

Paper presented at the ENHR Conference, Rotterdam 2007

The house as moral value.

Practising gender and generation in Danish single-family houses

So a home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions.

Mary Douglas 1991:289

The aesthetic, and particularly the moral, dimensions of the home that is constituted by Danish single family houses are the object of this paper. As Mary Douglas said in her sharp – even slightly cynical, as I read it – text from 1991, the home is a pattern of regular doings, an embryonic community, a realization of ideas, a memory machine. Characterized by massive redundance, the home's "capability to allocate space and time and resources over the long term is a legitimate matter for wonder". Its justification lies in its continuity (Douglas 1991: 296). With her background in classical structural-functional social science, the grand lady of British twentieth century anthropology here points to the very basic issues in understanding the home as a moral community and place for instituting solidarity and social order among the members.

The fact that there are values attached to the creation of homes and the practices of living in them is no news, neither to anthropologists who deal with different cultural models revealed in the physical arrangement that provide the material framework for homes, nor for social policy workers or house constructors. The question is, however, whether we understand the character and significance of these values sufficiently, and to which degree they inform housing policies.

Value is "the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves: normally, as reflected in one or another socially recognized form" (Graeber 2001: 47). Such a definition of course goes beyond the simple economic one in which money is the concrete token of value. It is a broad perspective that also relates value to individual meanings and actions. As Graeber says: "Value is the way in which an individual actor's actions take on meaning, for the actor herself, by being incorporated into a larger social whole" (Graeber 2001: 67). A further elaboration of the concept, as has

been done in Graeber inspiring work *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, which also includes a historical looking back into classical ethnography, carry promises of a wider and deeper understanding of values as attached to house and home and the confluence of social relations on the one hand and concrete material and economic value on the other.¹ Value is related to meaning and has strong moral connotations as is also emphasised by Graeber when he says that values are “ideas about what they [people] *ought* to want. They are the criteria by which people judge which desires they consider legitimate and worthwhile and which they do not. Values, then, are ideas if not necessarily about the meaning of life, then at least about what one could justifiably want from it” (Graeber 2001: 3).

Background

From 1960 to 1980 around 1,5 million people moved from the cities out onto the bare fields in what became suburbs in Denmark. They built houses and planted hedges around their parcels, and today, 59 % of Danish families live in an unattached house that they own. In Danish self understanding this life form is deeply associated with normality. A house with a garden around, mostly one, but sometimes two stories high, inhabited by a nuclear family consisting of a married couple and their two children (1,8 is the average birth rate in Denmark), a car in the garage, and perhaps a dog, this is more or less considered the epitome of Danish normal life.

The empirical material I am dealing with is acquired in interviews with family members in this kind of houses, which are in Denmark called *parcel* houses.² The Danish

¹ In Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* the notion of home plays a key role in Evans-Pritchard’s brief elaboration of value. Home in Nuer language is *cieng*. This concept can refer to house, but also to home in a wider sense, depending on context. It can mean village, territory or Nuerland as a whole, and it carries emotional overload and a sense of loyalty, which can be carried over into political action. “Home is the place one defends against outsiders” says Graeber (2001:13), and he quotes Evans-Pritchard’s own definition of value as something which is “embodied in words through which they influence behavior” (135, quoted in Graeber *ibid.*).

² the project, called *housing in time and space*, that I have worked with, on and off, for the last year or so, together with Mark Vacher and two other colleagues, and assisted by a group of students

parcel house is considered the frame around normality incarnated, so to speak, but it also represents generally appreciated moral values, and even where these are not lived up to, they must be assumed to play a role. The parcel house thus may be seen to reflect particular Danish – and to some extent Scandinavian – cultural ideals. The household is a place defined by specific social relations, and the material space of the house reflects the preferred social relations. In the case of the parcel house, these are two grown ups, a married couple in one bedroom, and two children, each in their room, and one of more rooms for being together.

