A Phenomenology of Inhabitation: The Lived Reciprocity Between Houses and Inhabitants as Portrayed by American Writer Louis Bromfield

DAVID SEAMON
Kansas State University

INTRODUCTION

One aim of phenomenology is to examine peoples' existential relationship with the world in which they find themselves, including its environmental and architectural aspects.[1] Phenomenological research emphasizes that an integral part of this existential relationship is the home, inhabitation, and at-homeness: "All really inhabited space," wrote French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1964, p. 4), "bears the essence of the notion of home."

In his *Poetics of Space*, one of the earliest phenomenologies of homes and inhabitation, Bachelard used an approach he called *topoanalysis*—"the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (ibid., p. 8). In the last three decades, topoanalysis has continued as phenomenological and other qualitative researchers have examined the wide range of supportive or debilitating ways in which people, houses, and inhabitation commingle existentially.[2]

This paper contributes to topoanalysis by examining houses and inhabitation portrayed by the American novelist and agricultural writer Louis Bromfield (1896-1956). Though relatively unknown today, Bromfield was regarded in the 1920s as one of America's most promising young writers. During his literary career, Bromfield produced twenty-four novels, over a hundred short stories, and several volumes of non-fiction, including works on American agrarian reform.

In 1939 at the age of forty-two, Bromfield ended a fourteen-year sojourn in France and returned to his native rural Ohio to start one of America's most significant twentieth-century agricultural and ecological experiments: Malabar Farm, a 1,000-acre property in east-central Ohio. Here, Bromfield demonstrated that eroded and exhausted farmland could again be made productive, mostly through topsoil restoration. From 1945 until his death in 1956 at the age of fifty-nine, Bromfield documented his Malabar experiment in five best-selling, non-fiction volumes that included *Pleasant Valley* (Bromfield 1945) and *Malabar Farm* (Bromfield 1948).[3]

A pivotal theme in Bromfield's writings and personal life was the lived relationship between human beings and the world in which they find themselves. On one hand, Bromfield emphasized that people play a role in shaping their world, but he also recognized, on the other hand, that the particular world in which people find themselves significantly makes them who they are and what they become.

One way in which Bromfield explored the lived relationship between people and their world was in accounts of the interconnections between houses and their inhabitants. Regularly in his writings, Bromfield depicted a lived reciprocity whereby house and inhabitants mutually afford and reflect each other, sometimes in positive ways that facilitate engagement and care; at other times in negative ways that intimate or spur personal or social dissolution. Drawing on Bromfield's writings, I examine his understanding of the lived reciprocity between houses and inhabitants.

HOUSES AND INHABITANTS

"[T]here are few things in life more interesting and revealing than the houses in which people live," Bromfield (1945, pp. 73-74) wrote in the *Pleasant*

Valley chapter describing the construction of what came to be called the "Big House," where he and his family eventually lived at Malabar Farm.

Designed by Ohioan architect Louis Lamoreux in collaboration with architectural historian I.T. Frary and Bromfield, This predominantly Greek Revival structure "was built the way a house should be built, bit by bit as we went along" (ibid., p. 73). More so, Bromfield believed that, if a house is to facilitate well being for its inhabitants, it must project a sense of living presence: "A house must, like the soil, be a living thing or it is nothing at all but walls and roof and cellar" (ibid.).

In speaking of the house as a "living thing," Bromfield pointed toward an invisible ambience that is much more sensed than seen and composed as much of a house's physicality as it is of the human experiences, situations, and events unfolding in and through the house. Bromfield suggested that, on one hand, the particular character of inhabitants affords a particular ambience evoked by their home:

> There is a kind of aura about every house I have ever entered, so strong that I believe I could tell you a great deal about the owners after ten minutes spent within the walls—whether the wife was dominant, whether the family was happy or unhappy, and almost exactly the degree of education and culture and knowledge of the person who built and furnished and lived in it" (ibid.).

On the other hand, though the character and quality of the inhabitants shape their house, the house contributes to the character, experience, and world of the inhabitants, partly through its nature as a physical thing and partly through the history of earlier inhabitants who have found comfort or discomfort there:

> Houses affect the lives and the character and happiness of people who live in them as much as all these things affect the houses themselves. I know of houses which have caused divorces and deformed the lives of children growing up in them, because they were badly planned for the personalities of the people who have occupied them. I know that almost any reader who has lived in many houses has had the experience of hating certain houses, partly because of the aura left by predecessors and partly because of the stupidity or harshness of the house itself (ibid., pp. 74-75).

