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What is in a Home?

Issues of Home and Materiality in Archaeology

*“The home is a prime unexcavated site for an archaeology of sociability.”
(Tim Putnam 1999:144)*

The focus of *Home* is currently an important one. Weekly magazines, journals and cookery books, as well as television and commercials, are overflowing with reports on Home and on concerns relating to aspects of Home, like homemaking, life style and dwelling. Apropos, the Internet returned 1 627 275 783 hits when I searched for the term Home (December 22 2005). Home seems in various ways to be important to people in general, individually and professionally, and not least to associates in commercial as well as in leisure pursuits.

What is in the term *Home*, and how can this broad imperative topic be approached by methods and theories significant to archaeology? This paper aims to explore a small selection of potential approaches to the study of *materialities of Home* in archaeology.

A field of study like this would not be an unfamiliar one to archaeology, but the term Home is not often theorized in archaeology, and we are first and foremost aware of other facets associated with this research area. Hence what we know a lot about are dwelling sites, house types, details of house constructions, and the functions of houses and rooms in prehistory. We also find some discussions about households and related terms, with reference to those who have been supposed to reside together (e.g. Ashmore & Wilk 1988; Cornell 1993). Moreover, archaeology offers a choice of studies about space and social dimensions, such as space and gender, along with interrelated processes of socialization (Grøn *et al.* 1991; Samson 1990; Gilchrist 1994; Sørensen 2000). All of these have relevance to the study of Home, sociability, and materiality in archaeology, but the possibilities of pursuing them are outside the scope of this paper. Instead a choice of most diverse examples are presented with the aim of throwing light on the flexibility of the materialities of Home together with some other current approaches helpful to archaeology. But not least, a few useful terms with powerful bearing on the materialities of Home, are forwarded from other current discourses on materiality, and briefly discussed.

Objective - variations on a challenging theme

There are several contrasting sources of inspiration to this paper. The first one is an article by Iris Marion Young (1997), titled “*House and Home. Feminist Variations on a Theme*,” referring to the challenging relationship between feminism and the notion of Home. Young often seeks dilemmas and paradoxes, a strategy that contributes to a multifaceted exchange of ideas about the area under discussion. According to Young, Home is a challenging theme, and she discusses problems attached to the theorizing of the notion of Home. She demonstrates how attitudes are shared by feminism and post colonial theories, as well as challenged among and within the same parts. Young expands on affirmative values in the term Home, among them are Preservation and Homemaking, and Home as a critical value at large. All of these are linked to materiality and sociability. A second source of inspiration is found in other disciplines’ approaches to materialities of Home, and a selection of these will be briefly considered. The third source of inspiration is my own observations on the numerous and diverse material arrangements of Homes and their fusion of connections to social aspects in the present (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Elaborate home interior from the 19th century. © Göteborg Stadsmuseum.

The term Home within archaeology has material connotations, as well as political dimensions. Although I am aware of the awkward political extent of Home in a global perspective, I will focus on materialities in this paper. In order to grasp some significant aspects of materiality and sociability I have therefore taken up terms that can add to the investigation of the idiom of Home, instead of only using Home *per se*. The next section brings a presentation of the chosen terms.

Materialities of home – supportive and problematizing terms

The quotation above from Tim Putnam invokes a range of possible approaches to the issue of Home in archaeology. One explicit facet of a physical quality is the *life supportive* aspect of the materiality of Home, as proposed by Putnam (1999). He says that Home is not only a locus

of memory and sociability, but in a sense also a complex artefact of material “life support” structuring home life. The ordering of goods in the home into a “life-support system” is in Putnam’s view also culture building (*ibid*:144 p).

Primarily the life-support view refers to the material dimensions undeniably specific to the academic field of archaeology, and of which archaeologists count among experts. Putnam’s turn of phrase shows the helpfulness of this field to archaeology. It hints at numerous possibilities of linking materialities of homes and the study of social life, and this is also the heart of the matter. Both objects and structures of numerous different categories are involved in such a process. Material support of things, arrangements of things and structures make up an extensive base to what is within a home, of all times and places, but with a next to endless variety. Main problems in this extensive field would be such as the changeability of home, and how to link materialities of Home with social processes in time and space. Among the aspects indicated is also the recognition that all times and spaces can be encompassed by the field, and should not be confined to prehistory.

Another vital aspect to the problem at issue is whether Home is a private space as opposed to the public world outside. There might be in-between cases, or cases which are of both a public and a private nature. This is a question of approach and phrase, and in this respect the term *hybrid interior* is suggested by Penny Sparke (2004), a term that should be tried to the materiality of Home. The hybrid interior works to problematize established categories like private and public, and can also throw new light on how social life intersects with materialities of homes.

