

HOMInG interview
with Hilde Heynen Historian and theorist of Architecture
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Interview conducted by Paolo Boccagni in Bruxelles

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Hilde Heynen is professor at the Faculty of Engineering Science and head of Architecture and Society, KU Leuven. Her main research topics include Architectural theory in the 20th century, Architecture and modernity from a cultural perspective, Critical architecture, Domesticity and gender, Architecture and urban design in a postcolonial condition. Among her key publications, *Architecture and modernity: a critique* (1999), *Negotiating domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in modern architecture* (coeditor, 2005), *The Sage Handbook of Architectural theory* (coeditor, 2012) and the forthcoming *Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. Architecture, Modernism and its Discontents* (2019).¹

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What does home mean to you in the light of your professional experience and background?

My field is architectural theory. My educational background is in architecture and philosophy and my PhD was on modernity and architecture. Modernity is a very broad concept, but it is somewhat connected with homelessness. This is a very important starting point because architecture is seen by many, including architects, as what provides home for human beings. Architecture is also supposed to answer to modernity, but modernity is about homelessness, or at least about leaving home and what is familiar and going into the unknown future. How these two aspects were interconnected was a major concern in my PhD.

In this sense, in my first book (*Architecture and modernity: a critique*) home was understood in a philosophical way, related to Heidegger and Bloch but also to Adorno, Cacciari and Lyotard. The idea was that home is in the past, that modernity is about the experience of how “all that is solid melts into the air” (a quote from Karl Marx, which Marshall Berman uses as the title for his book on modernity).² Following Berman, modernity is about being uprooted and leaving the traditional home, but it also entails

¹ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique* (London: MIT Press, 1999); Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar, eds., *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005); C. Greig Cryslar, Stephen Cairns, and Hilde Heynen, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory* (Los Angeles ; London ; New Delhi ; Singapore ; Washington DC: SAGE Publications, 2012); Hilde Heynen, *Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. Architecture, Modernism and Its Discontents* (BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS, 2019).

² Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. - The Experience of Modernity* (Londen: Verso, 1985), 2.3.

looking for a new and better home: the idea of a future *Heimat*, not the nostalgic heimat of the Nazis, but the ideal image of a world in which all people can pursue happiness in a just society; a utopian idea of *Heimat*.

After that, I got more interested in gender studies: how home is bound up with femininity and women. The emancipation of women is also a matter of questioning women's role in the home. Do women have to take care of the home? Can they leave the home? Are they bound to a private place only? The point, for me, was how ingrained ideas about gender roles are materialized through architecture, which sediments gender patterns and builds our social understanding into stones. It is architecture that makes the difference between private and public realms, materially speaking, in terms of walls, windows, and so forth.

My work has always tried to interconnect these abstract and challenging notions with concrete architectures and built environments, while also addressing the theoretical questions with empirical, concrete case studies.

And what about displacement?

Together with André Loeckx, in "Scenes of ambivalence: Concluding remarks on architectural patterns of displacement" (*JAE*, 1998),³ we elaborate on modernity as a condition of displacement, not so much in a physical sense, but regarding changes in the urban environment. As the city changes faster than human beings can follow, quoting Baudelaire, this induces a sense of alienation and transformation, making it sometimes impossible to recognize a place even for people who do not move. Already in the 19th century, therefore, many people had the experience that your home town can become a place you do not recognize any longer. You find yourself wandering among masses of people coming into the city from the countryside. This exerted the same effect of very different people coming together and living in the same city, in all industrialized cities. Therefore, the idea of the home as a non-changing place of familiarity is an imaginary construction that helps us a lot in our lives, but does not really exist. You cannot go back home to the home of your childhood. That home has changed, and if you grow old enough it is almost inevitable that the past home has disappeared! When you were younger, instead, you would probably long to leave home, as it is also the place of social control and constraint on what you can do or not. For this reason home can also be this place where you feel that you are not allowed to be yourself and want to break out and find a new home. It is a matter of processes rather than a stable or fixed situation. It is less a building per se, than what you make of it. Consistent with this view, our research group is called A2I (which stands for 'architecture, interiority, inhabitation').⁴ We are fascinated in how people appropriate the spaces they live in, how they make a house into a home.

