Introduction to the Phenomenological Approach to Urban, Residential, and Domestic Space

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Abstract: During the last century, in social and humanistic sciences, the dominant perspective on space was the political economy, focusing on how space relates to macro-social phenomena and minimizing the role of the micro-social ones, by conceptualizing space as a social force, constraining social actions. Despite sporadic attempts to theorize how people could escape the dominance of power by investing spaces with subjective meanings, appropriating spaces through body practices, or anchoring memories and identities into specific spaces, there is still a need to understand how spaces are lived and how daily life spatial contexts become micro-foundations for social actions. I conduct an interpretive synthesis to show how social scientists borrowed ideas from philosophers to understand the phenomenology of everyday life by capturing the experience of urban, residential, and domestic space. I explore space through phenomenological lenses to clarify concepts as: the constitution of space through perception, the sensorial and emotional experience of space and the atmosphere of a specific place, the sense of space, the meaning of feeling at home and being intimate with a particular place, the practice of home as a body extension. To nuance these ideas, I use results from four research projects I participated in: Couple living space in Brasov metropolitan area; Hidden faces of homelessness - Measuring homelessness in Europe; Inhabiting urban places and experiencing citizenship; I was a citizen of Stalin town. I conclude by extracting implications for the sociology of space field.

Keywords: *Lived space; sense of space; constitution of space; meaning of home; appropriation of space.*

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1. Background

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the establishing of a micro-sociology of urban, residential, and domestic space through an interpretive synthesis of the most recent literature in the phenomenology's of space field.

In social sciences, for more than a century, the dominant perspective on space was the political economy, focusing on how space relates to macro-social phenomena. Scholars drawing on Marxist dialectical materialism gave specific attention to the social production of the material space, under the joint influence of social, economic, political and technological factors. This perspective assumes an absolute space, independent of the actions and interpretations of persons (Faist, 2005), similar to the physical space defined by geographers or the abstract space of the mathematicians.

In the last's middle century, geographer Lefebvre (1947) seized the opportunity to turn to the relative space and configured the socio-spatial perspective that adds cultural and symbolic factors to the political and economic ones to move the accent to how people live space in their everyday day life. In explaining the social production of space, the author defines three types of spaces which interact to reproduce the capitalist mode of production: (1) representations of space (conceived space or mental-abstract space; e.g. maps, models, plans); (2) spatial practices (perceived space or how physical-material space is actively used; e.g. negotiating distances between locations, avoidable areas, daily routines); (3) representational spaces (passively lived space or symbolic space; e.g. ideas, theory, imagination, vision). Although he assumed representations of space play a dominant role in the production of space, he contributed majorly by suggesting that the greatest individual freedom manifests at the level of representational spaces and spatial practices from daily life where representations of space can be contested and changed.

These premises were not new in social sciences, as Simmel (1903) had emphasized, at the beginning of the last century, the influence of the modern urban space on the person's mental life. The author laid the ground for a phenomenology of socio-spatial processes, by interpreting how the particularities of modern urban life, especially sensory overload, influence the mental life of the city's inhabitants by encouraging the socio-psychological distancing.

Despite the dominance of the political economy approach, philosophers were planting the seeds to grow a phenomenological approach to space. Firstly, Bachelard (1958) was the one who oriented architecture

towards its lived experience, considering the emotional responses to urban artefacts. Secondly, Heidegger (1971) proposed an understanding of the way people learn-to-dwell. Thirdly, Merleau-Ponty (1962) gave accounts of the bodily mediated experience of being-at-home as derived from the experience of being-in-the-world and based on the premise that *the relation between the lived body as consciousness and the perceived world is not an external relation, but an internal relation of reciprocal constitution* (Liu, 2009: 139). As these ideas seemed too abstract and difficult to apply for social scientists, in the second half of the last century, the phenomenological studies of space were scarce.

