

Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architectural Theory: Part IV

***A Plea for a Reappraisal of Domesticity, A Historic Concept*
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The word, domesticity (from *domus*, home), could define primordial space relations in proximity, the scale at whose home finds place. However, English usage makes this broad historical sense difficult. Domesticity has become an ideologically charged word evoking the “home sweet home ideology,” a paradise for *homo oeconomicus*, the prototypical individual¹ sustained by the hard shadow work of *femina domestica*.² So we have to try to recover the meaning of “the domestic” under this ideological mask. It is the merit of the already quoted book edited by Christopher Reed to attempt this³. Unfortunately, the book limits itself to those aspects of “domesticity” that can be termed modern, what I am tempted to render by a single word: modern-domesticity, a conflicting juxtaposition, as the authors show. This limitation prevents the authors from a fundamental historical questioning of the condition of post-neolithic man as a “domestic being,” that is of *oikos*, *domus*, *mansus* and their aftermaths as expressions of a long-lasting movement (*mouvance de longue durée*) of history. This questioning should be two-fold: (1) Is domesticity really, as the authors claim, a social construction of the XIXth century? In his beautiful introduction, the editor’s answer is:

¹ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

² Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden, “Arbeit aus Liebe oder Liebe als Arbeit. Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus,” in *Frauen und Wissenschaft*, Berlin, 1977, pp. 11-199.

³ Christopher Reed, *Not at Home. The suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Literature*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, see particularly Reed’s Introduction.

Although often taken for granted, the idea of domesticity is an invention of the modern age. According to [...] Walter Benjamin, it was in the early 1800s that, ‘for the first time the living space became distinguished from the space of work.’ If we isolate the values that comprise the notion of domesticity—separation from the workplace, privacy, comfort, focus on the family—we find that each has been identified by historians as a defining feature of the modern age. Domesticity, in sum, is a specifically modern phenomenon, a product of the confluence of capitalist economics, breakthroughs in technology, and Enlightenment notions of individuality.⁴

(2) If “modern-domesticity”—separate from the workplace, private, comfortable, the shelter of the solitary nuclear family—is a recent invention, how to call the conflation of home and house (*oikos-domos, domus-aedes, mansus-casa*) that runs through prehistory and history since neolithic times?

I think that more significant than the separation of the dwelling from the workplace is its widening severance from the soil. Historically, the home was a web of traces left on the ground. Women and men dwelled in their own and in their forbears’ traces: the past of a dwelling place was part of its presence. In contrast, the modern urban apartment is ground-less (in German *bodenlos*, a term that also bespeaks the uncanny): it is deprived of the “presence of the past.” Life in it, estranged from the community of the living and the dead, does not leave traces.

In an essay written in German,⁵ I have tried to assess the historicity of space perceptions, particularly of those aspects of a society’s spatial constitution which are relevant for proximity and for sedentary everyday life in and around houses, for which I coined the term *technicus Domestizität*. Outside of a rare usage in ecological theory, this term was free. It has none of the connotations that plague the English word domesticity, since these connotations are captured in German by the words *Häuslichkeit* and *Heimlichkeit*. I could thus speak of the origins of Domestizität among the mesolithic and then neolithic peoples that inhabited the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean between the Xth and the VIIth millenium B.C. and insist that this was as much

an overall symbolic as a technical innovation: the constitution of a radiant space centered on the hearth and the granary and limited by the grave stones, whose classical iconic representation was Hermes.⁶ From the early Natuf settlements to Jericho, Can Hasan, Çatal Hüyük or Hacilar (where the first “full-fledged houses,” with interior hearths, doors, peep holes, kitchens and stables are documented), I tried to trace the early history of a world in which the threshold, the window, the roof, but also the field, the grave, the granary, the street and the bridge are not only basic facts of an increasingly sedentary life, but also root metaphors without which social life could not be bespoken. This is the world of “domestic” perceptions of space. It is characterized by the possibility—if not the uniqueness—of a form of appropriation of the soil which I called “*domestisch*.”

As already suggested, the true demise of “domesticity” is not so much the separation of home and workplace, but its severance from the soil. However, in Mexico, as well as in all Latin America, the relationship between acts of dwelling and of soil appropriation has not been broken, and is particularly alive in popular urban settlements, as has been documented by innumerable authors. Some of them attribute the contrast between the often joyful initiative capacity of the poor in poor countries and the despair of their counterparts in rich countries to the possibility or impossibility of communal soil appropriation⁷: it is easier to be poor among the poor than among the rich.

