

## Inhabitation as a process: Theoretical frameworks for analysing interiors

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### ABSTRACT

*The process of 'inhabitation', the process of appropriating interior, domestic spaces by individuals, is a complex phenomenon that has been studied in different disciplines and relies upon different theoretical frameworks. These frameworks often remain implicit, whereas they nevertheless have a profound impact as to how the economy of the interior is conceptualised. This paper sets out to map three of these frameworks. We discuss phenomenology, critical theory and Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). Phenomenology holds that the home is a place deeply needed by all individuals in order to be able to really reach their potential. Critical Theory rather seeks to unravel the hidden meanings of domestic interiors as tied up with the logics of capitalist economy, patriarchy and hetero-normativity. ANT studies home interiors as complex entanglements of objects and people that can only be fully understood when taking these interrelations into account. The paper argues that the choice of a particular framework should correlate with the research questions one is asking and with the motivations that drive particular research projects.*

### INTRODUCTION

A woman and a room are easily put together – as for instance in Edward Hopper's painting from 1957 (Figure 1) or in Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The latter text states that in order to be able to write, a woman needs her own space, her own room.<sup>1</sup> Within the patriarchal domestic economies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and of the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this demand was not easily met. Nevertheless it is an underlying assumption of Western modern culture that a room of one's own, a personal space, is the hallmark of modern people's capacity to identify and express themselves as individuals. Thus there seems to be an intricate connection between subjectivities and interior spaces. This interconnection is often recognised – in philosophy,<sup>2</sup> in architectural theory<sup>3</sup> as well as in psycho-analytical theory<sup>4</sup>.

The interconnection between individuals and interiors is also a focus of studies of inhabitation – studies that intend to 'read' the interior as a reflection of the social needs and aspirations of its inhabitants. Such studies are arising in different disciplinary environments, for the home is a site of overlap between the spheres of human geography, social theory, anthropology of space, archaeology and (interior) architecture – to name only the most relevant domains. In all these domains researchers have undertaken significant investigations into the meaning of the experience of 'home'.<sup>5</sup> These studies, driven by a variety of motives and research techniques, are often informed



Above  
Figure 1: Edward Hopper, *Western Motel*, 1957  
Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903

by rather different theoretical frameworks. These frameworks give rise to sometimes quite diverging interpretations, as can be gathered from the different comments, below, from the three authors of this paper on one and the same image of an interior:

Fátima Pombo (phenomenology):

What is most remarkable about *Western Motel* by Edward Hopper, is the absence of any connection between the character and the space. The woman occupies a place on the bed waiting to depart from a room without any traces of her identity. It is a context of discontinuity, of interruption in the flow of other personal spaces felt as reflection and representation of a self. The stay in a hotel room is far from the experience of home's atmosphere. A hotel room is not a home as not even a house is a home. Home is the place emotionally adopted by the individual bringing together the self and his or her world of life *Lebenswelt*. Therefore the interior economy that underpins this image is one of living without investing in a personalised environment. This image displays a hotel room as a territory not inscribed by its user. Each moment is a moment of transitoriness and consumerism is not far away.

Hilde Heynen (critical theory):

This painting can be interpreted as an intriguing and critical presentation of the ambivalence of the condition of modernity. A modern interior is shown with a large picture window offering an impressive view of a distant landscape, the car suggesting that this landscape can be explored, enjoyed and mastered through technology, while at the same time the stillness of the female figure points towards passivity and waiting, indicating that the joy and control might not be hers. The painting's *Unheimlichkeit* (Uncanniness) is based upon this oscillation between openness and vulnerability. The economy that underpins this image is one in which men drive cars and women are expected to accept the role of passenger. This role sits uneasily with this particular woman – who at first sight seems to convey patience, whereas this patience is belied

by the constellation in which the painter puts her (the harsh sunlight, the erectness of her posture, the clock on the bedside table, the luggage in front of the bed).

