Built Form and Cultural Meanings of the Homes of Veneto Post WW-II Italian Migrants in Australia

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Abstract: This study investigates the domestic dwellings built in Brisbane by twenty first-generation migrants, natives of the Veneto region in Italy, who migrated to Australia in the post WWII period and built their houses in the 1980s and 1990s in Brisbane. The purpose of this research study is to explore whether notions of culture were present in the homes migrants constructed in Brisbane, both in the material realm (interpreted as internal and external organization of space and the composition of the façade) and in the symbolic realm (the meanings attached to these houses by Italian migrants). The project is of qualitative nature and as primary sources of data uses semi-structured interviews, associated when circumstances made this possible, to photo-elicitation interviews, and focus group discussion. The semi-structured interviews were conducted both in Australia with twenty first-generation Italian migrants, and in Italy with another ten informants who are indigenous to the Veneto region and who built their homes there. These primary data are supplemented by (4) secondary data in the form of photographs and drawings. The findings reveal that home is both a physical structure and a set of meanings where these two components are tied together rather than being separate and distinct. It shows that there were two models the Veneto migrants chose for the erection of their houses in Brisbane and these correspond to: (1) the rural houses built in the 1970s and 1980s by their family and friends in the Veneto region and (2) the villas designed for noble families by the architect Andrea Palladio in the 15th century in the homeland of the respondents.

Keywords: Culture, Transnational Houses, Italian Migrants, Veneto, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a relevant topic for Australia, as this nation implemented one of the largest immigration programs in the second half of the 20th century, in order to double its size within a short period of forty years [1-10].

Of all migrant groups who came to Australia during this period, the Italian group has been one of the most numerous [3, 11] and its physical presence in the urban territory is observable in public places with, for instance, pizzerias, restaurants, ice-cream parlours, food shops and so on [12]. Here, the Italian migrants are seen to have annexed their characteristic culture to the Australian society, a modus operandi which concurrently offers continuity with their native country and adds variety to Australian life [11-15].

Yet the effects of Italian migration on the Australian urban landscape are visible also in migrant's private places, such as their homes and this has been barely documented prior to this study [16-22].

Therefore, the aim of this research study is to study the domestic dwellings built by a group of Italian migrants who emigrated from the Veneto region to Brisbane after World War Two. This study explores the material realm of these domestic dwellings in their physical form, including their facades and the organisation of their internal and external spaces, as well as the symbolic realm, represented by the various meanings that the Italian migrants have attached to their homes in Brisbane. Thus the research questions investigated are*: (1) How have the Italians from the Veneto region built their houses in Brisbane? (2) What are the meanings that the Veneto migrants have attached to their houses in Brisbane?*

Dichotomy Between High-Style and Vernacular Architecture

The international academic discourse about architecture has long been rooted in a dichotomy dividing the nature of buildings. More than four decades ago, Rapoport [23] distinguished between "the '*important'* buildings or monuments, especially those of the past" often recognised as masterpieces belonging to the "*grand design tradition"* and "the '*unimportant'* buildings or houses" belonging to the *"folk tradition* in which the majority of people live". This dichotomy still persists. Klaufus offered a similar distinction dividing "buildings designed by academically-schooled architects.." referred to as " high-style architecture" and

"Architecture with a capital 'A'", from buildings produced by ordinary laymen and referred to as vernacular, traditional, folk or popular architecture.

High-style architecture is embraced mainly by architectural historians and theorists, who, in their treatises, emphasise the extraordinary, the atypical and the work of men of genius [23]. Therefore, the investigation of vernacular houses has been neglected by architects with some exceptions [23]. These architects have conducted research on vernacular, ordinary buildings looking at their spatial form, design, decoration, aesthetic, material and construction methods with a wide approach comprising nations (Andersen, 1977; Ardelan & Bakhtiar, 1973; Blair, 1983; Fathy, 1973; Lee, 1989; Moholy-Nagy, 1957; Prussin, 1969) and the world [23] or drawing explicitly on anthropological theories (Alexander, 1964; Nabocov & Easton, 1989; Tjahjono, 1989). In fact, vernacular architecture is most studied in anthropology as well as in archaeology, sociology and human geography (Asquith, 2006; Klaufus, 2005; Rapoport, 1969). If archaeologists focus on the architecture of the past [24] anthropologists, sociologists and human geographers are more inclined to focus on architecture of the present, with some distinctions.

