# NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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Edited by
Adina Kamien-Kazhdan

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

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Curator:
Adina Kamien-Kazhdan

Assistant curators:
Neta Peretz, Adi Shalmon

Exhibition design:
Studio de Lange
Chanan de Lange, Yulia Lipkin

Catalogue design:
Studio Screw
Idan Epshtien, Neil Cohen

Editing:
Alan Abbey

Supplementary editing:
Annie Lopez

Image research and
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Rachel Laufer, Neta Peretz

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**Adina Kamien-Kazhdan**
David Rockefeller Senior Curator
The Stella Fischbach Department
of Modern Art



# The Poetics of Home: Between Psychological and Physical Structures

Esther Sperber

## Introduction

What is a home? Is it a place or an idea? Is our home the destination we yearn for on a long journey, or the childhood origin from which we travel?

In his seminal book, *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard examines the experience of space, focusing on the home. He writes:

> If I were to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths....
> Now my aim is clear: I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts and memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream.[1]

Bachelard describes the home as a safe and protected space in which one can dream. He points to the emotions and structures that shape our internal landscape, binding thought and memory through the symbolic place that we call home. For Bachelard, daydreaming is a central aspect of human experience, and the house is the sanctuary that allows us to daydream.

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, 1958), p. 6.

2. Judith Flanders, *The Making of Home: 500 Years of How Our Houses Became Our Homes* (New York, 2014), pp. 3–4.

3. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 102.

With homage to Bachelard, I suggest that a home is a place located between the physical reality and a conceptual idea, between past memories and future aspirations. Home straddles the threshold separating private intimacy and the public world of buildings and culture. Homes are hybrids of psychological and physical structures.

## Home and House

The English language has two words that refer to the place of dwelling – home and house – which are quite different. The term "house" identifies a physical structure that enables domestic activities, but "home" also points to a mental idea of belonging, protection, love, and shelter.

Cultures and languages differ in their use of these two words, house and home. Judith Flanders notes that in northwestern European countries these words are related but distinct, while Romance and Slavic languages have one word for both terms. "When an Italian goes home he *sta andando a casa*, he goes to the house."[2]

Although "home" is an idea and "house" a physical space, each word carries aspects of the other. Children and adults, when asked to imagine a house, often draw an archetypal image depicting a square box with a red roof, a smoking chimney, two curtain-covered windows and a small door — homes that do not resemble their actual apartments or houses. Flanders explains that the cultural and historical idea of a "home" is such a powerful image that it overrides the reality of the lived-in house.

Similarly, Bachelard contemplates the bird's nest as a primordial home,[3] noting the gap between the reality of its structure and its symbolic meaning. He writes that a loose pile of twigs is physically precarious and fragile, yet it symbolizes care and security. The nest, like the home, has such symbolic importance that it transcends the limits of its physical capacity to protect.



## Homes Are Primal Architecture

The word "home," like the word "mother," evokes layers of meaning that exceed physical and biological functions. Think of the word "mother": she is the womb and the breasts, nature and nurture, protection and punishment. She is yearned for and overwhelming. Mother is what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called the total supportive environment, the condition that allows a baby to survive.[4]

The word "home" has a similar density of meaning, because of its central role as the place of intimacy, safety, and dwelling, a place that enables survival. From caves and primitive huts to contemporary skyscrapers, we rely on architecture to shelter us from the unpredictability of nature. The house, as Le Corbusier suggested in 1923, is a machine for living.[5] It regulates temperature, controls lighting, and protects against moisture and noise. Homes serve our most primal needs through the protective skin that architecture provides.

The home has a primal role not only in physically protecting our bodies, but also in creating a psychologically safe space in which our most basic human needs are acted out. At home we cook, eat, and use the bathroom; we bathe, talk, sleep, read, and have sex. Home is the place of celebration and mourning, dreams, nightmares, and insomnia. Because it is rooted deep in our hearts, it is the place in which misunderstanding and mis-recognition are most painful. No other architectural structure houses such a range of human actions and emotions.

## Homes Are Built in the Mind

The home is not only a primal symbol for human need; it is linked to personal memories and desires. We remember, tenderly and nostalgically, the homes of our childhood, and imagine the home we wish to create for the people we love.

4. D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* (1953), 34:89–97.

5. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (London, 1923/1986).

In a paper titled, "On the Longing for Home," Henry Seiden questions the focus of psychoanalysis on the Oedipal story and the quest for love, rather than narratives of journeys home, such as the Odyssey, Gilgamesh, the Aeneid, and the stories of Genesis.[6] Like the search for love, our search for a home stretches from the womb, through childhood and adulthood, to our final resting place in death. Home is a place that is lost, then found, only to be lost again. The journey home is the path of life.

David Lichtenstein, following Jacques Lacan, suggests that longing and desire are always for a lack, for something we lost, yet never had. The original self, as Lacan shows, is fractured. But when the baby sees himself in the mirror, he does not see a real image, but rather an illusion of the self as whole. Similarly, Lichtenstein writes, the home is an illusion of wholeness: "We are born in exile and seek the original home that exiles dream of."[7] Lichtenstein realizes that his childhood memory of home is actually of a brief stay at a vacation house. While the memory was based on a real experience, it was also created and authored as home in an imaginative process.

