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18

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HOME INTERIORS

ABSTRACT

This paper examines theoretical and methodological principles for the analysis of home interiors. It begins with a criticism of recurrent approaches by architects, planners and housing administrators. Then it suggests and anthropological interpretation of the concepts of boundary, transition and spatial code, which are shown to be pertinent for the analysis of both the spatial and affective characteristics of home interiors. These concepts are used to analyse the transition between the inside and the outside of dwellings (notably the pragmatic and symbolic role people assign to the entrance hall); then it examines the relations between interior spaces and activities in terms of the structure of a privacy gradient and the interaction between space and household activities; finally, the location, meaning and use of household objects are discussed. These analyses show that home environments are like a web of affective and spatial characteristics, which cannot be abstracted one from the other. In this way, this study diversifies current research on home interiors.

INTRODUCTION

A dwelling, indeed any building, defines and delimits man-made space. Therefore, it is important to analyse how diverse spaces are separated and linked together. Architects use two predominant approaches for analysing the organization of domestic space. The first complies with the form-function model or the space-behaviour model. These interpretations of the design and use of buildings embody a concept labelled «architectural determinism» which assumes a unilinear relationship between the design of buildings and those human activities contained therein. Contemporary housing practice has often used this concept; for example, a series of housing manuals published by successive governments in Britain between 1919 and 1961 related deductive and predictive models of household activities to ascribed furniture layouts, thus generating house plans for «unknown users» of thousands of houses. This kind of approach is typical rather than exceptional of housing practice in many countries during this century.

The second approach includes morphological interpretations of people and buildings stemming from CHERMAYEFF's and ALEXANDER's (1963) analysis of house plans outlined by MARCH and STEADMAN (1971). The pertinence and limitations of this approach have been discussed elsewhere and will not be restated here (LAWRENCE, 1982). In brief, it was noted that the graphical analysis of diverse dwellings may highlight the similarities and the differences between several houses, yet it cannot yield any information about the meaning and use of

specific spaces. Man-made boundaries are not just created physically but are also ordered by symbolic and juridic parameters which are transient in kind. Therefore, this kind of analysis is only informative about the spatial characteristics of dwellings when they were initially constructed. In this respect they are interpreted as fixed objects by a static abstraction that overlooks their life-history. What if internal changes or additions were subsequently made to these houses? How are the different rooms classified and used? Such questions relate to the design and use of dwellings; they cannot be answered by a graphical analysis. In sum, to limit the analysis of domestic architecture to a study of its configuration would be quite misleading, because the meaning and use of domestic space is not solely dependent on its form. This approach must be enlarged to include an analysis of those transactions between the spatial, the socio-cultural and the personal meanings of domestic environments through the passage of time. Rather than further debit these two interpretations of domestic buildings, attention will now focus upon contributions from other disciplines to our subject of enquiry.

METHODOLOGY

Some cues for the diversification and reinterpretation of home interiors have been published by scholars in diverse disciplines. For example, some social anthropologists including TAMBIAH (1969) and HUGH-JONES (1979) present lucid ethnographies which show that although the spatial characteristics of domestic architecture in non-industrialized societies can be described according to orientation, relative position and the demarcation of spaces and objects in dwellings, such a description cannot account for the social meaning of household space unless other diverse practices related to the production and consumption of food, the categorization of animals, kinship rules and other social conventions are understood. Similarly, some social historians including EVANS (1978) and DAUNTON (1983) analyse how changes in the morphology, furnishing and use of dwellings cannot be dissociated from variations in the social meaning of domestic space and household life which engender changes in the resident's relation to his home. Likewise some sociologists including BOURDIEU (1977) discuss how personalization of domestic space varies in function of economic, socio-cultural and political factors that impinge upon the life-style of residents. Moreover, some psychologists including CSIKSZENTMIHALYI and ROCHBERG-HALTON (1981) and philosophers such as BACHELARD (1964a) and HEIDEGGER (1971) illustrate that the appropriation of domestic space is not merely inscribed in socio-cultural time but also the «personal world» of the resident and his goal-oriented behaviour.

