Built Form and Culture: Italian Transnational Houses in Australia

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Abstract

Accordingly to Wagner, "Dwellings stand as the concrete expressions of a complex interaction among cultural skills and norms, climatic conditions and the potentialities of natural materials". This study, beginning with an enquiry into the way trans-national houses are the physical expression of interacting cultural factors, provides a theoretical framework grounded on cross-cultural studies for understanding the way cultural needs have influenced the form of the archetypal post WWII 'house on a quarter-acre block' built in Brisbane by Italian migrants.

The findings reveal that while the architectural form of the Italian Trans-national houses built in Brisbane is influenced by the need to continue architectural cultural traditions in the host country, the spatial distribution of the artifact was influenced by socio-cultural factors and urban fabric, from both the native and hosting built environment, in the attempt of re-establishing and enhancing the native way of life.

Introduction

This research study builds upon the literature that seeks to explore the ways in which migrant groups influence the form of their vernacular houses in their host societies. The particular objective of this investigation is to use the insights of cross-cultural studies to explore the ways in which first generation Italian migrants in Brisbane have influenced the form of their self-built trans-national single detached house in the post-WWII period and what were the key-factors behind, and results of, this influence. This study investigates (1) the period of construction of the house; (2) the architectural form of the house, namely the structure, the materials and construction technique and the façade's decorative features and (3) the spatial form of the house, namely spatial configuration and utilization of space [1].

The objective of this study is (1) to provide insight into the ways in which migrants shaped the physical environments of their host societies; (2) to help to bridge the significant gap between transnational houses and cross-cultural studies; (3) to capture the store of knowledge held by older Italian migrants, by their still standing artifacts before this knowledge is lost in time.

Background

Transnational houses and migrants' culture

Before building their transnational house in a host country, migrants resided in their native country in houses built by their ancestors and then in a host country in houses built by locals. This means that the form of past houses can also have had an impact on migrants' human behavior (and/or activities) and ultimately culture, and therefore on the way present transnational houses in Australian were built by Italian migrants.

Thomas [2], who investigated the way Vietnamese migrants configured their houses in Australia in comparison with the one in their homeland, stressed how Vietnamese migrants attempted to adapt the spatial form of the house they lived in to their conception of the house they lived in their homeland.

Blunt [3], in his analysis of houses belonging to Anglo-Indians in McCluskieganj, Bihar, in the 1930s, highlights that this cultural group constructed and shaped their houses through nostalgic practice, where the house exposed a sort of attachment to both India and Britain. This means that the transnational house can be interpreted as a place of memory shaped through nostalgic practice whose purpose is to enhance a sense of familiarity.

The possibility of interpreting the form of the house in response to the need of creating (1) a place of memory shaped through a nostalgic practice in attempting to enhance a sense of familiarity suggests the potential for an approach to analyze the spatial form of transnational houses built by Italian migrants' in Brisbane. Also, Depres [4], in her exploration of transnational houses, stresses that cultural groups interpreted the house as a place of refuge-reminding migrants of their origins-and a place allowing migrants to go back to the traditional activities they used to perform before emigrating. In his paper, Gordon Young discusses the impact of a group of German settlers in South Australia. Young investigates the way of life brought from the native country which inevitably influenced the spatial configuration of their houses.

Following these insights, the study will explore how Italian migrants' past housing exposure has influenced the form of their new houses in their host environment in order to fulfill the need to create (2) a place of refuge reminding migrants of their roots and (3) allowing migrants to go back to the activities traditionally performed in previous spatial environments.

Importantly, the review of the literature reveals that another social factor, family, has an impact on the form of the transnational house.

The role of the family as related to house ownership is highlighted by Vasta [5] in his transnational studies, as he points out that generally for Italian migrants, the family was at the apex of their hierarchy of values. As a result, he points out that Italian migrants wanted to settling down in Australia for having the (4) family united and settled. In her studies into transnational houses, Depres [4] stresses that transnational houses are manifestation of a place where migrants established a (a) close-knit family, and (b) where they tend to spend more time than the dominant group. These investigations stress the role of the family as a factor, which influences the decision to build a house. Thus, the transnational house can be interpreted as a manifestation of the unity of the family. In conclusion, it will be investigated whether Italian migrants in Brisbane wished to settle permanently on arrival in Brisbane in order to have a united family and the extent to which the form of their houses is the manifestation of family unity and economic success.