In studying vernacular architecture, anthropology and sociology, although not denying the underlying concept of culture, tend to examine the interactions of the built environment with the social structures. Architecture and the use of space is seen as playing a primary role in constructing and structuring the social organisation of their resident groups (for anthropology see: Amerlinck, 2001; Behar, 1986; Forde, 1934/1963; H. Moore, 1986; Schefold, Nas, & Domenig, 2003; Waterson, 1997); (for sociology see: Ardener, 1993; Bourdier & Alsayyad, 1989; King, 1984; Lawrence, 1982; Schwerdtfeger, 1982; Sounders & Williams, 1988). Studies on vernacular architecture in human geography, or more precisely, in cultural geography, although not neglecting the social component, focus on the relations of culture with the built environment, stressing the cultural processes underlying the construction of the man-made setting. For scholars in this field it is the influx of culture that, through human agencies, shapes architecture [24, 25]. Since this research deals with vernacular architecture, culture and human beings, it is appropriate to ground it in cultural geography.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The two concerns of this paper consist in the exploration of the phenomena of building a house in the host county, incorporating the phenomenon of migrating from the sending to the receiving country (Research Question 1) and the meaning associated with the homes build in the host country (Research Question 2). The exploration of the phenomena of building a house in the host county begins with the analysis of the migration experiences lived by a group of Italian migrants originally from the Veneto region, who migrated to Australia after WWII (1950s). These experiences contributed to the construction of their homes in Brisbane, in the 1980s and 1990s [26].

This exploration progressed with the analysis of the material realm of these homes, and concluded with an analysis of the various meanings the subjects have attached to their homes. Even though the main focus of the research relates to material objects (the domestic dwellings in Brisbane), this study has made strong use of the intervention of human subjects - the migrants living in Australia, together with their relatives and friends living in Italy. This research used accepted methods of qualitative research: interviews; photo-elicitation interviews conducted both in Australia and in Italy; and focus group discussions conducted in Australia.

The methods used in this study include the collection of visual material in the form of photographs and drawings related to home possessed by the informants and complemented by photographs taken by the researcher [27-38]. After conventional content analysis, which consisted of codifying the transcriptions generated from the first three methods into meaningful themes [25, 35, 36], a deeper level of analysis has taken place using phenomenological hermeneutics [39, 40]. Hermeneutics is most commonly utilized for the interpretation of complex texts of biblical studies [41], however, it has been also effectively applied in texts related to migrant research in cultural geography [42-45].

Therefore, following Armstrong [42, 44-46] and Madison [47], the interpretations in this research have been based on hermeneutic principles requiring the interpretations to be coherent, comprehensive and thorough. They also had to be penetrating, contextual and appropriate while simultaneously having the potential for further levels of interpretation. These have then provided to the Italian respondents to this study to seek their validity, and later to qualitative colleagues to seek external validation. This process of analysis has determined the final interpretations of the domestic dwellings belonging to Veneto migrants who have settled in Brisbane. With these kinds of procedures, the interpretation of the cultural and symbolic elements of the migrant domestic dwellings expressed throughout this research are not facile whims but are derived from a rigorous process which has assured that the interpretations reached are rigorous and satisfactorily deep.

The current study, then, reinforces the efficacy and validity of this interpretative practice. Reflecting on the cooperation of the participants in the interviewing process and focus group discussions, at the same time the current study reveals the richness of knowledge regarding the homes, held by the migrants who are the proprietors, users, designers and builders. Therefore, the study recognizes the value of people-centered forms of research methods, and suggests that investigations of migrant places in a cultural landscape are not limited to the analysis of the physical fabric completed by the researcher, but can also be successfully investigated through qualitative methods involving the participation of human subjects.

FINDINGS

The findings are structured around two proposed research questions exploring (1) the material realm and (2) the symbolic realm of the domestic dwellings built in Brisbane by the interviewed migrants coming from the Veneto region.

