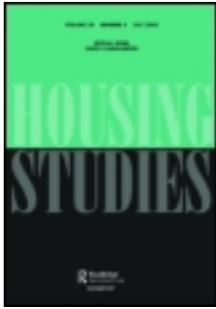


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Sizing Home, Doing Family in Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT *Large housing is an issue of growing concern across popular culture, academic and policy domains, yet little is known about how and why people live in large houses. This paper addresses this gap, investigating the cultural underpinnings and social practices of large housing through a qualitative study carried out in Sydney, Australia. In these suburban, detached dwellings, large housing is valued for the affordances it provides for enacting visions of home and family. Specifically, it is a strategy for managing the aural and material excesses of family life; it mediates familial relations and supports the production of middle-class identities. These findings demonstrate the myriad connections between familial practices and housing dynamics and adds to a growing confirmation of the cultural inflections of (un)sustainable practice.*

KEY WORDS: Home, family, privacy, sustainability

Introduction

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the increasing size of houses in some cities of the western world has become a significant issue across popular culture, academic and policy domains. In all Australian cities, for example, the average size of new houses has increased from a modest 162 square metres in 1984/1985 to 239 square metres in 2006/2007, an increase of nearly 50 per cent (ABS, 2005, 2008). This growth parallels trends in the USA (NAHB, 2010) and UK (although Australian houses are up to four times larger than new houses built in the UK, ODPM, 2003). From a policy perspective, this increase is seen to be problematic because of its multidimensional impacts on environmental and social sustainability: larger houses take up more land, are linked to sedentary, privatised lifestyles, and necessarily consume more energy, water and other non-renewable resources (Gleeson, 2006). Media and political condemnation of such 'supersized' 'McMansions' has been equally widespread, and decidedly more vitriolic,

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emphasising the ‘resource guzzling’ implications of large houses, their lack of architectural merit, and speculated links with childhood obesity (Curtin, 2009).

Perhaps surprisingly, given the popular predominance of the large house phenomenon, scholarly interventions on the topic are rare. Within housing research, there has been some exploration of the links between changing demographic profiles and house size. In Australia, for example, Wulff *et al.* (2004) show that small households do not necessarily live in smaller houses. Analyses of home extension practices, and new house design, in the UK have also touched upon the issue, but without exploring it any depth (see Hand *et al.*, 2007; West & Emmitt, 2004). Supply-side analyses have been equally scarce. The role of planning regulations in limiting housing options has been pointed out (e.g. Levine, 2005). In the Australian case, high land prices and the market predominance of a limited number of land development corporations have been identified as contributing factors (McGuirk & Dowling, 2007). Whilst not denying the role of supply-side factors, this paper begins to address this gap in understanding house size by adopting a socio-cultural perspective. We ask: what practices and values of home support and maintain large houses? As is now widely accepted across housing scholarship, material structures like houses are created and supported by cultural ideals, social relations and everyday practice (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Lauster, 2010). Houses are cultural and material spaces where domestic and family practices, social norms and consumption practices influence and shape the ways that housing, and by implication house size, are experienced and lived. As summarised by Hand *et al.* (2007) in their analysis of home extensions in the UK: ‘experiences of “filling up” and “spilling out” have to do with the intersection of space, time, routine, and injunction—not with square metres alone’ (p. 672). Social, cultural and



Figure 1. New suburban housing in Sydney.

material factors shape residents' sense of space and spaciousness such that experiences of house size include, but are clearly not limited to, square metres.

We develop this idea in what follows as a means to comprehending the links between practices of making home, doing family and the size of houses. Our argument is that the inhabitation of large houses is firstly connected to contemporary family practices that value both individualisation and togetherness, and in which the management of complex spatial and temporal routines is necessary. Living in large houses is secondly, though no less importantly, connected to the performance of middle-class identities, not just in relation to home ownership and status, but also in relation to ideals of respectability. We make these arguments about the multiple connections between house size, familial practice and domestic materialities using an empirical project conducted in Sydney, Australia. We hence begin with a description of this project, before developing the argument.