Wouter Bervoets (Actor-Network Theory) doesn't take the woman as the starting point in his analysis:

Both woman and motel room are embedded in a very complex and dynamic economical network. The motel room is cleaned daily by hired staff, the reading lamp on the bedside table is connected to the electricity network, people travel the vast American road network, the motel has to be profitable and motel guests need an income to pay for their room... etc. The way motel guests use their motel room – for overnight stays on a family visit trip, for working on business travel or perhaps for secret romantic encounters – constantly forms and transforms the materiality and meaning of the room. This rather neutral interior is inscribed with a very specific economic program which forms and transforms the motel guests' behaviour. The anonymous look of the interior constantly reminds the motel guest that she is on the road in a rented room with certain rules such as a check-out time to be respected.

It is the objective of this paper to elaborate on these three different theoretical frameworks, in order to map them and to highlight how they can be instructive for the study of 'home cultures' and dwelling experiences.

## PHENOMENOLOGY: THE UNRAVELLING OF LAYERS OF MEANING

Phenomenology, based on the philosophical ideas of Husserl and Heidegger, is the approach to home and belonging that seems to be most widespread among architects and interior architects.<sup>6</sup> It sustains that home is a place deeply needed by all individuals in order to be able to become themselves. As Rykwert states:

... almost always home is at the centrifugal hearth, the fire burning at the centre of my awareness, as its light once spread like a stain in the hostile night.<sup>7</sup>

Phenomenology interprets home economy close to the original meaning of *oikos*. Inhabiting home (*oikos*) is to develop knowledge of such inhabiting (ecology = *oikos+logos*) and ability of organising it (economy = *oikos+nomos*). Inhabiting is not translated by the market value of commodities or by the cycle 'use-discharge-replacement', but by the truth of things along the individual story of life. 'Home economy' based on this 'primitive' concept of *oikos* is a metaphor for sustainability and therefore a manifestation of eco-design.

Phenomenology asks: does a space as a personal domain mean necessarily a space owned by the individual as property? No. It's a kind of space that 'organises' the individual while he or she 'says': Now, I want to be alone or I want to be at my own with my thoughts, my emotions, my dreams, my nightmares, my rhythm, my neuroses... my life. It asks, therefore, for an attitude of caring instead of waste, abandonment or replacement. Let's look, symbolically, at a room of one's own.

The human presence in one's own room reveals a certain distancing from the reality of the exterior, even from the house which means 'shelter and implies edges, walls, doors and roofs'.<sup>8</sup> Is it related with loneliness? Much can be said about loneliness, but perhaps more than loneliness, the individual is interested in moments free of noise, free of the agitation of daily life, moments potentially more introspective and ruminant. A room is a refuge. It is also a territory of freedom. What does it mean to be, to feel at home? Gaston Bachelard, in his book *La Poétique de l'Espace* (The Poetics of the Space) defends home as a privileged domain to understand the phenomenology of the intimacy of the space which is also a phenomenology of time.<sup>9</sup>

Home is meaningful, according to Bachelard, because it is where the individual finds the resonance of his own intimate life. This intimacy can be found in a room, in the attic, in a closet, in a simple drawer, in a window... More important than the property of things, so relevant in a society based upon the value of possession, Bachelard cherishes the relevance of dreams, memories, thoughts (*réverie*) to define identity and happiness. Home is the interior space celebrated to stimulate those experiences and at the same time to protect them. Home sustains the continuity of the intimate life of the individual; it shelters at the same time

past, present and future through memories and dreams. Similarly Rybczynski states:

... hominess is not neatness. Otherwise everyone would live in replicas of the kinds of sterile and impersonal homes that appear in interior design and architectural magazines. (...) Many personal mementos, photographs and objects – reliquaries of family, friends, and career – fill my study. A small gouache of a young man – myself – seated in a Formentera doorway. (...) My writing desk is an old one. Although it is not a particularly valuable antique, its elegance recalls a time when letter writing was a leisurely art, carefully performed with pen and ink and blotter.<sup>10</sup>

Home interiors, from the point of view of phenomenology, have to do with an economy of frugality, of long duration, of appreciation – which is the opposite of commodification, alienation, mass production and consequently material wastefulness. Fashion, functions and fractions are the opposite of a phenomenological home economy, which is rather personal, poetic and long-lasting. Consequently, reflecting on the intriguing expression being at home, we are interested in highlighting the importance of the objects with which the individual surrounds him or herself. How much do these objects participate in the making of a dwelling's space into *one's home*? Which stories do objects tell?