In the last decades, scholars have reinterpreted and clarified the premises of the phenomenology of space. In this regard, Liu (2009: 134-136) explains Merleau-Ponty's perspective on space through the relationship between *the spatial archaeology of the lived body* and *the spatial archaeology of the perceived world*. Based on Merleau-Ponty's philosophical theorizations of the concept of being-in-the-world, Jacobson (2009: 355-356) gives a phenomenological account of the experience of home as an intertwining of activity and passivity. The author shows the continuity between the experience of home and the nature of the body and discusses how the experience of being-at-home is a developed condition, accomplished through learning.

In the present paper, by considering the previously presented turns from the dominant macro-social approach, I intend to argue for a micro-social perspective on space, by nuancing how recent phenomenological theorizations and empirical studies could extend the literature in the field of urban, residential, and domestic space.

2. Theoretical frameworks for premises' establishing

I assumed that the road towards establishing a phenomenological approach to urban, residential, and domestic space goes through two major theoretical contributions to the sociology of space field: the appropriation of space through spatial practices (De Certeau, 1984), and the constitution of space through perception (Löw, 2016).

2.1. From the production of space to the appropriation of space

Lefebvre (1991) and De Certeau (1984) theorized the social production of space. Lefebvre distinguished between two types of power relations: (1) the dominance of space - that influences spatial practices through urban planning; (2) the appropriation of space - that influence spatial practices by imposing a new definition of space by its users to escape

from domination and respond to the daily needs of specific people or groups. In Lefebvre's view, by appropriation, the space may end up having another use than that for which it was planned or can be changed to better meet the needs of its users. On the other hand, De Certeau established that through daily practices, users reappropriate their space, but cannot entirely set themselves free from power, because appropriation reaffirms disciplinary strategies.

In Fairbanks's (2003) interpretation, De Certeau's major contribution comprises proposing a space-based model of spatial space exploration, providing an alternative to the panoptic model of Foucault, in which people are dominated by the spatial structures through which power manifests. De Certeau (1984) proposes a study of space from the perspective of everyday life practices, dealing with the way people take control of the space and adopt spatial strategies to escape from the domination of power. In his view, space must be studied as a lived space, emphasizing its relations with different powers.

De Certeau (1984) draws the directions of a spatial analysis oriented towards the way people travel through the already planned space, creating their own mobility rules and their own descriptors of space, different from urban planners' discourses, the panoptic power, the dominant ideologies of groups in power positions. In other words, the maps and representations of the urban space are defined by the daily pedestrian practices (space trajectories and daily alterations of space), which lead to the interactive construction of a new spatial order. Another notable contribution of the author is the introduction of the concept of the rhetoric of space travel based on the analogy between walking and the acts of speaking, writing, and reading. Circulating in the urban space is like stating something. According to the author, walking through the urban space is like creating a text, choosing different paths between a set of possibilities and prohibitions, finding new trajectories in space and new meanings of existing spaces. Simply put, using a space is equal to recreating that space. The author takes this comparison further by considering that space appropriation is similar to the creation of figures of speech (tropes), by investing the urban space already signified by urbanists and architects with subjective daily life meanings. While walking through the urban space, the pedestrian causes: *certain parts of the city to disappear, others to be exaggerated, distorting it, fragmenting it, and deviating it from its immovable order* (De Certeau, 1984: 102). The author argues that the person who travels through space engages in acts similar to reading and writing, through which spaces are produced.

2.2. From the production of space to the constitution of space

In her recent book, *The Sociology of Space. Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*, Löw (2016) detaches from the absolutist and the relativist conception of space, by adopting a relational and processual approach. She rejects Lefebvre's ideas about the capitalist space as an abstract space, characterized by the fragmentation (the division of space in marketable parts) and homogenization (the exchange value dominates the use value), dominated by the visual and geometric perspective and looking the same from any point - so it can be parsed, controlled, or designed. Hence, space does not reduce to a container of social actions, a homogeneous substance of a fixed material surface, or a context separated from the human action and the human body.

She defines space as *a relational arrangement of living beings and social goods* (Löw, 2016: 131); and takes into account that the bodies are *incessantly in motion so that the arrangement itself is constantly changing* (Löw, 2016, p.106). The theory implies two simultaneous process: (1) spacing - *placing of social goods and people or by the positioning of markings that are primarily symbolic to identify ensembles of goods and people as such* (Löw, 2016: 357); (2) synthesis - *goods and people are amalgamated to spaces by way of processes of perception, imagination, and memory* (Löw, 2016: 357).

