Chapter 6.

De(sign)ing Home

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Abstract

Ideas of 'home' and aspirations for creating home environments shaped the emergence of interior design as a profession and discipline. This essay will continue this trajectory in terms of the consideration of the role of the interior designer in designing 'home' coupled with a more recent definition of the interior designer (from the profession's international association – the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers, 2011) – as a practitioner who 'determines the relationship between people and space in terms of physical and psychological parameters to improve the quality of life'. Motivation for addressing the question of designing 'home' comes from a project titled *Developing Spatial Design Know-How for and with Young People Living in Out-of-Home Care*. Through design-situated conversations, the complexities of making an environment home-like become apparent and invite a re-framing of the practice of interior design as one of de(sign)ing where the production of signs other than as representations emerges as a trajectory enabling transformation.

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Introduction

This chapter is an opportunity to reflect on the idea of 'home' as an interior design proposition through the lens of a research project titled *Developing Spatial Design Know-How for and with Young People Living in Out-of-Home Care* (2022-24). The project brought together interior design and young people who have lived experience of residential care in a series of design-situated conversations to pose 'home' in the context of the current environment of 'resi-care' (Attiwill, 2023).

In Australia, residential care is one of five forms of out-of-home care which is defined as overnight care for children under 18 who are unable to live with their families due to child safety concerns and are placed into protective custody. Residential care differs from the others such as foster care and kinship care in that it is group accommodation with paid staff in a residential building. The importance for residential care to be a 'home' is one that concerns many in the sector – for example: Department of Families, Fairness and Housing state residential care should be 'home-like' (DFFH, 2023) and the Commissioner for Children and Young People advocates – with reference to residential care – that every child has a right to live somewhere that 'feels like home' (CCYP, 2019, p. 25).

The shared spatial design know-how that was produced through doing the project manifested in extensive transcripts of affective tonality – 'warm data' where there is a sensitivity to 'the interrelationships that connect elements of a complex system' (Bateson, 2023). Collectively, we created a document with recommendations and selected key quotes that offer insight into how 'home' in resi-care is encountered. This document was then the focus for a further conversation with people involved in resi-care including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, residential care workers from Berry Street and those involved in current draft design guidelines for purpose-built resi-care houses.

Ideas of 'home' and aspirations for creating home environments shaped the emergence of interior design as a profession and discipline in the twentieth century. This chapter will continue this trajectory to consider the potential of interior design in addressing the complexities that surfaced with the idea of home during the project. Generally assumed as a practice of decorating, interior design re-posed here as a practice engaged in practices of interiorization where 'interior' is situated in a dynamic relation with/in exterior and time introduces the potential for new ways to approach the concept of home and acts of making home.

Home & interior design

> '… this wonderful word, "home", which connotes a physical "place'" but also has the abstract sense of a "state of being" ...' (Rybczynski, 1987, p. 62).

The concept of 'home' is a focus across a wide range of disciplines; the extent of this complexity is evident in the many literature reviews seeking to map this concept of home such as *Understanding Home*

(Mallett, 2004), *A Place Called Home* (Easthope, 2004) and *The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space* (Douglas, 1991). There are also distinctions that are made in relation to the use of the word – for example: as home, Home and HOME – to make apparent home 'both as an idea and a practice'. In an article, addressing the concept of home in relation to displaced people, the authors distinguish '"home" as the day-to-day practices of homemaking, "Home" as representing values, traditions, memories, and feelings of home, and the broader political and historical contexts in which "HOME" is understood in the current global order and embedded in institutions' (Brun and Fábos, 2015, p. 5).

> Home is much more than a house or the physical structure in which we dwell. Home is both a place or physical location and a set of feelings. … home is a relation between material and imaginative realms and processes, whereby physical location and materiality, feelings, and ideas are bound together and influence each other, rather than separate and distinct. Moreover, home is a process of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging. Home is lived as well as imagined. (Blunt & Dowling, 2022, p. 311)

The intent with citing the above quotes is not to introduce a definition of home that informs this chapter so much as to highlight the complexity of the concept in how it involves what seems to be a particular relation between people and space. How this relation is understood is inflected by different philosophical frameworks and these have implications in terms of how the dynamic between people and space are understood and approached. The terms 'home-like' and 'feels like home' set up a particular intent – that there is such an idea of 'home' that pre-exists, and another environment could be made like it. 'Like' introduces the idea of an analogy, metaphor and resemblance and with this the act of representation – representing home.

