House, Home, and Dwelling

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Abstract
The concepts of house, home and dwelling are frequently used in housing research without a clear indication of what is meant by the terms. The terms house and home are sometimes even used as synonyms, and especially the term home seems to be a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept which some researchers find attractive, while it has lead others to plead for abandoning the term altogether. In this paper an analysis will be undertaken that focuses on the terms house, home, and dwelling in the context of a conceptual and analytical framework that is used for studying people – environment relations in general and people – dwelling relations in particular. This analysis takes five different facets of house, home, and dwelling into account. The first facet distinguishes an object from the relationships people may have with the object. This distinction implies, for instance, that the term home cannot be used simultaneously for the physical structure, often called house, and the meanings we attach to the physical structure, which are sometimes called home or the meaning of home. The second facet focuses on the spatial dimension of house, home, and dwelling. In the literature the term home has been used for such different spatial entities as country, state, town, neighborhood, and dwelling. The time facet forms the third dimension of the analysis. When people talk about house and home they may mean their current house/home, but they may also be talking about the house/home of their youth or of an object or relationship in the future. The fourth facet refers to social relations. House and home are often considered from the perspective of the household or family, but other collectivities such as groups of friends or ethnic groups may also relate to house and home. The fifth facet relates to the distinction between product and process. Home is often considered as a place, but the term is also used for the process of homemaking. In the paper the different facets of house, home, and dwelling are elaborated, related to each other, illustrated, and evaluated.

1. Introduction

The concept of home and its ideas, interpretations and meanings have attracted quite some attention in the academic literature in the last two decades (Despres, 1991; Benjamin and Stea, 1995; Moore, 2000; Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). What all these publications have in common, despite their differences in approach and focus, is that they all acknowledge that home is a complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered concept, whose different connotations are often used interchangeably and/or simultaneously. Although some (Blunt and Dowling, 2006) do not seem to find this disturbing, it has lead others (Rapoport, 1995) to plea for abandoning the concept altogether. From an analytic point of view this seems to be an attractive idea, since we require our concepts to be as clear and as unambiguous as possible. On the other hand one might argue that the term home is being used both in the academic literature and in daily speech in many languages and that we should accept this as a fact of life (c.f. Lawrence, 1995). In this context it is interesting to note that the term home does not seem to exist in all languages and cultures (Benjamin, 1995). However, if one wants to use it this implies, though, that when one uses the term home it is the researchers task to demarcate the concept of home so that it becomes clear on which facets of the concept one focuses (c.f. Mallet, 2004). This may be done in a formal way by using methodologies, such as the facet approach (Canter, 1983), that aim at dismantling complex concepts, or in a less formal way by just indicating which connotations of the concept one emphasizes.

In an entertaining and instructive paper Rapoport (1995) has critically examined the term home from the perspective of housing and has argued that we do not need the concept of home at all, for everything that we want to express through the concept can also be represented by other concepts. More recently, others (Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006) have investigated the concept from a broader perspective than housing, resulting in many more connotations of the term, without being too critical about the conceptual ambiguity and logical inconsistencies this might create.

In this paper several of the connotations of the term home are critically examined from the perspective of a conceptual framework that I use to study people – environment relations. Since the term home is often used as a synonym for the terms house and dwelling, I shall also look at those terms. In the next section I shall first introduce the conceptual framework for studying people – environment relations, and subsequently refine this model for studying people – dwelling relations. Then, I shall look at the connotations of the terms house and dwelling. Subsequently, I shall evaluate the multiple connotations of the term home by using the conceptual framework as a frame of reference.

2. Conceptual framework

In this section the conceptual framework for studying the meaning of environmental objects is described first. Subsequently a refinement of this framework for studying the meaning of dwellings and dwelling features will be presented.