For us who live in a country where the poor and not so poor still have that basic freedom, “domesticity” has still a strong meaning grounded in history, so I can only differ on that with the conceptual pogroms of international architectural theory. Le Corbusier, for instance, is known for

⁴Christopher Reed, “Introduction,” in ---, ed., *Not at Home*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵Jean Robert, *Raum und Geschichte*, Hagen: FernUniversität, 1998, 3 vol + a 3 vol. reader.

⁶This symbolic “domestication of space” is the great feat of the early neolithic period: André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1965. As to the a-iconic meaning of Hermes, it is *hermaios lophos*, a heap of stone (on a grave) and recalls the primitive lithobolic (“stone-throwing”) gesture: Jean Robert, *Raum und Geschichte*, Kurseinheit 2, op. cit.

⁷Lisa R. Peattie, *View from the Barrio*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968.

his invectives against “the sentimental hysteria” surrounding “the cult of the house” and proclaimed his determination to design instead “a machine for living in.” His heroes were engineers, “healthy and virile, active and useful, balanced and happy in their work,” as well as “big business men, bankers, and merchants who work in a world where “economic law reigns supreme, and mathematical exactness is joined to daring and imagination.” His enemies were conventional architects, trained in schools like “hot-houses where blue hortensias and green chrysanthemums are forced, and where unclean orchids are cultivated.” According to Le Corbusier, the old-fashion houses produced by such architects “ruin our health and our *morale*,” threatening the heroism of their male inhabitants.⁸

In the heroic days of modern architecture, Walter Benjamin pointed out that the steel and glass aesthetics he identified with Loos and Le Corbusier stakes its claim to modernity on its “antagonism to the conventional function of the home as a refuge of privacy and an assertion of the individual—or family—identity.”

Contrasting to the modernist ‘glass houses’ the homes of the 1880s, Benjamin notes the way the inhabitant left his trace [spur] in every spot [fleck] of the traditional home.⁹

Remember: making a home is a neighborly activity: it requires some insertion into a community. Besides, it is rooted in some ground: it is a web of living traces on the soil. At least, it is what I observe in the popular urban district where I live, near the village of Chamilpa in Mexico, and it is also what I learned from the history of the domestic appropriation of the soil, of “domesticity,” if you accept my historical redefinition of the term. This domestic appropriation of the soil sets “informally” the pattern of many third world cities, making them livable in spite of the planners’ grandiose schemes, as has been documented for Brasilia or Chandigarh, for instance.

⁸Christopher Reed, “Introduction,” in ---, *Not at Home*, op. cit. p. 9.

⁹ Ibid. p. 10.

This resiliency of historic domesticity in countries that are called “poor” is echoed, in “rich”—but often culturally impoverished—countries by the return of its repressed modern form. Christopher Reed suggests that this repression was essential to what was once called “the avant-garde”:

...in the arts, the linkage of domesticity and modernism has been obscured by another conceptual invention of the XIXth century: the idea of the ‘avant-garde.’ As its military-derived name suggests, that avant-garde (literally ‘advanced guard’) imagined itself away from home, marching toward glory on the battlefields of culture. [...] Ultimately, in the eyes of the avant-garde, being undomestic came to serve as guarantee of being art.¹⁰

The book just quoted also documents the return of this repressed complement of the house, the home (domesticity) in recent architectural theory, which, I beg you to admit, is also a form of literature. This return of the repressed happens in two ways. Some celebrate the “postmodern” disjunction of house and home and stage a disembodied and soiless (“bodenlose”) domesticity as the lingering of a bad dream.¹¹ Meanwhile, some architects, mainly women, are aware of the woman-unfriendliness of unhomely houses and apartments. For them, gender becomes a main issue of architecture.¹²

Throughout the entire course of modernism, including its alleged post-lude, [t]he domestic, perpetually evoked in order to be denied, remains [...] a crucial site of anxiety and subversion.¹³

¹⁰ Christopher Reed, “Introduction,” in ---, ed., *Not at Home*, op. cit., p. 8. Notice that Reed reduces domesticity to “modern-domesticity” and apparently ignores its historic dimension as one of the deepest “mouvances de longue durée” of the post-neolithic period.

¹¹ Anthony Vidler, “Homes for Cyborgs,” in Christopher Reed, ed., op. cit., pp. 161-178; see also Christine Poggi’s already quoted comment on Vito Acconci, in *ibid.* p. 237-252.

¹² Examples in the already quoted article by Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed, in Christopher Reed, *Not at Home*, op. cit., pp. 253-273.

¹³ Christopher Reed, “Introduction,” in ---, ed., *Not at Home*, op. cit., pp. 15, 16.