Additionally, the constitution of space is not only an individual and subjective process, as the author introduces another concept, namely, the spatial structure, as a particular form of social structure, explained as follows: *the constitution of space, that is, either the arrangement of goods or people, or the synthesis of goods or people to spaces (recognition, linking, and sensing arrangements) is inscribed into rules and secured by resources that are recursively incorporated in institutions independently of place and point in time* (Löw, 2016: 378). The spatial structure both facilitates and constrains social action and is internalized through the process of socialization.

3. Empirical accounts for conceptual clarifications

Starting from the premises of the two theories earlier synthesized, I will expose their recent conceptualisations illustrated with empirical data both from the international literature and from four research projects I have taken part in since 2013: (a) *Couple living space in Brasov metropolitan area*; (b) *Hidden faces of homelessness - Measuring homelessness in Europe*; (c) *Inhabiting urban places and experiencing citizenship*; (d) *I was a citizen of Stalin town*. All the four mentioned projects applied innovative methodologies for data collection.

The first project, conducted between 2013-2016, focuses on the social construction of the metropolitan dwelling space inhabited by couples. It uses a mixed-method research design, combining the classic oral survey with various qualitative techniques, such as couple interviews, residents-generated written texts, commented photo-tours of the domestic space, social construal maps of territories within home space (Rezeanu, 2018).

The second project is ongoing, starting from 2017, and focuses on the homeless situation of intimate partners or families living rough to explore how they as a group in a complex discursive context, adopt coping tactics to produce and reproduce intimacy in their constraining situation. It uses the situational analysis (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2016), which assumes the social phenomenon being processual, contingent, and caught in a network of various influences. Situational analysis is flexible and configures itself based on previous findings, it allows for the use of a variety of materials, such as interviews, newspaper articles, TV debates, observational data, social media discussion groups or pictures, etc. Hence, we considered not only the human actants (without ignoring the silent, the silenced or the absent) but also the nonhuman ones (as personal objects or living spaces or places). We also analysed public discourses of various collective actors about the phenomena to evidence the major positions around the topic.

The third project, carried out between 2017 and 2018, is an ethnography of the transformations of cities through the day-to-day experiences of those who inhabit and circulate within them, being based on two extended case studies from Romania and France. As research methods we used a mix of qualitative techniques to immerse in the two fields (observations, filmed and commented walk-through urban tours using a camera worn by participants, interviews, daily life accounts), debates and workshops with various city actors, and public discourse analysis.

The fourth project was triggered by the fact that five Eastern and Central European cities took the name of Stalin for various periods of time during the communist regime. This tactic was part of the strategy of Stalinizing urban identities by changing the names of streets, factories, public squares, and parks, and building statues and monuments. The main activities in this participative action research were to collect memories, conduct interviews, share oral history, facilitate inter-generational and inter-cultural interactions, to unfold personal stories and disseminate results through museum exhibitions.

3.1. From the sensory space to the atmosphere of space

Simmel (1903) interpreted the impact of the sensorial experience of the urban space on people inhabiting it. He showed how the metropolis overstimulates the senses of its inhabitants, which reacts through various protection mechanisms. The urban passenger becomes errant, suppressing the emotions and intellectualizing the experience. In this way, the inhabitant of the big city ends up as an indifferent, with a blasé mind-set, avoiding interactions, being impersonal and searching for spaces of escapism. In brief, the author argued that the sensory overload produced by modern urban space negatively influences sociality.