In sum, diverse contributions of the kinds cited here show that (beyond a detailed description of room layout and furnishing), there are socio-cultural rules and conventions related to the design, the meaning and the use of rooms. Moreover, beyond manifest functions, such as the assertion of social status, and beyond explicit descriptions of how the structure and furnishing of houses may alter through the passage of time, it is important to comprehend how home interiors are endowed with meanings and values that are context specific for the residents. It is precisely for this reason that the analysis of those non-material factors which impinge upon the design, meaning and use of houses ought to be a subject of enquiry. In contrast to the preceding studies by authors from diverse disciplines which examine extant domestic environments, this essay will describe and illustrate how a socio-psychological interpretation of decisions taken during the architectural design process concerning the layout and furnishing of rooms can serve as a unique non-experimental context for the study of the meaning and intended use of home interiors from three complementary perspectives:

1. In terms of the «reactions» of the residents to what they have qualified either positively or negatively in their past or present residences.
2. In terms of the «interaction» between different members of the household who do not necessarily share the same aspirations and values about homes and daily domestic activities.
3. In terms of the generation of «new» ideas and values about houses and home-life specifically in order to achieve certain goals.

In this way this chapter is intended to diversify contemporary research on home interiors by illustrating the reciprocal relations between the spatial and the affective characteristics of houses.

Definitions

In this study a *code* is defined as the structure of a general set of possibilities for communicating and understanding particular characteristics of human culture. In this sense, architecture has a social and cultural as well as a pragmatic meaning; architecture therefore encodes social rules and conventions. A binary *code* is a kind of code that incorporates bipolar opposites, such as the positive/negative values associated with green and red traffic signals. The example of traffic signals is an interesting one, because frequently the addition of a third colour, yellow, is included to denote caution. It so happens that yellow is midway on the colour spectrum between red and green. In this case, the colour spectrum and the ordering of traffic movement corresponds. Yet, *there is no inherent fact in the colour spectrum itself why red should indicate «stop» rather than «go»*. Indeed, if the values assigned to red and green traffic signals were reversed the ordering of both systems would not change.

This example of traffic signals illustrates that the classification and coding of man-made objects depends on the ordering of boundaries. Taking cues from recurrent examples of this kind, LEACH (1976) applies the concepts of *boundary* and *code* to generate analyses of the classification and ordering of artifacts. In this essay, these concepts will be used to explore the meaning and use of home interiors. The decoding of residential environments requires an analysis of all the constituent parts without overlooking their role in the totality of their context or the reciprocal relations between them.

In this discussion of binary codes Leach employs an Euler diagram to illustrate the polarity and the boundaries between artifacts which are commonly classified as opposites. For ex-
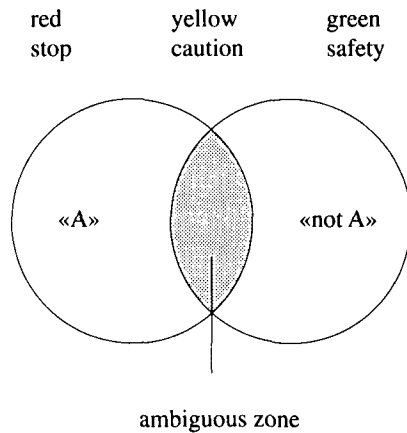
red   yellow   green
stop   caution   safety

ambiguous zone

Figure 1: An Euler diagram illustrates the binary coding of domestic space, objects or activities; from LEACH (1976).

ample, if Figure 1 es meant to represent traffic signals then «A» is red and positive, whereas «not A» is green and negative, and the ambiguous zone between them is yellow and cautionary. The distinction between red, yellow and green depends on the definition of boundaries which are artificial in kind (otherwise we would not refer to diverse colours of the spectrum).

