

AMONG OTHERS IN A WORLD OF ONE'S OWN

APPROPRIATION OF SPACE IN MODERN APARTMENT HOUSES IN THE EARLY POST-WAR PERIOD

Håkan Berglund-Lake

Abstract: After the Second World War an intense period of modern housing construction started in Sweden, which suddenly changed the circumstances of everyday life for a great number of the Swedish population. The tenants were offered apartments equipped with central heating, kitchen with fridge and electric cooker, and bathroom with bathtub. These dwellings gave rise to new experiences for everyone who moved in. By ordering their things and establishing new everyday routines and habits, people appropriated this new and unfamiliar space and made it one with their ongoing life. In this process of spatial organisation and routinisation new borderlines were drawn and new meanings were given to categories such as private-public, indoor-outdoor, home-outer world, us and them. Applying a theoretical approach from phenomenology, based on life story interviews with people who experienced these modern apartments in their capacity as the first tenants, the article elucidates how people through their daily habitual actions, in interaction with things and consociates both delimited and positioned themselves in connection with a wider world. Namely, how they established a relationship between private and public realms, home and not-home, inside and outside, “us” and “them”, and, furthermore, how they transformed an unfamiliar space into a familiar place, a place they could call their own.

Key words: appropriation of space, experience of dwelling, modern apartment houses, notion of home, phenomenology, private/public domains

After the Second World War housing shortage was a serious social problem in Sweden. For the Social Democratic Party, which governed the country at the time, the housing policy became an issue of high priority in their then political agenda. Unlike the housing policy of the 1930s, which was directed to the most vulnerable social groups, the new goal became to provide “good dwelling for everyone”, independent of social belonging and where in the country people

were living (Ekström von Essen 2003). The social democratic housing policy resulted in an intense period of modern housing construction, which suddenly changed the circumstances of everyday life for a great number of the Swedish population. The tenants were offered apartments equipped with central heating, kitchen with fridge and electric cooker, and bathroom with bathtub. These dwellings gave rise to new experiences for everyone who moved in. By ordering their things and establishing new everyday routines and habits in relation to objects and other inhabitants in the housing area, they occupied the apartments and the common spaces of the house in their quest to create a place for everyday living. In an investigation I am currently conducting in Kramfors, a small industrial town located in Central Sweden and far away from metropolitan regions, the aim is to examine this process.

An investigation of dwelling implies attempts to get in touch with a physical environment where life is lived, which I do not think is possible without detailed empirical observations; even though, in this case, it has to be done through people's memories. For that reason, the study is based mainly on interviews. By asking questions about tangible things, as well as about whole physical environments, such as the apartment, stairwell, laundry room, courtyard, and the residential area, memories will be awakened. Places where people are staying for a longer period of time have proved to have propensity to give rise to memories. This will be particularly obvious when places come up where people have lived and called their homes (see, e.g., Gunnemark 1998; Hodne 1986; Åström & Sundman 1990); they are what Casey (1987: 211) calls *the primary exemplars of remembered places*, or conversely, they are *congealed scenes for remembered contents* (Casey 1987: 189). This is confirmed in the interviews. My informants are remembering how the rooms were arranged, how they were furnished, what things one was surrounded with and made use of, and what daily activities one had to do. From field notes and transcriptions of tapes, it is possible to trace the routines of daily life in different localities, in the apartment itself and between the apartment and the outer space.

Thus far, I have interviewed fifteen persons (twelve women and three men) who in their capacity as the first tenants moved in and started to live in Kramfors' first modern apartment houses, built in the years following the Second World War. Based on these life story interviews and applying a theoretical approach from phenomenology, I will in this article elucidate how people through their daily habitual actions, in interaction with consociates and things in their housing environment, both delimited and positioned themselves in connection with the wider world. Namely, how they established a relationship between private and public realms, home and not-home, inside and outside, "us" and "them",

and, furthermore, how they transformed an unfamiliar space into a familiar place, a place which they could call their own.

MAKING A HOME

In the town where I have conducted my fieldwork, housing shortage was a common problem during the years after the Second World War. The apartments available on the housing market consisted of a small number of lodgings in owner-occupied houses; apartment houses did not exist at all. For single individuals it was something one could stand temporarily, but for recently married couples the situation was much more difficult. When the first modern apartment houses were erected, it was above all young families with, or still without, children who were moving in. The motive for moving into the house, as my informants pointed out, was to *get a place of one's own*, not primarily to get access to "modern" facilities.

But the rental for the apartments was rather high. The interviewees estimate that the rental charge amounted to 40% of the family budget. Compared to previous housing costs this implied a doubling for many families. Fortunately, after the war nearly every inhabitant in the town was permanently employed with regular and secure income. For that reason, the tenants were capable of defraying expenses.

