



LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS
MODOS DE HABITAR

ABADA EDITORES

LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD
GRANADA, 23-25 ENERO 2019



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La Casa. Espacios domésticos, modos de habitar
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Presentación	XIX
Juan Calatrava	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 1

**Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico
a través de la historia**

Lo público y lo privado en la forma urbis de Santiago 1910. El espacio doméstico en el Canon Republicano	22
Josep Parcerisa Bundó, José Rosas Vera	
La Alhambra habitada. Experiencias del paisaje desde el espacio arquitectónico..	37
Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga	
Housing and Children: Architectural Models from the Modern Movement	48
Alexandra Alegre	
Högná Sigurðardóttir. La misteriosa marca indeleble del origen	59
Julio Barreno Gutiérrez	
Las casillas de peones camineros y su implantación en la costa del sudeste de España	73
Antonio Burgos Núñez, Juan Carlos Olmo García, Francisco José García Castillo	
El <i>palazzo all'italiana</i>, de la casa del príncipe al principio urbano	82
Michele Giovanni Caja, Maria Pompeiana Iarossi	
The City and the House: Going Back to the Future	95
Antonio Alberto Clemente	
Traditional Urban Housing at Alentejo's "Marble Area"	104
Ana Costa Rosado	
La consolidación del cuarto de baño en las viviendas de la ciudad de São Paulo, Brasil	117
Clarissa de Almeida Paulillo, Tatiana Sakurai	
La cama <i>amueblada</i>: del objeto a la estancia	126
María de Miguel Pastor, Carla Sentieri Omarrementería	

The Spaces, the People and the Ways of Being at Home in the North of Portugal in the 19th Century	136
Alexandra Esteves	
Casa de John Soane en Londres (1792-1827). Luz, iluminación y patrimonio	143
Rosalía Fenutría Aumesquet, José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
Rita Fernández Queimadelos. Los proyectos de viviendas realizados en la DGRD (1943-1946)	154
Paula M. Fernández-Gago Longueira, Eduardo A. Caridad Yáñez	
Arqueología urbana en Barcelona: aproximación a los espacios domésticos entre los siglos IV-VI	167
Francesc Xavier Florensa Puchol	
Memoria e identidad: el espacio de almacenaje en el imaginario doméstico	178
Marta García Carbonero	
Between Doorkeeper Apartments and Housemaid Rooms: Ways of Living in a Changing Lisbon	188
María Assunção Gato, Filipa Ramalhete	
La casa popular de zaguán, patio y corral. Habitabilidad y protección para el siglo XXI	196
Vidal Gómez Martínez, Blanca del Espino Hidalgo, María Teresa Pérez Cano	
Casa en transformación: cocina y tecnología en el siglo XX en Cuenca (Ecuador)	206
María Augusta Hermida, María José Cañar, Guillermo Mauricio Torres	
Granada: la arquitectura doméstica de la ciudad cristiana	218
Carlos Jerez Mir	
Consideraciones históricas sobre la casa tradicional gallega y otras construcciones adjetivas	230
Francisco Xabier Louzao Martínez	
Modern, Rationalist and Mediterranean: Residential Architecture during the Italian Colonization in Libya	236
Andrea Maglio	
El confort en la vivienda canaria: de la arquitectura tradicional a los EECN	250
Eduardo Martín del Toro	
Instalaciones de la casa: el espacio doméstico en el siglo XX en España a través de la tecnología	261
César Martín-Gómez, José Manuel Pozo Municio	
El diedro casa ciudad en la arquitectura nobiliaria de Sevilla: la plaza del Duque	272
Pedro Mena Vega	
Un primer acercamiento a la <i>Quinta Nova da Assunção</i> en Sintra	282
Iván Moure Pazos	

The Construction of “Minho’s” Domestic Space in Portugal’s 18th Century.....	294
Flávia Oliveira	
Arquitectura moderna en la ciudad histórica. Adalberto Libera y la casa Nicoletti (Roma 1932).....	302
Carlos Plaza	
Casa Bellia en Turín: nuevos espacios para la burguesía.....	315
Alice Pozzati	
Live-Work Architecture. Learning from Peripheral Neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro.....	327
Ana Slade	
The Relationship Between Inhabitants and Vegetation in the Houses of Maceió in the 19th.....	339
Tharcila Maria Soares Leão, Josemary Omena Passos Ferrare, Veronica Robalinho Cavalcanti	
The Home and the World: Domestic Dynamics of the Postwar American Suburban House.....	350
Luísa Sol	
El hogar de Telva. Miradas femeninas al interior doméstico español 1963-1975.....	360
Jorge Tárrago Mingo, Cristina Sunga Zamora	
La casa jesuita en Granada: el Colegio de San Pablo.....	371
María del Carmen Vílchez Lara, Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez	
La habitación en la arquitectura agraria granadina.....	381
Eduardo Zurita Povedano	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 2

El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

Habitar el arte: la casa del coleccionista como modelo experimental de espacio doméstico.....	394
Ángeles Layuno	
Domesticidad Mediterránea vs. Modernidad americana de Posguerra. Sert y Rudofsky.....	411
Mar Loren-Méndez	
Tradiciones en las políticas de vivienda pública.....	422
Josep Maria Montaner Martorell	

