Chapter 4
New Domestic Rituals: Note on Design Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the relationship between design and anthropology and investigates the way in which social actors shape their domestic life and spaces through objectivation and resignification, using designed objects to convey a meaning to their everyday experience. Firstly, the paper discusses the role of domestic rituals and artifacts, providing specific examples and materials directly concerned with ethnographic research in domesticity (Miller, Appadurai, Gunn, etc.) so as to highlight the anthropological contribution in design studies. Following the first survey, the text presents some results of a field research in Italy (Siena, Venice), conducted with the aim of analyzing the effects of beliefs and practices on design and the function and value of contemporary objects in domestic rituals.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyse domestic space from an anthropological perspective. It focuses on several aspects in particular: the organization of the lived spaces of social actors, the role that objects and material culture play in the definition of identity and places, the new domestic rituals which affect the perception of private spaces, and the use of the new media in domestic intimacy.

The first part of this paper provides an initial explanation of the subject with a presentation of anthropological studies on the concept of home, taking into consideration the most important and influential contributions from other social sciences (i.e. semiotic and design studies). This research pays particular attention to the role that the home plays as a socio-cultural venue, crucial for the definition of the individual identities of social actors, as well as the relationship between relatives and friends and the definition of lifestyles and aesthetic taste.

There follows the real core of the present work, which highlights the relationship between people, objects and spaces by identifying the importance of the design phase as a way to understanding lifestyles, aspirations and the imagination processes of social actors.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0666-9.ch004
This idea is supported by two case studies developed in Siena and Venice, concerning the Sienese middle class home and art exposition in private homes in Venice. Both cases are supported by the extensive use of information technologies and new media that allow them to be placed within a global society.

In conclusion, this paper aims to show the close relationship between anthropology and design. In this inter-disciplinary approach, anthropology allows us to analyse the construction practices of the domestic space as well as intense non-professional planning.

**HOME STUDIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In anthropology, great importance has been given to studies on the home over the last decades. There are several classic studies on these themes, from Henry Lewis Morgan on the native American home (1881), to Pierre Bourdieu’s crucial studies on the Kabyle house (1972) and taste (1984). Such contributions have inspired the most important studies on the home, as Heather A. Horst says:

*Bourdieu’s formulation of the habitus and social practice in shaping taste and aesthetics in French homes and Moore’s analysis of the ways in which gender is structured and restructured in domestic space through practice represent seminal work on the ways which gender and other forms of difference become inscribed and reinscribed in domestic space* (Horst, 2012, p. 61).

Nevertheless, it is only in the last ten years that the home has become a constant matter of ethno-graphic interest and concern for anthropologists. This attention comes essentially from material culture and consumption studies and, in some cases, from semiotic studies and from the Annales School. These studies are mainly based on two different schools of thought: French and Anglo-Saxon. The former focuses on symbolic aspects and material culture (Bourdieu, 1979; Dassié, 2009; Paggi, 2015), and on the transfer of objects (Bonnin, Perrot, 1989; Segalen, Bekus, 1990). These studies have been strongly influenced by the anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1965), by the Annales School (Braudel, 1979) and by Jean Baudrillard’s (1968) semiotic approach to objects.

Céline Rosselin, for instance, studied the organization and the evolution of the hall:

*In Western domestic architecture the hall was originally designed to be the main room of the house and the showcase of the residents’ wealth. However, in nineteenth-century apartment buildings for the middle classes the size of the hall was reduced and its function changed into a distributing one: giving entrance to the various rooms of the apartment. The changed morphology of the hall is not a result simply of the formal separation of rooms, but more so of the nineteenth-century urban split between the private and the public domains. The hall became the intermediate zone to protect the privacy of the residents. Nowadays, the hall is defined as an adjacent space to the entrance door; beyond this zone, the visitor is no longer in the hall and is already in another area, either an intermediary zone or a proper room, usually the living room* (Rosselin, 1999, p. 54).

Philippe Bonnin and Matyne Perrot (1987) studied the use of the kitchen as a welcoming room in rural France. Sophie Chevalier studied different organizations of domestic space in England and in France (1999; 2011). There are also more classic ethnographic studies such as Leroi-Gourhan’s contributions about Japan (2004), Laurent Monnier’s and Yvan Droz’s research on the African home (2004) and
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