Foreword: ‘The anatomy of privacy in architects’ London houses’

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One of the challenges of studying domestic space organisation in the UK is the longevity and complexity of its housing stock. Historically, there were just two housing sectors: the vernacular dwellings of the vast majority of the country’s population, which were shaped by ordinary people’s immediate local needs, traditions and ways of life, and used rules of thumb and locally-sourced building materials to respond to the macro-climatic conditions of the region in which they were situated; and the stately homes of the aristocracy, which fulfilled complex programmatic and organisational requirements, referenced international architectural stylistic movements, reflected the dominant aesthetic values of the day and utilised expensive, high quality materials which were often transported to the building site from great distances away, resulting in monumental buildings that were largely indifferent to climatic considerations and site constraints.

The influence of philanthropic housing associations that built tenement blocks for the deserving poor of the burgeoning inner cities and of factory owners who sponsored model villages for their workers, and then of the modern state in providing housing for the UK’s working classes, changed the dynamics of house building from the late nineteenth century up to the mid twentieth century, and gave rise to a wealth of utopian, architect-designed mass housing projects. This trend culminated during the post-war welfare state, when its concept of security from the cradle to the grave. Housing became one of the four planks of the UK government’s plan for social reconstruction after 1945, alongside a national health service, state education system and social security in the event of sickness or unemployment. By the 1960s, there had been a dramatic acceleration in house completions, spurred on by the widespread adoption of system building. House building peaked in 1968, when over 425,000 new dwellings were completed. This was the year that I decided to become an architect. At that time, high-rise towers, slab blocks and mixed housing developments were believed to offer a solution to the UK’s housing shortage, which had been brought about by a combination of war damage, slum clearance, comprehensive neighbourhood redevelopment and an increase in the population.

When I completed my architectural education in 1975, a substantial proportion of my fellow-students found employment in the Housing Department of a Local Authority working on state housing projects, many of which subsequently attracted harsh criticism for their poor construction, low environmental standards and dysfunctional design.

Housing supply underwent another major change during the 1980s, a result of the Thatcherite drive to transform the nation into a property owning democracy (a much older concept, with a long intellectual pedigree) as part of her wider vision to reduce the role of the state in managing the economy, whilst at the same time encouraging more people to view themselves as responsible citizens with an obligation to uphold the values of society at large. Thirty years on, there are three different sectors that commission and build new homes: private sector house builders, who build homes speculatively for direct sale to households and families; the government, which provides ‘affordable’ social housing for rent to a residual group of people who are unable or unwilling to meet their own housing needs; and unique, architect-designed homes, commissioned by relatively wealthy clients and built for their own use. However, the size of these sectors as a proportion of the overall housing supply is very different.
Private house builders, of which there are nearly twenty thousand registered companies, account for over ninety percent of all the new housing that has been built in the UK since the 1980s, but only two hundred firms build more than fifty homes a year and fewer than fifty companies build more than five hundred dwellings annually (Barker, 2004). The private housing sector is geographically fragmented into many national and regional operations that respond to local land values, housing markets and planning requirements. Social housing (built by local authorities and housing associations) makes up about a quarter of the nation’s housing stock and provides rented accommodation for over five million households (Stone, 2003). Although it is difficult to obtain accurate figures, few homes in the UK are commissioned by private clients and designed by an architect. In 2010, for example, 134,000 new dwellings were completed altogether, of which 96,000 homes (72%) were contributed to the housing stock by speculative builders, 28,000 new builds (21%) were affordable homes and 10,000 (7%) were self-built homes which might have used the services of an architect. In many developed countries, the proportion of self-built housing is much higher, in some cases amounting to over half of all the homes in the national housing stock (AMA Research, 2011).

The diversity of the UK’s dwellings begs an immediate question: are the homes provided by these different modes of procurement and tenure also different in terms of their design, layout and spatial configuration, and if so why might this be the case? This is a question that I have sought to explore over the past three decades, by conducting a series of case studies drawn from just about every sector of the UK’s housing stock. The first of these, dating from the mid 1970s, looked at changes in the layout and material culture of London’s small terraced houses as they became ‘gentrified’ by an influx of more affluent, middle-class incomers who moved into deteriorating inner-city neighbourhoods to live alongside poorer, working-class residents. Pre-dating space syntax methods, the approach adopted for that study was catholic and drew on a mixture of direct observations, sociological research, accounts in the popular press and even fictional narratives.

