

A Filipino ‘Absorbed Screen’

Appropriation of dwellings by users in social housing in the area of Metro Manila, Philippines



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1 Introduction

As part of the course on urban shelter by Lund University, we have visited, during February 2017 several projects of low-income housing produced by the National Housing Authority (NHA) in the area of Metro Manila, Philippines. This in-situ experience with close proximity to users, architects and government officials provided an understanding of the use of space in these dwellings. The NHA has been a major actor in the housing sector in the Philippines for over forty years and as such this experience serves as a rich case to understand what appears as a pattern in modern Filipino culture.

Rita, lives in Beirut, Lebanon where she has been working for over twenty years as a domestic worker at a family of five. She left her hometown of Metro Manila in the Philippines to find a job almost eight thousand kilometres away. This mother of two took care of the three boys of this Lebanese family. Her daughter, April grew up and wanted to follow her mother. When she first arrived to Beirut, to live in the same small room of her mother, she was surprised to ‘feel similarities’¹ to their little dwelling in Pasig city. Rita and her family commonly referred to this

¹ Interview with April, February 2017

dwelling space that was allocated to them by the NHA as their ‘unit’². This room has an estimated size of around 20m². How did Rita, over the years appropriate the walls of her room in this Lebanese apartment and made it hers. What constitutes this Filipino ‘unit’ and what made April feel ‘at home’³? How do users’ appropriate spaces? How did Rita alter the finished neutral white walls of her room when she moved in? Perhaps, through a ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2011) of the ordinary that she lived in back home. Her years spent in this Pasig ‘unit’ besides her family and within her culture had a pervasive advancement on the ‘propertied’ neutral walls in her room in Beirut. This ordinary inadvertent encroachment over the strict rigid plan in the form of her room could also permit a better understanding of Filipino culture and the factors that affect the form of the room, of the space assigned.

2 Literature Review

Architectural form and functions are determined by ‘modifying factors’, these active influences on the space are discussed within two segments in Amos Rapoport’s early work. The Modifying factors of house form, that directly affect form and the socio-cultural factors, that indirectly affect form. The later affects the socio-cultural aspect later influencing the form of the space. Through a series of thorough examination using anthropological ideas, Rapoport examines a series of examples from around the globe in traditional societies. He establishes several categories first for the Modifying factors (Rapoport, 1969):

Climate and the Need for shelter: Rapoport explains that the need for housing is not generic, some tribes live without houses. Also, some people give more importance to shrines, kitchens over proper housing. Activities such as hunting influence the way tribes built their houses. Also the easy and cheap access to resources is essential in preference of some people when constructing their houses. People require a shelter to grow, move and live in.

Material, construction and technology: These essential elements when building are defined in relation to the other and reinforce the importance of using proper materials, construction techniques and local technologies to provide a durable solution.

² Interview with Rita, March 2017

³ Interview with April, February 2017

Site: It is a factor that is mostly influenced by the ‘economic importance’ of living sources in the area. Also the location of some practices such as high crafts are influenced by key elements in the city, a ‘baser’.

Defence: In traditional belief, the house is a ‘survival unit’ for both protecting and storing food but also defence against enemies and animals and spiritual defence. Some societies store their food in higher placed in case of natural catastrophes. Also, some societies use locking systems and tactics to hold the enemies far from their amenities. The notion of ‘hierarchical spatial zoning’ is central to some population that categorizes spaces according to central sacred points.

Economics: Rapaport explains that valuing economy can be achieved in some societies through different lifestyle. These practices reveal the wealthier classes in some areas. Also, simple ‘acknowledgement’ of the importance of a weekly market can enhance the economic value of a village.

Religion: Religion dictates in some areas a set of believes that govern the way the social spaces are organized. The profane is produced through these sacred practices. The plan, spatial arrangement but also orientation of a house can be defined by religious believes. Family rituals organize the arrangement of houses in some societies.

Alongside these Modifying factors, a set of Socio-cultural factors influence housing form:

Meaning in house form: These meanings are established by Rapoport considering that societies share similar life values and goals. These meanings range from world views, philosophical notions to concerns such as identity, status and wealth. Also, the author explains that low level meanings such as ‘where to walk in’ and ‘where to sit down’ are essentials as these indirect form givers.

Factors of criticality and choices: He explains a correlation between the number of possibilities and choices according to a value system.

Factors of Basic Needs: Family needs, privacy, position of women and social interaction are needs shared by societies.

Factors of the site and choice: Here religious but also exploitative towards nature for example influence the way people interact with their site.

Factors of Constancy and Changes: In different scales, architecture changes and undergoes alterations that change the needs of people and thus alter the use of the space, changing simultaneously the house form.

