Chapter 5

Beyond McMansions and Green Homes: Thinking Household Sustainability Through Materialities of Homeyness

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An increasing volume of research demonstrates the ways in which the possibilities and pitfalls of household sustainability are connected to materialities and imaginaries of home. Household energy and water use, for example, are undeniably informed by and constitute cultures of home, whether through cultures of comfort that underpin technology and energy use (Shove 2003), aesthetics and dispositions that shape water use in gardens (Askew and McGuirk 2004, Moran 2008), or the connections between cleanliness, class and water use (Sofoulis 2005). This chapter is positioned within this broad literature, and takes it in three new directions. Firstly, our conceptual entry point is that of materialities of 'homeyness'. Drawing on the early work of Grant McCracken and more recent work on materialities of home, we are interested in the practices, objects, consumption patterns and energy use associated with making houses homey: comforting, welcoming and, often, unpretentious. In the first section of this chapter, therefore, we outline the notion of homeyness and its possible connections with sustainable and unsustainable practices.

Secondly, we take the literature on home, households and sustainability as a focus for a site that is popularly considered to be the epitome of unsustainability: 'McMansions', or large, new dwellings located on the fringes of Sydney. In popular culture and some academic commentary, these houses are represented as over users of energy, and their inhabitants are cast as selfish and consumer driven (for example Curtin 2009). Surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted on household sustainability in Australia's outer suburbs, so we aim to partially remedy this gap here. Thirdly, rather than focus on the uptake of eco-efficient domestic technologies (cf. Hobson 2006) here we are explicitly interested in the ordinary rather than extraordinary, on the assumption that the everyday consists of a complex layering of sustainable and unsustainable practices. Hence we (re)read the ordinary in terms of sustainability: to what extent (if any) and in what form does sustainable practice take place within the fabric of everyday life carried out in suburban, single family dwellings? Our purpose here is to read 'against the grain', identify fissures in the ordinary and taken for granted and perhaps open up new possibilities for change. Thus in the second, empirical, section of the chapter we draw on interviews with residents of new suburban developments in Sydney to elaborate aspects of

domestic practice that may illuminate household sustainability in unintended ways. In particular we focus on the intersections of familially connected objects; bodily feelings of spaciousness and flow that shape residents' feelings of home; and materialities of homeyness. We conclude by considering the importance of examining the ways that homeyness intersects with (un)sustainable practices, offering barriers to and opportunities for more sustainable modes of living.

Materialities of Homeyness

Creating a house that is homely, or homey, is central to the feeling of being at home in the house-as-home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Homeyness is both a motivation for and outcome of homemaking practices as inhabitants materially and figuratively ensure that their house is a 'home'. Many of the imaginative referents of homeyness are both well known and well understood. These include feeling comfortable, secure and able to make independent choices (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Materialities of homeyness are equally important. Homeyness is a multi-sensory relation that grows through an embodied engagement with the spaces and objects of the house. As Hetherington (2003: 1939) notes in a related discussion,

> Whereas we enter our houses through the front door, we enter our homes through our slippers … Our encounter with certain objects is more obviously tactile than it is visual. The feel of something can generate a sense of who we are and where we find ourselves – a sense of place – hence warm cosy slippers. But, of course, the door might assume this quality, too, especially if we have been away for a long time. The feel of the key in the latch, the click as it opens – or perhaps we need to nudge it in just the right place because it sticks a bit – are all familiar experiences that place us within the familiar. The place is not in the slippers or even in the sticking door but in an absence made present in what these experiences reveal to us – in this case the familiar, the routine, the ordinary, the known, through which we can recognise ourselves as particular subjects. These qualities are not represented by the slippers, but performed by them.

Feelings of homeyness grow through these embodied relations with the materiality of the house, including furniture, toys, food, colours, textures and even the house itself. They are multi-sensory and highly contextual, drawing in culture, practice and place.