The study suggested that the space transformations made by the gentrifiers were systematic transformations, which inverted many of the spatial gestures found in the traditional working-class home. These spatial changes were accompanied by a series of transformations in behaviour, so that one social group’s domestic life opposed the actions of the other. The object arrays, styles, spaces and behaviours of each group seemed to be predicated on an underlying logical structure, suggesting that material culture is about how households and families are embedded socially, and are not just an expression of personal taste. Yet where the gentrifiers strove to individuate their homes, the domestic room arrangements of traditional residents closely replicated one another, so that the rules which underpinned middle-class domestic space were largely endogenous or self-generated, whereas the apparent conformity in the lifestyles of the working-class occupants were exogenous or imposed, so that the latter group was subject to a greater social pressure, in terms of maintaining their social identity. The enduring message from this study is that it is well worth comparing the housing cultures of different sub-groups within a society, as these may well relate to one another at a deep, subconscious level.

As the space syntax toolkit evolved, so did the kind of puzzle from within the historical record of housing that could be addressed. Most studies of vernacular dwellings are illustrated by just one or two typical, or ideal, examples of housing layouts, but one exemplary study of seventeenth century timber framed farmhouses from the Banbury region of Oxfordshire (Wood-Jones, 1963) contained dozens of plans, sections and elevations, all surveyed by the author and reconstructed to show the original features of each house. The first justified access
graphs and integration values were made for this sample of plans, immediately revealing both consistencies and temporal shifts in the way the layouts were configured to host domestic arrangements and household functions.

This study identified three main types of plan, which seemed to afford different possibilities for family life during a period when England was greatly troubled by civil war and religious and political turmoil. Building technology remained largely unchanged, but syntax responded to changes in social organisation and household structure. These houses seemed especially sensitive to two kinds of relationship, between inhabitants and visitors (hosts and guests) and among inhabitants (men and women, old and young, servants and served, people and things). The study demonstrated the importance of working with samples of plans, rather than relying for information upon an idealised, stereotyped plan. Moreover, the evolution of house plans from a small region of England over the course of only a couple of generations, revealed changes that were every bit as profound as when examining a cross-cultural sample of homes. A very different, but equally illuminating story emerged from a later study of traditional French farmhouses (Hillier et al., 1987).

The very idea of a housing ‘genotype’ was formulated and refined with reference to this sample of plans, towards the end of the 1970s and during the early 1980s, using the biological metaphor of a genotype to refer to the social information stored in the plan that can be retrieved by configurational analysis and used as a set of instructions to generate a new, unique version of the home; that is, a housing ‘phenotype’ with a different outward appearance and detailed design that give it a distinctive physical presence and unique identity. The metaphor is useful not only because it stresses the deep structure of spatial phenomena, but also because it reminds us that evolution depends on mutation and this can only occur if there is sufficient variety in the population. Studying domestic space organisation can often be time consuming and frustrating, because most real samples of house plans contain examples that are dissimilar to one another in many respects, as well as strongly replicating one another in others. It is rare for a clear and unambiguous genotype to emerge from analysis; more often than not we might identify a trend within a sample of homes, but also ‘untidy’ exceptions to the rules, which defy easy explanation. Moreover, some domestic space arrangements are ephemeral whilst others are more deeply rooted and enduring. These phenomena make it particularly challenging to understand and interpret the social significance of the home.

The sources of any observed differences could perhaps arise out of the various ways in which a home affords its occupants cultural and lifestyle choices, or be traced back to the ideological preferences of a political élite or a dominant social class about the moral values that underpin family life, which can literally be ‘built into’ the layout of the home; or could such differences be attributed to the potential that a home has to make manifest monetary or symbolic wealth, or even to express the personal taste of the householder? So many things can potentially influence housing morphology that the home can be regarded as a highly complex system, where it is a far from straightforward matter to establish the key variables, prioritise their significance and demonstrate their impact on housing design with convincing explanatory power.

