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Shouting in Silence: Expression of Self in Private Homes
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Abstract

This paper discusses a behavioral phenomenon of people living in housing schemes. The fact is, people would renovate their houses at certain stage of occupancy and many had done so even before they moved in for the first time. Previous studies suggest that this phenomenon indicated dissatisfaction including provision of rooms, space arrangement and finishes. Simply, people renovate to suit their personal needs and certain feature or fashion is favored by house owners. A study is currently undertaken to investigate whether this is just a trend or a form of self-expression at the highest order.

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1. Introduction

We would agree that we ourselves involved in shaping the environment around us. We have the know-how to make buildings and places which become the setting where people including ourselves conduct everyday routines and chores. The process of shaping the environment had started since the early civilisation where simple building structures were erected using mud or any other materials available in the locality.

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Later development saw people make complex structures and buildings notably for public and private uses such as temples, mosques and congregational structures. Consequently, environmental settings were formed inside and around the buildings or structures providing space where people carry on doing their daily lives.

In the present day, the authority to shape the built environment is given to the professional designers. They are given the licence to organise and characterise the form and structure of buildings which enable certain functions to be carried out. The functionality of the building and well-being of occupants and users depend on how well the designers able to translate the needs requirement of the users. Accordingly the performance of built environment lies on the ability of the designers to make appropriate decision regarding the physical and emotional needs they shape for the users.

It is a great task for designers, even the experienced ones, to come up with schemes which will suit every user, regardless of the type or complexity of the project. Fulfilment of physical functions of a building or space can be considered as less crucial compared to fulfilling the emotional needs. For instance, spaces within a building are organised based on the functions and how each is related to each other. During the design process an objective analysis would be carried out in order to ensure a planning that works as intended. However, the emotional aspect of designing the space is much more subjective and the designers depend on established theories in response.

The design of housing and housing units can be considered as fundamentally challenging. One major aspect of housing which have not been really worked but generally accepted is the method of design and delivery. As found by Darke (1982) there is always a gap between the housing provider, designer and the users resulting in mismatch amid developer’s intentions and the users’ aspirations.

Housing may be viewed from different perspectives. Authors including Egalius (1980), Mickelson (1977) classify housing into physical, social and psychological dimensions. These three dimensions should be looked into and provide the framework for any housing study as shown in previous studies (e.g. Saruwono 2006). Ultimately, housing environment could not work successfully without one of these dimensions.

2. A dwelling, house or home?

Connotation regarding the dwelling, the house and the home imply the different dimensions of these terms. The dwelling is a basic shelter with no particular relation to the occupants. The house is a sociological concept which notifies the physical structure where people lived. The home carries psychological meaning which implies the sense of belonging of a person. The concept of home entails the physical space that affects the emotional and spiritual needs of a person.

According to Saruwono (2006) each of the definitions of these terms clearly provides a distinct way of describing the same “object”. Thus, dwelling has connotations of a basic shelter, which probably comprises a structure that merely provides shelter from the elements. It is not specifically linked to any type of structure or material that shelters people. Generally, any abode, igloo or cave can belong under this definition. In view of that, Ravetz (1974) asserts that a shed or a tent is both “dwelling” if they are inhabited. On the other hand, an estate of flats that people refuse to inhabit constitutes neither dwellings nor a living neighbourhood, whatever the design intentions may have been. In the mind of Rapoport, dwellings implicate the most valuable possession, since they are where an individual spends most of his time (Rapoport 1995).

The house is more specifically defined as a “building” that provides living space for a family. This contains the notion of something more than a simple form that shelters the family, and, therefore, suggests the emergence of a more sophisticated concept of “living together”. Wagner (1972) describes the house as
also “exhibit the taste, power, and skill of the family” (p. 53). Wagner’s conception is closely related to the essence of this paper.

The definition of *home* is inclined towards the conceptualisation of *living*, and this is not specifically related to any physical form or structure. Instead the *home* is connected to a subject referred to as a “place”. The main element of the definition shows the idea of “family” living in which the *home* is “one’s display and the setting and the text of life” (Wagner 1972 p. 52). It may also mean that homes include insinuation of the humanity of the space (Lawson 2001 p. 41). A *home* also means more than just a specific house, but often implies locality, relation to other houses (Spryer 1971). It also includes the people around and most likely the place where one grew up. This notion distinctly combines the physical and social environment.