Houses are not only frames *for* people, people are framed *by* houses and the things they harbour, at the same time as people project their own emotions, dreams and hopes onto the things and the spaces that constitute the house. It is the specifics of this dialectic that we aim to identify in the project in which the material I am presenting here was collected.³ Before I introduce some results of this work related to gender and generation, I want to briefly present another recent research on single family housing in Denmark, a research which was aimed at identifying people's needs and wishes for the future in order for the building industry to adapt to the tendencies revealed in the present ideal forms of spatial living. This research was done by a researcher on future living, Jesper Bo Jensen, and it investigated the present and future qualities of Danish single family houses, based on 30 interviews at six different typical parcel areas in Denmark. One conclusion was that families with children do prefer living in parcel houses, and they do see this as living out the dream of the harmonious happy family life. This is the most favoured way of living, also for the younger generation. However, for the present, a majority of 64% of those who actually live in parcel houses are middle aged couples whose children are grown up and have moved out. The average number of inhabitants in parcel houses is 2.5 which means that the average space for each person is 65, but the amount of space for each inhabitant is unevenly distributed, since 64 % are only two in a house and thus occupy really spacious areas. In our own material, one elderly couple in a

³ The project was carried out by Mark Vacher, Kirsten Marie Raahauge and myself with a group of students. It is an anthropological project under the label Housing in time and space, and linked to the Centre for Housing and Welfare – Realdania Research at the Institute of sociology at Copenhagen University.

large house had closed down one floor, which they did not use at all, and I shall come back to the significance of that later. On the whole, space is generous in Danish single family living; a parcel house is averagely 139 square metres, while newly built houses are 156 on the average. The use of space has changed over the last 40 years. Before, the living room was the place for receiving guests, today the hearth of the house is the kitchen combined with “al-rum” the all-purpose room, preferably with access to a terrace or a garden. The findings by Jesper Bo Jensen also show that many families wish for more basement and deposit space, larger wash rooms, a common house for celebrations, confirmation and youth parties, round birthdays etc. People seem to want more children’s rooms, three instead of two, and preferably bigger, and many want an extra room for office plus an extra bathroom connected to the bedroom. The report concludes that in the future, families will want more all-purpose space.

In his report, Jensen characterizes the house as an arena of consumption. There is no doubt that consumption is a predominant aspect of house life in the families of the modern well fare state, but there are other dimensions as well, namely those that I propose to subsume as that which is found “behind modernity”. This takes us into the spheres of gender and particularly generation. I want to attempt to go one step deeper in interpreting what lies behind these rather straightforward wishes and see what it reveals about the character of social relations, gender and generation in home life.

Gender: horizontal relations, moral bindings and values

A few cases from our own material reveal that values attached to housing and space can be interpreted as relating to something other than what has to do directly with space and the number and sizes of rooms in the house.

Case 1: First there is Erik and Mona and their two children Melanie and Tina.⁴ Erik is a salesman and his wife Mona is a day care mother, who works at home. The girls are five and one, and they live in a suburb outside a middle size town in Jutland.

Erik does most of the talking, but he is frequently supplemented and supported by his wife Mona. They are both busy looking after the children while they talk. Erik is the

⁴ All names are pseudonyms. Man and wife were interviewed together.

most articulate about safety and his responsibilities towards the children, the youngest of whom is his biological child, the elder is from the wife's former marriage. Both he and his wife clearly express their attitude to the collated value of the house (*friværdien*). This concrete money value is not to be used on insignificant things, he says, they should not *klatte pengene væk*, not spend it on "this and that" and insignificant stuff, but invest it in something of importance. There is significant collated value because of the increased market value over the last few years. So, Erik says, "we had the mortgage altered, and then we took some of the value out for a wedding and then to build the terrace." ("vi fik lagt lånet om, og da tog vi så noget af værdien til et bryllup, og så til terrassen"). In the interview, the couple do not elaborate on the wedding, but the self-evident way in which they talk about the choices they make reveal that a wedding and a terrace seems to fall unquestionably within the same category of good investments. Other interviews and the general impression one gets from living in Danish society, and from following the extensive public discourse on the significance of the "friværdi", the collated economic value in house ownership confirm the impression that this is no special case. First of all, big weddings have come into fashion, and although Erik and Tina's may not have been one of the really expensive 15.000 Euro weddings, it is costly to hold a celebration of this kind, which is much valued in Danish social and family life. Young couples frequently save up for it and hold the party after some years of marriage, and often after one of two children have been born. Significantly in Erik's statement, however, is his self-evident way of expressing the wedding as in another category than "this-and-that". I see this as an example of the confluence of material value and the value of social relations. The collated house value is used to enforce the horizontal man-wife relation, and to mark and celebrate the social group surrounding this nuclear family.

