

Making space in the country house: practice, performance and plans

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Introduction

The country house is often seen as fixed and permanent: a stable space, produced to a blue print that, once manifest in stone and plaster, remained largely unchanged. As Girouard argues, it was both a reflection and expression of the power of its owner, imprinting their status and identity onto the landscape in complex, but essentially uncomplicated ways. Read in this way, the country house is all about status and taste, but it also gave its owner, and the landowning classes more generally, 'a sense of identity, of achievement, and of permanence'.¹ In reality, the situation was rarely this straightforward. I have argued elsewhere that 'viewing the great house as the embodiment of social and cultural capital places emphasis on *outcomes* and often overlooks the *processes* of consumption'.² It also ignores the constant flux which characterised any house, but particularly those of the landed elite. Flows of people, goods, capital and knowledge ran into, out from and through the house, producing and reproducing space as they went.

In this way, space can be seen as both the product of human activity and the active context in which that activity took place.³ Such arguments have been rehearsed in many contexts over the last twenty years or so, mostly by geographers but increasingly by historians who took the spatial turn. Yet attention has largely focused on urban rather than domestic space, and the country house has yet to be explored through such ideas. In this paper, then, I want to address this lacuna, drawing in particular on the ideas of Henri Lefebvre, who posited a so-called 'trialectics of spatiality'.⁴ This comprised *lived space*, produced by routine and everyday practices; *representations of space*, which are conceived, codified and planned by elites and professionals; and *spaces of representation*, in which the individual rather than society is reflected and which are often associated with attempts to subvert dominant spatial practices and spatialities.

Representation of space

In many ways, the country house as an integrated unit can be viewed as a *representation of space*; carefully planned in terms its architecture, layout and decoration, it was consciously conceived as the supreme spatial expression of power. The conscious, even self-conscious, processes of production are most obvious in the plans and designs prepared by architects and often reproduced in published volumes such as Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* or Gibbs' *Book of Architecture*. In these, and in the finished edifices themselves, we see the importance of scale, proportion, style and setting, all of which were carefully chosen to produce specific and deliberate effects. Shifts in architectural tastes are thus, in part at least, an attempt to renew the value of symbolic capital and project the owner as a man of taste and power.

Inside, both the arrangement and decoration of rooms reflect the same conscious production of space as power – a process most obvious in State Apartments. These were overt statements of royal and aristocratic power, differential access as well as the spaces themselves making abundantly clear both the ultimate seat of power and the individual's position in relation to this. Thus, at Chatsworth for example, we have the series of Great Dining Chamber, Ante-chamber, Withdrawing Chamber, Bedchamber and Closet; distinguished in terms of privacy, access and power, but linked by the enfilade and a common decorative scheme. Indeed, Cornforth makes much of the ways in which different sets of rooms were characterised by their own modes of

decoration: state apartments being constructed as markers of family and social status in part through the luxurious nature of their furnishings, but also through the frequent deployment of the symbols of lineage.⁵ At Stoneleigh Abbey, for instance, the Great Apartment, built in the 1720s for the third Lord Leigh, is lined throughout with stylar wainscoting, with heavy Corinthian pilasters, the capitals of which carry the Leigh family crests.

Lord Leigh had the advantage of several generations of titled ancestors, but the absence of these was not necessarily a bar to building lineage into the fabric of the house. Edward Dryden inherited the house and estate of Canons Ashby, but not the baronetcy. Nonetheless, he punctuated his remodelled house with coats of arms and invented a new motto for the family: 'Ancient as the Druids'. More importantly in the context of this paper, he constructed the Hall as a space which communicated lineage and permanence. Originally a plain room furnished only with a few benches and trestles, Dryden transformed it into a pseudo-medieval great hall replete with a varied armoury of weapons and hung with a banner of the Kings Arms.⁶ The scale may be modest, but the ambition is apparent: space being shaped to construct a particular image of the owner as established, both as landowner and member of the titled elite.