De la Weissenhoff a Oporto, un camino de servicio	430
José Manuel Pozo Municio	
Le Corbusier's <i>Immeuble-villas</i> and an After Lunch Remembrance	441
Marta Sequeira	
Le Corbusier. <i>Une science de logis</i>	454
Jorge Torres Cueco	
La casa productiva. Propuestas para la autosuficiencia alimentaria durante la República de Weimar	470
David Arredondo Garrido	
<i>Modernità y mediterraneità: sincretismo habitacional de Luigi Figini y Gino Pollini</i>	482
Emilio Cachorro Fernández, Cristina Medina Valverde	
El <i>piano Fanfani</i> en Roma: la torre de viviendas y la casa patio	496
Ana del Cid Mendoza	
Feet on the Sand: Living Spaces in Apartment Buildings by the Sea in Maceió, Brazil	510
Camila Antunes de Carvalho Casado, Maria Angélica da Silva	
Atomic-age Housing. The Fallout Shelter in Cold War America	521
Chiara Baglione	
De la manzana a la supermanzana. Recuperación e innovación en la cultura urbanística	531
Raimundo Bambó Naya, Javier Monclús Fraga	
La ventana y el balcón sobre avenida Providencia (1931/1981): evolución y permanencia de la arquitectura doméstica	544
Pedro Bannen Lanata	
Towards the Modern Block: Evolution of an Urban Type in Kay Fisker's Prewar Architecture	554
Guia Baratelli	
La casa en Isle of Wight (1955-1956) de James Gowan, austeridad en la modernidad británica	566
Alicia Cantabella Gallego	
<i>Villeggiatura</i> urbana: una residencia secundaria en el núcleo urbano de São Paulo	576
Sara Caon	
Otredades en la habitabilidad de un Monterrey moderno: primeros edificios de departamentos como alternativa a la vivienda unifamiliar	586
María de los Ángeles Castillo Soriano, Alberto Canavati Espinosa	
Brutalismo doméstico. Un espacio para la contemplación	597
Rubens Cortés Cano	

La Casa Barata dos Santos como experimento, por Nuno Portas y Nuno Teotónio (1958-1962)	608
Mª Ángeles Domínguez Durán	
Exploraciones cartográficas comparadas de paisajes residenciales: polígonos vs periferias ordinarias	620
Isabel Ezquerro, Carmen Díez-Medina	
The House as Experiment: House in Sesimbra (1960-64) by Portas and Teotónio Pereira	634
Hugo L. Farias	
La piedra en la casa moderna	645
María Ana Ferré Aydos	
Las casas unifamiliares no construidas del programa <i>Case Study Houses</i>	657
Pauline Fonini Felin	
Modern Housing and Duplex Apartments: Study of Discourses and Practices of a Typology	670
Sabrina Fontenele	
Polígonos de vivienda. Relevancia del diagnóstico en la regeneración urbana de espacios libres	681
Sergio García-Pérez, Javier Monclús, Carmen Díez Medina	
A City of Order: on Piccinato's Ataköy	692
Esen Gökçe Özdamar	
Paisaje y ciudad en las viviendas de la Universidad Laboral de Almería	702
José Ramón González González	
La imagen de arquitectura en la construcción del subconsciente colectivo	713
Carlos Gor Gómez	
Prácticas Concretas	725
Pablo Jesús Gutiérrez Calderón	
Tropical and Colonial: Single Houses as a Modern Lab in Angola and Mozambique (1950-1970)	737
Ana Magalhães	
Casa y Monumento: Roma habitada	748
Sergio Martín Blas, Milena Farina	
Las viviendas para empleados realizadas por las grandes empresas en la España de la posguerra	760
Miriam Martín Díaz, Enrique Castaño Perea	
Lecciones de Louis Kahn: la sala y la casa en Rogelio Salmons y Livio Vacchini ...	771
Clara E. Mejía Vallejo, Ricardo Merí de la Maza	

Interior Biopolitics—Domesticity as Mass Media in the Making of Swedish Social Democracy	783
Carlota Mir	
El arte de lo doméstico. Las casas de Alison y Peter Smithson	795
Carmen Moreno Álvarez, Juan Domingo Santos	
La vivienda colectiva como reactivador de hechos de vida urbana	806
Sebastián Navarrete Michelini	
The Façade as an Interface in the Housing Architecture of Rio de Janeiro: Design Repertoire	819
Mara Oliveira Eskinazi, Pedro Engel Penter	
Manuel Gomes da Costa. La casa algarvia del arquitecto	831
José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
A Wealth of Typological Solutions from the Twenties: Vienna and Frankfurt	842
Alessandro Porotto	
Un pueblo entre los muros de un cortijo	856
Ana Isabel Rodríguez Aguilera	
This House Is Not a Home	872
Ugo Rossi	
Los dibujos de Rafael Leoz sobre vivienda social	883
Jose Antonio Ruiz Suaña, Jesús López Díaz	
La calle sube al edificio. Vivienda en galería en Madrid, 1949-1956	897
María del Pilar Salazar Lozano	
Casas como células. La metáfora biológica y los nuevos hábitats plásticos, 1955-73	908
Massimiliano Savorra	
El hogar que envejece	918
Marta Silveira Peixoto	
Repetition and Geometry: The House of the Painter Zigaina Designed by Giancarlo De Carlo	928
Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta	
Plinio Marconi's Public Housing Projects between Innovation and Historical Continuity	938
Simona Talenti, Annarita Teodosio	
Casas patio y bloques: las formas de la vivienda para la ciudad moderna, Arica 1953-73	949
Horacio Enrique Torrent Schneider	

Doméstico y prefabricado: vivienda unifamiliar en Collado Mediano de Alejandro de la Sota	961
Miguel Varela de Ugarte	
Modern Living: Particularities in Rio de Janeiro	971
Denise Vianna Nunes	
Equipando la casa moderna. España, 1927-1936	982
María Villanueva Fernández, Héctor García-Diego Villarías	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 3

