

THE IMPACT ON ADULT ATTITUDES TO HOUSES OF CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES OF HOME

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Abstract:

This paper discusses how childhood experiences of one's house have consequences in adulthood, particularly in respect to preferences for openness and closedness of the house. Openness and closedness refers to the apparent transparency of division between interior parts of a house and between the inside and outside of a house.

The hypothesis for this study is that the interior spaces of a house (including form, material and dimensions) and the degree of their perceived openness and closedness have an important effect during childhood, as it is one of the most important experiences of non verbal communication with the world, society and family. The hypothesis also includes that the child's experience of the degree of openness and closedness in the arrangement of the house becomes embedded in the child's memory and that this experience will show its effect in attitudes toward house and home in adulthood.

Introduction

An individual's childhood experiences of one's house may have consequences in adulthood, particularly with respect to preferences for house location, type, layout, orientation, architectural features and details. This possibility is derived from literature on early childhood enculturation and its effects on adult behaviour and attitudes. The paper discusses a research project which is intended to provide empirical confirmation of a direct connection between childhood experiences of a house and an individual's adult preferences for particular aspects of a house. The significance of the study is that it is expected to provide a basis for more sensitive consideration of individual preferences in preparation by an architect of briefs and designs for houses for individual clients, particularly those from differing cultures.

This study focuses on one aspect of houses: the relative "openness" and "closedness" of the house. Openness and closedness refers to the apparent transparency of division between interior parts of a house and between the inside and outside of a house. The hypothesis for the study is that the interior spaces of a house (including form, material and dimensions) and the degree of their perceived openness and closedness have an important effect during childhood, as it is one of the most important experiences of non verbal communication with the world, society and family. The hypothesis also includes that the child's experience of the degree of openness and closedness of the house becomes embedded in the child's memory and that this experience will show its effect in attitudes toward house and home in adulthood.

Convergent reflection: towards a personal position

The author of the research, Mahnaz Pejam has always felt the deep affect of her childhood house, and that this memory, which is a part of her, has been influential in defining the meanings of new

situations and environments. Mahnaz also finds resonances for her own anecdotal feelings in the literature, for example, Gaston Bachelard (1994) says of the childhood experience:

“House is the human being’s first world, before he casts into the world”.

Ittelson (1974), writing on the adult condition, says:

“Spaces and places, no less than people can evoke intense emotional responses. Rooms, neighbourhoods, and cities can be ‘friendly’, ‘threatening’, ‘frustrating’, or loathsome;’ they can induce hate, love, fear, desire, and other affective states.”

Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) brings the childhood and adult conditions together, saying:

“Surely the fact that certain early memories retain their personal identifiability and emotional force throughout our lives provides convincing proof of the importance and authenticity of these experiences, just as our dreams and daydreams reveal the most real and spontaneous contents of our minds.”

Pallasmaa also sees the house as providing some profound experiences:

“The house as a sign of culture in the landscape, the house as a projection of man and a point of reference in the landscape”;

“Stepping into a house, entering through the door, crossing the boundary between exterior and interior”;

“Coming home or stepping inside the house for a specific purpose, expectation and fulfilment, sense of strangeness and familiarity”.

Architectural design could have an important role in what a child learns of social and cultural messages during the continuous contact with the childhood house. The childhood house is a scene for experiencing the personal and social life and (it is hypothesised) this scene persists in reminding the adult person of those memories and influencing the adult’s preferences and attitude towards his or her house. Memories of shapes, forms, arrangements, aromas and many other aspects of the childhood house therefore impact on the adult’s experiences throughout life.

In this respect, Bachelard goes on to say:

“A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.”

This study is intended to provide empirical evidence to confirm (or deny) that there is a direct connection between our childhood experience of a house and the way we perceive the houses we live in as adults. The study tests the hypothesis that childhood experience of one aspect of a house (the openness/closedness) is directly related to adult preferences in relation to the same aspect (the openness/closedness). If the connection is confirmed, then it provides a basis for confirmation of the philosophical and anecdotal basis of the assumption of these writers about the impact that our childhood house and home has had on us as adults.

Divergent reflection: from the personal to the World

In this research the differences and similarities of, respectively, childhood and adult house and home become an important consideration. When we occupy a house we tend to “personalise” it in order to satisfy our individual preferences, which might be aimed at enhancing our physical or psychological

comfort (or both). When a couple or family settle into a house they start to relate and define the meaning of its spaces individually, in terms of their separate social or personal values and interests.