Furthermore, while scholars provide an interpretation of the spatial form of transnational houses, other scholars extend the argument to the architectural form of transnational houses, in particular to the façade. For instance, Jacobs [6] investigates the association between migrants' past and the current architectural form of the houses. Through an analysis of architectural features within the current generation of migrants' houses, Jacobs shows how migrants attempt to emulate decorative elements present in their past houses with the purpose of feeling at home in their new constructions and in the host country built environment. Moreover, in her study focusing on Italian migrants houses' architectural style, as Baldassar [7] highlights, Italians migrating from Treviso (San Fior) to Perth, Western Australia, built the façade of their houses in the architectural style of houses built in Treviso, and therefore were influenced by (6) architectural elements learnt in their native country. Borgo and Boyd showed that Italian migrants in Carlton, Melbourne, built their own houses in an 'Italian-style' and they decorated the houses with Italian statues and materials, like marble [8-10]. Apperly, Irving and Reynolds discuss how, in the 1960s, Italian migrants built their houses with a distinctive style named 'Victorian Italianate' [11]. They state that in the 1950-60s Italian migrants purchased terrace or small Victorian and Edwardian-style cottages in inner suburbs. Afterwards the exteriors and interiors of these houses were renovated and modernized according to their interpretation of the way an Italian house should look.

Consequently, it is argue that not just the spatial form, but also the architectural form of transnational houses can be interpreted in relation to previous housing experience, or as a manifestation of memory shaped through nostalgic practice. In relation to this research study, this suggests the importance of investigating the extent to which the architectural form of transnational houses, namely the decorative features on the façade, was influenced by traditional architectural elements learnt by migrants through previous housing experience both in their native and host countries.

A cultural framework for vernacular spatial environments: Culture and physical culture

In his book 'House, Form and Culture', Rapoport [12] stresses that the form of the vernacular house is primarily determined by human beings' culture and secondarily modified by physical factors. Emily Dickinson [13] defines the intangible and all-encompassing concept of culture as "the sharing by a group, or more broadly a society, of a common system of standards, meanings, language, manners of relating and interacting, behavior or way of life based on common history and tradition". Moreover, as Howard and McKim highlight that culture is

'learning or gaining knowledge: every individual learns from the social environment how to think, speak and behave' [14].

The acquaintance of a culture is attained by a sharing process of a cultural frame, which a social group has in common [14,15]. Besides, as Marcus highlighted [16], 'a cultural frame refers to an interpretive grid, meaning system or schema. It consists of language and a set of tacit social understandings, as well as of the social practices that reflect and enact these understandings in daily life'. The explained concept of 'culture' and 'cultural frame' offers a valuable basis for comprehending how people make sense of the world by sharing commonalities, such as language, behavior and more generally a way of life, based, as said, on history and tradition.

The acquisition of a culture is achieved via a complex process. The sharing of culture comes through interaction with and among people who have values and attitudes in common. If people do not share common values and beliefs, then distorted communication between them may occur and lead to misunderstandings [14,15]. Furthermore, Howard and McKim stress that all of the influences and experiences in a person's life contribute to the construct of the cultural frame. This suggests that culture is assimilated by a sharing process of a cultural frame, which is not just statically based on common history and tradition. The cultural frame is dynamic: it changes and develops as per the individuals and the group experiences.

These are important insights for the study of how a cultural frame extends to the way in which Italian migrants represent themselves through the form (architectural and spatial) of their dwellings. These insights reveal the importance of analyzing the form of the house, generally as a sense of (1) belonging to a culture, (2) as expression of meanings or needs, (3) habit and traditions which people share through interaction with past housing experiences.

Physical factors and spatial traditions

Lawrence and Low point out that while a few scholars have placed emphasis on the built form as being mainly determined by the social groups' culture as a way of life, others have argued that built form is principally influenced by design and construction technology, which are then adapted by native builders accordingly to availability of materials and climatic conditions [17]. This view is contrasted by Rapoport and Oliver.

