Building a sense of home in rented spaces

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Abstract

Purpose – Much of the research into the development of home within the business literature has looked at home as a setting or a construct instead of as a process. Additionally, extant research has explored the process of homebuilding within the context of homeownership, often defining home in terms of a place that is owned by the individual living in it. However, nearly 30 percent of all housing units in which people live are rented spaces that are owned by others not living there. The purpose of this paper is to examine homebuilding as a process that can and often does occur in properties that the individual does not own.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews with renters lead to the development of a conceptual model of how renters build a sense of "home."

Findings – The paper finds that though ownership does play a part in some individuals' sense of home, apartment dwellers often are able to build a "home" within an apartment context.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations of the research include the small sample size; however, the process resulting from a small size may be used to develop hypotheses for future quantitative research.

Practical implications – The process outlined here may provide apartment communities and managers with insight into how they may retain tenants.

Originality/value – This paper focuses on an understanding of home that removes the notion of ownership from its definition, providing insight into how consumers build a sense of home in places they may not be able to physically alter.

Keywords Housing, Qualitative methods, Consumer behavior, Individual psychology, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Conventional wisdom holds that it is better to own a home than any other option because the home then becomes an investment that affords people a great deal of flexibility in their future financial options; however, that same conventional wisdom has helped to bring about the recent housing crisis. Almost nightly on the various news programs we see that the housing market has taken a direct hit in this economic downturn, leading to high numbers of house foreclosures, loss of equity, bank closings, and various US government recovery plans. Yet, despite the recent crisis, driving up home ownership is still touted as a cure for the nation's ills, returning individuals to the safety and comfort of owning their home.

Most marketing practitioners would have us believe that ownership is a requirement for the creation of home. Presidents and economists rank levels of home ownership as important markers of how the US economy is progressing. Culturally speaking, home ownership appears to be intimately tied to one's achievement of the American Dream. Social theorists have also echoed this concern with home ownership, examining how individuals build and adapt home environments to suit their particular needs and identities. Tognoli (1987, p. 661) includes as one of his six aspects of home the notion of ownership as it "signifies less permeable and inviolable boundaries than renting." Others such as Hayward (1975), Lawrence (1981), and Pynoos *et al.* (1973) have also examined the notion of ownership as an integral part of the conceptualization of home.

However, many people continue to be renters, either for economic reasons or for other reasons such as the need for a temporary home, age and lifestyle concerns, or

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simply because they would rather remain more "mobile" in the event of a relocation. The US Census Bureau (2009) reports that 36.5 million housing units (or 27.9 percent of all housing units) were being rented by the folks living in them. So, a significant portion of the American population – and more so the global population – lives within properties that they do not own; and quite possibly, these folks will never own the space in which they live. This suggests two basic questions: can people build a sense of home in spaces they do not own, and if so, how do they do so?

The answers to these questions would be of interest to a variety of practitioners and researchers alike. From a consumer research perspective, our research is informative to folks interested in how residents build a "sense of home" because this will impact the number of residential houses (and the type of houses) that transact in a particular housing market. Home construction industry personnel, especially those that specialize in multi-family housing, will be interested in the kinds of apartment features desired by residents looking to build a "sense of home" in rented spaces within certain housing markets. As such, the purpose of our paper is to examine individual's efforts at building a sense of home as a process that can and often does occur in properties the individual does not own. We do so by first providing a theoretical conceptualization of home and home-building as a process. After detailing our methodology, we provide the results of a number of in-depth interviews with people who live in rented spaces. These results led to the development of a conceptual model of home-building in rented spaces and our concluding thoughts.

2. A sense of home and home-building

Home is a complicated construct in that it is distinct from the physical structure within which it may be located; however, it is often used synonymously with a house. A house, as George Carlin (1981) cynically argues, "is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it." It is the physical dwelling that, Tognoli (1987, p. 656) suggests, exists in a public rather than a private sphere and "emphasizes an ultimately knowable set of physical and spatial parameters rather than the behavior of only one individual in one house." A house is a physical object, a collection of materials among which people live; a home, on the other hand is something much more. It is the experience of meaning associated with and within the physical construction, and it consists of the relationships that exist between persons inside and outside the home as well as between people and their dwellings (Dovey, 1985). As such, it is both a cognitive concept (Tognoli, 1987) and an affective relationship (Saile, 1985). In short, home is a concept that people possess. However, like a house or other structure in which people live, home must also be constructed by the individuals that possess it. The following section first provides an overview of a sense of home and how it is experienced and then proposes the processes that are involved in the construction of a sense of home.