These considerations connect with interior design as a practice that emerged from a history of homemaking and decoration where there is a specialist who is involved in designing homes for other people. The interior designer in a sense works between people and space, and usually this is then defined as a practice of representation:

> The decorum of our lived space, its furniture, walls and roof, is significant because it is a representation of our subjectivity: how we live is a sign of how we think, feel and imagine the world. Relating the interior to interiority, interior design addresses a different challenge than that of comfortable spatial arrangements … The interior becomes an issue concerning representation:

> it is a model of our subjective life that in turn allows us to better understand the world we live in. (Ionescu, 2018, p. 4)

The International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers defines the practitioner as someone who 'determines the relationship between people and space in terms of physical and psychological parameters to improve the quality of life' (IFI, 2011). The connection here with the discussion above regarding home is evident – and further situated the potential in bringing the practice of interior design to address the situation of residential care and the perceived need to make it 'feel like home' and 'home-like'.

Out-of-home & home

This interest was also motivated by an earlier project I was involved in – *Beyond Building*. Concerned about the institutional nature of residential care environments, Gregory Nicolau, a consultant psychologist in the out-of-home sector and founder of Australian Childhood Trauma Group, contacted me as program director of Interior Design to see if it was possible to involve students to help transform the interiors of residential care units from spaces that felt institutional to ones which were 'homlier' (to use Gregory's word) through decorating the interiors with colours and soft furnishing. This invitation led to a series of undergraduate interior design studios (2008-12), where students were invited to respond with design propositions to transform the institutional atmosphere of a series of resi-care units. The title *Beyond Building* flagged a reframing of interior design as a practice not defined only by the structure of the building but also as a situation composed of spatial, temporal and material conditions. The nature of the relation between people and space as necessarily psychological and physical was also questioned: What if we move from the phenomenological framing of how people experience space? What if 'interior' is no longer defined as solely the inside of a building but in relation with an outside?

The students' projects and proposals were presented to stakeholders including service providers and government architects who were working on the design of purpose-built residential units. While a number of insights influenced the new designs, it became evident that change in the sector was challenging. In 2015, an inquiry by the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People into out-of-home residential care documented 21 residential care units and called for 'immediate changes to the residential care model. …[to]… Immediately improve the physical environment of residential care units to make them look and feel like homes' (CCYP, 2015, p. 18). Then four years later, in 2019, an inquiry tabled in the Victorian Parliament by the Commission for Children and Young People titled *In our own words:*

Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system included the following finding: 'While the Commission is aware of residential units where efforts have been made to create a welcoming and home-like environment, many children and young people we consulted for this inquiry told us they had experienced the physical living environment in residential care as sterile, institutional and even prisonlike' (CCYP 2019, p. 42).

Developing Spatial Design Know-How for and with Young People Living in Out-of-Home Care is a project that was initiated to focused on the environment of residential care in relation to questions of belonging and 'home' and consider potential for the practice of interior design to enable immediate change. In the initial phase (2022-23), the project has involved working with lived experience consultants from Y-Change Berry Street and CREATE Foundation to develop an understanding of the out-of-home residential care environment and with particular focus on the question of 'home'. Bringing together spatial design and lived experience as two modes of spatial awareness and expertise, the shared spatial awareness develops a spatial design know-how aimed to enable immediate transformations in the relational dynamics of the environment.

The initial stage involved a series of design-situated conversations over house plans that were similar in layout to resi-units, photographs, and material swatches. This was deliberately a different approach to conducting interviews; in contrast to focusing on the young people's responses as the response of an individual and their personal experience, emphasis was placed on experience as expertise regarding the environment. Given the chronic and systemic nature of residential care and recognising that despite the best intentions of many care providers, it became apparent how important it is to give time and space to '… deeply understand "the problem" before moving to solutions – otherwise solutions won't stick (they don't meet the complexity of the problem)' (Cataldo, 2023).

