Interview with Peter Kellett (Newcastle University)

Conducted by Sara Bonfanti, Aurora Massa, Alejandro Miranda, and Ilka Vari-Lavoisier on 10 January 2018

Peter Kellett is an architect and social anthropologist. He is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture at Newcastle University where his research work focuses on the spatial, social and material dimensions of housing. He has extensive ethnographic fieldwork experience with communities in informal settlements, especially in Latin America, and more recently in Africa. He has supervised over 30 PhDs and his many published works include: Hernandez F, Kellett P, Allen L, eds. *Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America*. (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010); Kellett, P. and Hernandez, J. eds. *Researching the Contemporary City: Identity, Environment and Social Inclusion in Developing Areas,* **(**Bogota: Editorial Javeriano, 2013).

Homing team: What do home and home-making mean to you in light of your work and interdisciplinary approach?

Peter Kellett: Most of my work engages with the interface between two disciplines: architecture and social anthropology. I trained first as an architect, but I became interested in social anthropology to learn more about issues that were not satisfactorily addressed from an architecture perspective. For example, the social dimensions of space, particularly how we develop relationships with spaces and places and how meanings and identities are formed and reinforced. These are dimensions are fundamental to research in the fields of housing and home.

Coming from an architectural background I was interested in materials, spaces, processes of construction etc, but it is also clear that a dwelling or house starts to take on other, deeper meanings the moment we move in. Home is a series of relationships, a dynamic ongoing series of relationships with place or space, with the places we inhabit, where we live. These relationships are complex and deeply rooted in belief systems and understandings of how the world is ordered and how society works.

Bachelard wrote well about these things. He explained that the home isn't merely where we keep our belongings – it is where we store our most precious memories; it is where we come from and where we return – often on a daily basis, but also in terms of the life course. In many ways people feel truly themselves, they are completely at ease and feel truly 'at home' when indeed they are at home. And of course it is where we create and develop key social units such as the family, where we learn the basic social rules, language and behaviours – a type of social palimpsest for the building blocks of society. In this way the home locates and

spatially defines these activities and plays a key role in configuring and reinforcing these relationships.

So despite some good intentions and initiatives, particularly in recent years, standard architectural training and practice doesn't adequately engage with these issues. So later, when I was already active in housing research and teaching I decided I really needed to gain a more substantive and systematic understanding of human behaviour and social norms. So I became a student again and studied for a degree in Social Anthropology at Durham University. This proved to be a really productive, stimulating (and enjoyable!) experience; and more importantly, it confirmed my belief in the complementarity of the two disciplines.

Over the years I've enjoyed working and writing with people from a range of disciplines, institutions, cultures and countries. Dealing with people from other backgrounds very much enriches our work. It also highlights the limitations and artificiality of how we draw disciplinary boundaries. Fortunately interdisciplinary work is now being formally encouraged by research funders – because at last they are realising the advantages and gains to be made. This is very encouraging. However it is not always easy, as some people can be remarkably tribal and defensive about what they regard as their territory. But having dual qualifications is very liberating – perhaps in a similar way to bilingualism - where having at least two ways of framing, thinking and describing the world offers much richer dimensions and opens up other possibilities and interpretations. It's a bit like moving from black and white into HD colour!

HT: What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching housing and built environments as lived spaces?

PK: We've been talking about conceptual space, and architecture is effective at that level. But it is severely limited in understanding lived space – particularly the experience of everyday life. Let me briefly illustrate this with two contrasting examples.

Some years ago I set up a research project on post-war housing in Britain. Numerous mass housing projects were being demolished and I was researching why, in particular why so many people did not want to live there. I focused in detail on one particular project (in fact I had visited it as an undergraduate student, as our professors had identified it as exemplary). There was nothing apparently wrong with the housing in a physical sense, but for most people I interviewed it was clearly so different to what they wanted and expected. Although when new it was popular, not least as it offered better conditions compared to where they lived previously – a warmer, dryer place with full 'modern' facilities – it fell seriously short in other respects, and was certainly not an easy place to live in. Those who were able to moved out and it became increasingly difficult to find new tenants. I interviewed the chief architect and planner of the project, and from his perspective the problem lay entirely with the residents: they simply didn't appreciate the place and did not adopt the 'correct' attitudes and behaviour! This enormous gap in perspective was exacerbated by differences in class,

income and life experiences. But also in training: nothing prepared him to really understand the residents (who were not technically the clients) and he was incapable of appreciating the challenges they faced. And of course he did not see it necessary to even try understand what it was like to live there. The relatively modest time I spent when visiting the project and talking with residents helped me build up a picture of life there, but it was inevitably limited.

