

THE MAID'S ROOM: a tale of unchanging apartheid in a changing domestic space

Edja Trigueiro and Viviane Cunha

Maria was the real great maid. You couldn't even tell she was in.

Almeida (1987)

1 About the most resilient domestic space and how to keep it thus (as such)

“Today we are closing down the last slave quarters and throwing away the key” was the sentence said to have come from the President of the Brazilian Senate (Margolis, 2013:17) with reference to the act of legislature passed in April 2013, designed to grant new or ampler rights for domestic employees. The amendment to the constitution caused havoc up and down the country which is reputed to have the largest number of domestics in the world, being hailed by some as a “second emancipation from slave bondage”, by others as a hasty political manoeuvre on the eve of an election year, by most (employers and employees alike) as yet another burden, demanding paperwork and the interpretation of inflexible though imprecise legal directions. Centuries-long household habits were suddenly outlawed, such as the round-the-clock interaction of family members and living-in maids (sometimes the only plausible arrangement for girls coming from hinterland areas). Is nanny to rush into her room lest Junior entices her into some evening play?

Unconciliatory as the situation may seem, it will most certainly settle down into some more or less formalized arrangement as befits Brazilian ways and servants will carry on being part of the nation's home scene for long time to come. However, the recent legal turn has helped to bring the role of domestic workers into discussion among other issues, by exposing “the complex relationship that exists between housemaids and their employers, a relationship that confuses intimacy and power in the workplace”, as stated in the synopsis of the film “Housemaids” that motivated this article. It may also lead a step further toward the disappearance of the most resilient of all household spaces, the maid's bedroom, a descendent of the female slave quarters of colonial times, in form and content, syntax and semantics.

This essay focuses on domestic space configuration in Brazil as evidence of changing modes of social behaviour. The panorama we outline covers a period of around 150 years, starting in the mid-19th century when the form of a built environment deeply marked by the Portuguese occupation became gradually more exposed to foreign ways and steadily altered. It expresses sociocultural relations within households belonging to the middling layers of the social pyramid in the Northeast and Southeast regions of Brazil.

The discussion stems from case studies of houses and flats examined by us and by other researchers engaged in finding nexus in the relationship between architectural form and society in Brazil, mostly by applying an analytical approach based on the representation and quantification of the way in which key functions integrate the spatial structure, according to modelling procedures pertaining to the methodology of Space Syntax Analysis (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). The resilience or transience with which the spaces that accommodate such key functions hold their position in a discrete hierarchical order of accessibility across time, tells a lot about the modes of interaction among people closely related to those functions within that domestic milieu (Hanson, 1998). Morphological findings are also discussed in the light of the “classic” literature about Brazilian domestic space.

On a broad perspective, this diachronic spatial analysis of homes, up and down the country, shows that whereas nearly all key cells have been reshuffled in their relative position within the domestic spatial structure – both in geometric and topological terms – becoming more or less accessible in time, those occupied by servants, spanned centuries of nearly unaltered spatial segregation.

Detailing the analytical procedures applied in the studies that anchor this discussion escapes our aim and writing space. However, a few topological notions need be forwarded so that our argument makes sense. Three basic configuration schemes underpin the spatial layout of most buildings. When a set of rooms connects to one or to a sequence of common spaces – i.e. separated bedrooms off a common hall (Hillier and Hanson, 1984:159) – a “bush” arrangement is defined in topological terms. A bush (figure 1a) may segregate a sector from other sectors whereas allowing for a fairly close connection among the constituent parts of that sector. A “linear” sequence of cells (figure 1b) exerts a much more effective mode of segregation since each cell controls access to the next, making it easier to cut connections at any point by the closing of a door. Last but not least, a circular or ringy scheme (figure 1c) offer the possibility of alternative routes of access to the space that takes part in the ring, being, therefore, a powerful integrator.