A document, compiled collectively and led by the lived experience consultants, outlined a series of recommendations which were supported with quotes from the conversations. The document was presented at a workshop involving stakeholders with the view to informing the next stage of the project including proposed design guidelines for residential care in Victoria. Included here are sections from the document that relate directly to out-of-home residential care and the question of home together with the recommendations. The following three quotes introduced the document and make evident the complexity of the situation in terms of addressing 'home':

The environment you live in literally impacts on every single aspect of your life. It affects your whole journey and your quality of life in resi care – yet the environment seems like it's the least concern.

To try and make a place feel like home can do the exact opposite. You shouldn't aim to have a resi unit feel like home. You should aim to have a resi unit feel comfortable and safe. Pushing "home" onto someone can bring in a lot of things; like you have to connect with the other people there; you have to connect with the workers; you have to share etc. It can be overwhelming and intrusive.

Resi is a business, an organisation, not a home.

Recommendation: The value of focusing on ways of enabling comfort and stability – the ability to settle – in the environment.

If I'm not comfortable in a space, it feels more like a prison than it does an actual house. Not so much a home, just a house. I want to feel comfortable in the space and not like I'm being held like against my will in a space.

To not have to be in survival mode and with your sympathetic nervous system response switched on.

Home is a place where I do not have to deal with the rest of the day. Where you just relax. A lot of those spaces aren't places you can relax.

Recommendation: The importance of agency as an ability to organise one's life through being able to hang clothes and have a space to display things, to be able to make one's own space safe and to re-arrange and change the environment.

A lot of young people are really creative – want to be able to do things with their spaces – so how to do this – discussions about this are really important.

The biggest issue is when people assume what young people want or should have.

Personalisation without permanency.

Recommendation: A sense of genuine investment in residential care:

The current problem is that the environment feels institutional and clinical; and neglected.

You can tell a resi-care house from the street, it looks different. Often the grass is a bit patchy, and it doesn't look like it's been looked after.' 'They all look the same; not in terms of building style but other aspects, such as the grass is barely there, the windows are covered.

Like no-one lives there.

It doesn't really give you any incentive to want to like take care of things if it's always cheap and nasty.

Investment can be perceived through the time and consideration in the choice of finishes, materials and furniture. These design choices may also communicate qualities of trust and care; and in turn, create incentives to take care of things.

The following quotes draw attention to the affect of the environment as a composition of signs:

Every house has these sorts of curtains, the ones you see in offices as well – like the panelled curtains. It definitely feels institutional – but it also reminds me of one of the disability units and where it's all about safety and it's not about the shared space.

A dining table in one of the resis created a sense of unity because we had dinner together.

The first thing that really bothers me is always seeing those emergency-like plans and evacuation points on the door, on the walls, as soon as you come in. I hate them. They shouldn't be there because it makes it feel like you're in a hotel, which is very, very temporary. Or you're in like some kind of clinical facility.

De(sign)ing home – concluding thoughts

At the conference – *Voices in Action. Resilient, Resourceful, Remarkable* – convened by CREATE Foundation in 2022, there was a presentation titled *Building Homefulness: A guide for exploring and enhancing 'home' for young people*. The concept of 'homefulness' was developed through consultation with young people and as a term 'provides a positive focus for practice which problem-oriented categories such as "homelessness" do not … Home and homefulness shifts the focus onto the way people experience their living situation and its character, and appreciates their agency'. Outlining 'both objective aspects of wellbeing such as having access to housing/accommodation of a certain minimum standard, and subjective aspects of wellbeing such as (the young people's) lived experience of where they live – where they feel "at home"', 'home' and 'homefulness' were categorised as: Agency, Spaces and Places, Social Connection and Control, Feelings and Identity (Crane & Grace, 2021, p. 6).