At that time I also began another research project - which I spoke about in my talk – to examine how ordinary people in a city in Colombia were building their own houses in an illegal squatter settlement, starting from scratch. Fortunately I already knew two brothers from the settlement who invited me to live with their family while I was there. It proved enormously advantageous in multiple ways, and I very quickly appreciated the value and benefits of living in the place I was studying. In some ways it is obvious - if you really want to know about places you must live in them, and this is particularly true of dwelling environments and home-making processes. This of course is fundamental to the ethnographic approach developed in social anthropology: you live in the place, you live with the people, you experience it with your body, you feel the heat and the cold, hear the noises and eat the food from that very place. You observe, engage and participate to build up insights into how they see their world.[1]

Careful, meticulous ethnographic fieldwork doesn't resolve all issues - there are inevitable challenges related to positionality, ethics and perhaps most importantly, time itself. Trust cannot be established overnight. Secure and meaningful relationships take time to build up – and this is often not possible given funding constraints and timescales. In some respects longitudinal approaches can help. With the fieldwork in Colombia I was unable to go for longer than 2 months on any occasion – but I returned when possible. I first collected data in 1986 and have returned multiple times over the next three decades. This proved highly effective in documenting change through time and across the generations, and I don't believe I could have done this work without spending so much time in the place with the people. And although very demanding it's a privilege to spend the necessary time with them to really appreciate what they do, their motivations and the challenges they face. I don't know how it would be possible to write and speak with authority and conviction without directly experiencing these social phenomena first hand.

HT: Our project is a multi-site, collaborative research framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary mobilities. What do you think this investigation could add to the field of social integration, marginality and vulnerability?

PK: I'm very impressed from what I know about your project. The scale of migration, particularly inter-continental migration, has never been higher, and the implications for both

[1] Kellett, P. (2012) *'Living in the field: ethnographic experience of place'* **ARQ: Architectural Review Quarterly**, Vol 15 (4), 341-346.

migrants and host communities are critical – therefore I strongly welcome this international comparative project.

Where we are geographically located is a fundamental issue for human societies. People have strong ideas of who belongs where, whose land is whose and so forth. So the issue of how we make ourselves at home is an important one; and perhaps even more important is how we re-make home, how we relocate and reposition ourselves socially as well as spatially. Personally I find it fascinating to be focusing on the dwelling space, but I am encouraged that you are also looking at the broader picture, at how we dwell within broader contexts too. Insights gained from exploring the interplay between these levels should offer valuable lessons.

You are researching different countries and urban places, and there are likely to be commonalities as well as significant differences across them. And as I understand it, in all sites you are considering how people make home at different scales, from the dwelling place to the social, societal level. It's very pertinent to think about all these dimensions. I am unsure whether the timescale of your project will allow this – but it would be fascinating to follow individuals, households and communities through time (as well as space) – to tease out which issues and factors lead to positive outcomes – for migrants as well as host communities. As I mentioned earlier, such longitudinal perspectives have significant potential.

Undoubtedly this work will have policy implications, as well as theoretical and empirical contributions, to address some of the most pressing social policy challenges and debates around vulnerability and social integration. These issues are manifest in different ways throughout the European Union, and I look forward to the findings of your study.

HT: We are approaching homing as a special kind of relationship with place that involves domestic environments as well as larger entities such as neighbourhoods and cities. What kind of relationships do you identify between these spaces of attachment?

PK: Throughout my research I've focused largely on housing at the level of the household, but I've done some work on neighbourhoods too. It's interesting because in Colombia and many parts of Latin America they have clear definitions of neighbourhood - which could perhaps be also true here in Italy. In Britain we do have demarcated areas, but the boundaries are not necessarily clear, nor known to all residents and there is no systematic approach to neighbourhood organisations. However in the *barrios* in Colombia the *juntas de accion comunal* are neighbourhood-based organisations with legal status (even when settlements are not yet legalised) which combines the social with the spatial. There are expectations in terms of the communities and their activities. That sense of definition of neighbourhood is very helpful in the Colombian context because people can identify with their community at a local level and do things together, supported by the legal, formal character of the organisation based on clear geographical borders. This is also true in Indonesia, where the urban

kampongs are very well organised at street level as well as neighbourhoods as a whole. Meetings are formalised and elected community officials and leaders of different groups are held in high esteem.

The collective dimension is particularly important for people who are not only building new settlements, but also building communities. The nature of the interplay between them is complex and dynamic, and has been well-studied in the Latin American context, where settlement formation is often intimately linked to political processes and social movements. In the neighbourhoods I was studying, the early stages - particularly the land occupation (or invasion) and layout of streets and plots, rely on collective organisation. Not least to defend the occupation from efforts by the police to dislodge them. These are followed by long term efforts to organise electricity supply, improve roads etc and to plan and build schools and health clinics. They then put pressure on the municipality, infrastructure companies, education and health authorities to upgrade and integrate the settlement with full services – including supplying teachers and doctors. It is very impressive what can be achieved in a context where the local authorities are flexible and forward looking despite the lack of legal land titles. However in a country destabilised by long term violence there are dangers of being too outspoken and radical. Three community leaders in the settlement I am studying have been murdered and one forced into exile. In addition, over half of the households I interviewed had experienced the violent death of family members or close relatives. One occurred a few streets away during one of my stays. I find it remarkable how resilient most people are despite this climate of violence which could so easily undermine their ontological security.[2]

HT: Considering your work about informal settlements in different countries, what are some key methodological and theoretical caveats to consider in researching home in a comparative perspective?

