SEBASTIAN URETA

DOMESTICATING HOMES: MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION AND DECORATION AMONG LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN SANTIAGO, CHILE

SEBASTIAN URETA IS A LECTURER AT INSTITUTO DE SOCIOLOGÍA, PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE CHILE. HE OBTAINED A PHD IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS AT LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS WITH THE THESIS "MACHINES FOR LIVING IN: COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN TIME OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION" (2006). HIS RESEARCH EXPLORES THE CONNECTIONS AMONG TOPICS OF TECHNOLOGY, EVERYDAY LIFE, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND URBAN SPACE.

ABSTRACT   This article studies the process of appropriation of new homes in a housing estate by low-income inhabitants of Santiago, Chile. Based on material collected during fieldwork, it shows how this appropriation is a balance between two contrasting forces. On the one hand, the dwellers seek to express their individuality through the personalization of their living spaces. On the other hand, the modernist architecture of the estates materializes the ideas of policy makers and developers about how low-income populations should live

in urban areas. In this context families use two main strategies to adapt to their new dwellings: the material transformation of home spaces and their decoration. The first is related to the search for security and comfort in their new homes; the second to self-expression and normalization. In general, I conclude that these practices do contribute to the domestication of their new homes, although the impersonal architecture of the estate still constitutes a limit to their quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

> *El sueño de la casa propia* [the dream of home owner-ship] is a common phrase, used in popular and commercial language alike, that refers to the fact that owning a home in contemporary Chilean society is one of the main goals for individuals and families, a key way to demonstrate a family's successes (or failures). Through home ownership, a person can materialize all the other processes of integration and improvement in their living conditions that they have experienced over the years. The home represents the ultimate project, the fulfillment of their dreams and expectations about a better future, and in order to acquire it they are willing to make many sacrifices and take on a wide range of costs.

In this article I will study how the purchase of new homes by a group of low-income families in Santiago, Chile, is only the start of a process of home-making that entails much more than the mere legal ownership of a property. Through the study of two particular practices, the material transformation of home space and decoration, I will explore the way that these families' domestication of their homes is a process that tries to balance their identity and self-expression with their growing integration into Chilean society, always in relation to ideas of policy makers and developers, expressed in the architecture of the estates, about how low-income populations should live in urban areas.

I will first review the main ideas about the process of home-making, especially in relation to housing policies for low-income populations. Secondly, I will study empirically how these families have changed the material configurations of their new homes to adapt them to their perceived needs. Thirdly, I will observe how they also use decoration as a way to express their aesthetic ideas in their homes. Finally, in the conclusions, I will give an overview

about the tensions between identity and uniformity that lie behind everyday living in housing estates like the one studied here.

DOMESTICATING HOMES, DOMESTICATING PEOPLE

Among the low-income population in a developing society like Chile the word "home" has diverse meanings. It is not only the place where individuals can find shelter and protection from both natural and social threats (Kaika 2004), but also, given their relative exclusion from the labor market, formal education, and from urban life in general, it is the place in which a central part of their everyday routine takes place (Rodriguez and Sungranyes 2005). But homes and the objects that fill them represent much more than a shelter or the place of everyday routines.

Along with its functional character, in contemporary societies home is also the receptacle of multiple meanings and aspirations. Especially today, when traditions and other inherited and communitarian elements are weaker than ever before, "home ownership offers individuals a means through which they can attain a sense of 'ontological security' in their everyday lives" (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 25). In our societies, the home "owes its cultural and emotional power to its capacity to separate itself ideologically from the public spaces of everyday life ... which encourage functional transient behaviour, and produce a peculiar mix of alienation and liberating self-assurance" (Moran 2004: 608). So we have to see the home as "a highly complex system of ordered relations with place that orientates us in space, in time and in society" (Kellet 2003: 90).

But the meanings of home for low-income populations "simultaneously has broader dimensions which relate to issues of identity, economic and social positions" (Kellet and Moore 2003: 127). The reason for this is that in many urban societies throughout the world "property-owning is a virtually compulsory definition of citizenship" (Moran 2004: 618). In contemporary cities, to be a proper member of society is becoming increasingly connected to being the legal owner of certain kind of housing. Especially after the crisis in the welfare state and the privatization of housing policies (such as the ones conducted by the government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK), to be the owner of a house increasingly appears as *the* key indicator of the improvement in the living conditions of low-income populations.

This is also true in the case under study in this article, given the fact that "from the 1940s the dominant idea of Chilean society is that the right of housing, and to education and health, ought to be guaranteed by the state for that group of the population who, because of their low incomes, is unable to resolve their problems on their own" (Gilbert 2002: 310). This perception was radicalized under the dictatorship of General Pinochet when policies of

privatization of social housing programs, similar to the ones in the UK, were applied.

But ownership is just one stage of a much more complex process of home-making that can be defined as:

> An active process in which most people are permanently engaged. It is a reflective, developing relationship between an individual and key domestic places. This process is shaped and heightened by developmental, personality, and demographic factors, as well as by the goals and purposes that influence human behaviour and endeavour (Rivlin and Moore 2001: 329).