A BASQUE FARMHOUSE

One of Bromfield's most encompassing portrayals of the lived reciprocity between house and inhabitants is his 1939 short story, "The Hand of God," in which an American narrator, living winters in France and, in many ways, Bromfield himself, documents the defilement of a graceful Basque farmhouse overlooking the tiny fishing village of Salasso on northeastern Spain's Bay of Biscay, just a short distance from the French border (Bromfield 1939, pp. 224-56). Eventually, the farmhouse is desecrated and destroyed by people who, for Bromfield, represent the very worst of human nature.

Hidden by a hollow on a moor above the bay, the house is protected and solitary, making "a world of its own, high above the sea with the walls of mountains sheltering it from unfriendly north winds" (ibid.). Built in the vernacular style of the region, the house has a low, sweeping roof of red tiles, plastered walls, and large windows with shutters opening to balconies with flower boxes of petunias, climbing geraniums, and convolvulus. On the second floor is a "marvelous big room" where the narrator dines and sits over evening coffee, enjoying the views of sea and mountains.

Early on in the story, the narrator describes the spontaneous sense of contentment, pleasure, and ease he feels when he first discovers the house one day accidentally as he walks his dogs on the moor above the sea. He notices a "low friendly hedge" enclosing a large garden in the midst of which is a small farmhouse "close to the earth, bound to it by bonds of clematis and roses and the lovely sky-blue morning glory…" (ibid., p. 225).

The narrator had been searching for a house near the sea to rent for the summer, and, the moment he sees the farmhouse, he knows it had been lived in by people who have loved it. Happily, he thinks, "This is my house. I am the successor to the man who loved it" (ibid., p. 226). The narrator remembers earlier houses in which he had planned to spend just a season but then lived there for years "because there was something… which I had been seeking, sometimes without knowing it at all" (ibid., p. 224).

For the narrator, this "something" is peace, which, of all things in life, he believes, is the most difficult to find: "one needs peace to return to. One knows at once when there is peace in a house" (ibid.). The narrator immediately recognizes that

the Basque farmhouse has "peace and dignity and beauty and age" (ibid., p. 225). All houses have personalities, and the quality of peace is central to the Basque farmhouse's:

> There are houses which are cold and empty, houses which are malicious, others which are friendly, others dignified, and some, perhaps the best of all, are disheveled and merry…. The moment you came into [the Basque farmhouse], out of the hot sunshine into the cool of its big tiled entrance hall, you were aware of its personality, and the longer you stayed there, the more you knew that this was a house in which charming people had lived, people who were simple and knew the things in life which had value and those which had not (ibid., pp. 226-27).

"A PLACE WHICH GROWS ABOUT THE HEART"

Why does this particular house have such a powerful ambience? Partly its presence is strong, says the narrator, because the house is very old and the home place of generation after generation of Basques who "had gone off to places like Brooklyn and Buenos Ayres to make their fortunes and to return at last to die between the mountains and the sea" (ibid., p. 225). Most recently, the house had been owned by Monsieur André, who loved and cared for the house until he died, leaving the dwelling to his widow, who would rent but not sell the property because she wished to return to the house to die. "It is a place," she writes to the narrator, "which grows about the heart" (ibid., p. 226).

When the narrator first moves into the house with his wife and children, the villagers of Salasso distrust him because they fear he will change the old house and desecrate Monsieur André's memory. By the end of the second summer, however, the villagers become friendly, recognizing that the narrator has "changed nothing, only striving to keep the place as it had always been…." (ibid.).

From the villagers, the narrator learns about Monsieur André—how he had arrived forty years before to buy the farmhouse from a Basque family who had lived there since the dwelling was built in 1657. Monsieur André had changed nothing, and that, said the villagers, "was right. Monsieur André belonged there. He had the feeling of the place. God looks after such things" (ibid., p. 227). Over time, as the narrator comes to feel a deeper and deeper attachment for the house and its garden, he senses the invisible presence of Monsieur André: "I knew that he was there beside me enjoying the peace, drinking it in, savoring it, as I was doing." (ibid., p. 230).

The narrator emphasizes that this presence is not some fantastical conjuring of ghosts, in which he does "not believe or disbelieve" (ibid.). Rather, he suggests that past and present love of place interpenetrates, through an ineffable realm that is real experientially. He speaks of his strong faith "in the presence of the past and the sense of being and continuity which lies in old houses and gardens" (ibid.). The gratitude of place, in being cared for, gives thanks through the "friendly presence" of earlier caretakers: "Perhaps it was that in that corner, so ancient and undefiled and full of peace, the presence found it simple and easy to speak to me. Perhaps it knew that I was grateful" (ibid.).

The manner of relationship that the narrator and Monsieur André have with the Basque farmhouse is further clarified through a contrast with another of the story's characters—the narrator's friend Dalambure, a journalist who writes "bitter books and inflammatory articles for the Paris newspapers" (ibid., p. 231). Though born in a village near Salasso, the journalist is said by the narrator to have "never properly belonged" (ibid.). Dalambure suffers from "a certain restlessness and discontent"; the narrator is always irritated when the journalist visits his Basque farmhouse but seemed "unaware of the beauty and peace of the place" (ibid.).