La vivienda contemporánea desde el punto de vista patrimonial

Un carmen en el barrio del Realejo de Granada	997
Ricardo Hernández Soriano	
T y Block House, dos viviendas en Nueva York	1007
Antonio Álvarez Gil	
Experimentos de casas en el paisaje. Lo cotidiano y lo sublime	1020
Rafael de Lacour	
Cooperativas vecinales para la recuperación patrimonial de barriadas. Sixto (Málaga)	1031
Alberto E. García-Moreno, María José Márquez-Ballesteros, Manuel García-López	
Domesticidades del proyecto social del Régimen a través de los poblados de Bárcena (León)	1043
Jorge Magaz Molina	
La casa como memoria viva: injertos domésticos en ruinas vernáculas	1055
David Ordóñez Castañón, Jesús de los Ojos Moral	
PAX – Patios de la Axerquía. Rehabilitación urbana y de casas-patio con procesos cooperativos	1068
Gaia Redaelli	
La casa contemporánea en el cine: estrategia de difusión y promoción del patrimonio cultural	1080
Iván Rincón Borrego, Eusebio Alonso García	
Rehabitar después de Habitar	1092
Conceição Trigueiros, Mario Saleiro Filho	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 4
La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar

Notas sobre la casa como jardín.....	1104
Xavier Monteys	
Interiores de exteriores. La otra raíz del habitar.....	1116
José Morales Sánchez	
Género y modos de habitar en la Andalucía del siglo XIX.....	1127
Juan Manuel Barrios Rozúa	
La casa veneciana, desde fuera.....	1139
Francisco A. García Pérez	
Muerte de la ciudad y desintegración de lo urbano. La casa como refugio.....	1151
Juan Carlos Reina Fernández	
The Home and Its Transformations in the Daily Life of a Brazilian Social Housing Complex.....	1164
Fernanda Andrade dos Santos, Eda Maria Góes	
El jardín secreto de Luis Barragán.....	1177
Paloma Baquero Masats, Juan Antonio Serrano García	
A «Part of Sky and a Part of Sea, Even Alone»: Luigi Moretti Villas.....	1189
Gemma Belli	
La cocina como principal motor de cambio en la vivienda moderna y contemporánea.....	1199
Juan Bravo Bravo	
Casa contra arquitectura, Bernard Rudofsky y el “arte de habitar”.....	1212
Alejandro Campos Uribe, Paula Lacomba Montes	
El espacio doméstico en las exposiciones: nuevos conceptos durante la 2ª mitad del s. XX.....	1224
Manuel Carmona García	
La cocina-moderna en la vivienda colectiva española de la primera mitad del siglo XX.....	1236
María Carreiro Otero, Cándido López González	
Espacios de sombra y aire, transiciones en la arquitectura mediterránea.....	1248
Antonio Cayuelas Porras	

Habitar los hospitales: el bienestar más allá del confort	1259
Pilar Chías Navarro, Tomás Abad Balboa	
La cocina genérica: del marco físico a la atmósfera esencial	1272
José Antonio Costela Mellado, Luis Eduardo Iáñez García	
The House of Silence: The Franciscan Dwellings in the Colonial Convents of the North-East of Brazil	1282
Maria Angélica da Silva	
Arquitectura y jardín en la vivienda doméstica española del movimiento moderno	1294
Manuel de Lara Ruiz, Carlos Pesqueira Calvo	
The Italian House vs The American House. Decoration and Life-Style in the 50's...	1309
Elena Dellapiana	
Casas de vidrio – 1950: análisis de cuatro ejemplos coetáneos	1321
Ana Esteban Maluenda, Héctor Navarro Martínez	
Microarquitecturas a medida. Experiencia de arquitectura social	1330
Antonella Falzetti	
The Made-to-Measure House: From an Ideal Home to a Palace Between the 19th and 21st Centuries	1341
Maria Teresa Feraboli	
Holiday Houses in Italy in the 1930s	1351
Adele Fiadino	
Habitar la materia: apilar Cerdeña. Casa de vacaciones en Arzachena, Marco Zanuso	1361
Mario Galiana Liras, Miguel A. Alonso del Val	
1978. La Gran Casa, o sobre el interior en la obra de Enric Miralles	1372
Carolina B. García Estévez	
Donde termina la casa y empieza el cielo	1384
Ubaldo García Torrente	
Green Housing Dream. From Welfare Equality to Deregulation and Desire: Understeshöjden, 1989	1397
Andrea Gimeno Sánchez	
The “Medieval House” of Coimbra: Archeology of Architecture in the Demystification of Archetypes	1407
António Ginja	
La casa de luz tenue. A propósito de Alvar Aalto, Luis Barragán y Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas	1418
José Miguel Gómez Acosta	

Un análisis de la casa excavada-subterránea basado en la Sintaxis Espacial.....	1428
Antonio J. Gómez-Blanco Pontes	
King's Foundation: House, Power and Modernity in King Manuel I's inventory (1522-25).....	1440
Luís Gonçalves Ferreira	
“Raumplan-dwellings”: domesticidad y espacio en proyectos de Sejima-SANAA..	1449
Aida González Llavona	
La casa moderna en Cereté, una lección patrimonial.....	1461
Massimo Leserrí, Merwan Chaverra Suárez	
When a Big House Opens Its Doors: The São Marcos Hospital in Braga (17th-18thCenturies).....	1471
Maria Marta Lobo de Araújo	
El mito de la casa pompeyana entre los siglos XIX y XX.....	1478
Fabio Mangone, Raffaella Russo Spina	
Tiendas de campaña en Marte.....	1493
Josemaría Manzano-Jurado, Santiago Porras Álvarez, Rafael García Quesada	
La casa patio tradicional de la medina marroquí.....	1506
Miguel Martínez-Monedero, Jaime Vergara-Muñoz	
La forma tectónica de la casa: lo ontológico frente a lo representacional.....	1518
Alejandro Muñoz Miranda	
Habitar el cerro: la casa del arquitecto Bruno Violi en Bogotá.....	1530
Serena Orlandi	
Comida a domicilio.....	1541
Nuria Ortigosa Duarte	
Domestic Topographies: The House of Lino Gaspar, Caxias, 1953-1955.....	1551
Maria Rita Pais	
La ritualidad higiénica como domesticación espacial en el arte contemporáneo....	1563
José Luis Panea Fernández	
The Housing General Histories and Classes in Literature.....	1572
Fabrizio Paone	
“Paraísos” en el armario: homosexualidad y negociación doméstica en la California prebélica.....	1587
José Parra-Martínez, María-Elia Gutiérrez-Mozo, Ana-Covadonga Gilsanz-Díaz	