The other significant issue which came forward clearly in this interview – implicitly as much as explicitly – was safety.

"The safety that this is a home that is ours. It is these four walls, this is where we live. This is where the children will grow up, this is where we are going to be safe. If there is a lot of material damage [to the house], then it is not safe. The fact that we have four walls, and when we come in here, then we are sure to be safe... These kinds of thought... for the children, it is fantastic. Therefore I think it is important that it is a stable house."

The “four walls” is a concrete image and also a metaphor for an imaginary space of security and safety related to the future, to vertical relations between parents and children. The children’s safety is the safety of the parents, and the other way around. It would not be too much to say, I suppose, that the experience of safety, in social life, but also in a deep existential perspective, is closely bound to relations between people. The individual feeling of safety is premised on a feeling of being able to create safety for those with whom one has the most binding relations, and what better metaphor for that than the material stability of the house. The four walls of the house are frame as well as foundation.

Erik never uses the word “morality”; he does not talk about moral values. When I interpret his whole discourse in this interview as a moral one it is based upon the tone of his voice, the combination of the metaphors he uses and the way he interacts with the children, who are playing in the background during the interview. My interpretation is also based upon a life lived in a society which values the form of safety expressed here highly, and a personal childhood with ideals similar to the ones presented by Erik and his wife, although with half a century of time difference. Materiality in the shape of a house, in Danish as in other suburban life constituted by “these four walls”, is for many the epitome of safety. In the interviews, we asked people to take five pictures of their house, interior or exterior, of their own selection. Erik selected the picture of Tina, the eldest child in the family, safely snuggled up under her “dyne” (duvee), being for many Danes the incarnation of shelter, protection and safety.

The case of Erik and Mona and their children tell us about both gender and generation relations. As a quick take on the conclusion to this, based not only on this one case, but informed by other similar ones, I would say that gender relations are practiced and performed with a strong emphasis on consensus and harmony (and light jokes about sexuality) as a *means*, or way to, emphasise the *stronger* generation-relations. The horizontal relations are in a sense in the service of the vertical ones. However, most significantly, in the overall morality attached to the household, the horizontal and the vertical relations conflate and one enforces the other.

Vertical relations: Generation

As space shapes and is shaped by social relations, so space and *time* i.e. senses of continuity and *vertical* relations that reach beyond the present house dwellers, both backwards in time and out into the future, also come together in the house. While the physical walls limit inhabitants to the nuclear family, the house still encompasses more relations than those between the actual house dwellers. Some of these imaginary relations go back in time.

An elderly couple, let us call them Frida and Svend, live together in a house they have had for more than twenty years. Frida has collected a lot of stuff from her mother and grandmother, while Svend still considers his *real* home, the place that for him is "most home", the one of his childhood. He is 73 and has lived with his wife in this house for many years. They have raised their three children there, who have now left home, and they tease each other about their links to the past, through things and heritage, and through memories of the "real" home, which is not the same for each of them. Women are often considered the bearers of continuity through things. Much more than looking backwards, however, the answers given by both this couple and others, pointed towards the elements of safety and what I chose to call a compromise with the future as represented in the house. The safety of children had high priority for those who had children still living in the house, but also for those whose children were grown up and had moved away. The material property and the concrete value it represents in terms of collated value was mentioned by several as a security: "If something happens", as they said, "we will be able to help".

This elderly couple had shut off their first floor, because they had ample space already, and they had also realised some of the collated value and given it to the children in the form of cash. But what does this tell us? It tells us that there is a connection between space and obligations related to family ties and value, but it also tells us that this is an *indirect* relationship, a latent one. It also tells us that there may be other layers of value and morality at stake "behind modernity", although at first sight, and when looking at studies of immediate tendencies and straightforwardly articulated wishes for the future as in Jesper Bo Jensens research, people are "modern" all through, in the sense that

consumption, more of the same good thing, and physical well being is in the foreground and what is being stated, when asking about wishes for the future. The thesis that behind modernity's surface we might find forms of continuity as expressed through values related to the house seems however to be supported by the way people express sentiments and reflections related to the choices they make concerning their house and the money value it represents.

