

Homing interview

with Hazel Easthope

(University of New South Wales – Sydney)

Conducted by Paolo Boccagni

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Hazel Easthope is an Associate Professor and UNSW Scientia Fellow at the City Futures Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. She has qualifications in sociology and human geography and researches in the areas of urban studies and housing. She has a particular research interest in residential satisfaction and the intersections between mobility, identity and home. Much of her research focuses on the development, management, governance and planning implications of private apartment buildings and estates and the lived experiences of their residents. Her interests in this area span property title and ownership structures, estate governance and management, urban renewal and housing redevelopment, building retrofits and upgrades, and resident relationships.

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What brought you to take into account the concept of "home" in your writings?

I think home is about the relationships that people have with places, not necessarily understood as locations or spaces but as relevant nodes in networks, that help you understand how things operate. In this regard, home is a particularly important kind of node, where lots of things come together and characterize a strong positive emotional connection. If a place doesn't have a positive connection that can be an important node but perhaps not a home. There is a lot of literature about whether the home consists of location or whether is in the ether. I don't think that matters. In talking about home, people don't necessarily talk about living and dwelling, they talk about important nodes in their lives where lots of other things come and go, it is origin and destination of lots of relationships. In studying housing, properties in which people live, I consider what those properties mean in terms of connections: social, economic, political, environmental, and how they work. It's a very relational concept.

¹ Revised by prof. Easthope in April, 2020.

So do you think these nodes can be non-materially based?

Absolutely. Think of online nodes, for example, they are not materially based but they are important nodes of connections nonetheless. I don't think nodes need to be materially-based, but sometimes they are.

Speaking of the relevance of home in housing studies, do you think it is only about domestic dwelling, or is there more to it?

I think the point is that, in providing housing, you need to understand that houses can be central focal points for relations of different kinds, and you need to understand how that works. For example, houses can be central points for economic relations: people have mortgages, they pay rent, they invest money in the property, they have relations with parents and relatives on the economic dimension. In the environmental dimension, the house can influence people's health and wellbeing and their relationships with the outside world. In terms of the social dimension, the houses or properties where people live are places where social interactions happen, within the property but also with the immediate and wider neighbourhood. All of this relational stuff constituting "home" needs to be considered when building housing. How do these relationships operate? Why are they important? What might be the implication of this or another decision on all of those outcomes? So it's a holistic view of what housing does. I think that housing scholars, although they may not frame it in terms of home, acknowledge the importance of housing for the overall wellbeing of individuals and families.

I think some interesting work has been done in Australia by Cameron Parsell,² who researched homelessness in terms of home. He wrote an article on homeless people's experiences of home. He found that the dwelling, an actual property, is an important part of homeless people's understanding of what home is. So I do think that housing is important for people to be able to feel home. I think people can feel at home outside a housing context, and that there are different kinds of feeling at home, but I think housing and home are linked.

I was thinking of your 2004 article in *Housing, Theory and Society*.³ As 15 years have passed by now, would you have anything new to theorize or to add to the argument you made then?

What I didn't cover much in that paper is the political side, what I call the "small-p politics of home". That is important. I've recently been focused on the importance of control, the feeling of being in control over what happens in one's house or home. That might be because the research I was doing at the time was on young adults, which are perhaps a more flexible or care-free group. On the research I am doing now, mostly on unit development and shared management of property, control is really

² See C. Parsell (2012), Home is where the house is: the meaning of home for people sleeping rough, *Housing Studies*, 27(2): 159-73.

³ H. Easthope (2004), A place called home, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21(3): 128-38.

central. Whether people feel in or out of control really affects whether they can feel at home or not in their properties, it's also important in terms of their wellbeing and health. I've interviewed people who felt out of control on what's happening in their properties who experienced severe health impacts in terms of stress, as a result. So I think that's an important area to investigate.

In my own way of conceptualizing home, I think of the potential of people to attach a sense of ontological security, of familiarity, knowing how things work like, and of control on some particular places. I think the dimension of control is not so emphasized in the literature as it would deserve to be. It is also more of a contentious dimension: there may be a trade-off, if some have more control, others might have less. What would you say about this?

