

# The House and People's Life

The society impact in the housing process and the house influence in people's life



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*The interest on this subject is more than just a study in the architecture field, it is a way of comprehending a part of our lives. Some of these questions are the product, not only of a private life experience at home, of a family life, but also the result of observation made after a study trip to Philippines. There, several families were interviewed and I could see by myself their living situation. Not intending to take as a rule none of the next examples, I just want to better understand how these issues may vary from situation to situation, from culture to culture, from country to country, from family to family and from individual to individual.*

## 1 Introduction

A space is not just an area that we can pass by or stay in; a space can be different places that influence our lives, our relations with our families, friends and neighbours. The space is part of our life.

Based on this idea, the main goal of the paper is to provide a better understanding on how, in this case, the house can have different effects and so, an important impact, in each family life. It is as well significant for the comprehension on how even small changes where people live can make big differences. Related to the housing problems of today, especially in developing countries, this topic also intends to draw attention to the importance of each room in the house, even when there's not so much space, its role can not be forgotten. Thus, it will contribute as a tool and base for the architects in the housing design process.

The approach to this subject will be followed by a brief description on how the house has been developed over the centuries, always relating to historical, cultural and social aspects. So in this way it is easier to understand how this relation between space and people's behaviour and relationships is something that has always existed. After that, specific examples from today will be presented in order to show the different feelings that each person, in different situations, have about their home or a particular room. In this way confirming again the importance that each place has in each life and how this can vary from situation to situation.

Finally the role of architects will be discussed. How should architects act in consideration with this knowledge and also in other different situations?

## 2 Background

### Housing development

The house is, since the times of our ancestors, the place where the human being tried to protect himself from what happens outside, the barrier between the public and private life, and it should always respond to all the needs and requirements of a particular society. Therefore, it has always followed the humanity development and so, its organization and appearance is a result influenced by cultural, social, historical and economical aspects.

During the last centuries, many authors have tried to show how the cities, houses and so people's lives were affected by what was happening in the country, at the time. An example was Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) in his work *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) where is well shown how the working class in England was affected by the Industrial Revolution. If before the house was the place where all the family could live but also work together from their own land or by spinning and weaving, after the Industrial Revolution, these activities were replaced by machines and people started to work outside home, now not only depending on themselves but much more on others. Thus, a crisis began to be noticed, connected to an exploitation of the working class by the higher classes, affecting their way of living.

*“the houses are often so close together, that people may step from the window of one house to other of the opposite house (...) so high, piled storey after storey, that the light can scarcely penetrate in to the court beneath. Society in these quarters has sunk to a state indescribably vile and wretched.(...)The dwellings of the poorer classes are generally very filthy, apparently never subjected to any cleaning process, consisting, in most cases, of a single room, ill-ventilated and yet cold, ill-fitting windows and always scantily furnished and altogether comfortless, heaps of straw often serving for beds, in which a whole family, male and female, young and old, are huddled together in revolting confusion” (Engels: 1845)*

In this case the meaning of “home” for those people was something completely different from the ordinary meaning of “home” that “*tends to be associated with intimacy, privacy, comfort and belonging*” (Mallett: 2004). Here it was just where those workers could sleep and eat, not meaning that it was the comfortable and secure place where they would like to be. It was one of the main places where it was possible to see all the consequences of a society crisis at that time.

However, other kind of alterations in the house were made, and those were not just consequences of some society event but also the result of studies that tried to answer to the transformations that happened in Europe starting from the early XX century. The main modifications in the society, according to *La vivienda contemporánea* (Paricio and Sust: 2000), are related to several occurrences, such as the number of household members which is affected by lesser number of marriages and births, more divorces and increase of the average life expectancy; the economic growth and better capital distribution of which the main indications are the widespread use of the car, people starting to have more than one house, the increased electrical appliances at home, which brought more comfort, and the growth of immigration from developing countries. Finally, the last point is about the renovations in society ways and values which are example the variation in family relationships between generations, a better hygiene, the integration of disabled persons within the society, the increased number of women that work, a change in the school and work schedules, the intensification of extra activities after school or work and a bigger gender equality. Regarding those differences, new ways of living and acting have been experienced.

