

# Implications

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## Designing “Home” into the House

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There is little doubt home is a relevant topic for residential designers. Certainly, the dramatic surge in attention domestic interiors have received, in both popular media and research literature, is an indication people are interested in shaping their living spaces (Gibbs, 2007). A combination of conditions including popular media, increased mobility, housing market changes, social instability, and house building practices are intensifying the focus on what home is, what it means, and how home can be realized. As designers accept the challenge to create interiors that promote home, they need to learn how and why home exists.

### “Home” Defined

“Home is a social environment that is dependent on time or the impression of time and is represented by a personalized physical environment, such as a house, that nurtures the attachment of meaning” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 57). The concept of home is experienced to an extent by most people. Yet, the way home is defined varies considerably throughout the literature and between individuals (Rapoport, 1995).

The term’s use reveals our confusion about what home is and our propensity

to use the term in reference to something it is not. The term home is used when describing a trailer house as a “trailer home,” or when a realtor sells a “home,” or when a baseball player “steals home,” yet the home is not an object to be bought, sold, or stolen.

### More than a Physical Structure

While most Americans associate the ideal home with a single-family detached house, there are many houses where the ideal home is not achieved. This may be especially true for people who feel abused, violated, unwelcome, or in transition. A house is a physical structure that fulfills lower-level needs such as protection from weather and intrusion, but the home will encompass these lower-level needs while also fulfilling higher-level needs (Maslow, 1970). Higher-level needs include representing one’s ideals and values or creating positive memories.

Much discussion of home has centered on the meaning of place and place attachment (Manzo, 2005; Easthope, 2004). For 20 years, the feverish rise in housing values has resulted in Americans seeing their houses as investments. Subsequently, when “people own a house for investment purposes there is a predisposition to a reduced sense of attachment to place” (Rawls et al., 1995, p.74). Gertner (2007) points out that the recent decline in



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property values may be beneficial in that it may turn attention away from the house as a monetary investment and towards an investment in the concept of a home in which we live. The concept of home, not financial investment, should be the focus when designing a house that nurtures meaning.

## Dependent on Time

The concept of home is dependent on time. At one moment one may feel at home and the next feel home is lost—as in the cases of death, abuse, divorce, or burglary. A home has the impression of stability, which is acquired through memories of experiences and movements in the house. Stability is created when one expects to be able to experience the home in the future. At times, the home is experienced differently by different people living in the same house. For instance, parents who are preparing for a divorce may have little impression of home, while their child may have a fulfilling experience of home and feel all is well.

## Social Interactions

Home is dependent on social interactions with other people living there (e.g., family), people invited in (e.g., close friends), and people who live close by (e.g., neighbors). These relationships represent investments of time and trust and provide a sense of order and support. In a home, a person may look forward to sharing good news with a neighbor or discussing difficult decisions with a family member. While there are rare examples of people who live without social interaction, an ideal home consists of people who share some common beliefs and norms.

## The Concept of Home Guides Design

When designing a residential environment, the concept of home is often assumed. However, designing home is a purposeful endeavor that can be eclipsed by other worthy issues, including circulation, accessibility, sustainability, fantastic views, and security. Questions during the programming phase



about how memories are created in a home or how the home serves as a safe haven has the potential to enhance a design beyond meeting lower-level needs than does a question about the number of drawers necessary for silverware. Questions that get at the issue of home must be generated from knowledge of how the home is created. While the concept of home is experienced differently by each person, research on the home suggests that it is possible to generalize the concept of home to some degree.

## Research Informs Nurturing Home Environments

Minimum and maximum sizes of stair risers and treads needed to connect two floors are determined using standards created from research. Likewise, the work triangle in a kitchen was developed using research on human movement and ergonomics. These are examples of standards that focus primarily on fulfilling lower-level needs (e.g., circulation). It stands to reason that standards could be established for creating interiors that promote “home” as well.

For the past 30 years, several attempts have been made to identify general dimensions of the concept of home. Hayward (1978) proposed nine dimensions that included aspects of home such as a set of relationships with others, a personalized place, and a base of activity. Hayward’s dimensions were

developed from a very limited number of interviews with people of similar socio-economic and geographic circumstances. It was one of the first recognized attempts to order the concept of home.