Home is not only a material entity. It is also a matter of dreams and expectations. In some sense the definitive home does not exist at all, it is like a horizon for family actions, always a little bit further away. There are always changes to be made, things to buy, new additions to incorporate. The home is never settled, is never stable, but a flux of past and future changes. As Daniel Miller (2001: 9) recognized, "both the home and its attendant material culture can be central to the practices that make people mobile and able to reconfigure their relationships and indeed themselves in tandem with the changes that take place in the contexts within which they live."

Especially for low-income populations, homes represent the key indicator of achievements, but they also function, with all their current problems and limitations, as a sign of what is left to do, as an indicator of this socioeconomic group's still-incomplete social inclusion. For example, in the well-documented case of home appropriation among low-income populations in South Africa (Ngwane 2003; Ross 2005; Spiegel *et al*. 1996), it has been shown that "domestic consolidation practices are dialectically shaped by material circumstance, ideas of housing, and culturally shaped conventions regarding ideal kin relations" (Ross 2005: 24). For these reasons "the household never quite attained the status of a unit, but merely existed as a site of struggle over an imagined form of the household" (Ngwane 2003: 688). This example shows us how for low-income populations "the appropriation of the home is not a substitutive or vicarious activity but a material objectification of certain social resources available in the construction of household identity" (Miller 1988: 369).

But this process of appropriation of new homes by their owners is only one facet of the general process of adaptation to a new living environment that I will study here. From another point of view, the arrival at their new homes also implies the start of a certain domestication of this population into the kind of life that authorities and urban planners believe is proper for low-income populations in contemporary Santiago.

In this sense, social housing estates can be seen as epitomizing the public understanding of a "modern everyday life" for low-income populations. From the very beginning one of the aims of housing policies was not only to improve the living conditions of poor families and individuals but also to integrate them into a way of life in which residing in a proper home with modern facilities appeared to be the norm, even something compulsory, for modern urban life.

From this point of view, social housing estates appear to be the way that low-income individuals could become full members of a city as owners of homes located in a fully urbanized environment in which the "modern" nuclear family, in contrast to the traditional extended one, can live together. Housing estates can be seen, first and foremost, as the imposition of certain rationalities about how everyday life should be lived in contemporary society, rather than an opportunity for participation or social inclusion *per se*. In these settlements "architecture proposes a complete fracture with previous models, stating the need for a compromise with modernity and the future" (Funari and Zarankin 2002: 34–5). These "machines for living in" (Le Corbusier 1975) look to produce an unprecedented "normalization" of the everyday lives of these families in terms of what authorities, policy makers, and urban planners believe is the "normal" (meaning "decent," "hygienic," etc.) way that low-income populations should live in the city.

This connection between social housing policies and normalization of low-income populations has been found in several countries. For example, at the very beginning of the nation state of Israel "Zionism borrowed from the various strands of modernism the desire to subvert the norms, values, and aesthetics of traditionally accepted categories, in an effort to establish a new social agenda" (Kallus and Law Yone 2002: 769). In these efforts, the provision of public housing for the arriving population played a key role in the transmission of these modernist values because "the design of private space ... enables penetration into the personal space that belongs to the family, and enables control of its most intimate aspects" (pp. 772–3). Something similar happened in South Africa where "urban planners and community and local leaders alike envisaged urban planning as a means to curb 'disorderly' and unconventional social relations, epitomized by the organic forms of shantytowns" (Ross 2005: 27). This view produced a "disjuncture between the planners' idealised model of 'suburban bliss' and the actual lived reality of this low-income housing scheme" (Robins 2002: 511–12).

One key point to make here is that we have to be very careful in seeing these modernist agenda only as a hidden imposition from the state and policy makers to these populations through the particular spatial characteristics of the housing estate. As I saw throughout my research on Tucapel Jimenez II (Ureta 2006), modernist values

regarding housing and family life were already deeply internalized by the members of these families before they came to the estate. Whether this internalization is a result of former policies from the state or acquired through other processes (media exposure, personal observation, etc.), the consequence is that we have to be very careful in making assumptions about the role of the housing estate, and through it of the state, in the acquisition of values about what is meant to be a "normal" inhabitant of contemporary Santiago.

In this context, this article aims to show, through the study of two specific practices related to the adaptation to their new homes—material transformation and decoration—how this process of home-making serves as a platform to "materialize" many of the social processes of change that these families have experienced over the last few years. Beyond conceptions of the home as an "extended self" (Belk 2001) or as a mere reflection of the "social worlds" of their inhabitants (Malkawi and Al-Qudah 2003), I want to show here how homes are constructed as material and symbolic spaces that try to balance, not without conflict, the idea of homes as a "stage" (Goffman 1990), in which the individuality of their members is displayed and they come to perceive their new homes as the base from which they can be integrated into the lifestyle of low-income populations in urban areas.

