

Houses are a Necessary Illusion: Uncovering Family Process Through Asking Families to Draw a Plan of their Homes

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The way families organise their living space is an indicator of family relationships. The physical shape and organisation of houses, flats and dwellings of all kinds are not 'unchanging natural phenomena', they are historical, cultural, economic and family constructions. Therapists, like families, 'do not see that they do not see' (von Foerster, 1994). They are partly 'blind'. This becomes apparent when a therapist asks a family to draw the plan of their house. The therapeutic task illuminates the organisation of family bonds, and provides insight into the causes of family suffering. A clinical example is given.

We tend to accept dwellings — their shape, the way spaces are organised into rooms within them — as something familiar and unquestioned. Unless we are architects, we do not spend much time thinking about the physical organisation of our living spaces, except perhaps when we are seeking a new home, or trying to sell our existing one. We are aware of the things we find comfortable, and uncomfortable, in our dwellings, but not aware that how we arrange ourselves within them says a great deal about our relationships.

Yet once we move outside of our own socioeconomic class or our own culture, we are immediately aware of how other families in other living situations use their private dwelling spaces very differently from the way we use ours. And once we begin to compare contemporary homes with the way dwellings were shaped and arranged a century or more ago we become aware that private homes have been conceived and lived in very differently from the way middle-class people do today.

Similarly, a very different concept of 'fused' or 'enmeshed' relationships is involved when we compare a family who live in a house with separate rooms, and the possibility of privacy, and a family who live in a 'trailer home' or shanty as their permanent dwelling: family members in such spaces are in daily close proximity, whether they want it or not. The space

itself dictates family dynamics, at least up to a point (for some exceptions, see below).

These differences alert us to the fact that houses are a not a 'given' but a 'construction', differing according to the culture, class, and historical period within which they exist.

In the USSR during the Stalin period, the government built blocks of flats that looked exactly the same (these brick buildings remind me of Pink Floyd's 'The Wall'). These dreary, repetitive structures epitomised that specific moment of Russian history. Mental hospitals and prisons have also, historically, reflected monolithic, totalitarian concepts of crime and mental illness as Foucault (1979) pointed out. By contrast, the Egyptian pyramids, or the Teotihuacan pyramids in Mexico, employ similar monolithic architecture for a very different purpose: to commemorate gods, or godlike rulers. A space, or the way it is organised, reflects a system of values and beliefs in line with economic and social possibilities or impossibilities. In this way, architecture acts as a cultural guarantee of qualities and values such as order, stability, security, control or disorder, impermanence, insecurity, and chaos.

When we ask a family to 'draw the plan of their house', previously invisible aspects of the family come to light. The plans they draw tell us about the spaces each member calls his/her own, and about family life inside the walls. What these drawings hide is as evident as what they show. As with any interactive art exercise, when family members draw, they create metaphors of their family life. They 'bury' on paper a treasure which therapists can help the family to bring to light: the way they use the space provided by the



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paper, the size of the drawing, the furniture and other objects they choose to include, traffic ways which are marked (or not), whether spaces and objects are named, whether the spaces are full or empty, what family members explain and what they do not mention.

When children draw members of their family, they are giving information about gender differences, generation gaps, how family members look and how they feel inside, what is private and what is shared with others. Bit by bit, their drawings become two-dimensional 'sculptures' of their family relationships. And, if we arrange a therapy session at the family house, we can see the space for ourselves, and perhaps we can experience a 'double description'.

As the architect Rodolfo Livingston says, using the metaphor of the 'peel' or outer rind of a fruit:

Houses are peels that both separate people from, and connect them to, the outer world. They should be appropriate settings for the varied activities of the family or personal life like eating, having a shower, making love, being alone or getting together (Livingston, 2000: 3).

Each family occupies an 'interior' produced by unconscious variables (economic, cultural, social, aesthetic), by variables unique to each family, and by variables governed by time, history or nature. All of these need to be looked at very carefully. For example: one family *literally lives on garbage*. Their hut stands on compacted tons of garbage. The walls and the roof are made of metal sheets, but inside, you find a family with two TV sets, and very good stereo equipment, different rooms, and quality beds for everybody. They create their unique 'interior' in that place. However, they suffer from very high lead levels in their blood, resulting in illnesses, as a consequence of living on top of the garbage. They cannot live elsewhere because they work with garbage, but they don't live like slum dwellers; they try to live as if they were living at a good address. This family has 'constructed' their home according to norms of how the privileged live, despite the socioeconomic level we would associate with living on a garbage dump.

Another example: a gypsy family owns a very good house, but in their garden they have their traditional tent where they live part of the time. In spite of owning an urban dwelling, they keep up their traditional way of living in tents that we would associate with a nomadic existence. In this way, they keep alive an important part of their culture and their past and create alternative living patterns within a suburban residential block.