2.1 The meaning of the environment

An individual's operating environment consists of objects, the things toward which the individual is oriented, they form the focal points around which the individual's activities become organized. An object is anything that can be referred to or designated; objects may be material or immaterial, real or imaginary, in the outer world or inside the body, have the character of an enduring substance or be a passing event. From the perspective of a human being the environment may be classified in at least five categories: other human beings, other animals, physical objects, social objects, and abstract objects. If the individual notes or is aware of any one of these things, it is an object for that individual. Objects constitute the

world or operating environment of the human being. Taken together, they constitute the individual's world of existence, that is, the things the individual deals with in life activity. Objects have meaning for human beings in terms of the possibilities they offer for actions and intentions; that is, an object may have certain features in relation to a goal of the individual. The concept of affordances (Gibson, 1986) most basically highlights this congruence between structural features of the environment and the intentions and goals of individuals. Affordances are relations between features of objects and abilities of human beings (Chemero, 2003); they are attributable to the intrinsic features that objects possess by virtue of their make-up, and are specified in relation to the individual. For example, a firm, obstacle free ground surface affords walking on, a chair affords sitting on, a door to a room affords opening and passage, a dwelling affords shelter, a room affords privacy, a certain form of tenure affords independence. So affordances are mutual relationships that point both at environmental features and at human beings. At a functional level of analysis environmental features are experienced in terms of their affordances, i.e. their meaning, for the individual.

The features of the environment are only one facet of a dynamic individual-environment relation; the other facet is intentional actions of individuals, and this aspect of the individual-environment relation becomes most apparent in the selection, the discovery, and the creation of meaningful environmental features (Heft, 2001). Individuals selectively engage particular objects in their surround; individuals typically make choices from among the range of potential features in a setting to support some activity. However, individuals do not have unconstrained choice. Factors outside of their control may limit the range of socially and/or culturally sanctioned choices. So there is self-selection of affordances but often within constraints.

Intentionality is also apparent in the processes through which individuals learn about and discover the features of objects and the affordances in their surroundings. This is not a random process; which objects are selected in the first place is delimited by the perceived congruence between an object's features and the individual's functional capabilities and intentions. This reciprocity gives rise to exploration and discovery within constraints. Finding novel uses for familiar objects is a particular satisfying way for new affordances to be discovered.

Actions involving the learning about environmental features are frequently guided by others. Throughout life, most apparently during childhood, individuals are explicitly taught, often in very subtle ways, to recognize and utilize the functional features of objects. Individuals also learn about the meanings of objects by observing the actions of others.

Finally, affordances are sometimes created when the range of possibilities available in the environment are insufficient to meet certain goals. The environment is comprised of meaningful features that were created by an individual or a group of individuals at some time. This omnipresent fact about the world is one manifestation of the fundamental reciprocity of individuals and environment. Individuals do not merely take the world as they find it, the environment is continually being modified. Many of these activities are efforts to create new affordances in order to address specific individual and socio-cultural needs.

This ubiquity of affordances points to an important issue. In many cases, meaningful features of the environment that are created reflect individual's knowledge about environment-behavior relations. This means that a great deal of what is known is embodied in the environmental structures individuals create; we live our lives in environments rich in what might be called ecological knowledge. In this functional sense every object has a meaning that distinguishes it from other objects. This meaning constitutes the nature of the object for the individual for whom the object exists. One confronts an object, sees it, refers to it, talks about it, or acts toward it in terms of the meaning it has for one. No objects exist for a person except in terms of the meaning it has for the person. Meaning is not something that is inherent in an

object; it is not an intrinsic part or attribute of the object. The meaning of an object exists in a relation between the object and the individual for whom it is an object; its meaning exists in how the individual designates the object, and in this sense an object may have different meaning for different human beings.

But affordances are not the only meanings that matter in our framework, since affordances may also have meanings of their own (Coolen, 2008). For instance, the activity of walking afforded by a firm, obstacle free ground surface, may satisfy such values as health or enjoying nature, and the sitting that is afforded by a chair may satisfy such desires as rest or relaxation.