The master bedroom and the maid’s bedroom are particularly noticeable for having changed the most and the least, respectively. Master bedrooms have shifted from a very privileged position (in accessibility and visibility) to a topologically segregated one, similar to that of the servants’ quarters. However, the equivalences in spatial properties of seclusion do not disguise the enormous differences that set those spaces apart in virtually all aspects – size, light, ventilation, view, furnishing – and even the arrangement underpinning the syntactic nature of that seclusion (as shall be exposed), not to mention its corresponding semantic message.

The artifice that insulates the housemaids’ rooms in recent times re-enacts former stratagems for achieving similar modes of exclusion (as in pre-modern homes) by means of a totally diverse

spatial layout, which responds to sociocultural requirements that were not needed or even envisaged in the past. Although corroborating the pervasive refrain about the immutable segregation of servants in the literature, we aspire to expose nuances loaded in ambiguity and mouldability that reverberate the contradictions of our own sociocultural nature.

2 From the repertoire: a diachronic overview

The overview to follow reinforces the idea that dwellings are artefacts spatially articulated to express discrete ways of life, but above all, to allow for the patterns of encounter and avoidance that define those ways. Dwellings are, therefore, emblematic representations of socio-cultural transformations, and of how the search for social class distinction is reproduced in the microcosm of domestic life by means of a continuous re-structuring of key functions over time. The spatial structure of Brazilian homes inhabited by middling social groups (those who employ most of the domestic labour in the country) has initially developed from a fairly flexible system towards a rigid one in which the rooms mainly used by members of each community – master, family, male/female slaves, visitors – hold one and the same discrete position in the hierarchy of accessibility; then to a system that maximises family interaction while flexing that among family, servants and visitors; then to a separation ingrained in the design of functional sectors; and finally to a configuration that tends to insulate each community but may leave chance for knitting encounter opportunities between inhabitants and visitors. Throughout this trajectory that signals successive waves of convergence and retreat in the domestic milieu, also telling about changing modes of public / private interaction, there has always been a spatial manoeuvre that succeeds in keeping servants' quarters at bay.

2.1 Safekeeping goods and women

Most of what remained – or left records – of the so-called *colonial house* in Brazil date from the 19th century, before or after 1822, when the country was in reality no longer a colony but whose built environment carried on being strongly marked by Portuguese inheritance.

In such colonial houses, the antagonism between the public and the private domains, the clear demarcation between areas used by masters and by slaves and the polarity between male and female spaces are themes well explored in the literature. Freyre notes an aversion toward the street, resulting from a patriarchal system, which becomes exacerbated, when transferred from the rural homesteads to the urban settlements. The fiercest struggle is said to have unfolded around women whom the patriarch sought to confine to the deep interiors of the home (Freyre, 1981: 154). Vauthier (1981: 39-41) informs that whereas “[...] the owner of the house receives us with all pomp and ceremony” in the front room – an essentially masculine space – women are nowhere to be seen, securely kept behind closed doors that sever access to the interior of the house, a “gynaecium protected from profane eyes”.

Although studies point out a fairly broad diversity in house plans – especially in the earlier centuries of the colony –, a certain layout is generally accepted as archetypical of colonial domestic architecture from at least the late 17th century (Smith, 1981: 121-123).

[...] (1) the large front room that connects directly to the balcony [located on the upper part] of the façade; (2) the central corridor; (3) the sequence of bedrooms or alcoves; (4) the large living room at the back; (5) the kitchen at the rear of the back room, to one side (SMITH, 1981: 123)

However, space analysis of colonial house plans (Trigueiro, 1994) revealed the existence of two very distinct topological structures, both retaining all the elements, geometric display and layout that have granted the status of colonial archetype in the literature. In nearly all studied cases the front room (or visitors' room) and the master bedroom – both male-related spaces – are closer to the main entrance and benefit from alternative accesses, being part of a ringy scheme together with the front room, the corridor and sometimes also a hall, landing or back passage, whereas all service-related spaces, including the kitchen, tend to be part of a linear sequence only accessible by means of various other spaces. However the addition of alternative entrances may play a decisive role in altering the effect of such layout in the accessibility of some key functions. The exterior, therefore, serves in some cases as a bypass to re-structure an otherwise rigidly male-orientated hierarchy. Smith (1981:121) noted the integrating character of the rear staircase located in the backyard of an old *sobrado*¹ in Olinda, possibly built in the 17th century, which epitomises this fairly flexible system of spatial interaction. By offering alternative connections between the worlds of the family and the outside, different readings of the spatial structure and different routes of access could be experienced by the diverse communities of inhabitants, notably women, whose gynaecium (the back room) becomes less segregated.