This example is not meant to imply that the symbolism of colours is a universal constant across cultures. As Leach shows, red is not just a sign of danger, but is associated with joy in many cultures, being a dominant colour for festivities. The important point to grasp is that it is a set of contrasting elements which prompt interpretations of different kinds, not the individual colour(s) in question.

In like manner, the concept of separating and linking different spaces is fundamental to architecture. Boundaries delimit and define spaces; they enclose them, establishing a degreee of accessibility and visibility between them.

Yet, inside buildings spatial boundaries need not only correspond to physical demarcations of walls. Beyond these limits, the way items of furniture are arranged may influence the way people circulate and use areas that are otherwise considered to be an homogeneous space. In sum, boundaries permit the explicit or implicit demarcation of objects and activities; they locate them in specific positions relative to more global areas such as the front, public domain of the street. Thus, in terms of Figure 1, «A» could represent the public realm of the street, «not A» could represent the private, interior realm of the house and an unfenced front garden would be the ambiguous zone simultaneously separating and linking these two domains.

With this example in mind it is now instructive to show how the socio-psychological connotation of home interiors can be analysed using the concepts of boundary, transition space and spatial code. These concepts do not inhibit creative application by architects and planners in the design of houses, as can be shown by referring to a long-term project of research. The context for this research has been described fully elsewhere (LAWRENCE, 1982) and will not be repeated here; what was reported as an ongoing study has now been completed.

Results

The diverse kinds of data collected during this study have yielded complementary information about the spatial and the affective characteristics of dwellings which will now be discussed with respect to the following themes:

1. Transitions between inside and outside the house.
2. Interrelations between rooms.
3. The meaning and use of domestic objects.

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

It is instructive to consider how the transition between the exterior public spaces and the interior private spaces of houses has been considered by the residents. This passage has been analysed elsewhere (Lawrence, in press) according to architectural, pragmatic and psycho-social factors and this interpretation need not be repeated here. However, one example will suffice to illustrate this approach.

The comparative analysis of the entrance hall in the past, present and future homes of the residents has revealed the liaison between what has been experienced in the past and what is preferred. For example, when one couple had reconciled their two sets of personal preferences, they agreed on the design of a double transitional zone as the entrance to their future dwelling. This design proposal is compatible with each of their residential biographies for the reasons briefly outlined immediately below. For the housewife, the privacy of family life is a crucial parameter; moreover, this woman has positive recollections of her childhood which she likes to recall. For her husband, who recalls the precise rectangular plan of his parental home, the reception of friends is important, yet he also upholds that it is necessary to preserve the privacy of household activities when people other than invited guests are at the front door. The control of visibility into the apartment this couple rents is impossible and this fact was labelled a shortcoming by both persons. In contrast to this shortcoming, the future house of a precise rectangular form will include an entrance hall added to the exterior of this geometrical plan. The entrance hall is not within the confines of the walls of the dwelling, yet it is clearly not an external, public space: it is a transition zone *par excellence* which enables this couple to receive uninvited persons without taking them into the private realm of the house. Beyond the threshold linking this transition space to the living areas of the dwelling there is also a clearly defined passage and coat-rack, where guests or members of the household can remove outdoor clothing having been received into the private realm of the family.

This example illustrates that the transition between the exterior and the interior of houses can be simultaneously interpreted as a liaison and separation between public and private, exterior and interior, polluted and non-polluted —in the anthropological sense of those terms as discussed by LEACH (1976). This categorical differenciation of external and internal spaces can be extended to include the liaison and separation between spaces inside the dwelling, such a zones for kinds of domestic activities according to the following binary codes:

$$\frac{\text{inside}}{\text{outside}} : \frac{\text{female}}{\text{male}} : \frac{\text{private}}{\text{public}} : \frac{\text{non-polluted}}{\text{polluted}}$$

