

Not a Home!

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In Sweden when one speaks about Public Libraries one often uses general, and somewhat clichéd, descriptions. The library is often sweepingly called 'a meeting place' and/or 'a living room'. Descriptions such these are also often used in Swedish urban/city planning when one talks about public spaces. I've thought a lot about why the 'living room'-metaphor so frequently is being used. I find this very interesting. Why use a metaphor from the home sphere – the private sphere – when talking about public spaces and public libraries? Something that signifies the talk about the public library as a living room is that the 'meeting' between people is portrayed, primarily, as a mutual recognition and confirmation of what is same and similar. One paints a picture, intentionally or not, of a homogenous society where democracy is the same as consensus. A clear-cut and unambiguous society characterized by agreement. This picture does not seem to include difference, disparity or conflict. As also talk of community and safety often is, the 'living room'-speak is characterized by a domestication and intimization of the public (space).

The author John Berger stated in the mid seventies that different processes of differentiation and individualisation had put modern woman/man in a permanent state of identity crisis, which he described as a profound state of homelessness. This state of homelessness is very difficult to bear and evokes nostalgias of being 'at home' in society. In his book, *'And our faces, my heart, brief as photos'*, Berger continues a discussion on the different meanings of home. He says that the original meaning is that it is the centre where from one orientates oneself in the world. It is the place where the individual creates the world. Using what is constructed as home - borders that exclude the unknown and strange is erected. The difference between home and away is also the difference between us and them. The world outside of what is home is a lost and confusing world of shards and fragments. Home does not only decide what is central and what is peripheral, it also decides what is normal and what is different and Other. One can speak of what is homelike and familiar and that which is strange and alien. That which is not 'at home' in a place or does not belong is rejected. If you look upon the home in this way, as a wider concept, it does not exclusively relate to the place where one lives, ones residency.

The vast range of interior decorating magazines and TV programmes concerned with design and improvement of our homes and home life can be interpreted as evidence of our seemingly unlimited interest in the home. The fact that the theme of the IKEA catalogue of 2008 is *'Home is the most important place in the world'*, says something about how we view this place, this sense of belonging and the significance we ascribe to feeling at home. It is important to feel at home. One does not want to be the unwelcome stranger, the visitor. The home is an inside that we are able to design, shape, reshape and control. You are also able to control who is allowed in and who is shut out. The great sociologist Georg Simmel described the door as a symbol of woman's/man's freedom. The door can be opened and closed, symbolizes both power and control and can decide both community and generosity. The door represents our need to ourselves be able to set boundaries.

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The notion of the 'protective cocoon' was coined to describe the seeking of safety and comfort by shutting and filtering out what one believes to be surrounding threats. In this way one creates a safe private inside in relation to a threatening public outside. In recent years, though, it has become apparent that one does not stop there. One also wants to make common public spaces supposedly 'safe'. Many measures are being taken to "clean up" and show public spaces to be safe and secure. These measures often express ownership and ownership of territory. Even if what has been looked upon as private or public and good or bad public city life historically has been subject to change, the city has a constant characteristic. The city is unavoidably a space where strangers are in close proximity and contact with each other. City life is lived by strangers among strangers. And this is what one by many artificial means are trying to control by claiming ownership, constructing borders, conducting surveillance and by producing segregation. A prerequisite for safety and comfort seems to be that any difference or differences are denied. The ambition to make public spaces safe and to encourage people to feel at home and comfortable may be a good one in many ways. But one should probably question what the political, social and economical conditions or sacrifices might be for such simultaneously including and excluding/inclusive and exclusive comfortable safety. There is an apparent risk that the more the desire for socially homogenous public spaces (living rooms) are accommodated we will find life outside of the protective cocoon even more difficult and problematic. It will become even more strenuous to interact and integrate with those that do not think, feel nor talk as one self. To meet others perceived as unlike yourself could be considered even less comfortable and safe. And strangers might appear even more frightening and threatening. One creates a vicious circle where the desire for safety and certainty actually creates more fear and uncertainty.

The strong emphasis on the importance of the inside and the encapsulating of functions that were previously shared, general and public has been described as architecture without facades. That the private and the sealed off has been given a privileged position is being made clear by shielded communities, glassed-in suburban centres and shopping streets in the city and by the many big indoor shopping centres being built around Sweden. This also shows that the idea of shared public spaces is being hollowed out. There is a one-sided emphasis on creating insides. I believe that it is important to strengthen the idea based on the outside as a place of difference and politics, which could be done by consolidating the distinction between the private and the public space. The boundaries or the content of these two notions are never fixed or definitive, but the two categories are needed for a critical democratic discourse without the requirement of consensus or agreement. Public spaces should therefore never be transformed into some ones or some people's home or 'living room'. They should not be spaces that I or you could furnish/shape or reshape in accordance to our own preference and invite certain individuals or groups and shut the door in the face of others. We need public spaces open to all where everyone feel welcome - however - not as owners but as constant visitors.