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DOMESTIC SPACES AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

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A cultural approach to human geography

The cultural approach to contemporary issues in human geography can take many different paths, depending on the researcher's interests. My own work is mostly driven by a special interest for geographic knowledge as developed by the people themselves, a kind of folk-geography or, as I'd rather call it, a vernacular geography. Vernacular geography is often defined as the opposite of academic geography. Yet, as handy as this definition might be, it should be avoided, as things are far from being that simple. There is nothing such as a clear opposition between those two kinds of knowledge. Indeed, the relationship between them is more that of a tension between two various ways of developing knowledge.

In the realm of cultural geography my own research stands alongside other works that mainly focus on the issue of space and place as the geographic dimension of identity (both collective and individual). It also links with the constructivist school that considers knowledge as a representation and, in this context, I am particularly interested in investigating the spaces and landscapes that are constructed through this representation, and are constantly re-informed by it in a dynamic process where knowledge building – a never ending activity – tends to continuously transform the "reality" it pretends to grasp.

These issues are investigated through fieldwork research that focuses on a specific culture: that of the Inuit (formerly called Eskimo) of the Canadian Arctic. Until the 1950s-1960s the Canadian Inuit were a nomadic people whose life was organised around hunting (mainly seal and caribou) and, since the 1910s, trapping for fur (mainly foxes). This means working in an environment where the land, although highly exploited, is not – or only slightly – transformed. Tracks of human presence and activities are very limited. Therefore, cultural landscapes tend to be intellectual rather than material and their culturalisation lies mostly in the invisible grid through which they are read and understood by their inhabitants. In this context the most constructed space of all is the domestic space, the inner space of the mobile shelter that is constantly rebuilt to accompany the movements of the nomadic group. Yet, its spatial organisation appears to have been following a very stable pattern, as we will see.

But before that, the idea of domestic spaces itself needs to be clarified. First of all, we can define them as opposed to public spaces. Yet this is obviously not specific enough as domestic spaces are a special kind of private space, the most private kind of all: the home, where one seeks comfort and rest, among other members of the family or by oneself if the person is single. The intimacy of the home first lies in the simple fact that it is a delimited space, whose borders are recognised as such by outsiders as well as insiders. Apartments are delimited by walls of course, but houses, too, are more often than not surrounded by some kind of wall or fence, with a gate that can be locked. If not, there is always an invisible line that separates it from public space and of which neighbours are fully aware. The inside space, whether of a house or a flat, is the heart of the domestic space, which extends to some degree to the outskirts of the building. The latter can either be abruptly separated from the non-domestic space by a clear physical limit or slowly dissolve itself into the public space when no material sign marks the frontier between public and private spheres. There is much to be learned from a close study of the various ways by which the encounter between domestic and non-domestic spaces is dealt with, but in this paper I will specifically focus on the inside space of the house.

Geographers and domestic spaces

Geographers have indeed often shown an interest in domestic spaces, looking at them with different perspectives through time.

Vidal de la Blache, when he elaborated the concept of "genre de vie" (1911) in order to better understand the relations between man and his environment in rural Western Europe, included domestic space in his investigation. This interest was carried forward by rural geographers as well as by most regional geographers until the fifties. Most of them looked at domestic spaces as production spaces, integrated into a farming economy. The emphasis was on how the dwelling itself was designed to assist farming activities and on regional styles in vernacular rural architecture as an adaptation to various farming systems, themselves an adaptation to the physical geography of each region. These geographers also insisted on how work in the fields and work inside the walls of the farm itself depended on one another, being part of one production-consumption system seen as an almost closed circle. Although aware of the gendered work distribution – in Europe, in most cases, men were in the fields while women stayed mostly in the farm-house and its direct surroundings – they considered this to be natural and had therefore no interest in looking into it any further.