The Sydney Study

We explore practises of inhabiting larger houses through a study of the everyday practices and descriptions of 26 Sydney households. In-depth interviews were conducted during 2004 as part of a larger project concerned with the aesthetics and material geographies of mass-produced suburban housing, which dominates the Australian suburban landscape. Interviews were conducted with residents of such houses and invariably included a narrated tour of the house. Two-thirds of the houses were 5 years old, with an almost even divide between single storey and double storey (Figure 1). All but one had *both* a large, open-plan living space (typically a kitchen and 'family room') as well as a separate and more formal living room. Most had one bedroom per child, one bedroom shared by the adult couple living in the house and sometimes spare bedrooms. A number of households had additional informal living areas and/or a 'parents retreat', a very large bedroom occupied by the parents that also typically included furniture such as a couch. Finally, most had at least two bathrooms, with houses predominantly located in Sydney's outer suburbs.

Advertisements in local newspapers and flyers delivered to individual houses were used to recruit participants. Although these advertisements and flyers were not gender specific, with a few exceptions it tended to be women who did the interviews. The women interviewed were largely living in middle-class nuclear families. Demographically, all but four of the householders were aged in their 30s and had two or three children currently living with them. Most of the children were under 12 years. 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. Interviews were taped and various photographs of the home were also taken when permission was given. All interviews were transcribed and a thematic coding undertaken. For the purposes of this paper, initial coding identified themes of space, family and their intersections. Subsequent analysis of transcripts led to the development of the framing categories of family temporalities/spatialities, and middle-class identities, that form the structure of this paper.

Sizing Home, Doing Family

Detached houses are family spaces: inhabited, shaped and productive of the rhythms of (nuclear) family life (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Mulder & Lauster, 2010). Ideals and

practices of family critically shape homemaking practices and house size preferences in a number of ways. For example, the desired number of bedrooms is linked to cultural preferences for separate bedrooms for children whilst the attraction of a large outdoor space can be linked to assessment of the importance of outside for children's play. In this paper, we point to the ways in which familial practices and envisaged relationships between parents and children have changed considerably over the past 20 years, placing new and different demands on the spatial and temporal organisation of everyday domestic life. Three elements are of special importance: changing constructions of domestic privacy, the temporal and spatial complexity of family life and the changing nature of home-based consumption and leisure practices.

Home as a private sphere and private haven for the nuclear family is a strongly held meaning of home (Dowling, in press). Home as private is strongly connected to the ability and practices of the family as a whole to secure separation from the public spheres of work and politics. Important here is the notion of familial togetherness in which the ideal family holds exclusive use of, and shares, home space (Dovey, 1992; Dowling, 2008). In this study, the house becomes a family home through providing spaces and opportunities for members of the family to be together, to relax and feel secure in their shared living space. But the experiences of houses by families are also shaped by desires for familial 'separateness', what Munro & Madigan (1993) aptly term 'privacy in the private sphere'. In this construction of privacy the ability of individual family members to secure and maintain a sense of physical or social separation from other members is equally important. Munro & Madigan's (1999) research shows that domestic architecture and interior design play a role in securing privacy within the private sphere. The building of walls, the strategic placement of furniture, and the provision of single-use rooms like studies/dens/home offices help facilitate privacy from other family members. Such privacy is also secured through social negotiation between inhabitants, whether through formally agreed scheduling of activities within a shared space or informal negotiations as occasions demand. These social negotiations are arguably gendered, with men having greater freedom to achieve privacy and independence within the home than women (especially those who are mothers), who more often fit own needs and work requirements around the activity, space and time demands of children (Everingham, 2002; Munro & Madigan, 1999; Tietze & Musson, 2002). In our Sydney research, both architectural and social responses to maintaining privacy in the private sphere shaped the inhabitation of large houses.

