

The Role Of The Use In Transforming Ordinary Inhabitable Spaces Into Personalized Domestic Environments

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Abstract

Similar dwellings many times can express unique and particular lifestyles. Once occupied, the dwellers' different notions of domesticity surface; the former geometrically-measurable spaces absorb different ways of living, acquiring hard-to-define features: they incorporate new lights, sounds, gestures. These signs have the task of transmitting the image of the dwellers' domestic universe. Based on these considerations, this paper presents a case study which analyzes domestic spaces of two apartments of a same building. Because they share the same architectural intent, they enable a comparative study of the uses attributed to them. If the distinct lifestyles of each user group reveal unique domestic environments, on the other hand both groups share a characteristic, which is to defend their circumstances based on material assets. By accumulating and arranging belongings, they create the scenario which they feel best represents their notions of domestic comfort. The cohesive line of analysis suggested in this study is the duality of past and present, which is used to define in both samples particular lifestyles of each user group and their corresponding concepts and expectations regarding domesticity. This endeavor finds that the *use* of the domestic space is a key element in qualifying and personalizing originally-identical spaces.

Keywords: personal space, case study, domestic environment, lifestyles.

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This study is based on the notion that an analysis of a living space should not be limited to its physical aspects (formal concept, internal layout and decorative elements). Extending beyond the physical structure or requirements, this analysis includes a series of possible relations that place within this area between the users and their living space. This study goes beyond physical and anthropometric requirements because the private dwelling² also comprises the user's behavioral needs, in the light of psychological and social-cultural determinants. It can be said that a dwelling is not only the living space where one lives, but also the space that houses social interactions (Coolen and Ozaki, 2004). From this perspective, it is essential to realize that the needs, expectations and aspirations of the dwellers in regard to their living space spring to life in special with the act of living (Camargo, 2001; King, 2004). Whatever the criteria used to analyze living spaces, they must be associated to the satisfaction of a prime need of the user – the domestic well-being.

A particularly inciting fact is that similar, if not identical, inhabitable spaces – such as apartment units of a same residential building – can illustrate many different and quite unique lifestyles. This study analyzed two apartments – “A” and “B” – of a multi-family residential building raised in the mid 1950s, in downtown São Paulo, Brazil.

Apartment “A” is occupied by a 75-year-old retired male artist and collector of religious art. The first resident of the building, he bought the apartment at the age of 35 and decided that a phase of his life had drawn to an end and that he would not move again. He started to personalize his domestic space even before the building was fully concluded. Throughout the years he kept on fitting this living space to his particular desires.

A couple of university professors, he 35 years old and she 37, along with their ten-month-old boy, live next door, in apartment “B”. Since their arrival two years before, their apartment had to feature spaces without specific functions because they expected their uses to change with time. The family would grow with the arrival of a child; the domestic space would be subjected to new uses; furniture and objects would be replaced and renewed; the home would have to be ready to face future changes in the inhabitable space, so as not to fall into functional obsolescence.

Because apartments “A” and “B” share the same architectural intent, they enable a comparative study of

² King uses the expression “private dwelling”, meaning “the place where we are accepted and accepting, where we have a measure of control over our environment; where one is able to put down or ignore any social role or responsibility we may have”.(King, 2004, p.26).

the uses attributed to them.

The first contact with these inhabited spaces found a number of signs – intentionally exposed or not by their dwellers. Such a medley of information would in itself impress the casual eye, causing various sensations such as comfort, intimacy, nostalgia and austerity. Several visits to both apartments, at different times of the day, captured different domestic routines and produced photographs, drawings and statements of the dwellers. Considering however that this iconographic and verbal universe results from the specific context of the people it represents, and that it is subject to their bias, it can be said that such universe can not be analyzed in its true dimension. In the face of such a multi-sign reality, which is simultaneously represented by original and added architectural lines, objects and statements of the users, the attentive eye had to take on the task of ranking all this information. In order to isolate the various types of information to compare the environments, this researcher decided to “freeze” images, gestures and sounds. This enabled us to artificially control the feelings one could normally experience, allowing for the proper analysis of these domestic spaces.

To avoid the deceptive perception that differences between the domestic environments rested solely on the way systems of objects were organized, it was necessary to find a focus for our “reading” on “non-verbal statements”, which would center the interpretation and which would guide the cohesion and the interpretative logic of these domestic environments (Ferrara, 1968, p. 31). In examining these two apartments, we simultaneously found the memory – formally preserved – of the 48 years of life of apartment “A”, and the signs of interventions designed to attend to the new functions of apartment “B”. Since these two user groups had a two-generation divide, the cohesive line of reading suggested in this study was the duality of past and present. This was illustrated by the signs found in these dwellings and which unmistakably bore witness to the chronological context in all environments.