After World War Two, domestic spaces were forgotten for a few decades, as they did not seem to fit into what were then the main interests of geographers: spatial distributions, theoretical geography, regional science and urban geography. It was only in the 80s and 90s that they met with a renewed interest, mainly through the gender issue first raised by feminist geographers. The focus moved from dwelling structures to inside spaces. Massey and McDowell (1984) paved the way for a new look at domestic spaces, now apprehended as

spaces of entrapment for women. These spaces were also studied as spaces of conflict and violence, linked to identity issues in relation to the social construction of gender but not exclusively.

More recently, some geographers have started to look at domestic spaces as a specific kind of geographical space, whose "landscape" reflects a geographical representation of the world and plays its own part in the transmission of cultural values and identity to its inhabitants. "Space matters!, also at that scale", was the *moto* (Collignon and Staszak, 2003). This approach is based on the idea that those values, as well as the sense of space and place specific to each culture, are expressed in the internal lay-out of the homes, especially when dealing with vernacular (often called traditional) architecture (Pezeu-Massabuau, 1993). Domestic spaces are looked at as the spaces where one first experiences the interaction between oneself and others, and between oneself and various artefacts. These experiences are lived through the sensitivity of the body, through which one learns about locations, of bodies and objects, and of the distances between them. It is not only about learning how to locate someone or something, and how to evaluate distances, but also, and this is more important, about learning what is right and what is wrong in terms of locations and proximity in a specific cultural context. Each culture, indeed, has its own standards concerning the right location of things and, moreover, of bodies, and about the right distance between various things and, subsequently, various bodies, i.e., various people; depending on a wide range of factors among which gender often plays a key role. Until then, geographers had paid little attention to the means by which each individual and whole cultural groups organise their domestic spaces in order to feel "at home" inside them.

From this perspective, an interesting issue is to look at how the spatial organisation of the house itself makes it easy or difficult to interact in certain ways, by such means as partition walls for example. A related theme is the way such spatial organisation subtly transmits to its inhabitants, at a very early age, the notions of right and wrong distances and locations. Patterns of domestic spaces then appear as a key element in the geographical experience of space and therefore as a key element in the construction of geographic knowledge, i.e., of an operational representation of the world. As such, it deserves full recognition as a relevant object of research in cultural geography, like any other geographical space.

If domestic spaces are so important for the construction of identity as well as of cultural knowledge, a question arises: what happens when a cultural group experiences a radical change in the pattern of its domestic space? What are the cultural effects of such event, and how does it affect the geographic knowledge of the people involved? For nomadic cultures, economic development, more often than not, means settling down: either in a new village or in a building created by sedentary people who already live there. Settling down not only means shifting from temporary camps to permanent villages, but also shifting from mobile dwellings to immobile ones, which tend to be bigger in surface and more complex in their lay-out. In the context of nomadic cultures experiencing important transitions through settling down processes, the study of such micro-scale spaces and their dynamics appears to be of

special interest when trying to fully understand the consequences of the tremendous changes with which the people involved have to deal. Yet, if anthropologists and sociologists alike have extensively studied how sedentary life often brings loss of identity and radical cultural changes, they have mostly concentrated their research on the evolution of kinship networks at the scale of the communities created, not paying much attention to spatial patterns at the scale of the new domestic spaces. As a cultural geographer experiencing Inuit life and its changes since 1980 and trained to question spaces and places, I believe it is important to analyse how recently-settled nomadic people cope with dramatic changes in their intimate surroundings.

The study group: the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic

My own research on this issue relies on a close study of a specific case: that of the Canadian Inuit people and more specifically of a Western Central Arctic group formerly called by anthropologists "Copper Eskimos" and now known as the Inuinait, a dialectal form of the name Inuit – "the true people" (fig. 1). Nomadic hunters for centuries, the Canadian Inuit settled down under strong pressures from the Federal Government in the 1950s and 1960s. (In Alaska – USA – sedentarisation occurred earlier in the 20th century, in Greenland the Inuit were always less nomadic and the situation more complex).

