Rethinking the house as a public health technology of preparedness, writes Imogen Bevan

The main public critique levelled at the UK government's "Stay Home" campaign was its failure to be implemented fast enough, and the abandonment of community contact tracing in its wake. Beyond all expectations, the UK public proved "highly compliant" in staying home (even too much so) according to a recent report. A powerful new "spatial and moral logic" (Fitzgerald, 2020) had seemingly engulfed the UK. But what happens to houses now, as lockdown measures are gradually lifted? And more importantly, what did we learn from the "Stay Home" policy?

As a national strategy, home confinement provoked little controversy. As restrictions are eased, a new order not to leave one's home for fourteen days (if approached by a contact tracer) is seen as normal. The contact tracing technologies themselves on the other hand (such as those proven effective in South Korea, and currently being developed in the UK) provoke deep moral discomfort, understood to be the ultimate intrusion into our lives. Why is this? Isn't the house also a technology of sorts? What is being masked by discussions around data privacy? What might houses, in times of COVID-19, reveal about social relationships and values in contemporary Britain?

Anthropology has a long history of studying houses, and the many layers that compose them. From structuralism to feminist anthropology, to new kinship and material culture studies, we learn that houses participate in the production of power relations, gender, kinship and relatedness, as well as ideas

about individualism and capitalism. The theme of the house features heavily in my own research on sugar consumption, and what sugar might teach us about contemporary forms of kinship in urban Scotland. In my research, I am interested in the way that houses themselves, from the storage of (sugary) foods and objects to the configuration of rooms and furniture, embody and reflect the texture of social relationships.

In 2018-2019, I did fieldwork with families whose houses slowly warped over time, to accommodate changing relationships between kin. In 2020, their living spaces now compressed and strained to become the workplace, the school, the nursery, the clinic, and even the hospital. The policy of "Stay Home" largely relies on the (imagined) flexibility of the house, its capacities of absorption, and the magical powers of kinship to transform parents into nurses, school teachers, and early years practitioners behind closed doors. Houses are regularly depicted as spaces over which we have heightened agency and control, where we can express our individualities, our intimacy, and secrets. But when the home becomes a "clinical and epidemiological trope," as Fitzgerald writes, houses themselves disappear.

The 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' slogan recycles an oft-told story about the house — that it is a cocoon, a space of nurturance, the ultimate metaphor of kinship itself. Literary analysts reveal the long history of this trope in Britain, whereby houses emerge as "a symbolic substitute for the security and union of the womb," as they do in Dickens's work, for example (Armstrong 1990). In these romantic imaginaries, the house is made to work as an enclosure, a domain of life carved out, a safe haven constructed in opposition to the state. A black box of private life. A protective bubble. Yet houses and kinship are not starkly distinct from the realm of politics and the state. Nor are they inherently safe and protective places, as Sophie Lewis points out:

"How can a zone defined by the power asymmetries of housework

(reproductive labor being so gendered), of renting and mortgage debt, land and deed ownership, of patriarchal parenting and (often) the institution of marriage, benefit health?"

The imaginary segregation of the house from the outside world, and the dichotomies that accompany it (inside/outside, pure/polluted, privacy/surveillance, domestic/political), are attractive from a national and global policy perspective. As a technology of preparedness in times of pandemic, houses are readily available as a policy at no additional cost to the State. These imaginaries of houses – as hermetic borders, sites of personal freedom and mutual obligation – make them a prime tool for acting upon the virus. However, the language of "home" brushes aside a longstanding academic tradition in public health research, where home (as housing) has been readily conceptualised as a space of *exposure,* rather than one of safety.

Public health interventions have a long history of intervening upon, *or through*, the house. During the course of Dickens's lifetime, health authorities had come to establish the role of houses themselves in the onset and spread of diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis. In North Edinburgh, as late as the 1950s, a wave of cases of tuberculosis was traced back to the nature and conditions of low-quality urban housing. Public health research into houses' negative effects on health – temperature, dampness, leaks, indoor pollution, numbers of inhabitants – have led to some of public health's most important reforms. The long term effects of lead exposure, residual tobacco smoke, asthma, and allergies are just the latest chapter in the morbidities and inequalities houses produce.

While the UK government heavily invests in a new furlough scheme to shift people from workplaces into houses, responsibility is waivered concerning the glaringly unequal

ways this pandemic will be experienced, according to the kind of housing people can access. Meanwhile, forms of work that can be pushed inside the physical walls of the house — home-schooling, or nursing elderly relatives — are broadly exempt from any additional state assistance. Stay Home, Stay Self-Reliant.

Bourdieu (1970) famously argued during his early structural period, that the house represents a microcosm of society. In Britain 2020, the house bears witness to the reshuffling of priorities. It lays certain values bare. Within the logic of COVID-19, we are to seal (and conceal) ourselves within the home, regardless the type of housing. Any person in another household, however close the connection, must be distanced. Death of a grandparent? Stay home. A romantic relationship? Invalid unless it involves cohabitation. The house of COVID-19 feels a little like a Noah's Ark, each of us steering a floating household reduced only to the most necessary relationships — supposedly those of cohabitation, most often framed as the nuclear family.

I feel wary of the version of the house that "Stay Home" ushers in, with its celebration of nuclear family at the expense of other relationships. I also feel wary of current celebrations of homeliness and (gendered) ideals of domesticity, which are so often enmeshed with ideals of home ownership and fantasies of World War II austerity. The re-summoning of our so-called Blitz spirit — including memories of collectively producing a national blackout from our homes by boarding up the windows every night. World War II Blackout windows and home confinement are two sides of the same coin, I would argue. They both rely on the same notion: The British house as a sealed black box, whose outside boundaries can be thickened to better conceal and preserve the nation and the individual lives within.

In my Edinburgh research, the house cannot be theorised as a safe black box. People I met fought against threats of

eviction, or felt insecure in temporary housing with little to no cooking facilities, finding uncomfortable reflections of their positions in society. Anthropologists show that houses are metaphor, symbol, idiom, but also process, substance, structure. If the State expects and relies on the house to become the workplace, the school, or the clinic in times of crisis, this pandemic reveals more than ever the State's moral obligation to ensure good living conditions within our cities. And if the (nuclear family) house is also to be a technology of preparedness in case of future pandemics, we need to think of those who are excluded from its imagined and physical walls.

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