In spite of the relatively high rental for the apartments, the housing company did not exclude any applicants on the basis of profession or social status in favour of others. These new housing areas were environments where social borders and hierarchies were denied. This ambition, as mentioned before, was an explicit purpose for the social democratic housing policy. Almost every breadwinner in the households was a wage earner. Most of the men had jobs as labourers, workmen and lower-level officials. Gainfully employed women were extremely unusual in this environment. Generally, the husband had a job outside the home, while the wife was expected to stay home to carry out most of the required domestic work. These circumstances give rise to the issue of how gendered spaces were created and sustained. In my account here, however, my concern is not with gender, nor with class, age, or particular individuals. Instead, the pervading theme is the appropriation of space as a human imperative; the focus is on the imperative human need for a place somewhere in the world one can come into one's own, a place of belonging, security, and control.

The apartment these people encountered was a site for dwelling, but not yet a home. Among scholars preoccupied with issues on the practice and the

experience of dwelling, a prevailing approach has for long been to make a distinction between house (or apartment) and home, where house is considered a material construction, an object in a determined physical environment, and home as an emotional relation occurring in the interplay between the subject and the housing unit (see, e.g., Dovey 1985; Lawrence 1987, Saegert 1985). By virtue of this perspective I will see the home not as an entity but as something being made, something that has to be created continuously. That is, the home is created and recreated through routines of daily life, in the practices performed on it and in it (Saunders & Williams 1988), by women and men together or separately, in the recurrent practice of cleaning, cooking, decorating, laundering and repairing, buying, ordering and disposing things, from dawn to dusk, from weekdays to weekends. These activities, however, were something that “one just did”, unreflectively, something self-evident and natural. As Alfred Schütz (1962) has recurrently emphasized, in daily life we take the world and its objects largely for granted. People put *in brackets*, he says, *the doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise than it appears to* [them] (Schütz 1962: 229). That is to say, the world is experienced as something ordered and objective, having the nature of something permanent. Consequently, we conceive the home as something given, and not as something made. This illusion of a world of things with a life of its own, seemingly frozen and determined, is what Karl Marx (1976: 163–177) called fetishism, emanating from the experience that the labour *process is extinguished in the product* (1976: 287). Therefore, it is not surprising that people fetishized their homes and considered these as something consistent and essential.

Most of the interviewees describe their former homes as something physically anchored in a definite site, behind a closed front door, within the walls of the apartment. This experience of inwardness also gave rise to a sense of intimacy, privacy, and security. The informants depict an image of the apartment in a way that merges with the notion of private space, or rather with the notion of home. This notion of home as an entity, something concrete and tangible, made it easy for the residents to mark off the home and relate it to a wider world.

THE PRIVATE APARTMENT AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The crucial opposition between home and not-home, between private and public realms, was thus experienced to be situated between the inside and the outside of the apartment itself. This image marked off a space for family mem-

bers only, those who belonged to the place, those who lived here and called it their home, those who had the right of determination within the walls; it was a boundary vital to separate strangers from the family members, outsiders from insiders. Even though it is possible to disclose this polarity as a result of influences from bourgeoisie culture in the rise of a modern capitalistic society (Gillis 1997; Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Rybczynski 1986), there are, however, similarities in different historical settings and social contexts, in the way people think through their things and order their things, which we may consider as a function of basic human needs (see, e.g., Wilson 1988). A general observation is that, [a]ll *physically bounded domestic spaces are private to the extent that they allow household members to control access to themselves, perhaps to conceal or hide behavior from the view of others or manage the knowledge others have about them* (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúniga 1999: 4).

In the apartment, according to what my informants told, rooms were ordered in different layers of intimacy, according to the degree of their being exposed to the public gaze. Visitors did not enter the apartment in a random manner but through predetermined rituals; in a preconceived way they were lead from the front door through the hall to rooms which were considered more public than others. There were spatial arrangements and decorations intended as symbolical expressions of the family to prospective visitors; the living room was regarded as the most public room and the bedroom as the most private room, in other words, the rooms were organized in a hierarchical order. However, considering the scope of the article, I will not carry this discussion further. Instead, as presented earlier, my focus is on the relationship between the residents and the outer world.

As previously shown, my informants experienced the apartment as a place of personal control and security, definitely marked off from the surroundings. The front door had the function to demarcate the dwelling from the outside world; that is to say, the front door offered a distinct quality of being inside and outside. The significance of this borderline was practically and symbolically marked by locks, a name-plate, a door bell and sometimes also a door mat. Nevertheless, as the Swedish architect Tomas Wikström notes, the enclosure of the home always did correspond to openness. The boundary of the apartment was simultaneously an interface with the outer world. For that reason the physical shield of the home must have *an adjustable semi-permeability* (Wikström 1994: 192). Openings, both doors and windows, were required to regulate the contact with the surroundings, both for people and things to pass through, but also for a stream of sensory impressions.