This personalisation raises the question of differences in meaning between “house” and “home”. Attempts to define the respective meanings of house and home, however, are not conclusive. Architectural literature tends to refer to “house” as a physical object, a building providing sufficient space for physical activities, and modifying the physical environment, eg in terms of thermal and acoustic control. The psychological, sociological, anthropological and cultural literature, however, tends to refer to “home”, as a “place”, where a person lives for comfort and security, alone or with family members, including (for many people) raising children. It is a place, where a person spends time for essential day-to-day activities (eating, bathing, sleeping), as well as for retreat from the external world, and for leisure.

The boundaries of our ‘home’, however, may vary depending on our feelings of control and security and may be limited to parts of a house (eg for a child within a family) or may extend beyond the house to the garden (or “yard”), and to the neighbourhood. The boundaries of our home may also vary according to time of day (eg when we are “at home” or “at work”) and from one individual to another within a family or “household”. We may not be able to recognize these boundaries as definite borders, but they can have an effect on our sense of “belonging” and therefore on our perceptions and attitudes towards our immediate world and life.

Our house, therefore may be part of our home and our home may be part of our house. When the occupants can accommodate their respective physical and psychological needs in different parts of the house, the house can be defined as a part of the home for the inhabitants. In this respect, Dovey (1999) sees a house as a “social setting”:

The house is a “social factory”, the “engine room” of society. It is the setting which makes interaction meaningful and predictable, linking intimate emotional and sexual life to economic and political life. It both reflects and reproduces the social world of gender, age and class relations.”

The degree of openness and closedness (or “transparency” in architectural terms) of a house can be related to our respective perceptions of the boundaries of our home. Individual houses differ in the degree of openness and closedness, and two types of openness and closedness can be identified. One is the degree of contact between outside and inside of the house. Another is the degree of contact between the different spaces inside the house. We can experience these transparencies through various senses including visual, hearing, touch and so on.

Openness and closedness between outside and inside of the house:

Some examples of houses are presented below, illustrating differing degrees of openness and closedness in architectural terms according to visual sense (other senses cannot be engaged here).

Figure .1 illustrates a house with low levels of transparency. The small windows are covered with blinds, presenting a very low degree of visual transparency. Apparent *closedness* between inside and outside of the house is therefore indicated. This arrangement could be a result of culture or climate.

Figure .2 illustrates a house that presents a high level of transparency between outside and inside and, therefore, apparent *openness* is presented. The arrangement of the house is inviting the inhabitants to engage with the natural environment and to experience it not only visually but also through other senses, including hearing sounds from outside and feeling the outside temperature.



Figure 1- Low level of transparency



Figure. 2- High level of transparency

Figure 3 illustrates a “Queenslander” style house from north-eastern Australia, having a characteristic veranda around the rooms, that moderates the openness/closedness by moderating the feeling of contact between inside and outside (and therefore of transparency). A low height fences provide another type and degree of hierarchical transparency.

Figure 4 illustrates a house that presents a high level of visual closedness. The covering of metal sheets, provides a very low degree of visual contact with outside, however the type of material allows high levels of transparency of noise and temperature between outside and inside for the occupants, and so the house could be considered to present selective transparency. These adaptations by the inhabitants could be responses to environmental conditions, or could be intended to achieve higher levels of privacy or security.



Figure. 3 Moderated transparency



Figure. 4 selective transparency

Openness and closedness between interior spaces of the house:

A conventional house, with solid walls and doors separating rooms, presents high levels of closedness for each room. Opening a door will reduce the visual and acoustic closedness (increase the transparency) between adjacent rooms, and can be used as a device for adjusting the levels of transparency from time to time. A house with lightweight (low-mass) walls maintains high visual closedness but (usually) provides reduced acoustic closedness, which may be preferred.

An “open-plan” house (eg as illustrated in Figure 5), however, has no strict separation between the spaces, and presents a high level of transparency and low level of privacy, with interior spaces open to each other, the bedroom visible from the living area and with visual, auditory and aromatic contact between different spaces throughout the house.



Figure 5

The importance of previous experience on later perceptions of an environment

What we understand from our environment is not a complete reality but it is filtered by our perception of that situation, based on our previous experience of related environments. Brown (1972) says:

“The nature of the information that an individual acquires in such a setting (eg a specific room) depends not only on what is available in the setting but also on the character of the information that the individual brings into the perceptual situation.”