The complex spatial and temporal rhythms of contemporary family life play an important role in shaping the experience and management of privacy in the home. A number of cross-disciplinary studies of families and housing have shown that the temporal and spatial routines of individuals and families are increasingly fractured: family-centred home life is much more than family members spending time together, doing the same activity, in the same space. The growing cultural valuation of individual needs and desires within family routines is manifest as a preference for individualised spaces within the home. Contemporary cultures of parenting and childhood in which children's and parents activities are asynchronous and spatially diverse (Schwanen *et al.*, 2007) place different demands on home spaces. Finally, there is the increased interpenetration of work and household/family times as flexible work practices and mobile technologies allow paid work and the temporal expectations of the workplace to be brought into the home (Jarvis & Pratt, 2006; Kaufman-Scarborough, 2006; Tietze & Musson,

2002). Together, these shifting practices and values sit in tension with the traditional valuing of family togetherness and place new demands on the existing housing stock.

Research points to the multiple ways that these tensions are spatially and temporally accommodated within existing houses, for example, through 'juggling' responsibilities (Daly, 1996; Everingham, 2002; Rutherford, 2001), sequestering time and space for home-based employment (Tietze & Musson, 2002), 'eating on the go' (Daly, 1996), time zoning the use of shared living spaces, using paid home help (Jarvis, 2005) and enabling rooms, such as bedrooms (Munro & Madigan, 1999) and kitchens (Hand *et al.*, 2007), as multifunctional spaces. The materiality of home, including home designs and layout, plays a crucial role mediating complex home times by allowing time away, or facilitating multitasking. For example, Dowling's (2008) work suggests a valuing of open-plan design because of its facilitation of multitasking and a sense of control. This link between familial values and rhythms and house design is one that we take further in this paper. For the households in this research, the inhabitation of spatially expansive homes was an alternative way of enacting a familial ideal that embraced both independence and togetherness for family members. As aptly summarised by one participant, Paula¹ their house was ideal in that it provided 'enough space for us to lose ourselves and there's enough room for us to come together as a family basically.' In what follows we elaborate on what this means.

Large houses were firstly valued as a way of achieving privacy within family. In particular they facilitated generational privacy, allowing children and adults to have time and space for independent activities. In many households, as Fiona explains, this desire for privacy within family underpinned the search for a new home.

We had the needs of a growing family I guess, we wanted enough yard space to build a pool and we wanted to have enough rooms within the house where the children can go and spend time on their own, and we've got some privacy by spending some time on our own as well.

Likewise, Louise observed that the decision to move

afforded us the opportunity to have a larger home, with a lot more separate entertaining areas, which we hadn't had the opportunity to have before, so it allowed us to expand our lifestyle, both with teenage children, allowing them to have their own space, as well as the adults having their space, which we hadn't had the opportunity to do before.

These comments point to the spatial and temporal affordances of large housing. Multiple living spaces enabled parents to have time and space away from their children, and in turn afforded children a sense of privacy and independence. This is a significant contrast to the practices of negotiation, time zoning and activity juggling that have characterised the everyday relations of families living in existing, smaller housing stock. As Karen, one of the few participants who lived in a small house commented:

Um, well we're in the living room, that's where we seem to spend most of our time and it's an alright size living room, but we feel that we need another sort of big room, and we can't get away from one another. K and I have both grown up in pretty big

houses where being cramped and crowded was never an issue. He used to work night shifts as well and we found that very difficult with him sleeping, even if I was trying to be quiet out here I couldn't be quiet all the time. It's just hard, we need more room.

Large houses allowed separations between parents and children to be achieved in three ways: through (1) containment, (2) exclusion of children and (3) opportunities to undertake independent activities within one expansive space. Firstly, children's 'mess' and 'noise' could be contained into particular sections of the house:

They make their mess and their noise upstairs; they just muck around up there whereas my husband and I have time out downstairs and talk about the day (Louise).

[my ideal house would have] two or three storeys so you can get peace and quiet in one area of the house so if the kids want to make noise and have their videos on and DVDs on or karaoke or whatever they want then you can just go up to another end of the house and relax. Everyone can have their own space (Belinda).