The narrator has little sympathy for Dalambure because he has "little sense of *things*, and very little sentiment" (ibid., p. 233). Dalambure had no emotional warmth and "almost no sensual contact with life. He was very nearly all brain and so he was always alone" (ibid.). His house is as much a reflection of himself as the Basque farmhouse is a reflection of Monsieur André:

> … a gaunt house, plain and undistinguished, which by accident had a picturesque view of the canal and the harbor, although I am certain Dalambure had never noticed the view and would have been quite as content if there had been only a blank wall opposite him. It was furnished with the necessities of life and nothing in it had any charm or personality…. His concern was wholly with ideas and so to him my obsession with the house of Monsieur André was merely absurd and foolish (ibid.).

A HOUSE DESECRATED

Having rented the farmhouse for five summers, the narrator and his family must suddenly leave for America, though he hopes in time to return, perhaps purchasing the farmhouse from Monsieur André's widow. After four years away, the narrator makes plans to return to Salasso and writes Dalambure for news about Monsieur André's widow and the farmhouse. Dalambure replies that the widow died three years ago and the house has been sold to the Onspenskis, an unscrupulous husband and wife who swindle unsuspecting investors and symbolize, for Bromfield, human beings who are so rapacious and despicable that they coarsen and obliterate everything with which they come in contact.

Even though Dalambure warns the narrator that the farmhouse is changed in ways he will not like, he makes an appointment with the Onspenskis, thinking he can buy it back and undo the changes: "The memory of it had grown about my spirit as the old vines had grown over the house" (ibid., p. 232).

As he approaches the house on his return, he realizes immediately that "something awful had happened" (ibid., p. 242): "The house was no longer there, or rather the old house had been so changed that it was difficult any longer to recognize it" (ibid.). The flowering hedge surrounding the farmhouse had been replaced with a high concrete wall that eliminated the garden's magnificent views of sea, sky, and mountains; shutters, balconies, and flower boxes had been removed; the old plaster walls had been violated "with wide sheets of glass and harsh window frames of steel"; the orchard and kitchen garden had been destroyed, replaced by an "ugly red tennis court" (ibid., p. 243).

Worst of all, the ugly wall around the garden had destroyed its visual and social links with the immediate vicinity: The garden had degenerated from "an open friendly place from which one might see the heads of one's neighbors as they passed along the hedge into a prison, barren and bleak" (ibid.).

As the narrator leaves, Madame Onspenski asks him how he likes the changes to the house. He looks at her, "wondering that there were people in the world of so little taste and sensibility" and then replies, "Madame, you have murdered a house" (ibid.).

After leaving, he walks the moor, thinking of Monsieur André. Dalambure's old cook, reputed by the villagers to be a witch, has already told the narrator that Monsieur André is no longer happy and that she has met him at night "wandering in the village" because he is now homeless (ibid., p. 239). The narrator concludes she is probably right, since "his 'tiny paradise' [had been] destroyed" (ibid., p. 243).

The narrator never returns to the Basque farmhouse, and the rest of Bromfield's story details the Onspenskis' exploits and eventual ruin in an insurance scandal that leads to their gruesome deaths. "If they had escaped the Hand of God a dozen times," explains the narrator, "it had fallen at last with an awful vengeance" (ibid., p. 256). As for the Basque farmhouse, the narrator explains that it had a succession of short-term tenants until it was purchased by a Greek syndicate that converted it into a restaurant and "house of assignation."

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF INHABITATION

How, phenomenologically, might one interpret the lived relationship between inhabitants and houses as portrayed in Bromfield's short story? A first point is the powerful way in which his account substantiates the dialectical aspect of the relationship: Qualities of inhabitants sustain qualities of house, which in turn sustain qualities of inhabitants. One can apply the phenomenological insight of psychologist Bernd Jager (1985):

> A house…, when properly inhabited, not merely remains something seen; it itself becomes a source of vision and light according to which we see…. To enter and finally to come to inhabit a house… means to come to assume a certain stance, to surrender to a certain style of acting upon and of experiencing the surrounding world…. (pp. 218-19).

The Basque farmhouse, in the very first moments in which the narrator encountered it, instantaneously projected its ambience of serenity and comfort, which the narrator would come to safeguard by taking care of the property and allowing it to remain what it was. Through the narrator's "surrendering" to the style of being that the pres-

ence of the house evoked, he engaged with and so inhabited the house, which became an integral part of his daily life and pleasures. From Jager's perspective, one could say that the farmhouse became the "source of vision" as inhabitant and house readily fell in synch—an emotional, synergistic conjoining poignantly described by Monsieur André's widow as "a place which grows around the heart."