The desire of young people to be independent increased the demand of houses which, for economical and temporary reasons, should be easy to afford and thus it becoming quite common to rent. Therefore, houses with one or even no division start to be built as well as buildings dedicated only for students. Here the common

areas, as the kitchen or living room, are shared with the other students, the limits of "home" and private space can be extended and mixed among the corridors of each building or even with the entire building.

Other type of residence, different from the previous, is the one for the elderly. In this case, large spaces are required not only because normally this is where they pass most of their time, without going out, but also it should be able to receive visitors.

### Alterations in home

Nevertheless, it is not just in the type of habitation that is possible to see changes but in the organization of the ordinary family house, too. Activities that before were shared with other members of the household are turning into more individual moments. In the past it was common that the living room was the place for the radio where the whole family usually sat together in order to listen it. Although, this was replaced by the television, which is currently being used not only in the living room, as the radio, but also anywhere in the house, in the bedroom or even in the kitchen. It is not necessary anymore to go to the living room just with the purpose of watching TV. For this reason, the living room is being more used as a meeting point where the family can enjoy each other's presence.



Figure 1. (www.dontfeedthegEEK.com by Barry Buchanan)

The emergence of fast-food, the increase of the restaurants and the lack of time changed also the way of eating and cooking, meaning that the use of both the dining room and the kitchen has been varying a lot along the last century.

*"it has changed what we eat, but above all, it has changed the meaning of this central activity of the social life of our ancestors. This has been, perhaps, because*

*eating had been the main concern of a difficult life, however, now it occupies a significant part but shared with other less dramatic interests and, especially, linked to leisure and pleasure sense” (Cardús: 1998)<sup>1</sup>*

At the moment, it is not so common to share the main meals with the other members of the household, during the week when people eat in different hours and places. Consequently, the dining room is losing its value and becoming part of a bigger area consisting on the living room and, sometimes, the kitchen. Therefore, it is harder to define each space, especially because the boundaries are now just in our minds. Some architects, in order to find the most efficient plan, tested different organization solutions, are examples the Frankfurt kitchen by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (Figure 2) and the kitchen from the Unité d’Habitation of Marseille by Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier (Figure 3).

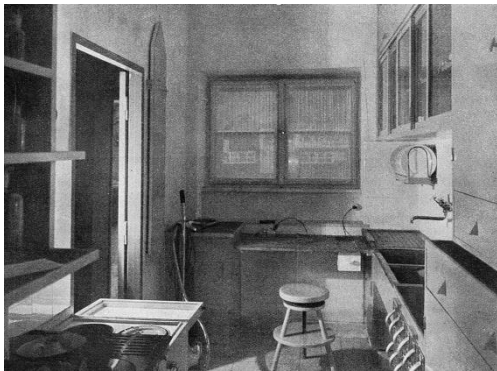


Figure 2. Frankfurt kitchen by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, 1925



Figure 3. Kitchen from the Unité d’Habitation of Marseille by Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier, 1950

The bedroom has also been changing, its role in the house is acquiring increasing importance principally regarding to young people. The old concept of a bedroom just for sleeping, a small room with only a bed, a bedside table and a wardrobe, does not make sense any longer (Figure 4). These days, it is the place where it is also possible to perform other activities more independently from other household members such as reading, listen music, watching TV, studying, receiving friends... *“It is an alive space both during the day and night”<sup>2</sup>* (Sust) Probably, the

<sup>1</sup> Original text – *“ha variado lo que comemos, pero, sobre todo, ha cambiado el sentido de esta actividad central en la vida social de nuestros antepasados. Esto há sido así, quizás, porque la alimentación había sido la principal preocupación de una supervivencia difícil y, en cambio, ahora passa a ocupar una parte significativa, pero compartida com otros intereses menos dramáticos y, sobre todo, vinculados al ocio y al plácer de los sentidos.”* Cardús, Salvador. *Las Cuines del Segle XXI*, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Original text – *“Se trata de un espacio vivo tanto de día como de noche.”* Sust, Xavier. *Innovación Tecnológica e Innovación Tipológica*

bedroom is, at the moment, the main area that is most influenced by each personality (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Bedroom from the 50's, Paul McCartney's bedroom



Figure 5. An ordinary bedroom from today

Finally, the last, but no less important, division that has improved so much or even more than the ones previously mentioned, is the bathroom. Before, the bathroom equipment was portable, an ewer and a basin were moved into the bedroom when someone wanted “to shower” (Figure 6). The evacuation utensils were situated in a small room outside the bedroom and sometimes outside the habitation, both for hygienic reasons and to simplify the management regarding its cleaning. However, after the wider spreading of running water in the second half of the XIX century, these hygienic utensils quickly became fixed. Nowadays, in some houses the toilet and the bath are separated into two different areas to facilitate their independent use. When there are a large number of household members this kind of organization can be very convenient.