Profundidad espacial. Abriendo el muro. De la habitación sin nombre al jardín de invierno.....	1599
Marta Pérez Rodríguez	
Rooms. Aldo Rossi and the House in Ghiffa: Symbol, Dust and Desire.....	1609
Michelangelo Pivetta, Vincenzo Moschetti	
La colina habitada: características morfológicas y modos de habitar el campo.....	1620
Luigi Ramazzotti	
El <i>studiolo</i> como teatro de la mente.....	1632
Jaime Ramos Alderete, Ana Isabel Santolaria Castellanos	
Modos de habitar en contexto de montaña: la región oriental del Atlas en Marruecos.....	1641
Miguel Reimão Costa, Desidério Batista	
La casa en Santiago de Chile a fines del siglo XVIII: valores materiales y simbólicos.....	1652
Marisol Richter Scheuch	
Hombres de condición inquieta y despegada: el fascinante espectáculo de la precariedad.....	1660
Carmen Rodríguez Pedret	
Maid Rooms and Laundry Sinks Matter: Modern Houses in a Non-modern Context.....	1671
Silvana Rubino	
Inquietante domesticidad.....	1679
Alberto Rubio Garrido	
Houses for Whom? Between the Habitat and the Inhabiting, on Henri Lefebvre's Quest.....	1688
Teresa V. Sá	
Una casa es una «machine de l'émotion».....	1698
Javier Sáez Gastearena	
Espacio doméstico e higiene. Políticas del habitar en Sevilla entre los siglos XIX y XX.....	1710
Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez	
La vivienda de los fareros, entre la casa y la máquina.....	1720
Santiago Sánchez Beitia, Fernando Acale Sánchez	
Naturalezas en la intimidad; acerca del jardín en los espacios domésticos contemporáneos.....	1732
Juana Sánchez Gómez, Diego Jiménez López, Isabel Jiménez López	
Cármenes, pequeñas historias domésticas.....	1743
Juan Antonio Sánchez Muñoz, Vincent Morales Garoffolo	

Algunas casas modernas: de la caverna al hogar	1755
Rafael Sánchez Sánchez	
Recuerdos de una escalera. Experiencias domésticas desplazadas en la obra de Siza	1764
Juan Antonio Serrano García	
¿No habitar es modo de habitar? Siglos de permanencia de mitos y criminalización	1778
Sonia María Taddei Ferraz, Evelyn Garcia da Cruz, Paula Andréa Santos da Silva	
Tres modos de habitar la casa popular: cereal, vid y olivar	1787
Salvador Ubago Palma	
La expresividad de la racionalidad: La casa estudio para Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo	1800
Luis Villarreal Ugarte	
Habitar en Iberoamérica	1811
Graciela María Viñuales	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 5

Miradas externas: la casa en la pintura, el cine y la literatura

Habitar la aventura: casas de Jules Verne	1824
Juan Calatrava Escobar	
Casas vacías, olvidadas y recordadas: arte, literatura y memoria	1836
Marta Llorente Díaz	
La villa Arpel: machine à habiter, “donde todo se comunica...” (Mon Oncle, J. Tati, 1958)	1850
Antonio Pizza de Nanno	
El relato doméstico desde una estrategia vertical	1855
Agustín Gor Gómez	
Fondos de escena en el cine de Ozu	1868
Carlos Barberá Pastor	
Habitar tras la Transición: los hogares cinematográficos de P. Almodóvar y A. Gómez	1879
Ruth Barranco Raimundo	
Espacios domésticos en transición y la ciudad moderna en Ohayo (1959) de Yasujiro Ozu	1888
Bernardita M. Cubillos Muñoz	

La casa Stahl, una vida de ficción	1898
Daniel Díez Martínez	
Habitaciones para la escritura: el autor y su espacio de trabajo	1909
Tomás García Píriz, F. Javier Castellano Pulido	
Ámbitos privados de la residencia colectiva en el imaginario cinematográfico español	1920
Josefina González Cubero, Alba Zarza Arribas	
Los registros de la luz. Vermeer y Hopper	1929
Luis Eduardo Jáñez García	
Allí reside el tiempo, mi infancia. La cabaña telúrica de Andréi Tarkovski	1940
Alejandro Infantes Pérez, Javier Muñoz Godino	
La casa, la calle y el territorio. Narraciones fotográficas de Guido Guidi	1951
Marco Lecis	
Entre la literatura y el cine. La casa de Sokúrov en <i>El segundo círculo</i>	1961
Pablo López Santana	
Habitar un espacio, contemplar un paisaje: mujer, jardín y arquitectura doméstica en China (desde el siglo X hasta el XVIII)	1972
Antonio Mezcu López	
Registro de una mirada, Cape Cod House	1981
Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez, María del Carmen Vílchez Lara	
La casa como metáfora del viaje. Fotógrafos y arquitectos en Mallorca	1993
Maria Josep Mulet Gutiérrez, Joan Carles Oliver Torelló, María Sebastián Sebastián	
La mirada indiscreta: la ventana en el cine como generador de emociones	2004
Patricia Pozo Alemán	
El telar es el cuerpo, el cuerpo es la casa	2016
Anita Puig Gómez	
El espacio doméstico en el cine de Jacques Tati: del bloque tradicional a la vivienda sobre ruedas	2024
Helia de San Nicolás Juárez	
Fisonomías arquitectónicas. La mediatización de casas de personalidades en Galicia	2034
Jesús Ángel Sánchez-García	
Mujeres y jardines en la China clásica: espacios domésticos en <i>Sueño en el Pabellón Rojo</i>	2046
Beatriz Valverde Vázquez	
Notas autobiográficas de los autores	2054