The definitions given above clearly indicate that the allied meaning of each of the terms can be divided into three orders. The lowest order of allied meaning belongs to the word “dwelling”, which merely suggests the most rudimentary ideas of “shelter” from the elements. The second is the “house”, which denotes a higher order, and thus carries social implications of living together. The third order is the “home”, and it implies the highest order and consists of an emotional idea which does not necessarily relate to any physical form or shape (e.g. Sixsmith 1995).

Therefore, the home is a useful indicator to study about the behaviour of the inhabitants who lived there. We can learn about people’s aspirations through observing and analysing their houses. This approach has several advantages particularly that the data are obtained discreetly without having to “disturb” the people. The main setback however, is the difficulty of translating the data into readable information that truly reflect people’s behaviour. Certain techniques have been developed in response to this issue and discussed elsewhere.

### 3. Theories on people and environment

It is a common knowledge that the physical environment affects the pattern of activities of the occupants and users. The environment also forms the behavioural settings which influence the attitude and responses of people within. Therefore, the surrounding environment influences the manner people live and feel. The theory which had been put forward by Albert Mehrabian (1976) is particularly relevant and consequently becomes the underlying framework of this paper. Mehrabian theorised people do react to the environment surrounding them in two ways, known as *approach* and *avoidance* (Mehrabian 1976, Mehrabian & Russell 1974).

For Mehrabian & Russell (1974), a person is said to have reacted in an *approach* mode if he tends to “move toward” the environment he is in contact with. Consequently he would make an exploration and attempt to be intimate with the place. On the opposite, a person with an *avoidance* character would display an unwillingness to explore the place and tend to move away from the environment. Even if he opts to remain in the environment, he will ignore the events occurring in the place.

Accordingly, Mehrabian & Russell conceived that the environment can affect the way a person reacts. A desirable environment would be expected to cause an *approach* reaction. This type of environment is also an indication of a “positive affiliation”. On the other hand, an undesirable or unpleasant environment will tend to cause *avoidance*, and is thus “negatively affiliated”. In simple terms, the feelings or emotions are affected by the environment, which in turn determines whether a person reacts in either an *approaching* or *avoiding* manner (Saruwono 2007).

This theory is useful in understanding people and their affiliations with their surrounding environments. Therefore, in the context of this paper, it is possible to suggest that there are positive affiliations of people with their housing environment which can be analysed further.
3.1. People, behaviour and needs

Because behaviour and motivations are inter-related, Maslow’s (1968) established model on hierarchy of needs is useful in interpreting people’s behaviour. The main point of Maslow’s theory is that most people are motivated by the desire to satisfy specific groups of needs. His well-known pyramid structure can be simplified in three levels as lowest level, the middle level, and the top level (Fig 1). Thus, it seems that as soon as one’s need is fulfilled, people will aspire to go up to upper level which comes to self-actualisation at the peak.

Maslow’s theory and Rainwater’s conception are helpful in the context of the current discussion, providing some lead into exploring the possible explanation differing motives and expression of self. It would then be possible to relate self-expression in levels which are in parallel with Maslow’s and Rainwater’s models.

Maslow’s model corresponds with the three levels of individual systems and values that were suggested by Rainwater (1966). Rainwater’s conception comprised a series of groupings into classes - low, middle and high – which parallels to the conventional “social classes”. However, instead of describing these classes in terms of income or social status Rainwater conceives of them in terms differing priorities (Saruwono 2006). Therefore, the lower the class, in this scheme, the lower the nature of the priorities for a member of that class. Accordingly, those of the lowest class prioritise “a shelter in which to eat, sleep and feel sure”, while the middle class aspire to security, and also look for features that ease the burden of housework. Right at the top is the “highest” class who are the most complex and sophisticated in attitude: in addition to all these functions, the house is for them the visible symbol of social and financial success.

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Thus, it is arguable that the lowest level of expression can be exemplified by a person demonstrating explicitly his emotion through body language to get attention from others (Fig. 2.). The next level of expression may be displayed through more discreet but noticeable manner such as personalising the car registration plate (Fig. 3.). The highest level is expressed in even more diplomatic and sophisticated which is the trait of people in higher social order. Reflecting Rainwater (1966), the highest order of self-expression may be exhibited and symbolised in the homes.
Fig. 2. The lowest level of expression. The Vuvuzela produces extremely loud sound which demonstrates emotions of the blower explicitly to getting attention from others.