In these instances, containment was expressed as a way for parents to achieve separation from children's excess, particularly from the toys of younger children and the noise of older children and teenagers.

Containment was frequently framed as a positive, child-centred parenting practice, as Lorraine explained:

I wanted to put all their toys in one spot. I've seen so many other people that have been oh, I can't stand this there's kids toys all over the house, and I thought no, I'd like to have a play room that there's to play in, that they feel they can do what they like to do, they can be creative, they can be horrible to each other in, it's like a really nice safe room for kids that they can go into and be what they want to be like.

Articulated this way containment became a practice that enabled children to have space for unbridled creativity and independence, an affordance that was perceived to be bound up with the provision of a spatially expansive home. In this way, the inhabitation of large homes became tied to discourses of (good) parenting. Importantly, these are middle-class discourses of parenting, which adumbrate not only the number of bedrooms required (see Lauster & Tester, 2010), but also the amount of communal space appropriate to respectable middle-class life.

Secondly, large houses facilitated further separation between children and parents through the practice of excluding children from sections of the house. In the majority of households formal living and dining spaces were designed as adult zones.

the other house had one main living area and we wanted two, so we wanted a more formal one, and one for the family, the children (Kirsten).

This is the room that's tidy, most of the time, but you're not sitting there looking at all of the things that need doing. [. . .]. . . this is a toy free zone. Toys, and they've



Figure 2. In this study, the kitchen, informal dining room and two living/lounge rooms were provided in the one open-planned space; the formal dining and lounge room were connected through a doorway.

been told that if they bring toys in here daddy will throw them out [laughs] so, well it's the only way to have a clean area (Jan).

These rooms were conceived as adult spaces from which children and children's toys were actively excluded. Yet, interestingly, they did not become regular adult retreats. Rather, they were isolated from everyday family activity and retained as permanently tidy spaces available for use by adult visitors. As Jan's comment reveals, the adult focus and the tidiness of these spaces was at times aggressively guarded.

A third way that large houses accommodated changing family ideals was through the provision of expansive spaces that allowed family members to be together and separate within the one space. Despite the emphasis on independence, privacy and separation in the home, and the importance of practices oriented at separating and containing children and adults within the home, households in the research did not eschew togetherness. Rather, family time, the coming together of family members for meals or to watch television, was valued and practiced by all households. What is most significant in this research are the novel opportunities that large houses offer for resolving the tension between ideals of familial togetherness and the desire for privacy and individualism, in particular, by allowing residents to be together *and* separate within the same space. This value was expressed by some as a key benefit of open-planned living where kitchen workspaces were part of family living areas. However, it was not limited to this more conventional model of house structure. Instead as illustrated in Figure 2 [from Julie's house], multiple living spaces were also sometimes included within the one large, open-planned living space. In these large multipurpose unpartitioned spaces it was possible for families to be together, while taking part in independent activities. The expanded spatiality of these homes, thus materially resolved the tension between the conflicting desires for togetherness and separateness within family by absorbing and accommodating diverse activities, interests and imperatives.

Sizing Home, Doing Respectability

Status and class are important elements of the meanings of home and family, and equally important in understanding the relationship between house size and practices of inhabitation. In popular commentaries in Australia and elsewhere, the term 'affluenza' is invoked to describe the penchant of the middle classes for an increasing volume of material possessions and for the accumulation of wealth. Housing is an important component of these strategies—both because the house is the principal asset of many people, and because housing ownership, renovation and occupation often necessitate other purchases—the accumulation of things. Both these senses of affluenza certainly underpin the occupation of the houses in this study:

What was it that you liked about this one [house]?

It was the biggest one [laughs].

Why was that important to you?

More for down the track too, you have to think that in Sydney prices are so dear that you want as much space as you can get because the blocks are getting smaller and smaller, so the bigger the house the more room you've got to move around, because the yards and the blocks tend not to be that big. Also, for a resale point of view, down the track, this isn't my dream house where I'm going to stay living forever, so the

fact that it's a bigger house means that it will attract a bigger price on the day that I sell it to do something else (Tess).