A sense of home

Research in this area has often taken the view that home is a concept or a state of mind that we create and associate with a particular place; and as such, consumers may experience a sense of home as a feeling or a state of being. Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) conceptualize it in such a way, arguing that the home shelters not only material things but the meaningful things and relationships that we gather about us as well. Others have followed suit, demonstrating that home is also a place that is profoundly personal, harboring our identity and making us feel safe and secure (Gunter, 2000) as well as acting as a symbol of affluence and a definition of the self in

modern American culture (Hill, 1991). Furthermore, as Altman and Werner (1985) assert, homes are a center of our psychological development and grounding. As a state of mind, there are three essential properties of home identified by Dovey (1985): home as order, home as identity, and home as connectedness.

Home, as a conceptualization or state of mind experienced by the individual who lives within its bounds, is an ordered environment in which the individual is centered within a particular identity that then is nestled into different types of relationships with place, time, and social entities. The characteristics listed above, however, tell us quite a bit about what home is, but what do they tell us about how home is constructed? What do they tell us of the process that individuals go through to construct and maintain a sense of home within a particular environment? And through what process or processes do individuals build up the characteristics of home as order, identity, and connectedness? The simple answer to these questions is that the individual or individuals build order in the dwelling, integrate it with the identity, and continue to connect with the various relationships associated with home. But how do individuals do these things?

In an attempt to answer such questions, the individual characteristics of home can be reshuffled into certain constituent elements that are combined then into the characteristics described by Dovey (1985). First, there is the spatial element that deals with the space and place of home and how the individual situates him or herself within that place. Second, there is the temporal element that involves the individual in continuity of past, present, and future. And third, there is the social element that includes the individual's relationships with others both inside and outside the home. In the next section, we explore the process of building a sense of home through the three elements mentioned here.

Building a sense of home

A sense of home is generally viewed as a state of mind, but there are many notable exceptions where home is also viewed as something that is constructed much as one might construct a house or another type of dwelling. McCracken (2005) provides an explanation of the various physical and symbolic characteristics of *homeyness* and then explores how that homeyness is then used to construct meaning for the individual or family living within the home, manage, and contain status, and otherwise be used as part of the process of converting a dwelling into a home. In other words, as the individual makes a living space more *homey*, he or she may then be constructing a sense of home. Horwitz and Tognoli (1982, p. 339) declare that "home has been shown to be deeply related to people's sense of personal growth and changes – as a living process or a construction, but not as a fixed concept or place." Garvey (2001) examines how individuals represent the self through the arrangement and re-arrangement of furniture within the home, and others have looked at how a sense of home is built through everyday consumption (Hirsch, 1998; Miller, 1987; Petridou, 2001) and other ritualized activities (Saile, 1985).

It seems, then, that home is not just a concept but an end-state that is achieved through some process of home-building where we, as individuals or as part of some group, construct our home within some environment. As such, home is something that may, in fact, be a mobile thing that we can take with us when we vacate particular living spaces and set up temporary homes (Bardhi and Arnould, 2005) or even something that can extend beyond our immediate living environment into work spaces (Tian and Belk, 2005) or other locales. These studies suggest that the process of building home is not, as some theorists contend, tied to ownership of the property in

which the home is being constructed. What then are the elements of this process of home-building? Dividing the characteristics of home listed by Dovey (1985) into their constituent parts, the following environmental elements remain: the spatial, the temporal, and the relational.

Spatial. With the spatial element, the home is built – or possibly discovered (Gallagher, 2006) – within the confines of a physical space that individuals arrange and decorate so that they are situated within an ordered home. Individuals must construct that order by placing the self and possessions within that space. We propose that this order is developed through the various rituals of meaning transfer described by McCracken (1986) that include rituals of exchange, possession, and grooming. Rituals of exchange include the process of looking for, finding, and settling upon the living space one is to possess. Rituals of possession include such activities as situating furniture and decorations within the living areas, cleaning the new spaces, and expressing the self and/or family within that space. And finally, rituals of grooming include the long-term care and maintenance of the home space in which one chooses to live. Mixed among these ritual types are such activities as construction and dedication rites, home festivals, family or individual rites, domestic routines, and other activities that transform the physical environment of the living space into a warm and welcoming home (Saile, 1985).