Home is the place of the mystery of the things, the resonance they evoke in the life of individuals. Home is where the objects are silent and meaningful at the same time. Home is where daydreaming is awake by the presence of objects. Home is the emotions related with the room, the attic, the basement...<sup>11</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, referring to a previous study developed by him and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, states that '... a successful lawyer took us to the basement where he unpacked a trombone he used to play in college. He explained that whenever he felt overwhelmed by his many responsibilities, he took refuge in the basement to blow on the old trombone.'<sup>12</sup> Inhabiting a space, feeling at home is to be contained in a symbolic context in which the relation with objects is of fundamental priority, an interior space which is evocative of images, sensations, emotions and feelings that give continuity to the individual biography, which allow it to say 'me'.

We may say then, that occupying a room (and by extension a home) is, in the view of phenomenology, being immersed in a kind of ecology of symbols, signs, images, stories and daydreaming (*rêverie*). Therefore, the *thing* that appears in private space is not merely an object that can be described through words. It evokes what we like to call a *blank meaning*. The blank meaning of a thing is a space for inscribing the impact that a thing possibly has in an individual's life, besides all eventual functions it might allow or represent. The blank meaning is the key to reading the role of each thing for its subjectivity – it is the blank meaning of *autopoiesis*, i.e. the making of the self. The individual defines his distinctiveness while asserting his condition of *poietic being*: the individual creates him or herself. The meaning given to the things by each individual participates in the construction of his or her own *self*. The same happens with other inhabited spaces. Maurizio Vitta devotes his book *Dell'Abitare* to a reflection about the experience of dwelling through four central topics – bodies, spaces, objects, images – which he considers the protagonists of that experience.<sup>13</sup> The author is interested in the representation of the phenomenon of dwelling within its importance for daily life. *Habito ergo sum* (I dwell so I am) states Vitta, insisting that dwelling tells about the individual that dwells in a space. And in that telling (*raccontare*), the process is expressed by the way in which the individual inhabits the space and is inhabited by it.

Memories, besides being a link with the past felt as longing (Bachelard)<sup>14</sup>, or as identity of a vital conscience (Vitta)<sup>15</sup>, are also an element of homemaking that continues throughout the lifetime cycle of the individuals (Cieraad)<sup>16</sup>. The parents' home (the childhood home), the first independent home, the home made through marriage (or living together), the home broken by divorce, the remaking of a new home ... bring with them a concentration of materials (objects and the practices related to them) and projections of emotions. 'Home economy' is then the expression of the processes of reusing, restoring and recycling that are characteristic for these connections. It appeals to frugality rather than consumerism, to understanding the holistic relation among 'things', to awareness of optimising both available resources and practical performances.

## CRITICAL THEORY: QUESTIONING THE CONSTRUCTION OF DOMESTICITY

Critical theory – encompassing the theories informed by the work of the Frankfurt School as later developments such as gender studies, queer theory or postcolonial theory – seeks to unravel the hidden meanings of the domestic interior as linked with the logics of capitalist economy, patriarchy and heteronormativity. Its relevance to the study of interiors is based upon its questioning of the concept of domesticity. Domesticity, states critical theory, is not something that naturally emanates from some essential human need. It is rather an ideological construct, the emergence of which can be traced in history.<sup>17</sup>

Walter Benjamin, the famous philosopher of the Frankfurt School, observed that the private individual makes his entry in history during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the moment that, for the first time, his home becomes separate from his place of work.<sup>18</sup> Indeed until then the house was not a private shelter for the members of a small family, but rather a large structure that comprised workshops as well as residential accommodation. It not only housed husband, wife and children, but also members of the extended family, protégés and servants.<sup>19</sup> Domesticity is thus a construction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When men left their places of work within the house in order to establish workshops, factories and offices as the main sites of economic production, a whole ideology came into being which justified the gender division between breadwinners on the one hand and caretakers on the other. This ideology is articulated in terms of gender, space, work and power: It prescribes rather precise (albeit changing) norms regarding the essential requirements of family life, the needs of children, the proper ways of arranging food, clothes and furniture, the care of body and health, the best ways to balance work, leisure and family activities, and the need for cleanliness and hygiene.