Space within the country house could also be moulded to reflect and reinforce internal divisions of power. This is most apparent in the growing move to situate servants at the spatial margins of the house, initially in garrets and basements, and later in semi-detached wings. This is nicely illustrated at Kelmars Hall in Northamptonshire, where the domestic offices were located in the basement of the main house, whilst the indoor and outdoor servants were housed in matching wings. Kelmars was designed without that other great marker and maker of social divides: the service corridor; but it does have a tunnel linking the basement store rooms and pantries with the separate laundry block. Such spaces served to structure behaviour and relationships within the country house. They did much to define the geographical bounds of servants' daily lives and projected the house as a model of modern, rational space. Yet it would be a mistake to take plans at face value (there was almost always a distinction between what was planned and what was built) or to assume that these alone shaped the country house; it was also produced through the everyday lives of its occupants.

Lived space

Goffman has argued that 'the self [is] a performed character', projected through preconceived self-conscious performances enacted on 'front stage' spaces which, in some ways, equate with the *representations of space* discussed above.⁷ State apartments, for example, might be viewed as stages for the performance of family and lineage, or of royal allegiance. Equally, as rooms of parade, they formed part of the staging of the self as a wealthy and tasteful collector.⁸ Yet in each case, the nature of the performance was as important as the space in which it took place; indeed, some state apartments were rarely frequented: the empty stage creating meanings and identities that had little need for living actors.

There are problems, of course, with Goffman's conception of the self as performed, and thus with his dramaturgical metaphor. Many view identity as being produced iteratively, through everyday and habitual behaviour; a perspective which meshes more closely with Lefebvre's notion of *lived space*.⁹ Testing this relationship is no easy matter, as the mundane routines of day-to-day life in the country house remain surprisingly under-researched; but one key point of entry into this world is the idea of comfort. Crowley has argued that 'physical comfort – self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one's body and its immediate physical environment –

was an innovative aspect of eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture'; one that supplanted emotional comfort in the minds and lives of broad swathes of society.¹⁰ This growing obsession was manifest in the greater use of bell-pulls, water closets, lamps, stoves and upholstery, items which increasingly filled the country house.¹¹ It also meant employing servants and spending large sums on cleaning, heating and maintaining the fabric of the house. Indeed, servants form an essential, but often neglected, part of the *lived spaces* of the country house: they underpinned its operation and were an important element in its socio-spatial relationships.

Concern with comfort, and its material manifestations, thus helped to make and remake space within the country house, filling it with new fittings and furniture. Something of this can be seen in the purchases and correspondence of Richard Neville, the early nineteenth century owner of Audley End in Essex.¹² He spent considerable sums on upholstery, organised his wife's rooms as a 'large South apartment' (of which he wrote that 'I never saw so comfortable a room'¹³), and continued his predecessor's moves to introduce stoves into many rooms of the house – a desire to be warm and snug ringing through much of his personal correspondence. Yet it is clear that Neville was also concerned with emotional comfort – feeling 'at home' and comfortable in this house. He wrote in 1804 of the pleasure of being with family, enjoying the companionship of friends and pursuing his own interests: we 'generally stay in the Saloon till two & we never want for conversation, & from two till dinner, I have as you know plenty of occupations'.¹⁴ This echoes the sentiments expressed a decade earlier by Mary Leigh, who noted that: 'my garden is in perfection and my new rooms pretty, I think worth seeing', and that she had been 'wonderfully engaged in receiving and paying visits'.¹⁵ It also reflects the preoccupations of elite women explored by Lewis, each of whom was active in making their house into a home that was moulded around their emotional comfort.¹⁶