Temporal. The long-term care of the home is also tied to a temporal element. According to Cuba and Hummon (1993a), the longer an individual lives within a space, the more attached that person becomes to the space and the more it contributes to the individual's sense of identity and home. Furthermore, the longer one lives within a given space, the more social ties within the community are developed (Sampson, 1988). This temporal element not only includes the length of time an individual lives within a location but also may include one's stage in the life-cycle. Studies suggest that the elderly have a clear sense of place attachment and identity (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b; Rowles, 1978; Rubenstein, 1987) and others have shown that young adults may not feel a sense of home, especially in apartments or non-owned dwellings as a result of still finding themselves intimately attached to the parental home (Horwitz and Tognoli, 1982).

Relational. Home is also about the relationships that are cultivated within the home. These include relations with family members who live both inside and outside the home, relations with neighbors and neighborhood, and relations with the community at large. In fact, Cuba and Hummon (1993a) contend that our sense of home is influenced by attachment to the larger community in which we live. But we also have to remember that home is a deeply personal place (Gunter, 2000) where we define our relationship with the self and express that relationship to others. In such a way, the home is an extension of the self (Belk, 1988) both in terms of the individual and the collective group of individuals that live within the space.

To this end, we propose that the process of building home involves a spatial process that orients the individual and his or her possessions in the dwelling through various activities of exchange, possession, and grooming. Though this spatial process may be enough to create a sense of home, it is often aided or enhanced by two additional factors: a temporal element associated with one's time spent in the dwelling as well as one's stage in the life-cycle and a relational element that consists of the various relationships the individual associates with home or experiences as the sense of home is constructed. We also contend that ownership of the property in which one lives is not a necessary feature of homebuilding. Before exploring these contentions in a consumer context, the next section provides an overview of the method.

3. Method

The paper utilizes a phenomenological approach to the study of homebuilding. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological approach to a study is one that seeks a description of the lived experiences that are common between all individuals experiencing a phenomenon. These descriptions emerge as themes that generally capture the universal essence of some human experience (van Manen, 1990) in terms of "what" is experienced and "how" it is experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, researchers are interested in what these experiences mean to and for the people who have them (Sayre, 2001). As such, it is as much philosophy as it is method (Goulding, 1999; Thompson *et al.*, 1990; van Manen, 1990). That being said, there are two basic traditions of phenomenology – hermeneutical and transcendental – that differ slightly in their philosophical underpinnings, requiring the researcher to specify the tradition to which he or she subscribes (Koch, 1995). The approach incorporated here is a hermeneutical one.

Van Manen (1990, p. 26) describes hermeneutical phenomenology as an interpretive process where the researcher "mediates between interpreted meanings and the thing toward which the interpretation points." The researcher essentially provides an interpretation of the lived experience instead of a simple description. For the most part, the existential-phenomenological framework discussed by Thompson *et al.* (1989, 1990) follows the hermeneutical approach with one major difference; the researchers include bracketing as a natural step in the methodology, envisioning it as an emic approach to the interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants.

In such studies, the patterns that are common between different individuals are allowed to emerge and blossom in order to better understand the phenomenon in question (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). As such, both emic and etic perspectives were adopted throughout the data collection and analysis process. As Hill (1992) notes, the emic perspective aims to understand the lived realities of the informants. This perspective guided the development of the interview guide used to discuss home and apartment living with our informants; and the etic perspective of utilizing a scientific approach to the analysis of the data informed our exploration of the data collected.

In order to explore the process of building home within rented spaces, each of the informants discussed his or her interpretation of home, his or her feelings about home and apartment living, and whether or not his or her apartment felt like a home. The bulk of these interviews took place in the informants' own apartments. The name of each person interviewed as well as other demographic information for each is also included in Table I. As is evident, several of our informants lived in rented spaces other than apartments (dorm rooms and a house); however, we speak mostly of our informants as apartment dwellers. We do so because of the similarity in our findings for dwellers in these different spaces. As such, when we speak of "apartment" in the text that follows, we use it as a general term meaning "rented space." Also, the names of each of our informants have been changed to protect their anonymity. None of our informants were compensated in any fashion; although they all seemed to enjoy talking about home and their recollections of home.