FIELDWORK AND METHODS

The research on which this article is based was conducted during ten months in 2004 in an urban location in the city of Santiago, Chile. More specifically the study focused on twenty low-income families, inhabitants of a social housing estate called Tucapel Jimenez II.[1] The estate is located on the western edge of the borough of Renca, in the northwestern limit of the city of Santiago. It was built by a private housing company on behalf of the Chilean Housing and Urbanism Service (SERVIU) of the government of Chile and it has been inhabited since June 2002. The housing estate is composed of 876 flats arranged in groups of three-story, O-shaped buildings with an average of twenty-four flats each.

This estate is an interesting site for research because it is a representative example of the virtues and defects of Chile's revolutionary social housing policy of the last few decades. Between 1980 and 2000, around 173,000 social housing units were built in Santiago alone (Tironi 2003: 35), with this program proving especially successful in an area that historically was the main problem of housing programs in the developing world: the provision of housing for the population with the lowest income (Rojas 2001; Rojas and Greene 1995). As a consequence of the increase in social housing stock and better focalization, today approximately 70 percent of the low-income population of the city lives on a social

housing estate (Tironi 2003: 37). Therefore, most of the population in critical need, who used to live in shantytowns on the outskirts of the city, now live in these housing units, having access for the first time to decent housing and basic services such as drains and tap water.

But this new living situation also gives rise to the appearance of new problems, associated with the development of a new kind of social exclusion that has been called a "new urban poverty" (Bengoa 1995; Raczynski and Serrano 1999; Tironi 2003; Wilson 1997). In housing terms, the issue to be tackled changes from the problem of "*los sin techo*" (those without a roof or home) or the traditional lack of decent housing for the poor in developing countries, to the problem of "*los con techo*" (Rodriguez and Sungranyes 2005) or the problem of low-income groups who already have a house, commonly provided by the public social housing programs, but still have critical housing problems. Ducci (1997) identifies three main negative effects of Chile's current social housing policy:

- The fast transformation of the new housing estates into ghettos, isolated from the rest of the city.
- The bad quality and size of the houses and the impossibility of introducing changes in the houses.
- The dissolution of traditional social networks and solidarities.

As a result of this "the residents in these housing estates are generally people who are unsatisfied with the quality of their everyday life" (Rodriguez and Sungranyes 2005: 14). According to a housing satisfaction survey (INVI 2002), 45 percent of them say that they want to move to another place, but they cannot "because they are poor and there are no other housing alternatives" (Rodriguez and Sungranyes 2005).

The negative impacts of the current policies in social housing can be found not only in relation to the population that already lives on one of the housing estates, but also in the structure of the city itself. As the private developers of these housing projects look for the cheapest land on which to build, the estates tend to be located on the periphery of the city (Tironi 2003), contributing to the enlargement of the urban area (Ducci 1998) and to the increase in the level of spatial and socioeconomic segregation of the city (Sabatini 2003).

The twenty families under study, half of whom came from shantytown and half from other living situations, can be also characterized mostly as young adult couples (average age of thirty-five years) that have around 2.8 children (average age of ten years). In terms of education, none of them had university or technical qualifications

and only 68 percent had finished secondary education. For this reason the majority work in the primary sector (as security personnel, taxi drivers, blue-collar workers, etc.) and the levels of integration of women into the formal labor market is still very low. Only in two families did both parents have permanent jobs.

In terms of methods, the research was based primarily on three series of in-depth interviews in their homes with all the adult members of the twenty families selected, talking about their life in the housing estate, especially in terms of their adaptation to their new living space (at the time of the fieldwork they have only been living there for a year and a half) and their use of media technologies in this process. This material was complimented with more general information about the housing estate and the living conditions of low-income populations in Santiago, in order to set a general framework for the analysis.

TRANSFORMING HOMES

If there is something that characterized the former living environments of these families it was their do-it-yourself nature. Due to complete deregulation and informality of shantytowns these families used to "establish identities, perpetuate social norms and mediate community through architecture," which was a form of "conspicuous consumption" (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994: 845). In these houses "the exterior is the representation of the current state of affairs in the household and the plans for the future" (Klaufus 2000: 353). The external appearance of their homes was the preferred space to express their aesthetic ideas and obtain some distinction from their surrounding social context (Holston 1991).

But the fact that their homes were usually made of lightweight materials and on land not owned by them affected heavily the transcendence and meaning of them. Their houses were always fragile and temporary, not at all close to the idea of home that everyone has in mind.

For most of these families, the movement to the housing estate transforms them for the first time in legal owners of a proper and private home away from their extended networks of relatives and friends. Now they can start to transform the flats into their ideal homes and, in doing so, reflect through it their personalities and ways of being to themselves and to their surrounding social environment.

Victor (32), his wife Ines (30), and their three children used to live with Ines's parents in a shantytown in the borough of La Pintana, the poorest borough of the city. They arrived at the housing estate in June 2002 and, though the distance from her relatives has been very hard for Ines, Victor feels that their life has changed for the better, especially in relation to his home.

> When we knew about the house we were happy, everyone was happy because finally we will have our own house and our life changed, because you become more responsible with what is yours, even the children with their bedroom, they can do whatever they like with it, they disorder and order it, because it's for them, it's not like there [their past house], because [there] if you clean something, you have to clean everything... [When we arrived] we put this division [a partition on the living], we made the division of the kitchen and in the children's bedroom, three divisions. What we need now is protections and nothing more, the other things will be done in the future, we want to put ceramics, but my wife doesn't want to because the floor is still good, we also want to paint, with a brighter color.