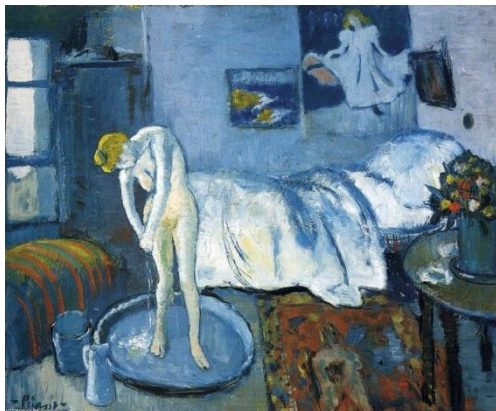


Figure 6. Pablo Picasso  
*La habitación azul*, 1901

## Other important factors of transformation

These days, the better integration of disabled persons within the society has also contributed to the rethinking of the house, as for example about the standard measures such as the door, the bathroom or the elevator. It is quite significant in the design process to take this into account so in the future the building can be prepared to accommodate somebody with different needs, too.

Several social housing institutions, especially in developing countries, have been focusing in solutions that allow the buildings construction by their residents. Thus, in order to facilitate this process, alternative ways of construction have been studied which means that in one way or another the building's design has also been changing.

Unfortunately, there are still modifications happening inside the residence with a lower success rate and these are related to the lack integration of the economic factors with the social and cultural aspects. The high number of people living in poor conditions cause a pressure to build quickly in small sites with limited monetary values. However, this should not mean to go over other equally essential factors. The living areas that are being constructed, mainly in social housing in developing countries, do not correspond at all to the essential needs. These areas are becoming smaller and smaller not meaning that it is the best solution. In many cases, a house with a reduced area is a house without rooms where an entire family can live. This, maybe, would not be so problematic in relation to a young person without children, as it was said before. However, a family is not composed with only one member but of parents and children and each one of them require their own private space, their own room. For this reason, it is really important to understand what are the minimal necessary areas to completely answer to all the needs.

It is also at this level, that the flexibility of the space should be more considered. A house that allows flexibility, which easily allows changes, will be a home that will satisfy not only a larger number of needs as well as a larger number of people, helping to solve many problems.

*“another approach to achieve diversity is to provide flexibility to the dwellings”*<sup>3</sup>  
(Sust)

In a World in progress, where our lives and our ways are also changing, where we are constantly looking for our ideal home to live, it is imperative that the offer is as wide, actual and diverse as those who look for it.

### 3 Analysis of The Design Effects

People’s life and relationship influenced by the space

The previous topic demonstrated how the society has influenced the housing process significantly during the last centuries. However, the main goal of this paper will be clarified at this point. Some other examples will be presented in order to show that is not just the house influenced by the society but also that people’s lives can change influenced by the design of their house and that can contribute to the people’s perception about the space. Some observations made by interviewing local residents of social housing in Manila, in Philippines, will be used as a tool in order as well to better understand this issue. The next cases are then related to the own experiences of the local residents, their ideas and feelings on the place where they live, their home.

Returning again to the last chapter’s situation, the problem of the small apartments is not a matter of size but that a house is considered small depending on who and the number of people living there. Therefore, reminding what was already said, if a dwelling with 24 m<sup>2</sup> with no rooms is good for only a person or even a couple, the same can not be so good for a family with parents and sons. This organization may be favorable for a better flexibility, when there are no divisions, it is easier for future residents to organize the space, they will have total freedom to build the interior as they prefer. Nevertheless, in Manila, it is common to find the same sort of organization but in social housing, meaning that, in many cases those people can not pay such investment. One of the most observed

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<sup>3</sup> Original text – *“conseguir diversidad consiste en dotar de flexibilidad a las viviendas.”* Sust, Xavier. *Innovación Tecnológica e Innovación Tipológica*



problems was then the lack of privacy that not only affects the relationship between each parent but also between them and their children, especially regarding to teenagers. For several families the solution is to build divisions made by furniture and curtains or in the case of the lucky ones, they can add a loft.

