Locked out of the house: privacy, status, exclusionary practice and its implications for ethnographic research on luxury homes

by

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Introduction

This paper will recount my experiences, frustrations and challenges with starting my fieldwork on the home building industry in Perth, Western Australia. After accepting an offer to conduct an ethnographic study of one of Perth’s most prestigious building companies, preparing a research proposal and gaining ethics clearance for the project, I found myself shut out of my field site at the time my fieldwork was set to commence. In this paper, I will speculate on the reasons why this may have occurred. This experience has forced me to reflect on the ways that notions of privacy constrain studies on domestic spaces. The social relationships of people with wealth and high status are marked by a sense of exclusivity that is sustained through exclusionary practices in the guise of maintaining privacy. Privacy acts as a barrier that protects the elite from the wrath of public opinion on consumption practices that may be deemed to be ostentatious and excessive. Secondly, the culture of building companies is grounded on privacy as a means to create barriers to control information flows.

The problem at hand: engaging with the home ethnographically

In Western capitalist societies, the home stands as a prominent symbol of identity - a concrete manifestation not only of wealth and status but also a statement of individuality and intimate relationships (Woodward 2003: 394). Domestic spaces provide fertile ground in which to examine issues of social identity, as they are personal spaces that lend themselves to the intimate expression of the self and of relationships to others (Csikzentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 139). They provide ‘not only a material shelter, but a shelter for those things that make life
meaningful’, functioning as a social symbol and as an extension of the self (Csikzentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 17).

The nature of the home in Western capitalist societies as a private sphere has not easily lent itself to ethnographic research. Studies undertaken on domestic spaces in Western contexts have not taken advantage of the full potential of participant observation. Ethnographic studies of domestic spaces present numerous methodological and ethical challenges. These relate primarily to issues of privacy. For example, informants who grant researchers access into their homes protect their privacy by presenting themselves in a controlled way - they ensure that their home is clean and tidy for visitors, and receive visitors in the public domain of their home such as in the kitchen, the lounge or in a formal living area (Silva 2000: 8). These tendencies have limited opportunities for participant observation as a primary research methodology. Studies on domestic spaces in Western contexts have consequently been limited to interview-based research within the home, rather than within the broader context of participant observation (see Southerton 2001, Woodward 2001, 2003; Shrove & Hand 2005).

The challenge, then, was to broaden the scope of research into domestic spaces in a bid to move beyond the interview and collect some ‘real’ data – the ‘real’ data being those observations that are recorded during the course of intensive participant observation, which are so crucial to anthropological research. The goal was to see what people really do, rather than what they ‘just’ say they do and to become a participant observer rather than an interviewer.

I resolved to work around this problem by taking a different approach. Many of the existing studies on domestic spaces are limited by their choice to research how people live in established homes. By studying home building – at homes as emerging spaces
rather than as lived-in spaces – I hoped to sidestep privacy issues and more easily engage in participant observation by watching the building process unfold. So far, experience has shown that it is not so easy to sidestep these assumed barriers to research – new obstacles just seem to emerge in their place! Ironically, I have found myself undertaking that kind of interview-based research that I initially had hoped to distance myself from, and am trying to make the most out of my limited opportunities for participant observation. But these very difficulties say so much about the nature of my object of interest – the luxury home in Perth’s Western Suburbs.

While doing some cold calling to scope for fieldwork opportunities to study the home building industry in Perth, I was fortunate to capture the interest of Michael James, the general manager of Regency Homes (please note that pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all parties involved). Michael expressed a strong desire to become involved in the research project, inviting me to undertake a study of Regency Homes. Michael assured full access to the inner workings of the business, suggesting that staff meetings, marketing sessions and meetings with clients could be observed to allow for an investigation of the home building process. The prospect of having this level of access was unexpected, unprecedented and was too exciting and innovative a research opportunity to refuse. We agreed to keep in contact while I prepared a research proposal and sought ethics approval for my project. All up, we held five meetings in addition to regular email correspondence to discuss the research.

**Luxury Homes in Perth**

Perth is in the midst of an economic boom that has been driven by the resources sector in the state’s North West and the city’s landscape is changing accordingly. But nowhere is Western Australian wealth more visible than amongst the new houses being built along the banks of the Swan River by Perth’s wealthiest residents. The
building industry simply cannot keep up with the demand for new luxurious houses. These homes have vast living spaces, imported Italian marble floors, expansive architect designed interiors with touches of granite, wood and glass, they boast river, city or ocean views, and are finished off with elegantly appointed furnishings and works of art. They embody a lavish version of the Great Australian Dream: home ownership, a piece of land in an affluent suburb, and a seemingly obvious statement of social status (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987: 26). Homes can be read semiotically as markers of taste, distinction and social standing. They ‘conspicuously manifest social position’ and are intimately bound up with the ‘build[ing] of class cultures’ (Sand 2003: 3). These homes seemed to hold the key that would allow for a more personal and intimate understanding of Perth’s elite.

