

From the Beaver to Roseanne: Lessons of TV Homes

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This paper examines four TV families and the spatial configuration of their homes—the Cleavers of “Leave it to Beaver”, the Bradys of “The Brady Bunch”, the Huxtables of “The Bill Cosby Show” and the Conners of “Roseanne”.¹ What makes these homes American? Which aspects of their use and configuration have remained stable, which have changed over time? And how can these shows influence our perception of the American home? The shows are themselves American classics, which many of us grew up with, popular during their original seasons and well loved as reruns today.

Popular media is two things: it is popular, because it strikes a nerve in many persons watching it. It is also influential, and can create shifts in our behavior and consumption patterns – as evidenced by the importance of an advertising phenomenon called product placement. Television and film are magic worlds, able to produce an illusion of reality in those watching. Marketing studies have shown that viewers often feel they “know” TV characters personally and consider them as “friends”.²

Perhaps part of this phenomenon is due to the fact that TV and movies allow us to see personal aspects of strangers’ lives, as we are hardly able to in reality. Society is full of groups and subgroups— with gender, generation, ethnicity, class, and professional and religious affiliation being some of the most defining. Our access to information about societal sub-groups we are not members of is normally very limited. Social scientists refer to a difference between “onstage” behavior, when one is in a more formal situation or with people who are not members of one’s social group, and “backstage” behavior, when one can “let one’s hair down” in a setting where the audience is a group of one’s peers.³ Visual media, such as TV shows and movies, reverse this distinction, allowing us to watch what others do in private, when we aren’t really there to see. As sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz has pointed out, electronic media, especially TV, have dissolved walls and melted down doors which once stood in the way of our gathering new information. This information has in turn blurred distinctions, allowing once segregated groups to gain knowledge formerly accessible only to peers.⁴

When addressing the question of immigration, ethnicity and the American city in this context, we may ask how and especially what immigrant families learn about the private home life of a larger culture which they are not yet a part of. How can they gain information about what might be expected of them when interacting with their new compatriots? Immigrants are strangers, and cannot always read the spatial or social cues, which members of a common group use to define a situation and circumscribe what behavior is appropriate.⁵ Ignoring such cues, or exhibiting the right behavior in the wrong place or at the wrong time according to accepted standards, can lead to stigmatization.⁶

Part of the difficulty anyone in an unfamiliar situation has in reading such cues is that spaces and objects can take on new meanings, depending on their context. A bed, for example, may be used

for sleeping, for nursing an invalid, for watching TV, for having sex, as an improvised coat rack, or as a trampoline, thus temporarily changing the nature of the room it is in.⁷ Whereas some of these activities are easily observable, such as the bed being used to stack coats on during a party, some are so private we would never see others engaging in them— were it not for movies or TV.

What then, has TV been telling us about how America lives? The four houses portrayed are all American standards: two bungalows, a California ranch type, and a New York brownstone. The families themselves indicate the shifting emphasis of the American heterotopolis: Whereas the first two shows depict stereotyped suburban WASP families, the latter two begin to portray the diversity of American culture as including African-American professionals and a feisty working class.

The houses these families live in provide a framework for their activities: spaces for group and individual activities and spaces which outsiders have more or less access to. When taking part in the activities of these houses as invisible observers, we believe what we are told to believe, and not what we really see. None of the four houses correspond to their historical prototypes, yet all manage to conjure up and establish images which match our expectations. How else could we so easily “read” these houses as the stereotypes they represent, and overlook details such as floor plans which in no way match the outside of the house, top floors which don’t fit onto first floors, or windows which seem to change position as needed?

In such a short text, any analysis of four living spaces must be very abbreviated. These four TV families and their spatial environments stand for many others, whose lives anyone with a TV set can observe at will. By allowing them a view of situations they otherwise might not have access to, such TV families can help new Americans to grasp the socio-spatial complexities of the world around them. As to the rest of us, we may enjoy just dropping in— on old friends in the privacy of their TV homes.

