The meaning of the meaning of houses: 
An interdisciplinary study

Nicolo Del Castillo and Aurora Corpuz-Mendoza
University of the Philippines-Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines

ABSTRACT: This study uses an interdisciplinary framework from Architecture and Psychology to investigate the meanings Filipinos ascribe to houses. The "meaning" of house is deemed important to understanding how people behave in their built environments. Using convenience sampling, 124 city residents from randomly selected informal communities, housing projects and gated subdivisions were interviewed, while 16 respondents participated in focus group discussions. Content analysis of descriptions and preferences in relation to houses yielded 38 dimensions that indicated the meaning of house is organized into 6 main themes: Inside the house, house as Building, Lot as part of the house, house in a Community, Location of the house, and house as Self. The first five themes suggest a schema of house that begins with internal spaces, expanding outwards to more external spaces such as the lot, neighbourhood, and eventually to the physical links of the house to schools, markets, churches and places of recreation and employment. The Self theme represents value dimensions that reflect relationships between self and house. The Self theme is not only central to the meaning of "house", but links together all other dimensions. Data also suggests differences in the meaning of houses across types of participants.

Keywords: houses, meaning, interdisciplinary, values

INTRODUCTION

The house is the most personal unit or aspect of the built environment, hence the richest source for personal meaning and affect. In the Philippines, most houses are not designed by architects and ‘star designers’. Instead, many houses are either merely bought as built or are self-built/self-designed with the help of skilled tradesmen. This gives rise to the curiosity on what people value in the houses they build or buy for themselves.

The study is a significant collaboration between the fields of architecture and psychology in providing an understanding of transactions between people and their built environments. The information generated by this study is seen as a valuable contribution to the formation of Filipino Architecture theory. As pointed out by Del Castillo (2003), the literature on Filipino architecture has been wanting in explanations of how architecture is communicated by Filipino culture and vice versa. According to Rapoport (1982), “…meaning is central to an understanding of how environments work.” By investigating the meaning of houses, this study can shed light and give a possible direction in improving or formulating a better architectural theory. The study also provides a psychological perspective in local research on person-environment events. More particularly, it may provide data to fill in the gaps in Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Philippine Psychology) by exploring the dimensions by which Filipinos describe and evaluate houses as part of their built environments.

From a practical perspective, data from this study may also help in a more comprehensive formulation and more effective implementation of housing programs and mass-housing designs.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study was derived from 2 theoretical models that highlight the dynamic process of interaction between people and their environments. Rapoport's model (1982) focuses on the cultural context of how people perceive architecture, while Brunswik's lens model of ‘Ecological Validity’ (Gifford, 2002) focuses on the psychological principles that determine how people perceive meaning in their physical environments.

In this study, the researchers consider ‘meaning’ to be derived from interactions between the physical features of the environment and the goals, values and expectations of the person. The richness of meaning in the environment, as perceived by the person, allows the person to make descriptions and value judgments regarding a particular environment. These descriptions and value judgements influence the behavior of the person in that environment, which may in turn modify the environment.

It is the contention of this study that, currently, there exists a gap between what meanings architects or designers...
endow in our built environments (houses) and the meanings people look for in their houses. To bridge this gap it is necessary to understand more fully how the built environment is perceived by its occupants through the lens of personal, social and cultural values.

![Conceptual Framework for Meaning of Houses](image)

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Meaning of Houses**

1.2. Sampling Scheme and Selection Criteria
The participants of the study were chosen from randomly selected locations in Quezon City, MetroManila. Using convenience sampling, a total of 124 residents from informal communities (n=42), housing projects (n=43), and gated subdivisions (n=39) were interviewed. These three groups of respondents, composed of 59 males and 65 females, ranging from 19 to 77 years old, were chosen to represent, respectively, residents from the lower, middle and upper socioeconomic groups. An additional 16 respondents, with an equal number of males and females, participated in two focused group discussions (FGDs).

1.3. Data collection
A short interview guide was designed by the researchers to obtain two data sets for determining themes or dimensions that reflect the meaning of houses across the three respondent groups. These two data sets included: 1) descriptions (non-evaluative impressions) of houses, and 2) preferences (evaluative judgments) with respect to houses. The relevance of preferences to meaning was pointed out by Arias (1993).

The data for the first set (descriptions) were elicited by the open-ended item “Describe the house you live in.” The data for the second set (preferences) were elicited using four open-ended items designed to reflect both positive and negative judgements in relation to the house they were presently residing in, as well as valuations in relation to a hypothetical, ideal house and a hypothetical house they did not want to live in: 1) What do you like about your house? 2) What do you not like about your house? 3) Describe the house that you want to live in, i.e. your ideal house, and 4) Describe the house that you do not want to live in.

The guide questions for the FGDs were derived from the interview data and were designed to elicit more elaborated responses.

