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Towards a Definition of 'Place'. Interdisciplinary Methodology for Integrating Architectural and Sociological Data in Claremont Court, Edinburgh

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Abstract

This paper introduces our novel cross-disciplinary methodology developed under the research project '*Place and Belonging: what can we learn from Claremont Court Housing Scheme?*' This original methodology integrates research methods from architecture and sociology in order to investigate the relationship between place and sense of belonging to a community, using the case study of Claremont Court, a post-war housing scheme in Edinburgh. The research's theoretical framework defines 'place' as the physical space together with the atmosphere, or phenomena that give meaning to it (Norberg-Schulz, 1996;Gieryn, 2000;Zumthor, 2006; Casey, 2009;Relph, 1976). Through individual and collective spatial practices, people attach meanings to a place that they can then claim belonging to (Benson and Jackson, 2012). Thus, the meaning and (co-)production of place become critical in the presentation of the self (Cooper, 2006), and in establishing belonging to a collective identity (Riggins, 1994). Consequently, our methodology is underpinned by the theory of non-verbal communication, according to which people generate the meaning of a place through 'personalisation' (Rapoport, 1982:21; Cooper, 2006; Riggins, 1994; Shields, 2002) of their environment. Drawing on these premises, we developed a qualitative research design which combines architectural research methods with research methods from the social sciences. Through visual methods, we study physical cues from which we infer inductively the meaning of place. Through interviews we study verbal behaviour, which further uncovers the meaning of the place through thematic analysis. From the synthesis of both analyses we elicit the meaning of place for the dweller. The variety of research strategies that we have applied to the case-study responds to the understanding of place as a physical and socio-cultural reality. Therefore, the research is structured upon the idea of considering visual methods as cross-disciplinary means, able to integrate the physical and socio-cultural aspects of the research problem, enabling the dialogue between different disciplinary areas. The findings of this work are two-fold. First, as part of our original methodology, this paper introduces 'contextual mapping' and 'visual narratives' as novel research methods for visualising and interpreting the data collected in relation to the lived spaces and their phenomena. 'Mapping' is here proposed as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) in opposition to the agency of 'tracing'. In so doing, we assume that architecture can be an interpretative tool for the situations of daily life (Troianiand Carless, 2015). Secondly, this paper questions commonly used methodologies to study environmental meaning that rely on linear models.

We suggest instead that visual methodologies can support the synthesis of physical and socio-cultural data in a cyclic model that brings together research approaches coming from two different, yet interconnected, fields of knowledge such as architecture and the social sciences.

Keywords: Architectural research methods, Contextual mapping, Interdisciplinary research, Non-verbal communication, Visual research methods.

Historical and Theoretical Framework

The research project '*Place and Belonging: what can we learn from Claremont Court housing scheme?*' investigates the case study of Claremont Court in Edinburgh from an original angle, which concerns the critical understanding of the linkages between place and sense of belonging.

Claremont Court is a post-war social housing scheme designed by Basil Spence and realised between 1958 and 1962 in Edinburgh as part of the national housing drive. The site allocated to this "inner-city" development (Glendinning, 2007) was at the boundary of the New Town, along one of the main axis leading from the town center to Leith. Claremont Court comprises of 63 dwellings of six different typologies, grouped in L-shaped low-rise rectangular volumes around two landscape courtyards. Consistently with the key principles of the Scottish housing drive, this scheme aimed to improve the living standards of the working class, enabling at the same time the idea of a *cross-class* development (Costa-Santos et al., 2017) based on new meanings of home and communal life. The dwellings layout and set up corresponded to the completely new public taste as presented at '*Britain can make it*' exhibition in 1956 (Woodham, 2004). For the first time, the introduction of some innovative technological products (such as kitchen appliances and television) were seen as the focal points of an efficient interior space design (Williams, 1990).