The arrival at their new flat represents for Victor's family an opportunity to start again, to take a new space and transform it into theirs. He has already made some changes and some others are on the way. Among them we can distinguish two main areas of structural transformation perceived by him, along with many others: protection against external threats and the search for more living space.

In relation with the first one, commonly the first area of material transformation after the families' arrival at the estate was the search for the "autonomy" (Kaika 2004) from social threats. As their new houses already offered shelter from natural elements such as rain or cold, the main task was to secure them against social threats, such as robberies or violence. Protection against this kinds of threat is historically central for low-income populations, the groups of the population more exposed to them. As recognized by Richard Freeman, "persons from disadvantaged or low income groups are over-represented among the victims of crime" (1999: 3533).

For example Joanna (50), a married mother of three, told us in one interview:

> [the housing estate is] not very good, there is too much delinquency, fights, they drink alcohol and then the fights start. Here you can see a lot of things. Actually yesterday they wanted to rape a little child, the police arrived ... I said that there, on the shantytown, it was nicer because I had everything closed and our piece of land was big and my daughter didn't go out. I lived relaxed because I knew that it was safe, but not here. Here I don't have security. With my son Jonathan [15], I'm worried that he's going to start taking drugs or alcohol...

Even though Joanna came from a shantytown, a living environment that from a commonsensical point of view could be seen as quite

risky in terms of crime, her perception is the opposite: the housing estate is perceived as the more dangerous area. But, as we can see from the second half of the quotation, this perception is not related to the housing estate itself, but mainly to her problems in delimitating clearly a space of privacy between the home sphere and the environment. Probably the public areas of the shantytown were perceived as dangerous, or even more dangerous, than the public areas of the housing estate; but the fact that she could establish a clear demarcation between this environment and her home area meant the whole space was perceived as safer.

This perception of risk and vulnerability is especially related to one specific change introduced by the movement to the housing estate: the explicit focus on nuclear families as users of the flats. Before coming to the housing estate, most of these individuals used to live in close proximity, if not in the same house, with the members of their extended families. In the housing estate, given the size of the flats, they are forced to live as nuclear families with the concomitant weakening of their extended social networks of support and protection, making them feel especially exposed and vulnerable. As Edith, who used to live in the house of her mother in the borough of San Bernardo, said:

> We always wanted to have our own flat, for our children, so in this aspect I'm happy. What I don't like is that my whole family is faraway, my mother, my other son, the father of my grandchildren and my daughter, the one that is single; they are still there and it is not the same when something bad happens, because I used to be right there (Edith, 49 years).

This perception of risk meant that one of the first priorities of these families in terms of material transformation of their homes was to secure the home space against unwanted intrusions from the outside, as can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1
Balcony protection

Figure 2
Window protection

Each home approaches security in a different way. Even in the most basic home transformations, such as window or balcony defenses, we can see differences that express much about the people who live in these houses. In both figures, beyond the functionality of the protection devices, we can see some sort of personal design. Both were products of DIY and show how, in their most basic form, home transformations are never merely functional but also express the individuality of each family. In addition, we can see the attempts by family members to "naturalize" their protections with plants and flowers in order to, possibly, hide the real meaning of them, make them look like a some sort of garden and not objects that show their fear of being the object of an attack or robbery. These aesthetic elements of external protection, along with some decorative elements in home extensions, show us how the expression through architecture, especially characteristic of Latin-American shantytowns (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994; Holston 1991; Klaufus 2000), has not completely disappeared in the housing estate, although its relevance has diminished greatly.

The second type of transformation related to enlarging the living space. Most families, even the ones who came from overcrowded dwellings, complained that they do not have enough space to live comfortably. Mariela (45), for example, used to live with her partner Ricardo and their two children in a shantytown located in the same borough. She has been living in the housing estate for more than a year now and she seems to be quite happy with her flat, her only criticism being the lack of space in it.

> [This] is too small, I would like to be in a spacious place . . . I would like to have more things but I can't because they can't fit here. It's very small! even though we are only four people, I ask myself how people with five children could live here; they have to live one above the other . . . if I could I would like all the spaces to be bigger, in every place there is a lack of space.

As Mariela recognizes, her situation in with regard to space is comparatively good. On average the families under study have almost five members (4.9) and they have to live in 36 square meters divided into a living and dining room, a kitchen, a toilet, and two bedrooms. This means that the flats are commonly quite overcrowded spaces, not very different from the places where these families used to live, a situation that generates a variety of problems, from lack of intimacy (Ureta 2006) to the general reduction in the quality of life of the inhabitants of these housing estates throughout the country (Ducci 1997; Rodriguez and Sungranyes 2005; Tironi 2003).

The search for more living space is the main way in which families actively look to be more comfortable in their current houses and it takes many different forms. One is simply the extension of the living space outside the house. As we can see in Figure 3, this search can take the radical form of an extension that goes outside the building, without considering any consequences, either social (the problem that they can have with their neighbors) or aesthetic (the disrespect of the architecture or design of the building).