Regency Homes cater to a niche market of Perth’s super-rich who purchase large blocks of land in prestigious suburbs of Perth, who pay premium prices to construct custom designed, high specification luxury homes. The construction prices for the mansions built by Regency Homes start at three million dollars, thus catering exclusively to an upper class clientele. These homes are not ‘off the plan’ display homes, but are contract builds that are designed and built exclusively for the client. Michael boasted that the staff at Regency Homes strive to produce cutting-edge houses that embody the latest trends in home design, utilising top of the range products and high quality finishes. Characteristically these homes are very large, between 900 to 1400 square metres with five to seven bedrooms, most of these with ensuite bathrooms. Garages will be able to accommodate at least three cars. In addition to a kitchen, home theatre, formal living and dining rooms a Regency Home will often feature special function rooms such as a wine cellar and home gym. Michael is all too aware of the power of a mansion to signal ones social position and
pointed out that a Regency Home is not just a living space, but is a clear statement to the world that you have ‘made it’.

Michael’s intellectual inclinations gave him a disposition to be personally sympathetic to my research. Michael was interested in the potential for the research to give a deeper insight into what Regency Homes clients wanted and why they made their decisions. During our meetings in his office, Michael articulated his genuine belief that sociological research could help Regency Homes better respond to the needs of their clients now and into the future. Michael expressed concern about the future of Regency Homes in a global environment where resources were becoming more scarce, potentially making it difficult for the super rich to justify building such large opulent living spaces. He envisioned building homes that were capable of encouraging inter-generational living to combat the trend where a home built by Regency Homes has a life of about ten years. After this, these homes tend to get knocked down and another is built in its place. At this end of the market, super rich clients want to build their own dream home rather than purchase somebody else’s creation. Now this, I thought, was something that I could eagerly sink my teeth into for the next few years. What motivates a wealthy person to build a mansion? Is it all about conspicuous consumption and status competition, or is there something more? What are their motivations? Michael decided to participate in the project and we agreed that I would follow some of his clients through a year of the building process.

**Locked out! Problems with ‘privacy’**

I thought my research project was all set and ready to go – I had a contact who was the general manager of one of Perth’s most prestigious building companies and he was willing to give me access to it’s inner workings. I had just finished my research proposal and gained ethics clearance for my project. I had even held meetings with
Michael James to allow both of my supervisors to visit the Regency Homes office to ensure that everything was ready to go. I then waited eagerly for my fieldwork to begin, but heard nothing. My emails were not returned, nor my calls, or the calls that my supervisors made to my precious gatekeeper!

To date, I have had no further contact from Regency Homes and I have been left to muse over what might have happened. Rather than being given any kind of explanation for their decision to withdraw from the research project, Michael James decided to remain silent and refuse communication. I was not at all cynical about Michael’s ability to get the project off the ground and had put all my eggs in one basket, placing myself in a very vulnerable position indeed. Why did the company decide to pull the pin at the last minute? Silence has proven to be a powerful mechanism indeed as I can only speculate on the reasons for this. However, this act of closure speaks volumes about the subject matter at hand. While a mansion may seem like a very public statement of wealth and social standing, when one attempts to get beyond its façade you find the gates remain firmly locked. In these circumstances, the tensions between notions of privacy and the very public nature of a home as a highly visible symbol of status become obvious.