Further, the term *Homemaking* (Young 1997) might offer certain possibilities to the archaeology of home and sociability. It involves specific acts and processes to which the work and embellishment of and with materialities, objects and structures are a part. It is also a flexible term with a wide range of connotations.

Home and materiality yesterday and today – a versatile theme

As no complete outline of styles of Home and materiality is given in this paper, I would like to bring up Daniel Miller’s edited volume *“Home possessions. Material culture behind closed doors”* (Miller 2001). This anthology takes up a series of material ways of making a home and presents evocative examples from many parts of the world. Besides good case studies, it gives a useful draft of how material aspects of homes are approached in ethnography and anthropology. Miller’s book provides a basic overview of classic reference studies along with new openings to the field.

Here, I will begin with an instance from another case study with wide references in materiality linked with Home and social terms. This is Marianne Gullestad’s book “Kitchen table society” (Gullestad 1987 (1984)). The anthropologist Marianne Gullestad carried out a study of how a small group of young working-class mothers living in council flats with their families in Bergen, Norway, organized their lives. The most important fora were their homes, although many of them were part time or even full time workers. Gullestad focused on women as actors in their daily lives, instead of on “grand models” of society. Identity and identity-management are central concepts in the study. Among the themes with a specific material reference to Home, is *Home decoration* which is seen as an ongoing process in the homes of the informants, and also as a central symbol. Both husband and wife are involved in home decoration, and

both have strong interests in it, as well as a mutual responsibility to achieve the standards of what a nice home looks like which is equivalent to cosy and homely. Despite the title of the book, the *living room* is given priority, and this is a room well furnished and decorated with ornamented pieces. Symmetry and order as well as cleanness are important values, with few signs of the daily activities of the family members. The living room is the room where guests are normally received (*ibid*: 85 pp).

There are many other facets of the Bergen setting, and the informants say that in this way they are continuously decorating, redecorating and elaborating their home, the frame of their life together (*ibid*:95). Home making, elaborating the frames of family life, has become a central symbol as markers of family identity (*ibid*:98). Gullestad states that Norwegian homes at the time of her field work (the early 1980s) were among the central products and symbols of Norwegians' culture. She goes as far as to state that the Home invites a symbolic comparison with the Gothic cathedral of medieval France (*ibid*:98). This is a very bold comparison to make, but an interesting comparison too, in its forceful way of issuing Home and homemaking as culture building.

From Gullestad's work we can draw some further knowledge. One important conclusion is that the Bergen living rooms studied in the 1980s had a status as a specific space in the homes' interiors – it can be stated that Home is not an entirely private space. The living room is a central material and social part of the home, but it is treated differently and is carefully looked after as it is constantly kept spick-and-span and ready for presentation if somebody should show up. In current terms, it might therefore be alluring to conceive of the living room in Gullestad's investigation in Sparke's phrase (Sparke 2004:6) and name these specific living rooms, a *hybrid interior* of the home. This formulation does not change the functions of the rooms, but gives new perspectives to this specific set of materiality of Homes.

Pertaining to this, Putnam (1999) gives a survey of an array of home studies carried out in different countries during modern times. One interesting facet is that in some studies the *kitchen* has increased in social loads in postmodern times, and consequently the other rooms, like dining and living rooms, have decreased in importance as spaces for socializing. They sometimes serve as workspaces or the like, instead of serving their initial functions. These processes of change of meaning and functions in the different rooms of a home seems, however, to be related to class and other processes of socialization, but Putnam states first and foremost that by the increasing importance of the kitchen an "informalization" has developed in recent times (*ibid*:150 with ref.).

Both Gullestad's and Putnam's study have the potentials of making evident the blurred physical limits between private and public interiors of homes. The altered meanings and functions are but a few aspects of change occurring in the materiality and sociability of homes in many milieus. Many further aspects of Home have genuinely changed since the 1980s, and in rather different ways. Changes in life style and living conditions are among the variables which have strong and profound effects on the materialities of homes, and *vice versa*. Therefore a range of additional aspects must be considered in a present outline of the meanings of Home and materiality. A few of these are reflected on in the following.