In a recent empirical study, Rahmeier (2012) brought to light the sensory dimensions of the residential space. The author analysed the distance between the different components of the domestic space, the view offered by the doors and windows, to illustrate how the specificities of the spatial structures provide researchers with information about the particular routines and the subjective sensory experiences of the residents differently placed in the social structure. Similarly, in my research project about couple's living space in a Romanian metropolitan area, I found that the narratives about the domestic space involve various sensorial accounts:

I wanted to stay in a new block because I had grown up in a communist block...the old lifts, the smells from the staircase, the elderly, etc. (...) I closed the kitchen to be a barrier of odors and noise between the living room and the place where I cook (a16);

Sometimes we would like to have a closed kitchen not to let out the smells of cooking (...) The dust from the outside accumulating often and the noise of the street makes us feel uncomfortable, especially because we can not sleep with the windows open (a11);

During winter is terribly cold. This hall especially gives me a cold feeling; it seems to me unwelcoming (a7).

Löw (2016) recognizes the importance of the sensory dimensions of space, but surpasses Simmel's distinction between certain levels of sensory stimulation with their positive and negative effects on mental life. She acknowledges that the feeling of belonging or alienation to specific spaces results from the atmosphere of those spaces. Therefore, she introduces the concept of the atmosphere of space, defined as *the external effects of social goods and people in their spatial arrangement as realized in perception* (Löw, 2016: 172). She started from the assumption that social goods and people placed in space

have extrinsic effects. The synergy of these effects leads to the creation of a specific atmosphere that must be perceived to contribute to the constitution of space.

According to Löw (2016), the atmosphere involves both the perceived object and the perceiver, as there is no atmosphere with no one perceiving it. This means that the atmosphere of a particular space is a dimension of the way space is lived; by the way it stimulates the senses. Moreover, people from different cultures can identify different atmospheres of the same space, as the perception of the atmosphere is culturally embedded. The atmosphere of a space emerges at the confluence between placing oneself in space and the habitus of those who make the synthesis. Thus, the interaction between the habitus of a person and the atmosphere of a space produces the feeling of inclusion or exclusion from a particular space.

The interview data for my research projects on the couple's living space in a Romanian metropolitan area show that the atmosphere is a common theme in the narratives about the urban and domestic space. Participants place their small living space in the larger space of the city, describing it in connection with various atmospheres produced by specific historical periods. While youngsters talk about the bohemian city life from between the two wars, elders focus on the industrial atmosphere of the city life during communism.

This old housing estate was built 70 years ago for workers at the Steagu` Rosu plant, that is, Roman, producing trucks. It is among the first blocks built in this city (a12);

Life in the Communist block of flats, filthy, dignified with Communist neighbours, drunkards, frustrated, uneducated, malevolent, willing to consume their money and time on nothingness and gossip (a7);

It is an interwar villa in the historical centre of the city. It's a romantic and quiet area, close to nature. I liked it because it was close to the historical centre, an old house, it's more romantic this way (a15).

As regards for the domestic space, the atmosphere becomes a tactic to individualize couple life:

Our home differs from other dwellings through its inner atmosphere of the soul's warmth and the desire to see the sun the next day (a9);

The photos and painting exposed on the walls of our home create a pleasant, warm and relaxing atmosphere (a5).

Moreover, Shaw (2015) studied from a phenomenological perspective the relationship of home darkness with relaxation, intimacy, fear, and violence, concluding that the power to control darkness in the domestic space makes the dwelling perceived by residents as either safe (intimacy) or dangerous (vulnerability) space.

3.2. From space-anchoring identity, memory, and emotion to the sense of space

Glaeser (1998) argues that space plays an active role in anchoring or mirroring the identity. In his view, understanding the identity of the self and the other involves processes of contextualization, of binding the self to something external, a process called identification. In other words, identification happens not only through interaction with other people but also through interaction with space. Therefore, identification is not just a dyadic (between itself and the other) and involves an interactive triangle that includes the self, the other and the space. The idea that the domestic space is experienced as an identity marker was an emergent theme in my research about the couple's living space in a Romanian metropolitan area:

The dwelling is a footprint, one could rarely see two the same, unless it is an impersonal or cold hotel room (a4);

The arrangement of the house says a lot about the owners. In particular, every person arranges his home according to one's personality (a15);

Every dwelling is according to the soul of the person who dwell there (a18).

