

Reverie and Socialization for the 'Electro-Nomadic Cyborg'

Duncan P.R. Patterson

University of Waterloo School of Architecture,
Cambridge ON, Canada
dprpatte@engmail.uwaterloo.ca

Abstract. This paper addresses the question of domesticity in the context of the increasingly nomadic condition of the world population. The history of the idea of domesticity is traced and the particular case of the hearth is addressed in detail. The paper speculates as to how user-centric information and communication technology might simulate the social and cultural value held by the traditional hearth.

Keywords: Nomadism, domesticity, ICT, user-centric media, hearth, actor-network theory, Faustian bargain.

1 'Nomadic Domesticity'

The notion of 'nomadic domesticity', is of course a contradiction. The word nomad implies, from its Greek root, *nome*, territory, coming from a Proto-Indo-European word for 'to allot', the nomad being someone who wanders about the territory putting their livestock to pasture. The word domesticity, coming from the Greek word, *domos*, meaning 'house', also implies territory, but this time the enclosed territory of a localized social group, the household, often bound together by family ties. It would seem that what is at stake then is the question of enclosure – what are the options between openness and closedness? Both openness and closedness have obvious appeals and attendant problems. Closedness implies inclusiveness as well as exclusivity. The closed territory of the *domos* for instance is the realm of the household, a structurally supportive social group. This seems to be very much a central issue here - while it is perfectly possible for the nomad to have a local social group within which they might situate themselves, a band, let's say, of jet-setting businessmen roaming the desert of the airport, it is unlikely: it is less the 'wandering' quality of the nomad that is troublesome so much as the 'loneliness'; less the 'place to hang your hat' that is missed in the *domos*, as the other hats that are also hanging there. Openness, as in the territory of the nomad, and closedness, as in the territory of the *domos*, are spatial ideas with important social and cultural implications.

An important symbol of the social value of the *domos* is the hearth, the place of fire within the house, generating light and heat. In the early middle ages in Europe, the hearth was simply an open fire in the middle of the room. Above this was often a lantern-type structure that directed the smoke through a hole in the roof. Sometime

around the twelfth century, however, the masonry chimney came into more common acceptance, allowing the hearth to be nestled up next to the wall and the smoke to be more effectively evacuated. When this happened, the fireplace became an important place of social gathering where the group would congregate, focused upon the fire, taking advantage of its heat and light without having to worry about the smoke. This poetic image of congregation epitomizes the social idea of domesticity and so in an era when domesticity seems to have become increasingly uncertain, it is one we should pay close attention to.

2 History of Domesticity

As Witold Rybczynski has shown, however, the idea of 'domesticity' actually originates as recently as the seventeenth century, initially in the Netherlands and then spreading across Western Europe [1]. It originates in a time when, due to prosperity, the number of occupants in a house was shrinking and work was beginning to be separated from the living environment. Previous to this, in the Middle Ages, it was common for as many as twenty-five people to live in a relatively small house in the city and there would have been little separation between work-space and living-space. In the seventeenth century, though, amongst the bourgeois it became the norm for work-space to be aggregated together, separate from the living space. This reinforced a gendering of occupation and of space as the women stayed home and worked on the house and men went off to work. These ideas spread across Europe and laid the ground-work for what we now think of as the house, along with its stubborn gender associations. A clear schema of the world was contained in the idea of the house. The house was the location of family, hygiene and nourishment, of attending to the basic conditions of life. In the morning the nuclear structure of the family would fragment, the men going off to work, and at the end of the day the social group would reassemble. Thus the house was not just a material enclosure, but a symbol of the stable family unit: the bedrock, in most political figurations since Aristotle, of the whole social construct.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the idea of the house had begun to undergo considerable change. Mechanization brought on significant changes as the care of the house became easier to perform. Servants were on their way out and appliances on their way in. Women began to enter the broader workforce in greater numbers. The fireplace began to be replaced by complex distributed means of tempering the internal environment. Fireplaces are inefficient both in their fuel consumption and in their ability to distribute heat, and they're also dangerous. Seriously beginning around mid-century in Western Europe and North America, the fireplace became decorative, kept alive by its social and cultural role. Meanwhile, however, this social and cultural significance was also being supplanted by technologies such as the radio and the television, technologies that are now in turn being replaced.