Home, bi-domesticity and mobility

It is a fact that many persons have a permanent home today, but there are a lot of persons who have not. This is another general, profound change in the politics and practices of Home throughout at least the last twenty years. Thus some people are bi-domestic, because they belong to a household of one or more commuters; many children are definitely bi-domestic as they live e.g. one week with their biological mother and the next week, or sometimes the week end, with their biological father. To make these changes of home, the children make extensive material rearrangements with the aid of their personal belongings such as clothes, school bags, computer and toys. They carry a selection of their material belongings from one of their homes to the other one, and thus rearrange part of each of their two homes in that order. An alternative is that they have two sets of life supportive things, one in each home, of basic things like tooth brushes and toilet articles, and also some toys. The widely practiced bi-domesticity of children of today often relates to divorced parents' wish to take part in the rearing and socialization of their children, besides affectionate yearning to have their children with them, and also to a wish not to play out the children against an ex-partner.

Many further reasons can be listed why a household or a person is bi-domestic, and investigations of them are known from different settings. In this respect anthropologist Sophie Chevalier discusses The French Two-Home Project implying that since the 1950s most French urbanites, irrespective of social class, have owned or aspired to own a house in the country besides their urban flats. It is the house in the country that represents values of identity as it stands for and symbolizes "the family" as anchored to their lineage in rural space (Chevalier 1999:85). This type of bi-domesticity is of another character. It concerns the entire family, and is also related to ideological aspects more than to practical arrangements.

How the management of two homes is arranged and experienced, is very much tied to social level, class and position. Members of royal families always had at least two dwellings to alternate between. But does this in all aspects really correspond to bi-domesticity? At least it is not automatically so if domesticity represents Home. A leisure hut or a bungalow does not necessarily make the owners and users of it feel at home, but perhaps rather the opposite, they feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable, and look forward to return to their more permanent and daily-life dwelling which they conceive of as Home. The experience of a Home does as such not necessarily connect to a material house, it might thus as well attach to a physical landscape.

One should also note homes that are not permanent in-house homes, but rather the opposite. A type of home that seems to have increased in number is connected to some kind of mobility. The mobile home has been emblematic for traditional travelling people, but currently other groups choose this type of home as a preference. Thus many live in caravans or house boats. People live permanently in these in one location or change location according to season. Some parallel aspects of alternative housing and homes are also taken up by Alison Ravetz (1995).

It is therefore apparent that homes related to bi-domesticity and mobility respectively do not make up any clear categories of their own as opposed to permanent homes. Instead, in-between groups are numerous.

The materiality of contemporary Homelessness

An awkward aspect of Home is presently the status of Homelessness. It is a distressing fact that today more people are homeless than only 10 years ago. In present Sweden nearly 18.000 persons are homeless (trailer on Sweden's Radio P1, February 7 2006). Above and beyond the political and social consequences of these circumstances, homelessness does not mean that people live without materialities. Inventive practices are in attendance of how homeless persons carry their home with them in bags or a shopping cart, or have set up a more or less permanent material shelter somewhere. Homelessness would rather represent altered ways of managing one's material objects needed as *life support*. One has to lean on other material structures and arrangements than in a permanent home, in order to sustain life. Another and rather new aspect of the tactile materiality of Homelessness is represented by the recent magazines organized and sold by homeless people themselves. In my neighbourhood we have the journal *Faktum*. In Gothenburg it is sold in the streets, in shopping centres and in front of the city library. The magazine is a member of the International Network of Streetpapers, and as a catchphrase on its cover is printed "We know all about life out in Gothenburg" (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The Gothenburg street paper *Faktum*. Picture by Gorm Boberg. Reproduced with kind permission by the editor, Per Adolfson.

The materialities of the homeless are thus huge as well as multifaceted, and represent as such an area of research by itself. However, it would have had to be organized as a kind of action research with an aim to do something about the increasing homelessness in the world - in this case having the aim of improving housing conditions. Without the aim of improvement, a research task like this, carried out only with a comparative aim, would in my opinion be subject to ethical as well as political criticism.

Home as a resource and as a critical value in archaeology

The few and dissimilar examples summarized above, can together provide an understanding of the multiplicity we are faced with in studies of the materiality and sociability of Home. But there are also a variety of explicit applications of the term Home in archaeology. A few examples are taken up next and serve as a device of comparison.

Skara Brae – material life support

Colin Richards (1990:111 pp) does not use the term Home, but takes up a discussion of Orkney Neolithic houses from a cosmological and social point of departure. Among other issues, he discusses space and gender in a structuralist frame with references to other scholars who related right and left with male and female as this was conceived of in historically known houses in the same geographical region (*ibid*:118). Richards shows the flexibility in the use of domestic space, a point which would have been helpful in a framework of Home, materiality and sociability.