One of the limitations associated with this study, and indeed with much qualitative research, is the small sample size. A total of 14 individuals were interviewed for study, and though the study would benefit from additional interviews, the theoretical saturation point had already been reached given the research questions associated with this study. Theoretical saturation, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), is that point where additional data collection adds little to no new information to the conceptualization. That being said, we acknowledge that some researchers view the

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Pseudonym	Sex	Live with	Dwelling	Age
Arthur	Male	Alone	Apartment	36
Barbara	Female	Family	Apartment	23
Bruce	Male	Alone	Apartment	62
Carol	Female	Son	Apartment	23
Cassandra	Female	Alone	Apartment	31
Dianna	Female	Daughter	Apartment	25
Hal	Male	Alone	Apartment	41
Ivy	Female	Roommate	Dorm room	22
Kara	Female	Roommates	Apartment	22
Linda	Female	Roommates	Dorm room	22
Mia	Female	Alone	Apartment	27
Oliver	Male	Family	House	23
Selina	Female	Alone	Apartment	25
Tim	Male	Alone	Apartment	27

Table I.
Characteristics of
interviewed renters

small sample as problematic. However, in-depth interviews, like those conducted here, purposefully skew data collection toward depth and not breadth to answer the questions we pose here. The outcome is an advancement of the residential housing market literature in understanding the motivations of those who live in rented spaces.

Another shortcoming of this research (and, in fact, of any qualitative approach) as pointed out by Hill (1992) is the difficulty in maintaining the balance between objectivity and subjectivity when analyzing the data. This shortcoming may be evident within our dataset, for informants were initially recruited from people living in an apartment complex located in a mid-sized Midwestern city, a convenience sample of college students, and other apartment dwellers encountered throughout the course of the study. However, this provides a level of sensitivity to the research topic at hand, a sensitivity which Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 46) suggest "means having insight into, and being able to give meaning to, the events and happenings in data." To further increase the validity of the findings, a number of key informants were provided with a copy of the resulting text for feedback. The story that follows is the result.

4. Findings
We begin with an exploration of how the informants define their sense of home and then tell how they establish possession over the environment in which they live. They then speak of the temporal and relational elements that affect how they feel about the apartment. However, many of the informants also reveal that each of these processes alone and collectively may not necessarily lead to a sense of home in a rented space. The final portion of this section attempts to reconcile this seeming inadequacy and provide a process model of how home is built within an apartment setting.

Dwellers' sense of home
Before individuals can begin the process of building a sense of home, regardless of where they live, they should probably have a clear understanding of what their own sense of home is so that they can work towards that ideal as an overarching goal. As discussed, Dovey (1985) outlines three distinct properties as essential to an individual's conceptualization of home: order, identity, and connectedness.

Sensing home as order. In many interviews, the notion of home as order came across in terms of survival and safety. Bruce referred to his home as his "safe haven," Tim calls it a "refuge" from the external world, and Kara claims that home "should be a safe place." She continues:

> I think a sense of home [. . .] [should be] basically the basics, you know, survival. You've got a roof over your head, there's food in the fridge, the electricity's going, you know, the cable bill [. . .] not cable, the electric bill's been paid, stuff like that. That's what I think of when I think of my home.

For Kara, the order of home is encapsulated within the protection and sustenance it provides; but she also includes a sense of comfort in her sense of home as indicated by the verbal slip of having the cable bill paid. Others also argue that comfort is a necessary attribute of home. When asked what the word "home" means for her, Barbara answered "somewhere where you feel comfortable" and a place where she can have "happy feelings" because those who live there accept her. This is echoed by Oliver who thinks of home as having such high levels of comfort associated with it that it becomes difficult to actually describe that comfort. "It just feels right," he claims, "you know that's where you belong, it feels just right."