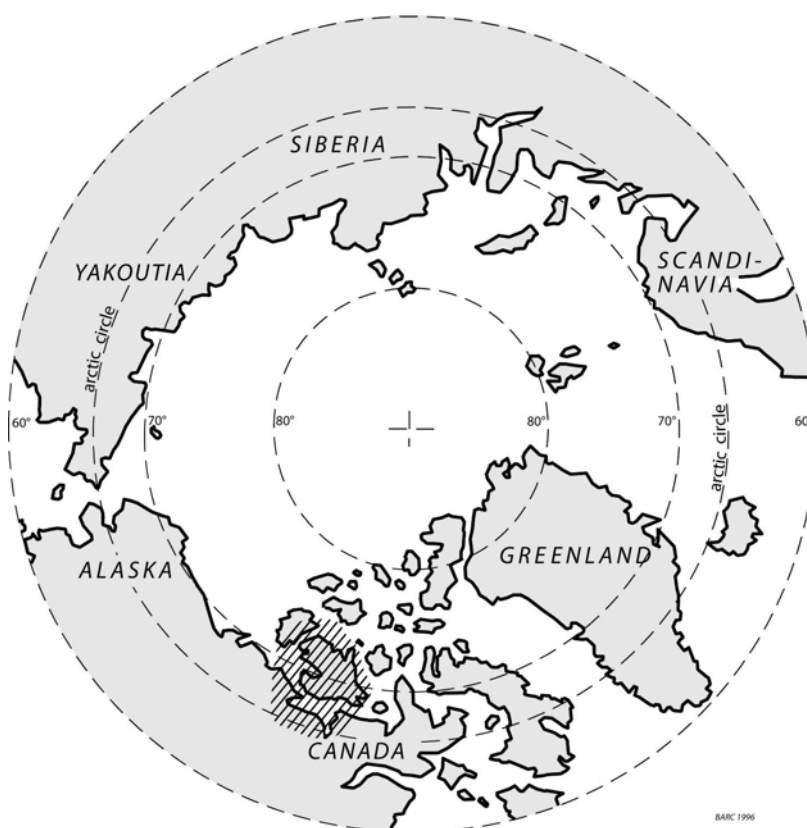


Fig. 1 - Circumpolar view of the land of the Inuinait

Until the 1950s the life and movements of the Inuinnait (as well as of all Inuit) were basically organised around hunting activities and a seasonal variation between the hunt of marine mammals, mostly seals, and that of land mammals, mostly caribou (Collignon, 1994). This variation had profound implications on the social organisation of all Inuit groups, described by Marcel Mauss (1905-1906) in an article that remains to this day a corner stone in the field of anthropology. From late fall to spring, they lived in igloos – the famous round-shaped snow-houses – and in summer time they stayed in seal-skin or caribou-skin tents. Those two kinds of dwellings were perfectly adapted to the high degree of mobility of the Inuit, as well as to the seasonal changes of their environment. But the new settlements to which the Inuit were moving rapidly proved to be ill adapted to a permanent use, and had to be abandoned.

As the Federal Government had pushed for the sedentarisation of the Inuit (Christian missionaries were also in favor of such move) it had the responsibility to find a solution. It did so by providing them with prefabricated houses under the so-called "low-cost housing program", a social housing program. As years went by, the program improved: bigger and better quality houses were, and still are, rented to the Inuit. In the late 1980s another social housing program was started, in addition to the first one, which encourages home ownership on the part of the Inuit. In any case, all the houses found in northern settlements are designed by Southern Euro-Canadian architects who know little if anything about the Inuit and Arctic life and follow Western domestic and cultural values in their work, basically reproducing the low-cost suburban detached house model that can be seen everywhere in North America. For the Inuit, adapting to foreign surroundings which reflect a culture alien to them, has been tremendously difficult. Researchers and public servants alike have largely underestimated the impact of this change.