3 Wirelessness, Nomadism and Alienation

Today, technology has completely transformed our lives, who we are, how we relate to one another, how we understand our place in the world. Technology, as it becomes

miniaturized, wirelessly networked, and immediately responsive to our will, especially within the emergent user-centric paradigm, tends towards empowerment of the individual. Read closely, technology can be seen clearly to extend our agency in the world and liberate us in one way or another from the confines of the contingency of our existence. Often, however, it seems that we fail to notice what we lose through our technology. As Neil Postman, celebrated and controversial critic of technology, put it, "the question 'what will a new technology do' is no more important than the question 'what will a new technology undo?'" [2] Every technology, he observed, comes with a Faustian bargain. Technological change is ecological by nature and no change can occur without causing broader ripples in both the material and cultural conditions of our lives.

Our powerful means of transport combined with our miniaturized, wireless technology, empowered to respond immediately to our will and enact change at very great distances, and the new possibilities of engaging with virtual worlds simultaneous to the real world or instead of the real world, increase our potential for mobility vastly. We no longer have need to be as 'situated' as we used to in order to be effective. As Leonard Kleinrock, pioneer of the Internet, put it, much of our new infrastructure constitutes "the system support needed to provide a rich set of computing and communication capabilities and services to nomads as they move from place to place in a way that is transparent, integrated, convenient, and adaptive" [3]. With the aid of, or perhaps because of our new technology, we are truly becoming what the architect William Mitchell has described as 'electro-nomadic cyborgs'. Says Mitchell, "in an electronically nomadicized world I have become a two-legged terminal, an ambulatory IP address, maybe even a wireless router in an ad hoc mobile network. I am inscribed not within a single Vitruvian circle, but within radiating electro-magnetic wavefronts" [3]. And this nomadism is not simply a theoretical fancy, but very real. The human population is on the move! According to the United States Current Popular Survey of 2008, 12% of respondents had moved within the previous year. The average American currently travels 22,300 km/year, and it is predicted that by 2050, the average American will be travelling 2.6 times this: 58,000 km/year [4]. 32% of Americans live outside of the state where they were born, while 9% of all European workers are migrants [5]. And technology is playing a strong role in this increasing nomadism. Cellular phones have reached 85% penetration of the adult market in the US [6], and according to Verizon Wireless, the number of text messages sent between 7:30 AM and 10:00 AM jumped by 50% in the past year alone [7]. People are rapidly adopting emerging technologies that facilitate this nomadism.

But yet, this emerging nomadism has its Faustian bargain. As we become unrooted, living more in 'open territory', the relationships we have with one another are destabilized. People are become increasingly alienated from one another and from the world about them. As the Pew Internet and American Life project has shown, from 1985 to 2004 the average number of intimate friends reported by survey respondents dropped from three to two. People who use social networking sites like Facebook it turns out are 30% less likely to know their neighbours [6]. Clearly information and communication technology, which emphasizes the mind over the body and shifts our concentration to virtual information, in supporting our ocular- and logo-centric orientation, seems to increase our alienation.

Our things are by no means neutral. Simple technology like eye-glasses, that have been around since the 1700s, frame and alter our visual confrontation with the world.

ICTs are even more intrinsically involved in our being. As Mitchell has put it, they “constitute and structure my channels of perception and agency – my means of knowing and acting upon the world” [3]. But as Foucault observed, we would be amiss to think of such material conditions causing cultural phenomena [8]. Cultural and material change, such as the dissolution of the hearth and social alienation are interconnected. ‘Actor-network’ theory can be instructive for understanding these ecological phenomena, positing the key role played by things as well as people in social networks. Things too are actors, affecting social and cultural change [9]. As the MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has observed, “objects help us make our minds, reaching out to us to form active partnerships” [10]. It is of vital importance then to keep technology in mind when thinking about social and cultural change, and likewise to keep social and cultural implications constantly in mind when thinking about technology.

4 The Technological Hearth

If we think seriously about the fireplace, we see that it has been an important cultural site. Fire both resembles life itself and threatens death. It both nourishes and endangers. Through its uncontrolled action in forests and cities it both causes immense destruction and makes room for new vitality. The fireplace is a tool for controlling the unpredictability of fire. In their union the fire and the fireplace become a symbol of love and of home [11]. As a place of gathering, the hearth has been a site of shared narrative and negotiated truth. People would congregate and tell stories, cosmologically important stories about the shape of the world, the hierarchical importance of things, the position of the individual as they relate to varying scales of social group and the world outside. The hearthstone after all had a gravity to it that alluded to the earth, while the smoke coiled up the chimney towards the sky, placing us securely between these cosmological realms. Incorporating all of this symbolic value, the hearth was an important site of reverie [12] as well as a focal point (the Latin word for hearth, remember, was *focus*) for ‘socialization’, the sort of conditioning that occurs intersubjectively amongst engaged groups of individuals. The ancient Greeks had an interesting take on the hearth which they figured as young maiden goddess named Hestia. Hestia was virginal and innocent; she represented stability and serenity. According to Vernant, in the Greek pantheon Hestia was paired with Hermes, the itinerant god who was associated with the threshold [13]. The hearth and the threshold - doors and windows - may be seen as the key symbolic ingredients of the house then, the *domos* stretched between Hermes and Hestia, two strong forces, one pulling outwards while the other held the centre.