Nevertheless, Claremont Court is a relevant case study within the broader framework of Modernist housing in UK also for the original social approach. Although Spence lacked a clear theoretical agenda, the design of the housing scheme seems to be in agreement with the avant-gardist theory of a planned community, developed by the TeamX in reaction to the socially alienating developments proposed by the orthodox Modernism. According to the TeamX, spatial hierarchy was essential for social life to function and to foster a sense of community. This principle has been translated into specific architectural features, such as grouped medium-rise blocks, joined by open decks for pedestrians or organized around communal courtyards (Smithson, 1962).

The theoretical framework underpinning the research project is structured upon the idea that 'place' is the physical space together with its atmosphere, or phenomena that give meaning to it (Norberg-Schulz, 1996;Gieryn, 2000;Seamon, 2014). Relph (1976), in his study on place and *placelessness*, identifies three components through which defining 'place': physical setting, activities and meanings. Thus, place can be defined as space that has been permeated with individual and collective meanings through personal, group, and cultural processes: '*Places are, therefore, repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just* place qua place*, to which people are attached*' (Low andIrwin, 1992:7). Most scholarship on place relates place attachment to place identity, which is intended as '*a component of personal identity*' (Cross, 2015:494) and the process through which people come to describe themselves as belonging to a particular place and adopting identifications which reflect places (Hernández et al., 2007; Stedman, 2002).

In the case of Claremont Court, we assume that the sense of attachment to the place can be of a different nature if we refer to the private space of the dwelling or to the communal areas of the development, such as the landscape courtyard and the roof terrace. Hence, we developed an ad-hoc methodology, which combines architectural and sociological approaches to place. Therefore, a sole architectural investigation would not allow a comprehensive understanding of the subject, which requires the integration of the tangible and non-tangible aspects of place. We assume here that people attach meanings to a place that they can then claim belonging to (Benson and Jackson, 2012; Tuan, 1974) through individual and collective spatial practices. Thus, co-producing the place is strictly connected to the representation of the self (Cooper, 2004) and to the formation of a sense of belonging to a collective identity. Consequently, our methodology has its theoretical foundation in the theory of non-verbal communication, according to which people generate the meaning of a place through the agency of 'personalisation' (Rapoport, 1982:21) of their environment. In the seminal study 'Topophilia', Tuan (1974) highlights the interactional nature of the process of place attachment, which is given by the association of place with meanings and emotional affection, at individual and group level. In fact, our research combines architectural methods, including contextual mapping and visual narrative of dwellings and photo-survey and critical mapping of communal areas, with sociological methods, including biographical, walk-along and photograph elicitation interviews, and activity diaries, in order to explore the residents' sense of place and belonging. The interdisciplinary methodology allowed to explore the subject taking into account individual and collective variables related to the spatial practices characterising the place and sense of belonging in Claremont Court.

The paper aims to explore the value of interdisciplinary research design to investigate the subject. In the first section, architectural and sociological methods are mapped and discussed, highlighting similarities and divergences across the two approaches. Secondly, we discuss whether visual methodologies can support the synthesis of tangible and non-tangible data in an iterative model, demonstrating in particular how visual narratives have been developed for the scope.

'Operating horizontally': the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity to Investigate Claremont Court

The conceptual framework of the research is structured upon the idea of considering visual outputs as interdisciplinary means able to integrate architectural and sociological data, enabling connections and overlaps across different fields of knowledge. In fact, although visual methods are not new to architecture or sociology, the novelty of the methods proposed in the paper relies in the new type of visual method developed which allows data to be critically combined together by the researcher. Interdisciplinarity is here intended as suggested by Rendell as a tool allowing for integration of methods and data of different fields of knowledge (2004): it thus implies the design of an original methodology including disciplinary overlaps and hybrid analytical techniques.