One practical reason why houses have continued to fascinate me is that, as individuals, they are relatively small, convenient to study and to analyse alongside holding down a full-time job and raising a family. Yet houses are perhaps the ideal vehicle for exploring the formal and experiential dimensions of architecture, hence the attraction of houses for eminent architects, whose continued interest in generating housing prototypes demonstrates that the intellectual challenge of finding the ‘perfect solution’ to a client’s housing brief is potentially limitless. The
everyday familiarity of the house renders it apparently so innocuous that architecture teachers tend to locate a proposition for the design of a house early in the sequence of student projects, and as every student has lived in at least one and usually several homes, the design of dwellings connects directly with their everyday sociospatial practices. During the 1990s, I used these practical attributes of house form and culture to develop a series of in-depth studies of (then) contemporary homes designed by architects and speculative house builders, to further explore contemporary lifestyle choices around the turn of the millennium. Several studies were undertaken as collaborative student projects, in which the spatial analysis of an individual house was used as a vehicle for learning about space syntax, whilst the findings of the student cohort provided a convenient sample for comparative analysis and interpretation.

As I had moved to the new town of Milton Keynes in 1991, where the post-Thatcher private house building boom continued unabated by the ups and downs of the wider economy, I was able to study speculative house building trends at close quarters, including the way that sales homes were decorated and furnished to show potential purchasers different interpretations of the ‘good life’. A paper on speculative houses in Milton Keynes (Hanson, 1998) told a story of houses as an expression of social status, with a strong spatial genotype that crossed all income levels and price brackets. However, downmarket houses simplified the genotype and shed its more elaborate features whilst preserving its structure. At higher price brackets, houses seemed to offer a progressively elaborate lure, which flaunted the social values of the class immediately above that of the prospective purchaser, so that a home of one’s own became a symbolic package that established status and afforded a stepping stone to the next rung on the property ladder. Upmarket, understatement became part of statement, expressing the satisfaction of the homeowner’s desires and intended to provoke the envy of visitors through the deployment of archetypal architectural imagery such as a columned entrance, spiral staircase, inglenook fireplace, and personal spa. Housing developments were either named for nature, expressing an escape from the city to a life immersed in an imitation of the countryside, or called after examples from the nation’s architectural heritage with its connotations of aristocratic ancestry, power and glamour. Speculative homes in Milton Keynes at the turn of the millennium seemed to reflect Britain’s social ‘dis-ease’ with modern life by imitating pseudo-vernacular villages, perhaps providing a stable imagery for a rootless and upwardly-mobile population. But if these homes represented freedom from the cares of urban life and the world of work, it was freedom through a door that opened inwards, towards the domestic interior, affording escape from a difficult and contested public lifeworld.

This study contrasted with two projects that I carried out collaboratively with my students during the early 1990s, on the houses of great international architects and, closer to home, on a sample of London architects’ houses (ibid., Hanson, 1998). The latter study examined a small sample of post-war family houses designed by architects living in London, for their own occupation, to answer the question as to whether they were similar to or different from suburban, speculative homes built for sale to owner occupiers by firms of house builders. That study found that architects’ London houses bore the stamp of popular values, but at the same time their homes revealed a richer array of configurational possibilities. Greater spatial investment was made in articulating relationships among family members and to visitors, and there was greater appreciation of the nature / culture relation by enclosing the site so that the house and garden together acted as a refuge. Inside, architects invested in space, but not in ‘open-plan’ or ‘plan libre’ in the fullest sense of the idea. The plans were functionally zoned and activities were separated from one another by transitional ‘buffer zones’ and courtyards that spatially
separated but visually integrated the home. These houses seemed to express a fine balance between delineating individual territories and acknowledging co-presence within the domestic interior. The study suggested that it is unsafe to assume a radical discontinuity between the architectural profession and society at large. Though architectural education is all about inducting young architects into a set of shared professional values and practices, these may still bear the imprint of ‘social knowledge’, and it is harder than one might imagine to break free of pre-structures to create something totally original, even when encouraged to do so by teachers and design tutors. Once again, houses that look totally unlike one another may share spatial or experiential properties at a deep level that can only be unveiled by rigorous comparative analysis. One of the reasons for the move to Milton Keynes was to design and build our own family home, and even without the benefit of syntactic analysis I know that my own home conforms to the architectural spatial genotype.

These studies addressed issues in three of the five sectors of UK housing (vernacular, speculative and architect-designed homes). A mid 1990s study of four seminal ‘stately homes’ examined the role of these great houses as a productive economic unit, a political arena, a site for conspicuous consumption and a setting for the display of wealth and taste. It built upon Evans’ (1978) distinction between a ‘nexus of interconnected rooms’ and a ‘compartmentalised corridor plan’, architectural motifs that he linked to sensual/social and paranoid/privatised forms of sociability. Configurationally speaking, my study found that a wide variety of architectural styles hid a configurational transition from deep core, tree like and segregated house plans to shallow core, ringy and integrated plans, which was accompanied by a change in household composition from an inclusive, mediaeval ‘great household’ to the Victorian ‘upstairs/downstairs’ separation between servants and masters, thus shedding further light on the shift in sociability that Evans had identified earlier.

