

HOMInG interview  
**with Keith Jacobs**  
(University of Tasmania)

conducted with Paolo Boccagni  
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**Keith Jacobs** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Tasmania. His most recent publications include: *House, Home and Society* (co-authored with Rowland Atkinson, Palgrave 2016), an edited collection with Jeff Malpas, *Philosophy and the City: Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Perspectives* (Rowman and Littlefield 2019), *Neoliberal Housing Policy: An International Perspective* (Routledge 2019) and *Housing: What Do We know and What Should We Do About...?* (co-authored with Rowland Atkinson, Sage: 2020). Further details of his work can be found at: [www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/sociology/keith-jacobs](http://www.utas.edu.au/profiles/staff/sociology/keith-jacobs)  
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**Could you tell us how home as a concept came into your research experience and trajectory? What about the relevance, meanings and functions of home as a research subject for you?**

As a sociologist, I see all theoretical concepts rather like an optician might see lenses. We use them to make sense of reality and adjust or even discard them if they are no longer useful. I recall this way of understanding concepts was discussed in a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze that took place in 1972. Deleuze described concepts and theory ‘exactly as a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function’.

So, the concept of home is a fabulously rich one to better understand our sense of self, our relationships and the world we inhabit. Anthropological scholars such as Daniel Miller (2010) have explored how home is one of the ways we create meaning and functions in everyday settings. In my own research, I have been interested in both the heuristic concept of home and as an object of inquiry. In a paper I wrote with the philosopher Jeff Malpas (Jacobs & Malpas 2016) we explored the heuristic concept of home to show how meanings are derived from an engagement between the human and the material. Home as a concept works best when it is elastic – it can be used as an optic and applied to understand different issues. As a concept it has to be broad, to really have value. I think the mistake comes when some academics try and narrowly define the home, because in a sense that limits its utility to make sense of the world we live in. That’s why I don’t really get too excited when academics want to impose limits on how the concept of home can be used.

There is confusion in the ways that some sociologists apply concepts! They often conjoin the material and the ideational realms in their analysis. I would argue that the home has validity in two realms: the ideational, to understand the subjectivities of experience, how we feel about a place, but also a materiality and a certain set of practices. If you don’t make this basic distinction, you end up with a confused set of observations. It is important that sociologists try and be explicit in the ways they apply concepts. When we talk about the home we can talk about it as a set of practices, but also as a material dwelling, or as an idea people have – a kind of mode of being, their identities as their homes. So, it is useful analytically to make these distinctions in our commentaries.

**So, on the one hand you would still see a merit in making a distinction between the material and the ideational aspect of home?**

Well, one could argue that even all ideas are materially produced... in an obvious way, ideas are physically produced as they require us to write or speak. So, ideas do have a material basis, but they also exist in a discursive way. However, when it comes to sociological analysis it is helpful to acknowledge the ways that the material and the ideational world coexist.

**And you would argue for the use of home as a heuristic, more, than a fully-fledged theory?**

Yes. When we use home as a heuristic we try to understand the habit, the human experience in the world. In this sense it is a valuable heuristic, to understand issues that are actually quite complex. At the same time, we should not over fetishize home as a concept, just as we shouldn't with any other concept. There are many other concepts that are just as important to cast light on human experience. Gender, for example, or sexuality. The idea that the home is the only concept to make sense of people's experience is absurd, just as it would be of we were to rely exclusively on 'class' for example.

**Sure. But as far as you use the concept of home, and as any concept needs an opposite... what is then the opposite of home?**

There is no singular opposite, because home has many different meanings. One meaning of home is being domiciled – you are living in a particular place – and the opposite of that would be homeless. But that does not mean that home is not significant to people who are homeless!

**And is there an opposite to the concept of home as an aspirational thing, an ideal?**

A feature of late capitalism is that the home has become so commodified and so constitutive of neoliberalism, that many young people see the home not simply as a place to live, but as a vehicle to generate wealth. So, there may be a quite serious position in being *anti-home*, as long as this entails the rejection of the commodification of home. There are people who are resisting the idea that in order to be happy we have to own our home. They are choosing to engage in forms of relationality, and ask: what's more significant for my life? It's not necessarily where I choose to live, but it's the encounters and the engagements I have. Many people want to reach out – they want friendship and conviviality, moving away from this obsession with wealth and materialism. It's a "turning away" from the neoliberal ascendancy!