When it comes to building our own adult homes, which elements do we choose to recreate from our childhood homes, and where do we diverge from our parents' style? How do we link our contemporary spaces to long-lost homes, and when do we need to let go of old baggage?

Homes are crafted from the materials of reality but are constructed in what Bachelard might call daydreaming, a mode of thinking that transcends rational cognition. Homes are buildings of the mind.

## Homes Are Products of Culture

"What is more sacred, what more strongly guarded by every holy feeling, than a man's own home?" Cicero wrote 2,000 years ago. Our homes signify the place of privacy, a secluded place to which we can retreat to be alone or enjoy our nuclear family. It is said that a man is a master of his own home, a place under his dominion, but the contemporary home is heavily linked to the cultural and social environment it inhabits. Our homes are part of an urban network of streets, neighborhoods, and cities. The home symbolizes privacy, but it is also the address through which we can be located.

Positioned between the public and the private, the house becomes a membrane that regulates the process of entering and exiting.[8] Notice some of the flows that a building controls: windows for light and fresh air, pipes for water and waste, cables for electricity and data, and doorways for people and goods. Architecture is a sophisticated mechanism for regulating the relationship of inside and out.

Although "home" signifies the place of an individual, it is formed and informed by its time and culture. Privacy is a good example of how culture affects architecture. Students of architecture learn to differentiate spaces within the home by separating the most public from the more private areas of a house. But in the essay, "The Translations from Drawing to Building,"[9] the British architectural theorist Robin Evans points to the misleading notion that the design of a home is a simple response to the functional needs of the inhabitants. Evans suggests that conventional residential designs conceal underlying cultural biases which reflect particular ways of living.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, home designs were influenced by modern ideas of autonomy, individualism, and privacy, which transformed the design of homes with the introduction of the hallway. Prior to that time, traditional Western homes were laid out en enfilade, each room opening onto the next. While rooms had their own functions, it was common to pass through one room in order to reach another. These types of spatial organizations can be seen, as Flanders demonstrates,[10] in Flemish interior paintings that show a succession of rooms, each opening onto the next. In contrast, new modern homes had a dedicated circulation hallway from which rooms were entered. The hallway meant that the owner and her guests did not need to cross paths with other inhabitants, including servants. As natural as privacy seems to us, it did not seem necessary in the past.

6. Henry Seiden, "On the Longing for Home." *Psychoanal. Psychol.*, 26 (2009): 191–205.

7. David Lichtenstein, "Born in Exile." *Psychoanal. Psychol.*, 26 (2009): 451–58.

8. Esther Sperber, "Sublimation: Building or Dwelling? Loewald, Freud, and Architecture," *Psychoanal. Psychol.* 31 (2014): 514.

9. Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

10. Flanders, *The Making of Home:* (note 2, above), p. 73.

Home construction is therefore never a simple reaction to functional needs; it is loaded with explicit and implicit meaning. While the home is a sanctuary of daydreaming, these dreams are not universal and unchanging, they are dubbed in the specific dialect of each time and place.

## Home Is Mind and Body

Homes, as we have seen, embody layers of memories and culture. They reside among past, present, and future, and occupy the space between the private and public. But a home is also a constructed building that functions as a place of dwelling. Architecture is an ongoing interplay between the sensual experience and its emotional, cultural, and symbolic counterpart. It is an actual space that evokes our imagination.

Winnicott suggests the useful term "transitional object"[11] for objects that straddle the threshold between real and unreal. He writes that one should never ask if the transitional object is real or unreal.

Because buildings also evoke deep emotions and have symbolic meanings that exceed their physical reality, one might see buildings as transitional objects. I suggest an important distinction between the child's teddy bear and the building. While the teddy bear comes to represent the mother in her absence, symbolizing security, attachment, and love, these feelings are almost indifferent to the actual physicality of that specific bear, and could have been attached to a blanket or an old T-shirt.

The architectural experience is anything but indifferent to the object, and our reaction depends on the physical experience that the building imposes on us.[12] The sensuality of light, sound, orientation, and stability create the embodied architectural event of space. We feel safe when a building is stable and warm, when it is properly sealed and keeps out the winter draft.

Contemporary renovations of New York City apartments often "democratize" the home by opening the kitchen to the living and eating space. These apartments were typically built in the early part of the twentieth century, when the cooking was done by a maid who entered through a service door, cooked and served from the closed kitchen, and lived in an adjacent small bedroom. Today, this organization no longer fits the style of living of the owner for whom both men and women can cook, while attending to children and guests. Architectural interventions permit a physical space to express the evolving values of its inhabitants.

Buildings hold an actual function, as well as metaphoric meanings, and they communicate on both of these registers. Like Bachelard's nest, which protects the bird and symbolizes protection, architecture both functions and symbolizes this function. An open kitchen expresses openness and hospitality and facilitates its enactment.

The architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez, in his book *Built Upon Love*, sees architecture as a love relationship between mind and body: "Architectural meaning is neither intellectual nor aesthetic… but originates instead in our embodiment and its erotic impulse… [T]he effects of architecture transcend the purely visual or theoretical by evoking both memory and expectations of erotic fulfillment in a thick and vivid present."[13] Love, according to Pérez-Gómez, arises from a building's abstract meaning, the physicality of its presence, and our bodily reaction to that presence.

The architectural experience, and the desire it awakens, is not only an internal experience of longing; it is directly linked to the meaning of the building, and therefore a message from the built environment to its inhabitant. This communication connects the many participants in the architectural project, including the architect, the urban context, the material world, and the subjectivity of the visitor and dweller. Perhaps one might say that we construct homes, and they in turn reconstruct us.

## Home, the Uncanny, and Death

Freud, in his seminal essay, "The Uncanny,"[14] notices that the word "uncanny" in German – *unheimliche* – is rooted in a word that means "unhomelike" or "unhomey," which describes an uncomfortable state in which something familiar becomes estranged. Freud also notes that the

11. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects" (note 4, above), 95.

12. Esther Sperber, "Site, Incite, and Insight – Architecture and Psychoanalysis: Commentary on Leanne Domash's Paper," *Psychoanal. Perspect.*, 11 (2014a): 122–32.

13. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), p. 42.

14. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *SE XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 1919.

15. Ibid., p. 256

16. Ibid., p. 244.

uncanny is scary and disturbing, because it is not only the familiar which has become estranged, but which also continues to hold both meanings simultaneously. The uncanny is both homey and unhomey; it is a familiar experience that conceals an unfamiliar situation.

If the uncanny experience is one in which the strange and the familiar blend together, it is more than fitting that the word used for these experiences is derived from the word home. Home is not only the primal symbol of safety, it also carries the repressed memories of its opposite. Conscious associations to "home" conjure images of family, intimacy, and love, but the home is also the site in which the majority of violent acts take place, the primary location for misunderstanding and loneliness. The same walls of a home that protect the sacred Bachelardian daydreaming can also hide unspeakable poverty, illness, and abuse. As Freud wrote, "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*."[15] When an architect designs a kitchen, she probably envisions freshly made dinners, attractively served and eaten in a warm atmosphere of familial intimacy. But kitchens are also used by lonely people who eat cold leftovers in front of the TV.

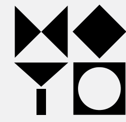
Freud's observation that an uncanny effect is produced when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced"[16] may reveal a different side of the architectural discipline. The architectural project aims to make an imaginary wish become a reality, yet these fantasies are often only partially executed. Because of this gap between the wish and the reality of a building, it may be experienced as an uncanny object containing both fantasy and reality, as Freud described it.

The uncanny, according to Freud, conceals its double. Perhaps the home is uncanny, because concealed within the inanimate building structure is its opposite, the living human being. While humans are mortal, they create buildings that attempt to escape death. From Egyptian pyramids and Greek temples to our current ever-taller skyscrapers, we erect monuments in an attempt to deny or transcend death. These structures exhibit power while obscuring the fragility of the human body and the temporality of both creator and his creations.

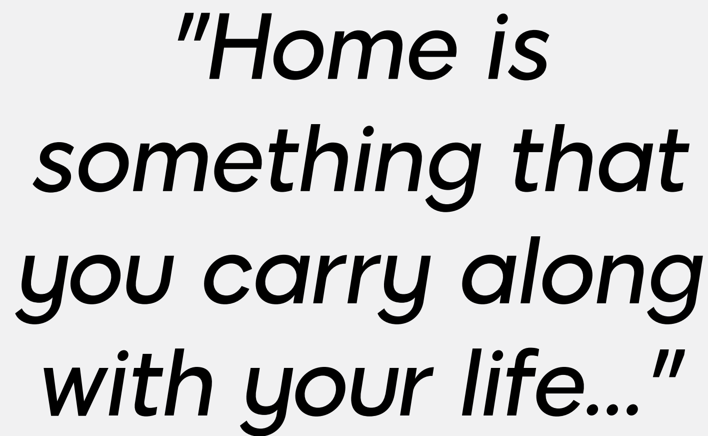


We have seen that the word home is loaded with historical, cultural, and psychological meaning. Our homes have deep, emotional, and symbolic significance as the place from which we come and our desired destination. The architecture of our homes is similarly infused with meaning, and is both a stable sign of shelter and a reflection of changing times. Homes are the site of both great companionship and haunting loneliness, of nurturing and abuse.

The home structures the way that we live and is structured by the cultural norms around us. And yet as these homes we inhabit create the necessary environment for dwelling and for Bachelard's "daydreaming," they also inhibit other forms of domesticity. It is only in the estrangement that is created by art, the shock of the uncanny, and the awareness of our embodied reaction to our dwellings, that we can glimpse other ways of living.



LIVING ROOM
ENTRANCE
DINING ROOM
KITCHEN




Do-Ho Suh