The achievement of homeyness can entail very specific aesthetic and textural choices. For participants in Grant McCracken's North American study:

> 'Homey' colors are the 'warm' colors: orange, gold, green, brown. The preferred materials for interior walls are wood, stone, and brick. The only acceptable material for furniture construction is wood. Fabrics for furniture are relatively unfinished natural fibres. Fabric patterns are florals (especially chintz

or conversationals). Furniture styles are traditional, homemade, hand crafted, colonial or antique ... Objects are homey when they have a personal significance for the owner. (McCracken 1989: 169)

In these households careful combinations of the correct colours, textures and fabrics, mediated by culture, taste and personal significance, worked together to create a homey space that afforded a sense of comfort and familiarity to residents and their visitors. Objects that narrate social relations and familial connections also shape feelings of homeyness, an effect that is compounded by the dominant association between family and home. Gifted and inherited furnishings, for example, can symbolise familial connections and help to turn a house into a family home (Blunt and Dowling 2006, Noble 2004). The placement of objects and the practices that take place around them are equally significant. For example in co-habiting households the process of combining possessions and taking shared decisions around design and decoration is an important way in which houses are made into shared homes (Gorman-Murray 2006, see also Clarke 2002). Similarly, Gillian Rose (2003) shows that feelings of homeyness and familial connection emerge not simply from the content of family photographs but through the everyday practices that take place around photographs as material objects, such as sorting, sending and displaying them.

However homemaking is not a one-way process where people simply appropriate objects, furnishings, colours and textures to achieve feelings of homeyness. Rather it is a multi-directional relation where the materiality of the house also shapes and potentially surprises, disturbs and alters residents' sense of home. Daniel Miller (2002) describes this as a process of accommodation, where residents both appropriate objects and alter the ways in which they live home in response to the particular materiality of the house. In Miller's own home this is experienced as a 'haunting' whereby an undesirable colour scheme installed by previous owners challenges his sense of control over the domestic space by suggesting his own lack of taste to visitors. Nicky Gregson (2007) argues that these processes of change and accommodation are a central aspect of homemaking, pointing to the ways in which furnishing and decorative choices are shaped by the style and design of the house and existing furnishings. Robyn Dowling (2008) likewise foregrounds the ways in which residents of open-planned houses accommodate to the openness of the space, adapting their domestic practices to complement and sometimes circumvent the openness of the house design.

Feelings of homeyness are further shaped by factors that exceed human intentionality and design and that speak instead of a more-than-human dynamic that goes beyond the decisions and practices of current and previous residents, designers and house builders (Hitchings 2004). Houses are constructed in an environmental context; house designs that complement cycles of seasonal change and the diurnal rhythms of daylight and darkness can contribute to residents' sense of homeyness. Conversely, designs that do not harmonise with these rhythms can prompt changes to living patterns – for example avoiding particular sections of the

house during winter – and give rise to feelings of discomfort and unhomeyness (Power 2009a). Ruptures in the borders that separate home from the outside world, such as the disruption of essential services like water and electricity (Kaika 2004), and unexpected incursions into the home by 'pest' animals (Power 2009b), can similarly disrupt feelings of homeyness and give rise to a competing sense of unhomeyness, of 'not being at home in one's own home' (Vidler, cited in Kaika 2004: 276). These challenges to residents' sense of homeyness prompt changes in homemaking practice, for example efforts to re-secure home against incursions.

In summary, the materiality of housing exerts significant effects on human residents. From carefully chosen furnishings and colour schemes to unexpected and undesirable happenings, the materiality of the house can shape and alter residents' sense of homeyness. These effects take place within a particular environmental, cultural and social context, and draw in factors ranging from house design to kinship ties and financial constraints. It is impossible to comprehend homemaking practice outside of these relations. With this starting point we move to introduce the empirical project on which this chapter is based.

Methods

Our focus is a study of the everyday practices and narratives of 26 Sydney households. In-depth interviews were conducted in 2004 as part of a larger project concerned with the aesthetics and material geographies of the mass-produced suburban housing that dominates the Australian suburban landscape. Interviews were conducted with residents of such houses. They were taped and various photographs of the home were also taken when permission was given. The interviews were transcribed and a thematic coding undertaken. Two-thirds of the houses were less than five years old, with an almost even divide between single-storey and double-storey houses. All but one had both a large open-plan living space (typically a kitchen and 'family room') and a separate and more formal living room. Although the advertisements seeking participants for this study were not gender specific, with few exceptions it was women who did the interviews. The women interviewed were living largely in middle-class nuclear families.