Figure 1   Conceptual framework for studying people – environment relations
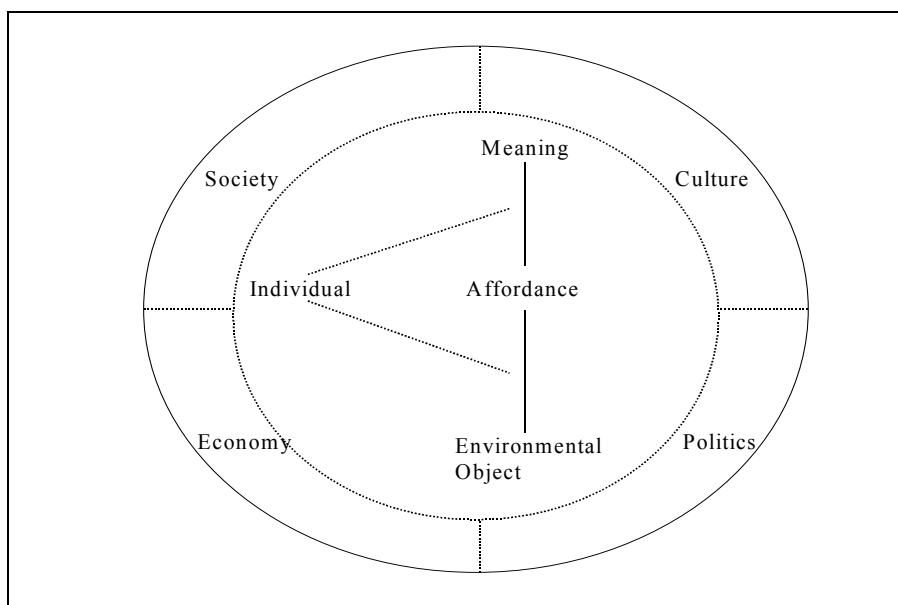
The chain *environmental object – affordance – meaning* forms the basis of the conceptual framework presented in figure 1. This framework shows the interrelations between the individual, affordances, meanings, and environmental objects, and at the same time depicts how these phenomena and interrelations are embedded in the social, cultural, economical and political system. Environmental objects potentially have many and diverse affordances. Whenever a function is assigned to a feature a relationship arises between the feature and the function, which is called an affordance (c.f. Chemero, 2003). This relationship originates from the individual that assigns the function, and it is relative to the individual in the sense that the relationship between a function and a feature may be possible for some individuals but not for others. The lower dotted line in figure 1 indicates this relativity of the individual-environment relationship. For instance, a chair may afford sitting on for some individuals but not for others due to their size. So the term affordance is reserved here for the direct relation between a feature and a function that is assigned to it by an individual, whatever the nature of that function may be. In this sense affordances may be considered as basic meanings (c.f. Chemero, 2003), but they will not be called meanings here but affordances because they form the primary relationship between the individual and the environment.

Given an affordance the function, which is one of the relata in the affordance relation, may have meaning for the individual. For instance the sitting on a chair may mean rest and

relaxation. These meanings, which are represented in figure 1 by the link between affordance and meaning, are also relative to the individual. The chain *environmental object – affordance – meaning* is called a meaning structure (Coolen, 2006, 2008).

The relativity of the individual-environment relationship, which has so far been illustrated in terms of abilities or attitudes, is also relevant in another sense. This concerns, for instance, so-called socio-demographic variables, such as income, age, and household composition. These variables condition individual-environment relations in the sense that they determine to a certain extent whether potential affordances may become actual affordances. For instance, a certain dwelling may potentially afford all the affordances one is looking for, but these affordance may not materialize because one cannot afford the dwelling financially. And a certain dwelling may afford a separate room for every family member to some families and not to others due to the size of the household.

The description of the conceptual framework so far has mainly emphasized the interrelations between individual, environmental object, affordance, and meaning, since this will be the focus of this paper. These aspects are, as indicated above, only one facet of a dynamic individual-environment relation; the other aspect is the intentional actions of individuals, which become most apparent in the selection, the discovery, the learning, and the creation of meaningful environmental features. These processes have been sketched as taking place in society at large, which means that they are shaped, influenced and constrained by social, cultural, economic and political factors, and that they in turn have their impact on these factors.

