become a place where one just happens to live,” but that “a good home needs to be appropriated.” As Dolores Hayden states, “A home fulfills many needs: a place of self expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard.”⁴ The term home is often used to describe where we were born or raised, our “home town,” indicating its profound and enduring ontological significance. To speak of one’s “homeland” is to describe a unique place to which we are inextricably bound. As in J.H. Payne’s *The Maid of Milan* (1832), “Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home.”

An enduring subject of myths, folktales and literature from around the world, “home” is a word that has significant and enduring meaning. The myth of Philemon and Baucis symbolically presents the propitious setting of simple domesticity. In the story (made famous by Goethe’s *Faust*), the pious old couple welcomes into their simple hut the gods Jupiter and Mercury, disguised as wayfarers, after all of the other inhabitants of Phrygia had turned them away.⁵ Even though they are very poor the couple welcomes the gods to their hearth and generously feed them. Eventually the wayfarers reveal themselves to the couple and punish their neighbors by flooding the valley. At Philemon and Baucis’ request, their primitive hut becomes a temple that they tend until their death – the simple hut now a sacred setting.

Many stories share a common topic of leaving and returning home and descriptions of “home” and of “coming home” have a rich literary history. Home is the center of our lives, the place that we may depart from, but to which we always return. As a bulwark against the uncertainty of our lives it serves as the hub of our personal world and its safety and stability are essential to our sense of well-being. According to Karsten Harries, it is the condition of “homelessness,” that provokes humans to construct myths, and by extension homes, to “re-present the world that no longer seems indifferent to our needs, arbitrary and contingent, but is experienced as a place we can call home.”⁶ It is Dorothy, who in the Wizard of Oz so plaintively cried, “There’s no place like home!” echoing Homer who wrote in *The Odyssey*, “There’s nothing better in this world” than a “happy peaceful home.” Odysseus is homeless for many years following the Trojan Wars, unable through a range of circumstances to find his way home, poetically describing the disorientation and terror of being “homeless.” And Oedipus, born into the Royal House of Thebes, lives his life as a wanderer, his antidote to the Delphic Oracle’s prophecy that he will kill his father.⁷ Robert Frost in his evocative poem “The Death of the Hired Hand” writes that “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Home is our refuge from the vicissitudes of the world and thus its enduring symbolism as a place of stability and safety.

The feeling of “being at home,” describes a condition of ease and comfort, and so it is not unusual that we often tell our guests to make themselves “at home.” Phenomenology has had an enduring interest in the ontological significance of home, beginning perhaps with Heidegger’s philosophical construct of “dwelling.” Christian Norberg-Schulz, who was primarily an interpreter of Heidegger, equated “dwelling” with a “return to things” and his arguments are often illustrated by domestic examples.⁸ Gaston Bachelard described the oneiric house, as a place saturated with memories, dreams and symbolic meaning. For Bachelard, home is deeply connected to the “unforgettable house” of childhood, and that the “house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.” Referencing the Swiss Psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, he attributes the different places and vertical layers of the house to the structure of the psyche. Similarly Karsten Harries states that the “psyche... has its attics, cellars and closets,”⁹ and Claire Cooper Marcus, “the unconscious often chooses houses, buildings, and secret rooms as symbols. The basement or cellar is often a metaphor for the unconscious, of something hidden that needs to be explored, whereas the attic of roof or opening to the sky often reflects a desire to

explore transpersonal realms or spiritual dimensions.”¹⁰ In Jungian psychology the house as it appears in dreams symbolizes the self, and it was Jung himself who built a highly symbolic house at Bollingen that at its completion became a “symbol of psychic wholeness.”

Symbolisms and descriptions of home also enjoy an extensive lineage in religion and sacred scripture. In *1 Kings* Solomon’s Temple is presented as the “house of the Lord,” a specific place for God to “dwell in forever.”¹¹ The Hindu temple is called the “house of god” (*devagriham*), and great care is taken in choosing its site, and in its design and proportioning – all to ensure that the deity will “dwell” there.¹² In the Christian Gospels the parable of “The Wise and Foolish Builders” equates a house built with firm foundations “upon rock” with the security only offered by adherence to the faith.¹³ And, in Zen Buddhism the simple hermit scholar’s retreat, celebrated in landscape paintings of the Southern Sung period, was both a place to live an authentic life and a threshold to the unconditioned realms of enlightenment.¹⁴