The Cleavers

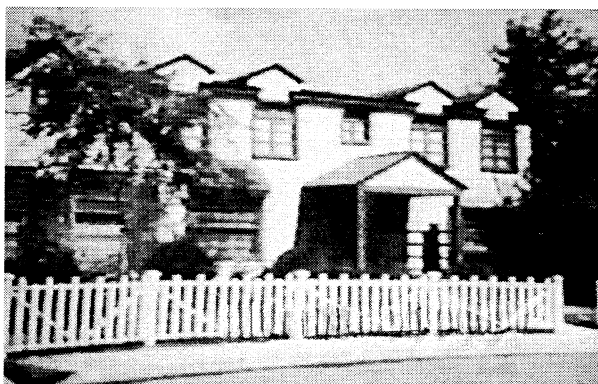


Fig. 1. The Cleaver house as viewed from the street.

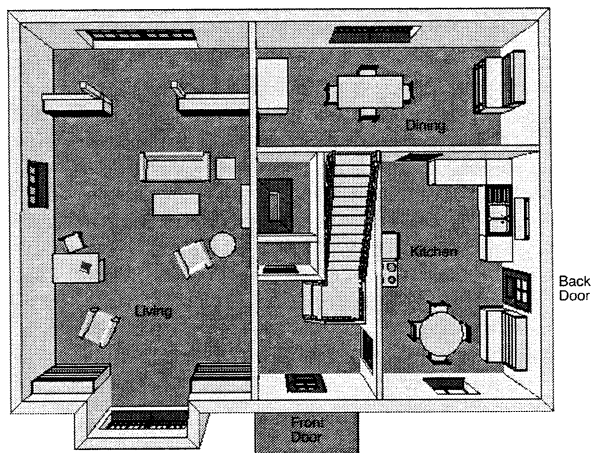


Fig. 2. *The Cleaver house, plan of main floor (not to scale).*

The Cleavers live in two houses in the course of the show, a smaller one in the early years and a larger, brick house in the later episodes. The analysis will concentrate on the first house.

The Cleavers' first residence is a bungalow type which is neither old fashioned nor overly modern. The house has several typical prewar features: the front yard is fenced in, the garage is detached but slightly set back from the house, there is a formal dining room in addition to the eat-in kitchen, and the kitchen is only partly fitted. The general architecture of the building is established enough that even adult viewers of the 1950s would have considered it familiar, as many of them would have grown up in a similar house.

The zoning is traditional: the living room, dining room and kitchen occupy the first floor of the house; the private bedroom and bathroom zone is on the second floor. The orientation of the kitchen is to the side, where the garage is.

There are two entrances to the house. The front door, which leads into a small, open foyer and beyond that almost immediately into the living room, is used by the family as well as by friends and visitors. Friends of the children always use this door and are screened by the parents, unless they arrive with the children. The second door, at the side of the house, leads from the driveway into the kitchen and is the entrance used by the family during the day.

The living room is the most open room of the house. Anyone standing at the front door can immediately survey this space and doors from the dining room and kitchen lead directly into it. A flight of stairs leads from the entryway to the second floor, making activities in the living room audible from the upper rooms as well.

The living room is used by the whole family for group or individual activities. A sofa, coffee table and armchair are grouped around the fireplace, while another armchair and a desk are by another wall. The furniture is traditional, the paintings landscapes, framed in gold. Only the father's arm-

chair is "special", all other furnishings, including a writing desk, are used by all family members as needed. A phone is on the desk where it is used for short conversations. There is no TV. The children are usually called to the living room and reprimanded here if necessary.

The kitchen is set apart from the rest of the house. A swinging door separates this room from the entryway, another swinging door leads to the dining room. Mrs. Cleaver is shown working in the kitchen during the day. Breakfast, a family meal, is eaten in the kitchen, and the parents do the dishes together after dinner. This gives the parents a chance to discuss matters they might not want to discuss in front of the boys. The parents' bedroom is not shown and rarely referred to.

The boys' bedroom is frequently shown, as the sons play, do homework and have discussions here. It is a "backstage" area, where the children have some privacy from their parents. Same-sex friends are allowed in the boys' room, mixed parties always take place in the living room.