Let us for a moment imagine a different scene, one that is closer to a traditional – to simplify and generalize – pattern of living. In such a scene, the grown up children might live in the house of Frida and Svend, in the free space of the house, or the elderly couple might move upstairs to a sort of “aftægtsrum” (the elderly peoples withdrawal house as it was known in traditional country farms) to make way for the younger generation on the more spacious ground floor. The value represented by the house as living space would be exploited *directly*, so to speak. However, since this is modernity, which means market value, cash economy, consumption, rapid change, freedom of choices etc., vertical relations and obligations are maintained *indirectly*, that is with the market as an intermediary. This also seems to be part of the implicitly stated morality related to house living. Money value can be taken out of the house to strengthen horizontal relations, as in Erik and Mona's wedding, or it can be taken out to help the younger generation by way of a money gift, as in Frida and Svend's case, but when it comes to the concrete use of space, horizontal relations are privileged over vertical ones. Generations of grown ups as a rule do not live together, and if they do, it may cause conflict.

Our material shows that if for some reason grown up children stay very close to their parents, or a parent of one spouse is spatially close to a family, this may cause trouble and in any case requires high diplomatic skills and tolerance. Here is the case of Birthe and Karl. Birthe is the daughter in law, who lives in the house in which she is being interviewed. Karl, her father-in-law does not live in the house, but he owns it. In the interview with Birthe, her father in law came in during the interview, and without knocking, suddenly stood in the living room. In an extremely cautious and polite manner, Birthe responded to his presence, and when later asked about the zones of the house, and if she would limit access by non-inhabitants to any of the rooms, she responded that she

had set the limit of her farther-in-law's access to the bedroom door. "He goes in everywhere" she said, "but I have asked him not to enter the bedroom." Karl, on the other hand, although jokingly but not insignificantly, does not hide the fact that the house is his property.

In another case, conflict of loyalties for the man in relation to his mother, whose house he and his wife inhabited on the first floor, while the mother lived on the ground floor, ended in divorce. This conflict was probably not the only reason for the divorce, but it did seem to be a significant contribution to the problems of the couple, and when the mother died, and the man after some contemplation decided to stay in the house, somewhat against the will of his wife, this became the straw that broke the camels back.

My point in this, in terms of the vertical relations of generation is that there may be a strong sense of moral sentiments and obligations in vertical relations, while at the same time romantic ideals about the priority of the horizontal ones between man and wife may prevail. The importance of the horizontal relations are the most articulated, which however, may not hide the fact that in reality, the vertical ones play a significant role in the overall morality of the household, and the values attached to the concrete money value represented by the house may be up for conciliation in significant and implicit ways when decisions have to be taken that point in both horizontal and vertical directions.

The home is, as Doreen Massey has stated it, a place formed by social interrelations which are wider than and go beyond the area being referred to in any particular context as that "place" (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 25). Both horizontal same-generation, gender relations and vertical cross-generational ones inform decisions and choices related to the house, and these go beyond the actual occupants of the house, the nuclear family, both in space and in time.

House values

Safety, and control over the house and its members, at the same time as keeping it the frame for relaxation inside, is a predominant features in people's articulations of the meaning the house has to them. The house is a significant material symbol of large-scale control of life; of responsibility for kin that reaches both back in time to the things of grandparents (often for women particularly) and forward in time to children and security

for the future. The home is also on a smaller scale a significant symbol of control as expressed through orderliness and tidiness and collective structuring of zones in the house, as was emphasized by Mary Douglas in her points about the home as a civilizing factor.

The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad confirms the idea that Scandinavian notions of home are deeply embedded with moral and emotional sentiments related to safety and continuity. “The image of solid house construction promises safety and stability in a changing world”, she says (Gullestad 2006).⁵ Our material points towards a strong sense of cooperation and consensus among man and wife in what I have chosen to call *house vocation*, implying all the practices and sentiments related to the house, from selecting and building or rebuilding it to the continuous decoration and redecoration, maintenance and resetting of the value it represents. I think house vocation is a good term, which distinguishes these joint and comprehensive efforts from “housework” that designates more limited housekeeping in the traditional sense. Housework was traditionally women’s business, and to some extent still is, although virtually all women work outside the house (otherwise you can not afford to have a house at all in Denmark nowadays), but house vocation is precisely a joint effort, which – also sustained by Marianne Gullestad’s findings - is not only that which comes out of marriage, it is also often what keeps a couple together (Gullestad 1993). Thus, harmony between man and wife is paramount and reflected to a large extent in joint house vocation.