Sensing home as connectedness. Aside from feeling safe, secure, and comfortable in the environment, most informants felt that home required other people to be present for it to actually be considered a home. Otherwise, the dwelling was just a place in which to live. Hal thinks of a house with three people when he thinks of home, and Selina thinks of "the place where you have memories and where the closest people to you usually are." When relationships are involved, home is not even necessarily tied to a particular location as pointed out by Cassandra. "Home for me," she states, "is where people that I know and love and interact with and care about are. So those people can be in different locations." For Mia, who perhaps states it most succinctly, "home is where my family is."

Sensing home as identity. Not one of the informants listed here explicitly stated that home is a part of his or her identity or self; however, several individuals did indicate home was a place where one could allow the true self to emerge. Home, for Barbara, is "where you can be yourself." It is also the place where one has made his or her mark. When asked what the word home meant for her, Ivy's response was immediate:

> Where my toothbrush is [chuckles] [. . .] no, it's not like that really, though it feels like that sometimes because I've been travelling so much that I just try to make myself home whenever [. . .] where my toothbrush is.

What started as an off-handed remark that she intended to pass off as a joke actually became something very telling, indicating that it was not simply where her toothbrush is that is home for her but, rather, where she is. Bruce echoed this sentiment, claiming that "home is wherever I am. Home is not a place. It's not a structure. It's not a building. It's just wherever I am. Wherever I live, that's home." For both Bruce and Ivy, it seems, they are their home.

For the individuals in this study, their conceptualization of a sense of home did provide support for the three essential properties of home as outlined by Dovey (1985): order, identity, and connectedness. However, it also seems prudent to discuss what the informants did not say about home. When asked to define home, all of the informants listed here except for one did not associate home as necessarily involving a house or any other type of structure. Though home many not necessarily apply to the place an

individual currently occupies, the concept of home is not necessarily linked to a particular place or type of structure. Furthermore, not one of the informants mentioned legal ownership of the structure as necessary for home to be generated. The next section explores how these individuals built (or did not build) home within their apartments.

The spatial element: activities of exchange, possession, and grooming
Homebuilding generally begins with the spatial processes of taking and maintaining possession which helps to order the environment. As individuals living in apartments, our informants created order within the confines of a space that is inherently not their own. As Chevalier (1999, p. 86) reports, tenants in an apartment "must adapt to the flat and have to use their furniture and decorative objects. In this process of appropriation the flat is transformed into a home." Chevalier's statement is echoed by Arthur who laments his lack of complete control over the apartment: "I can't just drill holes in the wall. ... The landlord probably wouldn't like me too much." However, he still takes possession of the apartment as do other informants. This process of appropriation falls into three realms of domestic activities that parallel McCracken's (1986) rituals of exchange, possession, and grooming.

Activities of exchange. With apartments, as with any other abode, the process of building a sense of home – if it occurs at all – begins with the decision to sign a lease. This part of the process typically begins with the individual searching for a range of apartments that fits his or her criteria and then touring those apartments to see if the features there are suitable for his or her needs. As with houses, "they may be asking whether the property has the potential to cater for their personal privacy needs, or their needs to socialize, or their needs to show off their identity in idiosyncratic ways" (Gunter, 2000, p. xi). For Selina, she knew the apartment she lives in now was perfectly suited for her after that initial walk-through, stating that "I quickly walked through and I said I'll take it." For her, the process of home-building began with her first visit to the apartment, and it continued as she set up move-in dates and move-in help prior to actually moving in to the apartment. For Tim, the process of home-building also began as he was looking for an apartment. He states:

> It's right in the heart of mid-town which is a historic part of town [. . .] really nice architecture, live oaks, etc. It's seven minutes from downtown where I work. It's five minutes from the mall [. . .] three minutes from the interstate for easy access to anywhere else.

In addition, his apartment is an hour from his mother's house and a little less than that from his brother's family. An activity of exchange that Tim undertook was orienting the apartment in the center of his world so that he could be close to the other places that were and are important to him.

Activities of possession. As Chevalier (1999) intimates, the tenant must also appropriate the space in which he or she is to live, making it his or her own. In the case of apartments, individuals take possession of something that they do not inherently own. They do not necessarily have the permission to do with it what they will, and so they must make do with orienting their "stuff" and their "identity" within the confines laid out for them. The act of taking possession of a space may in fact be an act of extending the self (Belk, 1988) into that space, making it a part of the self. As we spread our possessions throughout the space, they serve as not only reminders and confirmers of identity (McCracken, 2005), but they also may transfer meaning to the surrounding space. For instance, Selina explained how she was a big quote person and tacked a number of quotes to the hallway wall after moving in. The quotes, which hold intimate

meaning for her sense of self, help her claim possession over the apartment by contaminating it with that sense of self. In such a way, "the" apartment becomes "my" apartment. Other possessions such as a cookie jar that used to belong to her grandmother, a set of wicker furniture that used to belong to her mother, and a table that she won at an auction with her father all serve to situate her space in an ordered past as well as to center the apartment around her sense of self.