The portrayal of the Cleaver house makes several points about a "typical" American family of the 1950s. First is the emphasis on family life. The house is self-contained; semi-public spaces, such as the front yard, where informal meetings with neighbors or passers-by could take place, are not used. Neither a TV set, radio, nor long phone conversations distract the family from life at home. Although the father is away during the day, both parents spend their free time with the family; visitors are limited to the children's friends and occasional relatives.

The house is democratic. The main space—the living room—is used by all members of the family equally. The openness of the living room is part of a typically American message of "having nothing to hide". The fact that the children are disciplined here also lends transparency to the consequences of any transgression.

The children have their own space, where they are away from direct adult supervision.

Sexuality is taboo. The parents' bedroom is subtly off limits to both the boys and the camera.⁸ There is a sharp distinction between the children's female and male friends. Whereas the boys' male friends can go wherever the children go, the girls are part of an "adult" system of actions and thus treated very formally.

The kitchen is a private, family space, in contrast to the living room. Only the family and close friends use the back door, more formal guests use the front door and stay in the living room. The distinction may result from the days when the kitchen was the realm of the servants, yet in this household, the privacy of the kitchen allows the parents a "backstage" space without showing them in a bedroom environment.

The Bradys



Fig. 3. *The Brady house as viewed from the street.*



Fig. 4. *The Brady house, plan of main floor (not to scale).*

The Bradys are television's first patchwork family: both parents are widowed and have three children from their first marriages. Alice, a down-to-earth housekeeper, completes the clan.

The Brady House is a rambling and informal Californian house made of brick, wood, and flagstone. The main spaces of the first floor are very open. The sunken, double-height living room with integrated dining room are immediately visible when the front door is opened. Beyond these lie the kitchen, and a family room.

The children do not generally use the living room when adults are not present. The parents use this space frequently, either individually or together. The main furniture consists of seating grouped around a coffee table, with a fireplace in the adjoining wall. An infrequently used TV set is nearby. The furnishings are contemporary, but not overly modern.

The kitchen is open to the living/dining area and is Alice's domain. Since the kitchen is directly between the family room and the stairs, it takes on a pivotal position, as the children pass by Alice on their way to or from their rooms. There is a wall between the kitchen and the family room, but a large, louvered

pass-through and swinging doors make this border between spaces transparent. The family room has a table for homework, a phone, and a stereo set and is primarily used by the children as their living room, where they may entertain their friends. Sliding doors lead directly to the play area in the back yard.

The spacious back yard is directly accessible from the driveway and is fenced in. Family members arriving by car enter the house via the family room and kitchen.

There are three private areas in the Brady House. Leading off from the living room and slightly elevated is the father's study. When the children have a problem, they seek him or both parents here for a private talk. Alice's room and bathroom are accessible by way of a hallway leading from the kitchen, and are rarely shown. The third private zone is the second floor, reached via an open stairway from the living room. All family bedrooms are located here. The parents share a master bedroom suite with large double bed, dressing room, phone, and a private bath. They are frequently shown conversing or reading before going to sleep. The children are divided by sex into two bedrooms linked by a common bath. The two bedrooms allow the boys and girls to have discussions not meant for the other sex to hear. Since the bedrooms are very small, friends are rarely entertained here.

The child-oriented Bradys were very popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially among young viewers.⁹ The openness of the house expresses democracy in the use of space while the closure to the street and neighboring properties—neighbors are never shown—emphasizes the importance of the family unit. The children can move freely throughout the whole house, with only the parents' bedroom, the father's study and Alice's room remaining individual, adult domains. This was in keeping with a post-1968, liberal society, in which expressions of strong authority were being rejected. It is not surprising then, that when the Brady parents need to have a discussion with one of the children, they usually go to where the child is instead of demonstrating authority by calling the child to them.

That the formal living room is not used by the children on their own does not result from this space being forbidden, but rather from the greater appeal of the more informal family room with its adjoining back yard play area. There is no TV set here, but the Brady kids are too busy to watch anyway. The common family room stresses the community of the six siblings, who are portrayed as not needing much individual space.

As in the Cleaver house, the front door is for more formal visitors whereas the family room entrance is used by family members and friends arriving with them. Nevertheless, the house is so open that only the bedrooms are really closed to the visitor's view.