So where does this leave us with regard to a characterization of relations between family members across gender and generation? I have two points that I want to advocate for. First that in terms of generation and vertical relations, values attached to the future are strongly centred around children, the wellbeing of children representing the security for the future. In late modernity there is a strong link in people’s minds between the elements house-children-safety-future. However, values concerning this cluster of

⁵ Gullestad is interested in the political role and aspects of home construction, and she argues forcefully for a metaphoric link between the boundary setting of the home and that of the nation. In Norway, one of the recent prime ministers has used the metaphor of the house for the nation, (“the Norwegian house”.)

interrelationships are mostly expressed indirectly and in practice. Secondly, concerning gender and horizontal relations, gender differentiation is less articulated than the joint “moral” unit between man and wife. The house is a joint project and divorce is prevented by devotion from both man and wife to this common family life. This may very well be enforced by concrete conditions of modern life, which imply that two incomes and much work outside the home is required in order to afford a single-family house, and joint family life has thus become a scarce resource (Andersen 2004).

Perspectives

On the surface of things, the general picture indicates a high degree of consensus and even harmony among members of the single family household. Living in the house is a joint family project, where husband and wife live in overall agreement of how to use the house, how the different zones are identified, who does what where in the house, and considerable agreement on the atmospheres in the different part of the house. Behind the surface, however, statistics reveal high divorce rates, and possibly a lack of power balance among husband and wife. The home is to some extent to be regarded as a feminised space, and a recent newspaper article suggested that the number of males who leave because of female power in organising the home is increasing. While the home as a joint moral project is very much emphasised, the importance of gender differentiated spaces is still worth taking into consideration. Significantly, in the house of the couple who most elaborately articulated the house and home as a communal project of safety for the children, the man in the house had a hobby which was confined to the garage, where he spent a good part of his spare time. Too much communality may also represent a hazard to the harmony of the family. The material point towards further research in this direction.

It also points towards further investigation into the temporality of “being at home”. As indicated above, the high value attached to harmony and joint cultivation of family life in the home may be related to the time spent here as a scarce resource. Space seems to be highly valued at the expense of time. When following the immediate wishes expressed by people as in Jesper Bo Jensen's findings, wishes for the future are related to space exclusively. This may of course be due to the questions being asked, but the

findings in our material point towards the need for a deeper understanding of the whole cluster of spacetime. The use of space should not be analyzed separately from the use of time. When asking questions about people's ideals and wishes for the future, the effort must thus be to ask questions that include spacetime, as well as values in a broader sense. After all, more space with less time to enjoy it, as seems to be indicated so far, does not seem completely logical. So far, the space allotted to work at home, in most families is one office, often considered male space, and often a sort of liminal space, neither part of the home nor outside it, often used for storage and miscellaneous activities which are not really considered part of the good and cosy home life. This may of course change in the future, if more work, and in more and more flexible forms, is being moved to the home base.

Our material clearly shows that people do have both ideas and ideals about the good life in the house. The ideas are expressions of values in the sense of ideals that lead to practice, and practices on the other hand reveal ideals, also when not specifically explicated. When developing policies for single family housing in a wider perspective, how can these results be taken into consideration and applied in concrete building practices? If the research on wishes for the future, which was related in the beginning, is followed, new single family building should basically aim for more of the same (good) thing, i.e. more spacious rooms, more rooms altogether, and more bathrooms. On the other hand, when based on a practice oriented, holistic and interpretative approach to qualitative research data, which takes into account implicit values, tacit voices and unspoken ideas, what is needed is perhaps something different. A holistic spacetime vision of the parcel house and its social organisation may point in the direction of a whole different way of organising the entities that constitute a house. This would include a clearer distinction between communality and being-togetherness on the one hand and solitude on the one, and a better understanding of the collectivity that encompasses relations of a broader spectre than those covered by the nuclear family that inhabits the house. Both gender and generation are significant in this respect, and they interact in different intricate ways that may be further illuminated by looking at them as horizontal and vertical relations.

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