Once the identity and character of a culture has been grasped, and some insight gained into its values, its choices among possible dwelling responses to both physical and cultural variables become clearer. The specific characteristic of a culture - the accepted way of doing things, the socially unacceptable ways and the implicit ideals - need to be considered since they affect housing and settlement form [18].

Rapoport and Oliver's [17,18] argument is based on the evidence shown by history that form of buildings cannot be explained simply by reference biological needs, availability of materials and technology, and climatic conditions. They stress that materials and construction techniques cannot determine or provide fully an explanation of the nature and diversity of the form to be built: they can only facilitate and make possible certain decisions about the form. It is the subtle influence of cultural forces, which may affect the way people behave, and consequently the houses and settlements in which users live and the way users use them [18]. They conclude that physical factors are treated as modifying factors rather than determinants of the form, because they do not decide what has to be built, the ways and the reasons. In his view, the cultural concept of the house, shaped by an

accepted way of doing things, is the factor determining the form of the house.

Rapoport's view is shared by Kent [19] who states that the spatial form of buildings is specifically a reflection of behavior, which can be viewed as a reflection of culture. She asserts that the organization and utilization of domestic space is based on determined spatial traditions. Furthermore, she stresses that undoubtedly, the constraints of climate and natural settings will have some impacts on space traditions, but more deeply, spatial traditions are molded by the cultural backgrounds of societies. Kent's statement suggests that spatial traditions are the accepted way of doing things which Rapoport referred to, and in turn are the specific characteristics of a culture which determines the form of the building.

In relation to this study, it is also cardinal to investigate how the form of houses built by Italian migrants were influenced by (1) spatial traditions, as an expression of their culture as a way of life, (2) materials and construction techniques, and finally (3) climate.

Socio-cultural variables

Kent and Rapoport [12,19] make reference to culture in relation to socio-cultural variables; they also stress that the concept of socio-cultural variables still remains an overall abstract concept, not helping to determine how culture affects the form of houses. Therefore, they highlight the importance of breaking the concept down into more specific and concrete terms. More specifically, Rapoport makes a distinction between two distinctive components which are both manifestations of culture: social variables, such as group composition, family structures, social networks and behaviors, which are more physical; and cultural, such as world view, values, way of life and activities which refer to ideational variables [18,20-23]. As Rapoport and Kent [19] emphasize, the concept of culture (as a way of life) leads to a system of activity: activities are direct manifestations of culture.

'Built environments are created to support users' desired behavior and … if the architecture encloses behavior tightly, then activities will tend to shape architecture' [24].

They stress that through an investigation and analysis of the activities performed within the domestic space by the family members, it is possible to understand how the users configured and used the space of their houses and the extent of which human beings' culture, namely specific needs and way of life, has influenced the distribution of the house. This approach, also emphasized by Oliver [18], shows that built environments is reflection of behavior which has to be considered in the context of activities [25].

Furthermore, Rapoport [20-23] discusses the significance and the necessity to disassemble the concept of activities into specific variables, as he did with the concept of socio-cultural variables. In his view, the system of activities is based on six components: (1) the nature of the activity itself (what), (2) the persons involved or excluded (who), (3) the place where it is performed (where), (4) the order or sequence it occurs (when), (5) the association to other activities (how - including or excluding whom), and finally (6) the meaning of the activity (why). Rapoport [12] highlights the significance of investigating the systems of activities, because, as he states, 'variability with lifestyle and ultimately culture goes up as one moves from the activity itself, through ways of carrying it out, the system of which it is part, and its meanings' [24].

As Rapoport [12] also highlights, separation of domain, gender and privacy might be still very much culturally shaped, and consequently have a great impact on the house spatial form. In relation to the separation of domain, my argument is that the pre-eminence of women might also have affected the configuration of Italian migrants' houses, in particular the kitchen area, which in Italian practices, is a woman's domain. Males, on the other hand, might have dedicated specific working activities performed in a different space. The need for privacy can also vary among cultural groups, and the way privacy is achieved has to be considered because it will in turn affect the distribution and utilization of space [26]. For instance, Rapoport makes a distinction between privacy in relation to strangers and privacy in relation to a clear separation of domains.