The Built Form of Italian Migrants' Houses In Brisbane

The findings reveal that there is a specific sequence of four events relating the experience of migration of the subjects of this study to the construction of their houses in Brisbane. The sequence, common to all the families interviewed in this study, is organized around the chronology of their migration experience and includes: (1) the decision taken in the 1950s of leaving the native country; (2) the liminal plan thought for the first years in Australia and the modifications brought to it in the successive years of the 1960s; (3) how this impacted on the way in which the respondents solved the issue of accommodation chosen in Australia from the 1960s to the 1980s; and (4) the decision taken in the 1980s to settle permanently in Australia. This sequence, mediated by the culture of family migration of the respondents and by their Italian mentality, resulted in these migrants building their homes in Brisbane in the 1980s and early 1990s.

This study reveals that these dwellings were planned and built by the migrants themselves. The latter have actively participated in the design of their homes, relying on a builder only to resolve the bureaucratic framework. Equally, the Italian migrants were very much involved in the construction of their homes with the assistance of relatives, "*paesani*", and Italian friends, following their areas of expertise in the building industry. This participation in the process of planning and building their home demonstrates the vernacular nature of these houses. Since these dwellings have been constructed by migrants and in a migrant context, this paper argues that they be labelled 'migrants' vernacular dwellings', a definition never previously used.

This research study demonstrates that these domestic dwellings were planned and built by the Italian migrants by taking as reference the architectonic culture of their land of origin. Through the study of the facades and the internal and external settings of the houses in Brisbane, this research has shown a strong persistence of form of two models (ideals) belonging to the architectonic culture of the land of origin (rural domestic houses and Palladian villas in the Veneto region). This has been demonstrated by the study of Italian and Veneto architectonic customs and traditions (accepted way of doing things) maintained in the domestic dwellings in Brisbane. These models, customs and traditions have been considered important by the migrant families in this study, who have imported them to Australia and transplanted them in their homes in Brisbane.

The presence of the culture of the land of origin is also confirmed through the study of activities (socializing, cooking and tending the garden) performed in three internal and external settings of the houses in Brisbane (double living areas, two kitchens and the garden). These activities are translocated from the land of origin, therefore the settings, congruent with these activities, are expression of that particular culture. This study shows that the Veneto migrants planned and built their homes in Brisbane, driven by the cultural force of the country of origin. This has been supported by economic forces, which have made possible the construction of these houses.

The peculiarity of these domestic dwellings in their internal spaces, external spaces and facades, has permitted the construction of a new typology of migrants' house specifically for the Veneto migrants in Brisbane for the period between the 1980s and the early 1990s. Contributing to Brisbane's cultural landscape and considering the value for the Italian community and for the Australian mainstream who prize the complexity of their historic heritage, these houses now raise the possibility of historic protection of at least one dwelling of this style.

The Cultural Meanings of Italian Migrants' Houses In Brisbane

The paper shows that the domestic dwellings in Brisbane have deep significance for this migrant group, and that they are laden with many meanings. They include: (1) '*Sistemazione' (settlement)* in Australia; (2) hard work undertaken in Australia; (3) pride in their Italian culture; (4) a point of reference for the maintenance of family unity; and (5) a feeling of security.

This research study shows that the migrant's culture of the country of origin is not limited to the

physical fabric of the domestic dwellings but is also present in the symbolism associated with them. As this study demonstrates, the five meanings listed above are both directly and indirectly embedded in the culture of the country of origin. This means that among the many variables determining these meanings, the cultural one is the most pivotal.

An intrinsic aspect of the overarching question is where is home located for this group of migrants. 'Home' has been recognized to be 'here' and 'there', where here is the domestic dwelling in Brisbane and there is the hometown in Italy. Therefore, as a result for this group of migrants, the concept of home resulted to be multi-scalar and pluri-local. This also means that the houses in Brisbane can be really called 'home'.

DISCUSSION: CULTURAL RETENTION, CULTURE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

If the Italian culture is embedded in the form and activities performed in the investigated dwellings, as well as in the meanings associated with these structures, then the latter are complete examples of cultural retention [24], namely "cultural import" [23] or "translocation" of culture [45]. As such, the cases studied in this research study align with the literature relative to studies illustrating cultural maintenance imbued in the dwellings belonging to migrant people in their new country.