Adult members of all but four of the households were aged in their thirties and had two or three children currently living with them. Most of the children were under twelve. The majority were Australian born and there were no recent migrants to Australia. Most residents (both male and female) were in middle-class occupations, and all were owner-occupiers. The houses represented in the study were scattered across Sydney's outer suburbs principally because the recruitment strategies targeted those living in large-scale new-build developments where project homes predominate.

Household sustainability was not the central focus of this research (cf. Hobson 2006). Interviews focused on residents' perceptions and practices of home: their furniture provisioning, decorative practices, choice of housing style,

size and layout, and use of different spaces within the house. This focus allows, nonetheless, an exploration of the ways in which everyday household practice may, inadvertently and in a contradictory manner perhaps, intersect with less resource intensive patterns of everyday life. In this chapter, the broad coding schemas around family, furniture and spaciousness are drawn upon. In particular, the first empirical section examines interrelations between furniture choice, kinship ties and reuse/recycling, while the second examines the performance of homeyness through the spaciousness and flow of the domestic space.

Homeyness, Family and Circulations of Furniture

Homeyness is materialised in the home in diverse ways, including, for example, through practices of decoration, as initially analysed by McCracken; and also smells, sounds, memories and textures. It became apparent in the interviews that homeyness was embodied in furniture, and in particular furniture with familial connections. Furniture provisioning was a key component of many of these householders' domestic practices. Numerous participants described their trips to famous furniture and department stores to acquire furniture for their new house: just the right couch to fit their family room, a new dining table to fill an empty space, new beds for children who had previously shared a room. Such newly purchased furniture, and the minimalist aesthetic it commonly represented, could certainly engender homeyness through its sense of order and flow, as we discuss below. But the acquisition of new furniture took place alongside the circulation of old furniture, and in particular its circulation across the generations. All households had at least one item of furniture that had been given to them or acquired from friends and family. Wall units, cabinets, bedding and chests were gifted by family; sometimes literally inherited. Such furniture also prompted feelings of homeyness, and the ways in which this occurred is our concern here.

Homeyness was associated with a sense that a space needs to look and feel 'lived in' – not messy, but certainly characterised by a mixture of objects and furniture – in opposition to the style found on television shows and in magazines. Rebecca was talking about how furniture in stores and magazines didn't 'feel homely'. When asked what she meant by this she replied: 'Just lived in so it looks like people actually live there and actually enjoy living there.' For Rebecca, this could be achieved through inherited furniture:

> *Well for example the lounge out here, we wanted it to look good and it had to be comfortable, but we knew it wouldn't be the sort of thing we'd be curled up on, so it didn't quite matter as much. The one we've got out there is just a really comfortable one; it was my husband's grandmother's. We want to get rid of it and get a corner lounge out there so we can stretch out, lay on it, lounge on it, but because we envisaged this as a bit more of a visitor place it's not so much to lie on the lounge.*

Figure 5.1   'Inherited' Furniture in a Formal Living Space

In this case the inherited lounge was ultimately to be replaced with a newer model that would better meet the ideals of a relaxed family room yet, in the meantime, the lounge could be comfortably accommodated within the family space where appearance was not as much of a concern as in the more formal 'visitor place' (see Figure 5.1).

Homeyness was also associated with an eclectic mix-and-match aesthetic which could be achieved through receiving gifts of furniture from others. For one woman, building and moving into her new project home involved a significant investment of time and money in new consumer goods. Nonetheless, this is her description of her living room:

> *A bit eclectic. Because as I said this was second hand, we didn't go looking for sofas, this came up at work and I went thank you. As you can see, again we've been given the buffet a friend didn't want so I went thank you. A friend of my parents didn't want the china cabinet so I went thank you. The piano my neighbour didn't want. I mean it has cost me a thousand dollars to get it fixed, but it's still second hand.*

Here aesthetic compromises enabled the creation of a homey space, one in which the family could live comfortably. As this woman says about this space, it is 'not trendy, just friendly and welcoming, friendly and welcoming so people can come in and make themselves a coffee and sit down'.