In addition to the activity-system, Rapoport and Kent [12,19] highlight the significance of looking at the activity-setting: the house and the urban settlement [24]. Additionally, Rapoport and Kent highlighted the importance of investigating (1) the system and (2) setting of activities in order to understand how space has been distributed and utilized. In relation to the object of investigation for this study, Rapoport and Kent's [12,19] conceptual framework is adopted to analyze and reveal how Italian migrants shaped their trans-national houses in Brisbane.

Methodology

A detailed case-study is required for the collection of data, which allows to understanding how the form of transnational houses in Brisbane was influenced by Italian migrants' culture. The collected data is structured into 'oral data', collected through focus groups, in depth structured interviews and photo elicitation, and visual data - gathered through site visits, field observation, visual material and photographs. The selection of Italian migrants, followed by the selection of their artifacts, was accomplished accordingly to particular criteria. As stressed by Creswell, while qualitative research assumes that participants, physical sites and/or artifacts must be cautiously selected, within quantitative studies participants and sites can be arbitrarily selected [27]. For this investigation, forty Italian migrants (twenty male and twenty female) and four self-built trans-national houses were selected. Participants were restricted to first-generation migrants born in Italy during the 1930s and 1940s, who migrated to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, after WWII reconstruction in Italy and/or when they were approximately in their 20-30s. This means that before migrating to Australia, they already acquire a way of life belonging to a cultural group.

Findings

The period of construction of Italian Trans-national houses

After WWII, part of the Italian population decided to migrate from Italy. This was due mainly to (1) the poverty due to the pre-war fascist dictatorship and the ruinous outcome of the war and to (2) the lack of working opportunities. In addition, migrating to Australia was facilitated by a favorable bilateral migration policy agreed by the Italian and Australian governments. In the 1950s, while the Italian government realized that a migration policy would relieve pressure on the Italian economy caused by overcrowding and unemployment, the Australian government adopted this policy in order to attract a workforce due to a chronic shortage of labor [28-31]. The Italians decided to migrate to Australia for three main reasons: (1) to find

economic security, (2) to help their families in Italy financially, and (3) to build a house for their own new family and/or open a business on their return to Italy. This means that the idea of helping their extended families in Italy and creating economic security for their future family was the dominant factor which gave them the courage to leave Italy. This also suggests that Italians migrating to Australia in the 1950s did not intend to settle in Australia permanently, consequently to have a family in Australia and/or to build a house. All interviewees stated that before leaving Italy, they planned to migrate to Australia for a short period varying from two to five years. They assumed that during this period Italy would have recovered from the ruin of the war therefore there would then be favorable conditions to return and settle in Italy permanently.

Since migrants were not committed to settling in Australia, for many years they rented single story houses. After renting a property for a few years, Italian migrants purchased existing houses, eventually with the ultimate aim of renovating, extending and selling. Therefore, until the early 1970s houses were purchased by Italian migrants as investments, and definitely not because they wanted to settle in Australia.

By the 1970s interviewees had already spent approximately twenty years in Australia. This time had been a period of hard work and saving money, and most had not forgotten their initial plans to return to their homeland. It did not take from two to five years to achieve the economic security they had been seeking. It took them up to twenty years, and it also took the Italian economy twenty years to recover from the ruin of the war. It was only in the early 1970s that the Italian economy finally boomed in the form of the well documented 'Italian economic miracle'. Therefore, due to the favorable economic circumstances in the homeland, in the 1970s many of those migrants who had come to Australia in the post war period attempted to take advantage of the favorable economic conditions in Italy and returned [28,32]. They wanted to settle in Italy, to build a house for their family and start up a small business, a dream they had been pursuing for twenty years. In the 1970s many Italian migrants returned to Italy. While many of them successfully settled in their native land, others could not cope with the Italian way of life which had inevitably changed after their departure twenty years previously. Therefore, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Italian migrants decided to build their own houses to maximize, through the form of the house, the metaphysical idea of stability, success and wealth. The house built in Australia, its architectural and spatial form, became the manifestation of this statement [33-40].

The architectural form of Italian trans-national houses

The architectural form of Italian houses refers to its (1) structure, (2) materials and construction techniques and (3) the decorative features of the main façades.