So far as public sector housing is concerned, housing reform has been an objective of political regimes of all persuasions in many parts of the world, so it is interesting to speculate about whether state housing programmes are a worthy objective or a repressive tool. Architects working in social housing undoubtedly thought they were changing the world for the better, but tenants often found that their lives were changed for the worse. The grand scheme of things was to house as many people as possible in an economic, cost-effective way, but that often resulted in seriously reduced housing standards and a poor quality of life for the occupants. The detail as to how this mismatch between claims and practices came about has been explored by many of my international students, using their own state housing programmes as a case study. My own work in this area focussed on the impact of the Greater London Council’s Architects Department, which ran one of the largest and most innovative state housing programmes in Europe. This work resulted in a lecture course on modern housing prototypes for postgraduate architecture students, as well as in funded research on the morphology of affordable and private sector housing developments at the neighbourhood scale (Hanson and Zako, 2007).

Meanwhile, other funded research over the past decade has been devoted to studying housing designed for an ageing society. The literature on ageing assumes a progressive path from living independently to being cared for. The route is often marked by actual moves, from a mainstream home to sheltered housing and then on into a residential care home. Design guidance used to endorse these views, by assuming that older people needed lower space standards and simple, stereotyped layouts. Many ordinary UK homes built for families incorporate three simple spatial patterns: a linear sequence in circulation areas; fan shaped connections in bedrooms accessed from a common hall;
and daytime living rooms connected together in a small ring. These reflect the transition from outside to inside, individual and family spaces respectively, and together they define a ‘privacy gradient’ from social to intimate domestic space. By contrast, the homes designed expressly for older people around the turn of the millennium offered a low-cost, high-volume solution that was smaller in terms of space standards than the equivalent provision for younger people. Analysis revealed a compressed sequence of open plan living, with no space for a dining table or for older people’s furniture and possessions, and no discernible ‘privacy gradient’ within the home. The main living room was usually a bed sitting room that connected directly to a small kitchen area beyond, with no space to entertain visitors or for overnight guests. The genotype was strong and uniform across local authority, housing association and private sector sheltered housing schemes, and it was clearly designed for living alone, not for living independently. Yet a study of older people’s homes revealed that they resisted this ageist spatial stereotype by continuing to construct meaningful and detailed domestic environments, restoring the privacy gradient by arranging their furniture to reflect their complex social lives (Hanson, 2003). This research resulted in legislation that required new social housing for older people to comprise three habitable rooms, which could be deployed flexibly to support older people’s lifestyle preferences.

If my work on housing has had one overriding aim, this has been to highlight the importance of studying the relationship between cultural genotypes and architectural design. I hope that my work has shown that it is important to study both ordinary domestic environments and architect-designed houses as these are not necessarily poles apart, and to establish multiple lines of inquiry through a rich and variegated approach that draws on a wide variety of sources, where space syntax is not an end in itself but a means to understand the variety of domestic environments which societies and individuals collectively construct, together with their influences, modes of production and associated behaviours.

References
Hanson, J. (1998), Decoding Homes and Houses, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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ABSTRACT
A sample of eighteen post-war family houses designed by architects living in London for their own occupation is examined to see the extent to which they exhibit similar characteristics to the houses constructed by speculative builders to serve the private housing market. Although the houses are very much individuals, key continuities are identified with the domestic space configurations of modern speculative homes. The most important of these is the way in which the transitional zones in architect’s houses tend to be elaborated into a richly articulated ‘privacy gradient’ from the more accessible to the more secluded parts of the home. However, the way in which architects manipulate space to achieve this spatial insulation is shown to be quite different from the way in which it is provided by the speculative house building sector. In the speculative sector, spatial insulation is achieved only through the use of transition spaces such as lobbies and hall-ways whereas architects also directly shape the use-spaces which are provided for occupation and use in order to modulate spatial relations among domestic activities. This principle is linked to the balance between movement and occupation in the domestic interior and its relation to the perceived values of family life and individual privacy in giving a physical form to contemporary family structures.

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