La casa y el mundo: dinámicas domésticas de la casa suburbana estadounidense de la posguerra

The Home and the World: Domestic Dynamics of the Postwar American Suburban House

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Resumen

Teniendo en cuenta el concepto de Unhomely de Homi K. Bhabha en *The Home and the World* (1992), aquí se revisará el fenómeno doméstico de la casa suburbana que surgió en los Estados Unidos de América en los años cincuenta, en el auge de la era postindustrial.

El éxodo de la clase media estadounidense a la periferia durante los años cincuenta y sesenta, su dinámica y relación de la vida suburbana con la ciudad coincidirá con la difusión de este nuevo elemento doméstico: la televisión. La difusión de la periferia estadounidense y de la televisión son simultáneas y se han influenciado mutuamente. Ambas expandieron la efectividad de las prácticas sociales y las fantasías culturales de la clase suburbana emergente. Teniendo en cuenta el surgimiento de la era postindustrial y el inicio de la posmodernidad, este paper analizará la casa suburbana y sus dinámicas domésticas a través de imágenes de televisión.

Palabras clave: casa suburbana estadounidense, postindustrial, posmodernidad, televisión, la casa y el mundo

Bloque temático: Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio domestico a través de la historia

Abstract

Taking into account the concept of Unhomely by Homi K. Bhabha in The Home and the World (1992), this paper will review the domestic phenomenon of the suburban house that emerged in the United States of America in the fifties, on the rise of the post-industrial era. The exodus of the American middle class to the periphery during the fifties and sixties, its dynamics and relation of the suburban life with the city will have coincided with the spread of this new domestic element - the television.

The spread of the american periphery and the television are simultaneous and mutually influenced by each other. Both expanded the effectiveness of social practices and cultural fantasies of the emerging suburban class. Bearing in mind the rise of the post-industrial era and the beginning of postmodernity this paper will analyse the suburban house and its domestic dynamics through television pictures.

Keywords: American suburban house, post-industrial, postmodernity, television, the home and the world

Topic: Architectures of the house: domestic space throughout history

Television and suburbs are both engineered spaces, designed and planned by people who are engaged in giving material reality to wider cultural belief systems. In addition, media and suburbs are sites where meanings are produced and created; they are spaces (whether material or electronic) in which people make sense of their social relationship to each other, their communities, their nation, and the world at large.¹

The American postwar period has witnessed the emergence of a massive built periphery simultaneously with the spread of the Television. Lynn Spiegel points out that the American standardization of the suburbs, and Television, both constitute spaces that create and produce meanings concerning to the relation of the domestic with the community and the world. The increase of visual permeability provided by the the application of some principles of modernist architecture. Such as the wide sliding window, the reduction of distances caused by the banalization of automobile use, the integration of television and in domestic life and the increasingly blurred relations of proximity / distance, inside / outside, made the suburban home and its dynamics a clear example of *The World in the Home*.

Both, the television and the suburb, have influenced mutually each other and had spread at the same time. Capital, industrial, geopolitical, and territorial prosperity have emerged the United States of America into the bounty, success, and ascendant power that outlined the entire American Twentieth Century;

After all, this has been the 'American Century' [...] This is the century in which America, the young giant, became the mightiest nation on earth [...] This is the century in which she became the richest nation in all of history, with a wealth that reached down to every level of the population.²

The working housing class expanded in the city centers, in thirty, forty or fifty floors, gaining space in height, while lots of houses all alike spread out over the peripheries. The Modernist Architecture has been confined to cities and institutional buildings, while the post-war suburban villa became the *ex-libris* of the American Dream:

They were called public housing projects. But somehow the workers [...] managed to avoid public housing. [...] [and] headed out instead to the suburbs. They ended up in places like Islip, Long Island, and the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, and they bought houses with pitched roofs and shingles and clapboard siding, with no structure expressed if there was any way around it, with gaslight-style front-porch lamps and mailboxes set up on lenghts of stiffened chain that seemed to defy gravity.³

The exodus of the middle class towards the outer city limits represented a conquest based on mobility, powered by the automobile and motorways, and based on the expansionist idea of unlimited territory - the ever-surpassable and transposable *frontier* - where, supposedly, is located the *Promised Land*.

Moving in to the suburbs was a closest representation of what the Declaration of Independence proposed when it enacted the "Right to Freedom and the pursuit of Happiness" as the inalienable rights of the American citizen. The North American periphery thus constituted the materialization of

¹ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse. Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 15.

² Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to our House*, 52.

³ Wolfe, *From Bauhaus...*, 53-54.

a "post-city" (or what is after the limits of the city) that concentrated in itself, potentially, the best of these both dimensions, and, therefore, the realization of the promise to live in the "America" project.

James Brown's "Living in America" music video (1985) is a celebration of how easily distances are overcome - "*Super Highways, coast to coast, easy to get anywhere*" and the fruitful opportunity to the unlimited freedom to cross the territory in search of Happiness and the Promised Land, but above all the potential possibility of finding them (Happiness and the Promised Land) on the way:

Living in America – eye to eye, station to station
Living in America – hand to hand, across the nation
Living in America – got to have a celebration
I live in America, help me out,
But I live in America, wait a minute
You may not be looking for the promise land,
But you might find it anyway.