1.4. Data analyses
Interview data for both descriptions and preferences were analysed in two stages. Initially, the two researchers independently sorted all the responses to each question into thematic categories. The resulting categories were then jointly re-sorted by the researchers. The final categories were interpreted to reflect the dimensions by which the sample as a whole described and evaluated houses. These dimensions were then analysed and organized into a framework made of themes to suggest a schema of “house” from the point of view of the respondents. (Dimensions that had fewer than 5 responses were not included.)

Additional analysis was made to determine schema differences between the three groups of respondents (residents of informal communities, housing projects, and gated subdivisions).
2. RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1. "Describe the house you live in"
A total of 596 descriptions yielded 38 dimensions from which six themes emerged. The themes are: 1) Inside the house, 2) the house as a Building, 3) the Lot as part of the house, 4) the house in a Community, 5) the Location of the house, and 6) the house as Self. The themes and the main dimensions that define each theme are provided in Figure 2, reflecting a cognitive structure for the meaning of house for the respondents.

Interestingly, the first 5 themes, as defined by their component dimensions, suggest a conceptual organization of house that begins with the internal space of the house and the structure of the building, expanding to more external spaces, such as the lot, the neighbourhood, and eventually to the physical links of the house to schools, markets, churches and places of recreation and employment. These 5 themes reflect distinct spatial attributes that are part of the cognitive structure of house.

The Self theme does not refer to a physical space that makes up ‘house’, but consists of feelings and values that reflect relationships between self and house. For example, some respondents described their house as “my achievement”, or “functional”. Notably, responses under this theme primarily refer to the house as a whole (e.g. “my house is a happy family”). In a sense, this theme may be interpreted to refer to the meaning of house as intertwined with concepts of self (e.g. “my house is lucky”). In addition, references to self-attributes often accompany responses that fall under the physical dimensions of house (e.g. “my house has too few rooms for privacy”, “my house has a prayer room because I am a religious person”). This is reflected in the cognitive structure by how Self overlaps with the other themes.

The importance of each theme to the meaning of ‘house’ is indicated by the proportion of responses that compose that theme, relative to the overall obtained number of responses. It is noteworthy that the descriptions of ‘house’ that related to the themes of Inside (40%) and Building (39%) were the most frequent, followed by the Self theme (12%). This finding was consistent for all three groups of respondents.

However, the salience of other themes varied across types of respondents. In their descriptions of ‘house’, respondents from Gated subdivisions did not include the Community theme, whereas for Informal Settlers there were no descriptions related to Lot. Project residents had more responses under the Self theme, often describing the house as “a happy family”.

2.2. "What do you like about the house you live in"
The same 6 themes emerged from data regarding what respondents liked in relation to the current house, but these were composed of only 25 dimensions out of 313 responses. Overall, the theme most often expressed was Inside (36%). This indicates that most of what they like about their houses can be attributed to their experiences of living inside the house, as afforded by its layout and sensory quality of internal spaces. Unexpectedly, the “Beautiful
The Building (19%) and Self themes (21%) were also quite salient for all groups in relation to what they liked about their houses. The combined salience of Inside (Internal Configuration, Indoor Environment and Cleanliness), Building (Size and Style) and Self (Family, Function and Comfort) themes highlights the importance of people-environment interactions to the positive valuations of “house”.

There were interesting differences between types of respondents in relation to what they liked. As shown in Figure 3, respondents from Gated subdivisions gave the most number of responses (132) reflecting all 6 themes, indicating there are many more things they like about their houses, compared to the other groups. For Project residents, only 5 themes emerged from 109 responses (Lot was absent). For Informal Settlers, only 69 responses were obtained. What they liked about their houses was confined mostly to 3 themes: Inside, Self and Building. More particularly, what they liked about their houses was in terms of Internal Configuration (e.g. having rooms that afford basic activities such as eating and sleeping) and Family (e.g. having a place where the family can be together).

These findings point out that as one goes down the socioeconomic scale there are fewer and fewer things to like about one's house. More importantly, it suggests that the meaning of house for poor people is reduced simply to shelter for one's family. On a more positive note, it shows how informal settlers compensate for the inadequacies of their physical environments by focusing on fulfilling social relationships. In fact, the results of t-tests showed no significant differences in the mean satisfaction (with their houses) ratings across the 3 groups of respondents.

2.3 “What do you not like about the house you live in”
This question elicited 262 responses, 26 dimensions and all the 6 themes. The Building theme was mentioned most frequently (35%), particularly in relation to the poor physical condition of the house, defective materials/parts, inappropriate size, and inferior finishes. The Inside of the house (31%) was also important to what respondents did not like about their houses, specifically in terms of lack of rooms, small rooms and poor indoor environments (e.g. ventilation, lighting, smell). The Community theme (mostly in terms of noisy, unkempt and/or unruly neighbours and the presence of squatters) was more salient to negative preferences (11%) compared to positive preferences (6%).