PK: Spending time in Latin America and also conducting research in other locations, I am amazed not only by the variations and differences between how people create dwelling places for themselves and their communities – but also the similarities. In my research unit at Newcastle we have carried out a number of international comparative studies – working closely with local researchers, many of whom are our former PhD students. We know each other well and have already developed good working relationships. And of course they are very familiar with the context and local language. Language is critical – as concepts and ideas are culturally formed and articulated with the words used to define and describe them.

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[2] Kellett, P. (2015) *'Towards Belonging: Informal Design and Dwelling Practices in Northern Colombia'* chapter in Klaufus, C. and Ouweneel, A. (eds.) **Housing and Belonging in Latin American Cities**, Amsterdam: CEDLA/Berghahn, 223-240.

Kellett, P. (2020, in press) *'Histories and stories of Informality: popular housing processes in Caribbean Colombia'* chapter in Mayne, A. (ed) **OUP Handbook on History of 'Slums'**, Oxford University Press.

So one of the first things we do is review the basic vocabulary and ensure that interview questions are carefully framed – and that variations between different places identified. Dealing with spaces and activities within the home also brings up issues of privacy and sensitivities around gendered access to particular areas. All these needs to be discussed and reviewed as the project proceeds.

In Indonesia I had the privilege of living for a limited period with a family in one of the settlements we were studying. It was a fascinating experience and very useful – but also frustrating without knowledge of the local language. A level of fluency is vital. It certainly underlined the necessity of language in research – and makes me more sceptical of scholars who have to rely exclusively on translators.

However the absence of a shared language made me rely much more on observation. One thing which struck me was the extraordinary level of organisation and the collective dimension of the communities that we were researching. I am cautious of generalising, but it seemed that in this part of Indonesia the collective is much more highly valued compared with many western societies. There is a different way of connecting and belonging which was clearly expressed in the use and appropriation of what in other places would be 'public space'. The houses are laid out back to back with narrow, largely pedestrian alleys. I found it remarkable that so much energy and effort goes into making these alleys attractive and positive places to be: they are much more like collective living rooms than circulation routes, decorated and furnished with trees, plants, bird cages, benches, etc. People spend much of their time in these wonderfully supportive shared areas. People move in and out of the houses, the houses merge - blurring the line between the public and the private. Conceptions of space in these communities are clearly different to places where hard boundaries are erected to define and defend private territories. It was a wonderful opportunity to be reminded of how social values are spatialized and to experience and witness Lefebvre's ideas of the social production of space in action.[3]

HT: What kind of strategies would you suggest for studying the architectural and interior design dimensions of home-making?

PK: In the past I worked for a while in archaeology and one of the things we do is to record everything in great detail. You don't have many people to talk to, they are all dead! The only thing you've got is what's left. And that requires a different way of thinking about places. It is necessary to record what remains - so I was drawing exactly what was there, what is left. Of course it is now possible to analyse soils and things that are not visible, but the meticulous recording of all that can be seen provides essential data for analysis.

[3] Kellett, P. and Bishop, W. (2006) *'Reinforcing Traditional Values: Social, Spatial and Economic Interactions in an Indonesian Kampung'* **Open House International**, Vol.31, No.4, 58-66.

Similarly in researching housing I believe it can be equally important to create accurate records of what can be seen – which of course is complemented by what we can learn from the inhabitants. Through the processes of drawing you are forced to look carefully and so you notice all sorts of things, in a way which doesn't happen with photography. Also drawing means you engage not only with the space, but also with the people. It almost always provides a positive focus for discussion – both during the drawing process itself as well as afterwards. Plans and photographs can be very useful to elicit information- about decision making processes, meanings attached to particular objects, past experiences and planned changes etc. Another related technique is to get residents to draw as well. To draw their homes and key spaces and the material objects within them. I've done this quite successfully with children, and I have a current PhD student who has managed to get indigenous people in Thailand to not only to draw but to make bamboo models of the houses they are planning and building as part of resettlement project. We so easily underestimate people's capacity.

Such active processes can have significant benefits through transforming the distinction between the researched and the researcher - to change people from passive respondents into active participants. Although I have only limited experience of Participatory Action Research, I believe this is the direction in which we should aim to move, particularly in the field of housing - where as researchers we must surely play a role in the struggle to achieve decent and dignified housing conditions for all.

Those of us studying informal settlements are in a privileged position to go beyond examining the use of space and processes of inhabitation, to also to engage in the processes of creating, defining and building spaces. Dwellings are occupied even before they are built – from the first days when all that exists are fragile structures. These are slowly transformed through time into solid dwellings – meaning that the house-building and home-making processes happen at the same time. Indeed this raises questions about the distinction between them. An understanding of the simultaneous processes of what we might call production and consumption – can offer rich insights into home-making processes, particularly from a spatial perspective. This is also important in the field of social and low-cost housing where much of the policy literature is based on the reductive idea that housing is essentially about shelter – and overlooks fundamental human processes of home-making, of creating meaningful places where people can live in dignity.

HT: Thanks so much for sharing all this with us!