2.2 The meaning of the dwelling

The dwelling forms the primary anchor for many individuals in the environment and provides such primary functions as concealment and shelter. Most research into the meaning of a dwelling has taken a holistic view of a dwelling (Rapoport, 1995; Moore, 2000), which means that in terms of figure 1 the dwelling is considered as the environmental object. However, the conceptual framework in this paper also allows one to study features of dwellings, since these may be treated as environmental objects too. These features will often be physical ones, for instance the number of rooms or the size of the living room, but may also be non-physical in nature as in the case of the feature tenure. There are several reasons for studying the meaning of dwellings from the perspective of dwelling features. First, there is the heterogeneity of the category of dwelling. There are many different types of dwellings that differ mainly in their features. Secondly, people perceive dwellings not only holistically but also in terms of their features, clearly demonstrated in research into the reasons for moving, where many people include dwelling features as a reason (Rossi, 1955). Thirdly, the holistic view of a dwelling and the feature view of it are just two different ways of considering the same object: every dwelling is made up of a certain collection of features. And last but not least, a dwelling has many potential uses and people are looking for multi-functional dwellings that can have many different meanings, which are, in the first place, afforded through the features of dwellings. So, the meaning dwellings have for people lie in the functional relations between the features of dwellings on the one hand and the goals and intentions of people on the other.

Rapoport (1988, 1990a), who holds a similar view on the meaning of the built environment, distinguishes three levels of meaning in the built environment. *High-level* meanings are related to cosmologies, world views, philosophical systems, etc.; *middle-level* meanings such as identity, privacy, status, wealth, power, etc. which are also called latent functions; *lower-level,* everyday meanings, for example accessibility, seating arrangements, movement, etc. which are also called manifest functions. According to Rapoport these everyday meanings have mostly been neglected in research on the meaning of the built environment, although they are essential for understanding the built environment. People's activities and built

environments are primarily linked by lower-level meanings, although middle-level meanings also tend to be important. In this sense especially lower and middle level meanings are related to specific features of dwellings (Rapoport, 1988). The term meaning is used here in very much the same way the concept is used by Rapoport (1988, 1990a) and Chemero (2003), and meanings may be defined as beliefs about the relations between environmental features and human abilities and about the consequences of these relations.

Figure 2   Conceptual framework for studying people – dwelling relations
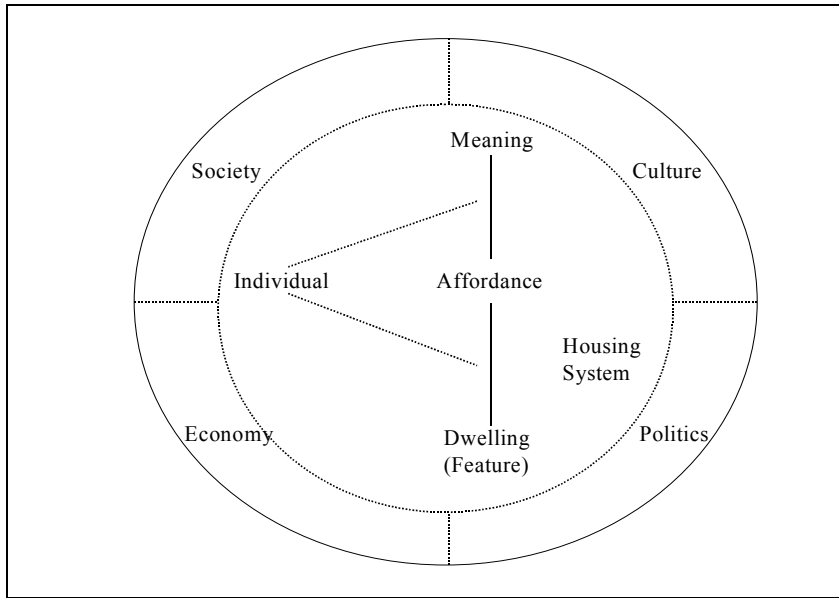
Rapoport's conceptualization of the meaning of the built environment is very similar to our conceptualization of the meaning of the environment in the previous subsection. Both approaches are based on a certain layering of functions or meanings. In our approach the meanings of an environmental object are denoted as affordances and meanings, while Rapoport refers to lower-level, middle-level and high-level meanings, whereby high-level meanings are not so much separate meanings but systems of meanings which are part of the social, cultural, economical, and political factors in the model in figure 1. More importantly it seems that lower-level meanings and affordances are very similar concepts. People's activities and built environments are primarily linked by lower-level meanings, and affordances reflect the congruence between structural features of the environment and the intentions and goals of individuals. Since the model in figure 1 is a general model applicable to all environmental features a specification of it for dwellings and dwelling features is depicted in figure 2. In this figure the environmental object is the dwelling when one studies it holistically, or it is a dwelling feature when the dwelling is deconstructed into those features that make up the dwelling. The inner circle is now called the housing system, which is a subsystem of the social, cultural, economical and political systems, and which can be defined as that structure or organization whose elements are related and interact with respect to housing. The main agents in the system are individuals and households who demand housing, producers of houses and housing services, such as building companies, project developers, social and

