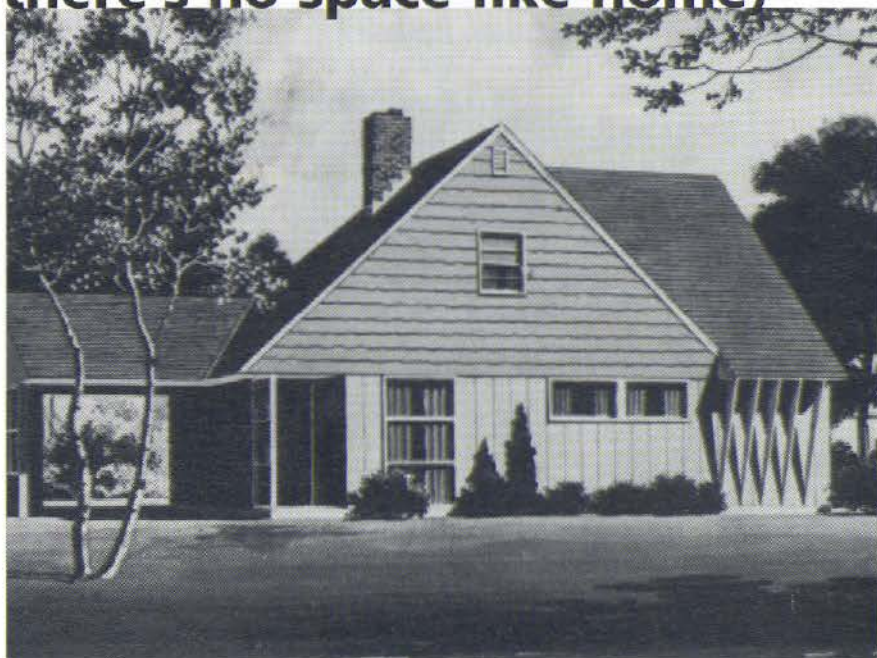


(there's no space like home, there's no space like

home, there's no space like home)

fiona heath



Ranch-style home, Levittown, New York, about 1950. National Archives, from *Housing: Symbol, Structure, Site*, Lisa Taylor (ed.)

i'm a culture hugger, a city hick, a suburban chick. (i've driven through algonquin park.) i'm visiting a heart-friend in cottage country. snow, ice, lake, trees, sun, birds, clean air. we walk across the singing lake, smiling at the sun, each other, the trees, until our faces hurt with pleasure. here is beauty. but cottages crowd every inch of shoreline. snowmobiles snort by. electric giants hum as they march along the horizon. cars whine along the not too distant highway. is this nature? is it home? what feels like nature? what feels like home?

Home. What do I mean when I use the word home? Is home where the heart is? East, west, is home best? Wherever I lay my head, is that my home? Does it feel good to be back home again? Is it where the deer and the antelope play? It's hard to clearly define home — sometimes I think cliches have more truth than these cynical times will allow us to admit. But I'm also sure we have utterly misunderstood the meaning of home. Whatever home is, it isn't a split level in the burbs, and it isn't privacy and security; at least not in the sense of burglar alarms and car phones. In much the same way as Neil Evernden has described the social creation of nature,¹ home, for North Americans, is also a social creation. The meaning of home is now a constructed (imposed) ideal and manifestation, both of which are meant to represent an intangible meaning, but don't. What was home before?

I use the word "home" to describe a particular web of relations between self and

environment.² These relations are between a core-being and other beings, both human and non-human, and between the core-being and place, rooted in the past and continuing into the future. But what isn't a series of relations? What makes home feel like home? Home is an *experienced* meaning which orients and identifies the core-being. Home arises out of intimate, meaning-full relations between beings; other beings and places are autonomous *living* entities, and these relations grow through the process of non-cognitive knowing. What I mean is home-making is a closely lived experience, a development of feeling and orientation, not a conscious mental construction. Obviously mind is involved too, body, emotions and mind can not be separated that easily, but the sense of home arises first from feelings. People do not think they are at home somewhere, they feel it. The power of home arises out of the knowing of the body and the emotions. Home is what/where/who the body and emotions know best. Experiencing home necessarily takes place in the immediacy of the lived world.

