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***Object Placement and Aesthetics: the  
Creation of Third Space: A Comparative  
Study of Interior Spatial Conditions of  
Canadian First Nations and Muslim  
Families***

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I am comforted by the faces that dwell in memory...

Vernacular expressions in the home's interior are often overlooked and undocumented because they may lack the Western ideals of beauty. Design industry's 'commodity-aesthetics', driven by trend and fashion disconnect many groups in contemporary Canadian society, leaving their personal spatial expressions to exist only memory.<sup>1</sup>

This exploration of the homes of two Western Canadian families, First Nation Cree and Muslim, examines interior modification and configuration using object placement. In both cases, the social relationship between family and Canada is mediated using cultural signifiers and cosmological codes, manifesting into a fusion of sensibilities in the interior condition.<sup>2</sup> Termed *third space*, the place of spirits, acknowledges past, present and future, spatially articulating the beauty of transformation. In the investigated homes, the personalized spaces for sanctuary are marked with the intimacy of the human hand, sheltering artifact and recording the moments of discovery, recovery transformation

**seek**<sup>3</sup>

1. to go in search or quest of
2. to try to find or discover by searching or questioning
3. to try to obtain
4. to try or attempt
5. to go to: *to seek a place to rest*
6. to ask for; request: *to seek advice*
7. to search or explore
8. be sought after, to be desired or in demand

I dream through their eyes...

Close the mind's eye and remember a place alive with spiritual presence. When one enters 'lived space', a metaphysical reaction occurs between the body and texture, sound, and smell, the physical characteristics of home. Too often spaces engaging the 'primal senses' are dismissed as vulgar because of Western society's preoccupation with sterile

ocular-centric interior environments.<sup>4</sup> The beauty of lived space is inherent in its markings, providing a metaphysical 'map' that anyone can use to access memory.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard theorized 'daydreaming' inside the home's interior links one to the initial concept of universe and the memories in the subconscious.<sup>5</sup> Using the sensual 'map' of space leads to the door that opens onto the uncorrupted identity of self. Linking the spaces of past with the unknown using the daydream as catalyst demonstrates how the tradition and culture endure and how the investigational families achieved solace in the alien architecture. Linking the *present* with *former* by simply grasping a worn doorknob overcomes historical and geographical distances and in both the Cree and Muslim homes, the phenomenological process of creating comfort in space initiates the reconciliation of identity, instigating the fluidity between time and place.

**recover** <sup>6</sup>

1. get or find back; recover the use of;
2. get over an illness or shock;
3. regain a former condition
4. to get control of (one's actions, emotions etc) again
5. to cover again or anew
6. to regain the strength, composure, balance, or the like,

suspending time and distance, linking past and immediate...

As a medium, the interior environment is a documentation of the everyday experience. It facilitates the exchange of information between inhabitant and the world, communicating ideals, norms and taboos. Swiss linguist and pioneer of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure proposed architecture and artifact be read as language, systematically composed of signifiers (symbols) that represent the signified (original).<sup>7</sup> Both families relocated into geographically diverse communities, distinctly different from homeland, signifiers aided healing sorrow from cultural and geographical separations, developing new relationships between known object/experience and the unknown. An example signifier healing in the interior is the Iraqi prayer rug.

Woven for a different climate, the Persian Salat offers minimal comfort from the cold linoleum floors of Winnipeg, but in the apartment interior it alters mental and emotional states, reconciling personal norms or taboos, promoting the family recovery using space.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, objects in the Cree home, a critical negotiator between inhabitant and the exterior world, mediate communication at the entry threshold. The following sections are generated from numerous site visits and conversations with the families, each essay details subtle behaviors and the arbitration of 'self'.



*Figure 1. Photograph. Yuzicapi, The needlepoint Brave, Cree Home*

faces hang on the wall

Objects cannot generate meaning on their own; significance is acquired through historical, social and political means.<sup>9</sup> In Cree culture, the traditional act of sewing is a metaphor for the social fabric of family and society. In this home, the female is an avid sewer, skilled in many areas including knitting, quilting, beading, and decorative stitch work. The needlepoint 'Brave' was created in the 1950's after leaving the home Reserve. See Figure1. The wall hanging, an acculturated post-colonial art form, replicates the traditional Cree sewing practices of quillwork and beading, operating as symbol of family and culture.<sup>10</sup>

Each thread, stitch and knot links the maker to her community/family and the hours spent learning needlepoint from both her mother and the Nuns at a residential school. Making and displaying the object reconnected her to the higher self, simulating subconscious memories of membership and comfort during a time when the family struggled with maintaining cultural existence. Brave's location at the front door has remained unchanged for over 50 years. He watches the evolution of time and place and eventually sharing his space with another.

As children, the family members attended a Catholic Indian Residential school that culminated into a strong Catholic faith, complimenting traditional Cree spiritual practices. In 1998, the couple received a portrait of Pope John Paul II from the Vatican, immediately he secured a place alongside Brave. Both these faces are aesthetic symbols, anchored in the home interior with meanings generated from iconic belief systems and personal experience.<sup>11</sup> Few people will appreciate the figurative representations because they hide behind the shadows of a door swing. Only when the door closes, do the forms magically appear side-by-side, sharing secrets about family, Cree history, culture and identity.



*Figure 2. Photograph, S. Yuzicapi, House Plant, Muslim Home*

...bodies sleep soundly draped in the corners of space

When first entering the Muslim home, visitor is greeted by a common Canadian houseplant miraculously blooming in the middle of winter. Protecting the secret of the flowering vine is a boundary marked with a rug, moving beyond this threshold reveals the magic of the vine.