Concerning Claremont Court case study, in the first instance the interdisciplinary nature of the research project put forward the question whether we should '*adopt (and adapt) methodologies developed in other academic disciplines*' (Seagoand Dunne, 1996:1), or develop ourselves an original cross-disciplinary methodology able to decode the distinctive meaning of place in Claremont Court. Drawing on the principle that architectural research can maintain a specificity of its own, while being influenced by a number of disciplinary procedures (Rendell, 2004), we designed a multi-stage methodology, which put the notion of place, as tangible and non-tangible realm, at the edge of architecture and sociology disciplines. Since in architectural research the aim is to expand the cultural understanding towards more open-ended propositions rather than solve identifiable problems (Troiani et al., 2013), our interdisciplinary approach allowed us to '*operate horizontally – surveying a field, examining the fissures and boundaries, the folds and overlaps, the tears and rips, the points where disciplines fall apart and come together*' (Rendell, 2013:129). Fieldwork sessions have been conducted in parallel during the first stage of the research, easing the exchange of the initial set of data collected through architectural survey and biographical interviews. Establishing a discussion since the very early stages of the process allowed researchers of two fields to '*establish complicities, learning how to discuss both their competencies and the outcome of their interaction*' (Coles andDefert, 1997:6). From an operative angle, this was possible through a continuous dialogue about the methods and potentialities of integrating textual and visual data across the different stages of the research. To this extent, interdisciplinarity provided '*more alternatives with which to view data*' (Kent, 1983:1), allowing for an integrated approach to the analysis of the place.

In the second stage, the research focused more on the communal areas and how they're used and perceived by the community, focusing on what Tuan (1974) defined place attachment relations at the group level. In so doing, the space in Claremont Court has been investigated through techniques belonging to different field of knowledge: architectural methods have been applied alongside methods of social sciences. These allowed to analyse Claremont Court as a complex spatial system where the private realm of the dwellings interacts with those shared areas, originally intended to create a sense of community. Architectural and sociological methods- a community workshop and walk-along interviews respectively- showed different attitudes and sense of attachment to the place, suggesting significant divergences in perspectives, behaviours and meanings of place.

Investigating 'Place' at the Cross-boundary between Architecture and Sociology

MappingResearchMethods

The variety of architectural research approaches applied to Claremont Court case-study responds to the physical and socio-cultural relevance of the project. In order to ground the project on a substantial architectural

foundation, an initial set of data has been collected through an architectural survey (measuring and sketching) of dwellings and communal areas, accompanied by a detailed set of photographic materials. In some cases, the flats' survey has been conducted through a laser tape, when the alterations from the original design features had been significant.

The archival research at Historic Environment Scotland allowed us to analyse thoroughly the technical drawings (produced by Spence and Partners between 1958 and 1962) and correspondence, in order to substantiate our assumption to consider Claremont Court as an example of *'cross-class'* post-war development. The drawings confirm Spence's intent to create a strongly mixed development through the combination of various dwelling types, able to deal with the needs of some new types of households. The archival research also highlighted some specific characters of the place, such as the relevance given to the communal areas and the cross-points between different blocks, thoughtfully designed by Spence to confirm their value as catalysts of community formation.

A detailed photo survey has been conducted alongside the architectural survey, focussing on peculiar aspects of the inhabited spaces, paying attention to any detail that could be read as a manifestation of 'the self' through the personalisation of the place (Cooper, 2006). The survey considered a set of predetermined variables: number of occupants and their ages, time they moved in, type of profession, type of hobbies practised, and if the dwellers had any special needs. Crossing these variables with the outcome of the first round of interviews, allowed to originate a more detailed set of interpretive categories for analysing the dwellings. These are grouped in two macro-areas. The first relates to the interpretation of the interior space and its patterns of use (including: Spaces for family leisure/entertainment, Working from home, Housework spaces, Social/ gathering); the latter refers to those peculiar spaces here defined as 'thresholds' (including: Use of balconies, Type of access, Bike parking, Degree of personalisation of the access/entrance door, Degree of privacy).

Drawing on Rapoport's position mentioned above, the agency of surveying the dwelling represented an opportunity to record spatial practices and the material culture of the place, highlighting the personal ways through which the original space has been appropriated and inhabited by the dwellers (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Contextual Mapping showing Spatial Appropriation of Two Adjacent Maisonettes*

Alongside the architectural methods, Claremont Court has been investigated through techniques belonging to different fields of knowledge, such as ethnographic observation of the communal areas, with particular attention to the use of balconies and covered walkways as private/public thresholds.

