

Atrium-house: An exercise in self-analysis

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Abstract

Commenting on the “way ahead” in researching domestic space, Hanson has pointed to the importance of both “insider’s” and “outsider’s” views of home configuration. “Both views”, she observed, “are likely to be flawed, and so each can in principle inform the other”. In this paper, I present an exercise in which, say, “insider” and “outsider” are superimposed, in that the researcher is also a member of the family who inhabits the house, and also the designer of the building. In other words, at the same time that techniques are applied to *objectively* describe the configuration of the building, detailed data is available concerning how people label and re-label different bits of spaces on different occasions and, moreover, how they subjectively evaluate the performance of the building *vis-à-vis* their expectations.

The design of the house experiments with the millenary *atrium*. I attempt to understand the nature of the spatial code implied in this exercise, and perhaps the specific impact of the atrium in the configuration of the house, as compared with other examples of modern architecture, revealed by means of Space Syntax Theory. Of course, modern architects have also speculated with atrium houses. But it seems that this has not been dealt with specifically by syntactic literature. In this paper, I will compare data from this house with data from Hanson’s studies on modern architects houses, Amorim’s studies on houses designed by modern architects in the city of Recife, State of Pernambuco, Brazil, and some more recent and varied studies carried out on domestic space organisation in Brazil. On reflection, the point here is thus to try to understand what *code* I have adopted, in the face of such evidence. Is this house a *pernambucana* one? Is it *modern*? More generally, under a configurational point of view, is it really possible to speak of a *consistently modern paradigm in domestic space organisation*? The analysis will be carried out at two levels, and will deal with the relations between these: 1) the level of spatial configuration *per-se* and 2) the level of the activities in the house, concerning their deployment in space-time.

The study will use more traditional syntactic measures, such as integration, symmetry/asymmetry, distributedness/non-distributedness and difference factor, as well as explore more recent tools, by means of the depth-map. Visibility structure will be compared with permeability structure, to see the degree to which they converge or otherwise.

Keywords

domestic space,
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On the use side, activities will be mapped onto places, and the degree of “correspondence” will be characterised, i.e., the degree to which spaces are designated for specific and unambiguous categories of activities and/or people, or otherwise. In this sense, relations between the main “agents” in the house will be studied, by means of the study of the categories of gender, generation, owners, visitors and servants.

The use of the house since it was built (three years now) suggests some interesting hypotheses concerning the evaluation of the place. Again following Hanson’s warnings, I will comment on the difficulty of assessing a particular configuration – as far as ethical values are concerned –, *independently* of the mode of life of the people living there. Integration and visibility will constitute a key aspect at issue. It seems that the atrium, closely connected to the integration core, and also integrating, to a large degree, the social, the private and the service sectors of the house, implies “panopticom effects” that may be differently interpreted: authoritarian surveillance of some agents over others, or, on the contrary, easy access among people, enhancing the possibilities of exchanging opinions and experiences in the interior of the place, in a rather egalitarian micro social system? It will be the hypothesis in this paper that this house, with *the people* using it, clearly implies *one* of these alternatives. The curiosity of the reader concerning which alternative I am talking about will have to wait until the full paper is available.

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