

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Wet and the Dry

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, March 18th, 2020

Context

At the threshold of old age, albeit a relative notion, my memory seems to bring back images and experiences of places of *particular meanings, as if they held the key to the “thread” of my life as a person.*

The places that hold these particular meanings for me are places where I have resided for any appreciable length of time and which have held experiences articulating those meanings, *such as waiting for the school bus on my first day of school, sitting on the building doorstep with my lunch basket nearby, as shown in the feature image.*

The Wet and Dry As Social-Spatial Categories of My First Home



diagram of social-spatial organisation of a middle eastern home

From my childhood's perspective some areas of the home that happened to include private water related activities (kitchen, WC, bathroom) were associated with the women of the household (mother and maid) ... these were, conceptually, the *wet areas*.

In contrast, the areas of public activities that do not involve water and that are furnished accordingly, (entry hall, formal living room, dining room) were associated with the men of household (father, son and guests) ... these were, conceptually, the *dry areas*.

My parents' bedroom and mine were located across the entry hall from each other: the first in the wet and the second in the dry sides of the home.

The kitchen and the dining room were located across the entry hall from each other: the first in the wet and the second in the dry sides of the home.

An internal corridor joined all the wet activity rooms and allowed my mother from her bedroom, and maid from the kitchen, to access them privately without passing by the entry hall ... *a feature much appreciated by Middle Eastern families.*

Experiencing the Wet and Dry Areas As Social-Spatial Behavior

Those experiences *qualified, if not defined, what it is to reside somewhere and to structure the sense of being a person, as such, and in relation to others.*

Any departure from these was authorized only by parents. On a scale of behavioral restrictions, the entry hall had the least of them and my parents' bedroom the most.

Private Zone: Bedrooms, WC, Bathroom, Kitchen

In the first home that I remember: *bed and work table were mine in a bedroom I shared with my young sister ... these made up my private space*, with instructions not to play on them and not to interrupt my work.

My parents had *theirs on the other side of the entry hall with a private corridor leading to kitchen and bathroom and allowing my mother to use these places without passing by the entry hall*

The kitchen was not only accessible by the private corridor but had also a door leading directly to the building central staircase, so as not to bring market bought food and other goods considered dirty, through the entry hall. The kitchen was of course my *mother's privileged domain*.

The WC and the bath room were separated for ease of use at the same time, and both were accessible from the private corridor that ran between the kitchen and my parents' bedroom.

Public Zone: Entry Hall, Formal Living Room

The entry hall was where guests and visitors were welcome, they were at ease there and, if close friends, we would all gather there.

At the end of, and on axis with, that hall there was a formal "salon" for quiet conversation; a place that was earmarked for adults ... *it had a set of folding doors.*

Interesting to note that both formal living room and my parents' bedroom had a window onto a quiet side street.

Semi-Public Zone: Children Bedroom, Dining Room

At one end of the entry hall and open to it, *the dining room was reserved for us to eat in and was located for ease of access to the kitchen.*

My *bedroom* was on that side across the entry hall from my parents' bedroom.

Interesting to note that both dining room and my bedroom had windows facing a busy street ... nothing like those openings for observing the urban fauna!

Ritual Enforcement of Social-Spatial Behavioral Patterns

By ritual I mean a repeated activity involving people in a given role to perform a given task that provide-help structure the social identity of the people involved and their relation to each other.

For instance:

- *My mother heating bath water over a Primus stove then pouring it in a tub for me to bathe in*
- *The local plumber disinfecting periodically the toilet bowl and sewer connection.*
- *My climbing up a ladder to a mini attic to re-attach the WC flushing chain to the reservoir located there.*
- *The post wash day ritual, when sun dried bedding was brought down from the roof terrace for folding and storing in a large armoire located in my parents' bedroom, and which consisted of my mother and the maid folding each bedsheet and swinging me in its middle to flatten it ... this to a Greek tune my mother would sing in rhythmic correspondence to the swinging ... a tune I can still sing today!*
- *My gilding with water color the SINGER name, forged in the frame above the pedal of my mother's sewing machine located in her bedroom.*
- *My lathering the back of my father's neck to shave the bottom wild growth of his hair ... with his Gillette blade shaver... which I have kept to this day!*
- *My shining with BRASSO liquid cleaner my father's brass name plate attached to our front door, to distinguish it from its kiddy corner neighboring kitchen service door.*
- *Our occasional Sunday morning "crazies" when we would gather around the radio before breakfast with guests in the entry hall, then proceed to the dining room.*
- *My waking up at sun rise on cub scout outing days to while the time at my bedroom window to watch through the louvered shutters our street come to life, including the waking up of the errand boy of the candy store across the street, who had slept in a cart box parked nearby in order to be first at lifting the store's iron curtain.*
- *The social mediation particularity of shutters being of course to allow one to see outside without being seen. That is the way I used to witness the slaughter of chickens that were allowed to bleed to death by running around the dirt side road with their throat slit.*

End Words

This was in essence what residing meant, socially speaking ... a series of experiences associated to physical features of the home concerning being and doing things at their assigned place and which oriented me to what it was to be ME in relation to US, and THEM ... i.e. to socialize me as a person and as member of the family.

In retrospect these experiences must have rooted in me, intellectually and emotionally, the eventual interest and study of social-spatial behavior in architectural and urban space.

Credit feature image to my late father Simon Amiel

Colored diagram by the author

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