There is an excess - of speed, of information, of brilliance and of exuberance - inherent in this video that reflects the life style full of optimism that prevails in this decade: «American pursuit of happiness degenerated into an obsessive pursuit of pleasure, both indulgent experiences and beautiful things».⁴ The continuous and intermittent sequence of consumption, optimism, and the various glimpses of activities in the tertiary sector recall what Jameson describes as the paradigm shift in the information, markets, and culture of the new and emerging type of society most famously baptized post-industrial society «(Daniel Bell) but often also designated consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech, and the like».⁵

In "Living in America", which simultaneously illustrates status, social ancestry and power, aspects that were increasingly projected in the aura of the celebrities of this decade, are based on the binomial of materialism / consumerism, fomented also by Reagan's speech. Troy reports that:

Considered America's oldest yuppie, his call for capitalist renewal fostered the money-media culture. His celebrity politics resonated with a society obsessed with 'The Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous'. His easy-listening nationalism gave a communal and even idealistic veneer to individualist, consumerist excess. Delighting in the four million new jobs created in 1983, toasting the trailblazers mastering computers and other modern miracles, Reagan would summarize the year's accomplishments in his January 1984 State of the Union Address, saying: "Hope is reborn for couples dreaming of owning homes and for risk takers with vision to create tomorrow's opportunities".⁶

Through a "modern", comfortable, house-with-garden and large-garage-for-one-large-car lifestyle, the suburb represents a bittersweet reconstruction of domesticity. On one hand this emphasizes the fulfillment of ambitions and its ostentation, on the other hand gives a new impetus and meaning

⁴ Gil Troy, *Morning in America – How Ronald Reagan Reinvented the 80's* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 119.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London-New York: Verso, 2008), 3.

⁶ Troy, *Morning in...*, 120.

to consumer culture and masses. In addition to this search for belonging, identity and meaning, the average American middle-class individual faced the possibility of becoming an owner:

By purchasing their detached suburban homes, the young couples of the middle class participated in the construction of a new community of values; in magazines, in films, and on the airwaves they became the cultural representatives of the “good life”.⁷

The North American periphery, emerged in the 1950s, is based on the dilution of the boundaries between public-private, proximity-distance, domestic-urban. The American middle class found a harmonious middle ground in the massive configuration of tree-lined streets, delimited by single-family houses, all with the same type and configuration, with a garden, a barbecue and a garage.

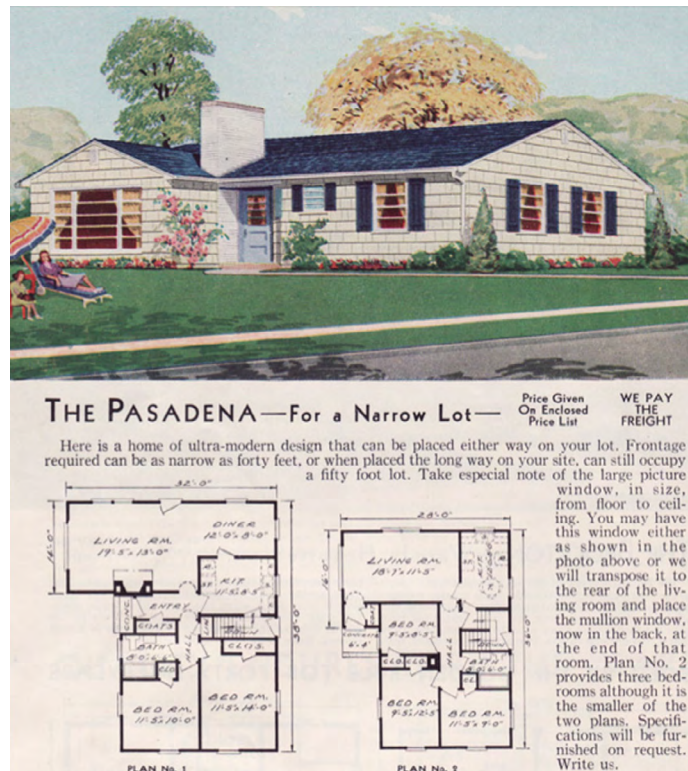


Figure 1: “The Pasadena”, 50’s North American suburban house-type

Source: *Mid Century Home Style*, consulted on January, 30, 2014
<http://www.midcenturyhomestyle.com/plans/aladdin/1951/51aladdin-pasadena.htm>

Beyond the establishment of a comfortable relationship of proximity-distance with the city, with the neighborhood, and with the world, the suburb carries in itself the idea of an infinite space, reproduced in single-family houses designed and mass-produced, in an illusory personalization of the domestic space.

Michelangelo Antonioni dealt with this standardization and subsequent commodification of the house-space in his 1970’s film, *Zabriskie Point*. The process of appropriating the Los Angeles desert by a megalomaniac project for urbanization is the backdrop to a documentary based on the

⁷ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 32.

late 1960's American counterculture. The massive and random deployment of a housing complex in the middle of the desert, stuffed with the small luxuries that attracted the petty bourgeoisie, alludes to a kind of colonization / conquest of the wild and infinite space by a Financial Group that manufactures and sells a Promised and Plastic Earth:

- Enjoy the full relaxation of outdoor living, in the desert sun by your own private pool. Why be caught in the red race of city life, when you could enjoy life sunny dunes way? Breathe the unpolluted air of the high desert, take your sun a quail shooting in the wide open spaces. Get out in the sun and water your own private garden.
- You girls will really enjoy the fully equipped sunny dunes kitchen.
- Stop driving yourself in that miserable crowded city. Move out today and start over with the Sunny Dunes House in the sun.⁸

Bhabha would associate, in the postcolonial period, the dilution of the boundary between the *Home* space and the *World* space to the feeling of an imminent vulnerability, which transforms what is supposedly familiar in dubious. Tangent and prior to the period in which Bhabha focuses, the emergent and hybrid suburban space - situated between the city and "what comes next" - is thus a de-territorialized, rootless, standardized and normalized space where this search for a Home space is precisely based on turning the uncertain into something familiar.