The ways of life of people have a 'direct connection' to how they built their environment. And this is demonstrated through the seminar papers compiled by Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna in 'Ways of Life in Dwellings: Cultural Analyses' and held by architects during 1988. The authors, such as Mammo give a thorough explanation of how plans are designed and used in several regions around the globe. Basic functions are similar but considerably varies from culture to another (Mammo, 1988). The preparation and consumption of food varies for example from westerns who have a specific room for family dinner and eastern that do have a specific room assigned for this purpose. The analysis of house form through the ways of life of the people using the house is essential. The goal is to indicate cultural characteristics that the architect should be aware of when designing housing. They explain the necessity to be sensitive to the culture we are designing for. Also, the concern with utility and convenience. In some houses there are no 'dominant room' layout. The rooms are impossible to identify: the main dining and entering room are impossible to only distinguished by a low raised platform around the wall on which couches would rest more elaborate decoration. It is also essential to control or look at density in a room. The author also provides a description of houses as 'living-and working-room' that is center of the ordinary workday life of the house. Also some houses are 'remarkable' considering their variety, there was a standard size and shape but internal arrangement differed widely. Also, the changes in the social structure characterizes the stages of the development of the house in some houses.

These patterns observed in dwellings are as studied by architect Charles Correa also essential to understand within the larger context of buildings within cities, it does not exist 'in isolation' (Correa, 1999). These phenomena of influence could be inscribed within globalization in its 'current phase' (Jenkins, 2006), where they have an impact on urbanization and on the housing units. Correa explains a 'brutal' discrepancy between the way cities are built and the way people use their cities. This lag is similar when looking at the context of neutral wall rooms and how users decide to alter the walls. These alterations occur in an incremental way and have the 'possibility to grow' (Correa, 1999). This composition is an imperative work according to Correa that would 'more easily express the identity and cultural value of the occupants' (Correa, 1999).

The dwellings can then be more ‘malleable’. This freedom permits the families to ‘colonize’ these dwellings that Rita and many other families in the Metro Manila context identify as their ‘unit’.

3 Argument, Critique or Discussion

From a thorough reading of these guidelines and objectives studied by Amos Rapoport, Charles Correa and the seminar group work compiled by Anja Kervanto Nevanlinna, one could create his own cultural analyses of the dwellings provided by the NHA in this region of Metro Manila. If we start with a reading of surfaces in these ‘units’ as bare walls and floors and later try to understand that these families are reshaping these rigid plans and appropriating the space allocated. From there, a wall is not just a flat surface to divide from the adjacent unit or used for structural purpose. Rather, a wall is demonstrating the way these Filipino families live in their dwellings. It also provides a background to what could be studied as an ‘absorbed screen’ wrapping around the walls and floor of the unit. This screen is then essential to observe, understand and situate within the context of Metro Manila and the culture of Filipinos. It influences the room layout, movement and use of the space. The observation of the dwelling’s constituents and the movement of users in the space are essential. As such, the following is a tentative reading of what constitutes this ‘absorbed screen’ by simple description of some of the ‘units’ visited in Metro Manila.



Collage by author of this Filipino ‘absorbed screen’, April 2017

The exterior wall is used for laundry, it is occupied by the laundry drying feature and is used to socialize with your neighbours. A chair is kept near the door to join the others playing a poker game in the corridor. Some create simple wooden benches and paint them. This wall is composed by these object, a window framed by a light blue frame, a dark blue bench, a wooden door with religious poster and laundry machine on the side. In the entrance also, some decide to place religious imagery to ‘protect their houses’⁴. Slippers and flip-flops are kept outside. This wall is shared with the other users in the corridor both visually but also as a continuation of the neighbour’s exterior wall. This shared ‘screen’ wall that acts as a first impression of the users inside the unit has been appropriate and ‘absorbed’ by the inhabitants for activities, storage, and protection.



Exterior wall as part of the ‘absorbed screen’, Taken by author, February 2017

Religious icons are placed on shelves, such as images of Jesus, Virgin Mary and angels, these colourful religious icons are never far from what one could consider as modern day ‘icons’ (Rutherford, 1994), such as the television, the karaoke machine when it is possible. The home audio system is central to the unit; it is located close to the TV. A lot of cushions and plush toys are placed on the low mattresses used as bed space by the entire family. Some gifts mainly plushes

⁴ Interview with Joy, February 2017

and frames are placed on the highest shelves, perhaps to protect them (Rapoport) and emphasize their importance. Some gifts such as a lamp made from sea shells or statues of Buddha's are proudly exhibited alongside the extensive photo albums. The wall is a reinterpretation of the family tree and is composed of birthday, wedding but also studio shot pictures. Certificate of the children with some of their 'art works' are hung to the wall using simple tape on a yellow wall for example. The colourful walls are a frame to pictures stuck to the wall using tape. The kids draw directly on the coloured walls. The images of the kids during formal photoshoots are organized by coloured frames and placed by age. These 'family icons' become essential to showcase. Shelves can be made of different compartments that close up and stock mostly clothes, plush and bed sheets, mostly placed in bedrooms but also specific areas dedicated to storage. Fans in different sizes are placed at each end to keep the users cooled. These standard models have a large circular base that occupy the floor surface. The influence of icons and graphic representation are expressed within this 'screen'.