Figure 5.2   Homeyness and Inherited Objects

Spaces also needed to be relaxing for their inhabitants. Central to Figure 5.2 is a large wooden model-aeroplane that the inhabitants described as 'inherited': 'Some friends that went to England had that and we inherited it.' For the male householder, the plane was central to his sense of homeyness: 'It's just relaxing. I sit there, watch the TV and look up there.' In contrast, circulation via family did not always engender homeyness. Sarah had been given 'that buffet, a second-hand thing from someone who died when we got married. It's great to hold things but I hate the look of it'. Similarly, for Nicole the presence of grandma's 'corner thing' was to be tolerated rather than embraced:

> *Like this corner thing over there, that was my grandmother's. Don't really like that, but she's passed away now and my mother was clearing out her house and said grandma would love you to have that, so I didn't really want to say to Mum oh, it's really ugly, so I just put it over there and deal with it.*

For Nicole, then, the corner display shelf was retained and used because of its connection to family. Although not valued beyond this connection, its presence and functionality within the house replaced the need for purchasing a new item.

Finally, re-circulated furniture materially embodied one of the classic elements of homeyness: family. The placement and continued presence of such objects in

these houses was dependent on familial relations. For Julie, her grandmother's furniture was deserving of a prime spot in the house:

> *And that box there, that was my grandma's. That was just in the corner in the family room before and I really wanted it. There wasn't a good place. We didn't have enough room in the last house to make it somewhere that would stand out more, and I really wanted it, because it was my grandma's too. I really wanted to put it so it would show up.*

The case of Julie illustrates practices of both keeping connected to family and the circulation of objects within the house. Julie had a granny flat built for her father when he came to live with them from England. He brought his own furniture with him. When he died, his furniture was moved into the main house, into the formal living area. Julie now described this as the 'English room', containing objects 'older than Australia'. She liked these objects: 'I find them warmer, yes warmer … I love to look at them. Say with this bureau with its carving, I just like to feel it, and because I remember it from when I was a little girl … Oh yes, oh yes, I love to have that furniture. I'd rather have that than go and buy it.' The granny flat became a temporary holding space for mobile children and their objects. The youngest daughter's furniture occupied the granny flat while she was away.

Family spaces were also frequently home to older items kept because they allowed a more casual style of living that allowed family members to relax and not worry about dirt and cleanliness. Justine kept her old couches for her dogs to sit on and also used them when she was eating a 'messy' meal, like spaghetti. Similarly Vera retained old couches for her children to use:

> *This is the games room. The kids play here, and with their friends. And if I've got extra things, furniture, I keep them here instead of putting them in the rubbish. They [couches] are old, very old, from the old, old house. But I just keep it for the kids, or just in case people are sometimes here.*

Children and children's spaces become the recipients of furniture that is no longer fashionable or is simply old. Rumpus and family rooms become dumping grounds for 'old stuff'.

Homeyness in these households had a number of intersecting materialities – of colours, aesthetics, textures and objects. In terms of furniture, which has been our focus here, furniture gifted by friends and family was associated with homeyness, and eclectic rather than modernist and minimalist aesthetics; while the parts of the house most identified as homey were family rooms, rumpus rooms and, sometimes, children's bedrooms.

Flows

While the previous section focused on the flow of furniture into and through the house, and the ways such flows were held together (or fell apart) according to notions of family and style, in this section we focus on people's senses of flow. Flow was both a visual and whole-of-body experience that gave rise to feelings of homeyness through a sense of freedom, mobility and comfort. Specifically, homeyness was enabled through an embodied sense of openness and flow tied to house size and design. It is in this intersection between flow and size that domestic practice becomes entwined in complex ways with the materiality of household sustainability.

Feelings of openness and flow were both a visual and whole-of-body experience. Visual flow was about the ways the space was encountered when entering or living in a space: it was about the ease through which people felt they could take in the space as the eye moves across its landscape of objects, furnishings, textures and light, and the feelings that this gave rise to, whether feelings of relaxation, comfort or anxiety. Feelings of visual flow were tied up with norms of domestic practice, particularly around dirt and tidiness. Flow could be restricted by clutter, described as an excessive number of decorative items, including photographs, as well as through the presence of overly detailed or 'fancy' objects, such as ornaments. Belinda maintained her own home according to a modern, minimalist aesthetic, but discussed feeling anxious when visiting houses that she felt were cluttered (see Figure 5.3):