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commercial landlords, institutional agents such as governments and housing policies, and norms and values that play a role in housing.

The conceptual framework presented in figure 2 has been used for empirically studying the meaning of dwelling features by Coolen (2006, 2008), and by Meesters (2009) for investigating the meanings of the affordance category of daily activities of the dwelling and the residential environment.

3. House and dwelling

In housing research the term house seems to be the common term to describe the physical structures we live in. Given the fact that housing research is mainly Western oriented, the term house seems to be synonymous with the Western type of single-family house. Oliver (2003) notes that 90% of the dwellings in the world are not of this type but are what he calls vernacular dwellings, which are buildings that are self-built by their owner-occupiers or built by members of the community in which the occupier lives. Sometimes we recognize that not all dwellings are houses, for instance when certain types of dwellings are characterized as slums, huts, or tents. So the term house seems to be a certain Western-oriented type of dwelling, which makes it from a comparative point of view a less useful term. Rapoport (1980) has recognize this and uses the term dwelling as a generic term for all physical structures which are used by people for living. He defines a dwelling as a system of settings in which certain systems of activities occur (Rapoport, 1990b). The dwelling is embedded in a larger system of settings called the environment, and for many individuals it forms the primary anchor in this environment by providing such basic functions as shelter and concealment.

Hooimeijer (2007) distinguishes four categories of functions of the dwelling:
1. the dwelling as care center that affords personal care such as personal hygiene, eating, sleeping, but also shelter, safety, and privacy;
2. the dwelling as activity center that affords such activities as reading, listening to music, watching television, and entertaining family and guests;
3. the dwelling as an anchor point in the organization of daily life;
4. the dwelling as operating base from which activities are undertaken in the outside world.

Although these functions are not mutually exclusive, for instance the activities of eating and sleeping which are categorized in the category of *care center* might also have been categorized in the category *activity center*, the distinction points to an important aspect of the dwelling that seems to be overlooked in Rapoport's definition. In Hooimeijer's description the dwelling does not only afford activities, but also socio-psychological functions such as safety and privacy. Although Rapoport (1988) makes a distinction between manifest (= activities) and latent functions of dwellings, and emphasizes the importance of latent functions, such as privacy and safety, for the shaping and use of dwellings, these functions do not appear in his definition of the dwelling. Since socio-psychological functions of dwellings have not only been hypothesized, but have also been found in empirical research (Despres, 1991; Moore, 2000; Coolen, 2008) it seems that Rapoport's definition needs adaptation. For the purpose of this paper a dwelling is defined as the system of settings, being a subsystem of the environment, that affords certain systems of functions, which make it for the inhabitants the primary anchor in the environment. These systems of functions comprise activity systems but may also include socio-psychological functions and values. The term primary anchor indicates that a dwelling is a more or less permanent place from where people explore and experience the world and where they return. Considering a dwelling as a sub-system of the environment makes it possible to understand its specific functions, such as a place of retreat, not only in terms of its occupiers but also in the context of the other sub-systems in the

environment. Only a subset of all the relevant functions is afforded by a dwelling. This subset of functions may be different for different individuals and the subsystem of settings that makes up the dwelling may also vary. An a priori assumption about what a dwelling is, therefore, cannot be made. It may include for instance, a garden, a driveway, a garage, a certain number of rooms, an attic, and many other settings.

Given this definition of the dwelling it is evident that dwelling, as a verb, comprises more than activities; it encompasses the performance and experience of all the affordances that make it a dwelling for the individual.

