# Creating Home. Establishing the Features that Turn a Dwelling into a Home

## By John Armstrong

Covered in this chapter:

- What are the needs that get met via home?

- What are the features of home we all take for granted?

- What is frequently missing in 'homes' provided by formal service?

- What are some of the challenges in bringing home to people in more personalised ways?

- What would help resolve the difficulties associated with providing and receiving in-home support?

- What is the single feature most essential for creating a true home over a mere dwelling and how might it be pursued?

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The needs of people that are met by a home. Home constitutes *the* most important domain in our lives. This is not to say that other domains lack importance; our work-life, community connections, education or spiritual pursuits enrich us greatly and are greatly needed, yet all of these pursuits can still not flourish without the essential and secure foundation of a home. Refugees have shelter, but cannot flourish until they have home. People in group homes, nursing homes and shelters for the poor, have shelter, but do not have home. They can be said to be homeless; not shelter-less, but homeless. And they do not and cannot flourish.

While shelter meets some bodily needs, home meets the needs of the heart and therefore the emotional life of someone. When our emotional self is secure, then our intellectual life is free to grow. When ones emotional life is filled with unremitting change in relationships *and* endless boredom (for example, as many nursing homes

essentially provide) emotions and thinking are tied down to living in the moment and survival. Yet it is not really living and it is not really surviving; it is more akin to a slow death.

We can flourish when we belong and be recognised as fitting in. Home is where we fit in with ourselves which in turn forms a basis for fitting in with others. It is via relating to others that we experience some of our happiest moments (Haidt 2006). We are now free to grow and discover who we really are. We are free to do the internal work on ourselves and pursue those things that bring meaning and purpose, not encumbered by dreadful insecurities of future and belonging. A meaningful life is a life of meaning. Home is a pre-requisite.

A shelter can never bring these qualities. A shelter[1] can only feed the body and if that is all that is provided reduces the soul. Home and the security it implies liberate the personality (Vanier) so that the heart and mind is free to pursue its potential. Being homeless dramatically limits that potential.

<u>What are the features of home we all take for granted?</u> In helping to shape the legitimate experience of home for someone else we need to pay careful attention to the qualities of home that we often unconsciously come to expect. Everyone within a given culture carries a perception of home strongly based on cultural expectations of what constitutes home. In our society at this time in history things have gotten a little bit more difficult in this regard given the pluralistic nature of our culture, meaning that so many cultures now co-exist within our communities, each with its own blend or take on what home is.

<u>The ideal of home:</u> But even given this, we each know what our ideal of home would not be. It would not be being bossed around constantly, but it wouldn't be having my own way all the time either; it wouldn't be having loud parties and drinking all night –

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[1] Certainly, adequate shelter is an important feature too of any home, as anyone whose house has been damaged by flood, earthquake, fire etc can attest. Our point here though is that shelter once having met the immediate bodily needs of people is of itself grossly inadequate to meet other higher needs of people, as can be witnessed in "immigration detention centres" and jails anywhere in the world.

or day, but it would mean being considerate to neighbours and even helping out in lots of little ways. In other words, it is possible to draw up a list of the typical and cultural expectations of home, even if we know of examples where those practices don't occur. We also have a sense that when people violate those practices, things do not turn out very well. This can be a long list: having door keys, a letter box and phone, having (many) personal possessions I choose, dressing easily at home or for working in the garden, but having a wash and clean clothes when visitors are coming. Such a list can become a powerful reminder of what this home is trying to be, and pushes any supporter to seek and sustain such qualities in the life of someone else. Ultimately, one is considering what is "culturally appropriate" for home and what is "age appropriate" for someone of this age and can we use that knowledge to communicate a real home for someone that others will immediately recognise and support. Of course, if we step away from those ideas—perhaps we have faulty notions that the community "should accept people the way they are', "it's their choice anyway", then any visible and significant infraction of what is culture and age appropriate will likely bring further rejection and isolation *to the person we are seeking a home for*, because that is just the way it works.

Lifestyle: There are many things about home that are also unique.  If you've ever had to stay with someone for even a few nights you know that we all have unique (peculiar even) ways of doing things. This is our lifestyle and everyone is a bit different. For people coming from segregated and regimented environments finding a lifestyle that suits them can be a difficult but enlightening journey. How sensitive to this journey one might need to be in order to foster such an exploration in someone very limited by such an experience. It would be too easy to "support their choice" of someone who simply adopts the routines of the past because this is all they know, including the lack of privacy awareness, eating decorum, speech and interaction habits, uses of free time, appearance and music preferences, just to name a few. There is a world of growth within a lifestyle, especially for people who have never experienced what is typical and good about home. The security of home and the stability of relationship that should

come with it provide the exact nourishment for discovering who one really is, apart from the identities of the past.