³ Heynen Heynen and André Loeckx, 'Scenes of Ambivalence: Concluding Remarks on Architectural Patterns of Displacement', *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 2 (1998): 100–108.

⁴ <http://www.a2i-kuleuven.be/>

How about the variation in these “practices of inhabitation” along class or other lines?

Practices of inhabitation are very different across classes, in terms of selected objects, ways of decorating interiors etc. There is a whole range of possibilities that is class-bound. Even in the case of the homeless – although I don't have enough research experience on this – I can imagine they have their own little things to exert “inhabitation”. It may be that the lesser possessions they have, the more precious they become. That's maybe why a homeless condition looks so terrible for those who live in ordinary homes. There are many shelters, of course, but they are not homes. This is why some people clearly prefer the street, which offers them a certain amount of freedom. There is a dynamic going on between shelter, freedom, protection and appropriation: in short, between being able to be yourself or not.

What I know is that *housing first* interventions (as solutions for alleviating poverty and homelessness) tend to work rather well. In fact, making sure that people have very modest homes may turn out to be more cost-effective than leaving them out on the streets and exposed to crimes and diseases (this was e.g. the experience with experiments in San Francisco and elsewhere in the United States). This means that housing is apparently the primary factor. Which is not to say, however, that giving a person a house means it is a home. Some people may not even know how to make an apartment into a home, if they never had one! The practices of homemaking are most obvious to most of us instead, even for those who grew up in a non-functional family. Yet, if you have never been allowed, say, to change furniture in your room because of the institutional rules of the foster care centre in which you lived, maybe you don't even know how to turn a new dwelling into a home.

Going back to an earlier point you made: has architecture the mission of producing *homes*, or of producing *houses*?

Architecture has the mission of producing home in the abstract, Heideggerian sense of *dwelling on the earth*. In a more concrete and practical sense, I would rather say that architecture has to do with building houses, and these houses offer a frame for inhabitation and for making homes. They provide the physical frame for inhabiting practices. These physical frames are very important though.

To give an example about the importance of this physical frame. In the 1920s the Modern Movement in architecture built minimal houses, with very small kitchens. This was seen as a very practical way to save women's time. It was meant as an emancipatory solution. Fifty years later we started to claim that, as women, we are not the only ones responsible for domestic chores... but if we are still there with these small kitchens, this is no more an emancipatory solution at all! In other words, there are social patterns that are being sedimented into architecture. It's a challenging question for architecture how to provide physical spaces that are interesting and engaging, but still allow for a variety of interpretations and ways of inhabiting. You cannot make the small

kitchen work for two persons at a time, hence it is difficult to share kitchen duties. In the 1920s however, it was arguably a very emancipatory move to provide these very efficient kitchens, which saved women a lot of time!

This is always a challenge when you design houses and even cities at large, especially public spaces: how to accommodate the living together of many different people from different backgrounds; how to accommodate spaces to be used in multiple ways by multiple groups of people? How to enable future possibilities while answering to present needs?

Many scholars have remarked that the very idea of home is, historically speaking, a very recent one...

True, relative to the history of architecture. Walter Benjamin in particular claimed that the home, or actually the *interior*, emerged in XIX century, when places of work started to be differentiated from places of living, at least for men. The cult of domesticity, therefore, is a XIX century phenomenon.

On the other hand, Lyotard, in his article on ‘Domus and the megalopolis’⁵, argues that the Roman *domus* already included both the house and the extended family, involving even domestic and slaves, with one male patriarch. This is also part of our image of home: not just the close family but also more people you are connected with. As people used to say, it takes a village to raise a child – the idea of an organic community. These ideas are certainly older than XIX century. Nonetheless the idea that the domestic interior should express the identity of those living in it is definitely a XIX century idea.

What about the (im)possibility to translate “home” in other languages, and the language and cultural specificities in the ways of using the term (or its equivalents)?