At the same time, data have been collected through sociological methods, such as biographical and walk-along interviews (Table 1). Interestingly, we noticed that, if on one hand many data collected through the two methods overlapped, on the other architecture and sociology highlighted aspects, which could not be noticed, nor recorded, through a single-discipline approach. In fact, we found that architectural methods were highly focused on the '*unspoken dimension of physical spaces which shape the spatial practices'* (Lewis and May, 2017). The investigation of the physical component of the place allowed to decode the spatial and embodied elements of the dwelling and set up the framework within which the inhabitants interact with the physical environment. On the other hand, the interview-based data focused on the everyday aspects of the resident lives that are taken for granted and consequently unnoticed (Garfinkel, 2006), unveiling hidden meanings behind spatial patterns and ordinary practices. Several elicitation methods have been adopted to stimulate talks about the aspects of participants' everyday life, deepening the understanding of the inhabitants' perspectives and offering alternative means of expression in relation to some aspects of their everyday lives that could be difficult to verbalise (Croghan et al., 2008). Differently from other methods, discussing a photograph prompted talk about different things that researchers had not

thought about and places that researchers could not access. Photo-elicitation encourages more emotional and '*ineffable*' (Bagnoli, 2009:548) reactions, tapping into what is no longer there, examining unnoticed changes and access experiences, memories and feelings that often remain unspoken. The interview-based methods also introduced the concepts of temporality and mutability, aspects that cannot always be noticed through the sole architectural reading of the place. The participatory nature of these data collection methods provided research participants with substantial control over what was to be considered meaningful, as confirmed even more clearly through the activity diary interviews and the community workshop described below (Figure 2).

A different approach has been applied to the study of the communal areas, whose spatial features, character and atmosphere are determined by physical factors and modes of interaction that the community puts in place within these areas. As noticed previously, Spence designed the shared spaces in Claremont Court with rigour, trying to establish connections between this project and the avant-gardist theories of the TeamX. However, the variables describing the physical space in Claremont Court are typical of some post-war Modern housing estates in Britain, as noticed by Coleman (1990) in her extensive study on how the physical space affects the social behaviours in Modern housing developments. Based on Coleman's classification of the 'design variables' that typically identify the communal areas in such schemes, a preliminary photo survey has been conducted in Claremont Court focussing on: (1) *Types of entrance and relation with the street*, (2) *Covered walkways and stairwells*, (3) *Landscape courtyards*. In addition to these, a new category has been introduced for Claremont Court in relation to (4) *Character and use of the balconies*, which seemed to be a very relevant subject for this research. In particular, the last variable is to be read alongside the data related to the dwelling spaces previously defined 'thresholds'; their overlap provides one of the clues to define the meaning of 'place' in Claremont Court. These in-between inside/outside places reveal massive amount of information of how the domestic and the common interact. However, having found that *non-interactive* methods were not sufficient to cover the wide range of residents' feelings and attitudes towards the communal areas, an expert-led community workshop has been organised.

Figure 2. *Community Workshop with Claremont Court Residents and Example of 'Cognitive Map' Produced by one Participant*

The workshop aimed at understanding the users' perception of the shared spaces in Claremont Court and defining a hierarchy of elements according to their criteria. During the workshop, the participants have been invited to take part in two main activities: first, they have been asked to sketch their 'mental map' of Claremont Court, where the architectural space resulted distorted according to the individual perception that one had of such a familiar place. Inspired by Robinson's well known exercise (1981), the process of developing a cognitive image of Claremont Court served to develop the ability to gain a spatial understanding of the place and reflect on the meaning that the individuals associated to that place. The cognitive images varied from person to person and were shaped heavily by past experiences, personal perceptions and their everyday lives: '*Cognitive mapping is a process of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, stores, recalls, and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of the phenomena in his everyday spatial environment'* (Downs andStea, 1977:7). However, when different individuals relied on some of the same features in composing their mental maps (such as oversizing the parking area, or putting landscape elements at the core of their map), this reinforced the importance of these features in understanding the physical environment. The second type of activities complemented the mental maps: the participants were given a simplified map of the court and asked to highlight (through icons): A. *Where the neighbours you interact with most frequently live*; B. *The access you use more frequently*; C. *Your path to go home/go out*; D. *Your most-liked places in Claremont Court*; E. *Your least-liked places in Claremont Court*. The outcome of this second stage, overlapped with the mental maps, confirmed or denied some initial assumption about the community perception of the place and the sense of attachment.