How does the body know the world? I like Joseph Grange's use of the term "flesh", *whose sensuousness shocks us into remembering the fundamental activity of the human body; to feel the world and to house the environment in our being. Flesh speaks of the living, not the dead.*³ The flesh-being is alive and passionately involved in the other, directed outside itself, inextricably entangled in existence.⁴ The flesh is involved in the immediate world through movement in space; it



The Canadian Home: From Cave to Electronic Cocoon by Marc Denhez

knows by incorporating the world into being so that the flesh may act without conscious cognitive direction. Touch, which is essentially intimate movement through space, discloses primary information on a being's surroundings. Dodie Smith, in *I Capture the Castle*, writes: *What a difference there is between wearing even the skimpiest bathing suit and wearing*

nothing! After a few minutes I seemed to live in every inch of my body as fully as I usually do in my head and my hands and my heart. I had the fascinating feeling that I could think as easily with my limbs as with my brain...

The feeling being also has to be engaged in the world, it's knowing is temporal, it moves from one moment to the next. The feeling-being is the emotional response to the other, it is the felt sense of our interaction with the environment.⁵ Feelings are not simply internal states, they are avenues through which being is expanded out into its lived world. Feelings are an expected response to the world, allowing meaning and value to be discerned in others and in place, disclosing time by emotional movement and perception. This is closely aligned to the idea of the self as a field of care, where the self is not limited to the boundary of the body, but has a gradient of involvement in the world; recognizing other beings as intimate parts of itself.⁶ To care is to feel, to be vitally involved, caught up in the messy and passionate ways of life that surround each being. In *Postcards from*

the Edge Carrie Fisher writes: *Sometimes... I'll be driving, listening to loud music with the day spreading out all over, and I'll feel something so big and great – a feeling as loud as the music. It's as though my skin is the only thing that keeps me from going everywhere all at once.*

The knowing of flesh and feeling may require familiarity, but it doesn't mean

control or domestication. Knowing may not even be equated with understanding. It may have more to do with acceptance and letting things be. I know the dog that I share my house with. I mostly know when he's hungry and when he wants to go outside. I can tell if he likes someone. But I certainly don't know how he experiences the world, or what he knows; the vacant lot down the street is flat and empty to me but is clearly full of exciting information for him, given how much time he spends sniffing about the rocks and mud.

If home is based on the knowingness of the being of flesh and feeling of the living other, where does place come in? Can't we just relate to beings wherever we are? Home, as I have said, takes place in the lived world of flesh and feeling. The web of relations of home requires a centre – the core-being. Home must be localized, grounded, and take place in lived space and time in order for flesh and feeling to develop knowing. Places contain centres. Places particularize relations, giving them a spatial dimension. Places serve as anchors for memories, for continuity. And, most importantly, places can be experienced as alive.

So home is place bound, immediate and lived, bringing us back to dwellings. Most people first think of their houses or apartments when home is mentioned. As in, "I've got to get home" or "I left it at home". I do that too, but most of the time I don't really mean I have to return to the place in which I feel at home, I mean the house where I keep my stuff. But sometimes, when I've had a bad day out in the rest of the world, when the bus is late, and it's really cold, and my clothes are itchy, and I have a headache, and the forces of evil and darkness are running all the institutions, I think, no, I feel: *I want to go home*. And when I finally get to my house and stop for a moment outside and just look at the crumbly old and messy place then I feel glad that in another moment I'm going to be inside and everything will seem better. Of course, then you're inside and it's the same as it ever was and the dishes aren't done and the answering machine is blinking furiously but you do actually manage to get some perspective and know you'll feel better in the morning. Unless, the bad day happened inside the house and then you need to get out.

I have said home is a web of intimate relations between the core-being and living others, organized in space over time. These relations are first established non-cognitively,

through flesh and feeling. How does flesh and feeling relate to the other as alive? What does alive mean? What is the difference between the experience of home and the dwellings we identify as home. Flesh and feeling do tie houses to home, since dwellings are typically where our most immediate bodily and emotional needs are met; but the way in which needs are expressed and met by private dwellings is a distortion of the authentic experience of home.

Relationships between the core-being and others can only exist in time and space, but have no material expression in time and space. There is no embodiment of a relationship that exists distinct from the beings involved, although there may be symbols, such as the wedding ring, which indicate a type of relationship exists but is not the relationship itself. Relations are continually in process, intangible occurrences that cannot be examined directly, only form may be glimpsed through symbols and actions.

The process of relating may be best described as communication. For home, this communication can be best described as conversation or dialogue. I don't mean the "did someone feed the cat?" spoken word, but conversation as a transformative exchange between beings. Conversation must be lived. It develops through the rhythms of moving from nearness to distance, from openness to closure. Dialogue brings other beings toward the core-being, and sends the core-being out to other beings. If there is a me and there is a you and we enter into conversation . . . as it continues, if we've both participating and giving of ourselves, we're both more defined but also more together, a bond has been created. In making the relationship between us clearer, we are also defined. Conversation involves at least two *living* beings, another that can converse right back at you, a reciprocal process. It has to involve beings that are alive and self-willed. If you have continual control over other beings' responses, or view the other as an object, communication is simply a monologue.