Image and Competency: There are some crucial questions within the issue of home for every person; who am I, who do I want to be when at home, how should I use my time at home usefully, how do I want to be seen by others in my community? The answer to these significant questions provides a template for considering the image of people as they establish home from such things as its location (near needed resources and transport), its furnishings (that are tasteful, comfortable and 'say' something about who the person is), habits and disciplines of house-keeping; utilising free-time for renewal, enjoyment and growth; learning to express hospitality and serve the needs of others; sharing, giving and pulling 'one's weight'. These and other things might be drawn into two large categories of considerations:

1) what should the person look like and be seen as in their own home, i.e., their image; and

2) what abilities will need to be developed or supported by others, i.e., the competencies for taking full advantage of living at home?

What is frequently missing in 'homes' provided by formal service?

One possible impetus for creating a real home for someone is to consciously avoid the prospect of relying on a formal service to provide, administer and 'staff' a home for a party.  Home by definition, is an 'informal' part of our life. Such informality is characterised by spontaneity, variety, choices and autonomy. It is also filled with the richness and tapestry of un-paid and freely given relationship commitments; some of them involving love.

One can see immediately why it is so difficult for even the best of services to create and sustain such conditions, when paying people to do so. Formal services tend to standardise everything and therefore de-personalise their interaction with people demonstrated through bureaucratising the most minor of procedures. There is a policy

for everything, which means it becomes 'standardised' with almost no capacity for variability and flexibility. Whereas home is a 'customised' environment, adjusted to precisely fit with the needs, requirements and preferences of the individuals who live there.

Home is also where a large amount of time is spent, and especially so if one doesn't work or get out much. Services and their staff find it very difficult to know and arrange for time to be spent well, beyond the daily chores of washing and eating. People's lives in most residential services can be characterised by idleness, as they sit and wait killing time as time kills them (Wolfensberger 2003). Good use of time—and our time is our life, can be a challenge for anyone creating an authentic home, though certainly made easier when one is not constrained by the weight of hierarchy, policy, reporting and formalisation.

One can begin to see how a formal attempt at home can so quickly become derailed from its intention. Home may be in name only. Such environments become bizarre and it is very hard to remain there, even as a visitor. Even many staff who cannot accommodate the endless and ceaseless regimentation seek to leave, sometimes in quick succession, which is another of the hugely damaging effects of formal services; relationships are constantly changing creating massive social and emotional problems for people exposed to such a relationship circus for any length of time[2].

Those of you planning and arranging supports for people within their own home can take some heart that there are some indications – mostly anecdotal, that when people experience aspects of 'the Good Life' (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso 1996) their good support staff also get to experience that too, which often means they stay around for a much longer time; sometimes decades[3].

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[2] See Wolfensberger 1998 for a a much more detailed analysis of the effects of formal human services
[3] There may be many reasons for this, including: the person they support is seen in more positive light because their life, roles, associations, routine, images etc are valued & typical, they do interesting things together that can match their identities & roles, both parties can grow, to name a few.

<u>What are some of the challenges in bringing home to people in more personalised ways?</u>

In the 70's and 80's institutions began to close and people began to "live in the community" for the first time.  It was thought the past 'evils' of institutional life would be left behind, along with the buildings. We never imagined that a regimented, institutionalised life could live outside the walls. But of course it can. Any effort to create an authentic home must entail the appreciation that error and mistakes can also occur. Not that this fear should immobilise one's efforts, but that one fights for consciousness about everything one undertakes lest our well intentioned blind spots pay out on the person least able to bear it.

In all of human affairs there has always been a tendency for things to start well and with much energy and celebration. But after the parties have finished and most of the supporters have left, there is often the ongoing work that must be done by someone. There will need to be ways of ensuring such efforts and such arrangements can be sustained without entailing collapse.

One major reason for 'counting the costs' is that even when life conditions are favourable and support is constant and well balanced against need, there is always the potential that something unexpected will happen that can have drastic effects on a vulnerable person, even if not on others. That is, vulnerable people always remain vulnerable and that vulnerability can express itself in an instant where something happens that changes everything. Positive illusions can sometimes cloud our judgement reducing one's scrutiny of such prospects and the need for safeguards.