Fig. 3. Higher level of self-expression is discreetly explicit

4. Pessac housing – lessons learnt?

Some years ago, there was a housing project commissioned to a well-known architect, Le Corbusier. The client wanted to build 51 units of houses for his employees at a vacant site in Pessac, France. The architect’s main conception was to provide houses which were in line with his idea for modern living. Le Corbusier had advocated himself the rule of architecture and put to test his concept in this housing scheme the open plan, ribbon window and flat roof were prominent in the completed house (Fig 4).

Fig. 4. Original design of Pessac Housing. Sources: Le Corbusier, (1926)

What had happened after residents moved in was significant as there was a remarkable number of residents had altered the houses based on individual imagination (Fig. 5.). In some cases, the original design was completely changed. In view to this observable fact, there was a lot of interest to know what had happened mainly because the housing scheme was designed by Le Corbusier, the Architect. A comprehensive study was done by Philip Boudon (1971) who had published the entire report in his book entitled Lived in Architecture.

Boudon interviewed a number of people including the original residents and some others who had involved in the design of the scheme. He had also visited some of the houses and record of the changes...
made by the residents. Some of the changes observed included side extensions, removal of ribbon windows notable replaced by smaller ones due to poor insulation, modification of the flat roof due to leaking problems, and alteration of spaces of the open plan which is one of the main features of Le Corbusier’s conceptions.

Fig. 5. Changes made by the residents

The lesson learnt from Pessac was simply that the architect was ignorant towards the ordinary needs of the residents. As Boudon aptly concluded, Le Corbusier had been far too advanced compared to the people he designed for. He had pushed his idealism to people whose main concern was about leading an ordinary, practical life. As a result, almost every single unit of the houses were altered residents didn’t seem to care who the architect was however strong his idealism was.

5. Observing the phenomenon

The physical characteristic of housing in Malaysian urban areas is monotonously structured environment featuring a repetitive housing unit designs arranged in rows. Informal observation would suggest that residents eventually carry out alterations of the houses sooner or later. Renovations of the houses usually include extending the porch area, and erecting new fences and entrance gates. Other cases involved minor work such as applying new layers of paint, which incidentally quite often contrasted with the colours chosen by the neighbours. Still others involved major work with certain walls being demolished or the roofing replaced with new materials. Fig. 6. shows some examples of externally observable work being carried out in some residential areas.

What that can be observed from here is that people have been adapting the physical features of their houses to achieve certain purpose. What had happened in Pessac long time ago has not seemed to be learned?

Fig. 6. Externally observable work being carried out
6. Previous And Current Work

The research currently undertaken by the author was triggered on observing the continuing trend of residents renovating their houses. Based on previous research by the author, the physical alterations made were analysed and quantified providing clear evidence of the lack of space and inadequate rooms as the main reasons modifying. Residents did whatever legally allowable to add extra space in fulfilment of their needs. Adding one or two bedrooms was common indicating that generally the bedrooms provided were inadequate. In situation where space extension is very limited, the residents used their creativity to transform existing space for other uses. Even a small terrace at entrance could be converted to some kind of use. Space gains in the houses vary greatly, but on average, the additional area acquired can be as much as 180 per cent (Fig.7.).

Fig. 7. Space gain after alteration. Sources: Saruwono, (2006)

Revisiting the housing estates, there seems to a particular feature or fashion that is favored by house owners including putting up a pair of commanding columns particularly at the front entrance of the house (Fig. 8.). This triggers the curious mind into looking at the possibility of the people's motives of doing so. A study is currently undertaken to investigate whether this is just a trend or a form of self-expression at the highest order.

Fig. 8. A particular feature is favored such as putting up commanding columns – what does this mean?

7. Concluding remarks

This paper has described a mundane behaviour of people in specific environmental setting of housing. The beauty of it is that people are freely expressing themselves, communicating with the outside world about who they are. People did what they think best for them to lead a good living environment. The big
question is how relevant are the process of providing home environment that are acceptable to people with varying physical and emotional needs.

We have to be clear in our objectives in the design for housing and housing units. There should be a strategy in which people are given freedom to alter and make adaptations of their houses. Perhaps it is time that we start listening to people who apparently shouting in silence.

References