**Could we even say that home is a metaphor, or that's not what you mean?**

Yes, the home does perform as a metaphor. There is a whole literature on the way that words and ideas can be said to exist – and they clearly do, although they are very different from the kind of things we can touch and hold. I discuss some of these issues in respect of housing research in a paper I co-authored with Michele Gabriel titled 'The post social turn' back in 2008.

**The notion of home is obviously central to housing studies. However, I wonder how much it has been (or can be) a specific subject of theorization in this field. Would you see any**

**merit and potential in one overarching theoretical framework about home? Or at least in advancing further a social theory of home, on a deeper analytical level than the ordinary lists of “good attributes” a dwelling should have to qualify as home, or beyond a generic view of home as the whole set of cultural, emotional and relational dimensions of dwelling?**

I see little point in attempting to develop an overarching theoretical framework on the home. I was schooled in analytic philosophy as an undergraduate, my honours thesis was on Wittgenstein and I view philosophy and indeed sociology as critical and analytical enterprises. For these reasons, I am resistant to academic scholarship that posits overarching theories or frameworks. To me, the question of theory should be informed by what we are seeking to find out. I am far more comfortable with the idea of the home as being a broad one that encompasses both ideational and material features.

**Some colleagues have written about the “migrant architecture”, and many have done qualitative studies of (and in) migrants’ houses. Their research suggests that migrants’ domestic infrastructures and routines are revealing of their life conditions, and tend to mirror those of their countries of origin. In your view, is migrant/ethnic background a significant category for studying the lived experience of housing – say, on the same analytical level as class, gender, education, age etc.? Or is migration (or ethnicity) too essentialist or “orientalist”, as a category, to really matter for research on the subjective side of housing and home?**

I am familiar with what has been written about migrant architecture and the attempt to read migrant homes as somehow revealing of migrant experience and their country of origin. Of course, in a most general way this is probably true but we have to be careful not to reduce migrant experience in all its richness to any singular form whether it be architecture, nationality or ethnicity. I also think there is a risk in treating migration and ethnicity as ‘settled’ sociological categorisations. When writing my book *Experience and Representation*, I drew upon the ideas that featured in Nikos Papastergiadis’ book *The Turbulence of Migration* published in 2000. He showed that migrant experiences are in flux and they cannot be separated from the trajectories of global capital. So, to answer the second part of your question both migration and ethnicity are useful for understanding housing and the home but they work best alongside other categories such as gender, class and capital.

**In “Material objects, identity and the home” (Jacobs & Malpas 2013) you make a powerful case for the domestic experience, and the use of significant objects in it, as an embodied source of meaningful connections with the past – in essence, a privileged space for the production of identity. This holds, you add, “leaving to one side the case of transient and refugee populations”. What if, instead, we foreground this case, in a “relational housing research optic”? Are those displaced, or on the move, necessarily devoid of the opportunity, or right, to rearticulate their identities through the home? Or can they do so nonetheless, even in provisional or marginalized housing spaces (including camps, shelters, or even sleeping rough)? Is the “embodiment of memory” necessarily a prerogative of the well-off, or is there more to it?**

Your question is an interesting one and I like the idea of a ‘relational housing’ optic to consider human experience whether it be in the home or in marginalised spaces such as shelters, camps and the street. Domestic experience does not have to be consigned to what takes place within the confines of the home itself. There is a lot of interesting research to show that objects and connections are symbolically as important for people who are experiencing homelessness and sometimes even more so because the absence of these objects loom large i.e. psychically. So,

the embodiment of memory is not a prerogative of those who occupy a physical home but to all of us, regardless of our tenure or where we happen to be. I suppose I am staking out a claim that the embodiment of memory has an extensive reach.