Morton (2007) investigated phenomenologically the relationship between home and subjective memory. His study has highlighted that the dwelling, as a changing material entity, influences how people locate, activate and signify memories. In the project about the oral history of cities who took the name of Stalin, we found that it was easier for the research team to collect personal stories and urban legends from elders residents by asking them to bring personal objects and narrate their story. Also, by exposing today's pupils to some of those collected objects, it was easier for them to collect from their grandparents some glimpses of the oral history of the city. Therefore, the objects which were in the past part of the arrangements that constituted the domestic or the urban space can become in the present memory-anchors activating specific meanings attached to space and narratives converting those meanings.

The way through which the domestic space anchors the memories and emotions of their residents is different with migrants. For instance,

Long (2013) analysed from a phenomenological perspective the situation of Palestinian immigrant women in the UK and concluded that migrants' domestic space is the territory where they seek to harmonize inner life with the outside world. Similarly, Taylor (2013) focused on Indian immigrants from the UK and concluded that the way they emotionally relate to the home concept suspend them in a transnational space and make them constantly refer to an inaccessible present home (being unable to feel at home neither in their country of origin nor in the host country). Boccagni (2014) reached a similar conclusion by studying the migration experience of the Ecuadorians in Italy. He highlighted that the way migrants ascribe meaning to their home is a complex process involving apparently opposite elements: comfort and alienation, inclusion and exclusion, the material and non-material character of the transnational housing experience.

Likewise, for the homeless people, one can not imagine how the placing of memories and emotions into the concept of home functions. In collecting data on the hidden faces of homelessness, I found that people living in accommodations for the homeless in impersonal spaces shared with other room-mates decorate specific room corners to get the feeling of home (even when they never experience living in what we usually call family home as they were sent to the orphanage after being born). While interviewing institutionalized homeless people from Romania, some of them showed me pictures with the rooms they live in, where they arranged places with flowers, books, and even baby dolls, as an emotional reminder of what they imagined being or what they were told about their family home before they were born.

Borrowed from human geographers, the concept of *sense of place* was introduced in social sciences to suggest an intimate, intense and thick relationship with a specific place, including the feeling of belonging and the attachment to it (Vanolo, 2017: 40). In another project about inhabiting urban places and experiencing citizenship, together with the research team, we evidenced how the atmosphere of the residential space from a central Romanian neighbourhood is used to suggest a sense of community life:

So this is a place, how to say, liked by everyone, because behind the block somehow a kind of quietness was preserved and (...) people care about civilization here. They take it into account. If one goes a little further, one does not even know who's the other passing by. Here, the fact that one has this stability creates an attitude of silence, of civilized cohabitation (c3).

3.3. From the embodiment of home experience to the city as home and feeling at home in the world

In Jacobson's (2009) interpretation, the phenomenological perspective on the domestic space is inspired by the works by Bachelard (1958), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Steinbock (1995), and Heidegger (1971). It identifies the house with the second body of the person, functioning as an external shell that provides stability and consistency. The author explains how, by maintaining a constant temperature, the home allows the exercise of the physiological functions (nurture, hygiene, sleep, sex, etc.) and the extension of the limited senses of the person (through illumination, audio systems, the circulation of the air, etc.). As a result, the domestic space becomes a part of the person's universe, with its own rules (of cleanliness and intrusion) that come to be considered as inherent and natural. The idea of perceiving the house as a second body of the person is learned during childhood because the house is the child's first universe, the place where he learns how to circulate in space, how to control the physiological impulses, how to order objects in space, how to understand the feeling of ownership of objects and the distinction between the self and the surrounding space. In other words, the parental home is the reference framework which structures the person's future experience through spatial routines. Through the frequent exposure of the body to the space experience of the house and to the routines of domestic life, a sense of familiarity emerges, based on which one related to the rooms of the dwelling as to the parts of one's own body. This explains why one finds the way to a certain room in the house as easy as one knows where, for instance, one's own foot is. According to the phenomenological perspective, the experience of the first dwelling is fixed so strongly in the person that it influences the meaning of the future dwellings and the living experience therein. Specifically, the spatial habits learned in the childhood home (ways of looking, moving, ordering objects, sleeping or listening to music, etc.) come to be reactivated in the spatial exploration of other homes so that one feels at home by reactivating how one learned to relate to the domestic space during childhood.