In his analysis of 'the bourgeois interior', Benjamin formulated some intriguing and influential reflections on the notion of dwelling as the 'leaving of traces'.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, he was convinced that the bourgeois interior was intimately linked with the capitalist values of property, ownership and ostentation. The traces inhabitants leave on their interiors result in the message

to visitors: 'There is nothing here for you; you are a stranger in this house'.<sup>21</sup> Following Benjamin's reasoning, stuffed bourgeois interiors in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century are not just reflections of the inhabitants cherishing loved objects because they embody dear memories, but also demonstrations that a capitalist economy has managed to convince people that they should buy things for the home.<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, feminist and gender studies have devoted quite some attention to the topic of domesticity and interiors. There is a long tradition, starting with Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, which sees the ideology of domesticity as the reason for the oppression of women.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless attempts to simply do away with domesticity have proven rather fruitless. Notwithstanding critical and feminist reasoning unmasking the complicity of domesticity and oppression, the phenomenon itself of people devoting time, energy and money to the making of their interiors has only become more important and more central to contemporary economy and culture. Feminists nowadays advocate a 'recycling' of domesticity rather than its annihilation.<sup>24</sup> They argue that domestic arrangements should be re-negotiated in order to eradicate inequalities between men and women.

Studies of the interior informed by postcolonial theories are attentive towards the background of imperialist and colonialist practices that informed 'good taste' and 'proper housekeeping'. As Karen Hansen<sup>25</sup> and Anne McClintock<sup>26</sup> have pointed out, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century domesticity was often considered as part of the 'civilising mission' that motivated many Europeans in the colonial encounter. In the current postcolonial condition, this genealogy is not completely eradicated. Indeed ideal domesticities of today often disguise the racial economies upon which they rely – in how many households is housekeeping work not performed by immigrant workers who might have trouble combining domestic labour with their own family life?<sup>27</sup> This situation continues a long-held tradition of servants being drawn from other classes and other ethnicities<sup>28</sup> and of the representation of domesticity as a predominantly white prerogative<sup>29</sup>. Postcolonial domesticities can also be seen in the hybridised interiors of migrants' homes, who negotiate their identity through combining elements from 'home' with those of the host country.<sup>30</sup>

A last branch on the tree of 'critical studies' to be discussed in this respect is that of 'queer theory'. Spargo states that queer theory encompasses a wide range of critical practices and priorities which mobilise 'queer' as a verb to unsettle assumptions about sexed/sexual being and doing.<sup>31</sup> Queer theory thus questions the 'hetero-normativity' that is implied in most social systems as well as in the built environment, asking why it is that the pattern of heterosexual family life is so explicitly and persistently inscribed in the conventional lay-out of homes and in the images depicting ideals of domesticity.<sup>32</sup> Opening up towards the possibilities of other sexual identities being inscribed in specific interiors might contribute towards a better understanding of the interaction between social norms, consumptive patterns, architectural models and the individual's construction of identity.

## ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY: THE ENTANGLEMENT OF MATERIAL AND MEANING

Less established than Phenomenology or Critical Theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is today gaining ground in social sciences and architectural theory alike. The theory originated in the field of science studies, developed by Science and Technology Studies scholars Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, the sociologist John Law, and others. ANT was developed to describe how facts and artefacts are constructed, configured and reconfigured through negotiations between different human and non-human actors. Where theories usually try to explain 'why' something happens, ANT rather explains 'how' the relations between objects, people and concepts are formed, hold themselves together, or fall apart.<sup>33</sup> ANT offers us a methodological stance to analyse the relational aspect of home interiors and interior economies.