The lack of space can be as well a hindrance to open a home business which, sometimes, signify also a hindrance for a better life. In the Philippines it is usual that some residents have a small store to get more income and it makes no sense that because of the housing design this may not happen.



Figure 7. Home business in a house in Manila Philippines

Additionally, there are still other types of flexibility that were not yet referred, for instance, by extending the housing limits increasing its initial area, which can be one answer for many of those problems. So, with this solution if a family is changing, for example in the number of household members, instead of swapping homes because the previous was small, it can continue in the same, not losing a whole previous life.

It is also much appreciated that in the design process a place for common activities is kept, both at the building and habitation level. At the building level, this is more than just a public and accessible area for all neighbours, here is where each person has the opportunity to get to know better each other and so, where all the existing prejudices may end. This place may be considered as a part of a corridor, a big living room, a kitchen or even a laundry area. Regarding to the residence, the role of this common space is almost the same but in another level, in the household level. The existence of an area where the family can eat together, talk and enjoy each other's presence, as it was previously reported, may contribute for a more united family. These moments are the best chances for the family to get

to know better each other, as well, it is when parents ask to their children what did they do during their day at the school or when the sons ask to their parents to tell them how was their lives before they were born. During one of the interviews, a household member explained that one of their favourites spaces was an outside area close to their house entrance, where is possible to see the street and their neighbours. Here is where they like to be together after a meal inside their apartment, it is where they play cards and meet with their cousins and friends, too. For these reasons, the non-existence of these places can break people's social life and so, their relationships.

A bad indoor climate, caused by excess heat or lack of it, is an aspect that equally affects people's behavior. Thus, an interviewee said that the place where she prefer to be is not in her home, because it is too warm with a bad air circulation, but right next to the window in the end of the building's corridor, since is a cooler area. These kind of preferences should never be the result of a bad housing condition. If we always feel uncomfortable inside our own home, where can we go? In this way, should be easy to guess how this fact has been affecting her life.

At last, there is also the feeling of being safe and secure that should be always part of a neighbourhood and home life. However, this is often only achieved by the implementation of railings and gates. Actually, in many cases seem to be enough that the locals see their apartments with these kind of protection, even if it does not mean a drop off the crime rate. This fact may equally be taken with the opposite sense, if someone is walking down the street and see all those houses enclosed by gates or grids, the feeling may not be of security but of insecurity, which sometimes does not also mean a higher crime rate.

After all these examples, it is expected that the idea discussed along this paper is now clear and so, that it is possible to assert with conviction that is not just the society that influences the housing development but that our homes have a big impact on our lives, too.

## 4 The role of architects

As it was said by Eileen Gray "*A house is not a 'machine à habiter'. It is the shell of man - his extension, his release, his spiritual emanation.*"<sup>4</sup> also everybody responsible for the construction of spaces for people should always keep this idea in mind.

Nowadays, with all the housing problems, with the tendency to build in bulk, people tend to forget what is really important. The constantly consideration of the needs of each culture, family and person is one of the main key tools for a project with success, especially because we live in a World in progress. Thus, architects should never take some event as guarantee. In other words, it is not because an architect has more experience that should stop to try to understand everything that the project involves, even if this has already been studied before.

The role of the architecture should also be about giving a chance to people of having a better life. The rethinking about the housing design should be an incessant process trying to answer to all the continuous changes. For this reason, it is essential to find the largest number of alternatives design criteria in order to answer to the largest number of current problems. However, the architect's duty is not to try to change what he/she thinks is wrong or strange but according to people's requirements. That is why is also so important that architecture and other areas as sociology, psychology, economy, work together.

Finally, it is crucial that us, architects, students, teachers and everyone interested in this subject, realize that architecture has the power to influence either improving or prejudicing people's lives and so, it is very important to know what are its limits, until where should we act and change people's life.

*"Building means designing life processes"* – Walter Gropius

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<sup>4</sup> Gray, Eileen. *A House is Not a Machine to live in*

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