We also interact with our environment, so that our total (or net) perception is conditioned in part by our sensory contact with the present environment and in part by our previous experiences. Thus, we can see our environment as negative or positive depending on both our immediate responses to the environment and our interpretation of that environment according to our previous experiences. In this respect, Strongman (1987) asserts:

“It is indisputable that the environment has an emotional impact on the individual.”

Epsar (1989) says:

Some psychologists believe that the power of cognitive control effects the way that a situation is understood. Cognitive control changes what the situation is, based on perceptions of the situation, to a subjective reality.

Ittleson adds:

“We behave as if the environment is structured in a certain way. Such perceptions are frequently influenced by one’s previous experience with an environment”.

The importance of childhood experience on later perceptions of an environment

At this point, perhaps the question is of how far in the past our “previous experience” can be while still having a significant effect on our present perceptions. That is, how long can our memory of such experiences be sustained. Epsar observes that:

“ Long-term memories are unlimited. Whatever we have experienced, it is presented in the form of networks in the mind. Each piece of concept links to others, which are associated with them.”

Thus, when we find something familiar, we connect together a range of memories from the past. As a result, we are “activated” to feel comfortable or uncomfortable when entering a place or when occupying a room or a part of a house, not only on account of our immediate response to the place itself, but also in response to our memories of previous experiences over long time periods.

Bachelard (1994) extends these long-term memories back as far as childhood, saying:

“A demonstration of imaginary primitive elements may be based on upon the entity that is most firmly fixed in our memories: the childhood home.”

The importance of of such long-term memories from early childhood experience is then established by Pallasmaa (1996) who says:

“One of the most important “raw materials” of phenomenological analysis of architecture is early childhood memory.”

Questions arising at this point are: whether an adult can remember his or her early childhood experiences, and whether high degrees of sensibility, in either or both the child and the adult are required to establish such memories to the extent that they are embedded. Pallasmaa observes:

“I personally, for instance, cannot bring to mind from my own childhood a single window or door as such but I can sit down at the windows of my many memories and look out at a garden that has long disappeared or a clearing now filled with trees. I can also recognise the dark warmth and special smell of the rooms that are there on the other side.”

The discussion to this point, based on selections from the literature, suggests that our early childhood experiences of home do influence our adult perceptions of our environment, including our home and the house as part of our home environment. There is also the suggestion that such early childhood experiences play a very important role in determining our adult perceptions of the environment including particularly the architectural environment, which includes the house. While we may not be able to remember some specifics such as architectural details, our remembered experiences of our childhood home environments are likely to be sufficiently clear to establish a connection to our adult preferences in relation to our adult home environment, including with respect to the openness/closedness of those respective environments, and the present study is proceeding on this basis.

Intended method

The research question is whether a statistically-significant connection can be established between an individual’s present (adult) preferences with respect to the houses he or she occupies, and the remembered (or recalled) perceptions of their childhood houses.

An attitude survey, by cross-cultural interview methods, is being made, to study the preferences of people in adulthood and to find out about their perceptions of their childhood homes. The reasons for the particular preferences will be considered, as correlations are thought to be more likely to occur between reasons why than between the attitudes themselves. Significant features of the respective houses, as indicated by the subject’s responses, will be recorded and compared.

Subjects are selected from three social groups of people with differing cultural backgrounds. One is a group of people who were born and are living in Australia. Another is a group of people who were born in Iran and experienced another culture and architecture there and are now living in Australia. The third group will consist of Iranian people who are still living in Iran. Comparison of results for these three groups is expected to indicate differences in adulthood preferences stemming from differences in childhood experiences.

Significance in psychology and architecture

In psychological terms this research focuses on the roots of peoples' attitudes in relation to one of their most important cultural institutions: their home. As the house forms a most important component of home, the study is justifiable in terms of psychology and the understanding of enculturation, and in terms of architectural practice and design of houses.

If the hypothesised connections are confirmed, then architects' design of houses might require reconsideration, on one hand to allow for the impact of their clients' early childhood experiences on their present briefing of architects, and on the other hand to allow for the possibility that the architects' own early childhood experiences will intrude into the interpretation of a client's needs and into the design of a house for that client. A further consideration is that a client couple may well have significantly different preferences for their joint house, driven by their respective childhood experiences, that may confound the traditional briefing and design processes. Norberg-Schulz (1996) foreshadows this outcome saying:

"A place is therefore a qualitative, "total" phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationships, without losing its concrete nature out of sight".

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