The configuration of everyday life in a single-family detached house evokes a genre of privacy that a block of flats does not offer. At the same time, it encourages the construction of a healthy life within the community, where ideally the community itself appears as the collective emancipation of a certain homogeneous socio-economic, age and racial range, with very specific intentions and objectives, as «... the central preoccupation in the new suburban culture was the construction of a particular discursive space through which the family could mediate the contradictory impulses for a private heaven on the one hand, and community participation on the other».⁹

The public-private dichotomy is mixed, and the hybridity of being-in-between allows us to be simultaneously far enough and close to everything. It is in this context that this architecture of the peripheral housing ends up defining a very specific type of domesticity: «the domestic architecture of the period mediated the twin goals of separation from and integration into the outside world».¹⁰

It was the enforcement modernist architecture principles, such as the dilution of boundaries between interior and exterior space, that became one of the underlying premises in the conception and mass production of the houses that propagated in peripheral America. The contamination of the inside by the outside and vice versa is provided, in part, by large sliding windows, which also emphasized the modernity of these houses. The suppression of the boundary between the inside and the outside has emphasized the ambiguity between the public and the private, between the domestic and the community, which so clearly defines the lifestyle on the American periphery.

The fluid frontier between the living room and the garden becomes part of the typology of the suburban house, where the exterior becomes an extension of the house. Lynn Spigel says that «by

⁸ Michelangelo Antonioni, *Zabrieskie Point*. (MGM, 1970) 110 min.

⁹ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 32.

¹⁰ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 32.

far, the central design element used to create an illusion of the outside world was the picture window or 'window wall' (what we call sliding-glass doors), which became increasingly popular in the post-war period». ¹¹ Spigel further paraphrases Daniel Boorstin, «The widespread dissemination of large plate-glass Windows for both domestic and commercial use 'leveled the environment' by encouraging the 'removal of sharp distinctions between indoor and outdoors' and thus created an 'ambiguity' between public and private space». ¹²

The *Window*, in this context, allows this fluidity of space between the domestic and its own neighborhood. The large glazed windows were the curtain that enabled the modern-and-sophisticated-mothers-with-their-kitchens-equipped-with-all-the-electric-paraphernalia-apparatuses-to-free-them, to make dinner and other household chores without losing control of their children playing in the garden.



Figure 2: American suburban house kitchen-type

Source: *Afreakatheart*, consulted on January, 30, 2014, <http://afreakatheart.blogspot.pt/2013/07/1950's-kitchen-style.html>

This pleasant relationship with the window and the consequent dilution of the boundaries between home-and-the-world has fostered the emergence of a prominent place for the element that would reconfigure the entire layout and dynamics of the room and suburban family life:«Given its ability to merge private with public spaces, television was the ideal companion for these suburban homes». ¹³

The typology of these new and modern houses provided a wide visual outreach to and with the world, establishing a comfortable relationship of staticity and movement that gave the residents the possibility of being-al-over-the-place-without-ever-actually-being-there . The large windows and the

¹¹ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 32.

¹² Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 32.

¹³ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 33.

television allowed the world to enter the house, providing trips that are sometimes near sometimes distant, real and hypothetical to the viewer. With the advantage of exposing it only to its charms, it kept it protected from its threats, enabling an ubiquity, hitherto unprecedented:

The new tract homes of the mass-produced suburbs featured sliding-glass doors, bay Windows, and open plans that were designed to maximize the visual field. In addition, the domestic environment was increasingly conceptualized as a vehicle for transport – a place where people imaginatively travelled not only around the globe but even, as President Kennedy promised, to the moon.¹⁴

The integration of television into postwar culture precipitated, and was symptomatic, of a profound reorganization of social space. Leisure time undergone significant changes as spectator entertainment - movies, sports, concerts, etc. - had been progressively incorporated into the home. And it is in this context that Baudrillard attenuates the border between an artificial experience and a real experience of domestic television consumption:

From the perspective of the satisfaction of the consumer, there is no basis on which to define what is “artificial” and what is not. The pleasure obtained from a television or a second home is experienced as a “real” freedom. No one experiences this as alienation.¹⁵

The contamination of the domestic space and of the family routine by the television reality led to a “theatricalization” of the (living) room. The layout of the space should privilege the place of the television as the social center of the home. Television would, from now on, assume the place of the stage, and the sofa would assume the place of the audience, giving the residents a bundle of abstraction and more-than-private space within their own home and their own family. The aesthetics and the reconfiguration of the home as a function of the television set was extensively promoted by magazines, catalogs and advertisement of home and decoration:

Postwar home magazines and handbooks on interior decor presented an endless stream of advice on how to make the home into a comfortable theatre. In 1949, for example, *House Beautiful* advised its readers that ‘conventional living room groupings need to be slightly altered because viewers look in the same direction and not at each other.’ *Good Housekeeping* seconded the motion in 1951 when it claimed that ‘television is theatre; and to succeed, theatre requires a comfortably placed audience with a clear view of the stage.’ Advertisements for television sets variously referred to the ‘chairside theatre’, the ‘video theatre’, the ‘family theatre’, and so forth. Taken to its logical extreme, this theatricalization of the home transformed domestic space into a private pleasure dome.¹⁶