Table 1. *Mapping of Correspondences between Architectural and Sociological Data Collection Methods during Different Research Stages*

	Architectural methods	**Sociological methods**
Stage 0	Archival research Literature review (focus on post-war architecture and urban policy)	Literature review (focus on post-war social changes and new dynamics)
Stage 1	Architectural survey of dwellings Photo survey of dwellings and communal areas Non-interactive observation	Biographical interviews Walk-along interviews
Stage 2	Photo survey of communal areas based on Coleman's design variables Community workshop with residents	• Photograph elicitation interviews • Activity diaries

'Compositional Modality' and Critical Visual Methodologies

Given the variety of data collected through the methods described, during the process of analysis we questioned whether (and how) visual outputs could eventually be the synthesis of architectural and sociological data, and what could be the advantage of interpolating information coming from these two different, yet interconnected, fields of knowledge. Assuming that architecture can be a tool to reinterpret the situations of daily life, drawing is considered a way of '*communicating a plot, revealing a situation*' (Troiani and Carless, 2015:270), decoding the meaning of the designed space based on the patterns of use and spatial practices put in place by the dwellers.

Seeking to identify the clues able to narrate the process of place creation, we developed a set of analytical methods, which- although based upon typical spatial representations as starting point- tried to integrate the variety of approaches characterising the study. The three methods are: 1. *Dwelling charts*; 2. *Contextual Mapping*; 3. *Visual narrative*.

In setting up the dwelling charts, the initial archival research at Historic Environment Scotland allowed us to take the technical drawings produced by Spence and Partners between 1958 and 1962 as the basis for the subsequent architectural survey, and photographic survey of dwellings and communal areas. Dwelling charts (Figure 3) allow us to explore commonalities and divergences in the way that residents inhabit the architectural space. The data visualised through the dwelling charts can be read 'horizontally', to understand the process of making place in each dwelling, or 'vertically' to compare how the same process developed in two or more different dwellings. It is a comprehensive comparative tool, which provides an overview of all the dwelling spaces investigated.

Figure 3. *Excerpt from the 'Dwellings Charts'. Analysis of Spatial Practices in a Sample Flat*


We defined 'contextual mapping' the main mode of visualising and interpreting the data collected in the dwellings and communal areas. 'Mapping' is here intended as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in opposition to the action of 'tracing': "*the map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself […] it fosters connection between fields*" (1980:13). It includes therefore, not only those aspects strictly related to the character of the physical space but also those elements such as furniture, finishes, belongings etc. that determine considerably the atmosphere of the place and its degree of 'personalisation' (Figure 1). Within the framework of this project, contextual mapping collects and displays information able to tell the story of spatial appropriation, confirming or denying the initial assumption that the living spaces' layouts in Claremont Court were able to support successfully the living patterns of its dwellers. The representation through mapping of architectural spaces along with the material objects in it allowed us both to reveal and realise hidden potential (Corner, 1999) and provided critical tools to read the contents of the interviews and 'place' the textual materials within their spatial context. Colours have been used to stress certain elements of the image, to critically reflect on the spatial atmosphere (as perceived by the researcher) and put these contents in relation to the information provided by the participants during their interviews. A short narrative describes the integrated understanding of spatial and social factors for each case study.