Another example is a middle-class family in a good area of Montevideo where they have an ocean view, a barbecue for Sunday meals, and where everybody has his/her bedroom, his/her private space. But one of their children, an 11-year-old boy, 'needs' his mother or father to sleep in his bedroom every night. In spite of having bedrooms for everybody, this family have organised their space in accordance with their particular emotional dynamics.

Domestic Architecture: Possible Meanings

A house is the place we are in. It is the space that we ourselves create or build, or that others provide for us. A house provides the most fundamental source of human safety. It is the place that shelters us (or not) from the weather, and from social, economic, and health problems (consider the many vicissitudes which homeless people suffer simply because they have no 'roof over their heads').

It may be the place that ties us to our family of origin, because we inherited the house from them, or because they bought it for us. Our house locates us in relation to them. Adult children may build their houses on the same site their parents live on, on the same piece of land, or they can live in the same block of flats; or at the other extreme, live far apart, perhaps disguising their inability to separate. A couple who consulted me about family violence used to live during the week in her parents' house, and at weekends in his mother's house. In this way, as in others, they showed they couldn't have 'their own place' as couple and as a new family.

“A house can be a 'suffering-meter' or a 'happiness-meter,' providing a 'read-out' of what we experience inside its walls.”

A family's living space can be with or without windows, fully protected from the weather, or open to the air, the cold and the rain, isolated from its neighbours, or closed off to exclude them. Its interior differs from the outside. It is intimate space, different from public space. A house can represent the maternal womb, welcoming or suffocating. It can be associated with being trapped, with loneliness, silence, and darkness or with warmth and security. A house can be used as shelter from the dangers of the outside world (drug-addicted children 'retreat inside the house' to protect themselves) or it can be a house with open doors, where private spaces are not defined. The clutter and mess of its interior can mirror the emotional chaos and disorganisation of its inhabitants (the houses of severely obsessional individuals are often surrounded by verandahs full of discarded appliances and old newspapers, while the windows and gateways of paranoid individuals may be boarded up, or protected with barbed wire against unwanted intruders).

A house can be a 'suffering-meter' or a 'happiness-meter' (Livingston, 2000: 3), providing a 'read-out' of what we experience inside its walls. Thus, the activity of drawing our houses can enable us to register the upset caused by a leak over the bed, the fear caused by opening a window, or the distress caused by the colour of a living room wall. I may suffer because my room is like a corridor through which everybody walks (once a normal part of middle-class European life, now more likely to seem an intrusion upon

the 'privacy' we have come to value so highly), or because I have to wear an overcoat to move from room to room in winter. Our habitat plays an important role in making us feel better or worse. Living in a flat in a luxurious neighbourhood is far removed from being interrupted a thousand times during a meal because the kitchen is a long way from our table, or having the bathroom separate from the house, or not having the means to heat the house in cold weather.

I believe that, if a living space produces suffering, it is our obligation as therapists to question the family's organisation of space and provide a way to change it.

Think over the idea of paradigm, the idea of the architectural design of a space, the construction of a particular, delimited sense of space. Look in detail at the internal mechanisms of architectural speech, which guarantees and is guaranteed by that concept (Wigley, 1994: 235).

Buildings with alarms, iron fences and private gardens offer a stable lifestyle that is secure, controlled and isolated, designed to keep the owners safe from outside dangers. Equally, someone's choice of a house like this may represent his fears about the outside world. Illegal buildings on the outskirts of towns without electricity or running water offer an insecure, isolated, unstable way of life (little better than living on the streets). When there is bad weather these huts are flooded, hurricanes destroy them and they will surely suffer most in an earthquake. These days, in Uruguay, there are more and more homeless people. What place is our society giving them? What do their flimsy dwellings say about them, impose upon them?

Family Use of Domestic Space

The way in which each family organises its space gives us evidence of family relationships, individual and shared places, and patterns of interaction. Organisation of space can give us an idea of the meanings nearest to, and furthest from, consciousness, and those which are denied or silenced in a family's history. The family space is both more, and less, than the sum of individual spaces, because every way of organising the space implies new opportunities and restrictions for each member. Doors and windows can be considered to be ways of regulating comings and goings, and how easy it is for a family to differentiate individual and couple spaces. Each style of organising admits a finite number of transformations, which may imply stability, change, order, chaos or chance.

As in every system, the meanings of the different subsystems are ordered in relation to one another, embodying a semiotic structure, which has its effects on family pragmatics. Each space has meaning only in relation to the other spaces, not in itself. The effects are shown in the way each family organises the space, not in words. And so, the family members' drawings of the 'floor plan' of their house would be in a code, which we would have to work out. There could be dichotomised relationships: inside/outside, at the front/back, in the centre/on the margins, ambiguous relationships that hint at positive or negative definitions, permissions or prohibitions.