This paper does not pretend to give an exhaustive account of these changes but rather, to raise a few key points to illustrate the interest of research on domestic spaces and advocate that cultural geographers focus their attention on this issue. A quick description of the traditional spatial organisation of Inuit homes will help illustrate the tremendous change moving to suburban houses was for them. The study is based on informal participant observation begun in 1986 and completed by long interviews with elders in 1998 (Collignon, 2000/2007, 2001). It is also supported by anecdotic observations made in 1980 when, as a teenager, I was fortunate enough to spend the summer on Arctic land and regularly visited various Inuinnait's camps.

The traditional domestic spaces of the Inuit

Archaeological work in the North American Arctic, combined with ethnographic observations in the 20th century, have revealed the remarkable stability of the pattern of the spatial organisation of the domestic spaces in this part of the Arctic, at least from the 10th century.

The igloos and tents of the Inuit were one-room units. There lived the nuclear family, often extended to an elder – mainly widowers too old to support themselves – an unmarried sibling, a young girl promised for marriage to one of the sons, or a new couple without any children yet, or just a baby. The rule was that an adult man should be able to provide for his family by himself, and that his wife should be able to maintain her own dwelling and take care of her family's common needs, especially in terms of clothing. Closely related siblings often lived near one another. Two families related might even share a common entrance corridor to their respective igloos, each of them living in its own.

Igloos and tents were always built to fit the size of the household. As such, there were never "empty" spaces inside of them and body proximity was very high. This was a potential source of tensions and conflicts, and it was controlled by a strict though implicit spatial organisation which ruled who stayed where, close to whom and far from whom. Though never put into words, never explained nor discussed, the repetition of the same order in each and every Inuit dwelling made it a powerful pattern which ruled social life at home. Since the spatial organization of igloos and tents was identical, the following description focuses on the igloo, as it is the home "par excellence" for the Inuit. The tent is only a stopgap during the seasons when the weather is too mild to have any snow, or to have snow hard enough with which to build igloos.

The inside space of the igloo is spatially organised around the seal-oil lamp, which gives light and heat and which is the heart of the home (fig. 2). As the mother sits in front of the lamp, it is her body that rules the location of the others. All the members of the family sit and sleep on a platform (a sort of snow bank) which occupies one-third to one half of the total space, on the wall opposite to that of the entrance. The mother sits at one end of the platform, usually to the left from the entrance, in front of the lamp. Next to her, or one should say on top of her, is the baby, who spends most of its time on her back until it reaches two or three years of age. Next to the baby, the father. At night time, the baby, or the youngest of the children, sleeps between its two parents, the warmest spot. On the other side of the father, stay the older children, from the youngest – closest to the father – to the oldest – furthest from the heart of the family. The older child has therefore her/his spot along one of the walls of the igloo, unless there is another sibling – aunt, uncle, cousin, young couple or elder – or an unrelated visitor staying in the same dwelling. This spot, on the "other" end of the platform, is the one furthest to the heart of the family and the home, and to its warmth, the lamp being on the opposite side as mentioned earlier.