Coping with everyday life presupposed activities in different arenas, which implied movements more or less far away from the place the residents called their home: on their way through the stairwell, down to the cellar, out in the courtyard, and further out on the nearest streets and neighborhood, with the purpose of going to work, shopping, visiting friends and relations, participating in social activities. Through these movements the home was related to a wider world in different layers of practical relevance for the daily life. Thus, as a consequence of daily habitual actions the home was connected to people and things outside the private realm.

MOVEMENTS AND ENCOUNTERS

Living in an apartment house implies living close to others. The apartment houses of the 1940s and 1950s were constructed as freestanding entities, three- or four-storey buildings, and were divided into apartments with two or three rooms and a kitchen. Each building consisted of a certain number of stairwells (see, e.g., Björk *et al.* 1984). In Kramfors the first modern apartment houses, five in number, were built between 1945 and 1949. They were constructed as three-storey houses with three stairwells and the entrance facing a courtyard at the back of the house. In the stairwells the apartments were situated over and under each other with two, sometimes three apartments on each storey. All apartments were provided with balconies. The apartments had access to the common stairwell through the front door. Consequently, to move from the apartment out of the house and back, people had to take the route by the entrance to the stairwell and the stairs. That is to say, all movements of individuals and things between the dwelling and the outer world took place by passing through the stairwell. Accordingly, in the stairwell people constantly moved extremely close to the apartments of others. Only a door and a threshold separated the private apartment from the more or less public stairwell.

In spite of this physical proximity, the relationship with the neighbours rarely developed into a friendship. It is essential to note that only a few of the interviewed moved in as a result of already knowing somebody living in the residential area; more often one was moving into the houses to get access to a large apartment for the family to live and grow in, not to live close to others. In these housing estates the dwellings were separated from relatives, friends, workmates, as well as from work places and areas for leisure activities.

The people interviewed stated that most of the residents in the houses, with the exception of children, did not know each other, but did know of each

other (cf. Bauman 1993: 146). In most cases people knew their neighbours only by sight and name, but, occasionally, close contacts were established. With some of the residents in the housing estate one sometimes used to drink coffee, exchanged newspapers, or borrowed foodstuffs and tools from. Sometimes people helped each other with small things. Whether this happened or not had nothing to do with how close to each other the apartments were situated; to have apartments in the same stairwell did not automatically result in friendship. *We exchanged greetings when we met, and chatted with each other for some minutes or so. But we did not see each other*, one of the interviewees said. Friendly relations could be established between people sharing a stairwell, but these instances were none the less frequent than those of making friends with people living in another stairwell or with people living in another house in the same residential area. Generally, people were not on visiting terms; they kept their distance and did not force themselves upon others. A neighbour was expected not to disturb and not to be self-assertive. It was a silent agreement of mutual respect. This behaviour, to live in balance and harmony with neighbours at a distance and in conflict avoidance, that Tomas Wikström (1994: 221) calls *an informal agreement of not-interference*, has been observed in several investigations on dwelling in modern apartment houses in the 1950s and later (e.g., Daun 1974; Hansen 1978; Wikström 1994).

Encounters between people living in the residential area usually occurred on their way home or away from home, in most cases in the form of a nod, some words in passing. What people always knew about other residents was in which stairwell and in which house their apartment was located. This knowledge determined how people were moving around and where they were staying in the area to be considered decent in the eyes of others. There was a socially constrained way to move in a place; it was a matter of being the “right” person in the “right” place at the “right” time. People mainly stayed in their “own” stairwell and near their “own” entrance. It was considered uncomfortable to keep running in stairwells other than one’s “own”, at least without a reason; it would have given rise to a feeling of trespassing. Likewise it was considered improper to be seen in the window or stay on the balcony for too long; especially, leaning over the balcony parapet for a better view would have been judged as curious and indiscrete. Nevertheless, peeping on the sly was going on everywhere; people learned to watch without being seen.

Even though the encounters between the residents were mainly based on the knowledge of others at a distance, private information did leak out into the public. Behaviour and clothing are telltale signs. Also, the apartment conveyed information in the form of sounds, things moving around, and people scream-

ing or laughing. Even smells were transmitted through the front door and people on their way up and down in the stairs could recognize by the smell the food their neighbours were cooking, especially those having stronger smells like fried herring, sausage and onion. Direct observation became possible if the front door happened to be opened at time of people passing by. Also from the outside, the courtyard, it was possible to get an idea of how the apartments in the houses were decorated. The apartments had many large windows. In between curtains and potted plants, furniture, lamps and pictures, people moving around could be seen, particularly during the period from September to April, when the dark nights made a sharp contrast between the well-lit apartments and the outside darkness.

