Interview with Irene Cieraad (Delft University of Technology)
Conducted by Aurora Massa, Sara Bonfanti and Alejandro Miranda on 10 May 2017.

Irene Cieraad is a cultural anthropologist and senior research leader of Architectural Design/Interiors at Delft University of Technology. Her publications focus on a wide range of topics, such as domestic space, cultural history of the Dutch domestic interior, cultural theory, consumer cultures and household technology. More information here.

HOMInG team: What does 'home' mean to you in view of your work and disciplinary approach?

Cieraad: First of all, we have to make a distinction between the cultural and the personal meaning of home – that's how I see it. While the cultural meaning of home is shared, personal meanings are not, as they are determined by age and biography. The cultural meaning of home in the Western world evolved from a 19th-century history of urbanisation and industrialization and developed into opposition with the male domain of work as the non-home. Non-home could be the workplace for adults, school for children, the neighbourhood for elders and so forth. My theoretical approach is rooted in an old-school structuralist and symbolic approach in anthropology which focuses on key oppositions within a culture. The personal meaning of home has four dimensions: material, convivial, privacy and the wider home environment, such as one's neighbourhood, town, country, language community or the natural landscape. These dimensions are in fact age-related scales of home. This theoretical approach turns the definition of home as in essence a place where one wants to return to. Of course one can say 'I'm home', but it draws its meaning from the non-home. In the case of migrants, the home one wants to return to might be the home country or an imagined homeland, while the host country acts as the non-home. But this may change over the course of time for the personal meaning of home is not fixed in time nor place.

H: What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migration?

C: There are fluidity and shifting meanings that not only involve the case of migrants. I'm going straight back so we can discuss things in more detail. Fluidity and shifting meanings occur because there are several processes: material homemaking comes first and then mental homemaking. The material and mental making of home are linked by practices—which refers to how people can make a space feel like home and name it as such.

In my article "Homes from Home: Memories and Projections" I talk about students, but we can relate it to migrants too. One starts with material home making: at first, they may have a photograph in their wallets but when they settle in a refugee camp and put the photo on the wall above their bed, that's material home making. A photo in one's wallet is not homemaking. Walls acquire meaning in the practice of decorating, which is part of material homemaking. Mental home making, however, takes an enormous effort as it pertains to all four dimensions of the personal meaning of home, which explains why migrants who are discriminated in the host country and don't feel at home in the wider home environment still long for the home they left behind.

Practices connect and reinforce the processes of mental and material homemaking. When asking students when they had called their student room 'home' for the first time, they mentioned not only the material conditions of comfort and privacy, but also the social condition of conviviality with their fellow students in being able to receive guests and cook a meal. These practices are very important in the making of home: receiving people, cooking for them, hosting them… That is why the decoration of a reception room is often so interesting in its display of prestigious objects and family portraits.

I was struck by a photo of a young African professional football player portrayed in his new Amsterdam apartment with a kitchen filled from floor to ceiling with boxes of new domestic appliances. He clearly wanted to show-off his prosperity in the possession of these devices, or impress a future girlfriend who might actually want to use the appliances. So the meanings of objects on display are not the same for everyone. The material and mental home making are therefore linked by practices. Probably the football player was waiting for a woman to use the appliances and who would enable him to receive guests and make him feel at home in his Amsterdam apartment.

H: Our project is framed around processes of homemaking in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this approach can add to the field of migration and home studies?

C: It's my conviction that information and communication technologies are crucial in the understanding of contemporary migrant trajectories. Mobile phones have changed people's ways of 'homing'. In the case of refugees, for instance, what they have in their phones is so important, and how they use the technology to keep in contact with those who stayed behind, and to create a new support network in the host country. Not only mobile phones but also satellite dishes are crucial devices in migration trajectories. Migrant households in Dutch cities are identified by satellite dishes at the facades of their apartments, unlike native households who use cable television providing only European networks. Satellite dishes show the involvement

of migrants in their home country's news and entertainment or in the wider Arab language community. It's a way of saying that, while they are in this country, their thoughts are somewhere else. Again, it's through technology. So ICTs can help to create home, but also prevent an emotional investment in the home, especially in the 'wider home'. We constantly speak about home as located in space, but in communication studies one speaks about 'telephone space'. When mobile phones were first introduced a lot of people started talking on their phones in public spaces and moved within their own telephone space. So it would be interesting to see how people communicate in private and public spaces with their dears, families or friends, to make home in telephone space.

H: We are approaching homing as a special kind of relationship with space that involves domestic environments as well as neighbourhoods. How do you see the connections between these dimensions of home?

C: I see four dimensions of home: the material, convivial, privacy and wider environment, such as neighbourhoods. When all four dimensions are positively evaluated you could say that the homing process has been fully completed. However, when the wider home is hostile, you are discriminated at work, or your neighbourhood does not feel like a safe place you will not feel entirely at home, even though the other three dimensions might be positively reviewed.

H: In reading your work about the role of memories on the projection of future homes, how would you address the methodological and theoretical aspects of the connection between past and future homemaking processes?

C: I have distinguished several temporal levels in the way people remember, address and project home: a past, present, near future, distant future and a final future home. These levels interact. Memories of the past home being the childhood home are only relevant for adults in creating their present and projecting their future home. Children don't think of their final future home, but seniors do. The projection of a near or distant future home is for the most part invigorated by social competition among friends in similar position, which might propel people to save money to make their dream come true, or keep fantasizing by collecting magazine clippings of dream houses, looking at the display in real estate agencies, checking houses and prices on the national real estate website.

I have identified these five temporal dimensions of home based on how students saw their housing career. They often mentioned the desire of having an apartment with a partner in the inner city in the near future, but when they pictured themselves with children, a nice house with a garden was a more common projection for the distant future. These distant future home projections appeared to be connected with

pleasant memories of the childhood home. Most of these students grew up in suburbs, their mothers were at home after school. Those experiences were important for how they projected their future homes. But things have changed now, most children go to after-school arrangements. Many suburban neighbourhoods are completely empty during the day. The activity of these children is more attuned to the working schedules of the parents. The neighbourhood becomes less important because they are entertained in after-school facilities outside their neighbourhood. This situation is also different for split migrant families: there is beautiful literature (e.g. *The Love Chain*) on the many mothers from the Philippines and Indonesia, who work as domestic servants in places like Saudi Arabia or the UK. They earn money for their children back home while taking care of children of their employers and their own kids are raised by relatives. These texts bring to the fore how complicated it is to sustain mother and child relationships over a distance.

H: What kind of strategies would you suggest for studying homemaking practices, considering that privacy is sensitive point?

C: Yes, privacy is indeed a sensitive point, but also the extended period to study practices over a longer period. In my research project on the Dutch home I have collaborated with my students by turning them into the key informants on their own parental home. The students followed a prescribed format which enabled me to compare their parental homes. It is a way of self-reporting which might also work in the case of refugees with enough time on their hands. There are examples of research on young children and home where the researcher asks parents to send a photograph every time she sends a text message to them. In this way parents take a photo of their child, making a few notes of what she or he is doing. As parents couldn't do it during the week, most photos were taken on the weekends. Shopping together with the parent was a prime activity of wee ones in the weekend. There were of course also photos of activities of these kids in their homes. In researching refugees and their children you need to be creative. You can also use prompts, such as drawings made by them, to then develop a conversation about their activities and feelings. It gives so much to talk and you are using a connection with their real home. Or you can also ask about the images refugees or migrants send home. For instance, what was the first picture they send? Is it their face, the landscape, the accommodation? I think you need to be very creative.

H: Thank you for sharing this with us.