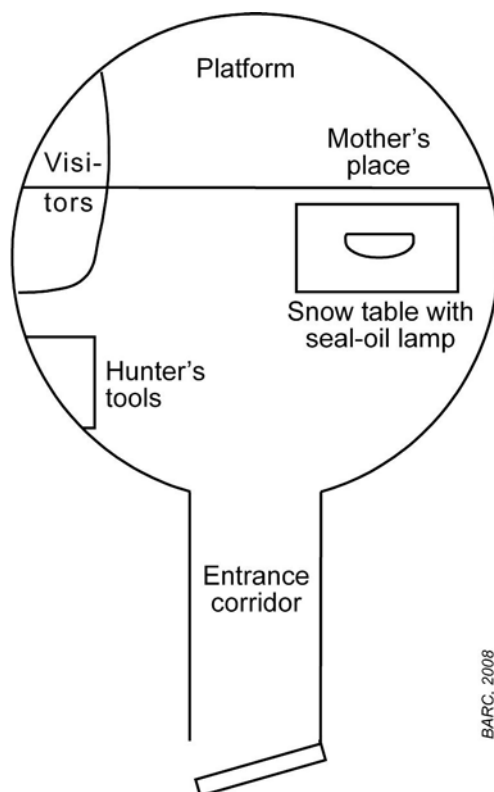


Fig. 2 - Lay-out of an igloo's inner space, nuclear family

This spatial organisation can be read as a metaphor for the process of growing up, described by Inuit people as learning to be autonomous and able to live and think by oneself: "make one's own decisions". From an Inuit perspective, this is achieved through a slow process of loosening the ties that closely link a child to her/his parents and especially to the mother, to whom one is literally attached from the first day of conception, and on whose back Inuit children spend most of their early years. This process, under parental control, is also induced by the socio-spatial organisation of the igloo, which gradually and smoothly separates children from their parents over the years, and through which one learns that the right distance between people changes with age as well as with one's status in the highly developed Inuit kinship network. The adult's independence is hence prepared from the very day of the child's birth, in a non-violent yet very suggestive way. Yet, proximity between bodies, and souls, stays high, playing an important role in maintaining a strong sense of community and identity.

To close this rapid analysis of traditional Inuit domestic space two additional points are worth mentioning. First, the igloo's openness to the outside environment. It is a shelter from the harshness of the outside environment, but certainly not a place where one can hide from others. The igloo has no internal walls and, as a consequence, anyone who steps in can immediately see everything and everyone that is in the home, and whatever is going on inside at that time. Maintaining the link with others is more important to Inuit than protecting their privacy, and their dwellings' architecture expresses that priority. The long corridor that leads

to the only room and through which one often has to crawl, is meant to trap the cold air and store whatever needs to be at hand but kept frozen, not to prevent visitors from entering. In summer time, there is no need to trap the cold and therefore tents have no corridors whatsoever. One steps directly into the family's intimate space, after having coughed or made some kind of noise to announce one's arrival when still outside. Family life is exposed to any visitor, as foreign as he may be, at any time of day and night. Indeed, when I was interviewing elders in Ulukhaktok (formerly Holman) in 1998 Mary Uyarartek and Rene Taipana commented on how, looking back to that time after living in multi-room houses for nearly thirty years, it seemed so strange to think that a visitor might step in while you were sleeping.

Second, the circular structure of the igloo. This circularity creates a space that both surrounds and embraces all its inhabitants, bringing them closer together. Inside, they are all part of a round matrix that recalls – and this is clear to the Inuit themselves – the mother's womb in which life is first created and nurtured. Such a shape is also in accordance with Inuit social organisation, which is built on avoiding as much as possible the development of a hierarchy. Each person is considered equal to all the others of the same age group, and leaders always keep a low profile. In a round-shaped house everyone has his or her place in the same circle, no one is either at the centre or on the margins. The highly valued sense of equality is not only protected by the shape of the igloo, it is reinforced by it, through the very suggestive language of architecture. This shape is also adapted to the communication standards of the Inuit, where information is passed on and opinions are expressed through story telling rather than through discussion. Favouring story telling over discussion is a means to avoid direct conflict, and depersonalising arguments helps to find pacific ways to resolve conflicts that are always latent in tiny communities with a high degree of proximity. The round-shaped structure, combined with the multi-use one-room internal organisation, makes it possible for people to say what needs to be said without pointing at anyone in particular, which would be regarded as a much too violent way of coping with any kind of problem, as serious as it might be.