The Bradys are not touched by post-1968 issues such as drug use, liberal sexuality or serious parent-child differences. The children seem to engage in only harmless fun and their dates are mere evidence of their popularity. Nevertheless, the openness of the house and the lack of privacy for the individual children means that their social behavior is always being controlled—ei-

ther by Alice, who occupies the centrally located kitchen, or by the brothers and sisters, who can be expected to pop up at any time. The pressure to conform to a common ideal is strong in this family. Except for the parents' and Alice's bedrooms, there are no real "backstage" areas, which guarantees that this clean-cut bunch really does have "nothing to hide".

The Huxtables



Fig. 5. The Huxtable house as viewed from the street.

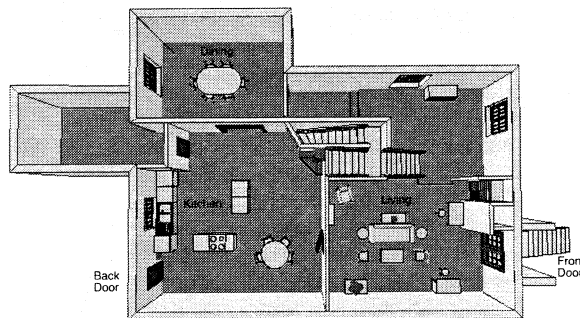


Fig. 6. The Huxtable house, plan of main floor (not to scale).

The Huxtables are an upper-class African-American family with five children and represent a break from the usual portrayal of ethnic minorities as being lower-middle class. They live in a renovated New York building from the Federalist era.

The ground floor is divided into two main spaces. The front door leads directly into the living room, with its sofa, coffee table and armchair arrangement. Two writing tables, a TV set and a phone are also located here. An open flight of stairs leads to the upstairs hallway.

A swinging door leads into the second major room, the kitchen. The kitchen has a table and chairs, where the family usually

eats – the formal dining room is rarely used. Aside from household tasks, the kitchen is used as a second living space, where the children do homework, and both parents and children entertain close friends. There is a second phone here. The kitchen becomes a private zone when major problems arise, for example when drug use or teenage sex is at issue. The children not involved are then sent out of the room and one or both of the parents have a stern session with the child in question.

The bedrooms are on the second floor, reached either via the flight of stairs leading from the living room or a second flight leading from the kitchen. The four girls share two bedrooms, the only son has another bedroom, and the parents have a master bedroom with a large double bed. The children use their rooms for recreation or for entertaining same-sex friends, although the youngest daughter occasionally has male playmates here as well. The parents use the evening hours in their bedroom for discussions the children are not meant to hear.

The furnishings throughout the house are traditional Queen Anne or Colonial, in keeping with the historic nature of the building itself. African-inspired prints hang on the walls and give the furnishings an ethnic flavor.

As in the Cleaver house, the Huxtable house is separated into three zones: the more public living room, the private kitchen, and the individual and private bedrooms. In contrast to the Cleavers or the Bradys, the Huxtables, while remaining a close-knit family, have many contacts outside the house, as expressed by two working parents and frequent visitors. The TV and phone are frequently used by all family members, taking them outside of the family unit electronically as well.

When no visitors are in the house, the living room takes on the same informal quality as the kitchen, when visitors are present, the kitchen becomes a "private" zone in contrast to the more "onstage" living room. Friends of the children are interrogated by the parents here, turning this space into a tribunal. The bedrooms are, as in the Cleaver house, areas of retreat for the children seeking privacy from the adults, although teen sexuality is still taboo in that opposite-sex friends are required to stay in the common areas.

The Huxtables are strict and caring parents who are confronted with realistic, modern-day issues in raising their children. Whereas the Bradys used spatial openness as a form of social control, the Huxtables allow their children more privacy, with all the ensuing consequences. The separation of the first floor of the house into two zones indicates a need to maintain a certain facade while being able to quickly retreat in order to deal with problems out of public view. The approach is similar to the one used by the Cleavers, although the issues dealt with in the Huxtable family are much more substantial.