Deconstructing the Family's 'House Plan' Drawings

The real knowledge of a family group is different from its overt expression. These differences and contradictions can be understood if we think about the family as a system in which all members are interconnected, but not necessarily aware of the nature of that interconnection. In Hans Andersen's story only one little boy was prepared to say openly that the Emperor had no clothes on; all the others had colluded in pretending that the sovereign was sumptuously dressed. The idea a family has about the state of its relationships can be totally different from the reality. The family's portrayal of itself as 'loving' or 'close' can be a 'necessary illusion'. Yet the way that family organises its domestic space can point to sinister secrets that negate that illusion.

When people go through losses, separations or other destabilising experiences, they need to remain unaware of some aspects of the way they use their space, in order to preserve their sense of unity. To family members themselves, however, the way they organise their space appears to family members to be without special significance, or to be simply dictated by the physical features of the building.

De cada casa escucho
su modo del orden
su forma singular
de sumar el universo
y oigo
— atentamente —
los latidos originales del espacio
el auténtico perfil de su habitante
como si las casas fueran
confesión muda
espejo de lo recóndito (Silva, 1994).

I am a profiler
of houses,
for every house
has its unique personality,
its particular rearrangement
of the universal order of things,
and I listen closely
to its heartbeat,
the murmured confessions of
its inhabitants
as if the space itself
bears silent witness
to the crimes committed
within its walls.

Family relationships permit variable distances from, and different levels of tolerance toward, others' bodies, and these variables are enacted in the way the space is used. At the table each member of the family can have a fixed place or sit in different spots on different occasions; similarly with beds. The way bodies are arranged in space signals the changing ways individual family members relate to each other. Children may have their own room, or sleep with their parents, or even share their parents' bed. Everybody may have their own bedrooms but still be enmeshed. When a family member is seriously ill,

s/he may be separated from the rest or occupy a central place in the house, in contact with everyone.

Once I made a home visit to a family where the father had a terminal illness. I spent half the session with the wife and children in the kitchen, and the other half with the sick man, alone in the bedroom. This arrangement of spaces could be understood as an acknowledgment of the family dynamics: the healthy ones together, denying the seriousness of the disease, and the patient near to death in a room by himself. It seemed as if they were expecting me to be a mediator between two parties. A member of a family who is isolated can keep the family secrets and guard its history.

Even after death, the place which individuals occupy can communicate something of their social situation: are their bodies interred in a cemetery, are their ashes kept in a wardrobe, or do they simply have no place at all? An example of this last is the 'disappeared', whose mothers here in Uruguay and in Argentina are living monuments for people who cannot be buried, because their bodies have never been located. And, when someone has died, how do surviving family members treat 'their' room? Is it preserved unchanged, as if waiting for the departed to return, or is it redecorated and refurnished completely? In both cases, 'death' has been denied.

By watching the use of the different spaces, we can be aware of the changes in the way society regulates relationships. Courting couples in the 1940s or 1950s in Uruguay met each other in the entrance hall and then passed into the living room under the eye of the girl's mother who always sat with her eye on them. Nowadays, most adolescents meet their boyfriend or girlfriend in their own bedrooms.

In the therapist's room, the reliable, unchanging way in which furniture and time are arranged allows the therapist (and the family itself) to notice how the family organise themselves, that is, who comes in first, who second, who chooses what seat, who sits near whom, which places are left vacant, the way they all sit in relation to the therapist, whether these behaviours are consistent from one session to another, whether they sit close to or distant from one another, who takes the leadership roles, and so on.

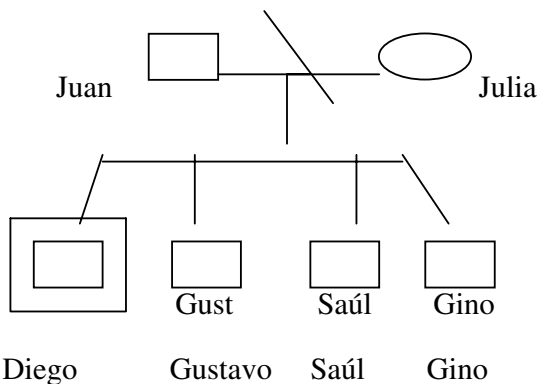


FIGURE 1
Family genogram.

Clinical Vignette:
Mother and Sons 'Map' their Family Home

The members of this family were the mother, Julia (45), Diego (20) an identified substance abuser who wasn't studying, working or looking for a job; Gustavo (12 years old), Saúl (11) and Gino (10).