This is where nature and natural spaces comes in. How can non humans participate in our experience of home if we view them as objects? As well, there are just less and less living non-human beings about, both physically and conceptually; more and more species are extinct, more and more end up as representations, subject to our control. There are lots of human beings, but we all say the same things after a while. Mostly

everything else seems to have become an it. The control of nature, its categorization as "it" denies anything but manipulative relations of dominance. "Its" require external forces for change. Home, requiring conversation between living beings, can not be developed with a natural "it". The experience of home becomes inauthentic, trying to replicate a meaning without recourse to the full spectrum of the living other.

What does authentic home mean? *Authentic meaning cannot be created through the manipulation or purification of form, since authenticity is the very source from which form gains meaning.*⁷ Over the years, in North America where we live in the future before we live in the present, we have been able to plan ahead, building places before anyone actually lives there. The suburban model of "home" along with its symbiotic nuclear family model has become the conceptual ideal of home. These dwellings are replications, economic and technological creations, places of consumption with only limited production, that can only partially act as a structure for experiencing home. Home is not suburban developments such as the Credit Valley Estate in Mississauga, whose advertising billboard trumpets: "You've Arrived Home". Home doesn't consist of wall to wall carpeting and central vacuum. This concept/manifestation of home is fundamentally inauthentic for two reasons: it is a purification of form, both physically and in the ideal it is identified with; and it limits the experience of the flesh and feeling beings. I don't mean people who live in cookie cutter houses and apartments can't experience home, I only mean what is socially created as home isn't, and in fact, limits your ability to create authentic home. The houses-are-homes mentality prevents relationships with living non human beings, and limits relations with places.

If you buy a 'monster home' in the Credit Valley ultimate housing estate you get a really big house, a big garage, asphalt driveway and some monoculture domesticated grass. That's it. There are no living others on the property, except perhaps for some unrepentant dandelions. You can bring in others, but given local by-laws and vigilant neighbours, you know only certain others are allowed in. Pleasant flowers and shrubs and trees and nothing that looks messy or looks like it is growing without your express permission – or is that control? Inside, you have to work to create spaces that reflect the individual time and

space rhythms of your being. Everything already has a place. Every room already has a definition. You know which room is the master bedroom, the kitchen, the family room or the dining room. And don't you immediately feel like you'd better be a double income heterosexual couple with a kid or two? It's all planned for convenient living. Just not yours, unless you happen to be June and Ward Cleaver.

Home is when me and my surroundings are defined by our relationship, a necessarily close relation, so no matter which you looked at, you'd see us both. Home is the inseparability of self and circumstance.⁸ Home overthrows the distinctions between self and environment, it denies the arbitrary labels society uses to quantify and box the world. Home also refutes the division between inside and outside and between nature and culture. The world made, in which function is embedded in form prior to use, restricts "home-making" – developing a sense of your way of being at home through your own experiences. Douglas Coupland, in *Life After God*, writes: *I have never really felt like I was from anywhere; home to me... is a shared electronic dream of cartoon memories, half hour sitcoms and national tragedies. I have always prided myself on my lack of accent – my lack of discernible regional flavour. I used to think mine was a Pacific Northwest accent, from where I grew up, but then I realized my accent was simply the accent of nowhere – the accent of a person who has no fixed home in their mind. When lived places turn into conceptual spaces, both home and nature lose.*

We have re-conceptualized home in such a way that precludes an authentic experience of home. We have "naturalized" the socially constructed home so that it has become the accepted, rarely questioned standard. But this solidified concept forgets that experiences can only be *experienced*. The only way for flesh and feeling to know the world is to live within it, move through it. I have bodily and emotional rhythms that resist the imposed rhythms of the house. My rhythms may be "natural", they no doubt follow some more subtle social constructions, but they arise out of my own orientation to the world. The prefabricated lifestyle of the house resists my involvement, my engagement with the world. It is simply a setting for activities, rather than a participant. Just as we have "naturalized" nature into objects, we have done the same to our dwellings. We continue to offer our flesh and feeling beings less and less avenues to knowing. We deny them on the

basis of comfort, efficiency, and economics. How can we experience home in our houses or in nature?