The relationship between family dynamics and television became reciprocal. Domestic and family daily life became a frequent theme in the television series and soap operas, particularly from the late 1970s and the 1980s and 1990s. The reversal of the spectator's place is evident in such series as *All in the Family* (Norman Lear, Johnny Speight, Tandem Productions, 1971-1979), *The Cosby Show* (Bill Cosby, Ed. Weinberger and Michael Leeson, Bill Cosby & Carsey-Werner Company, 1984-1992) or *Family Ties* (Gary David Goldberg, 1982-1989). The camera was precisely where the television set was, and in many moments the spectator glimpsed his own portrait: a whole family sitting on the couch, looking/watching at each other on the other side. In any case, the television

¹⁴ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 2.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001), 43.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *Selected...*, 39-40.

plays with the complicity of those who are watching it, always subverting the Home Place, be it the House, the stage or the audience.

The Window is not confined here to framing what-is-there, but it is also the element that delimits the space-that-is-between —«Ubiquité de l'information, dématérialisation des supports, glisses des véhicules, convocation sur écran de toutes choses»—. ¹⁷ The screen - the window of the videosphere - allows for the extra and trans territorial break in which «the real world appears in the image as it were between parentheses» ¹⁸ and a consequent inhabit-for-a-while: «The relationship between public/spectacle and private/spectator was inverted. The spectator was now physically isolated from the crowd, and the fantasy was now one imaginary unity with “absent” others». ¹⁹



Figure 3.1: *All in the Family*, 1971-1979

Source: *Ended TV Series*, consulted on March, 18, 2015

<http://www.endedtvseries.com/family/>

Figure 3.2: *The Cosby Show*, 1984-92

Source: *Urban Newsroom*, consulted on March, 18, 2015

<http://urbannewsroom.com/2014/01/24/america-ready-new-cosby-show>

There is a definition of public-private borders in the house of the North American periphery and, simultaneously, the dilution of its frontiers. The increasingly murky relations of proximity / distance, inside / outside, House and World, make the suburban villa and its dynamics a clear example of The-World-in-the-House: «This results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-the-political; the-world-in-the-home». ²⁰

It is, however, in the materialistic and resigned strength of the 80s that television becomes an institution. Omnipresent, stimulating and absorbing, it has spread in quantity and diversity of: technology, channels, television stations, programs, cable companies and mediatic experiences. It is, from 1980 onwards, that CNN (Cable New Network) emerges, the first cable channel with twenty-four hours a day news, MTV (Music Television) or ESPN (Entertainment and Sports

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Selected...*, 279.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. by Emmanuel Levinas (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 6.

¹⁹ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 41.

²⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London-New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

Network) offering spectators an easy and endless world of entertainment, anytime, with a wide choice of channels and specificities, all from the distance of a remote control:

During the 1980s, the American media was becoming more fragmented yet concentrated. Even as a niche marketing developed, even as the three-network oligopoly dissolved into the hundred-channel cable galaxy, the center of gravity in the media universe emerged stronger than ever. [...] Culture and [...] standards demonstrated the power and ubiquity of the modern media.²¹

This permeability stimulates the extra-territorialization of which the North American periphery is based. As mentioned above, the movement beyond - to move beyond - is the impulse and resignation to a distressing stagnation in between. According to Bhabha, existence on the edge of the "present" causes an inevitable and abrupt transition to the post: "postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism". In this context, the suburban or hybrid space that is no longer a city but also not yet is the countryside, acquires an extra-territorialized status of post-city.

Bhabha notes that dereference and the harrowing sense of non-belonging are consequences of the blurring of boundaries when in 1992 he describes the disorientation that came from the fusion of the World with the House and its consequent desacralization. Bhabha refers, in turn, to the defamiliarization of the House space as locus, claiming that the sense of *Unhomely* «captures something of the estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place».²² The desecration and roaming of the domestic space implies a vulnerability that Bhabha describes as follows: «the intimate recess of the domestic space becomes sites for history's most intricate invasions».²³

The villa of suburban America thus represents the Unhomely: a place that is in between, divided between the House and non-belonging - displacement - in between the idyllic and the disillusion. The exodus of the middle-class, from the center of the city towards a not-sure-where-but-potentially better built from scratch to accommodate a modern and ideal lifestyle, promotes deconsecration, is based on a built, staged and plastic familiarity:

These nightmarish visions of the preplanned community served as an impetus for the arrival of a surrogate community on television. Television provided an illusion of the ideal neighbourhood — the way it was supposed to be. Just when people had left their life-long companions in the city, television sitcoms pictured romanticized versions of neighbour and family bonding.²⁴

The Window is the element, metaphorical and literal, that provides the permeability of and to the World with all possibilities and harms arising from it. It amplifies the desecration of the Home space, makes it more vulnerable, exposed to the invasion of other people's realities and its total de-positioning:

²¹ Troy, *Morning in...*, 124.

²² Homi K. Bhabha, "The World and the Home", in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 141.

²³ Bhabha, "The World...", 141.

²⁴ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 43.

The inclusion of public spectacles in domestic space always carried with it the unpleasant possibility that the social ills of the outside world would invade the private home. The more that the home included aspects of the public sphere, the more it was seen as subject to unwelcome intrusions.²⁵

In addition to the vast territory occupied with standart batches, mass built and in a peripheral and random space, the assiduous presence of television in the suburban daily life increases the dereferenciation of the Unhomely that characterizes the hybridity of space and suburban housing. It is this inhabit-for-a-while that makes Fiction the only truly possible House to dwell in the discontinuous, transitional and extra-territorialized context of the postmodern period.

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²⁵ Spigel, *Welcome to...*, 43.