

Intimate Spaces

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I. Introduction

This text has been drafted with reference to the speeches given by Vittoria Giuliani (CNR Rome) and Tim Putnam (Middlesex University) at the Prague Encounter.

As Vittoria Giuliani stresses in the introduction to the speech she gave at the meeting in Prague, there are two words in English - intimacy and privacy - for translating the more general sense which the French language assigns to the term "*intimité*". Privacy has a limited meaning and refers, essentially, to the idea of control whereas intimacy takes account of numerous other dimensions like, for example, the familiarity when one talks about knowing someone intimately, the nature of social relationships when one describes friends as intimates, the physical and psychological comfort when one describes a place as intimate. These distinctions are taken up by Giuliani (1992, 1993) to stress that the contrast between the public and the private is not necessarily the best distinction for talking about "*intimité*" and that other distinctions like a feeling of appropriation or belonging, contrasted with a sensation of feeling a stranger, would no doubt be more relevant for talking about the spaces in which the subject lives, and that it is not sufficient to define inside and outside in terms of contrast. This thought leads us to associate the general title of the meeting in Prague "being at home in the city" with the definitions of "*intimité*". This is because "*intimité*" is also feeling at home, an expression which, in its strict sense, means a relationship between a place and an identity. The term "home" expresses a unique identity but the preposition "at" does not limit the nature and number of places in which that relationship can become a reality. The feeling of being at home is experienced first in the space of the house but it can also be experienced in a public space, a district, a city and possibly be called to mind about a country when one is far away from it.

The first thought brought to mind by the title of the EUROPEAN meeting is, of course, to ask oneself about the pertinence which it still has in the urban context today. In the past, the city belonged to us all, everyone was at home in it. The size of cities and the fact that most commercial activities were carried out in the street prompted very open public sociability where different levels of society were permanently rubbing shoulders with one another. From the eighteenth century onwards, a social ordering of urban life developed gradually, culminating in the nineteenth century where one sees a true phenomenon of residential allocation reinforcing the distinction between the rich and working class districts. That

transformation and, in particular, the disappearance of a certain form of public sociability will profoundly change the rules of social life. Private sociability takes on more and more importance and that evolution is to be translated by a new distribution of spaces and a strengthening of frontiers between the public and private.

In other respects, urban growth and the more and more frequent differentiation between working areas and living areas will lead to important changes in the life of the citizen which is characterised today by the complexity and heterogeneity of spaces through which the citizen has to travel daily. Amongst these numerous spaces will be those which the French anthropologist Marc Auge (Auge, 1992) describes as non-places, that is spaces which cannot be defined either as having an identity or as historical. These are spaces where the reference points of collective identifications no longer exist where the streets have become circulation routes, where cross-roads have become intersections where pedestrians are channelled in flows subject to the speed of traffic lights, in short, spaces where it is inconceivable that one will feel at home. However, as Giuliani (1992, 1993) stresses, this set of negative aspects associated with urban growth does not necessarily lead us to think that private space is a haven of peace and security in face of a dehumanised, dangerous environment. This contrast can provide an ideological alibi for concluding that all residential requirements are satisfied within the home, and that one can thereby neglect the planning of outside spaces.

It is not possible, within this short article, to analyse in what way one can talk of "*intimité*" with regard to the spaces outside the house. Let us stress only that each of them can be characterised by the degree of permitted control and appropriation because these two dimensions are, let us remind ourselves, those which we have, in the first place, defined as "*intimité*". However, to illustrate the fragility of the contrast between the inside and the outside, here are some words on the quality of the intimate relationship which is generally established between the inhabitant and his neighbourhood - the space which is situated on the outside but in which one nevertheless feels at home, a familiar universe which one has gradually appropriated. That appropriation is first of all physical. One knows the reference points, the buildings, the businesses but also, even if that perception is more often than not unconscious, more subtle signs, such as the street corners, the limits which constitute the obstacles, the unevenness of the paving slabs in the street. The appropriation can also be symbolic. Some subjects, and this appears very clearly when one carries out interviews on housing conditions, experience a feeling of belonging to a collective identity in which they fit at a certain time in history. As the old districts have a history, they, more than others, favour this symbolic identification, which, for some people, is a protection against the anguish of the passing of time. In other respects, the district today remains a place of sociability in which one has many moments for meeting known faces. Even if rare and furtive, these exchanges give the feeling of belonging to a community. The feeling of belonging to a microcosm within the city seems today, moreover, to find a new sense through mobilising inhabitants into local action to protect the immediate environment. To finish this short analysis of the intimate relationship between the inhabitant and the spaces outside the house, let us point out that these can vary considerably according to sex and life cycle.