The flexible spatial type found in older homes and in 19th century semi-urban locations relates to the less rigid modes of social interaction reported by observers of the time, especially foreign visitors, who often expressed surprise concerning the informality of manners they witnessed during their stays in summer resorts sometimes in the company of the same people they knew to behave with extreme reserve in town. Conversely, an inflexible hierarchy of accessibility that places male-related spaces on the privileged end of the scale and female-related spaces on the other end – regardless of how many entrances are available to the house – was also found in 19th century *sobrados* of Recife's town centre. As the 19th century witnessed the apogee and decline of the patriarchal model, that unvarying male-centred *sobrado* seems to have been the last materialization of that era, thus confirming Freyre's argument that the urban *sobrado* took up and retained, for as long as it turned possible, the role of safekeeping women and valuables that had belonged to the *casa-grande*².

¹ Multi-storied colonial houses.

² Rural homesteads.

In both the flexible and the rigid configuration types of colonial dwellings, however, the female slaves' quarter, the street and the male slaves' quarters were almost always – and following this order – the most segregated spaces in the system, no matter the entrance chosen to access the building.

2.2 *Almost an urban senzala*³

Despite their diverse built shells the late 19th/early 20th century, multi-volume, highly-ornamented, eclectic houses (in which stylistic fads ranging from French neoclassic to Brazilian neocolonial through Alpine chalets and Victorian villas may be combined) present a recurrent layout. Two sequences of intercommunicating cells develop along a central axis, one comprising mainly day rooms – terrace or porch, sitting room, dining room, servery/daily meals (copa), kitchen and utility lobby – the other assembling bedrooms and the one bathroom used by the family. Servants were accommodated in outbuildings, well tucked away in the backyards, sometimes also comprising a laundry compound or a garage. In these houses dining rooms tend to be the most privileged space as concerns geometric (larger and more centrally located) as well as topological properties (more accessible for being part of a ringy scheme connecting various doorways). Master bedrooms and to a lesser extent sitting (visitors') rooms are also privileged in likewise manner although tending to occupy a more reduced area.

The pervasiveness with which the master bedroom and the visitors' room retain their integrating and controlling properties concerning all other spaces are evidences of continuity as refers colonial dwellings. On the other hand the role played by dining rooms – in which the display of polished wood and leather, silverware and crystals, linen and lace is usually dealt with by the mistress of the house – tells about changing modes of behaviour concerning gender and display of social prestige in the domestic sphere.

These houses are highly permeable and visible to the public domain by means of their exterior spaces which also functions as an important integrator of the interior spatial structure. Indoor and outdoor routes play a crucial as they contribute to level hierarchy among day rooms and reduce the insulation of the outbuildings, while, at the same time, conferring high flexibility to the system that can become rigidly hierarchized, provided some doors are shut and alternative routes broken up. The mouldering of configuration may define a polarity between a family-plus-visitors versus a servants' sphere or a three-partite structure of well-defined sectors for each of these communities.

³ The slaves' quarters located in an independent outbuilding usually in a rural settlement.

Outdoor areas, shaped into gardens, patios, yards and a multiplicity of terraces, are thus, crucial for achieving a versatility of articulation not recorded before or afterwards as a mainstream trend in Brazilian domestic space.

2.3 *One roof, many walls*

In Brazil the ubiquitous acceptance of the modernist formal repertoire confers a general look of modernity more or less faithful to the international style in terms of volume composition, stripped surfaces, horizontal windows and building materials. However the recurrence of spatial articulations identified in pre-modernist homes suggests that space is organised to reproduce old types of interface among dwellers that feels as a reverse of what had been prescribed in the early discourse of the pioneers of the Modern Movement.