Sixsmith (1986) identified 19 distinct types of home (e.g., Married Home, Parents Home, Friends House) based on interviews with 22 post-graduate students. While Sixsmith's study sample was limited, the list helped tie the concept of home to "place." Despres (1991) built on Hayward's work by creating a list of 10 factors relating to the meaning of home, while Kenyon (1999) furthered the understanding of home by developing four categories of home with factors for each category. Each of these attempts to organize the concept of home into categories has aided the understanding of home, yet all were based on qualitative analyses of interviews with individuals of similar socio-economic backgrounds.

A recent study further expanded understanding of the concept of home from an interior design perspective (Gibbs, 2007). The study built on the work of previous authors by testing established concept categories



using data gathering and quantitative analysis. The study suggested it is possible to generalize aspects of the home. Further, it demonstrated the benefits of combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the concept of home. Another important outcome of the study was that a model of home was created consisting of four general categories with each category containing five specific factors or characteristics to be considered:

#### Personal

- Meaningful
- Sense of independence and freedom
- Personalized
- Sense of belonging
- Memories

#### Temporal

- Stability
- Potential to be familiar
- Base of activity
- The potential to be lasting
- The potential to stimulate

#### Social

- A supportive atmosphere
- A friendly neighborhood
- A place of social interaction
- Social status
- Family and Friends

#### Physical

- Meaningful possessions
- Comfortable environment
- Single-family detached house
- Safe haven
- Reflection of one's ideas and values

Although much remains to be understood about home, the model of home proposed can be cautiously used to investigate the concept of home. Interior designers can ask questions that address each of the identified factors. By asking questions originating from research, interior designers have a systematic way to approach the issue of designing a nurturing home environment.



Creating home by interior design is emphasized as exteriors become increasingly controlled by outside forces.

## The Ideal Creates New Realities

In many places, influences outside the homeowner's control determine the appearance of the house. Today, most houses were not built by the people who live in them and were likely mass-built by speculative developers with little concern for future owners. Housing design may have been restricted by zoning, home owners associations (HOA), financiers, cost efficiencies, and restrictive covenants. As a result, it is common for people to have little say in the appearance of the exteriors of their houses. In one example, a city restricted lot size while the builder offered only five house plans to maximize building efficiency. To ensure no homeowner devalued the neighborhood with design modifications, a HOA was established to restrict paint colors, exterior modifications, fences, basketball hoops, and number of trees in the front yard. When choices for exterior modification are limited or nonexistent, the importance of interior design, as a means to create a home, is even more apparent.

## Conclusion

The need for informed interior designers who are prepared to design around the concept of home has never been greater. Interior designers who program based on the concept of home will ask questions that

systematically address the characteristics of home identified by research. The resulting interiors are more likely to support the concept of home for each person living there. When interior designers focus on the issue of home, they begin to create interiors that support the satisfaction of higher-level needs, and thus increase the value of the interiors they create while promoting the importance of the interior design profession.

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## About the author:

Chad Gibbs, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of interior design at Colorado State University. He has practiced as an interior designer and taught at several universities. He has lived in 10 states and more than 26 houses and apartments and is acutely sensitive to the



challenges of recreating home. His current research focuses on how to teach the concept of home to interior design students as well as the changing definition of home in different life stages.

## Related Research Summaries

InformeDesign has many Research Summaries about creating home and other, pertinent, related topics. This knowledge will be valuable to you as you consider your next design solution and is worth sharing with your clients and collaborators.

“Cultural Considerations in Housing Design”  
—*Housing and Society*

“Features of Home Express Identity”  
—*Housing, Theory and Society*

“Place Attachment is Influenced by Interior Features”  
—*Journal of Interior Design*

“Understanding Emotional Relationships to Places”  
—*Journal of Environmental Psychology*

“Family Interaction and Home Design”  
—*Journal of Interior Design*

“Housing and Divorce”  
—*Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*

“Values and Lifestyle Reflected in House Layout”  
—*Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*

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