



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION  
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

**Report on *From House to Home*  
the Second International Conference  
in the Excellence in the Home series  
organized by Home Renaissance Foundation**

*London, November 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> 2008. The Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre*

As Winston Churchill once said, 'We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us'. Where we live, that is to say our house, plays a significant role in the development of our lives. It is where our future is moulded, where we learn to live with others, where our values are defined, where we seek refuge, protection and security.

Over the course of the conference, the experts studied this role of the home and the way it might be managed in the future from the fields of architecture, interior design, business studies and home-making. Delegates from more than a dozen countries gathered at London's Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre to answer the question: **what makes a house a home?**

The focus of architects and interior designers is mainly on the physical aspects of space and design. The concept of home, however, is so much wider. It encompasses anthropological aspects, the management of space and time, the home as a workplace, the home's inhabitants and its evolution.

The economic downturn and modern work tendencies bring with them new trends regarding the home. Homes have become houses that double-up as offices, creating an environment where the two realms, work and family, coexist more and more intensely. It is therefore necessary to respond to this new reality with larger and better structured accommodation in which every member of the family is catered for.

Charles Handy, writer, broadcaster and lecturer, the most influential living management thinker, believes the home will shortly become "a place where people live, work, eat, sleep and play, a base of operations". This is due in part to the fact that most people find taking work home with them convenient. It is also more convenient for organizations from an economical point of view: it is an unnecessary expense to provide office space for employees when the majority of the work they do could be done just as easily from home." This new trend in home design can already be seen in the increasing demand of homes with areas specifically designated for work as well as homes with multifunctional open-plan rooms.

During the Conference, architects were encouraged to think ahead and consider how the ageing population will alter design. Charles Handy offered the view: "Increasingly, more old people will live at home. Doors will need to be wide enough for wheelchairs". Furthermore, Mr Handy said that the importance of the home cannot be underestimated and extends to the education of the individual.

According to Mr Handy, "The most important school is the home, where you learn consideration for others. You learn about self-discipline much more than at school".

Other speakers investigated how the physical structure influences the way a home can be created, how the interior and exterior space impacts on an individual's well-being and development as well as why management skills are critical in the running of a home.

What definitively turns a house into a home is the care of others within that vital space. Without that activity, even when a space encompasses all the physical and aesthetical elements proper to a home, something essential is lacking.

The person can only find fulfillment within the home when the house is 'made to work' for them, i.e. when its resources and potentialities are successfully managed for the benefit and well-being of those living there. The home is a space that once constructed needs to be managed.

Achieving excellence in the home was a key proposal. Monica Lindstedt founded a Swedish company twelve years ago to outsource housekeeping services. The firm, called Hemfrid - meaning 'peace at home' - employs 800 people. Mrs Lindstedt, a working mother, saw a gap in the market created by ignorance of even basic domestic skills among Swedish parents.

Maria Julia Prats, Professor of Entrepreneurial Management at the IESE Business School (Barcelona), offered an alternative to buying in help: training people in home-making. She said homemaking had much in common with conventional professions. Like a doctor, homemakers have a duty to put others before themselves. She is convinced that professionals need a common basis of knowledge in addition to practical - and certifiable - skills, as well as some form of association and social recognition.

Professor Lawrence Barth argued for more flexibility in housing policy. He stated "The role of the home is to cultivate autonomy in the next generation...There is a constant search for excellence within it."

Oxford University's Janine Nahapiet commented that homes are where children learn how to co-operate, by doing something as simple as solving a jigsaw puzzle together. "The home provides the foundation for relationships," she said. "Families which are high in social capital have better educational, career and health outcomes."

In bringing together interested and committed professionals, the second Excellence in the Home Conference has contributed to interdisciplinary research on home-related issues in the twenty-first century. It is our vision to make the home the place in which each individual is respected and encouraged, thus enabling change in the direction of a more humane society. It is hoped that this research will inform both policy and practice in future.