Domestic symbols have also been intrinsic to sacred architecture. For example, at the Third Dynasty Funerary Complex of King Zoser in Saqqara, the bundled reeds of traditional house supports are rendered in stone in the entry hall, and paired “red” and “white” palaces employ domestic symbols to concretize the political union of the north and south. According to E.B. Smith, the dome emerged from the earliest of domestic architecture and came to potently conflate home as center and the domed sanctuary as the center of the cosmos.¹⁵ Norman Crowe has outlined a lineage that begins with the Mycenaean megaron and leads to the house of the deity materialized in the Classical Greek temple.¹⁶ Early Christian “House Churches” appropriated and transformed domestic architecture to facilitate the nascent rituals of the formative faith. The sacred structures of the Shinto Naiku Shrine of Ise Jingu represent ancient archetypal Japanese dwellings associated with the gods and the founding of the nation. The Long Houses of the Iroquois Confederacy were domestic structures built at a colossal scale, which served as the ritual and spiritual centers of their world, (and its members were often called the “people of the longhouse”).¹⁷ The Hopewell Era moundbuilders of the American mid-west built wooden charnel houses, homes for the dead, which were ultimately transformed by fire and earth into the massive mounds for which they are known. And, of course there is the lengthy history of house tombs, where domestic images symbolize the eternal house of the dead – a place built to house the dead, materialize their lives, and provide portentous bridges to the land of the dead and revered ancestors. All of which suggest the primacy of home and house and its enduring ontological symbolism.

Domesticity, Sacrality and Contemporary Culture

According to Thomas Moore, “Home is an emotional state, a place of the imagination where feelings of security, belonging, placement, family, protection, memory, and personal history abide. Our dreams and fantasies of home may give us direction and calm our anxieties as we continually look for ways to satisfy our longings for home.”¹⁸ For Moore, feelings associated with truly being “at home” are among the most significant and meaningful. Being at home is associated with “enchantment,” of being connected, centered, even rapturous and ecstatic. One is literally under the “spell” of the numinous, the mysterious and the meaningful. But, paradoxically, these realms are often accessed through the everyday activities of life – fully experienced and appreciated, in an Epicurean sense, simply for what they are. Moore argues “nothing is more intimate than home, and therefore nothing more proper to the soul. Whatever it takes to call forth the spirits of home, our own lares and penates – ancient Roman household spirits – is worth our effort and expense.”¹⁹

And yet for Moore, the “emotional sickness” of contemporary society (and its built environment) is emblematic of our alienation from ourselves and the places we inhabit, and that “our society is suffering from profound homesickness.”²⁰ The house, according to Moore, is a place that has the

capacity of enchantment, to engage our soul in profound and meaningful ways, but that “the principles of enchantment... are directly opposed to those of modernism.” We are, in essence, disenchanted with our culture and its artifacts.²¹ Christopher Reed, in his introduction to the book *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, discusses the cultural forces that have produced the domestic environments Moore finds so deficient. For Reed, even though a home dedicated exclusively to domesticity is a modern phenomenon, modern art did not tend to celebrate it, and that Modernism’s preoccupation with the *avant garde* “imagined itself away from home, marching towards glory on the battlefields of culture.”²² Witold Rybczynski suggests that the 17th century Dutch were among the first to create the modern home, often celebrated in the art of their time. However, according to Reed, beginning with the favored subjects of the Impressionists – landscapes and city scenes – modern art had “no time to spare for the mundane details of home life and housekeeping,” and that the home was eventually positioned “as the antipode to high art.”

The 20th Century architectural *avant garde* did not so much abandon the domestic environment but sought to rehabilitate it. Influential theoritons such as Adolf Loos dismissed decoration and ornament as both superfluous and degenerate – an attack directed in part at the favored domestic interiors of his time. The moralizing tone of much of the treatises of early modernism often conflated architecture and morality -- Le Corbusier opens his discussion of the ideal house by citing “a question of morality,” and the need for “truth.” Referencing the primordial nature of the house as the “first tool that (man) forged for himself,” he argues that the current “out of date tool” should be relegated to the “scrap heap.” Le Corbusier insists that his contemporaries “should be pitied for living in unworthy houses, since they ruin our health and our *morale*,” before turning to the virtues of the “pure” and the “abstract,” epitomized by the eponymous engineer.²³ Le Corbusier’s acerbic and prolonged polemic regarding “home” has actually very little to say about domesticity, and is emblematic of modernism where “the domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion.”²⁴

It was in the post-modernism of the early 1960’s that the terms home and domesticity were rehabilitated and a renewed interest in the domestic appeared. Charles Moore shares Thomas Moore’s sentiments when he states “You bind the goods and trappings of your life together with your dreams to make a place uniquely your own. In doing so you build a semblance of the world you know, adding it to the community that surrounds you.”²⁵ Feminism in particular had an interest in repositioning the domestic as a means to reclaim its suppressed histories and challenge its agency as an enforcer setting of gender roles and social hierarchy. During this time, phenomenology was also put in service of validating the quotidian nature of life and the sensuality of domesticity. Thomas Moore, whose descriptions of home are phenomenological in spirit,²⁶ invokes Heidegger when he characterizes the earth as our home and argues, “we are always making a house for the heart and always looking for the house of divinity.”²⁷