There is an obvious coincidence of concerns here with Homefullness. In thinking about the role of interior design – the next steps could be the identification of physical and psychological parameters as a way of making relations between young people and their surroundings to create an environment where they feel 'at home'. However, the 'warm data' collected during the *Spatial Design Know-How* project suggests there is a significant problem with affirming resi-care should be 'home-like' and purpose-built resi-units were often referred to as worse than adapted houses because 'they are built for a purpose'. The issue here is one of representation – where the intent is to make something 'home-like'; where design becomes an act of representation and in this process, determines the relation between people and space

The description of interior design cited earlier by Ionescu is worth returning to here, in particular the statement that '… interior design addresses a different challenge than that of comfortable spatial arrangements … The interior becomes an issue concerning representation: it is a model of our subjective life that in turn allows us to better understand the world we live in' (Ionescu, 2018, p. 4). In the 'warm data' produced as part of this project, there is constant reference to the desire to feel comfortable and be able to settle. It is often the acts of representation of 'home' by others and the design of the buildings that, while the young people recognised as well-intentioned, have the effect of making it feel like a prison. For the young people, it is the bedroom where – depending on the situation – they have some capacity to represent themselves. The bedroom becomes a place of withdrawal and refuge.

Walter Benjamin, a philosopher writing on the late nineteenth century domestic interior, is often cited in histories of interior design regarding the emergence of the concept of 'the interior' as a retreat from the exterior of the public realm of work and industrial city – 'To live in these interiors was to have woven a

dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself in a spider's web ... From this cavern one does not like to stir' (Benjamin, 2002 [1939], p. 216). While this refuge may provide a sense of control which is critical, there is also an overwhelming sense of stasis and being fixed in place – where 'a model of subjective life' could also become prison-like.

Another way of approaching the problematic through an interior design lens is offered by a project called *Zero Flat*, a design for a new type of apartment for chronically homeless people:

> Fundamentally, the idea was to create a spatially sensitive apartment that would impose few restrictions upon occupants … people sleeping rough perceive hostels or shelters as overly regulated, restrictive institutions … inhabiting is not an issue of interiority versus exteriority as much as what kind of transition or what type of relationship the inhabitant establishes between interiority and exteriority. The way people inhabit the world unfolds in a continuous movement from one space to another. In other words, it happens on a journey through intimacy, privacy, the communal and the public. It is in this transition from one point to another where dwellers create their personal territory, an individual space built day-by-day, an environment in which things are arranged *comme il faut* thanks to the repetition of the same familiar actions. It is in this idea of the interior where the intimacy is built, something that is not related to property or possession but rather to shelter or refuge … this is the circumstance that allows the person to retreat and not be lost or dispersed … In this process of conceptualising a new type of housing, the design team realised that they needed to rethink their vocabulary and reconfigure the constituent verbs of the act of "zero inhabiting". From street to bed, Zero Flat was both an interior design project as well as an exercise in urban and landscape design. (Cid et al., 2019, pp. 78-82)

Zero Flat shows how one can design somewhere for people to settle and feel comfortable which does not rely on establishing a set of closed parameters that determine the relationship between people and space. In contrast, movement and temporality are foregrounded where encounters are less about ensuring something is denoted as meaningful than one of openness and responsiveness. Design becomes reframed as a process of de(sign)ing to confront representation and assumptions underpinning the value of making something 'home-like'. De(sign)ing foregrounds experimentation with signs as processual and temporal. Instead of space, there is a sense of how an environment can shift and change; 'building not as a stable thing but as an event, an ever-unfolding verbal-noun' (Gibson, 2020).

The idea of an unfolding and folding through movement – as with Zero Flat – 'the way people inhabit the world unfolds in continuous movement' connects with the concept of the ritornello as 'refrain' articulated by psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari together with colleague Gilles Deleuze. A musical term, a ritornello is a repetition within a score – literally 'a little return'; they give a bird song as an example and discuss how through sonorous repetition a provisional territory is created; how a young child whistling as they walk through a dark forest is 'like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing , calm and stable, centre in the heart of chaos' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 311).

For the practice of interior design, the challenge is to engage with this way of thinking about people and space as 'spatially sensitive' environments composed of connections and counterpoints that sign the environment not in a way to make it 'like' something but instead invite connections that affirm the capacities of the variety of lives.

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