The Conners

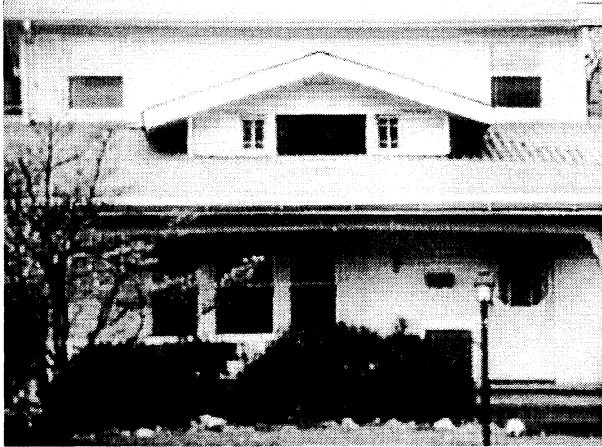


Fig. 7. *The Conner house as viewed from the street.*

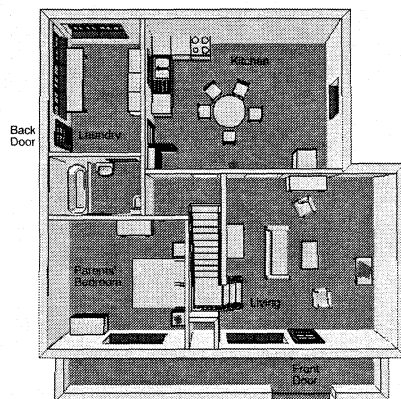


Fig. 8. *The Conner house, plan of main floor (not to scale).*

Roseanne and Dan Conner are a working-class couple with three children. They live in a two-story clapboard bungalow with a detached garage behind. The first floor comprises the living room, kitchen, and the parents' bedroom. The upstairs has two bedrooms for the children.

A large porch spans the front of the house. Together with the first-floor bedroom, the position of the garage, and the lack of a dining room, we may date this house as having been built in the 1920s or 30s for a family of modest means. A rear porch by the kitchen has been converted into a laundry room and provides a back entrance to the house.

The Conners have many outside contacts, as both parents work outside the house. Access to the house is liberal. The front door leads directly into the living room. Close friends use both the front and back doors and often do not knock before entering.

The living room and kitchen are separate spaces, but with no door between them. As in the Huxtable house, both zones are

used for work and relaxation, although the kitchen with its large table is the real center of family life. The frequently used TV set is in the living room, the main phone is a wall mounted model in the kitchen. Meals are taken at the kitchen table. The children are openly disciplined in a common sense and often ironic manner, usually in the group spaces.

Aside from the bedrooms, there are no special spaces for children and adults. In a pinch, the parents' bedroom is used for private adult conversations; close friends might retreat here to discuss a pressing problem. The viewer is witness to another backstage behavior: In contrast to the other TV families, the Conners are shown in their bedroom shortly after having had sex.

Parents and children do not generally knock before entering each other's spaces, although the siblings jealously guard their privacy from one another with big "keep out" signs on their doors.

The Conners exhibit much of what societal consensus would consider "backstage" behavior onstage, which would normally lead to their stigmatization. And yet the Conners force us to rethink such rules. The spatial openness of their house expresses a new forthrightness: that the Conners are not ashamed of their working-class status and that the world had better take them as they are. Their assertiveness is underlined by the fact that both Conner parents are unapologetically overweight.

There is little differentiation between "onstage" and "backstage" behavior in this family. Friends and colleagues witness internal family matters, men and women discuss their differences openly, and children see adult behavior with all its shortcomings. Even the youngest child hears adult conversations, which often take on a very open and biting humorous tone.

The parents' private area is their bedroom, which is much opener than in the other families. The children also have spaces where they can retreat to from family life. This allows them freedom from adult supervision. The Conner parents, demanding of the world that it accepts them as they are, grant their children the same right. Instead of hiding behind false pretenses, the Conners use their outspoken openness as a message of tolerance.

Conclusion

The four television families show that certain aspects of the American home and its spatial language have remained surprisingly constant over the years, while others have gradually changed to accommodate societal trends.