For people in very precarious housing - homeless people, refugees, asylum seekers - the symbolic features of the home may actually be more pronounced when compared to the experiences of many people who are happily housed. Just to give you an example, we know from research with homeless people that even if they are living on the street, some of the things they take around with them, and also their ideas of what a home constitutes, are very important psychically. So, in a way the significance of the home can be more pronounced for people who haven't got a home, or whose relationship with the home is very precarious.

**Would you subscribe to the statement that with asylum seekers or refugees on the move the mobile phone is like a functional equivalent of the home?**

That's absolutely right. We tend to think narrowly of what the home comes to as a physical dwelling. But of course, there's a psychic component to the home. The meaning of home can encompass objects like those you mentioned - a phone, even a scarf, or an article of clothing - when it comes to a form of attachment, which has great significance for many people, almost like a symbolic home. So, the importance of the home can actually be larger, in the imaginary, than the actual physical aspects of the home. At the same time, we have to be very careful not to impose rigid distinctions between those that are housed and those that are not housed.

**Would you say, based on your research experience in Australia and elsewhere, that home - as a discursive category, an emotion, or a "special place" - has something of a universal value and relevance? How far, instead, is it fundamentally an Anglo-Saxon construction?**

I am cautious of making universal claims about the efficacy of specific concepts that I have used in the conduct of my research. I like the idea of concepts being contingent and subsequently in need of being reworked to ensure they help guide our research. In the latter part of my career I have been focussing on conceptual vocabularies and their heuristic value. I am working my way through some of the most important concepts in the field of housing studies; for example, neoliberalism, financialization, resilience etc. I am currently writing a paper on the utility of class as a concept stating that it has relevance for understanding contemporary developments but only in conjunction with other concepts. To see all housing outcomes through a class lens is too reductionist. Whilst embarking on this theoretical work I have come to realise that much of the scholarship within housing studies fails to distinguish between the ideational and the material. To give you an example, the term neoliberalism is used as a heuristic concept to understand late capitalism but also as a shorthand to denote a set of practices enacted by governmental agencies. I see a role for more analytical approaches that foreground these and other conceptual distinctions.

In my work on migration (Jacobs 2016) I also sought to adopt an analytical approach making a distinction between the way that migration is experienced but also how it is represented in politics and other realms. This distinction is important if we are to use the concept of migration productively and not elide its different features.

**A number of colleagues, most obviously anthropologists, would point out that the semantic field of home in English is not necessarily the same as the equivalent word(s) in other languages. Would you see this as a challenge for comparative analysis not only of the domestic space, but of the experience associated with it?**

I personally don't think these issues are insurmountable. I think that some of the anthropologists, when they alert us to these issues, can get tied up in knots. Of course, there are differences in the ways people understand home, but the claim that the substantive differences that exist are that between people of different nationality, or different languages, is mistaken. There are other differences such as class, gender and age. We just have to be more confident in the ways we engage with these points of difference. I'm not one of those people who would ever say that we cannot make valid claims about people with different beliefs or values. Just to make an example, I'm familiar with the work of the social anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner, who did interesting research on the Berbers in the early 1950s. There are also examples of sociologists who did insightful research in disadvantaged communities in the UK such as Ronnie Frankenberg (1966) who were not intimidated by the class differences that separated his experiences from those he studied. I just don't buy into this idea that some things are too difficult to research. You don't need to have a similar background to your research subjects, in order to investigate them! I find very problematic the idea that someone cannot speak of a subject, unless they are not a part of the relevant group. I think we all have a contribution to make, to understand the world regardless of our background.

**In the case of Australia, would you agree with the argument that home, for indigenous communities, has more to do with the natural environment than with their domestic place only?**

Well, that's certainly what the literature says: indigenous communities, particularly in remote parts of Australia, tend to have a very different conceptions of home, which is much more embedded in landscape. And they have also a very long notion of time, and genealogy, which tends to be different from the European one. But again, the relationships between indigenous people and the mainstream are interactive. They go in two directions. It's not that "we" just impose our narratives on indigenous people. The connections between different cultures is complex and entails a continual movement back and forth. The literary critic, Edward Said pointed this out in his work *Orientalism* published in 1979.