The interdisciplinary value of visual outputs as a way to integrate architectural and sociological aspects of the research is particularly evident in the use of visual narratives (Figure 4). We defined 'visual narrative' a non-realistic, out-of-scale representation of the threshold spaces, realised through a mixed-technique collage combining drawings, photos and relevant interview excerpts. Key words have been highlighted to express a sense of emotional hierarchy connected to the architectural spaces, as emerged during the interviews and deducted from the living patterns recorded during the survey. In this sense, the knowledge of the mixed-technique adopted

helped in describing and transferring the particular nature and characteristics of the work (Taylor, 1957). In our understanding, these visuals can tell a different spatial story, enabling the narration from a multiple perspective and defining a sense of belonging to a place through the exploration of '*another spatiality which defies the codes of architectural tools, and another textuality within the discourse about architectural space*' (Lozanovska, 2002:141).

The visual narratives are based on the principle of compositional modality, which, according to Rose, can be considered a critical visual methodology: '*Visual images do not exist in a vacuum, and looking at them 'for what they are' neglects the way in which they are produced and interpreted through particular social practices*' (Rose, 2016:57). In this regard, the spatial organisation of the visual and textual contents composing the narrative is not neutral as it influences its own interpretations and becomes the framework of the critical re-production of the researchers understanding of a specific place.

Figure 4. *Visual Narrative*
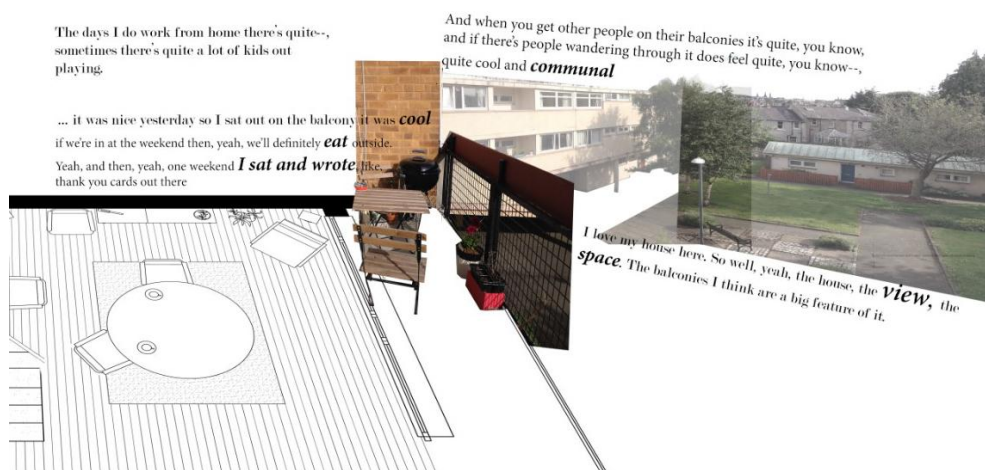
Moreover, it encourages a peculiar way of looking at images: '*it focuses most strongly on the image itself, and although it pays most attention to its compositionality, it also pays some attention to its production*' (Rose, 2016:61). Drawing on Rose's position, the agency of selecting materials, paying attention to the technique of production and eventually composing the visual narrative has been a critical iterative tool, which was implemented at different stages according to the progressive level of understanding of the space analysed. In fact, this analytical means allows us to overlay and integrate data from various media in order to test out different hypothesis through an iterative process. In fact, throughout the process of 'making' the visual, some information initially considered significant lost their relevance while others appeared crucial. In this case, the drawing indeed is seen as a text and '*used as a method of textual analysis*' (Troiani and Carless, 2015:269).

Towards an Interdisciplinary Definition of Place: The 'Domestic Microcosm'

The interdisciplinary methodology described above aimed to define what Riggings named '*the domestic microcosm*' (1994:102) where the living room in particular is considered the place where the self '*articulates its identity socially and materially*' (1994:102), becoming the favourite place to study the interaction private/public. The living room is here seen as the place of everyday life, as the ground of sociality and culture and at the same time '*the emotional ground tone of individual interaction*' (Shields, 2002:4). In a similar way to the methodology adopted by Riggings in his auto-ethnographic narrative, we assume that drawing attention to aspects which are not typically included or represented in architectural surveys, such as interior decoration and domestic objects (Figure 5), could suggest clues to decode the spatial practices in relation to the original design features in Claremont Court. We found thus relevant to record details related to finishes, material objects and the way they are displayed and placed in the room (Riggings, 1994), how natural light and shadow are managed etc. All these contribute to the definition of the atmosphere of the place.