Owing to this information, but above all, owing to the appearance and presence of people in the area, the private came out in the public, and became an object for others. This “objective” relationship, as Hannah Arendt (1958: 58) remarks, *is essential to a truly human life*, which occurs only where people simultaneously are related to and separated from each other *through the intermediary of a common world of things*. Accordingly, places are always read and experienced in relation to other people. The world of things and people in the housing area became evident and tangible in encounters with other residents, who off and on appeared in the courtyard, in the attic, in the basement and in the laundry room, on their way up and down the stairs. These were face engagements, something that Erving Goffman (1963: 83–111) has called focused interaction, which occurs when persons are in one another’s physical presence in the same situation. He reminds us that within the physical boundaries of a situation where persons are seeing each other, they *function not merely as physical instruments but also as communicative ones* (Goffman 1963: 23). Through bodily idiom and in narrative practice, in the social act of small talk, gossip and storytelling, even if brief and made in passing, other residents were linked to and merged with the places of one’s own.

MAKING IT ONE’S OWN

As described above, the practice of everyday life entailed movements for the tenants between different places both within the domestic space and beyond. In these recurrent movements and activities, people gradually became acclimatized in their new apartments and in the residential area. Conversely, we could say that the places were experienced and known through the intimate attachment of a body in action. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962: 105) observes,

[t]here is a knowledge of place, which is reducible to a sort of co-existence with that place; the places were known, as Casey (1997: 232) puts it, by *acquaintance in the form of familiarity*. But the sense of familiarity among the residents was more or less intense, depending on how thoroughly they had appropriated the place with their activities and personal belongings. The geographer David Seamon (1979: 81) describes the appropriation of spaces in terms of possession and control. Appropriation is a matter of recurrent doings, whereby a place becomes possessed, marked off, and felt as being within one's own control. This process was, of course, most intense within the walls of the apartment. Nowhere was the sense of possession and being in control more comprehensive than in the apartment. This sense of control and familiarity, however, decreased according to the scales of action and concern as soon as people left their apartments. The ties were particularly weak with places outside the residential area where people used to stay and act just temporarily: for example, in the wooded hillside where they used to pick lingonberries, the place where they used to bathe with their children or the grocer's where they used to buy food.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the level of familiarity, people experience a place through recurrent bodily presence and action whereby the place is conceived and asserted as their own, though not literally, of course; it is more a question of *making something one's own by making it one with one's ongoing life* (Casey 1987: 191–192). The places people are acting in and upon, as the things they are using become, as Michael Jackson (2002: 284) terms it, *an inextricable part of [their] private lives*.

A paradox arises out of this. As noted above, people lack distance from the actions of everyday life because they are ceaselessly engaged. People are missing the point that they embody something of themselves in the place where they work and dwell, because this fusion between person and place is neither visible nor accurately measurable. Yet, in our everyday life the physical environment is regarded as separated from us and objectively real.

People in the housing area were preoccupied with establishing the habits and routines in the new setting in a way that allowed everyday life to be obvious and manageable. As mentioned before, this is an experience of the world as something consistent and constant. For the world of places appears to us in its very materiality, experienced as pre-established, inert and objective, that is to say a concrete world of things. People encountered the housing environment as a physical construction, consisting of buildings, walls, doors, fences, roads, and paths. This substantiality and tangibility predisposed the residents to encompass their everyday world in a design of entrances and exits, border-

lines and passages, between different places, whereby they could objectify their sense of belonging. That is to say, these concrete forms made it easy for them to subsume things and persons into a world they could call their own.

In this process of appropriation, the concreteness helped the residents to draw a line between “us” and “them”, inside and outside, home and not-home. However, such binary relationships do not correspond to any fixed boundary in the environment. The borderlines are imagined and constantly shifting and depend on the context; they are altering according to the situation. In the world of the residents in my study, the interviewees say that on certain occasions they experienced “us” and “home” tantamount to the family and the domestic place inside the apartment, on other occasions tantamount to the stairwell as an entity and the neighbours connected to it, and on yet other occasions tantamount to the whole residential area and people living there. What is at issue is not so much a need for fixed positions between “us” and “them”, home and not-home, nor a fixed line between varying layers of anonymity and intimacy, but a need to mark off a corner in the world which the residents could regard as their own, a microcosm that they could trust and manage, *a place of certainty without doubt* (Dovey 1985: 46). As Michael Jackson has convincingly shown in his works, there is a universal human need to delimit and reduce the world to somewhere one can come into one’s own, a place graspable and within one’s governance (see, e.g., 1998; 2002). Though this existential project may be seen as a universal human imperative, it gives different forms and expressions in different social and historical settings. My account here deals with the microcosm people created and sustained as a result of habitual actions, in a setting of newly-constructed apartment houses with modern equipment during the post-war period, when living in such houses turned out to be a reality within reach for every Swedish citizen.

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