There were notable differences between the three groups of respondents with respect to what they did not like, as depicted in Figure 4. Dislikes of residents of Gated subdivisions had a strong emphasis on the Building (51%) and
Inside (28) themes, but had no references to the Self and Community themes. For Project residents, the Inside was the most salient theme (36%), but the most frequently cited dimension was under the Community theme. This was the Neighborhood dimension (21%), relating to noisy, nosy and disorderly neighbours, as well as to dirty and unsafe surroundings. Surprisingly, some respondents cited discord in the Family (5.5%) when asked what they did not like about their house. For Informal settlers, the most salient theme was Building (33%), in terms of lack of finishes, poor physical condition, small size and inadequate utilities. Another salient theme for what this group did not like was the Inside (30%), referring to limited spaces, poor sanitation and ventilation, lack of appliances, and pests. Like Project residents, they also complained about Community (16.7%), particularly in relation to noisy and unruly neighbours, and Location (12%), mostly because of unpleasant smells, being flood-prone and/or noisy. Discord in the family (8%) was also mentioned.

2.4 “Describe the house that you want to live in – your dream house”
Overall, the Inside (35%), and Building (34%) themes dominated 540 responses as to what constituted a dream house. This indicates that what respondents want is still about how they will live inside the house, and the quality of the building itself. In addition, across all groups, a Garden (17%) is part of the dream house, as is a Location (9%) that is peaceful and quiet yet with high accessibility to markets, schools and workplaces. It is noteworthy that the Community theme did not contribute to the dream house schema.

2.5 “Describe the house you don’t want to live in – your nightmare house”
From 262 responses to this question, the dominant themes for a nightmare house for all groups of respondents were Location (22%), particularly for Informal settlers, and Community (22%), especially for Project residents. The specific dimensions under these themes included both physical (e.g. geographic locations) and social (e.g. neighbours) aspects of the external environment that pose threats to safety, health and comfort.
The Building theme (32%) was also salient across all groups, but the important dimensions under this theme differed between types of respondents. Residents of Gated subdivisions made substantially more references (46%), particularly to style and size of the Building. Project residents had similar issues with size, style and type, but to a lesser degree (19%), while Informal settlers were more concerned about inferior materials/parts and utilities (20%). The Inside theme was also important for all groups, but more especially for residents of Gated subdivisions in terms of the internal layout and poor quality of the indoor environment (29%).

2.6 Reality and Fantasy
Another important observation is that the dream houses of Project residents and Informal settlers mimic that of the current houses of residents of Gated subdivisions (Fig. 7). That is, they aspire for bigger houses with more rooms, more storeys, etc. On the other hand, the dream houses of residents of Gated subdivisions are often downsized, suggesting a process of fine-tuning on the basis of their experience with their current houses.

In general, the respondents may aspire for the same things related to their houses, but their fears are different. (See Fig.8) Across locations, the respondents seek the same affordances from their dream houses – the quality of the spaces within (internal configuration, indoor comfort) as well the amount of space to contain their activities (size of house, garden, number of storeys), and also how it will look (style and finishes). On the other hand, their ‘nightmare’ house, show very varied concerns for what they do not want to live in. For Gated subdivisions, it is “how my house appears” (style), for Project Houses it is “who I am with” (neighborhood and the presence of squatters), for Informal Settlers, it is “I don’t want to die” (the safety of their location). The informal settler’s need for basic survival; the project resident’s seeing of better social ties; and the gated subdivision dweller’s aspiration for individual expression all emphasize how the Self theme integrates all the other dimensions into a whole, that is a more encompassing meaning of “house”.

3. THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGS OF HOUSES
One of the objectives of the researchers was to provide a psychological perspective in local research on houses by examining, through the use of open-ended questions, what houses mean to people. Data from this study clearly show that the meaning of house varies across individuals, but within a given individual it is also multidimensional, suggesting many meanings. These meanings of house (e.g. shelter, comfort, achievement, family) derived from descriptions and preferences are invariably associated with the different values, needs, as well as goals of each
Further, these many dimensions can be organized into six main themes that emerged not only from descriptions but also from preferences expressed by respondents. This finding lends support to the argument of Francescato (Arias 1993) regarding the multiplicity of meanings that can be attributed to housing but are often neglected by architects and designers. The researchers later attempted to fit the data into the more traditional frameworks in architecture, such as function-aesthetics, and commodity-firmeness-delight (Lang et. al 1974; Moore 2000), but too many dimensions fell into the category of “miscellaneous”. This supports the researchers’ and Rapoport’s (1990) contention that architects/designers and users utilize different schemas, hence the gap between them.