This moulding of the country house by everyday concerns and behaviour often involved the acquisition of new goods, but it also meant reusing and rearranging existing items. At Stoneleigh Abbey, Mary Leigh in particular was active in moving furniture between different rooms to create the right environment in which to accommodate guests and enjoy their company in a relaxed and informal manner. The Breakfast Room and Dining Parlour, which formed the main reception rooms in the house, were augmented with pieces taken from several other rooms including a piano-forte, two backgammon tables, two card tables and four small work tables. Such changes were driven by the growing informality of heterosocial domestic entertainment noted by Girouard and others.¹⁷ In these ways and many others (not least the routines and practices of servants) the mundane and everyday shaped the country house as domestic space, refining the conceived spaces of architect's plans, often through incremental change. At the same time, these *lived spaces* merged with and were in turn challenged by *spaces of representation* which often shifted the meaning of space.

Spaces of representation

One aspect of this is the desire on the part of some owners that their house should reflect their personality rather than the tastes and mores of society as a whole. In some cases, this preoccupation affected the whole house, as might arguably be seen at Strawberry Hill and Arbury Hall – both gothic-inspired confections created at a time when neo-Palladianism was dominant. More often, *spaces of representation* can be found within the house. Libraries and galleries of paintings or sculpture might be seen in this light, but in reality they were much more often a badge of status and taste than a reflection of individual character and interests. There were

exceptions, of course; at Canons Ashby, Sir Henry Dryden created a museum room in the 1840s, not to display treasures from across the globe, but to house his collection of archaeological remains acquired in excavations in the surrounding countryside. These were augmented with hundreds of carefully drawn pictures of the minutiae of his domestic surroundings, from finials on curtain rails to the drains in the kitchen. This museum was created in a room previously used as a withdrawing room, the walls of which were painted with tromp l'oeil panelling and pilasters.¹⁸ Its new use transformed both the fabric and meaning of the room in a way that was perhaps more profound, but similar in essence to some of the changes made by the women studied by Lewis. These often focused on personal belongings such as gifts from friends or patrons or mementos of earlier, even childhood homes.¹⁹

These changes were hardly what Lefebvre had in mind when he wrote the *Production of Space*. His *spaces of representation* were more subversive and political: citizens reclaiming and remaking urban space in their own image. Yet there were ways in which the conceived space of the country house was challenged by occupants, visitors and others. One slightly facile example comes from Cassandra Austen, who wrote to her sister Jane during a visit to Stoneleigh Abbey in the early years of the nineteenth century:

‘On the left hand of the hall is the best drawing-room and within a smaller one [the Great Apartment]. These rooms are rather gloomy with brown wainscot and dark crimson furniture, so we never use them except to walk through to the old picture gallery. Behind the smaller drawing-room is the state-bedchamber an alarming apartment, with its high, dark crimson velvet bed, just fit for an heroine’.

The Great Apartment was neither revered as a symbol of lineage nor occupied as room of parade; instead it was a corridor and the imagined space of a gothic drama. More profound was the way in which servants compromised and subverted the intended meanings of the country house. In some ways, their mere presence was problematic – hence the attempts to carve out service corridors and install bell systems – but they also opened up the possibility of transgression. Owners were worried about the physical integrity of the house and its security, especially at night, which could all-too-easily be compromised by a careless or dishonest servant. And there was also a concern about the illegitimate use of spaces within the house: for idling, gambling or sexual liaisons.

Even more profound in their impact on the fabric and meaning of the country house were the contents sales which sometimes followed the death or departure overseas of the owner. These sales often involved the complete clearance of certain rooms or even the whole house, a process of unmaking space which has yet to be properly explored.²⁰ The removal of furniture in this way unpicked the spatial, social and symbolic relationship between the house and its contents. In most cases, of course, new goods were acquired to replace those being sold (indeed, this was sometimes the whole point of the exercise), but this meant restitching the fabric of the house to integrate new and old, taste and lineage, fashion and patina. Moreover, the sale itself compromised the integrity and meaning of the house: treasured possessions, sometimes with strong family associations, were commodified and made available to the highest bidder. Thus, for example, the state bed from Fonthill Abbey ended up as a theatre prop on the Bristol stage – the setting for Desdemona’s denouement.²¹ And, of course, with sales taking place in situ, the country house was thrown open to anyone with the time and curiosity to wander through its rooms. Practically everywhere could be accessed, from state apartments to servants’ garrets, each space acting as a showroom for the goods on offer.