In the project about the couple's living space, I found some men who identified the domestic space inscribed with memories as the childhood room from the parental house:

I keep my memories in the room where I grew up in my parents' house. There I keep my loved things from childhood and adolescence (a21).

As for some women taking part in the study, they identified specific appropriated spaces in the domestic space based on acquired routines, not in the current dwelling but in the parental home. The childhood experience of sleeping on a particular side of the bed has been so strongly imprinted in the body's memory that the subsequent violation of this routine produces negative somatic reactions:

The right side of the bed is my own spot, as a habit since I was a child. My partner does not occupy my side of the bed as he knows I can't have a good rest sleeping on the left side of the bed (a10).

In the most cited literature review about the meaning of home, Mallett (2004: 84) defined home as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people's relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces, and things; and concluded that it has the following dimensions: (1) shelter (residency); (2) hearth (love, support, safety); (3) intimacy (individual control of physical and personal boundaries); (4) origin (source of identity and meaning); (5) domicile; (6) refuge from the outside world. She also states that understanding home from a phenomenological perspective brings attention to the concept of feeling at home in the world, understood rather as a subjective experience unrecorded to the physical dimension of a home, but shaped by routine activities and cyclical events that take place in the domestic space. The perception of the house as the second body is internalized in the parental house and subsequently maintained to give the person a sense of stability and coherence to feel at home in subsequent homes and in the world. Simply put, home is not a space, but a set of spatial practices because, for instance, homeless people can feel at home without having a home.

With institutionalized persons who did not grow up in a family home and ended up on the streets, the situation is different. Some scholars evidenced that particular cities or urban configurations produce specific time and space perceptions of people experiencing homelessness (Petrusak, Perry, & Hassevoort, 2017). While interviewing homeless people from a Romanian city, I found that they circulate within the city by taking specific walking routes and these routes remain constant, reaching specific destinations and stopping at specific points in the city, which they call their favourites spots. Some participants told me that they like to stop in front of specific houses that they like and imagine what it would be like to live there. Others prefer to take long walks in nature, calling the forest or the place near rivers their home. Even if they do not always interact with one another, homeless

people can recognize each other, the daily city tours being studded with familiar faces. Every day, they stay on the same bench, eat in the same place and meet with friends or acquaintances at the same street corners. Therefore, for homeless people, the city space with its streets and neighbourhoods is lived and embodied as a home space and this experience is reinforced by daily rituals.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper is part of a larger attempt to popularize the spatial turn in social sciences and to argue for establishing a micro-sociology of urban, residential, and domestic space. In this regard, I took the phenomenology approach to space and synthesized its historical background, presented what I considered being the two major theoretical contributions (the constitution of space and the appropriation of space) and updated them with recent conceptualizations, illustrated with empirical data both from the international literature and from the research projects I have been participating in since 2013. Its results should be interpreted with caution as the present discussion paper does not aim to present the definitive conclusions of the four mentioned studies. It only uses particular findings extracted from them with the only purpose to advance the understanding of the most recent concepts of the phenomenology of urban, residential, and domestic space. This paper is also an appeal for complimenting established research designs with emerging research methods and techniques to collect those spatial data suitable for the phenomenological approach. Nonetheless, this paper shows that, in order to phenomenologically understand the home, scholars might consider the perspective of those without a home (the homeless people), to understand residential space they should not ignore those with multiple residencies (the migrants), and to understand the urban space they could gain insights by changing the historical scale (referring to the same city in a different political regime) or the cultural scale (studying districts or cities with similar histories from different countries).

All in all, I conducted an interpretive synthesis of the most recent phenomenology of space literature to plead, in accordance with Gieryn (2000), for a space for place in sociology:

Sociologists could become more adept with maps, floor, plans, photographic images, bricks and mortar, landscapes and cityscapes, so that interpreting a street or forest becomes as routine and as informative as computing a chi-square (Gieryn, 2000: 483-484).

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