According to this interpretation (LAWRENCE, 1987) the entrance hall has a spatial order and purpose which is explicit and specific. It is intended to regulate the access of people and objects between private and public domains; it is required to control visibility between the exterior and the interior; it is not simply a space to store umbrellas and coats but a place where personal appearance can be controlled; it is not just a passage between exterior and interior spaces but a space where people other than guests (the postman, salesman, etc.) can be received. The role of the entrance hall as a fundamental spatial component in the transition between public and private domains is represented in Figure 2: all exterior shared space beyond the entrance door of each dwelling unit is freely accessible and visible whereas the private interior space is neither freely accessible nor visible. Moreover, whereas the external spaces are profane, the dwelling is symbolic, as the entrance hall not only controls access and visibility between these two domains but, from and anthropological perspective, it regulates polluted matter. In sum, the entrance hall is an ambiguous space, neither public nor private, neither sacred nor profane, which is attributed a spatial form and ritual functions to inhibit unwanted matter from contaminating hearth and home.

entrance hall

exterior spaces around dwelling

interior of dwelling

external, public polluted, profane, male

internal, private, non-polluted, symbolic, female
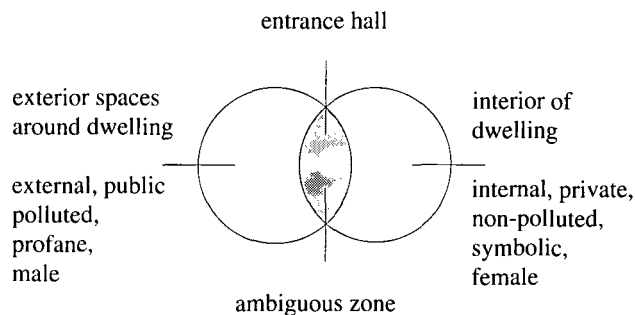
ambiguous zone

Figure 2: An Euler diagram representing the characteristics attributed to the entrance hall by the residents.

The preceding discussion considers the transition from the public, exterior domain of residential areas to the private interior spaces of the dwelling in terms of the underlying socio-cultural pattern. In this sense, the design of a dwelling is a setting in which the residents create their daily household life and establish contacts with the larger community. How people do this is not solely dependent on the spatial characteristics of homes, but also other factors including their goals and intentions and past residential experience. Therefore, the study of domestic space organization should be enlarged to include an analysis of how people behave according to *explicit norms and rules* (i. e. should the bathroom door be shut and locked while that room is being used) and *implicit codes and controls* (i. e. one does not pass from the entrance hall into the living room until invited). The presence of both implicit and explicit regulations for the use of space is related to socio-psychological factors, which transform the residential

environment from a «spatial backcloth» into an affective setting endowed with personal values and meaning. In general, ALTMAN et al. (1981) show that both kinds of regulations, which can be in a state of flux over a long period of time, help define the quality of transitional zones.

INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN ROOMS

Having examined the transition between the exterior and the interior of the dwelling it is instructive to consider the liaison and separation between different rooms which are commonly assigned specific domestic activities. The complementary approaches of this study have revealed some important findings with respect to the disposition of rooms which will now be considered from two complementary viewpoints.

The roles of a privacy gradient

Analysis of the house plans reveals that a privacy gradient structures the position of interior spaces, leading from the most accessible, social and displayed nearest the entrance hall, to the most private, least accessible and unseen farthest from the vestibule. This ordering of rooms can be studied with respect to the relative position of the entrance hall in relation to the central public courtyard and the private gardens or outdoor spaces located around the periphery of this residential development. Given that the «front-door» and vestibule are always directly accessible from the public court (not the private outdoor areas) it is evident that a consistent graduation exists from the most public to the most private rooms inside each house. The relative positions between the entry/vestibule and other rooms of five houses are shown in Figure 3. This figure illustrates that although there is no direct correlation between the nominal distance between the rooms in each house, there is an underlying structure which enables the position of rooms to be considered with respect to the desired degree of privacy envisaged by the residents. In sum, the parents' bedroom has consistently been envisaged as the most private room, in contrast to the toilet directly accessible from the entrance hall, which is specifically intended for house guests.