We should of course be careful and most critical when we try to engender Skara Brae through terms of Home and sociability. However, Skara Brae makes up a most inviting example of preserved physical structures if one wants to enlarge on different aspects of the theme of materiality of Home (Fig. 3). One strong reason to discuss Skara Brae as a home is that we know a lot about the material supportive structures at this site. On the basis of these material



Figure 3. A house in Skara Brae with its life support structures. Photo: Diego Meozzi, Stone Pages (www.stonepages.com).

structures, we can inform them with Putnam's terms of material *life support*, and theorize about how people moved, how materialities afflicted and co-operated with the people and their movements and choreography at all. The layout and construction of the site show many small interconnected entities: clustered together in a geographical place which could be discussed as Home as life supportive structures. In Skara Brae with its preserved life supportive structures we can see the stone furniture, the beds, the table, and the cupboard. The arrangements in stone material structuring the inhabitants' ways and patterns of interacting, of moving about and being in activity and gesturing during their actions and interactions with each other and with material formations they themselves or their predecessor or ancestors made. Possibly new generations rearranged the stone structures in the houses, improved them as life-support structures, and thus made them better suited to their own use and taste, as well as to their own choreographies in daily life.

In a detailed study of Skara Brae, many qualities of archaeology, materiality and sociability have the capacity of being combined, and throw new light on this well preserved and alluring site.

House stables and co-dwellings as hybrid interiors

House stables are widely known in Holland and Germany as *Wohnstallhäuser*. They occur, but are not common in South Scandinavia. House stables are three-aisled long houses divided into two sections, a human dwelling space with a hearth, and a stable area with visible stall sections. Camilla Årlin (1999) discusses these house constructions in terms not only of economy, but in terms of the raising value, also ideologically and spiritually, of livestock in Bronze Age society. One of the earliest houses in Scandinavia is from Bjerre in Thy, Jutland, dated to about 1400 b.c. (*ibid.*: 291 pp).

The use of Spark's term *hybrid interior* would in this case refer to the co-dwelling of people and animals, and also to the house as a possible combined home and area of production. This would shed light on the argument Årlin takes up on living and production spaces, and add to the discussion of materiality and sociability of Home. An attempt to grasp this specific house construction in terms of hybrid interiors seeks to problematize and find the fine distinctions in notions of home in archaeology and prehistory.

Another interesting style of co-dwelling shared by people and animals is exposed through a focus on a detail in some peasants' houses, also found in South Scandinavia. These are the house interiors with a special structure named *goose bench* (Sw. *Gåsabänk*; cf. Genrup 1991: 18). A goose bench is a closed bench or counter, in which geese were kept in times of special feeding routines (Fig. 4). Geese were of high economical value in the geographical region in question. But keeping animals directly inside a house is rather uncommon, and also different from the construction of house stables. The phenomenon therefore also calls for query about hybrid interiors when the physical limits between animals and humans are blurred.



Figure 4. Goose bench (Sw. *Gåsabänk*) without context. © Malmö Museer.

Home of the Vikings

In his introduction, called “At Home in the Viking period”, to the edited volume “*Land, Sea and Home*”, John Hines throws light on the term “home” in a Viking Age, Norse context. He shows that the word “home” was rich in meaning in the Viking-period Scandinavia, covering the connotation of a place of residence as well as of the large-scale area one belonged to. “Home” in Old Norse also takes up a mythological meaning, furthermore found in place names referring to specific focuses of settlement or building complexes. In the Middle Ages “Home” was also used for the world, i.e. as “*Heimskringla*”, meaning “The Circle of the World” (Hines 2004: 1 pp). In the context of Hines’ edited volume “Home” seems then to refer to settlements, i.e. the home loci of the Vikings, as opposed to the sea and to foreign land. Hines shows that “home” had several layers of connotations in Old Norse. However, the term “home” remains unproblematic and hence under-theorized, regardless of the fact that Home is a central term in the volume’s concept.

Studies of homes of the Vikings might be seen in the light of value systems built into the tradition of archaeology, in the same vein as is the next instance.

Home as involved with unequivocal value systems

When Ross Samson edited his book on houses he defined two general approaches to houses in archaeology, namely spatial analysis and social theory, derived from sociology and social anthropology, and applied on architecture (Samson 1990:2). Matthew Johnson’s article in that volume is highly valuable in a critical evaluation of the connotations of Home and attached values in academic as well as heritage aspects of archaeology (Johnson 1990:245 pp). Aspects of the same branch of critical and awkward values are found among emblematic materialities attached to home and dwelling in archaeology. This concerns very often the hearth, and to this, critical reflections on the phrase “*of hearth and home*” are put forward by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen (2000: 156 pp).