In floor plans, modernist houses can be identified mainly by being subdivided in sectors – social, service and private – as described by Cunha (1992) and Amorim (1999). These are orientated primarily to meet environmental requirements with the ‘noble’ sectors – social and private – being privileged. The private sector of bedrooms no longer intercommunicate, being mostly dead end cells off a hall or a sequence of transition spaces (i.e. corridor, landing) that links the private to the social sectors, or, less frequently, also to the service sector. The servants’ quarters albeit usually built under the same roof, do not link to any other part of the building except through the kitchen.

Judging from various space syntax analysis of house plans (Trigueiro and Marques, 2001; Cavalcanti and Trigueiro, 2001; Trigueiro, Marques and Cunha, 2003, Aldrigue, 2011) in homes built from the 1950s through to the 1970s, the social sector – visitors’ and dining rooms – are the most accessible key spaces, as found in pre-modernist houses, but the exterior is not nearly as integrating as in eclectic (and some colonial) houses and the master bedroom no longer holds its former privileged position in relation to other bedrooms, but retreats into the ‘private sector’, being part of a bush scheme off a hall that links to the social sector. Bedrooms cease to present alternative accesses (to other bedrooms or living rooms), becoming dead end cells or nearly so, by only linking to a hall and perhaps to an *en suite* bathroom and or a walk-in closet. The street and the maids’ bedroom are the most segregated spaces likewise homes of previous times.

Ease of movement was one of the goals aimed at by the supporters of the Modern Movement in its heyday. The severing of the ‘private sector’ from all others can hardly be felt in tune with those aims, despite the popularity of the modern style in the country.

Neither can the discourse underneath publicity advertisements of flats in Rio de Janeiro where this dwelling type was first adopted on a large scale in the 1930s, serving as benchmark for the

whole country, especially in the second half of the 20th century. Apartments were then a novelty that alongside a range of urban transformations, signalled a new historical period marked by the contradictory circumstance (again, as befits Brazilian ways) of an authoritarian regime, the Vargas Era (1930-1945), which supported the ideals of modernity – and of modern architecture – as means to set pace with the developed world, and at the same time to legitimise unrestrained power.

Space analysis of ground plans and text descriptions in advertisements announcing apartments for sale in the main local newspaper were combined in a study (Cunha and Trigueiro, 2005) that focused on flats built in Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s (when they started to be viewed as a dwelling option round the country), in the 1970s (when they spread to most large towns in the country, in the wake of an urban development boom) and in the 1990s (when they became the main dwelling option across regions and social groups). We found out that in earlier times service-related spaces were an almost obligatory item in the advertisements. In the 1950s, 90% of ads mentioned servants' accommodations, some with detailed descriptions of their generous sizes, some informing the presence of more than one such facility in the flat. In the 1970s service bedrooms are mentioned in 70% of adds, this percentage dropping to 62% in the 1990s; in the 1950s utility lobbies were mentioned in 32% of cases, but hardly ever from then on; kitchens were considered publicity items in 40% of adds in the 1950s against only 22% and 10% in the 1970s and the 1990s respectively. In the early cases the most important reasoning was apparently that of convincing prospective buyers that moving to a flat would not mean parting with their domestic service comforts. It was just like living in a house.

In the plans of flats built in the 1950s servants' quarters though kept well out of the visitors' eye were often near at hand by way of interior passages in the private sector, an arrangement that tended to disappear in the 1970s. In the 1990s, servants' rooms tend to vanish into the depths of a linear sequence of cells, becoming, therefore, more closely linked to the exterior –through the utility lobby than to the home spaces.

This aspect is strongly emphasised by Cunha (2007) who found it to be a recurrent pattern in the later cases examined in the thorough diachronic overview of flat plans designed from the 1930s to the last decade of the 20th century and discussion about the limits of the private and (un)public realms as well as about how desirable was the awareness concerning the presence of servants, that supports her doctoral thesis and discussion about the limits of the private and (un)public realms as well as about how desirable was the awareness concerning the presence of servants.