A study by Leonardi & Giuliani (1992) shows that, in a working class residential complex in the suburbs of Rome, the outside space in the vicinity represents an extension of the living space for elderly people, children and their mothers,

whereas, for everyone else, the meaning is above all symbolic and involves making the most of the green spaces. In another study on the city of Rome, during which 400 people between the ages of 25 and 64 were questioned, important differences were found between the behaviour of men and women in relation to urban residential spaces. Age and type of family also play a determining rôle. Young single men frequently spend time in the city centre, whereas middle-aged men spend the majority of their free time at home. Age plays a less important rôle in women's practices because their domestic activities lead them to make a more continuous and wider use of urban space. In the last period of the life cycle, the differences persist but are reversed. Elderly women, in particular, in working class areas are confined to the house while, above all in small towns, men tend to reappropriate the local space for themselves, in particular for forming relationships with their fellows (Bonnes, Secchiaroli & Mazzotta, 1992).

2. "Intimité" and Housing Conditions

The need to possess a private space is a fundamental requirement of human beings who temporarily experience, in varying degrees of strength according to the individual, the need to put distance between themselves and to cut their relationship with the physical and social environment. In reality, it is a matter of a complex balance between the need to communicate with others and the need to protect oneself from them. This process is dynamic. It can vary according to the personal situation of the person, their sex, their age, their personality *etc.*, or the circumstances of the interaction. A neighbour can be seen as kind or, on the contrary, invasive. The determining element in the feeling that one can have of possessing a private space is that of control: control of external nuisances, control of access, control of the choice of social interaction.

The management of private space can be perceived at two levels. The first concerns the domestic group, this can be limited, moreover, to a single person. Private space is then defined in relation to the outside world, in relation to those who do not belong to that group. The second refers to the sharing of domestic space between the members of the family group.

3. Private Space and the Outside World

The neighbour's noise, smells and television always on, the noisy games of children in the yard are stress factors when one has no means of escaping from them. The control of access is the minimum condition which enables relationships with the outside to be regulated. Certain physical elements play a determining rôle in the management of that control: walls cut out communication, windows and doors enable it to be re-established. Windows are important because, in numerous cultures, the feeling of being at home is based on the conditions which protect the individual from prying eyes while giving visual access to the outside. It is, however, necessary to point out that, in some societies of puritan culture, the window must also enable the stranger to have visual access to the inside because it is understood that one must not have anything to hide. The noise of neighbours is one of the factors most often referred to when describing the violation of "intimité", a violation perceived both by

the person who is heard, but also by the person who hears. The loss of the possibility of filtering information concerning one's personal life but also the disclosure of the "intimité" of others destroys the limits of the private space. The idea of control supposes that there is a choice and, as such, isolation and solitude are two totally different situations. Isolation is a means which enables one to manage "intimité" to the extent that people can decide when they wish to make contact with other people again. On the other hand, with solitude there is no choice and that absence in itself is a factor of imbalance.

Domestic withdrawal, also called cocooning, is frequently referred to in order to characterise a new stage in the evolution of lifestyles. The failure of collective ideologies, the dislike of politics, the feeling that there is scarcely any hope in solutions likely to transform society, would lead the individual to lose interest in the state and to develop his interest in his own history: one's home naturally becomes the privileged place of this new personal investment which one can also explain by the development of home leisure. There is little statistical data to support this general hypothesis. As we have seen in a previous paragraph, it seems that domestic withdrawal to a large extent depends on the sociological identity of the inhabitant. The same can be said of the protection of private space from other people's glances, an attitude closely linked to the level of education of inhabitants (Bernard, 1992).