ANT operates by effacing the analytic divisions between agency and structure, material and meaning, the macro and the micro<sup>34</sup>, and thus also between global and interior economies. Global economies influence interior economies and vice versa; they are entangled. Home interiors are not only sites of economic, social and cultural exchanges, they are also embedded in these exchanges. In line with ANT, home interiors must be seen as a networked environment where all actors influence each other. A choice for low maintenance ceramic tiles instead of wooden

flooring in rental apartments, a DIY redecoration of a living room to match an inherited antique cupboard, or the transformation of a former warehouse into a loft by a fashionable interior architect; home interiors result from complex processes involving human and non-human actors. When one of these actors is removed or replaced, the home interior as the resulting network might look completely different. All these human and non-human actors should thus be considered together in a network, and that is exactly what the term actor-network accomplishes. ANT's generalised symmetry or refusal of dualisms<sup>35</sup> also affects the classic polarisation of home interiors into opposite domains of purity and popularity. A rustic and a modern home interior might at first sight seem to be very distant from another. By following the different actors we can analyse how both interiors are embedded in the same economical networks: the available budget, the shops that supplied the furniture, the magazines on interior decoration which inspired both, the selected contractor for the refurbishment job and even the building in which both interiors are located might be identical. Both interiors are thus also very much interconnected.

ANT holds that the relational view on space<sup>36</sup> for home interiors implies that distances between rooms, furniture and decorative objects have to be conceptualised as relations. For example, two adjacent bedrooms in a shared apartment, occupied by two young professionals with different nationalities and different networks of friends, could in a relational view be considered to be very distant from each other. On the other hand, the bedroom in the parental home, stuffed with the personal belongings of the child working abroad, might be considered very close to the child's home abroad. In our global economy with increasing numbers of people moving around the world, home interiors can be conceptualised as hybrid assemblies constituted of people, objects, and furniture spread over different geographical locations. For most people in Western countries, housing relocations throughout their career have become normal. Houses have become similar to other consumer products, being bought and sold, used and discarded. Our consumer culture is also characterised by a continuous succession of new interior trends leading to frequent redecoration. With each move and refurbishment

the home interior must be reinvented. The home interior as a tight lattice of network relations is each time unravelled to be reconsolidated in a new network of relations. In the economic system the sequence of these network processes – unravelling and reconsolidation – only seems to accelerate.

ANT sees technical artefacts as highly moral and as highly social actors that deserve careful consideration.<sup>37</sup> It is by inscribing program of actions into a piece of technology that the technology becomes an actor imposing its inscribed program of action on its users.<sup>38</sup> A famous example is Latour's description of an automatic door closer,<sup>39</sup> but a suburban tract house could be analysed in the same way. Developed by building companies, sold as 'turnkey' projects and designed with the nuclear family in mind, these houses are inscribed with a very specific program imposing itself on the inhabitants. Imagine a single family house with a living room and kitchen, a large master bedroom with ensuite bathroom and three smaller bedrooms sharing a second bathroom. In theory nothing prevents the use of this house in a different way, but in reality the majority of these single family houses are inhabited by nuclear families with the parents occupying the master bedroom and the children the other bedrooms. Also the objects in the home interior are inscribed with programs of actions. If we take for example the fridge-freezer we can see how they have certain expectations of the networks around them:<sup>40</sup> frozen-food stores must be relatively nearby, electricity supply should be constant, there should be space for the freezer in the kitchen. It also makes demands of the people that use it: they would have to learn which kinds of foods can be frozen and maybe even have to adapt their eating patterns. By exploring the agency of objects, ANT helps us to tackle the taken-for-granted character of consumer products within the average home interior.

Home interiors and interior economies are produced, maintained and constantly reinvented through heterogeneous networks. All the different actors composing the home interior are active in orchestrating certain regimes; home interiors can promote or constrain certain types of lifestyles and meaning, and certain sorts of patterns of use.<sup>41</sup> Through ANT the specific inscriptions, knowledge, information, alliances and actions of home interiors that too often remain invisible can be unravelled.

## CONCLUSION

This interpretative mapping of Phenomenology, Critical Theory or Actor-Network Theory shows how these different theoretical frameworks are based upon different conceptualisations of home interior economies. Each of these frameworks is coherent in itself, but that doesn't mean that they are immune to criticism.