4. Home

The concept of home and its ideas, interpretations and meanings have attracted quite some attention in the academic literature in the last two decades (Despres, 1991; Benjamin and Stea, 1995; Moore, 2000; Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). From the use of the concept in this literature there are at least five facets of the concept of home that can be deduced and that may aid in dismantling the concept. Before describing these facets it is worth noting that in the use of the concept of home there seems to be a bias towards using the concept mainly in positive terms (Rapoport, 1995; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Home seems to be embedded in positive feelings and affective bonds; negative feelings, for instance associated with broken families or domestic violence, have mainly been ignored.

The first facet that can be deduced entangles an environmental object with the relationships people may have with this object. In terms of housing the concept of home is used both for the material structure (Despres, 1991), the physical aspects (Moore, 2000) and the place or site (Blunt and Dowling, 2006) in which we live, as well as the meanings we attach to the physical structure (Rapoport, 1995; Moore, 2000), which are characterized by Blunt and Dowling (2006) as 'the experience and meaning of home' or 'home as an idea and an imaginary imbued with feelings'. According to Rapoport (1995) the original meaning of the terms dwelling and home were in terms of this facet. House and dwelling were used to indicate the physical structure, while home was used for the relationships we experience with the physical structure and the meanings we attach to it. Given this distinction the use of the term *meaning of home* seems tautological, and a sign saying *home for sale* is meaningless.

The second facet that appears in the literature on home is the spatial dimension. The term home is being used for such different spatial entities as house, neighborhood, town, state, and country (Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006), for instance in the words hometown, home state, and homeland. Sometimes when using the term home several of these different spatial connotations are simultaneously being meant. For instance, a person who is currently in a foreign country and tells us that he is going home tomorrow probably means that he is returning to his homeland but also to his dwelling. Although these different spatial connotations of home occur in the literature, there is a strong emphasis on home in terms of the dwelling (Moore, 2000; Blunt and Dowling, 2006)

The time facet is the third dimension that appears in studies about home. In many studies about home the focus is the current dwelling and more in general the current time period. But it also occurs that with home one means the place where one is born and/or raised or once happily lived, for instance after a divorce (Anthony, 1997). In this context Brink (1995) distinguishes the *real home*, the place where one is born, from the *present home*, the place where one currently lives. The time facet may also be focused on the future, for instance in situations in which individuals do not consider the place where they were born and raised as a home, for instance because of broken families or domestic violence, and express that they once would like to have a home for themselves and/or their children.

The fourth facet refers to social relations. Blunt and Dowling (2006) remark that home is often considered from the perspective of the family or the household, which seems to be a

matter of course since we have already noted that often the emphasis is also on the home connotation of dwelling. But other groups such as a group of friends, in case of a commune, a group of monks or nuns, in case of a monastery, a barrack in case of the army, or an ethnic group, for instance in the expression 'I am going home to my people', may also be the connotation of the term home.

A fifth facet relates to the distinction between product and process. In many of the meanings of the concept of home that we have described so far home is considered as a place and/or in terms of people's relationships with this place. However, the term home is also used for the process of homemaking (Rapoport, 1995). And Blunt and Dowling (2006) in criticizing humanistic geography for its ignorance of the relation between social structure and the meaning of place, consider the concept in an even broader context by arguing that home can be conceptualized as 'processes of establishing connections with others and creating a sense of order and belonging as part of society.'

There still seem to be other connotations of the term home that are not directly related to one of these facets. For instance, home as the place where something is invented, founded or developed as in the expression *the US is the home of baseball* (Mallett, 2004) or home meaning familiar or conversant with as in such expressions as *the truck driver is at home on the highway* or *the working woman is at home in the spinning mill* (Heidegger, 1971). These meanings will not be dealt with here.

5. Do we need *home*?

In this section I shall examine whether we need the term home given the conceptual framework for studying people – environment relations and given the definition of dwelling presented above.