Comparative analysis

The living area

Both apartments preserve the tradition of an area set aside for visitors – the living area³. Great care is

³ “From the first samples of housing architecture built in Brazil, back in the 16th century, this [living] area is dealt with the strictest ritual. In the absence of the old sugar plantation yards, the farm verandas and the city gardens, this area makes the transition between the outside world and the domestic environment.” Veríssimo and Bittar, 1999, p.57.

taken in preparing this space, which will be seen by those foreign to the home. Traditional subdivisions of sitting room, dining room, music room and study were transported to the apartment layout in the manner of a multitude of small spaces within the whole, without these spaces being necessarily separated by physical barriers. Wall and furniture coverings, appointments and technological apparatus spell out the functions attributed to each of these “sub-environments”.

In apartment “B”, the living room has clearly the function of a sitting and a dining room. Nonetheless, in addition to housing an area suitable for watching television or listening the music, on a more intimate sphere, the living room also plays the role of a library or a study. A spacious bookshelf and a computer are in charge of transforming the use of this space. On the other side of the hall, the users of apartment “A” proudly display fifty years of religious art collection. The grandeur attributed to this work leaves no room for any functions not associated to this activity, the magnitude of which is intentionally made manifest to visitors. Meals are not intended to happen in this living area. Yet the presence of a television set creates around it a small entertainment area, the user’s only concession away from this room’s “main theme”.

This fact, as well as the overlapping of functions in the living room of apartment “B”, disclose the function given to objects of “producing” environments within the home. Picarelli (1991) points out that the production of a dwelling is supplemented in its internal layout. Together with the furniture, the home structures a complex system of objects, all marked by the parameters of consumption in industrial societies⁴.

The private and services areas

According to Veríssimo and Bittar (1999, p. 107), the private and service areas allow us to grasp much about the family’s intimacy. In line with this reasoning, these two areas were analyzed as a whole. Still according to these authors, it is in the service area where social habits are shown free of the mask dwellers normally wear when performing their roles in the living area.

The physical separation of the living and service areas in each apartment reveals the different set of values of each user group. The degree of flexibility in the integration of these two areas is directly proportional to

⁴ “From the great single spaces, the home is fragmented into well-ordered details, aimed at specific activities of the private-life routine and is organized as a system of objects, to clearly show the scale of values that define and inform it. In this respect, the home represents an ideology of the world of consumption, is fragmented to create a proper place for the electronic appliances that multiply themselves and corroborate the ideology of waste and excess, creates the conditions for a proper statement for certain furniture pieces, the function of which is to exhibit possible and impossible dreams or is expanded to dress the need of other arrangements created by the very system of objects of which it is part”. Picarelli (1991)

the modernity of the domestic lifestyle of dwellers. In spite of the original standard layout of these two apartment units, the actual *use* is responsible for drawing the – sometimes faint – line between that which is open to strangers and that which is only for the family.

In apartment “B”, the physical proximity between these two sectors is emphasized. From the living room one can see the kitchen through a glass door. Here visitors share with their hosts the task of preparing food, in a clear social interaction. The kitchen has thus become a natural extension of the living room. On the other hand, in apartment “A”, the kitchen has a discreet door to the living room and the private areas are likewise discretely set apart from the areas visited by the guests. The formal and visual restriction found in apartment “A” filters from the visitors that which is experienced in the privacy of this home.

Final remarks

From examining these two living spaces, we conclude that the effect of the use differentiated and qualified originally-identical spaces. In ascribing their particular values to the spaces they occupy, the user groups specify the apartments’ standardized language, transforming something which was identical into something particular and unique. This means that the specificity of each domestic environment corresponds to a particular lifestyle, which in turn reflects the different concepts and expectations regarding domestic comfort. Once taken over for use, the visible and tangible spaces present before the occupation assume the life of their users, as well as their values and their social, economic and cultural circumstances. The former geometrically-measurable spaces absorb different ways of living, acquiring hard-to-define features: they incorporate new odors, lights, sounds, words and gestures. Elected by their users, many of these signs assume the task of conveying the image the users would like to convey about their universe. Considering however that this universe is the result of specific circumstances of the people it represents, and that it is subjected to their particular feelings, it can be said that such universe can not be presented in its true dimension. Consequently, any statement made by the dwellers in regard to their inhabiting of that space is incomplete. An effective interpretation of this act will depend on a careful reading of these spaces, one which can dissect the feelings involving the casual eye and penetrate unbiased within the actual use attributed to this space.

The careful inspection of the use of each living space helped define common features and unique aspects to each. The common feature was that both groups share a characteristic, which is to defend their

circumstances based on material assets; through a gathering of objects and internal arrangements they create the scenarios they feel best represent their notions of domesticity and comfort. Yet it is precisely the uniqueness of the lifestyles of each group of users the aspect which reveals and distinguishes the use made of each domestic environment.

Once the user of apartment “A” has decided that this would be his definitive dwelling, the personalization he has been carrying out since he moved in substantiates the pursuit of one’s expectations regarding domestic comfort. On the other side of the hall, the user group of apartment “B” gave their home a less definite character. To the extent that all “aspiration-spaces” become and then immediately after cease to be “obligation-needs”⁵, in the opinion of Portas (1969), the users begin to consider the possibility of replacing this home for another, which can better address their new needs.