The analysis of the word 'culture', in the functional definitions of this term proposed by Baldwin, Faulkner, Hecht and Lindsay [48] finds that culture provides guidance [49-52]. Drawing concepts from the value orientations of cultural groups, as Gallagher observed [53], we see that there are societies that are past-oriented, attaching great importance to traditional values and ways of doing things derived from the past, and others, instead, that are more future-oriented, focusing on new ways of doing things that replace the old. These different patterns give societies their cultural character [53]. Now, according to the historian Ginsborg [54], Italians are past-oriented. This population strongly values roots, history, traditions, customs and knowledge held by the elderly. Ginsborg [54] also asserts that "old societies, like the Italian one, tend to be conservative" (p. 70). Therefore, for the Italians who migrated to Brisbane, keeping ideals, traditions and customs, or, in one word, their culture is a way of giving themselves a strong sense of direction. This, in turn, produces feelings of security, prominent for their well-being as they live their lives in the host country. For them maintaining their original culture is central to their feeling 'at home' in Australia.

This final paragraph offers a reflection on cultural diversity. In general terms, according to Rapoport [23], mankind is always choosing from the range of possibilities within its culture. This is also contended by the philosopher Heidegger [55] in his writings about the bond of individuals with their culture. The philosopher Philipse [56] confirms this concept by asserting that "[O]ne cannot free oneself from one's cultural background, even though one might move to a different one" (p. 27). Returning to Rapoport [23], he reminds us that building a house is a cultural phenomenon, while Noble [57], speaking about migrants in a new country, affirms that "the tendency was, … , to build as they had been used to, but such was not always possible or even desirable" (p. 281). As a matter of fact, in nations with recent experience of questions relating to immigration - such as Italy - manifestations of culture different from the dominant one are generally still relegated in the interior of the domestic walls [58]. On the contrary, in Australia, with noteworthy experience of immigration, the mainstream community attitudes to migrants have reversed from insistence that diversity is relinquished to a celebration of that diversity [43]. As a result, as demonstrated by this research study, even in Queensland, the most conservative state in Australia [59], Italian migrants felt free to build in the Italian manner which seemed to be so dissimilar from the autochthonous vernacular one. This happened not only in places hidden from the prevailing culture's eyes such as in rural areas but also in urban settings. In our view, this is a clear indication of the ability of the dominant culture to accept and accommodate cultural diversity. It is hoped that in the not too distant future, this acceptance may inspire other nations to follow Australia's attitude towards cultural pluralism.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This research study has extended the knowledge of humanistic studies concerned with migration and place making in the following ways: (1) By revealing the experiences of Post WWII Italian migrants from the Veneto region in settling in South East Queensland, hitherto neglected in humanistic studies on Italian migration to Australia. This study captures the rich body of knowledge held by elderly members of the Italian community in Brisbane before this knowledge is lost. In doing so, this study helped to bridge a gap in this literature; (2) By examining the material realm of domestic dwellings built in Brisbane by a group of Italian migrants from the Veneto region, hitherto neglected in humanistic studies in new cultural geography. This research examined the composition of the facade, the internal and external organization of the space of these dwellings and also defined a typology of domestic vernacular architecture specific for Brisbane; for this migrant group; and for the period of the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, this study bridged the gap in the cultural geography and humanistic studies literature on domestic dwellings of Italian people in Brisbane; (3) By examining the symbolic realm of the same domestic

dwellings in Brisbane, this research extrapolated a specific set of meanings associated with the dwellings, closely held by the Italian migrants. In doing so, this research study bridged the gap in the social studies literature on the meaning of home for Italians in Australia; (4) By using research methods for the analysis of physical objects that acknowledge the value of the spoken word and research strategies that rely on the participants' view. In doing so, this study explored the merit of these research techniques in contrast with orthodox architectural examinations and concludes that the former allows a deep insight into the analysis of migrant domestic architecture.

Implications for Practice and Advancement of Research
Other Objects: Semi-Fixed Elements, Other Types Of Dwellings

This research study explored domestic dwellings belonging to Italian migrants, focusing on their architectural elements (facade, internal and external organization of space) also called fixed features of a house. However, looking back at the fieldwork, within these domestic dwellings a substantial quantity of material that forms other sources of ethnic evidence of their occupiers was observed. These correspond to decorative elements imported from Italy such as: chandeliers, lamps, silver picture frames, taps and door handles in the living rooms; silverware, plates and coffee cups in the kitchens; and soft furnishing such as sheet sets and bedspreads, part of the women's *dote* (dowry) in the bedrooms. These elements are classified as semi-fixed. Due to the framework chosen for this study, these were out of its scope, however there is a lack in the literature about this topic. Therefore, a future study could focus on an examination of these semi-fixed elements, since the latter could constitute another lens through which to interpret the maintenance of Italian folklore, heritage and culture in the host country.