But now the hearth has transformed completely, and so has our social behaviour. We gather less than we used to as localized social groups. Our social networks are increasingly abstract, based on commonality of ‘interest’ and other perceived and declared similarities. Our primary communication is increasingly mediated by our technology, be it cell phones, email, instant messaging, etc. The television replaced the fireplace as the new hearth, situated in a prominent location in suburban living rooms, a focal point for local gathering. And it did provide for some negotiation of truth-claims and the sharing of important ideas about self and world. Unfortunately,

this sharing of narratives occurred decidedly in a one-way direction: narratives and ideas were received, the television watcher an inert consumer. For a while it seemed like the television was being replaced by the home computer, especially in the days, not so long ago, of large towers and CRT monitors, but today these too have been supplanted by smaller means of computing such as notebooks, netbooks, and even smaller personal electronic technology such as smartphones. If the television had effectively replaced the fireplace as the hearth, then these technologies may be read as also being heir to its significance. This new miniaturized electronic technology allows for active socialization. Maybe then our large communication network is actually becoming like a world-sized fire accessed through 6 billion tiny hearths.

In terms of providing either a place of reverie or a focal point of solidarity for the local social ecology, however, these new hearths fail. As we've observed, our new technology can be very alienating, separating us from our immediate environment and people for the sake of connecting us to larger networks. But as Felix Guattari once reminded us, "it would be absurd to want to return to the past in order to reconstruct former ways of living"[14]. We cannot expect either ourselves or the world to be as they were. It is simply nostalgic to mourn the quiet reverie in front of the fire available to Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century. We have moved on, and as Foucault pointed out, we cannot simply blame these changes on technology. The hearth had provided us with a focus for socialization, for grounding us in the present time and place, for reverie. If we wish to retain some of these things, we must figure out how to incorporate them into our new technology. In the description of this workshop it was asked: "what is required to feel at home? Can this be digitized and delivered-on-demand to a mobile phone?" Here is the crux of the issue: can we write an app for existential belonging?

One consideration, given what has been said thus far, has to do with the Greek notion of Hestia and Hermes. Hestia focuses, brings in, while Hermes distracts, pulls out. Penelope concentrated on her loom while Odysseus wandered the surface of the earth. In the traditional Western house, the number and size of windows were limited and thus the relation between interior and exterior was clearly calibrated. With the intrusion of digital technologies into the house, the proliferation of screens amounted to a sudden proliferation of windows and with it a proliferation of this hermetic principle. When the television replaced the fireplace, according to this line of reasoning, this was paramount to the uprooting of the hestian almost completely by the hermetic. This is one major obstacle to the conversion of the smartphone into a hearth – it is in fact a window, a window through which we can see all kinds of useful and interesting things, through which we can be seen and through which we can communicate. Still, however, it is a window, not a hearth.

Perhaps then it could be a window to a hearth. The hearth at 'home', whatever form it may take in the future, could be visible through the small technological window that we carry in our pockets. Whenever you were lonely, perhaps in a hotel in far-flung location or waiting at an airport, and you were tired of your nomadism, you could set up your phone's built-in projector targeted upon a nearby surface and bring your far-off hearth into focus. Alternately, perhaps our smartphones could become a focus for localized socialization, a modern version of the innkeeper's hearth around which weary travelers could gather and swap stories. Maybe several nomads together on a commuter train, rather than reverting to private worlds accessed through

private technology, could assemble their miniature hearths into something new, something communal.

We can see the dilemma at hand. Domesticity is a social and cultural phenomenon not easily quantified or digitized. This is an issue that architects deal with perpetually as we try to work with the social and the cultural in our very physical mode of operation. I hope that this case study of the hearth, from an architect's perspective, has helped to elucidate some of the intricacies of this dilemma and will aid in framing the pursuant discussion.

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