Figure 3
Enlargement of flat space

Figure 4, taken in the house of Teresa (36) and Nicolas (39), providesa good example of the other common strategy that families use to deal with the lack of space: the redistribution (or even the elimination) of the original home partitions. When an extension is not possible, many families decide to simply remove or redistribute the original partitions to adapt them to the needs of family members. In the case of Teresa and Nicolas, their flat was quite small for them and their five children, so they decided simply to remove the wall that separated the kitchen from the living/dining room in order to have more space available and, in the near future, build a new bedroom for their two male children.

When neither of these options is available, or sometimes in addition to them, there is a third alternative that families use to

Figure 4
Teresa and Nicolas' dining
room and kitchen

create more space: to throw away or strictly limit the amount of furniture that fills house. Cristian (38) and his wife Andrea (40) used to live with their four children in a small rented house in Renca, in which she also worked. When they arrived at the housing estate they were forced to leave or rent out some of their belongings because they did not fit in their new home, a decision that even forced Andrea to start working outside the home.

> When we just arrived here ... we didn't know how to order anything, nothing fitted here ... we were forced to leave furniture there, we had some bookshelves and we left them, we had another sofa, we left it, we had a space in which we worked, 5 meters by 5 meters, there we had tables and sewing machines. We have to rent them, there is no space here. For this reason my wife has to go out to work, she used to work here, she worked at home for almost ten years.

This situation of throwing out and/or controlling the stock of furniture and home goods is especially difficult for low-income groups compared to more affluent ones. Due to "consumer restrictions that severely limit their consumption options" (Hill 2002: 288) their ability to participate in contemporary consumer culture is quite low. For this reason, goods are highly appreciated and, in a culture of relative material poverty, "most of their belongings, whether furniture, wall decorations, or electronic apparatus, are milestones marking events in their lives" (Klaufus 2000: 350). Furniture and decoration carry special meanings, they represent their past, their stories, successes, and failures and to leave them behind is, in some sense, to leave behind a part of their own story.

These examples show us how highly valued is the availability of more space. Families are willing to make many sacrifices and changes in order to create even a little more space, sacrifices that involve not only the aesthetics or the material aspects of their lives, but also more intimate spheres related to memory and identity.

This struggle for space is motivated by a diversity of factors but centrally by the demand for individual spaces, a demand that constitutes in itself the third great need of the families under study in relation to their home spaces. This demand, without exception, assumes one specific form: the need for a gendered space for the children. Originally, the flats came with only two bedrooms, one for the parents and one for the children, without contemplating clearly any space for building another bedroom. This distribution forces the parents to put all the children in one bedroom, without any separation of age and/or gender.

Jonathan and Rosa had three children, two boys (Javier and Elias) and one girl, Nayaret. As she was ten years old and about to enter her teenage years, Jonathan perceived that the most urgent need in terms of space was another bedroom to allow him to separate Nayaret from her brothers.

> Another bedroom, this is the space we need, another bedroom for the girl, because there are two boys and one girl, so this space would be for the girl, she's starting to need her own space, more intimacy, she needs a more private space, like any other child she needs her intimacy, that's what I think, to make another bedroom, to make the other two [bedrooms] smaller and make one bedroom just for her.

In a social context in which many of the eldest children were entering their teen years, this situation appears a major obstacle for many parents. Some families had already built an extra bedroom at the time of the interviews and some others were planning to do it as soon as they had some money and/or time available to do so. Many parents, as Jonathan did, thought that the lack of space for one more room in the original plans of the housing estate is one of the central problems of its design, an opinion that is shared by inhabitants of different housing estates all over the country (INVI 2002).

This last aspect shows how unclear, and even contradictory, are the "normalizing" ideas behind housing policy and planning in Chile. On the one hand, they recognized the nuclear family as the preferred familiar type to live in housing estates and encouraged it through small flats in which only families with few members can live. On the other hand, the lack of a third room (or even the space to build one) means that parents cannot provide the most elementary privacy that is perceived as normal for children of nuclear families.

Even in the cases in which these ideas were quite clear (such as in terms of the size of the flat or the minimal house partitions) the examples seen here show that in domesticating their new living spaces, people often do not respect the original plans of buildings and flats, implicitly rejecting the ideas that builders and policy

makers had in relation to the characteristics of "normal" housing for low-income populations. This situation is similar to what Amorim and Loureiro (2001) found in their study of the transformations made by neighbors of a housing estate in the city of Recife, Brazil.

> It is supposed that a block of flats is less changeable than is an individual house. The transformation process imposed by inhabitants to the original housing structure, however, shows that this is not always true, mainly when some rules of communal living are not taken into account. It also challenges professional congruence in its roots, because it often takes an opposite direction of the explicit regulatory factors that influence both, the design and the use of the built environment. In fact, this transformation process reverses some priorities of professional design, emphasising individual desires, or a particular spatial culture (p. 2).

Therefore, beyond the limits imposed by the spatial structure, when they are able to do it the members of these families appropriate their new homes by transforming them in accordance to their previous ideas or needs.