Conclusions

Exploring the country house through Lefebvre's spatial trialectic is in some ways a rather artificial and heavy-handed process. Yet a full understanding of the country house requires us to look at it from a variety of perspectives and not simply as the product of an architect's vision or a landowner's ambition to communicate taste and power. Of course, these were of fundamental importance in shaping the country house, but so too were the routines of everyday life, and the related concerns of physical and emotional comfort. Cutting across these were other processes and other constructions of the country house, from the etching of personality into the fabric, to its remaking as a commercial space during auctions. The country house was thus produced in multiple and overlapping ways: it was a space of power and status, but also of sociability and domesticity, and of subversion and consumption.

Notes

¹ M. Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New haven, 1978), 1-13; G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1963), 209.

² J. Stobart, 'Gentlemen and shopkeepers: supplying the country house in eighteenth-century England', *Economic History Review*, 64 (2011), 885.

³ E. Soja, 'Reassertions: towards a spatialised ontology', in J. Agnew, D. Livingstone and A. Rogers (eds) *Human Geography: an Essential Anthology* (Oxford, 1996), 685.

⁴ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991).

⁵ Girouard, *English Country House*, 152-5; J. Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors* (New Haven, 2004), ??.

⁶ Stobart, 'Inventories and the changing furnishings of Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, 1717-1819', *Regional Furniture*, xxvii (2013), p.16.

⁷ E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1956), 252.

⁸ Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*.

⁹ See, for example, J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 2000); P. Glennie and N. Thrift, 'Consumers, identities and consumption spaces in early-modern England', *Environment and Planning A*, 28 (1996), 25-45.

¹⁰ J. Crowley, 'From Luxury to Comfort and Back Again: Landscape Architecture and the Cottage in Britain and America', in M. Berg and E. Eger, eds, *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, Palgrave Macmillan (Basingstoke) 2007, p. 135. See also J. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort. Sensibilities and Design in Early-Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore, 2010)

¹¹ Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, 245-66; Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, ??; J. Cornforth, *English Interiors 1790-1848: The Quest for Comfort*, Barrie & Jenkins (London, 1978).

¹² H. Waugh, 'Material culture and the country house: fashion, comfort and lineage', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Northampton (2014), chapter 3.

¹³ Buckinghamshire Record Office, D/EZ6 C1/1, f. 116 – quoted in Waugh, 'Material culture and the country house'.

¹⁴ F Record Office, GG15 –quoted in Waugh, 'Material culture and the country house'.

¹⁵ SCLA, DR671, 22 August 1790 and 12 September 1791.

¹⁶ J. Lewis, 'When a house is not a home: elite English women and the eighteenth-century country house,' *Journal of British Studies*, 48:2 (2009).

¹⁷ Girouard, *Life in the Country House*, 238; J. Robinson, *The Regency Country House* (London, 2012), 15-16; K. Lipsedge, *Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century British Novels*, Palgrave Macmillan (Basingstoke, 2012).

¹⁸ Stobart, 'Inventories and the changing furniture of Canons Ashby'.

¹⁹ Lewis, 'When a house is not a home', 346-7

²⁰ R. MacArthur and J. Stobart, 'Going for a song: country house sales in Georgian England', in J. Stobart and I. Van Damme (eds) *Modernity and the Second-Hand Trade* (London, 2010), 175-95.

²¹ R. Gemmett, "'The tinsel of fashion and the gewgaws of luxury": the Fonthill sale of 1801', *The Burlington Magazine*, CL (2008), 381-8.