Uhm, I'm not sure that is always the case that there is a limited amount of control so that if one person has more another has less. In fact I know it's not the case with my research on apartment buildings: in some buildings you end up in situations where, say, two people are trying to maintain control over the building, and they may appear to have more control than the others, but in reality they don't, because the others don't buy into what they're trying to do, there is always a push back. Whereas in other buildings there is more of a collaborative and democratic approach, you find that there are many more people that are in control, and because of that there is less push back. I think the overall ability to get positive things done in those buildings is much greater than in those buildings where a couple of people are trying to maintain control.

I think that rather than being about the distribution of decision-making power, control is about whether people feel that they have sufficient decision-making power, regardless of other people having more or less. In asking people whether they feel in control in their buildings, some of them say "yes", some say "no, and that's a problem", some say "no, but that's ok because I trust the people who do to make the right decisions". If there are people who are happy to delegate their control to people who they trust, that's ok.

Could you also elaborate on what you called the "small-p politics of home"?

This has to do with everyday decision-making in managing one's housing. For example, in a lot of countries, including Australia, laws have been recently changed to allow the majority of owners in a multi-owned property, like a condominium, to vote to demolish that property. Say there are a hundred owners in a property: in New South Wales, where I live, only 75% of owners have to agree in order to wind up the governing organization and sell the building to a developer. So that means that the 25% of owners are essentially "voted out" of their property. Now, when you think of people's understandings of what home-ownership means in most countries, that has to do with control. If you own your property then you can do with it as you wish, and you can sell, buy, move in, move out, and it's not up to your neighbours. And that's one of the reasons why multi-owned property systems like condominiums were set up, because they allow for that type of ownership, whereas others like coops don't, there it is a group decision. So that's a particular political issue that's really charged at the

moment in the multi-owned property space, people are able to essentially vote their neighbours out of their properties. Now, getting to the politics of that: imagine that the 75% who voted "yes" are actually not the residents but they're investors having renters living in their units. Also imagine that the 24% who voted "no" live in the units, and they're elderly, and they don't think that they're going to be able to move because they would have to move out, and then to move in somewhere else, and that's very distressing for them. Under these new laws, "too bad!"

This is an extreme example of the small-p politics of control in a multi-owned building environment: you have different groups having different capacities and interests who are able to make decisions about other people's properties, which would seriously affect their lives and their experiences of home, because their home as a unit would be knocked down. Other examples, which are very common, are cases in which board members or property managers make decisions without consulting all of the owners. Or you have things like people installing long-term contracts with suppliers who they're friends with or related to, which have economic impacts ongoing on the residents. So, these are all political things that happen at a very small scale.

Do you see any merit or possibility in doing research not only on housing but also inside the homes of people, and finding from the inside-out how they attach (or not) a sense of domesticity there?

Yeah, absolutely. One area I'm very interested in but haven't done any work in is the materialities of home. I'd be interested to know what methodologies, other than interviewing, could be used to understand how people change the material of home in order to make home within the house. One relevant thing in this regard is the body and the fact that we make home through our bodies' interactions with the material environment. I think the process of how we actually interact with the material environment through our bodies is still not as explored an area as it could be, probably because of the difficulties of the research methods to do that. Maybe it could be something as simple as asking people to keep diaries of what they've done, or auto-record themselves as they do activities that they repeat every day, and perhaps that's already been done, I don't know, but that's an interesting avenue for future research.

We were discussing earlier on how housing studies have evolved over the last two decades, with more attention to issues of home. Do you see a potential for expanding further on this?

I think that housing studies, like studies from sociology and geography on experiences of home, have natural relationships to each other, and there are researchers who have been working on these almost all the time. David Clapham is a good example in the UK. In terms of what housing studies researchers should be doing, I think that they should keep home in mind in all of their work. There can be a temptation in housing studies to focus very much on policy outcomes, and these need to be ones that would work for people as they live their lives. But that means there should be an understanding of housing as home. It cannot be just a numbers game; it has to be about understanding those relationships that extend from the individual to the household and to the wider society.

My next question regards your work as an Australian scholar: I have the sense that much of the research on home has been done either in Europe or in Australia to some extent, a little in Canada. Would you agree on this? If so: why, according to you?