Due to the exploratory nature of the current research, this study focused on the most common type of habitation, that is, the domestic dwelling on a 400 square meter block. However, during the conduct of this study I came across four other typologies of structures built by this group of migrants, such as: (1) the mansion-style dwellings with pools, tennis courts and adjoined parks; (2) six-pack blocks; (3) an Italian retirement village; and (4) the very last 'abode' in the Catholic tradition, that is, the tombs built in the Italian style. These are not documented in the academic literature but they have the potential to show interesting relationships between built form and socio-cultural factors. This could be salient for social as well as also for architectonic disciplines.

At a more general level, this study found a paucity of academic information on the history and

activities performed in the clubs and regional associations in Brisbane and rural areas of Queensland. These contribute to the maintenance of the social life of the Italian migrants. As such, the Italian clubs and associations are also worth future research with a focus, for example, on the history of the foundation of the clubs, reasons for their opening, difficulties encountered in opening the premises and social activities performed within. That would be valuable for historic and social studies.

Other Subjects: Second Generation, New Migrants and Different Ethnic Groups

The future of the Italian presence in Australia lies with new migrants from Italy and the second (and succeeding) generations. Other studies concerned with these two sectors of the Italian population then come to mind. Both are nonexistent in the literature and require systematic attention.

The first study could consider how recent Italian migrants that are the transnational migrants, or trans-migrants, have approached and resolved the question of home in Australia. Compared to the subjects in the current study, due to the updated policies regarding entry to Australia, these Italian trans-migrants now have a formal university education, are white collar workers, are experienced in their jobs, and have higher economic status. How have these new migrants resolved the question of home? Do they construct their homes in the new country? Or, do they prefer to rent or renovate Australian homes? Why? If they renovate and build, how do they do it? Do their homes reflect Italian architectonic traditions or was this a characteristic belonging to the peasant culture of the first generation Italians? These questions await research. In this context, it is also suggested that the meanings associated with these houses should be explored. It is in fact expected that the Italian trans-migrants - because of different historic, economic and political situations of the receiving and sending countries, lived experiences and ways of thinking - have a different understanding of home and a different set of meanings of home from the ones found in this research study. This study would be relevant for social studies and new cultural geography.

The second study could revolve around how the second generation has renovated the domestic dwellings inherited by their parents in Brisbane and the meanings attached to them. How have they been renovated? Who did they rely on to do the work? How much have they changed of the internal and external organization of space and on the facade designed by their parents? It would be interesting to compare these results to other second generation Italians who, instead, have renovated Australian premises or have built brand new homes. A study such as this may give an insight into the way in which the dual cultural components,

Italian and Australian, have been integrated in the domestic dwelling. In fact, the second generation learned to negotiate multiple identities, married Australian partners, moved up the educational level and the position in the work hierarchy and the income levels. Thus, it is suggested that this kind of study should be conducted from a cross-cultural perspective. This study would be significant for social studies and new cultural geography.

The proposed studies could provide interesting developments and produce new forms of knowledge considered important especially at this juncture of Australian history where the Australian government values, supports and celebrates the cultural diversity and its expressions, recognizing that, today 44 per cent of its people were born or have a parent who was born overseas, and that this multicultural character gives the nation the edge in an increasingly globalized world.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that the culture of the land of origin of the respondents is present not only in the lives of the respondents in their migratory process that led them to construct their homes in Brisbane in the 1980s and early 1990s but is also present on the facades and the internal and external spaces of these domestic dwellings, as well as is being embedded in the meanings associated with these homes. Given that, it is concluded that these houses are full examples of cultural retention. This adds a further dimension to theories concerned with migration, culture and place making.

By exploring the history that led the migrants to construct their homes in the host country, as well as the socio-cultural and the symbolic aspects embedded in migrant domestic vernacular places, this research study has gone beyond simple descriptive readings of cultural landscape of migrant people in Australia and their place making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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