However, transformations are always partial. Especially in a context of low income, the resources involved in the transformations of home space are very limited. As happened with Cristian and Andrea, in many cases neighbors are also forced to accept some of the limitations imposed by the flats and to adapt to the type of life that they are supposed to live there. In doing this they have to look for other ways to domesticate these spaces within the limits imposed by their builders. Among these tactics, one appeared in all the homes under study: decoration.

DECORATING HOMES

From a common sense point of view, we might think that taste and aesthetics are unimportant to these families. Due to their situation of relative scarcity and precariousness, taste could appear as something secondary, not relevant in their everyday lives. These people have such serious and urgent needs that any interest in refinements appears superfluous and meaningless. What they need are things, it does not matter how they look or if they find them beautiful or not. From this viewpoint, low-income populations have would find it difficult to develop an aesthetic judgment because, due to their urgent needs, they are always embedded in the "content" of things, their "value of use" in Marx's terms, rather than in their aesthetic "taste" or "meaning." In this context the only aesthetic option for this population, using the concept developed by Bourdieu (1984), is the "choice of the necessary."

But in the last few decades a new approach to material culture and aesthetics has challenged this presumption (Appadurai 1987; Dant 1999; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Miller 1987). From this perspective, one of the more salient aspects of contemporary society is the "aestheticization of everyday life" (Featherstone 1991) or the fact that "more and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled, and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction for us" (Welsch 1996: 1, cited in De la Fuente 2000: 235). In contemporary societies, aesthetic judgments are always embedded in considerations about the goods and services we purchase, use and/or dream about.

In this context in relation to the aesthetic judgments of low-income populations we have to abandon "a deficit model in which the working class is simply treated as an absence, i.e. lacking both cultural and economic capital and therefore incapable of making distinctions, unlike the case of the dominant classes" (Watt 2006: 778). The radical separation between everyday life and aesthetics that a concept like "the choice of the necessary" comprises can only be true for groups in urgent, and commonly temporary, state of need (like survivors of a natural disaster, migrants or refugees of war). Beyond this specific situation "there is no merit in reducing working-class taste to the rack of functional necessity where it has, by definition, no aesthetic distinction" (Holston 1991: 460). Even for people with the lowest incomes, such as the homeless population (Kellet and Moore 2003), certain degrees of aesthetic judgment always form a part of their everyday lives.

Especially for people who live in conditions of modern urban poverty, like the families under study here (Bengoa 1995; Raczynski and Serrano 1999), their participation in contemporary society always involves a growing centrality of aesthetic judgment. This aesthetic judgment starts from the very beginning of their life in their new homes with their perceptions of the housing estate as beautiful or ugly and lies behind most of their judgments and opinion about their current everyday lives.

Among these elements decoration appears as one of the key areas in which the members of these families can show their aesthetic conceptions and, in doing so, express their individuality. Especially since their move to the housing estate, decoration of their homes becomes the central area of aesthetic expression, replacing the use of exterior architecture of their homes as a form of distinction. In an environment of flats and buildings of identical shapes and sizes, at least originally, family members are forced to concentrate their aesthetic expression and judgment on the interior areas of their homes, to transform them into unique spaces that materially express the identity of the people who live there.

As can be seen in the Figures 5 and 6, the living/dining room represents for these families the first place in which they can

Figure 5
Ines and Victor's living room

express their own tastes and ideas in order to transform their homes into unique places. In Ines and Victor's living room (Figure 5) and Mariela's dining area (Figure 6) we can note the presence of a mixture of a very diverse array of material elements.

In this diversity we can identify four major kinds of elements that form the decoration of the homes under study. First, there are pieces of furniture like sofas and dining tables, commonly made of low-quality materials (such as fake leather, cheap tapestry, etc.), in imitation of furniture of groups with higher incomes. Second, there are always communication technologies, especially in the form of television sets and hi-fi equipment. Not uncommonly these technologies were quite new and expensive, establishing a clear contrast with the rest of the material culture of the home.[2] Third, there are various of strictly decorative items like tablecloths, small statues, and posters, usually bought in the weekly market or received in the form of gifts from family and friends. Finally, there are a number of mementos of family history, for example pictures, diplomas, handcrafts made by the children, etc., displayed on the walls and spread over tables and shelves in the public areas of these homes.

Figure 6
Mariela's dining area

However, as can be seen in both images, these elements are not randomly positioned. There is always a certain order, certain meaning, in the way material objects are arranged in the home. Above all, this rationale is aimed at making something "unique" or distinctive, even in the cases where most of the elements are mass-produced commodities. In this sense our findings are quite similar to what James Holston (1991) found among working class population in Brazil, where:

> The kind of kaleidoscopic combinations that characterize the "rustic modern house" are motivated by a strategic conversion of commodities into personalized signs, refashioned to remove them from the context of the mass market by investing them with non-commodity values, namely, the personal competence, knowledge, and originality of their users (p. 461).