Housing as a financial asset or investment is not only important to this household, but is also explicitly connected to size. Their interpretation of the Sydney housing market dovetails with those articulated by some developers (see McGuirk & Dowling, 2007), and in this respect indicates a link between practices of inhabitation and practices of supply.

Similarly in terms of 'affluenza', a sense of status and of moving up an imagined housing ladder were connected to larger houses:

What do you like about the higher ceilings?

I think it makes a room, I think it makes the room look bigger, you don't feel crowded in. I think it just adds, well elegance is probably the wrong word, I don't know it does make a difference (Kirsten).

Clearly struggling to articulate her feelings, her use of the word elegance suggests an association with sophistication and classiness. And, a classic description of affluenza was also provided:

So what sorts of things were you looking for in a house?

We had set room numbers that we wanted. The last house had three, we wanted one more of everything, the last house had three bedrooms, we wanted four bedrooms; the last house had one bathroom, we wanted two bathrooms; the other house had a single garage and we wanted a double garage, and the other house had one main living area and we wanted two, so we wanted a more formal one, and one for the family, the children (Kirsten).

We had been living in a nine square home, with a little child who managed to take over the entire house, we were on a big block and we couldn't stay there, we'd just outgrown the house and we were kind of just looking around and this was a fantastic price with a really good return on the lease back that actually propelled us into a higher state in the market than what we would have been able to if we'd just sold our house and bought something else, so we actually leap-frogged to a better house and that's why we took it (Tess).

Yet, whilst it is a plausible explanation, affluenza too narrowly prescribes the complex connections between patterns of inhabitation of large houses and middle-class identities. Larger houses are certainly used to signify status; an attribute connected to middle-class identities. But the performance of middle-class identities in and through housing and home are much broader than those adumbrated through the lens of status. The notion of being respectable underpins many aspects of middle-class identities, and we alluded to some of these connections with house size in our discussion of expectations of shared family spaces above. Performing respectability has long been part of middle-class practices of home, emphasising a tidy house, tidy garden and the sense that children are under control (Berner, 1998; Lauster & Tester, 2010). Tidiness and cleanliness have strong moral

dimensions and have a central place in the construction of identity (Douglas, 1966), including the notion of the ‘good’ housewife. These relations, including the determination of what constitutes mess, dirt and other excess, and the acts of managing or removing mess, are important components of home and family making. This is not always a straightforward process, but is bound up with and constitutive of complex emotions and relations including love, care and guilt (Gregson *et al.*, 2007). Research demonstrates the multiple ways that people negotiate excessive items in the home including throwing them away and recycling (Gregson *et al.*, 2007), passing them on to friends and family (Gregson & Beale, 2004) and even living with ‘mess’ to establish an identity that is distinct from the traditional housewife (Pink, 2004). In this research, households took a different approach to mess. The management of mess was bound up with larger houses, which were understood as offering greater prospects for respectability.

The sense of keeping mess hidden from visitors was critical. According to Julie:

I love the bedrooms separate because you can keep your mess up there [laughs]. With my mother’s it’s a single storey so the bedrooms were always there, it meant we had to shut the doors if people were coming over, whereas here I don’t have to. It’s just a matter of don’t go upstairs, it’s easier. [she continues later] I have nowhere in this house to sit and do my ironing unless I do it in the rumpus room, and if I get visitors well all my ironing’s everywhere and I don’t like that at all.

Similarly, Maria observed:

This was supposed to be a lounge. It’s you know, in front of the door. With the strangers you prefer to keep them here, not in the family room. So it’s a very good place, it’s close to the garage, to the door. *Why do you prefer to keep strangers in this part of the house?* Because I think this part may be cleaner [laughs]. You know, the family room with the kids is always messy, but with the strangers you prefer to stay here [laughs].