The modern domestic spaces of the Inuit

From the early 60s, the Federal Government of Canada began providing public housing for the Inuit, through the Northern Rental agency first and later the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation. There is no need here to go into the details of the programs and their evolution, directly linked to changes in Canada's northern politics. If the first dwellings sent were rather simple, being just one-room units, poorly built and insulated, the quality improved over the years and houses became bigger and more sophisticated. In the late 60s, two- and three-bedrooms houses were sent up North for the Inuit. Nowadays, houses available for the Inuit, either for rent or for sale, range from one-bedroom units to four-bedrooms ones. All of them are equipped with an oil furnace, electricity, running water and an internal sewage system. The layout is very similar to any other North American low-income suburban house: a small entrance room, a fully furnished kitchen – with a sink, a stove, a fridge, a counter and numerous cupboards – widely opened to the living room and a corridor giving access to the bedrooms located far from the entrance, a bathroom with a bath tub, closets in the entrance

and in each room. As 95% of them are built under a public housing (or social housing) scheme, they tend to be basic in equipment and with little attention given to the finishing off details, but very functional from a Westerner's point of view.

As far as comfort is concerned, these houses are indeed an improvement compared to traditional Inuit dwellings. But they also are radically different from vernacular (often called traditional) architecture. When they moved in, the Inuit had to deal with surroundings that did not fit the traditional spatial organisation pattern of their homes. This led to several problems that reveal the cultural importance of domestic spatial organisations, and I am inclined to argue that they all stem from one major change the Inuit experienced when they moved to permanent houses. Except for the tiny one-room units of the early 60s – known as “match-box houses” because they were so small and burned so easily –, the houses that are being provided to the Inuit confront them with a divided space, in which walls separate people from one another and from the various objects they used to have directly at hand in their traditional dwellings.

People are kept far apart, and the proximity that was so important for both collective and individual identity and well-being is lost. The walls erected between them are much more than a functional and moral partition: they create a space in which the traditional non personalised mode of communicating is no longer possible. Indeed, one now has to directly address the other, instead of being able to say what needs to be said without explicitly pointing at anyone in particular. Moreover, parents are encouraged to break the physical tie between themselves and their offspring at a very early age, and in a very brutal way, as the domestic space, with its numerous bedrooms, is no longer adapted to a slow transition. This has had important consequences on the social order, which is totally disorganised and has led to a loss of control of their children by parents. Furthermore, it is the whole complex of cultural values and representations that cannot be passed on from one generation to the next, and the deep sense of community and solidarity based on proximity is also quickly degrading.

We thus clearly see how abrupt changes in the spatial organisation of a domestic space can put a whole culture at risk. Yet, it is interesting to see that the Inuit have reacted to this foreign architecture in ways that express their attachment to their traditional spatial organisation. Indeed, participant observation in many Inuit contemporary homes has revealed that most families tend to recreate the multi-use one-room space by often deliberately occupying only the living room of their multi-bedrooms houses, sleeping all together on one big mattress that is put on the floor every night, as they used to do on the sleeping platform of their igloos and tents. The reluctance to use the bedrooms, in which only teenagers tend to spend some time, as well as the common habit to never close any of the inside doors, is a clear sign of the uneasiness many Inuit feel when confronted with imposed partition walls.

The relevance of a geography of domestic spaces

The experience of the Inuit is somehow extreme, as they probably experienced the widest gap one could think of between their vernacular architecture and the professional one with which they were suddenly confronted, that was designed to fit values and ways of living alien to them. In many other cases the encounter is not so brutal as one is exposed to a professional architecture that has at least partly stemmed from the same cultural background that has some links with the previous vernacular architecture.

The various ways by which Inuit express their attachment to the traditional spatial organisation patterns of their domestic space should encourage us to develop further the study of these micro-scale spaces, in any cultural context. Beyond the specific case of peoples having to cope with a professional architecture inspired by cultural values radically different from their own, there is no doubt that recognising domestic spaces as geographical spaces, and studying them as such, can help understand better how the sense of place and space is built, and how it is linked to the sense of oneself and of identity. A better knowledge of those processes should help geographers to answer one of the key questions of the new millennium: how will identities cope with fast and multiplied movements of people, goods and information?

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