The study’s finding that the Inside theme is most salient coincides with Lawrence’s argument (Arias 1993) that the most meaningful domain of a house is its interior since it is probably the most utilized). Page limitations do not allow an elaborate discussion, but this theme refers mostly to the internal layout of rooms in the house and how it permits goal-directed activities (e.g. sleeping, cooking, entertaining) and value satisfaction, (e.g., safety, privacy, family), combined with sensory quality (e.g. lighting, ventilation, acoustics, odor), as perceived by the respondents. This indicates that the most manifest meaning of the house involves both the functional and sensory experiences provided by its inside spaces. This is an important finding as Perin (in Lang et. al 1974) pointed out a gap in the discussion of housing quality, particularly in terms of the interior livability of houses.

However, data from this study also show that the various meanings of house are not restricted to the dwelling itself. Interestingly, the cognitive structure of house contains 5 themes (Inside, Building, Lot, Community, Location) which correspond to different levels of ‘scale of reference’ (such as home, building, complex, neighbourhood, community, city) cited by Rapoport and Francescato (Arias 1993) as important influences on the meanings attributed to housing. More specifically, Norberg-Schulz (Arias 1993) asserts that the social meaning of house is acquired “by virtue of the continuum of which it is but part”. Indeed, under the Community theme, respondents expressed how neighbourhood defined their social status, whereas under the Location theme, respondents emphasized accessibility of houses to valued social institutions such as schools, churches and places of recreation and employment. Clearly, for the study’s respondents, the larger physical environment is not just context but an integral aspect of the meanings of house.

Another important finding of this study is that meanings of house do not only vary with personal attributes and spatial scales of reference, but also with socioeconomic status. When data was analysed according to the 3 respondent groups, systematic differences were observed. For informal settlers the meanings of house revolved around shelter and family, while project residents particularly stressed the importance of community, whereas for residents of gated subdivisions the meanings of house included a variety of self expressions. These results are partly in accord with Cooper’s (1974) assertion that the image of self for those living in dangerous and hostile environments is associated with the meaning of house as defender-of-self, while middle-income residents view house as an expression-of-self. Such findings seem to lend credence to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1954), from very basic (physiological and safety), to social (affiliation and esteem) to very abstract (self-actualization and aesthetic). While Maslow’s theory has been criticized in terms of its universality (Lefton 2000), local data from this study can not be ignored, especially because a large proportion of the country’s population is poor and live in make-shift houses that compose “informal communities”. As argued by Franck (1993), housing research must embrace a broad range of meanings from different household types to include the marginalized, because maintaining safe, sanitary accommodations for the bodily self is a fundamental ability of housing ‘to enable one to be a person’.

Thus far, data from this study has provided a cognitive structure for the meanings of house, reflecting an organized representation of beliefs, needs, values, goals, and attitudes about houses. It is significant that at the beginning of this study, the researchers had intended to find out the meanings people have of their houses in the local setting with little previous notions of meaning in mind. That respondents seldom see form or shape when describing houses, but more often perceive “affordances” or meanings, supports Gibson’s view that environmental perception generally does not consist of building blocks that traditional architectural education emphasize as the basis of design (Gifford 2002).

The study has also provided some empirical proof for the ‘house as self’ theme presented in several papers – most notably the seminal theory of Clare Cooper (1974) on the “house as symbol of self”, which is repeatedly cited in the book edited by Arias (1993). Cooper, who drew from Jungian theory, postulated that the “self” is a universal archetype and that this explains the universality of the house as its symbolic form. Although responses pertaining to the house-as-self theme are not always distinctly present, responses that were coded as among the spatial attribute themes almost always had the “self” as referent. A closer scrutiny of the responses in these themes reveal an automatic referral to the “self”, i.e., “where we eat together”; “our own rooms”; “a garden where we can relax”; “near our place of work”; which all suggest that spatial attributes of the house are all linked to the self or the family.

Seen in its entirety, the resulting cognitive structure of the house depicts a range of meanings – from spatial attributes with personal and social meanings, to purely symbolic attributes of the house as an extension of the self.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In understanding the meaning of houses, the researchers discovered an integrated structure of values in the context of houses. This schema of houses can be utilized by both Architecture and Psychology in interdisciplinary value research for meaningful social change. The researchers do not propose a cross-cultural approach to the study of
meanings of house which may impose an assumed universal structure that may not be relevant to a particular culture. What is proposed is that different cognitive structures of house be investigated in different settings or cultures so that they may be compared for a better understanding of cultural differences. Towards this end, the study’s simple five-question instrument can be employed with ease. In addition, the instrument can also be used by architects, designers and planners, to profile individual clients as well as special groups of users such as the marginalized. Hopefully, this will bridge the gap between users’ and designers’ schemas of house.

REFERENCES