Hiding mess in separate and distinct sections of the house was seen as easier and more desirable. It enabled householders to maintain familial privacy by keeping the excesses of everyday family life hidden from visitors, particularly strangers. As Lorraine expressed: ‘strangers see this mess, including washing, ‘it’s opening up another part and [. . .] you feel uncomfortable.’ Even ‘clean’ mess, like freshly washed clothes, was ideally hidden from view. These houses reproduced the traditional public—private structure of housing, but in a more elaborate and spatially expansive way. Furthermore, not all family spaces were necessarily maintained as ‘private’; this classification was predominately preserved for spaces that were perceived as messy.

However, mess was not only hidden from visitors. In some households large houses meant that mess could also be hidden from family members, particularly those in charge of the mess. In most cases, this was a strongly gendered activity, with women hiding children’s toys, and even tasks that they did not feel like doing, in separate sections of the house. According to Fiona:

This is the rumpus room, which is basically their play room, if they want to make mess then they come up here. It’s nice that it’s upstairs because then I don’t need to keep thinking about the mess downstairs, it’s away from me.

Or from Alex:

The fact that if we needed to go away from the children we can [laughs], you can separate. Also if you've made a mess you can leave it upstairs. Like for instance my vacuum cleaner hasn't been put away, just throw it upstairs. Stuff like that. If you haven't done the ironing you can throw it upstairs, that place can be messy as. [and later] I've got a couple of friends who've built double storey houses and I can actually see now why they did. Like they've often said oh we've done that because when they get older we can separate ourselves from the kids, like they can have the downstairs, have popcorn and nibbles, and we can have the upstairs and also if there's mess up there who cares. And I went oh, ok yeah.

Mess was unacceptable in a respectable household and was also associated with work. Hiding mess allowed these women to pretend that the mess, or rather the task that it represented, temporarily did not exist. This was an important strategy for reducing the feelings of stress and anxiety associated with messy houses, and for facilitating moments of relaxation within the home amidst the flurry of everyday life. As Maria intimates, it offered a feeling that the housekeeper had at least one section of the house under control:

we can keep one clean, and untouched, but the other one just for using routine. Maybe use it for lunch, breakfast, and they can be clean when you need it for, I don't know, a party or something. But at least you have one part of the house clean.

Hiding mess was also a way of managing busy lives and undesirable tasks. Hidden mess did not have to be cleaned which freed up time for more desirable activities. It also meant that women could leave tasks unpacked, increasing the likelihood that they would feel like continuing or finishing the task at a later date. This strategy was used for desirable and fun activities as Maria explained:

whenever you are working on something you don't want to pack, you want to just leave it and go and then when you have time come back and continue, but when you pack you have to find another time to unpack and start again, but this way you can just close the door and go.

It was also a strategy for managing undesirable household tasks, as Melanie captured:

And this is our study, junk room, which is always a bit of a mess in here. The ironing board lives up; I couldn't yeah, if I had to pack it up every time I'd never iron. I hate ironing, I think every house needs somewhere to leave an ironing board up.

These practices gave rise to a preference for the space in which rooms could be task-oriented and single purpose homes.

Practices of hiding mess and delineating rooms for specific tasks brought diverse textures and tempos to the house. Some rooms were characterised by constant flows of activity. Family and living rooms, kitchens and toy rooms were the hubs of daily activity, shaped by the rhythms of everyday family life as well as by the smaller scale movements

of objects such as toys. Other rooms were separated from these rhythms, sequestered from the everyday and preserved as still and quiet spaces that were separate from children and other forms of ‘mess’. These were the formal lounge and dining rooms. Ironing, sewing, study and ‘hobby’ rooms represented a third type of activity-specific timespace that was dormant throughout much of a typical day, yet busy with the clutter, mess and excess of everyday life. These rooms were characterised by isolated flurries of activity. These types of spaces imaginatively and spatially displaced mess from the house. In sequestering mess they carried out a central homemaking task, allowing the rest of the house to maintain a sense of cleanliness, openness and respectability. In participants narratives this strategy for mess management was irrevocably tied with large and expansive housing. Participants regularly contrasted their current house with a previous much smaller house, emphasising the difficulties of managing family, life and mess in the smaller home.

