



**HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
WORKING PAPERS
Number 79**

**Narrative and visual articulations of home: dispatches
from suburban fringe and small town Ireland
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Paper delivered at Home Renaissance Foundation V International Conference: "Happy Homes, Happy Society? The contribution of domestic life in a time of social changes",
Online due to Covid19 measures, 12-13 November 2020

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Abstract

Home provides a place of material shelter, but it is far more than just a place to live. Its significance resides in its function as a "territory of meaning, a place where pleasure, affect and aesthetics are deeply interwoven with the functional and utilitarian dimensions of home."¹ Homes are valued primarily as private space, a territory that offers security, respite, and some degree of control in contradistinction to a world that may be experienced as uncertain and insecure.

Rarely though are homes- real, lived-in homes- on display. This changed for me when I teamed up with a visual artist to collaborate on two local arts projects, *House Portraits* (2013) and *Townscape* (2015). In each case, the visual artist photographed each house, inside and out, and then selected a single image for portraiture. As a sociologist, I conducted home based interviews with twenty-two the householders across the two settings who had agreed to participate in the respective projects. The art works produced were exhibited widely and were documented in two published books alongside interpretive essays on the householders' sociological understandings of both their homes and local contexts.

House Portraits was set in Tallaght, once a small village on the edge of Dublin that was earmarked for suburban development in the 1970s and 1980s. Large local authority housing estates were built there to which inner-city residents were decanted. For years, Tallaght lacked services such as transport and shopping facilities. Although the area has undergone regeneration and significant public investment, Tallaght West in particular remains deprived in comparison with the broader Irish population. The ten participating households lived in social or formerly social housing. In contrast, *Townscape* focused on a diversity of home settings in a single midlands town, Stradbally, Co.Laois, nestling in a pastoral landscape. The town has a population of 1350, overwhelmingly of Irish nationality. The twelve participating householders lived in private homes, of varying size and character.

¹Leonardi, C. et al. 2009. "Knocking on Elders' Door: Investigating the functional and emotional geography of their domestic space" Paper presented at CHI Designing for Senior Citizens, April 8, Boston, MA.

Drawing on practice theory², this paper analyses the 22 interviews as a single data set alongside the visual artist's photographs. In particular, I focus on the relationship between the material structure of the house, the symbolic and material practices involved in making a house a *home*, and the degree to which residents experience a sense of competence and agency in the management of both the home and the local context.

Although the two settings are very different, and the participants vary significantly in terms of class and cultural backgrounds as well as personal capitals and resources, significant commonalities emerge in terms of their social practices. This calls into question our received notions of taste and status boundaries and suggests that despite social change home practices tend toward the universalistic rather than particularistic.

²Shove, E, M.Pantzar and M.Watson, 2012, *The Dynamics of Social Practice. Everyday life and how it changes.* (Sage: London).