> *I hate walking into a house and you feel like if you move you're going to knock something over because it's small and then they've crammed all these ornaments and things onto shelves everywhere and yeah, it's just like, it's like it's stressful, you don't know where to look because there's so many things … it makes you start to feel tired in some ways.*

Participants also experienced their own homes this way, but expressed a more ambiguous relation to 'clutter', which typically consisted of significant family items like children's toys, photographs and ornaments. For example the clutter in Rose's current home was experienced as familial and homey, but also as making the space feel small. Rose and her husband were excited about moving to a larger house described as having a more 'sterile' look and feel: this home would absorb rather than simply contain the objects, transforming them from house-shrinking clutter and re-establishing their value as homey objects.

Flow and openness was also a whole-of-body experience, with feelings of homeyness associated with easy navigation and mobility through the house (cf. Imrie 2004 on disability and house design). Whereas visual flow entailed an encounter *with* objects, bodily flow took place in the spaces around and between the objects and walls inside the house. Feelings of flow were enabled through a sense of openness, as Jenny explained of her open-planned house: 'You don't feel

Figure 5.3   Spaciousness, Flow and Minimalism

boxed in, you don't feel confined to a certain room or certain area, you're sort of free to come and go.'

By contrast, flow was frustrated by smaller or less open spaces, particularly those that additionally performed as a thoroughfare. Flow thus took place around other inhabitants of the house, with children having a particular capacity to crowd and fill up a space. In June's previous house the kitchen was smaller *and* provided a route to the dining room; her children frequently filled up and ran through the kitchen while she was cooking. The new, more open-planned home sequestered the kitchen from family travel, providing a sense of sociality and openness where, when 'the children are here they can do their homework but in a separate bit, not on top of me when I'm trying to cook and run around the kitchen getting stuff out of the drawers and that'. The sense of openness supported familial togetherness while also affording June space to complete kitchen tasks. Rose likewise described her new 'nice big kitchen. One that you can actually walk in and walk out [of] so it's not cluttered, so you're not walking all over each other'. This sense of easy mobility was central to homeyness and provided an important motivation for moving house.

Senses of homeyness were also shaped by the flow of objects, sounds and light through the house, although these different elements often sat in tension with each other. Children and teenagers were a key challenge, with adults concerned to limit the movement of children's toys and noise throughout the house so that

they could have child-free time and space or, alternatively, to minimise the spread of adult conversation into children's sleeping areas. For these purposes a large, closed-off house was valued, allowing toys and sounds, including conversations and television, to be contained in specific areas. Yet at the same time participants emphasised the importance of 'lightness', 'airiness' and warmth, observing that these are limited within a closed-off house. These conflicting ideals are clearly illustrated in Louise's comment:

> *I like to have light in a house, so I like the fact that there's big windows, the kitchen is fairly open-planned and I like that you can be in the kitchen and if people are out there in the family room you can watch, and you could still be playing with them or whatever even while you're cooking them tea …*
> *[But] once we had kids we realised that in some ways it's a little bit too open. Because we've got the living areas all down one side and the bedrooms all down one side, like if we have people over, the bedrooms are very close and the kids can see and hear what's going on and sometimes you just want them to go to bed. [laughs]*

These everyday efforts to manage light, sound and family turned what initially appeared as an ideal house design into a challenging and fraught relation where the design placed restrictions on the ways in which the family could live in the house, threatening their sense of homeyness through an inability to effectively manage familial separation.

Senses of openness and flow, then, were central to residents' sense of homeyness. Yet these feelings were also mediated by relations with objects in the house (which readily transformed into clutter), as well as inter-familial relations. Strategies for managing these relations frequently referenced house size and design. Specifically, flow and openness were associated with largeness and expansiveness. Through contrasts between new and older homes participants emphasised the association between large housing and feelings of openness, freedom and comfort. Large houses enabled appropriate storage, which, as Belinda explained, allowed clutter and excess objects to be stowed out of sight. Storage meant: 'You can see what you have to get to' and 'it's easy to keep the house tidy because you've got places to put things.' In many cases storage exceeded cupboard space to also include 'spare' rooms and even the second storey of a house. Justine used a spare bedroom to house her and her husband's clothes, while Meg was one of a number who valued 'upstairs' for hiding washing, vacuum cleaners and other 'mess'. Large houses further facilitated the 'storage' of children, whose activities could be limited to specific sections of the house so that their toys and noises could be separated from the rest of the household. The purchase of large housing was a key strategy for managing openness and flow and resolving stagnation in many households; many of the participants had moved or were soon to move from smaller housing stock into these much larger homes which were seen to more readily accommodate the needs of a family.