The first facet that was deduced from the term home entangles an environmental object and the relationships we have with the object, and more particular in terms of the dwelling it mixes up the physical structure with the meanings we attach to that structure. It seems evident that both aspects should be distinguished from each other, and that it obscures our research if we call both facets home. Given the conceptual framework it is also undesirable and unnecessary to use the term home for both, since it clearly distinguishes an environmental object from its meanings. This implies that we should call the physical object we are studying by its proper name. This may be the dwelling, or house if one prefers this term, but may also be other physical structures such as a monastery, a barrack, a second house, or a geographical area. Although one might reserve the term home for the meanings attached to these physical structures, as was originally the case, I propose not to do so, given the many different connotations of the term home, and to use the terms affordances and meanings.

The spatial dimension is the second facet of home that appeared in the literature. Although there is a strong emphasis with regard to this aspect on home in terms of the dwelling spatial entities such as neighborhoods, towns, states and countries are also associated with the term home. This entanglement of spatial entities is completely unnecessary from the perspective of our conceptual framework. By using the proper name for the entity one is studying, or by distinguishing the appropriate spatial entities when several are indicate simultaneously, one can simply avoid the term home in this context.

The third aspect of home that appears in the literature is the time dimension. Do we mean an environmental object in the past, the present, or are we talking about the future. In housing research the emphasis is often on the current dwelling and its associated meanings, but as Brink (1995) argues the object of meaning may also be the dwelling where one is born but no longer lives, and may even be a dwelling that does not exist yet as is the case when one studies housing preferences for new dwellings (c.f. Coolen, 2008). In order to be able to incorporate the time dimension when studying for instance the meaning of dwellings one does

not need the term home. By clearly specifying both the environmental object and the time window in the conceptual framework the term home is superfluous.

A similar line of reasoning is appropriate with respect to the fourth facet of home that refers to social relations. Although in studies about home the focus is mainly on the family or the household, other groups such as friends, a professional group or an ethnic group may be the object of study. By clearly specifying what group or groups are the referents of the analysis one avoids confusion and does not need the term home to express this facet.

The central point of attention in the conceptual framework, as depicted in figures 1 and 2, is on home as a product. This framework has been developed to study the meanings of dwellings and dwelling features, and not to study how these dwellings and their meanings come about. It has been indicated that the discovery, creation, selection and learning of environmental features and their meanings are processes that take place in society at large, which means that they are shaped, influenced and constrained by social, cultural, political and economical factors, and that they in turn have their impact on these factors. Although it is very interesting to study these processes of establishing connections with environmental objects and of creating a sense of order and belonging as part of society, this is not the focus of this paper. Moreover, it would require a further elaboration of our conceptual framework in essentially two directions. Since the framework is static one would need to incorporate the time dimension in order to be able to study dynamic processes. Secondly, one would have to open up the black boxes of what have been called social, cultural, political and economical factors by specifying what these factors exactly are and by elaborating how these processes really work in the making of environmental features and their meanings. For both aspects the reader is referred to Werner, Altman and Oxley (1985).

6. Conclusion

In this paper an analysis has been undertaken that focuses on the terms house, home, and dwelling in the context of a conceptual and analytical framework that is used for studying people – environment relations in general and people – dwelling relations in particular. The kernel of this framework is the meaning chain *environmental object – affordance – meaning*. This meaning chain is relative to the individual in two ways: in terms of individual abilities and capabilities, and in terms of individual characteristics. The framework also indicates how this kernel is embedded in the social, cultural political and economical system of society at large.

My first analysis in the paper concerned the environmental object of house or dwelling. It was shown that the term house is a Western oriented term, and that the term dwelling is to be preferred from a cross-cultural perspective. It was further argued that a definition of the dwelling is not easy to formulate given the many functions that dwellings might provide. Subsequently I analyzed five different dimensions of the term home that appear in the literature. Each of these dimensions, is at least in someway, associated with the dwelling, but has also associations with other environmental objects. Since it is not always clear from the context which of these associations is meant, it makes the use of the term home confusing. Furthermore, I found that the term home is sometimes used for the environmental object and sometimes for its affordances and/or meanings. From an analytical point of view this is undesirable, and from the perspective of the conceptual framework it is completely unnecessary and confusing.

Finally, it was argued that the conceptual framework focuses mainly on home as a product, and that it needs further elaboration and specification in order to be able to facilitate the study of home in terms of the process of home making.

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