Although the privacy gradient presented here can locate the relative position of rooms with respect to the public realm of the residential environment, it does not explicitly define the spatial relations between rooms, whether they are only accessible from a circulation corridor, whether there is sequencing of spaces, or changes of level between them. This will be the intention of the following paragraphs.

Relationships between spaces and household activities

This study reveals that the spatial location of domestic activities conforms to the way domestic chores are commonly classified, located and interrelated. Beyond the boundaries of those spaces intended for cooking, eating and leisure activities, the residents have expressed a clear distinction between

Relative distance

The private area

The public area

h
g
f
e
d
c
b
a

Entry

——— Layaz
—··—··— Châtelain
—·—·—· Jysch
— — — — Sciboz
········· Loeffel

(a) Workshop/child's bedroom (b) Visitors toilet (c) Kitchen
(d) Dining room (e) Living room (f) Bathroom
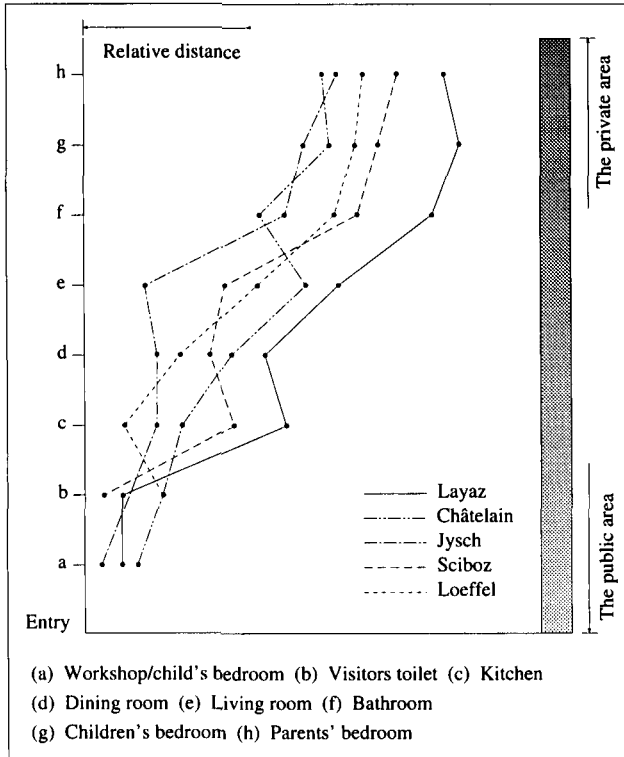(g) Children's bedroom (h) Parents' bedroom

Figure 3: Diagram representing the distance between
the rooms and the front door, and their classification
as «public» and «private» by the users.

the design of rooms for diurnal and nocturnal uses. Although there may be one (or two) large spaces in which cooking, eating and leisure activities occur juxtaposed, in contrast there consistently is a strict, demarcated, cellular plan form for those spaces in which sleeping or ablutions are located; in this study it is even rare for children to share a bedroom.

This divergence between the ordering of domestic space not only illustrates a strong dichotomy between spaces for diurnal and nocturnal use, but also whether these spaces are intended for private/personal or collective/household activities. The following binary code expresses the connotation of interior spaces:

cellular plan form	nocturnal use	personal activities
«open» plan form	diurnal use	collective activities

The origins of this code are not clear. This ordering of home interiors was rarely debated during the design-by-simulation process. Moreover, it does not stem directly from present residential experience in flatted dwellings and contradicts the customary arrangement and use of space in previous homes.