**Indeed, would you see enough commonalities in the ways of conceiving, feeling and making homes, to justify comparative research across countries and national backgrounds? Or more specifically, in the case of Australia, between different immigrant groups? And between indigenous minorities and "white settlers" and their descendants?**

Anyone who engages in any form of comparative work has to make some important choices. To what extent do we focus on the convergences that are a feature of late capitalism e.g. neoliberalism, globalisation, migration and how much should we attend to the particularities of specific places and note the differences or divergences that exist? I tend to see the commonalities as being more significant than the differences at this current point in time. So, I am interested in research that seeks to bring together divergent issues across place and time and try and make sense of what is happening (see Dallas Rogers [2016] as an example of research that succeeds in this way). I have less patience with empirical research that obsesses with differences and fails to make these connections across time and place. So much of comparative research on housing and indeed migration falls into the trap of what Charles Wright Mills called abstracted empiricism. That is research that is largely devoid of political relevance and overly focused on just gathering data for its own sake. I discuss these issues in a recent book on neoliberal housing policy (2019) So, there are good grounds for comparative research on migration and/or housing but it does require sociologists to make these connections and not get overly fixated on pointing out what are quite narrow differences across places.

**“Rarely”, you write in the Introduction to *House, Home and Society* (Atkinson & Jacobs, 2016), “has the home been identified as a pivotal focus in a subdiscipline of sociology”. We have something of a sociology of housing, but little of a sociology of home. Why, in your view, this is the case? What can a distinctively sociological focus add (if anything) to the social study of home?**

I am resistant to any attempt to develop a housing sociology or indeed any attempt to portray housing as an academic discipline. I have always maintained that housing *is a field of study* and that the best scholarship can draw from different disciplines, geography, sociology, political economy and so on. Studying housing requires us to use concepts to ‘shine light’ on what we are looking at. For some research, the vocabularies that are a feature of psychoanalysis are invaluable for understanding home: for example, ‘splitting,’ ‘displacement,’ ‘dissonance’ and ‘projection’. But when to use these concepts depends on what kind of questions you are asking. We need to reflect on the way that concepts are applied and modify them if necessary. Within housing studies, I often think the best scholarship draws from traditional disciplines, like sociology, geography and anthropology. A paper by Shelley Mallet (2004) provides a useful review on the literature of the home.

So, the sociology of the home should be attentive to the practices in and around the home and the subjectivities that are constituted there. The field of housing is a more expansive field that includes public policy and economics. I do think a sociological study of the home can add to the insights that have been provided in other disciplines including anthropology, geography, history and architecture. A sociological focus prioritises the relational aspects of housing – showing the connections that link individual lives and social structures. I have always been drawn to the rigour that is a feature of good sociological inquiry as well as the commitment to collecting empirical data. I would however add that these attributes are not unique to sociological inquiry.

**There is a stark contrast, as we know, between the positive imaginaries elicited by the notion of home and the life experience of many people that are pushed away from their homes, are homeless, or subject to violence in their own domestic places. In the light of this, can we still use home as a meaningful category of analysis to make sense of what happens empirically in relation to the domestic space, including all circumstances that are opposite to “home” in the normative or emotionally warm sense of this word?**

The notion of the home has to be broad and expansive and I agree with your observation that much of the literature on the home has failed to acknowledge the darker and more problematic side sufficiently. But of late, there is a greater recognition of these issues. I think Feminist geographers have been at the forefront of this research and we now have a far more rounded understanding of the experiences in and around the home. There remain good reasons to use the home as a category for analysis in this broad way.

And talking about “homing”, I think that as human beings we are full of contradictions. We have a “homing” drive, but we also want movement. And sometimes to escape from places we once felt at home. We live with these psychic conflicts, of wanting to belong, but also to be different... you can see that with the way human beings talk about their lives: they say they want stability, but if they have too much stability they want excitement. The Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage has written extensively on these issues.

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