Theorist Joseph Rykwert asserts individuals are entirely conditioned by the collective associations that influence how we modify the interior condition.<sup>12</sup> The visual medium of the vine communicates a strong desire for acceptance within the community and transports the family from the intense constraints of Winnipeg's physical environment by linking the red flowers with the climate of home. Images and objects from memory like the flower's form and color, tremendously affect psychological wellbeing, mediating cultural difference in Canada. The secret of the flower, grafted onto the vine with tape and twine, links family to the past, and the gentle exchange between vine and scripture quietly acknowledges difference. See Figure 2.

**transform<sup>13</sup>**

1. subject to a mathematical transformation
2. change or alter in form, appearance, or nature
3. change in outward structure or looks
4. change from one form or medium into another
5. change into a genetically distinct cell by the introduction of DNA from another cell of the same or closely related species

6. increase or decrease

... and whispers caress

The unconscious memories of the individual, collective associations and regional history influence and determine a person's perception of physical and psychological comfort. Quite often people will select a design object or utilize a spatial configuration based in psychological comfort influenced by history and culture over the physical needs of the human body. According to Rykwert, "comfort is a complex notion, which varies from person to person and from social group to social group."<sup>14</sup> Individuals, family, and societies evolve over time, thus renegotiating the perception of comfort. Both the Cree and Muslim families have adapted space and object culminating into a new order, termed third space. Third space or metaphysical space envelops the activities that operate on higher planes. Third space accommodates prayer and the objects associated with spiritual activities enabling the mind, body and soul to leave the constructed world. The following examples of a fireplace and a rug, acknowledge a transformation, representing the evolution of emotional and spiritual needs.

when I leave this place, home, site, origin,

Three important connotative signifiers in the Cree home include braids of sweetgrass, a stone facade and fireplace mantel. The elements express the duality of spiritual beliefs, providing historical context about the Cree family. The stone fireplace, a metaphysical spatial expression of Cree and Catholic faith, anchors the family within Canada's pluralist society. The ceremonies held in the rear of the home, signal the beginning of third space, the place with no door, assisted by a vernacular spatial element.

As an aesthetic articulation, the stone fireplace, completed in the late 1980's, signifies the Cree tradition of stone cutting. The stones, collected over 25 years were selected for their physical characteristics encoded with spiritual meaning. The crafted stone eagle at the center of the fireplace represents truth and freedom; carrying the prayers of humanity on its wings to the creator. The masonry work is accented by a wooden mantel and curvilinear supports salvaged from the altar of a Reservation Catholic Church. Integrating the two elements enables the individual to *conceive of* and *connect with* a place in the world; the fireplace unravels the past, resonating with meaning for the future. See Figure 3.

... I will find them again



*Figure 3. Field Sketch, S. Yuzicapi, Fireplace detail, Cree Home*

Architecture, more than any other cultural artifact serves as a visual description of national identity because of its relatively permanent assembly in place and time. The architectonic signifiers of apartment façades, including that of the Muslim family's building, erroneously imply a semantic relationship between architectural symbol and occupant. In the interior of this family dwelling, simple modifications begin to anchor the family to place. See Figure 4.

The interior environment of the Muslim family home is transformed from Western 'living room' into multipurpose space, accommodating numerous activities such as visiting, eating and praying. The amalgamated functions, separated only by temporal division, can seamlessly occur because the sofas are located against the perimeter walls, maximizing spatial flexibility. In the heart of the multipurpose room lies a rug that beckons guests to join the family on its surface, linking the physical body posture to the moment. Sitting on the carpet reinforces familial intimacy, eliminating spatial distancing from furnishings. The textile transforms from the 'original' Western idea of space and language, accommodating Muslim prayer, an integral part of this family's daily activity.



*Figure 4. Field Sketch, S.Yuzicapi, Muslim Home*

To pray is to abandon the self, surrendering the body in a moment of abject devotion. In this home, the only artifact separating the activity of prayer from layers of Winnipeg history is a thinly woven rug marked with time. Functionally, the carpet provides minimal physical comfort; metaphorically, it suspends time and place, overlapping histories, geographies with circumstance. As semiotic symbol, the carpet creates a space within a space, signaling the eternal dimension.<sup>15</sup> The activity of kneeling together and feeling the carpet's texture against the body, links the family to their original home and the activities now associated with both countries, defers physical, mental and spiritual barriers, transforming the banal room into the third space of prayer.

To summarize, aesthetics in the interior environment are often dismissed as superficial expressions because of a link to home decoration trends and fashions. The investigational purpose of examining design interventions presented in each family demonstrates how people integrate social and historical conditions with spatial variables, thereby altering consciousness in the creation of aesthetic beauty.<sup>16</sup> Inherent human behaviors, regardless of collective associations, modify and adapt serving as a link to the past using the present conditions. Interiors, new and old, sacred or profane serve as a place of reflection and comfort for occupants who choose to manipulate space, cradling human frailties and triumphs. By studying the interiors of groups such as the Cree and Muslim people, it becomes evident, regardless of religious practice or cultural expression; the qualities of home are no different. Ingrained in the human condition, motivated by comfort and the desire of belonging, people connect the unconscious moments from the past using spatial configuration and artifact to the present condition. French theorist Jean Baudrillard argues people select objects because of its status or the empowerment it provides the owner in society.<sup>17</sup> His theory and the investigation prompt a question about the notion of aesthetics and the millions of people who cannot afford status symbols.

Can homes of marginalized groups be considered beautiful in a society that links aesthetics with inequity and elitism?

I am comforted by the faces that dwell in memory  
I dream through their eyes  
suspending time and distance, linking past and immediate  
faces hang on the wall  
bodies sleep soundly draped in the corners of space  
and whispers caress  
when I leave this place, home, site, origin,  
I will find them again  
formed in paper, resin, wood and cotton

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## End notes

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