Barsted (1987) argues that in the 1970s, when domestic labour started to be ruled by contractual bound that regulated rights and duties the presence of servants were better deemed if invisible. Cunha asserts that when the door linking the kitchen to the social sector is closed it is as if the solidarity that bridges the world of masters and servants is lifted out and the two

categories are allowed to regain their independence. Instead of comprising three sectors it is as if the complex becomes reduced to a dichotomy of servants versus owners, granting that visitors are also becoming fewer.

This distancing may also indicate the reduction in the use of service-related spaces that tend to become areas for tackling chores only, and these more and more performed outside the domestic sphere whereas living-in servants give way to day cleaners that come in once or twice a week.

In the 1970s and 1980s the location of housemaids' bedroom adjacent to both the private sector hall and the utility lobby has enabled the appearance of the "reversible" room. This has remained a layout option to this day maybe anticipating the disappearance of the servants' quarters, for which the recent change in legislation might trigger the final act.

2.4 Skipping / re-guising the servants room or where has the maid gone?

Here and there research findings point out the disappearance of servants' rooms, especially when addressing 21st century homes. In her doctoral thesis Griz (2012) examined flats in Recife, of which the originally conceived plans were altered to suit their owners' needs. Housemaids' rooms were suppressed altogether in a few cases, but the choice for maintaining them predominated in the sample, an attitude that indicates the intent to rely on domestic help for some time to come, thus confirming the tendency recorded in studies of late 20th century Brazilian.

Some aspects of present day housing which manifest visibly in the built environment and seem to associate with new domestic requirements suggest a reenactment of modernist proposals (i.e. the shrinking of service-related space) whereas others point towards a setback from them (enclosed semi-private communal areas strongly detached from the public space), and others, still, signal the emergence of novel themes (the home-based office). Marques (2000) investigated new ways of life in homes of Natal that could be associated with post-modernity, as extensively referred in the literature, such as those inhabited by single parent families, home-based working family heads, restructured families. By means of empirical observations and open surveys she sought to ascertain how those dwellings were used as their occupants went about their daily routines. In the studied cases bedrooms had become whole houses in themselves (França, 2001, found a similar situation in homes of Brasília), whereas dining rooms, though still kept as sacred icons of family gatherings were seldom used by household members and/or visitors at one same time. Respondent informed that meals were often had in self-service restaurants near work places, whereas receiving, when still occurring, took place in the "reception halls" of buildings or condominiums or in 'reception houses' that multiply in most towns. (Marques e Trigueiro, 2001).

Tendencies found in houses built and/or converted in the last decades in Recife and Natal were confirmed and emphasized by the analysis of plans for middle class residents in Rio de Janeiro by Cunha. Plans were analysed by the application of space syntax procedures (Trigueiro, Marques, Cunha, 2001) in order to investigate whether the hierarchy of accessibility showed traces of continuity or change with reference to Brazilian homes of previous time periods as well as to the original plans in the converted cases. In these, bedrooms as well as the exterior had become generally more segregated from all other spaces. In the newly built homes, bedrooms and, particularly, master bedrooms were even more segregated, *en suite* bathrooms proliferated, often coupled to a dressing closet. The growing complexity of the so-called private sector seemed contradictory insofar as the social sector became larger and more diverse. Bedrooms were knocked out to give way to multiple sitting arrangements.

Although confirming the increasing segregation of the private sector in the apartments investigated in Rio, Cunha, (2007) shows that bedrooms tended to shrink in area. The author proposes that this happened in order to allow for more space in the social sector, a repository of social prestige. In the early decades bedrooms could appear distributed throughout the plan sometimes in close proximity with other functional cells, especially the master bedroom, retaining diverse levels of topological accessibility among them. As they became more insulated from the other functional sectors, they also turned more symmetrical in relation to one another, thus indicating a reduction in the asymmetry of relations between man and wife and between parents and children. The syntactic analysis of plans disclosed how segregation was enhanced by means of successive breaking-ups of space to conform passages, corridors or hallways which create topological (and visual) distance in the routes to the private sectors, where bedrooms are articulated in a bush-like configuration. The area of the bedrooms themselves may be broken into a segmented entrance that accommodates the door swing and screens the bedroom interior.