Here one hypothesis is presented to account for the design of the future homes according to this pattern. For those families who participate in the design of their new home (especially those who rent a government subsidized flat), there is a strong preoccupation to eliminate the faults of a present (and perhaps previous) residence. One of the most common defects of contemporary flats is the lack of acoustic insulation

from adjoining dwellings. In some cases, this defect has been a principal reason for constructing one's own home. The current flatted dwellings of all but one couple are located in a large building containing many rented flats. These flats have a cellular arrangement of all rooms. As the couples change their social rank from tenants to owner-occupiers their intentions include moving from «noisy, unpleasant, poorly maintained» residential environments to a better quality dwelling. One way of doing this is by living in a residential complex of much lower density. Another way is by eliminating the cellular arrangement of rooms, and/or their distribution on only one floor level, which are common characteristics of flatted dwellings (but not of houses) in Switzerland.

This interpretation, coupled with the previous discussion of the privacy gradient and how domestic roles and routines are embodied in domestic space organization, shows that there is no deterministic relationship between spatial form, room area and the location of household activities. Concurrently, at a psychological level, a house which simultaneously emancipates the residents from the defects of previous dweelings and synthesizes the positive features of these and other homes becomes an important vehicle for the expression of socio-psychological meaning. The psychological investment in home design is an important criterion for planning residential environments, and a means of personal dialogue. In essence, this research shows that the materialisation of the design of a dwelling embodies a *psychological project* or goal that may be strictly personal or shared by members of the household. Thus, spaces and objects acquire symbolic connotations owing to the polyvalent meanings different people in the same household at the same time attribute to them. It is important to consider the relationship between an individual and his home not only in terms of personal values and preferences but as the expression of compromises (perhaps conflicts), because houses are invariably shared domains which reflect consensus decisions, particularly in those rooms which are not reserved for person use. In sum, this study shows that if *binary codes* related to nocturnal and diurnal classifications are used to discuss the spatial definition of rooms, there are important divergencies between the designs of rooms intended for food preparation and eating activities that reflect different values and practices related to whether the housewife is solely responsible for chores in the kitchen, or supported by others members of the household (Lawrence, 1982).

MEANING AND USE OF DOMESTIC OBJECTS

Beyond an analysis of domestic space organization as proposed here, the location and use of household objects, and the meanings endowed in them should not be overlooked when analysing home interiors in terms of a socio-psychological perspective.

During the design-by-simulation process and the interviews with the residents it has been noted that the position of household objects may bear a direct relationship to the furnishing of the present flat or a previous residence of the inhabitants. In some cases, this relationship suggests that there was a constant association between specific items of mobile furniture and the layout of particular rooms. For example, the location of a desk in a guest's bedroom in a mockup of a

house has a direct correspondence with its position in the spare bedroom of the users' present flat. In other cases, however, the correspondence between furniture layouts is not direct; in the majority of simulated houses, the residents designed the kitchen by adjusting the position and dimension of existing appliances, work surfaces and storage space of the kitchen in their present residence. In both these cases specific items of furniture were used as *reference elements* to control the simulated design of the future house. In this sense domestic objects are attributed a pragmatic function with respect to assessing the shape and size of rooms, and the position of windows and doors.

Apart from this pragmatic value, this study has shown that domestic objects are endowed with symbolic meaning. The examples of a staircase and the recurrent inclusion of heirlooms in the simulated houses have been discussed elsewhere and will not be repeated (LAWRENCE, 1982). These kinds of objects evoke past residential experiences for the residents; in this sense they have unique, personal associations and meanings that can only be grasped by comprehending the residential biography of the inhabitants. However, unlike CSIKSZENTMIHALYI and ROCHBERG-HALTON (1981), who failed to consider the social connotation of domestic objects, this study illustrates the interaction between personal and social values and meanings. The fireplace is but one example. The hearth is the archetypal symbol *par excellence* of the domestic realm, that has acquired a social connotation in diverse cultures since Antiquity, and is still extant in contemporary societies (BACHELARD, 1964b). The provision of fireplaces in conjunction with central heating in all the houses ably illustrates this, but there is also evidence that the inclusion of a hearth reflects its value as a *status symbol*. The fact that flatted dwellings for low —or middle— income wage earners rarely or never include a fireplace suggests that it acts as *an index* of the social value of a dwelling unit and the social rank of its occupants. Such indices can be analysed according to the following principle: *domestic objects (and those activities associated with them) are endowed with meanings which are illustrative of their connotation and use in the total range of household wares and activities.* In sum, this research indicates that there are three classes of household objects which can be classified as follows:

1. *Construction indices* that are fixed, such as doors, windows, roofs or structural features which serve as reference elements to appraise the size and shape of rooms in terms of pragmatic requirements, such as the furnishing of rooms.

2. *Domestic indices* that are mobile, such as a piece of furniture, probably heirlooms or items with a special significance (at least for one member of the household) that are referred to throughout the design-by-simulation process.

3. *Socio-cultural indices* such as the fireplace which are included in the design of houses primarily owing to their symbolic value rather than practical reasoning.

In each of these cases, these sets of indices can be distinguished from mundane objects which have no symbolic meaning for the members of the household. In essence, the binary code of symbolic: secular is pertinent for comprehending the meaning and use of objects inside the house.

CONCLUSION

The study of the transition between inside and outside the home, the relations between interior spaces and activities, and the location and use of household objects reported here shows that a socio-psychological analysis of home interiors should account for both the physical/spatial and the affective/symbolic characteristics of domestic space, objects and activities. Yet, unfortunately, it has been common for studies of house planning to ignore the affective meaning of spatial relations, room shape and position. Likewise, studies of the psychological or sociological meaning of furniture layouts have frequently abstracted interior decoration from the morphological structure and geographical context of the house. This conceptual dichotomy between the spatial and the affective characteristics of dwellings has inhibited the development of an ontological comprehension of home environments.

In sum, this essay requests and suggests a redefinition and a diversification of current research on home interiors. It has presented and illustrated certain theoretical and methodological principles for the analysis of domestic environments. As a whole, the preceding discussion shows that home environments are like a seamless web of affective and spatial considerations that form an interactive set. For this fundamental reason predictive «models» of furniture layouts and activity patterns (as espoused in much modern housing practice) cannot be employed as resources for design because they misrepresent the inherent nature of domestic life. Knowledge and information about the design, meaning and use of houses can only be derived from a relative (rather than an absolute) model of household life. Such a model enables the analysis of home interiors and household life to be considered from three complementary perspectives:

1. In terms of the resident's *reaction* to what has been qualified either positively or negatively in past and present residences.

2. In terms of the *interaction* between different members of the household who do not necessarily share the same aspirations and values about the design of a new house.

3. In terms of the *generation* of new ideas and values about houses and home life, specifically in order to achieve certain goals.

From each of these perspectives, an ontological analysis of home interiors can enrich current understanding of the nature of domestic space and household life.

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red   yellow   green
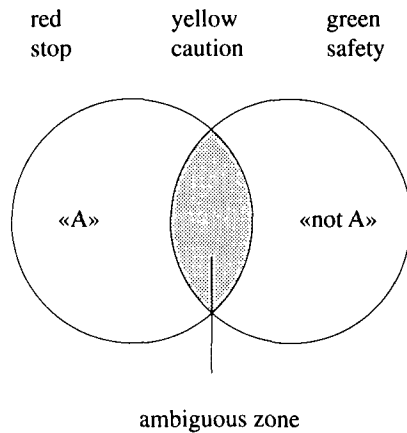stop   caution   safety

«A»   «not A»

ambiguous zone

Figure 1: An Euler diagram illustrates the binary coding of domestic space, objects or activities; from LEACH (1976).

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TRANSITIONS BETWEEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

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