Well, I can tell you why I think Australian academics are invested in it. In Australia, an extreme cultural importance has been placed on homeownership. Homeownership is culturally linked to all sorts of other things (that perhaps it shouldn't necessarily be linked to): it's linked to social acceptability, economic stability, citizenship. I think this could be related also to a strong migrant culture, in that many of the earlier waves of migrants that came from European countries had similar desires in relationship to homeownership. Those people sacrificed everything in order to achieve homeownership. That, in a way, stayed as a cultural norm and desire in the country. Homeownership used to be mostly linked to the ownership of a detached property. Part of the reason for this has to do with control, being able to control your land.

What we're seeing in Australia today is a rapid increase of attached property development, like apartments or multi-owned houses, and that is starting to challenge those norms. We're also seeing a rapid increase in private rental and a decrease of homeownership, and I think these changes are really interesting to housing researchers. So, housing has been important in the political agenda in Australia, which means there has been funding, it's been important in the social agenda, which means there has been interest in it, and I think it is changing in ways which are maintaining that interest.

As to why it's important in Europe, I'd possibly say some of the same reasons, in many countries. Eastern Europe is very fascinating in this regard, because of the move from Communist, state-controlled housing to private housing, and in my area of interest, that of multi-owned housing, some of the best research is coming from there. I'm not sure why there is less in the US. There is some really interesting work in the US about large planned estates, and a lot of the research on privatization and gated communities came from the US. A lot of the US research seems to be in the "privatization" side of the housing question rather than the "homing" side, and I'm not really sure why.

The emotional subtext of home as a category in exclusivist politics is rather widespread in Australia, as much as in other immigrant and refugee receiving countries. What do you think about this? Could the debate on home be useful in understanding this kind of discourse, or are they just two different phenomena?

I think it's somehow inevitable, although disappointing, that such an emotionally-charged concept will be used in that way. I hadn't thought about it before but sure, you could use theories and conceptualizations of home to analyse what's actually going on there. I think of all Edward Said's work on "the other", or Ghassan Hage's work, that could be important in understanding the politicization of home, so yes – there are definitely opportunities there for understanding those kinds of discourses.

If you were to re-define home again now, would you call it just a "special place", or also "a special node in people's personal networks"?

Yes, a special node in people's economic, social, political and environmental networks. That's a mouthful... it's easier to say "a special place", isn't it? But yes, that would be my definition!

Within my research group we are working on "homing", referring to people's wish and need to incrementally attach a sense of home to the circumstances where they are. What promises and pitfalls would you see in advancing this kind of research, in a comparative framework involving migrants and non-migrants?

I don't think that home is static anyways. Home has always been created. Home is always a process of homing. It makes sense to look at homing, but you should do that in looking at home already – that's somehow inherent in the concept itself. So if you look at people who don't feel at home in a particular context, I guess what you're looking at is homing as a desire for home, rather than necessarily the creation of home. When I hear you saying "homing" I think of *nesting*, as the practice of making home, which is a bit different from what seems to me more of an unfulfilled desire for home, in its absence. It's kind of a stage before: you have the desire, and then you might think about what that desire looks like, and then you might start working towards creating it. So maybe you would need another word, like *home desire*, to better discriminate the concepts.

I would probably call *homemaking* what you referred to as *nesting*. Anyway, you said that home, to you, is already dynamic and processual in itself. So my question is: how widespread is this view of home in housing studies? I have a sense that the bulk of people in housing studies just sees home as "that place" and that's it.

I think it depends on the researcher who you're talking to. We know home is used in lots of different ways in the general public, never being clearly defined in a theoretical way. Housing researchers who haven't thought already about theories of home might be using home in the same way. But I think it's difficult to be a housing researcher and not be aware that there are theories around home, and I would think most professional housing researchers are quite aware of these. Although maybe scholars don't directly engage in them in their publications, these are pretty widely understood and the term "home" used carefully, at least in published research. The term "home" is still used in "homeownership", though, which is interesting, because a more precise term would be "property ownership": it is possible to own a property without this being home, if there's not a significant positive emotional connection. However, this is likely to be a reflection of the use of the term "homeownership" in policy language. I think in housing studies there's probably more focus on practical outcomes rather than theoretical debate, but not always.

Going back to home as positive emotional connection, I'm thinking of the feminist literature on home as also a place of violence. In those cases would you call it "home"?

I wouldn't, but I am aware that there's a body of excellent feminist literature talking about homes in the sense of dwellings where people live and that play a central role in their lives as places of violence. The thing with home research is that you really need to be clear about what you mean when talking about home: I have explained what I mean, that doesn't mean that other people have to use that definition.