'Modern day icons' as part of the 'absorbed screen', Taken by author, February 2017

The kitchen is central; it is well organized with hooks for the many utensils ready to be used directly. Also this storing where the elements are all visible is easier in small areas without necessitating opening and closing of drawers in cramped space during lunch times. An electrical

fan or window is close by to avoid long lasting odours in the unit. Also, bottles of frying oil and other oils are stocked in arranged plastic baskets. The kitchen walls are them upholstered with the utensils. Also, part of the kitchen is tiled on the higher part of the wall. There is a wish to extend the color scheme and identity of this area. The carmine red tiles with stripes of white motifs and fruits design extend the pale pink walls of the room. On the table of the kitchen area there is always food that is being prepared or that can be eaten at all time. Here a series of cups with gelatine desert prepared for the *Halo-halo*⁵. It is probably the most organized area in the house. In an effort to hide the large blue water reservoirs some built wooden closets that are later painted in the same pink tone. The fridge is always ‘blocking the road and takes too much space’ according to Mary⁶. The couch adjacent to this area is covered by a shiny orange and blue combination of flowers that both echo around the striped pink walls. Jars of sardines, juice, corn beef, tunas are stocked in large amounts on shelves. The coffee patches, ‘crispy fry breading’ and chips are also kept in great quantity. These elements that testify a consumerist excessive habit could be studied as a symptom of US rule over the Philippines and now inscribed within a modern day Filipino culture. They are ‘absorbed’ then organised by levels that permit an easy prioritization of features within the ‘screen’.



Kitchen space as part of the ‘absorbed screen’, Taken by author, February 2017

⁵ *Halo-halo* is a popular Filipino dessert with mixtures of ice cream, milk, sweet beans, coconut and other fruits

⁶ Interview with Mary, February 2017

This Filipino ‘absorbed screen’ has evolved and altered through the process of ‘distress migration’ (Correa, 1999). Irenia, for example is from a far island south, Ilo-ilo, she ‘proudly’⁷ brought her traditions of decorating her walls with religious imageries. This Filipino ‘screen’ was also later influenced by the workers who immigrated and came back bringing with them items from their working time, such as Diego⁸ who was able to provide his kids with an electronic tablet and a special stand to display it on. This screen is created within a ‘product of processes’ (Lefebvre, 1991) which is ‘organic to each society’ (Correa, 1999).

4 Urban Shelter Design

Sometimes, requests and desires of users can help us, architects to better our design proposals. Irenia and Diego, both expressed their desires to be considered by architects as a special category of users. Their families are composed similarly to many other Filipino households with one particularity: a father/ a mother (or both) work abroad, from their family ‘unit’. The space then has to adapt to these conditions. Architects can then start to design for these families differently while considering all the other requirements that other users would express. This field study offered an acknowledgment of this new user group that has specific needs and use of space. The families with workers abroad have some specific patterns in the way they use the unit and interact with this ‘absorbed screen’. They also permit architects to raise other questions such as: what does a bedroom require? What is the importance of communicating with the family member overseas? What kind of services do they require (money transfer/ internet café)? Through a reflection on these

Once, these users are identified, the ‘absorbed screen’ is an apparent data to reflect on while designing. This ‘screen’ can be a shared space between different families. This wall translates needs for outdoor activities, storage spaces, and protection features. This ‘absorbed’ wall is an interpretation of many cultural aspects of Filipinos: the ‘screen’ is ‘absorbing’ such colors schemes, atmospheres, iconographies and furniture. It is essential then for architects to provide adequate understanding of location, display and organization of these elements within the ‘unit’. Organization of users, activities and objects in the dwelling is important to consider in this rather tight space that is provided to users by the NHA. Also, as design proposals should be anchored

⁷ Interview with Irenia, February 2017

⁸ Interview with Diego, February 2017

within a site, architects should propose a clear connection to other existing structures around the proposal. The 'screens' are inscribed within a system of other 'outdoor absorbed screens' that connect to each other and are understood within the area of Metro Manila. The proposal should then consider its relation to neighbouring structures, shopping areas, green spaces. It is essential for us to start by observing and identifying what constitutes the culture of the users. This 'absorbed screen' integrates a series of color-codes, organization elements and patterns. The proposal should be sensitive to this aesthetic and understanding of form, colours and atmosphere. It is also important to identify the main activities in the unit and the basic movements to limit the use of useless doors, closets and object that limit movement in space.

5 The Role of Architects

Architects stand. Architects have a durable control over the lives of the users they design for. Architects should stand by the communities they meet. Many architects have mostly designed specific spaces for wealthier clients and the less affluent clients, such as these users met during our field study, have disposed of a space without it being really 'designed' for them on an individual or family level. This design proposal could reflect on such a condition. We, as future architects can also try to learn from this 'absorbed screen' that form the Filipino culture. In each unit, we could try to understand what is planned by the architect and how much of it is kept for the user to appropriate. The architect that has acknowledged this Filipino particularity could later facilitate this appropriation. Architects should then stand by their users, understand them, design for them. In return, we could hope that these communities stand by us to make a durable change.

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