Efforts of home building can also be based on certain idealized concepts that have some potential for distortion unless balanced off against other principles (Armstrong 2012, Kendrick 2001). Personalisation, individualisation and 'person centredness' have become the standard bearers for obtaining a better life and in particular, a good home.

And why not; home *is* the place for discovering who one is and how one might express that identity. But such lessons of differentiation take considerable time and ironically, many interactions with others. That is, one can only discover truths when confronted by the presence of others, who have needs and preferences as well that one must learn to appreciate and be responsive to. One can't, or shouldn't have it all one's own way. Differentiation needs 'integration' to fully appreciate who one is and what one can bring to others. The emphasis on personalisation can unwittingly produce a life of self indulgence where the world bends to the distorted beat of one person's drum.

This raises a crucial issue; what kind of life might home actually facilitate? What would make a life worth living? How does one experience a meaningful life? Well, its simply a life of meaning, (Csikszentmihaly 2008) but one has to discover what that might be. It will typically have within it features of love (giving and receiving it) and work, and in particular, work that contributes and 'makes something happen' (Haidt 2006). Home is an ideal location for loving and home is one of a number of places where one can 'make something happen' sometimes in quite unique and distinct ways.

Some of this extends outside the scope of this topic into the realm of philosophy and psychology. But the point is clear; for home to be a basis for not just a Good Life, but a Meaningful Life, it cannot become a citadel of self indulgence, even if fuelled by such noble concepts as 'person centeredness'.

### What would help resolve the difficulties associated with providing and receiving in-home support?

We discussed earlier the potential to create shelter, but not home. But what is it that makes the real difference? Jo Massarelli and Joe Osburn in their fine one day event titled "Stranger in the House" discuss the dilemma of providing and receiving in-home support. It describes many of the dangers and difficulties that are ever present when someone is supported in their own home by formal supports. To stay in one's home though may actually require receiving such support, but at the significant costs in

inconvenience and hassles, the intrusions of formalities, poorly socialised and oriented workers that have to be trained and want to give you advice you don't want or need or others who try usurp and take control of daily decisions. Then there are places workers have to enter that most of us would not want to go, where you are given orders at every turn, and where animals are not house trained and neighbours and neighbourhoods are tricky and where householders try to make you to do things that are not reasonable. Quite a dilemma.

What could reduce the potential that these competing issues would come into an unworkable conflict? Massarelli and Osburn recommend that a very clear idea of what home actually means for someone becomes established—a kind of vision of what home can and should be—for them. Once articulated, that vision has to be communicated to anyone who enters their home to provide them a service…"this is what we are striving to maintain in Sarah's home". When workers enter Sarah's house—irrespective of their task or role, they know precisely what is being aimed for.

This is a very high level strategy bringing consciousness to home owner and service provider alike. But Massarelli and Osburn had something else to offer as well.

<u>What is the single feature most essential for creating a true home over a mere dwelling and how might it be pursued?</u>

We learn from Social Role Valorization (SRV) that roles make all the difference to how one is seen and treated and how one sees oneself (Wolfensberger 1998). In the context of home, what role seems to make all the difference to creating a true sense of home, and not just a dwelling?

Homemaker. Yes, every home needs a homemaker or someone learning how to become a homemaker. Historically and traditionally, such a role fell on the woman of a household. But today that role is being picked up (with varying degrees of success) by men as well. It is also the role that services find very hard to duplicate—even if they are aware of it, but clearly the role that makes all the difference to the 'feel' and

ambience of a home; its routine, its interaction, the relationship with neighbours, the smells in the kitchen, the decorations and many other little touches.

Like all roles, this role has to be sort after by the would-be role incumbent and practiced over the period one holds the role. And it would usually take the fairly intensive presence of an experienced homemaker to teach someone those ropes.

Conclusion: The notion of home speaks to a fundamental question of need in us all. It is the staging area for all of life's other pursuits and it is where we can craft an identity and learn what it means to be ourselves. The pursuit of a secure home over a shelter or agency carries much potential, but will require sustained effort and layers of safeguards—mostly captured in people's commitments to each other. A keen sense of what makes for home combined with a nurturing approach to discovering a unique lifestyle will require patient effort. Such notions provide a vision of home life that also guides any entry into such a home by paid support services and the potential for sustaining rather than interfering with such a vision fulfilment.

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