Focusing on such aspects allowed connections with the data gathered through semi-structured biographical and walk-along interview, which helped decrease the inevitable subjectivity of the perspective through which architectural researchers look at and record places.

Figure 5. *Personalisation of the Space beneath the Stairs in Two Maisonettes (work-from-home VS. relax/yoga station)*
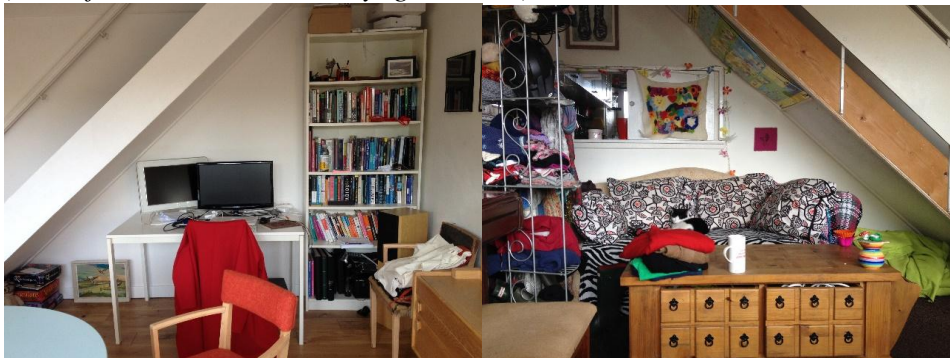
Exploring the dwelling through the analysis of the living patterns put in place by its inhabitants thereby means decoding the relation between human lives and the meaning of home, seen as a space '*annexed to our body, and incorporated*' (Lang, 1985:207) through a process of personalisation. In so doing, the interdisciplinary methodology allowed us to describe the process of spatial appropriation as a process of critical embodiment, where the dwelling is '*the place of adjustment between body and the built environment*' (Roderick, 1998:5). In this sense, the dual nature of the research helped us to uncover the meaning of spatial practices that residents were not necessarily aware of and unspoken elements of everyday life that couldn't be revealed through interviews only, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the meaning that residents attach to place in Claremont Court.

Thereafter, the thresholds reflect the way the dwellers interrelate with their domestic space and their attitudes toward the community and the surrounding environment. In particular, in Claremont Court the liminal areas (balconies, windows, entrance spaces from deck/stairwell) provide information of key aspects related to the agency of dwelling such as privacy, security, and the production of leisure spaces. According to these premises, during the survey we recorded thoroughly details describing the outcome of the process of appropriation of balconies and entrance spaces. The latter, in particular, in most cases revealed a loose link between the private space and the common areas (open decks and stairwells), so that the outside space facing the entrance door is not considered a place to personalise or able to foster interactions among neighbours. It follows that some activities, which can be usually hosted "outdoor" (such as parking the bike, drying clothes or growing plants), have been moved "indoor", contributing to defining the pattern of use of this threshold space (Figure 6). However, the photo survey along with the interviews showed that the entrance door, repainted, replaced, decorated is seen by the dwellers as an object to appeal to their sense of arrival(Busch, 1999), highlighting the passage from the unsafe outside to the familiar domestic space.