‘Privacy is very important to our clients’ was a catchphrase at Regency Homes and Michael stressed this point upon me. He pointed out that Regency Homes clients are concerned about maintaining their privacy and do not want to be seen as engaging in conspicuous displays of consumption in the eyes of the general public. Consequently, Regency Homes rarely get the chance to showcase their completed homes to the public. As Michael Gilding pointed out in *Secrets of the Super Rich*, ‘money is the last taboo’ (2002: 7). People, particularly those who are affluent, do not discuss the particulars of their wealth or disclose how much wealth they hold (Gilding 2002: 10).
Some of Michael’s comments also pointed to anxieties surrounding wealth and consumption. He noted that the general public are eager to ‘point the finger’ at the rich for social problems, and that they harbour a resentment towards wealthy citizens because they are ‘jealous’ that they can’t afford to live a similar lifestyle. Michael cited the Australian ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ to make sense of these attitudes towards the rich. To make his point, he made reference to the public reaction to the proposed $70 million dollar mansion that Panjak and Radhika Oswal are planning to build in Peppermint Grove. The Oswals are Indian entrepreneurs who moved to Perth in 2001 to take advantage of the resources boom by establishing a fertiliser plant in the Burrup peninsula in the state’s North West. Set to become the most expensive home in Australia, the project has generated a lot of media interest and publicity. Michael had been keenly following letters to the editor that had been published in the local western suburbs newspaper, *The Post*. Some letter writers had condemned the Oswal’s decision to construct such an ‘ostentatious’ and ‘extravagant’ home and suggested that the money would be better spent on charitable causes (Pott 2007). Unlike the Oswals, Regency Home clients generally opt to stay away from the media spotlight to avoid such criticism from the general public over their spending habits. It may be the ‘Australian’ thing to do to ‘cut down the tall poppy’ but there is more to it than simply being a case of jealousy, as suggested by Michael James.

With the rise of a consumer society, commodities have taken on significant ‘symbolic importance’ where consumption has become central in the expression of identities and lifestyles (Schor 1999: 41). Those at the top of the capitalist tree are all too aware of the power of consumption in a ‘society of consumers’ where people define themselves through what they purchase (Bauman 2007: 1). Regency Homes clients’ acute awareness of the ‘jealous’ masses points to the fact that they consciously understand
that their wealth and status, embodied in a luxurious home, stands as a symbol of
power and of exclusivity – and consequently as a tool of exclusion. The anxieties
surrounding consumption and the home amongst Regency Homes clients exists
because the very act of constructing such a public statement of wealth in effect,
breaches the taboo on making your personal wealth public knowledge. While on one
hand, it is desirable to express one’s individuality, taste, wealth and status through the
home – or in the case of Regency Homes clients, through building a mansion – it is
socially appropriate to convey these social messages to a specific audience rather than
to publicly broadcast your achievements. It is understandable then that privacy ranks
as a high priority for Regency Homes clients. By acting as an exclusionary practice,
the emphasis on privacy serves as a protective mechanism to ensure that the social
messages that the home conveys are directed towards peers, neighbours, friends and
family rather than to society as a whole. Creating privacy thus ensures that the
responses to the social messages conveyed by the luxury home are met with a
positive, rather than a negative, response.

While privacy may be important to the client – I suspect that privacy is equally as
important to the builder. After being assured by Michael that I would have the full
support of Regency Homes behind my project, with the promise of unrestricted access
to the inner workings of the building company and their clients, I devised a research
methodology that was geared towards engaging with all aspects of the building
process. I was to spend time in the offices to learn about the business, to spend time
with clients and to visit building sites and engage with the site supervisors and
tradespeople. I was to find out, the hard way, that this proposed methodology was
idealistic, naïve and did not fit well with the culture of building companies.
As Philip Moore noted during his fieldwork researching the experiences of tradespeople on Perth building sites in the mid eighties, it is in the builder’s best interest to ensure that all participants in the building process have little knowledge of the overall picture because it ensures that the builder has sole access to information such as wage rates and profit margins and other so called ‘trade secrets’ (1991 :35). Exclusionary practices thus form the backbone that shape interpersonal business relationships within building companies as barriers are constructed between clients, tradespeople and management to control flows of information. During my meetings with Michael he made it very clear that I was not to publish any information deemed to be a ‘trade secret’. Moore points out that the very structure of the home building industry is not conducive to a holistic research methodology typical of anthropological and sociological studies that unapologetically seeks to gain access to all aspects and viewpoints of the subject under study. A building company is thus unlikely to allow a sociologist to have unfettered access to such information without establishing trust first.

**Conclusion**

The opportunity offered to me to study the construction process behind the creation of some of Perth’s most exclusive residences turned out to be ‘too good to be true’. The importance of maintaining privacy, both for the clients of Regency Homes and for the Regency Home enterprise itself, conspired to create an untenable research scenario that was not conducive to the pursuit of traditional ethnographic research methods that place a premium on holism and participant observation. Without an explanation from Regency Homes regarding their reasons to withdraw from participation in the project, all that is possible is speculation. However, Michael made it abundantly clear that privacy was an issue for his clients and ultimately, the notion of privacy was utilised
to shut out the researcher to serve the best interests of the building company and their clients. Ethnographic studies of elites need to be acutely aware of the barriers to research in such contexts in order to devise more appropriate methodologies that may lead to more successful research outcomes.

References


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