This field of explanations shows additional examples of how terms referring to ostensibly unproblematic notions of Home, might have biased ideological connotations.

Discussion

There are already many inspiring studies in archaeology with some bearing on notions of home, materiality and related terms. Among the notions are space and gender, and this is important as it directly shares the relationship between materiality and social aspects of Home. When Home needs to be investigated in archaeology, approaches with an aim to theorize and further investigate connotations of Home can be sought in a range of references. The issue of Home and materiality is far from restricted to prehistory, but it is of importance to archaeology to problematize home in prehistory, too. To shed light on some aspects of the matter, we know that mobility seems to have been rather common throughout certain periods of prehistory. Persons and households involved in a mobile life style had to carry with them their life supportive things. So we might ask if prehistoric people had a Home? If they had, how did they conceive of it? Was home a room, a house, a farm, a village, a cave, a tent, or whatever? Was it a place, a space in the scenery or in the world? Was it more than one location?

Homemaking is a term showing that material elements of a home are used in order to construct social dimensions attached to memory and identity. Homemaking might have been important to people throughout the eras, and would have quite distinct connotations depending on when and where people were situated. Some of the works surveyed above refer to homemaking aspects as culture building. This is a problematic issue in archaeology. Expressions with connotations to culture building and culture values do all of them concern some corollary to archaeology and the subject's specific history, of which it is significant to be aware.

Materialities of homes might have aspect of not only memory, identity, and of supportive functions. There are as well houses, dwellings and spaces which are hybrid interiors – being both homes and not homes, having also other functions. Hybrid interiors might indicate a specific room or a part of a home which is open to other practices than those of private home life. They might represent an area in which social relationships outside the home are negotiated and sustained. Hybrid interiors might also refer to rooms or areas which are not exclusive to humans, but even animals and production of life requirements. Examples from prehistory and history are many, and make up a special interest for theorizing in several respects.

The term “critical value” has references in Young's application of the idiom of Home as a critical value. It also has references in values subject to critical evaluation in archaeology as a historical, academic and heritage linked construction. Both of these points of reference have political connotations of different nature.

Conclusions

The materiality of Home and its potential in archaeology has been the focus. The very purpose of this paper was to bring up most diverse themes and contexts. My aim has been to show that the terms Home, materiality and sociability in conjunction make up a multifaceted and wide field of possibilities in archaeology. Additionally, an attempt to indicate a limited variety of ways of how to theorize about the idiom of Home in archaeology has been made. Some potential perspectives have been presented with reference in some current ways of approaching the idiom of materiality and home. Terms with a direct reference in the material and social dimensions of Home can be tried in a range of contexts. Among the most helpful terms and approaches to archaeology, are those with an ability to see objects and structures as *life support*, terms of *hybrid interiors* as well as the approach of *Homemaking*.

Archaeology can add to the discourse on materiality and Home through an enlargement on issues like

- Home as a locus of memory and as a locus of sociability
- Materialities of homes seen as objects and structures of life support
- The idiom of Home can be further problematized by the aid of the term hybrid interiors
- Homemaking and materiality in time and space
- Materialities of homelessness

So to the question of what is in a home; there is a multitude of answers depending on how archaeologists and other experts in material studies move towards the problem area, and by

which theories and methods. The terms and approaches suggested in this paper are flexible and have the capacity of being adjusted to context. Such qualities are an ample resource when the archaeological area of study encompasses such a wide chronological and spatial spectrum. This constitutes an extensive area of study to archaeologists.

Acknowledgement

The idea to expand on the theme of Home and materiality started to grow in the autumn of 2004 when I read Young's article. I am most grateful to Elisabeth Arwill Nordbladh and Per Cornell who have read and commented on a slightly different version of the paper. Many thanks to the editor of Faktum who so generously let me use the cover of the magazine as an illustration. Thanks as well to Diego Meozzi who provided me with an example from Skara Brae, and to fellows of different museums who so kindly supported me with illustrations. I am grateful to Raimond Thörn who told me where to find the goose bench.

Summary

This paper seeks to make evident some aspects of the materiality and sociability of home in archaeology. When houses and households are widely conceived of in archaeology, home, and terms relating to the materiality of home need further critical investigation. The choice and meaning of terms connecting to the field of home are highly changeable in time and space, as are the materialities of homes. Questions of how to approach diversities in the materialities of home are discussed with references in selected examples from past and recent contexts. In this paper, the aim is primarily to point at the various possibilities to archaeology.

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