Figure 6.*Patterns of Use in Correspondence of the Threshold Space between Dwelling/Open Deck, Showing the Looseness of the Relation Inside/ Outside and the Pattern of Use of the Interior Space before the Front Door*
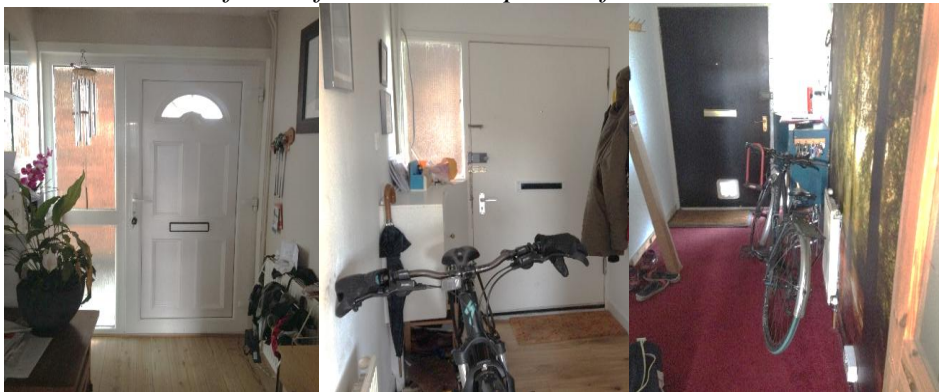
Thereby it follows that the definition of place applied to the domestic microcosm implies the overlap of diverse components, which refer to the architectural/spatial character of one place, to its relational meanings but also to the process of personalisation of that space over time. The patterns of use and spatial practices are seen here as clues able to describe in a comprehensive way the link between the three conditions.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to deepen understanding of the value of adopting interdisciplinary research methodology to investigate the private and public sphere of the home as place. Given our critical theoretical standpoint, we were not expecting to operate 'vertically' and adopt separate spatial and social approaches to investigate the case study. Rather, we were seeking to identify those methodological convergences (and divergences) which could allow us to proceed 'horizontally' in the exploration of the notion of place from a new angle. In this regard, it is important to emphasise the importance of combing textual and visual sources in understanding the everyday lives and decoding the spatial practices, which characterise the place.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study suggested the value of adopting visual methodologies to '*show things and prompt talk*' (Rose, 2016:329) that other types of research data may not. In fact, analysing the place through the visual allowed in first instance to deepen the understanding of the meaning of 'home' as place through the study of the material objects in it. This is a common practice among geographers, ethnographers and sociologists; however, the value of such approach for integrating data coming from different fields, such as architecture and social sciences, needs further reflections. In fact, although visual methods are already extensively used in both disciplines, the visual narratives developed within this research projects allow to represent similarities and divergences across the data "tangible" gathered through the architectural survey (photos and drawings), and the ones collected through biographical and walk-along interviews (texts or keywords). With respect to the use of visual methods to research the dwelling space, the Developed Surfaces Drawing, developed by Troiani and Carless (2015), and the *Flattening* method and *Show Us Your Home* by The High-rise Project Team (Jacobs et al.,2012) are significant precedents. However, the originality of the visual narratives proposed in this research project is first given by the iterative nature of the process through which they have been developed, which makes them a flexible tool of critical understanding both for architects and sociologists. Furthermore, the composition of images and texts provides a comprehensive, multi-layered reading of the relation between individual and the collective, home place and the communal areas, based on the integrated knowledge of what the residents told and what the researchers understood of it. Nevertheless, as noticed by Riggings, the relation between material cultures of home and the physical dimension of the domestic environment is inevitable. Drawing on this premise, our novel methodology provided clues to study how '*material and imaginative geographies of home are closely bound together*' (Blunt andDownling, 2006:82), as we found by decoding the meanings associated with places.

At the same time, visual outputs '*carry different kinds of information from the written word*' (Rose, 2016:330) as they transfer more evocative meanings than a sole written text could do. In particular, our visual narratives, by combing visual and textual materials in a compositional modality, attempt to go beyond the ambiguity of architecture as a sign system (Eco, 1973). As

pointed out by Jencks (2002), the architectural message has to be supplemented by other signs in order to be understood.

Rigorous interdisciplinary studies of this kind may be a fruitful opportunity for future research to investigate the built environment as a complex system of strictly interrelated spatial and social factors.

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