Conclusion

Hestia, the virgin goddess of the home, was known as the goddess of the hearth, and a Greek custom was to carry a new born baby around the hearth as a symbol of their homecoming. Meal offerings included the following prayer:

*“Hestia, in all dwellings of men and immortals
Yours in the highest honor, the sweet wine offered
First and last at the feast, poured out for you duly.
Never without you can gods or mortals hold a banquet.”²⁸*

But Hestia also had a civic role as guardian of the sacred hearth of Greek cities. And so her personified divinity and responsibilities ranged from the realms of individual dwelling to the civic – both essential to the preservation of wellbeing. Similarly, Henry David Thoreau’s philosophical discussions regarding the building and inhabitation of his simple hut on Lake Walden occupy a broad territory, encompassing psychic, spiritual, sensual, quotidian, metaphysical and cosmic realms. Throughout his extended essay, even though anchored to a specific place delineated by essential architecture, he looks both inward and outward. Home in both of these contexts is a sacred realm that comprises broader ontological territories that transcend the common assignation of home to the secular. But, as Gadamer reminds us, the sacred and the profane are always paired – the profane originally denoting the place in front of the altar.

Thomas Moore broadly defines “home” to structure his ontological argument – home is the psychic interior that houses our soul, the place of intimate and sensual domesticity, and the broader home of our culture, homeland and even universe. In this context, I would like to suggest three fundamental notions of home that may be useful as we consider expanded and helpful definitions. First there is the home of our bodies and the inner realms of our psyche and soul, the vast numinous territories of our memories, dreams and self-definition. Secondly, there is the domestic home – the place of comfort, rest and ease, of family, meals and intimacy, the setting for the dramas, passages, pains and joys of our lives. And lastly, there is the home of the world, a deepened sense of interconnection with others and the natural environment of which we are an intrinsic part, of being at home in the universe.

Our home is not only a refuge that protects us from the world, but also a place that connects us. According to Moore, the root word of “inhabit” means to give and receive. Home satisfies our phenomenological and psychological needs for comfort and security, while also providing the threshold for our departures to the broader world. Symbolically it is a place that looks both inward and outward, and thus its significance to the broader tasks of architecture in general. As stated by Gaston Bachelard, “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.”²⁹ Consequently we may understand home in more diverse and multifarious ways, from inner psychic realms to vast cosmic perspectives, in ways that may serve to inform the housing of the psyche and the incorporation of sacrality in the places we design. In this context architecture may participate in the enduring human need to come home to themselves, others and the universe.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Moore, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 42.
- ² Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1972, p. 183.
- ³ Rykwert, p. 190
- ⁴ Claire Cooper Marcus, *The House as Symbol of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*, Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1995, p.4.
- ⁵ Wayfarers and travelers were under Jupiter's protection.
- ⁶ Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998, p. 136
- ⁷ He does eventually find a home, but, as is well-known, it is short-lived and ends in tragedy.
- ⁸ For example, Georg Trakl's poem, "A Winter Evening," is discussed at length to illustrate Heidegger's positioning of phenomenology as a "return to things" and the ontological significance of home and domestic rituals. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1980, pp. 8 – 11.
- ⁹ Harries, p. 208.
- ¹⁰ Marcus, p. 40.
- ¹¹ 1 Kings 6.1-8.13.
- ¹² George Michell, *The Hindu Temple, An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 61.
- ¹³ LK 6.46-49.
- ¹⁴ In Buddhism this is described as "relative" and "ultimate" reality.
- ¹⁵ E. Baldwin Smith, *The Dome: A Study in the History of Ideas*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ Norman Crowe, *Nature and the Idea of a Man-made World: An Investigation into the Evolutionary Roots of Form and Order in the Built Environment*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995, pp. 42 – 46.
- ¹⁷ See Peter Nabokov and Robert Easton, *Native American Architecture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 82-91.
- ¹⁸ Moore, p. 77.
- ¹⁹ Moore, p. 85.
- ²⁰ Moore, p. 43.
- ²¹ Moore p. ix-x.
- ²² Christopher Reed, Ed., *Not at Home: the Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 7. Reed reminds us that the term *avant garde* is a military one, meaning the advance guard that leads the charge against the enemy.
- ²³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, pp. 17-20.
- ²⁴ Reed, p. 16
- ²⁵ Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses: three Architects Suggest Ways to Build and Inhabit Houses*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1974, p. vii.
- ²⁶ Like many phenomenological writers he can be exclusive in what he considers pertinent to his subject, generally reserving his arguments for the transcendent nature of domesticity to the exclusion of other important elements.
- ²⁷ Moore, p.42
- ²⁸ Quoted in Hamilton, Edith, *Mythology*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1942, p. 37.
- ²⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p.5.