Phenomenology takes the individual biography as a continuity of experiences that are 'dragged through life' and that one hardly can get rid of. Home, where space and time are a factor of identity formation with intense emotional appropriations, thus tends to anchor the individual to his or her past. Romanticised feelings of nostalgia are present in such relations between home, past, present, and future, possibly blocking any awareness of radical ruptures with the past which might be emancipating rather than oppressive. Phenomenology has been criticised because its focus on roots and belonging might give rise to a logic of exclusion, favouring the local over the universal or the rural over the urban. The 'other' might be seen in such a logic as belonging to a collective that doesn't have the right to occupy 'my territory', 'my ground', 'my environment'. So, a certain oblique interpretation of phenomenology may mask economical, political and social statements with serious human consequences.

Critical Theory, focusing on societal mechanisms that have to do with power and oppression, is often not well equipped to make sense of individual experiences. Indeed, the individual's opinions and choices are often explained away by as being merely instances of broader social, political and economic patterns, rather than authentic manifestations of an autonomous self. This criticism is for instance at the basis of Daniel Miller's farewell to Marxism as an all-encompassing and all-explaining theory, because Marxism isn't really capable of recognising all the choices people make in home consumption.<sup>42</sup> Critical Theory also has difficulties in accepting the agency of material objects and constellations. For many critical theorists, the world as we know it is the result of *social processes*, and they have no tools to understand how the material (and especially spatial) patterns that resulted from previous social processes inevitably influence the current ones,

because they accommodate certain behaviours and connections while prohibiting others.

In case of the Actor-Network Theory, architectural analysis would simply be reduced to network analysis. We can doubt that such a simplified methodology is really sufficient ground for such an analysis. ANT is indeed highly controversial, as the major criticisms outlined by Law make very clear.<sup>43</sup> Star, for example, argues that ANT studies are often centred and managerialist, attending to the powerful in a sometimes functionalist and masculinist mode.<sup>44</sup> Lee and Brown suggest the ANT approach effaces whatever can't be translated into network terms, so failing to recognise its own role as an intellectual technology of Othering.<sup>45</sup> Haraway argues that the theory is not very aware of its own politics, and in particular of the political agendas of its own stories.<sup>46</sup> These severe criticisms on ANT make it a controversial method for the study of interior economies.

How then to develop an appropriate, theoretically suave methodology for analysing interior economies? We, as authors who have worked with these different theories, are convinced that they each offer valuable insights. Each of them however also implies a certain world view – an encompassing way of understanding how social reality works. From a philosophical and epistemological point of view, these theories are therefore in conflict with one another, and some would argue they are even incompatible (see Adorno's and Heynen's critique on phenomenology,<sup>47</sup> Latour's dislike of Heidegger,<sup>48</sup> Hoogsteyns' concerns on combining Miller's approach and ANT).<sup>49</sup> Without denying this incompatibility, we would nevertheless argue that the choice for a particular framework might be informed by the cases one investigates and by the research questions that one wants to pose. If a project were to research how elderly people experience the transition from their own home to a care facility, phenomenology might be most helpful because it would highlight the importance of their memories as embodied in objects and furniture. If however the research was about home interiors in a squatter settlement in the global South, it might be better to use critical postcolonial theory, in order to unravel economic, cultural and political inequalities that are formative for these environments. If the project addressed 'empty nest' interiors

in suburban houses, where parents continue to live after their grown up children have left, ANT might offer valuable clues as to how these interiors are nodes in many different interacting networks, including those making connections with distant places such as where those children live now.

All three of these frameworks conceptualise interior economies in a different way, allowing researchers to ask different questions and to highlight interconnections in divergent ways. Aspects of them might be combined in any given research or design project, but we think it is prudent in these cases to think through the possibly conflicting or paradoxical elements such a combination might give rise to. Careful correlation between case, researcher and motivation should allow for an informed and well considered methodology, which contributes to a more profound understanding of what is at stake in Virginia Woolf's appeal for *A Room of One's Own*.

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