Home and nature are increasingly separated because nature as a social category, and nature as a physical entity, has less and less beings and more and more "its" inside its tenuous, but nonetheless currently there, borders. You can not have a conversation with an it. How can circumstances be part of you if you are alive and they are not? It used to be that nature was mechanical, thanks to Descartes, and we were just a mind and a machine. Now that we have seen fit to construct nature as utilitarian object, we are human resources. The term 'natural space' follows this detached management orientation. Is a forest a natural space? A river? Are parks? Parks are, that's my point. Natural space is a term used by those with socially sanctioned control. Do you decide to go take a hike through a natural space on a beautiful day? What images does the term "natural spaces" create? It is essentially meaningless – you have no physical referent for such a term. More accurately (sadly), you do. Parks and all those other "green spaces" which are non-places. Just as we have the generalized home, represented in physical form through the suburban house, we have generalized nature – grass and a few trees – manifested in parks and other socially designated "natural spaces". I am not implying that any human intervention in the natural world necessarily removes its authenticity, just that North American planning practices tend towards a fundamental alteration of places, be they "natural" or human. Places are lived, immediate, experienced. Space is just something you move through, it is empty, a setting for your interactions with other more important beings. "Natural space" implies a space to move



through which was here before humans. As more and more of the beings who lived in places (making homes) disappear or come under human control, the underlying conceptual framework becomes disconcertingly apparent. The term "natural space" is the logical linguistic extension of the conceptualization of nature as resources, as objects, as without particular meaning-full value. Natural spaces are no more natural than the Credit Valley. Natural space has replaced wilderness. Where did all the wild go?

We have dis-placed (spaced?) wilderness. By wilderness I mean that which is un-governed, uncontrolled. Gary Snyder defines wild behaviour as that which is *artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic.*⁹ Isn't this also a description of life? As meaning and value disappear through domination and control, life, in the human made world of predictable permanence, may become synonymous with wild. We can only weave our webs of home through the process of relating to beings and places that are alive, or wild.

The meaning-full relations that I develop with living beings form my experience of home. But when I'm only offered dead things to work with, both conceptually and concretely, any home I develop will inevitably have little do with nature or even "natural space". The web of home becomes more and more dependent only on other people, and in a society based on unequal and destructive power relations, only certain people. The trend in North America is towards an increasing purification of form, denying the possibility of authentic relationships, both in the category "nature" and in the category "home".

I once read a science fiction short story set in a manly man's world where man and spaceship were as one moving through the universe. Faster than fast responses were required to operate the ship and so man and machine were mated for life. One man ends up with another's ship through misfortune and he has to work with it in order to prevent thousands from a dying a horrible death. But as it isn't his ship, he can't function normally. He tries to learn the new ship, but he can't do it in time to save the people. Finally, he redecorates the bridge in his own ship's image, so that his body feels like this is his ship. This saves the day. We tend to do the same, redecorate our surroundings in order to persuade ourselves that this is where we live. We believe

Christopher Fry: *Margaret: She must be lost. Nicholas: Who isn't? The best thing we can do is make wherever we're lost in look as much like home as we can.* But looking isn't the same as feeling. The underlying organic structures simply no longer exist, having been replaced by plastics, asphalt and circuitry. The lights are on, but nobody's home.

I can't offer any definitive ideas about the role of nature in experiencing home, or the role of home in experiencing nature. I can only suggest they are mutually beneficial. Positing nature as living, with beings that have their own will to change, broadens our (and their) opportunities for being at home. The opportunities for home are increasingly limited in North America as locatable, particular, lived nature is obscured by general, unspecific natural space. As Rainer Maria Rilke noted, the shrewd animals notice that we're not very much at home in this world we've expounded.¹⁰ It's too bad there is no space like home.

... fiona heath has recently completed a Master's in Environmental Studies at York University. She finds herself at home in Waterloo, Ontario.

Notes

1 Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992).

2 For a comprehensive model of home, see Kimberley Dovey's "Home and Homelessness" in *Home Environments*, Irwin Altman & Carol Werner, eds., (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).

3 Joseph Grange, "Place, Body and Situation" in *Dwelling, Place and Environment*, David Seamon & Robert Mugerauer, eds., (Boston: Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 72.

4 Carol Bigwood, *Earth Muse: Feminism, Nature, and Art*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 50.

5 Joseph Grange, "Being, Feeling, and Environment," *Environmental Ethics*, 7, 4 (Winter 1985), 361.

6 Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien*, 2nd Edition. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 64.

7 Kimberley Dovey, "The Quest for Authenticity and the Replication of Environmental Meaning," in *Dwelling, Place and Environment*, David Seamon & Robert Mugerauer, eds., (Boston: Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), 33.

8 Neil Evernden uses this phrase to describe the concept of environmentalism, but I believe it applies equally well to home. Evernden, 1993, 142.

9 Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 10.

10 as quoted in Neil Evernden, 1993, 144.

Image: *The New York Times Complete Manual of Home Repair* by Bernard Gladstone (New York: The New York Times Co., 1978)