## **Second Conference Report: From House to Home**

### **Second International Conference in the Excellence in the Home Series, organised by the Home Renaissance Foundation**

'Home' is a difficult concept to define. The richness of the home is reflected in the many facets attributed to it, and it is perhaps the unique and ambitious mission of the Home Renaissance Foundation to explore all these facets. At last November's Home Renaissance Foundation international conference, *From House to Home*, architects and urbanists, as well as experts in the fields of economy, sociology, business management – and even a museum director – gathered to answer the question, 'What makes a house a home?'

For most people, the link between 'home' and a specific building and location is undeniable. Houses come in all shapes and sizes. They vary in décor, functionality, comfort and basic standards. If home is so intrinsically linked to a place and the form of this place depends so much on who built it or where it is located, who makes a home? Can it be said that an architect makes a home?

Professor Lawrence Barth opened the conference by giving a brief history of architectural thought in the twentieth century, which has placed a great importance on the interaction between the space and the individual. The home, as the environment for human development, is a dynamic space: 'That care and nurturing leads to a kind of search for excellence on the part of all who dwell there that is continually asking for the home to change, transform, do more and be more.'

Because the home cultivates our development and encourages us to strive for improvement, we turn our energies back to the home and constantly demand more of it.

Lorenzo Apicella, architect and partner of Pentagram, used examples of his own renovation projects – transforming buildings with a history into homes for new owners – as

evidence of the architectural potential of a building that respects the dynamic nature of the home.

The way in which the home advances human development was poignantly described by Charles Handy, who referred to the home as a school for life. As well as being the place where values are acquired and passed on, the home provides people with both personal privacy and a communion with others. It, therefore, acts as a microcosm of society. Janine Nahapiet, one of the panellists, continued in this vein: 'relationships are the foundation of society [...] my argument is that the home provides the foundation for relationships.'

The panel also discussed ways in which a person may develop on a professional level in the home. Drawing on what was said about the development of social skills in the home and on Monica Lindstedt's experience as the founder of a company that outsources work services related to the home, Julia Prats suggested that homemaking could be considered a profession.

The home, however, is not an isolated unit. It exists within a social and geographical location that feeds into it and which it in turn feeds. After all, it is not at the precise moment of sliding the key into the door or walking through the threshold that we begin to feel at home. As Dr Michael Hebbert asserted, the feeling begins much sooner.

The contributions of the second panel discussion looked beyond the individual and focussed on the urban context of the home: 'We can measure the success of a home by two measures of family life... the point at which the family members come together with their feet under the same table...and dispersal – the extent to which members of the family go out, spread, ray off into the community and form part of that larger home which is the neighbourhood and the town.'

According to Piers Gough, it is the contrast between the hard side and the soft side of the city, the variety of options available to the collective and the warmth and security of the individual home that makes city living bearable. As examples of the positive effect the

urban context can have on city-dwellers, Gough presented his master plan for the renovation of the Gorbals in Glasgow in the 1990s, and Juan Ignacio Vidarte, Director of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, gave a first-hand account of the 'Bilbao Effect'.

What conclusions can be drawn from the contributions to this conference, then? From an architectural and urban planning perspective, the debate over housing is ongoing. To use an example mentioned during the conference, tower blocks are a case in point. They were first introduced in London in the 1930s as a solution to the dire living conditions in the slums. The enthusiasm for this progressive vision to improve people's lives is evidenced in the 1935 documentary *Housing Problems*. In the 1970s, scarcely forty years later, another documentary, *The Block*, was filmed to expose the horrors of tower block living. Despite being a vast improvement from the slums of the 1930s, tower blocks built in the 1930s, did not meet the basic human living requirements for city dwellers in the 1970s.

People had developed, society had developed and the home needed to develop in order to keep pushing its inhabitants forward. Thankfully, in most cases the standards for tower block accommodation have been raised. Many people today live in apartment buildings that have developed from the tower block and which meet high living standards, as Piers Gough highlighted. However, the tragedy last July in which six people lost their lives to a fire in a tower block reminds us that this is not a resolved issue.

Individuals living in homes must strive towards creating that are homes worthy of themselves and their loved ones. In the end, it is in the home that people grow, develop and take society forward.