Such design artifice bears parallel to Evans's (1997) proposition of transition spaces as means of connecting as well as of setting apart spaces and people in order to control encounter and avoidance. It also fragments the spatial experience – an important component of the individualisation process according to Velho. According to Cunha (2007), Singly (2000: 18) points out that it is in the bedroom that Family members build up their individualities from childhood while maintaining links of dependency with other family members. The symmetry of access concerning bedrooms may be perceived in this context of individuality as these rooms become personalised worlds adjacent to one another. Morley (2000:90) upholds the view that these new intentions place bedrooms in a political-moral environment of "choice" based on the desire for individual privacy rather than on the idea of home as a unity. This situation may also be viewed in the context of new familiar compositions, whose diversity of interest makes it hard to conciliate routines. Hillier and Hanson (1984) argue that segregation associates with differentiation.

The self-contained worlds of bedrooms involve the individualisation of technologies that were formerly displayed in the social sphere for communal of family members. Individual communication technologies can redefine notions of proximity and intensify virtual relations at the expense of spatially defined ones, such as those within their own homes, as discussed by Virilio (1993).

It is argued by Cunha (2007) that the increased insulation of bedrooms also contributes to redefine private/public boundaries within the domestic dominium. Because bedrooms may be viewed as a collection of spaces positioned in the segregated end of the accessibility scale, the social sector may pose as its antagonist, lying in the integrating end of the scale, ready to be shared by inhabitants. This polarised spatial scheme of individual reclusion versus community of inhabitants may be at the root of the diminishing interface between inhabitants and visitors – with inhabitants seemingly taking the part of visitors in the space.

The redefinition of boundaries also affects the service sector that tends to become topologically closer to the public space than to the private (or communal) domestic sphere. The way service spaces are configured – defining a linear sequence of cells in which each one exerts control of all following others – allows for the strategic positioning of doors that may sever all contact with the social and private sectors leaving the rooms that are positioned at the end of the sequence – almost always the maid's bedroom and en suite bathroom – accessible only to the utility (for laundry and cleaning materials) lobby and to the exterior. Although the spatial arrangement of both the private and the service sectors are designed to achieve isolation, the nature of this isolation is distinct as pointed out by Cunha (2007). Whereas that of the private sector provides for reclusion, that of the service sector signals exclusion, meaning not a desire for privacy from the part of its occupiers but from the part of the other inhabitants in relation to them. In the flat plans designed in the late 20th century some cases of alternative interior routes were found. These, however, would never link spaces mainly occupied by servants.

In various flat and house plans that served as object of study in this essay, in the Northeast and Southeast regions of Brazil alike, master bedrooms and maids bedrooms are often adjacent, but their doors are set as far apart from one another as the remaining domestic spatial arrangement allows for. Besides, master bedrooms tend to face east to south – the cooler quadrant – whenever possible, while maids' bedrooms are often orientated towards the torrid afternoon sun of the tropics. And whereas master bedrooms have expanded into self-contained worlds, servants' bedrooms have shrunk to little more than walk-in closets, often deprived of windows.

Yet, the provision of a fairly comfortable room for a housemaid can backfire into not providing any room at all. In three occasions one of the authors of this essay (Trigueiro) designed houses in which the mainstream characteristics of the housemaid's bedroom was subverted in some aspect: (1) an area equivalent to two of the other three bedrooms, facing the same part of the

plot as the other three, through a similar window, bunched together with all others in a bush configuration off a corridor – though coming last in metric distance from the social sector; (2) a generous area facing the privileged view and the dominant ventilation, though connecting solely to the service sector and the exterior; (3) an orientation towards the privileged side of the plot and an indirect connection to the social sector, albeit separated from the private sector located upstairs. Clients belonging to three different middle-class families were all open-minded nice people. In two cases, somebody declared that their housemaid was “part of the family”. The buildings were all second homes for leisure and relaxation, a circumstance that tends to be associated with loose modes of behaviour. Plans were accepted and built accordingly. However, the outcome was that in all cases the maids could only enjoy the privilege if there was not a single extra soul to be lodged, an occurrence all but common in a holiday house. In (1) the maid would be pushed into the children bedroom (or any other corner where a hammock could be hung) as soon as a guest showed up; in (2) and (3) maids ended up by being accommodated in a windowless compartment built for storing purpose by the swimming pool, and in a makeshift shed orientated towards the hot afternoon sun in the backyard, respectively.