This is an issue, for sure. “Domesticity”, for instance, is not completely translatable into Dutch. And in England the XIX century cult of domesticity was also used, in the frame of colonialism, to emphasize the superiority of British people over colonized people who had not proper practices of domesticity. The very notion of home has no exact equivalent in Dutch, where we distinguish between *huis* and *thuis*. The same holds true in German – *zu hause* and *haus* – or in French – *chez soi* and *la maison*... there are all of these distinctions, but it is never really exactly the same as *home* vs *house*. This is a major question for research on home in a comparative optic. Think that, for instance, in Arabic the distinction between *public* and *private* may have to do less with a particular space than with those who are staying there. A space is private only as long as there are just family members in. It is no more private when there are outsiders. The distinction has to do with the situation, not with the place in itself. This has practical implications,

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Domus and the Megalopolis’, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 191–204.

for instance, when it comes to when or where Muslim women should wear or take off their veils. These women take their *hijabs* off when they feel they are in a private space, or depending on who is able to see them in a particular place.

However, the history or architecture in the Middle East is very much based on the European standards, so that students learn the ways things are done in Europe! As a result, the design in new houses and cities is not accommodated for people there, especially in terms of gender – think, for instance, of the need for separate sitting areas, and yet an average house does not necessarily come with two separate areas. And again, in many Middle-East cities women are not supposed to relax in the outer space, lingering or sitting on urban furniture. It would make a lot of sense to design the city in certain ways for women only, or for women with children, for them to relax, but there is a huge resistance against this, in the design of public space in Middle East cities. Architects just act as if this did not matter! Cultural sensitivity is not always part of architectural education.

Is there, in your view, anything like a “migrant architecture”?

I would not be able to recognize *the* houses of migrants in Belgium – not from the exterior at least. Rather, I could recognize houses migrants have built in their countries of origin - so-called remittance houses. As far as I know, there is not much systematic study done on these topics. Still the diffusion of often exuberant, classicizing and abundantly decorated houses, many of them not finished in the inside and scarcely inhabited, unless for a few months per year, is clearly a phenomenon in countries with a lot of emigration. In their interior you can probably have a certain feeling of emptiness or unfinished. That would be the most characteristic “migrant architecture”, rather than the one in the countries where they get settled. This is also because many of them do not get settled with the aim to stay here. I’m thinking for instance of Polish migrants in Belgium; they tend to commute and invest much more in Poland, in terms of housing, while living in very modest homes or even shelters in Belgium. All of this becomes different, of course, if you take your whole family with you.

And what about the interiors of migrant houses, in the countries of destination?

Yes, I know, for instance, of studies of Moroccan families (in theses done in our department) that clearly indicate the influence of their own ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Within the same living environment, they need to create more thresholds! In Belgium, generally speaking, the sitting room is the most formal one, while the kitchen is more informal. Moroccan immigrants tend rather to change the sequence of “thresholds”, in order to leave the sitting room as the least accessible, more intimate one.

What about the patterns of transnational decorations in migrant houses, whether “here” or “there”?

This is an interesting phenomenon, but again, I do not know of many systematic studies about it (apart from the work of the group of Daniel Miller).⁶ One thing is to study the practice of how to organize interior spaces and articulate privacy and hospitality, also between parent and children, by adapting the structure of their house accordingly. Quite another level is decoration. Almost all migrant families would probably have things on the wall that refer to their countries of origin (e.g. in the case of the Muslims from Turkey or Morocco). The same is true, in terms of circulation of ideas and know-hows, in their countries of origin too. For instance, Polish workers involved in the construction sector in Belgium can then apply similar techniques in their communities of origin. The same can be appreciated in the patterns of decoration of their houses, both in facades and in interiors.

However, what exactly is the source of change here? Maybe it is just due to mass-media, television and internet, rather than by the experience of individual migrants... or maybe it's a combination of different things? I'm thinking for instance of the introduction of so-called American kitchens in Belgium in the 60s. Do ideas “migrate” on their own, or is fundamentally people who bring new ideas along with them? It is probably a combination of both.

Many thanks for this, Hilde!

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⁶ Daniel MILLER, ed., ‘Home Possessions: Material Cultural Behind Closed Doors’ (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2001); Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (London: Routledge, 2003).