(1) Despite the commonality of single story houses in Brisbane, Italian migrants opted to build a spacious two story house, because this type of building allowed the users to have more space to be used to carry out specific daily activities and (2) it would have resembled the shape of the extended grand family house in Italy. The large house was the manifestation of their wish to continue the old tradition of the grand family house, which was inherited by one of the heirs.

(2) In the 1970s most detached houses in Brisbane were built by the use of two different construction systems: the weatherboard and brick veneer wall techniques. Italian migrants wanted a house constructed using a system called cavity brick wall. The distinctive cavity brick wall construction technique, not common in Australia, was chosen for traditional reasons, which is because Italian migrants in Brisbane were acquainted with this construction technique as it was commonly used in Italy. The cavity brick wall house was a manifestation of physical stability, solidity and durability. Therefore, cultural traditions, memory and migrants' housing experiences influenced the materials and construction technique Italian migrants chose for the construction of their houses.

(3) The material utilized to build the external walls of the house, that is, the bricks, dictated the most common external decorative features visible on all the façades, the face brick finish. Italian migrants revealed that this was not a feature visible in the houses in which they lived in Italy before migrating to Australia, since houses in Italy built using the cavity brick technique were usually rendered and painted. Therefore, in this case they were not influenced by cultural traditions. On the other hand, they revealed that they were influenced by Australian brick veneer houses where the external wall always had a face brick finish. This did not require plastering and/or painting as happened in Italy, and consequently was maintenance free. The porch and the balcony, the brick arches, the balustrade situated on the balcony on the first floor, differentiated by stainless steel patterned or solid white concrete columns, and the Roman pillars supporting the overhanging slab, on which the balustrade sits, are other peculiar decorative features of Italian Trans-national houses.

Italian migrants wanted to maintain an 'Italian flavor' on the main façade of their trans-national houses through the use of Italian architectural elements. By utilizing traditional architectural elements, migrants wanted to create a façade reminding them of their origins and culture. The designs of the façades of their houses arose from traditions in their efforts to simulate, through memory, an Italian architectural design in Australia [33-37].

The spatial form of Italian trans-national houses

The frequently chosen two stories Italian house allowed for more space to be utilized by the family to perform activities also dictated by cultural needs. Therefore, the influence of the internal mechanism and organization of the activities performed by family members was the leading factor in decisions regarding the division and utilization of domestic space in these houses. The activities performed by family members could be subdivided into working and social activities.

The pattern showed that working activities could be further divided into two sub-groups comprising domestic and income generating activities. The findings revealed that most domestic activities within the house were in turn related to food preparation and storage. The domestic activities related to food preparation and storage were carried out on a daily basis in the kitchenette and in the back multi-use rooms located on the ground floor, near the backyard. The need to perform income generating activities, which were mainly related to food distribution, the building industry and the manufacture of clothes, also played a relevant role in the spatial distribution of the house. In turn these activities were influenced by the way migrants lived within the extended family in Italy, and by the need to make a living in Australia. The findings reveal that these activities were carried out on a daily basis in the multi-use rooms located on the ground floor at the back of the house. Migrants revealed that working activities were subdivided by gender. The pattern shows that while wives spent much time in the kitchen preparing, storing and cooking food, husbands were more involved in income producing activities [41].

In addition, the house was configured in order to allow social activities to be performed in a different context. More specifically, social activities were also subdivided into informal and formal. Informal activities, such as the daily family dinner, the random meetings of the family and female friends and relatives, occurred in the living-dining area located on the ground floor, readily accessible through the front door of the house. Formal activities, such as the Sunday, Christmas, Easter and general holiday lunches were carried out in the open space comprising the living, dining and kitchen area, located in the front of the upper level [33-40].

Conclusion

The findings revealed that Italian migrants constructed their artifacts in response to cultural traditions and needs based on their culture. The form of the Italian transnational house mirrors the cultures derived from the ways of life belonging to two societies, based on history and tradition. This confirms that culture, as a way of life, is dynamic and subject to change. The form of houses built by Italian migrants in post WWII Brisbane is the manifestation of two developing cultures: the Italian and the Australian cultures. This study contributed to better understanding of how Italian migrants influenced the built form of the host Australian built environment and how socio-cultural factors are embedded and preserved into the form of trans-national houses, which now represents the national cultural heritage of Australia.

Acknowledgement

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