A continuing American feature is the relative openness of the home's interior. Once the front door has been opened, the main living space of all four houses is immediately visible. This is in contrast to entry situations in many other cultures, where architectural elements allow members of a household to keep visitors at bay. In the American home, the visitor is immediately part of the family space, a transparency which in itself leads to social control. In families where more privacy is desired, other

zones, such as the kitchen, are used to retreat to.

The family unit is shown as strong and caring in all four shows, although the two earlier families are much more closed off to the outside world than the later two. The later families not only have more actual contacts, but are shown using the TV and phone more frequently. The camera position has also changed: from a more neutral “observer” position in the living rooms of the first two shows to a position where the viewer often directly faces the sofa in the later shows—allowing a feeling of face-to-face interaction. This is in keeping with Meyrowitz’s thesis that television, in making onscreen strangers sometimes seem more “familiar” than the people we deal with in real life, has led to a new permeability of the family unit.¹⁰ The family structure is additionally portrayed as having opened to the outside world through the fact that in the earlier two shows the mothers are homemakers, whereas in the later two families the mothers work outside the house at jobs which are equivalent in status to those of their husbands. This has led to a shift in the role of the kitchen as well, from being a woman’s workspace in the Cleaver and Brady household, to being a more general family space in the Huxtable and Conner homes.

The spatial realms of parents and children have stayed fairly stable over the years, with the children having their own spaces to withdraw to in all four shows. Independent of family income, children are shown sharing rooms in all the families, a situation which usually leads to sibling support when there are problems with the parents. Children are shown as separate personalities with a right to their own spaces, away from the adult world, from the very beginning of their life. This is again in contrast to many other societies, where the individual is subordinate to the group or where parental control over children is greater. Even the Bradys allow their children their own, albeit collective space, with the result that social control is less parentally than peer effected.

Portrayal of another private space, the parents’ bedroom, has changed tremendously over the course of the four shows. Not only the viewers, but also family members gain greater access to this space, indicating an increased acceptance of sexual openness. In the Cleaver house, the kitchen had to serve as the parents’ “backstage” space because the bedroom could not be one. By the time the Connors appeared, many bedroom functions had virtually turned into “onstage” behavior.

Many more aspects of these homes could be points of discussion. In looking at how these fictional worlds have been opened up to our view, I have tried to show how America has been presenting itself— to natives and immigrants alike.

NOTES

- ¹ The original running dates of the shows are as follows: Leave it to Beaver 1957-63, The Brady Bunch 1969-74, The Bill Cosby Show 1984-92, Roseanne 1988-97.
- ² Neil M. Alperstein, “Imaginary Social Relationships with Celebrities,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (1991): 43. In the first five years of the TV show “Marcus Welby, M.D.,” for example, the fictional character Welby received a quarter of a million fan letters – most requesting medical advice. Larry Gross and Suzanne Jeffries-Fox. “What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up, Little Girl?” *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benét (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 247.
- ³ Joshua Meyrowitz quotes Erving Goffmann in making this distinction. A doctor, for example, might act one way in front of a patient (onstage) and very differently with a colleague discussing that patient (backstage). Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 29-30.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, 131.
- ⁵ For a discussion of the use of such cues, see Amos Rapoport, “Vernacular architecture and the cultural determinants of form,” *Buildings and society: Essays on the social development of the built environment*, ed. Anthony D. King (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 283-305, Amos Rapoport, “Identity and Environment: a Cross-cultural Perspective,” *Housing and Identity: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, ed. James S. Duncan (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 6-35, and Amos Rapoport, “Systems of activities and systems of settings,” *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space: An interdisciplinary cross-cultural study*, ed. Susan Kent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9-20.
- ⁶ Rapoport, “Identity and Environment”, 14.
- ⁷ Susan Kent, “Activity areas and architecture: an interdisciplinary view of the relationship between use of space and domestic built environments,” *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space*, ed. Kent, 6.
- ⁸ Other sitcoms of the era which show a couple’s bedroom show twin beds instead of a double bed, for example “I love Lucy” (1951-57) or “The Dick Van Dyke Show” (1961-66).
- ⁹ Alperstein, “Imaginary Social Relationships”, 56.
- ¹⁰ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 147.