This particular order is a way to escape uniformity, to resist the imposition of a standardized way to decorate low-income homes. As happened in the preceding section in relation to the transformation of the flats, in decoration we can see another way in which these families actively resist the uniform "normalization" logic that lies behind the consumption of mass-produced commodities by low-income populations. In this case "their solution is to turn the copy into an original by developing a unique mode of articulating, rather than merely repeating, the standard set of mass produced objects and styles they use" (Holston 1991: 461).

This role of artifacts, especially purely decorative ones, in the representation of the identity of the families is quite clear when we examine in detail any statement about decoration and the order of the home. For example in Jessica's (30), a married housewife, mother of two, evaluation of the living room of her house:

> For me it's always been important to develop, to live well, even in my economic situation. Between having too many and too few things I prefer to have just one beautiful painting. I always try, with the money that I save, to buy beautiful things for the house, maybe not so much furniture or other things, but beautiful things, I like people to come and find my house beautiful, and that they say "this is very beautiful," but ... I put this painting and my husband put these pictures and ruined it all, but good enough ... I like to have it beautiful.

As we can clearly note, the "beauty" of the things in her living room appears to be important to her; something about which she has some pre-established aesthetic concepts, "not so much furniture or other things, but beautiful things."

At the same time, there is one central aspect of the aesthetic attitude of these groups that appears clearly in this short statement: how difficult it is to buy new commodities, especially decorative ones. It is obvious from the very beginning that these families have very few monetary resources to acquire purely decorative items or to choose commodities not only for their price but also because they are beautiful. They cannot develop an aesthetic valuation of "new" commodities, or at least not as frequently as more affluent groups do. In these circumstances, they are forced to develop replacement aesthetic judgments. In the case under study, these judgments took two main forms: the aesthetic valuation of cleanness and the constant relocation of goods.

First, cleanness and order of the house is commonly perceived as having an aesthetic value. As Catalina (42) said in one interview, "a house that is not ordered to me is ugly, it's like you don't care about anything." For most of the individuals under study, especially the women, to have their houses clean and ordered in some sense replaces the lack of new or expensive commodities. As Patricia, a married, 30-year-old mother of five, told us in one of the interviews:

> I think that you can be poor but with dignity. To be poor does not mean to be dirty or not in order. No, for me to be clean is important. It does not matter if you don't have good things or too many things, but if they are clean, everything is all right.

As we can note, the valuation of order and cleanness goes a lot further than its mere aesthetic value. For them order is beauty, but at the same time it is a sign of normality. Therefore, besides beauty, cleanness and the order of things at home represent a source of "ontological security" (Giddens 1991). It even has a moral value, a demonstration of the dignity or decency of low-income families (Martinez 1996) summarized by Patricia's phrase, "you can be poor but with dignity."

The second strategy commonly used is to give some aesthetic value to the relocation of commodities in home spaces, a similar practice to what Garvey (2001) found in her study of Norwegian homes. In the cases under study, this relocation usually means the movement and rearrangement of the already available stock of things in new ways. Isabel (24), for example, was a married housewife, mother of two, who did not receive any regular income. As her husband, Carlos, only received quite low wages, buying goods for decorative reasons does not appear to be possible. In these circumstances, she opted to change continually the position of things in her house, in order to make it look different, at least at first sight.

> We like to change [the distribution of things], because it is the same as if you dress in the same way all the time. So if the house is beautiful, after some time it becomes boring, you get bored of the same color or distribution, [you have to] change it, it's the same as if you dress the same way for three days, your clothes will be dirty, but if you change them you change a little and you feel better.

If novelty cannot be reached through new things, then a fictional novelty is created through the redistribution of the available stock of things in different parts of the house. In some cases this tactic even led to hiding some commodities for some time and then, after a period, interchanging them for others, in order to make them look strange, to give them a new character that forces a re-domestication into the current material culture of the household.

Along with the public areas of the living and dining rooms, there is another central area of aesthetic concern: the bedrooms. These spaces commonly are the only ones in which we can find some kind of individual expression, especially from the children. Children in general do not have very much of a role in the public aesthetics of the house. This is because their parents do not really take in consideration their aesthetic judgments but also, and centrally, because children in general do not really care about it. They could have opinions and judgments about the aesthetic of these spaces, but they saw them as their parents' space.

However, they do not have the same attitude to their own spaces. As we can see in Figures 7 and 8, the children actively use their bedrooms as a space of self-expression and identity.

In Figure 7 we can see the bedroom of Francisco (12), son of Alan (48) and Edith (49). As the last remaining child in the house—the couple has two other children who are married and living on their own—Francisco has a great degree of freedom in terms of the decoration of the bedroom because he is the only one that uses it.

Figure 7
Francisco's bedroom decoration

> He decorates it the way he likes, he has a T-shirt of Colo Colo [a Chilean football club] hung on the wall, he has some figures, some pictures stuck to the wall, he arranges his environment the way he likes, I don't say anything to him, because he didn't have this freedom when we were living with my stepmother, then [now] he has the freedom to arrange his space the way he likes. The only thing that I force him to do is to keep it ordered, nothing more (Edith).

But the freedom that Francisco has is quite unusual in the general context of the families under study. As we described already, most of the children have to share their space with their siblings, making this process of self-expression through decoration much more difficult.

