When a House was a Home

Anyone who grew up in or around large families probably remembers a particular kind of evening. Perhaps it was a birthday, or a family reunion, or a Christmas or New Years' party, or a civic holiday.

Depending on the ethnicities of the families involved, there might have been trays of baked ziti and meatballs, or pierogies and pickled herring, or kielbasa and sauerkraut, or perhaps all of them and much more. These were the nights when the kids could eat as much dessert, or anything else, as they wanted, when the visitors and hosts agreed it was time to part ways before opening another bottle of wine.

I and other writers here often talk about the built environment, about things like zoning and street width and neighborhood design. But just as important are the individual buildings that make up those built environments. Construction and architecture are about more than aesthetics: we now know that humans are wired at a very deep level to appreciate various elements of traditional architecture and planning. Traditional middle-class homes promote those fun-filled evenings through their design. Basements, attics, nooks, and little mazes of rooms are inseparable from things like kids hiding out, trying to make their parents forget the night is over.

Many modern homes, like everything else in our tech-ified, ultra-efficient era, are stylish but not cozy, functional but not warm. There are no inconvenient nooks and crannies, no janky closets under staircases, no half-rooms above the garage, no dark, mysterious basements that could be caves or tunnels in a child's imagination. Increasingly there is just an "open concept" floor plan, the domestic equivalent of the vaguely authoritarian open-plan office. One article notes, "Prior to the last 25 years, an 'open floor plan' meant a

living configuration without *doors*; now the term has come to mean a living configuration without *walls*."

It can be challenging in a traditional house to have a quiet dinner, watch television, and segregate the children during a family gathering or party, let alone in a house with an open-floor plan. But maybe it's less of a problem than it should be; my mother used to point out that family size inversely correlates with average square footage—smaller and smaller families live in larger and larger homes. There is something profoundly lonely and consumeristic about that.

Then there are the "smart" devices, which too often require an inordinate amount of intelligence to actually operate. They can read us our shopping lists and schedule our laundry and tell us when someone is approaching the front door. Because they can be controlled remotely, they also permanently lodge themselves in our brains, one extra thing to check while fidgeting awkwardly with our phones. What these devices provide in convenience they take away in focus.

If a living space does not allow for a few moments of comfortable solitude, it cannot really be called a home. There are, one suspects, not very many homes being built in America today. It is highly unlikely that most of the recent housing—whether the soulless, gaping McMansions that evoke international hotel lobbies, or the condo complexes with pastel facades and fake balconies, or the industrial-chic urban row houses—will ever age gracefully or be able to provide that enchanting mix of wonder and comfort that makes a place a home for a child.

What does the lack of these spaces do to children's creativity? Does it blunt their minds? Perhaps we are too busy with our daily grinds to remember what it is like to be a child in a house. Having people over, especially entire families, is a way to recapture a little bit of that feeling, to see one's home from the perspective of a guest, if only a

little bit for a little while. It’s a useful exercise.

Among my most pleasant childhood memories are “rosary nights”: a group of us homeschooling Catholic families would meet at someone’s house every 13th of the month (it had something to do with Fatima), and pray one, sometimes *three*, rosaries. Occasionally we would display a large statue of the Virgin Mary, which came in an equally large bag and which one family’s cat liked to treat as an enclosed bed. When the praying was over, we would retire to the kitchen for cakes and desserts. The kids would eat quickly and fit in as much unsupervised playtime as we could—even more exciting if we were in an unfamiliar house—before it was time to go home.

In our own way, we were a part of that vast but receding web of private, communal associations that we call “civil society” or “intermediating institutions,” the maintenance of which is the core of conservatism, and perhaps of society itself.

What all of this has to do with housing and urbanism is that in my child’s mind, the pleasantness of the houses and the company of friends and the comfort of the Faith were inseparable. I’m not sure my child’s mind was wrong. Perhaps I am merely elevating the bourgeois lifestyle or indulging in nostalgia. But what’s really so bad about the bourgeois lifestyle (or its relative, the much-reviled “middle-class morality”?). America is poorer for its vanishing communal middle between the individual and the state, for its vanishing blue-chip firms and lifelong occupations, for its burgeoning economic inequality and insecurity.

I can’t change the housing industry or the economy. I can only be thankful for the janky closets in my home, for the quirky rosary club, for the endless trays of baked ziti during the holidays. But they are not the point, ultimately—the point is that those memories modeled for me what a home and a family are. The family is biological, but it is also a web of inherited and learned behaviors. Those seemingly trite bits of

childhood nostalgia can serve as little models, as little guideposts. Our families are one piece of making that happen. Our physical houses and built environments may be no less important.

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