If the narrator's inhabitation of the Basque farmhouse illustrates how this lived reciprocity between inhabitant and house evolved in a positive, sustaining way, the situations of Dalabure and the Onspenskis illustrate how the lived reciprocity can devolve and undermine people and place. Restless, discontented, and dominated by his intellect, Dalabure manifested a stance toward his world that responded through a house that was plain, gaunt, and impersonal. "He never properly belonged," says the narrator, because Dalabure could not fully engage with his world—unaware, for instance, of the "beauty and peace" of the Basque farmhouse.

The most flagrant example of a devolving relationship between inhabitants and house is the insidious Onspenskis, who were not only ignorant of the farmhouse's uniqueness but transmogrified its grace and beauty into hideousness. Their self-centered, grasping stance toward the world annihilated a place. "You have murdered a house," the narrator rightly accuses Madame Onspenski.

Bromfield's short story points to one other important dimension of a phenomenology of inhabitation: The lived ways in which physical and built qualities contribute to or undermine the inhabitant-house relationship. As demonstrated by the vernacular features of the Basque farmhouse, these qualities may be sustentative—the farmhouse's protected and secluded site; its sheltered placement in relation to north winds; its low friendly hedge and large garden supporting neighborly sociability; its large windows with shutters opening to balconies with fine views of sea and mountains.

These architectural and environmental features contribute to the serenity and enjoyment of the place by affording exhilarating encounters and situations automatically unfolding in and around the house through the taken-for-granted course of everyday life—for example, coming in from the hot sunshine to the cool of the big tiled entrance hall; or lying on the balcony at night, looking up at the stars.

The farmhouse's physical features and associated environmental experiences allow the narrator, in Jager's words, "to surrender to a certain style of acting upon and of experiencing the surrounding world." The particular environmental and architectural physicality of the place contributes to the narrator's style of being; his daily life is indebted to the farmhouse because it contributes so much to what that daily life is. The result is a world that is comfortable and gracious architecturally and environmentally.

On the other hand, the Onspenskis' disconnectedness with the farmhouse leads to the inappropriate physical and built changes that unsettle and destroy the singularity of the place: plaster walls replaced by glass sheets; shutters and balconies removed; orchard and garden converted to tennis court; the high concrete wall destroying neighborly contact and garden views.

In this situation, the farmhouse can no longer be a "source of vision" because the Onspenskis do not have the organ "to see," nor do they have the sensibility or refinement to "to surrender" to the place. Their crippling, oafish character rebuffs and suffocates the farmhouse's hospitable ambience; through their obtuseness and willfulness, they extinguish the magic and wonder of the place.

In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1964, p. 4) argued that, in doing topoanalysis, the aim is to understand "how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world'. For our house is our corner of the world…. it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world." Bachelard demonstrated that one venue for topoanalysis is phenomenological interpretation of artistic media, whether painting, poetry, novels, or the like.
In this paper, I've drawn on one short story by Bromfield to examine some topoanalytic topics and themes. Though phrased in a language that is literary and imaginative rather than conceptual and discursive, Bromfield's story of the Basque farmhouse, when examined phenomenologically, is valuable exactly because the account arises

from situations and events with which readers can readily identify and thereby grasp. Through the concreteness of life portrayed imaginatively, one better understands Jager's contention that:

> To enter and come to inhabit a place fully means to redraw the limits of our bodily existence to include that place—to come to incorporate it and to live it henceforth as ground of revelation rather than as panorama. An environment seen thus is transformed into a place which opens a perspective to the world (Jager 1985, p. 220).

ENDNOTES

1. On phenomenology and its relevance to architecture, see Casey 1997; Dovey 1993; Graumann 2002; Harries 1993; Mugerauer 1994; Seamon 1993, 2000; Seamon & Mugerauer 1985.

2. Exemplary work includes: Altman & Werner 1985; Barbey 1989; Blunt & Dowling 2005; Boschetti 1993; Chawla 1995; Cooper Marcus 1995; Harries 1993; Heidegger 1971; Jager 1975, 1985; Korosec-Serfaty 1984; Norberg-Schulz 1985; Olivier 1977; Pallasmaa 2005; Relph 1976; Seamon 1979; Seamon 1993; Seamon & Mugerauer 1985.

3. On Bromfield's life and work, see Anderson 1964; Scott 1998. On the Malabar experiment and Bromfield's contribution to ecology, sustainable agriculture, and place studies, see Anderson 1997; Beeman 1992; Beeman & Pritchard 2001, pp. 49-53; Little 1988; Seamon forthcoming. On houses in Bromfield's fiction, see Bratton 1999.

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