This is the case with Mercedes (15), the daughter of Edith and David, who shares her bedroom with her brother Guillermo (11) and her sister Natalie (4). As can be seen in Figure 8, her available personal space is much smaller than Francisco's (just one corner of the bedroom) and it is in continual competition with the space of her brother and sister.

Figure 8
Mercedes' bedroom decoration

> For me its important that each one of us has our space, because I say that the bedroom is the personal space, the living/dining room is the space of when we are all together, for that I would really like to have my own space ... because there you can make and unmake without having anyone telling you "no, this looks bad" or "this looks ugly;" then if I had my own space I would have it the way that I want, I would like to paint it another color, a lemon green or a pastel green (Mercedes).

As described earlier, the demands for personal space for their children are at the center of current family dynamics and aspirations. These examples show us how these demands are not only related to the parents' perception of the need for a gendered space but also to the children's need for spaces of freedom and self-expression. In a demographic context like the one under study, in which many families have children at pre-teen stage, it can be reasonable to expect that in a short time this demand (and the problem caused by their inability to complete fulfill it) would be at the center of the family dynamics and conflicts.

Therefore, in the process of decorating their homes we can see an alternative strategy to appropriate their new living spaces. In most of the cases, decoration is used to fulfill two successive roles: to show the families as participants in a culture of order and decency, characteristic of "normal" urban living, and also to express the individuality of the members of the homes, especially

those who do not usually express themselves in public activities or spaces, like women or children.

CONCLUSIONS

What are the consequences of all these diverse processes of transformation of home spaces and their decoration in the general view and meaning of homes? In material terms, as can be seen in the figures in this article, home environments tend to look like a patchwork, a mixture of very diverse objects located in spaces that are becoming increasingly different. In this sense, home spaces can be seen above all as places of identity and self-expression by the members of these families.

But at the same time this diversity is limited by two main "normalizing" forces: the state and the market. On the one hand, the state through the provision of flats and a housing estate that looks exactly like any other new flats or housing estates in the country, explicitly tries to domesticate this population in a certain way of life suited to low-income populations in urban areas. On the other hand, mass-produced commodities bought in the market limit the way in which these families can obtain distinction, in Bourdieu's terms, through their consumption practices, giving a certain degree of uniformity to the internal spaces of their homes.

As a result of both dynamics, I agree with the conclusion of Kallus and Law Yone in their study of housing policy in Israel in the Fifties for whom

> Following Lefebvre (1974) the public housing project can be seen as the concurrent outcome of three processes: the formal representation of space by the State, the official practice that takes place in the space, and the perceptions of the space by citizens, including their daily activities. The dialectical relationship among these forces produces a concrete space such as the one described here (Kallus and Law Yone 2002: 773).

But to say that the state (and the market, through commodities) is an actor in the development of the space known as Tucapel Jimenez II does not imply that its role in this process is the same as the people who actually live there. As we saw in this article, both material changes and decoration strategies can be seen as steps towards a progressive appropriation of their new home spaces. In this sense we can see both practices as "activities through which they attempt (with variable degrees of success) to render what is inevitably met as alienating when received through the distributive institutions of the nation-state, into inalienable culture" (Miller 1988: 354). After almost two years living on the housing estate (at the time of the fieldwork) all the families under study have more or

less adapted their material environment in order to make it more similar to the "ideal home" that they had in their minds when they first arrived there, a space that is commonly quite different from the original ideas of authorities and urban planners about how the living areas of these families should be.

Although the attempt to normalize low-income areas through social housing has been relatively successful in Chile, at least more than in other developing societies where "the 'formal' suburb ... seems to have reverted back to its original 'unruly' state" (Robins 2002: 512), the case under study shows the persistence of several problems regarding the adaptation of these families to the estate. In order to minimize these situations in the future, policy makers and practitioners have to take into account the fact that "'target populations' are indeed 'moving targets' that do not easily conform to the homogeneous and standardised suburban housing models that [they] have inherited" (Robins 2002: 543). The low-income urban population is not an amorphous group of individuals with identical housing needs and demands. As seen here, there are as many perceptions and uses of home space as people inhabiting them. Obviously, in devising social housing policies it is impossible to take into consideration all individual demands and specifications, but in order to develop housing projects that better respond to this diversity previous research with the potential beneficiaries of the projects is needed in order to, at least, identify and address the major needs in relation to their future homes.[3]

NOTES

1. Named after Tucapel Jimenez (1921–82), a union leader assassinated by Pinochet's intelligence agency (DINA) members in 1982.
2. We can even speculate that communication technologies as material culture have absorbed a great deal of the symbolization of the current social status of the home owners that used to have external architecture. Big and shiny television sets and powerful hi-fi equipments can be seeing as materially representing the improvements in their quality of life, to themselves and others. Explicit research on this point is needed to test this hypothesis.
3. A good example of this approach is "Proyecto Elemental" (http://www.elementalchile.cl/), a research and policy initiative that looks, using the same "market and policy conditions" as other social housing projects, to "think, design and build better neighbourhoods, housing and the necessary urban infrastructure to promote social development and overcome the circle of poverty and inequity of our cities" (from the website, accessed xxxx).

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