4. Sharing Domestic Space

The size of the house and the distribution of rooms either facilitate or prevent the sharing of spaces, which can satisfy the needs for "intimité" within the family. Family relationships are generally spatialised and reflect the rôles and rights attributed to each one. The main points of the speech by Tim Putnam are devoted to the analysis of the changes which affect the organisation of domestic space. These changes are said to come firstly from the advent of the modern house. Whereas in the past, the organisation of middle-class houses was based on a clearly defined division of spaces, in which service spaces were hidden and set aside for staff, the modern house has been designed by engineers and social reformers who have produced a universal model in which the organisation of the house depends partly on external structures and partly on co-operation established between different family members. An important change is, for example, the fact that the normative and physical barriers which were erected around housework have disappeared and that the spaces which one used to hide have, on the contrary, become spaces that one shows and are, therefore, increasingly personalised. These changes, associated with the effects individualising macro-structures, have profoundly modified the nature of the home and the quality of transactions which take place there. Symbolic communications are an increasingly important part of these transactions and are expressed, in particular, through the planning of the house. It seems in fact that, in post-modern society, it is less the characteristics of the house as a form of construction which are important but rather the way people take the freedom to furnish it, as this furnishing fits into a process of symbolic exchange implying new cultural forms of managing family relationships. By illustrating a quote from Wittgenstein on the variety of methods of achieving shared space delineation, from concrete examples such as how people deal with their washing (Kaufmann, 1992), Putnam shows that the ways in which several

people use the resources available for sharing a space are complex and depend, essentially, on the education and aims of the different members of the family group.

The repercussions which cultural changes and the evolution of lifestyles can have on the use of domestic space are referred to by different participants in the workshop; but one sees notable differences between countries. In Italy, the last census showed that 94% of young Italians between the age of 15 and 24 live with their parents and more than half of the boys and a third of the girls are still in this situation at the age of 29 (Rullo, 1993). In France, the figures are lower (60% of boys and 45% of girls less than 24 years old) but also convey how frequently young people stay in the parental home. The presence of young adults in the home necessarily leads to a change of the rules of "intimité". T. Putnam does not give any figures for cohabitation, which is no doubt less frequent in England as he points to the fact that young people often go through a period when they live alone or with other young people. He thinks this profoundly changes their later portrayal of conjugal "intimité" and the rules of communal life; a portrayal also modified by the increasingly important intervention of models broadcast by the media to the detriment of traditional family models. He also insists on the recognition, at various degrees and in various forms, of the interdependence of domestic responsibilities, which necessarily leads to a re-negotiation of the rôles within the couple and which may also have consequences on how spaces are divided up. Here, too, the differences between European countries are important. In Italy, the proportion of women at home is approximately 60% and the majority of Italian small children are brought up at home, with only 10% going to nurseries. Housework is still considered to be woman's work, especially in working classes where fewest women work. In France, on the contrary, 70% of women work and this, of course, changes the distribution of domestic tasks and the time spent in the different rooms of the house. Although there are important variations between the social categories, the majority of women say they spend more time in the living room than in the kitchen (Bernard, 1992).

In the three countries, one notes the promotion of the kitchen as a social space. In Italy, it is the place where the woman entertains her friends and neighbours; in France, it is more and more often the chosen space for the family meal; in England, it has become the place *par excellence* for the redefinition of rôles, to such a point that one often describes conjugal dramas in the expression of "kitchen sink" drama. Putnam sees, in this social investment of the kitchen, the translation of informalisation, that is, the abandonment of formal spaces given over to a single function as was the case with the middle-class dining room. The transformation of the rôle of the kitchen, associated with the changes in the way people entertain, has also changed the uses of the living room, which has become a space for relaxation and personal or shared leisure activities: this choice, itself being a function of the diversification of what is on offer.

In conclusion, the question one can ask about "intimité" within the house is whether architects should think in terms of a multiplication of personal spaces or in terms of flexibility of use. The results we have seen with regard to flexibility of use - 58% of French people have never re-arranged the furniture in their living room (Bernard, 1992) - leave us a little sceptical about the creative abilities of inhabitants for changing their space. On the contrary, Putnam sees in this possibility an architectural response to the evolution of lifestyles.

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