A second strategy to achieve a sense of spaciousness and flow was through open-planned design complemented by careful colour choices and the strategic selection of housing materials, for example using glass instead of solid doors so that more light could enter the house. June explained:

> *It just feels more spacious. You don't feel like you're tripping over everything all the time. Whereas when you've got, see it might be the same amount … of floor space as one that is open-planned, but you have to go through doorways and that to get there. So it's just nice that it's more … it just feels more airy and just free.*

She especially emphasised the outcomes of such openness in terms of its impact on mobility. She demonstrated how, in a previous home that included a separate formal dining room, the physical necessity of squeezing past chairs when leaving the room, explaining that: 'It was nice to have the separate room but it didn't feel as spacious as it does now.' Or as Kathy captured:

> *We still wanted to create a sense of space and when you sit in the lounge room, there's no door so of course you look [towards the sitting room], and of course it creates an image of space. Whereas it's not, you know.*

Homeyness in these contexts, then, was associated with and achieved through a sense of spaciousness and the ability of objects and people to flow through the house.

And Household Sustainability?

While not directly engaging with debates around sustainability in this chapter, we have attempted to illustrate some of the ways in which people engage with and shape the objects in and materiality of their suburban, detached houses, and how this engagement is motivated by and shapes feelings of homeyness. In this short conclusion we summarise the connections between furniture, flows and homeyness, and sketch further connections to household sustainability.

In terms of furniture, we have suggested that keeping old items of furniture co-exists with purchasing new furniture, although importantly such practices are framed by both aesthetic and familial considerations. It was deemed important that houses felt 'lived in' rather than empty and sterile, and this could be achieved if they were filled with objects that had familial connections or had been acquired through friends and acquaintances. Crucially, these accounts point to fissures in the popular scripting of McMansions as the epitome of unsustainable practice. In the case of furniture this fissure can be detected in the economy of second-hand furniture that is central to everyday familial relations and practices of home. These furnishings are not only connected to feelings of home, family and belonging but

also, in terms of sustainability, offer an alternative to new purchases. Thus it is the case that eco-efficient/sustainable practices co-exist alongside more resource intensive ones. Furniture provision associated with creating a homey space drew upon both re-circulations and new purchases. This suggests that broader, sustainability-oriented concerns with reuse may have traction in these suburban environments if aligned with everyday practice and constructions of homeyness.

In terms of openness of flow, we have suggested that participants achieved these goals for home in two ways. The first was dependent on physical largeness, materially idealised in the form of the two-storey home with multiple, open-planned living spaces. The second involved a sense of spaciousness and flow through better design. In the mass-designed project homes visited in this research the former has a more clearly antagonistic relation to ideals of domestic sustainability and eco-efficiency: these large houses were typically dependent upon artificial air-conditioning and heating to achieve comfort; some were designed without eaves to protect the house from the sun; and one, built before changes in government legislation, did not have any insulation. This type of house is a significant component of new domestic supply in Australia and was selected by those who participated in this research as a solution to issues of homemaking, rather than out of a concern for environmental outcomes. Openness and flow gave rise to feelings of homeyness that participants were less likely to have in more cramped and cluttered spaces. It is in the second option that opportunities for change are more clearly evident. In creating a 'sense of space' through better design and the careful selection of building materials that enable air and light to flow into the house, these houses are suggestive of more eco-efficient design: of passive heating, cooling and lighting coupled with a smaller physical footprint, while still affording the sense of spaciousness that has become so central to the ways in which people imagine and live home and family, and thus choose their housing. Although there is no simple relation between smaller housing and eco-efficiency, the domestic practices of people who took part in this research suggest that aligning the dual imperatives of homeyness and sustainability in the materiality of housing might be a key initial step in the move towards more sustainable household practices.

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