Julia and Juan had divorced each other some years prior to our first session. Juan had been diagnosed as paranoid. The divorce had been very traumatic, since Julia had to call the police to make Juan leave the house.

I asked Julia and her children to draw the plan of their house. Each one drew his/her version of the space and how family members occupied it. Their individual drawings are reproduced here.

- I noticed striking differences in the way family members used the paper. Diego used only the right upper corner of his sheet. Gino needed two sheets of paper, as he was the only one who drew the whole house.
- Four family members drew only the bedrooms, the private spaces. Gino was the only one who drew the shared areas: living room, sitting room, hall, kitchen.
- The sizes of the plans varied, depending on how the paper had been used, showing that Diego, the eldest, experienced confinement (*encierro*), while Gino, the youngest, experienced openness (*apertura*).
- Gino and his mother gave names to the rooms, calling the one that belonged to the youngest 'the kids' room'. Nobody else named the rooms.
- Gustavo gave a name only to Diego's room – the others were just rooms. He didn't mention whom they belonged to. Gino wrote initials like 'M' (mother), 'D' (Diego), 'G' (kids).
- Diego wrote initials in the rooms: his own, his mother's, 'G' in the room the youngest children sleep in, as if to imply that Gino and Gustavo were one person?
- There were no doors or windows in Diego's plan. He 'drew his own isolation'. I could make some guesses as to what this meant: that he did not want to be extruded, like his father? That he wanted to guard the family's history in secrecy? What did he want to be known and what did he want not to be lost? He seemed unable to be open about how he was at that moment.
- Gustavo wrote 'door' and 'window' where he drew doors and windows. And he did the same with Diego's room. But he rubbed out two walls of Diego's room. Did this mean that he felt that the rest of the family were taking care of Diego, or that he was unprotected, or that he needed

clearer limits to be set on Diego? Or did he need to 'open' the house because he felt his house (family) to be very closed?

- Diego and his mother had separate, private rooms. The three 'kids' slept in one room. So it seems that in this family, Diego had a place as 'father' and 'husband'. As a consequence of his being recruited into such a devalued role as 'replacement' for the extruded father, he acted out through drugs and symptoms. He didn't have a 'son place', so he couldn't grow up and live his own life. His function was useful to the precarious equilibrium of the system. He filled the empty spaces left by the father so that the family didn't feel Juan's absence. The family perceived Diego's suffering and symptoms, but they couldn't perceive the symbolic role shift that made him act the way he did. They all were imprisoned by the family 'narrative'. In order to preserve the 'necessary illusion' of an intact family, Diego had to be symptomatic.
- Diego's, Gustavo's, Saúl's and Julia's drawings failed to include a way to enter or leave the house (we can see the street door only in Gino's plan). This may show the isolation of the family from social/community life.
- In Saúl's drawing, Diego's room had nothing through which you could go in or out. In his image, Diego was confined, whereas in his own room, his mother's and brothers', there were no doors: they could communicate between themselves more easily than they could with Diego. On the other hand, maybe it was difficult for them to have any privacy.
- Gino needed two sheets of paper. He 'experienced' the house as much bigger than the others, and he was the only one who drew common spaces. He was also the youngest. Surely he was the one for whom the family occupied the most 'psychic space', and the one who most needed the family to be united. His drawing showed no windows, and the only door was the one used to go into the house.

In the drawings of these five people there are no empty spaces. This corresponds to a structural representation of the family in which Diego has taken his father's place, which we can diagram like this:

Mother-Diego

 Gustavo-Saúl-Gino

On the evidence of their drawings, I think Julia, Diego, Gustavo, Saúl and Gino experienced their

family as restricted, without enough internal and external interaction, with rigid roles and functions, and without a place for their absent father. It seems as if family members weren't able to have any private space.

The differences among brothers in the fraternal subsystem were not well delineated. The three youngest children seemed to be seen as one. By contrast, Diego had a 'privileged space' as he occupied a room as important as his mother's. But this privilege meant being cast in the father's role, unable to be himself. I think we could ask ourselves whether the mother, who had thrown out her husband, might have been unable to avoid confusing Diego with her husband. This may be another reason for Diego's inability to grow up and become a man. To become an adult male in this family was clearly very difficult, and this would apply to Diego's brothers as well. This family's house – its 'shared space' – is very close to being a 'suffering-meter'.

This has been an extended illustration of how family members' drawings of their family home can provide important and suggestive information about how family members relate, and feel. What happened to this family is less relevant to the theme of this paper; however, suffice it to say that therapist and family worked together both to make their home more pleasant, *and* to change the shape of the family's narrative. Drawing the floor plans of family home helped to facilitate a 're-design' of their family's shared 'story'.

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