Hammocks hanging in kitchens were also found in a middle-class high rise condominium built in Natal in the 1990s. According to Loureiro and Marques (1999) the designer assumed that housemaids would be occasional workers so that only a common bathroom and toilet facilities were offered on the ground floor of the communal area, whereas kitchens and utility lobbies were amalgamated and located next to the only entrance to the flat – an innovative feature considering that a “service” and a “social” entrance (often side-by-side) – had always been viewed as obligatory requirements even in very small flats. The hanging hammocks became the sleeping arrangement for the ubiquitous housemaid.

3 Of maids and masters

It's all but obligatory for middle and upper-class families in Brazil to employ a housemaid and the country has more domestic workers than any other. Gabriel Mascaro's powerful and sensitive film Housemaids directly addresses this long-unspoken issue, which some describe as one of the most prominent remnants of the country's colonial past.

(Commentator about a film screening in Columbus, Ohio, IN
<http://www.artsinohio.com/event/housemaids-domestica-by-gabriel-mascaro-2012>,
accessed on January 11, 2014)

Although not in the least “a long-unspoken issue” – the subject has been explored in the literature at least since the early 20th century – the commentator’s assertive about the presence of a housemaid as an almost obligatory circumstance in Brazilian middle and upper-class homes, states the contours of our contemporaneity.

The fine tuning of doors and walls to allow for mouldable spatial structures stretches back to colonial times – as has been demonstrated here – being more or less restricted, here and then,

according to sociocultural circumstances, but always offering the means to cope with a history of extreme social inequality now over five centuries long. By flexing patterns of encounter and avoidance they help to rear the ambiguity necessary to maintain such inequalities underneath a kind of social pact that although exploding daily in the crime and violence of the streets is mitigated by quasi-family relations within the domestic milieu.

As exposed, recent trends herald the outline of what might be the typical 21st century abode of the middling social groups in Brazil: the shrinking of service-related spaces plus the occasional disappearance of the servants' quarters; bedrooms that encapsulate a home in itself as if the domestic complex were a set of independent dwelling units bunched together; the home-based office; the scarce use of a sometimes expanded social sphere even when retaining its traditional arrangement of living-plus- dining room suites.

The apparent contradiction between increasing demands for privacy and enlarged social sectors – complete with “home theatres” and “gourmet kitchens – seems to associate more with the need for status display than with expectations of a richer social life, a fact that although gaining specific nuances nowadays, has always permeated, in one way or another the domestic space layout, albeit probably never in such scale.

On the other hand, the plasticity of some residential arrangements echoes the old debate about the “ideas out of place” versus “the ideas in place” (Schwarz, 1977; Franco, 1978) underlying the nature of sociocultural relations in Brazil, which was capable of accommodating liberal thought and slavery, neoclassicism and rusticity, landowner fathers and industrialist sons, modernism and dictatorship, housemaids who are considered “part of the family”, but may not sleep within the family spatial compound.

It is exactly when flexibility and ease of movement is well stressed in the international discourse of the modern movement that Brazilian homes become less so. We are a country renowned for the immediate acceptance of the modernist formal repertoire across social and regional spheres. However, as Amorim (2008:324) points out, in Brazilian modern architecture flexibility is yet another myth.

The present day spatial configuration may be pointing towards a new step in this saga: whereas some aspects, suggest a re-enactment of what may be viewed as a search for “la maison modernism perdue” (Marques and Trigueiro, 2000) or for contemporaneity, others point toward universal segregation in tune with the global obsession for privacy and virtual communication or for selective, occasional episodes of co-presence among dwellers (Holanda, 1999) which seems to have become ever more selective concerning the contact with the housemaid.

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