⁵ Expressions used by N. Portas (1969): “Inasmuch as possible, a space should be designed to consider the evolution of the use, because what at first would be nothing more than spaces of “aspiration-needs” soon become “obligation-needs”.

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Apartment "A"



Fig. 1 - Living area



Fig. 2 - Living area



Fig. 3 - Living/tv area



Fig. 4 - Kitchen



Fig. 5 - Door to private/service area



Fig. 6 - User's workbench



Fig. 7 - Bedroom

Apartment "B"



Fig. 8 - Living area



Fig. 9 - Dining room



Fig. 10 - Study



Fig. 11 - Study



Fig. 12 - Kitchen



Fig. 14 - Master bedroom



Fig. 15 - Baby's room

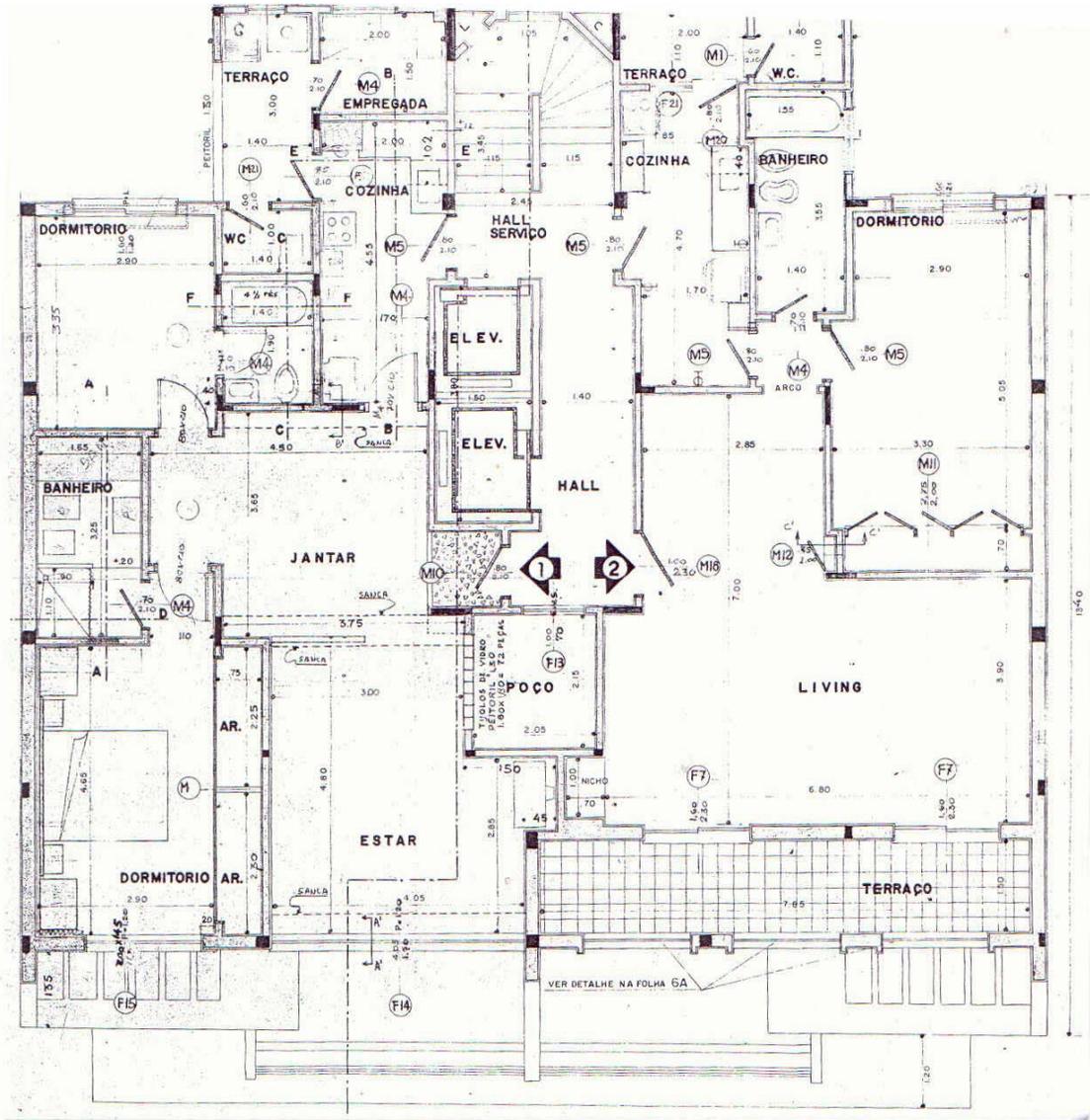


Fig. 16 - Apartments' "A" and "B" plans