Participants, like those in many other studies of middle-class homes, were concerned with the visual appearance of their home to outsiders—that it look cared for, and that they were in control. These practices and strategies do more than represent and perform affluenza, rather, strong desires for spaciousness were closely linked with strategies of mess management and, by implication, class identities.

Conclusions

We began this paper with the intention of understanding the practices of home associated with large houses. Our qualitative exploration has identified that, in the context of suburban Sydney, bigger houses are a spatial accommodation of the complexity of contemporary middle-class family life. Privacy, independence and ‘time alone’ were spatially facilitated through the provision of excessive space. In separating children and adults large houses managed and mediated the soundscapes of everyday family activity and played a crucial role in the avoidance and resolution of interpersonal tension. By allowing family members time and space apart multiple living spaces ideally enabled more harmonious familial relations without the need to negotiate around activities and noise. Second, relations of family were irrevocably connected with practices of home: participants’ narrations of everyday household practice suggested the capacity of large houses to manage children’s excess which was central to the maintenance of a tidy, respectable aesthetic. Through the acquisition of a large house the excesses of family life were (ideally) accommodated through the containment and exclusion of undesirable objects and sounds. Large houses were therefore not simply about a cocooning retreat from the world outside, but also about ways of managing relationships with the outside through the presentation and appearance of cleanliness and respectability.

Our analysis takes a number of elements of housing studies forward in new ways. First, we have begun to address to Mulder & Lauster’s (2010) call for a richer understanding of the connections between familial and housing dynamics, including, but not confined to, house size. Our sketch of the familial affordances of large houses adds a richer texture to understandings of housing demand. Second, our consideration of the complex workings of familial privacy similarly adds a complicating layer to understandings of privatism and privacy in housing studies. Considerable recent attention has been paid to the ways in which the contemporary middle-class home is secured, or fortified (Atkinson & Blandy, 2007). The practices described here both underscore and unsettle this notion. In managing mess and enacting middle-class respectability, these households were contributing to the sanctity and

separateness of home. But we have also pointed out the many additional layers of privacy within the home that require incorporation into conceptualisations of privatism. Third, the affordances of large houses were gendered: it was women who did the work of managing mess, of cleaning the large houses and of overseeing complex family routines. In one respect our analysis hence confirms longstanding feminist observations of home that point out the gendered burden of domestic labour, childcare and respectability. It was certainly the case that expanded space simply provided more rooms in which housework activities could be carried out. In another respect, these spaces gave women a sense of greater control over the conditions under which this housework was undertaken, and enabled them to not simply and always prioritise the choices of their children and partners.

Finally, the issue of housing size is clearly of critical importance to environmental sustainability and in this respect our paper joins a growing evidence base of the cultural underpinnings of both sustainable and unsustainable practice (e.g. Hobson, 2006; Lane *et al.*, 2009). The connections between large houses and perceptions of good parenting and respectability suggest that attempts in the Australian context to reduce house size will require complex policy responses. But cultural approaches can also reveal directions these policy responses may take, and we offer a number of speculations here. Senses of spaciousness and openness are about more than size, but rather are created through interrelationships between furnishings, bodies and spaces. For example, improved insulation between rooms in a house might limit the transference of sounds and enable family members to have space apart within smaller houses. More generally, home is multisensory; light and sound play a critical role in shaping the ways that people encounter and engage with space. As an architectural device light is utilised to create feelings of space and openness, as well as to delineate places and ‘hide “faults”’ (Bille & Sorensen, 2007). Awareness of the ways that sound and lightscapes are manipulated to enhance senses of space in the production of home, and shape feelings and practices of home, could usefully shed light on ways to develop more sustainable housing and household practices and are a useful starting point for further research.

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Note

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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