Activities of grooming. According to McCracken (1986, p. 79), given the perishable nature of certain meanings attributed to possessions, the purpose of grooming rituals "is to take the special pains necessary to insure that the special, perishable properties resident in certain clothes, hair styles, and looks are, as it were, 'coaxed' out of their resident goods and made to live, however briefly and precariously, in the life of the individual consumer." Following this, residents of any living space may also need to groom the living space to maintain the sense and feeling of home. Comfort comes from some of the tenants by regular cleaning of the apartment or by disposing of older possessions while bringing in new ones. Others may indeed modify the apartment and their possessions within that apartment. Bruce describes how he regularly donates an assortment of books each year to the apartment complex for use in the corporate apartment. For him, one of the unique attributes of apartment living is that there is a finite amount of space which means that he can only have a finite amount of stuff. Even though Bruce "can afford to buy an awful lot of stuff," he doesn't have the place to put it so he does other things with his money such as investing it. In a sense, the confines of the apartment allow him to groom himself at the same time that he grooms the apartment. Bruce further grooms his apartment by changing its decorative structure to suit his needs. He has added track lighting in the dining area, removing the lighting and the ceiling fan that was there and storing it in his garage. He has also painted the walls and exchanged the light-switch plates throughout the apartment. Over the 33 years he has lived in the apartment, he has continued to modify his apartment within reason in order to keep it groomed for his needs.

None of these activities, by themselves or even together, guarantee that the individual is in fact creating a home. Selina, though she has taken part in all of these activities, does not consider the apartment a home for it does not compare to her childhood home where her parents still live. That house, to her, is a home. Mia claims a nearly identical sentiment, stating that "home is my parent's house." Hal, who also doesn't perceive his apartment to be home, still talks about it in possessive terms. When asked what specific features he liked about his apartment, he answered "it's just because I'm there, so I like the apartment. I feel it's my space." But, taking possession of an apartment by contaminating it with one's own possessions and orienting the self within the space does not mean that the apartment is then home. There is something more to this process that must be taken into account. That something more may involve the element of time.

The temporal element: salience of time and life stage
Time plays a role in how the consumer perceives certain activities or even products or services (Bergadaá, 1990; Pavia and Mason, 2004) and in engages in those activities (Jacoby *et al.*, 1976). Given Cuba and Hummon's (1993a) assertion that the length of time an individual lives in a place increases his or her attachment to that place, it follows that time plays a factor in how individuals create and maintain a sense of home in an apartment since building a sense of home is a consumption activity. It does so in two distinct ways. First, the amount of time or the importance of the time spent in the

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apartment plays a factor in how individuals create and maintain a sense of home in the apartment; and second, the stage in life that the individual occupies also plays a part in how he or she perceives home in the apartment.

Temporal salience. The consumer's experience of time passing may also play a part in how the individual perceives his or her apartment as home. Bergadaá (1990, p. 300) suggests that time orientation has an effect on consumer action and behavior, noting that individuals with a future orientation are more likely to "have an attitude of action, actively seek change, and want to be ready for opportunities that will enable them to develop" whereas individuals with a present-orientation "have a general attitude of reaction or resistance to external stimuli." Also, Pavia and Mason (2004) note that an individual's mortality salience may affect how he or she deals with life and how he or she consumes; as a parallel, an individual's "temporal salience," or how the amount of time spent or to be spent in the apartment is perceived, may affect how the individual ultimately perceives it as a home.

For instance, Hal is adamant that his apartment does not serve as a home because "it's a temporary thing. It's temporary... it's transience." Mia also claims that her apartment will never be her home, that it is just a place she lives in for now. When asked if anything could be done to make it feel less like a temporary home, she replied "no... it's an apartment, it's not mine. No matter how long I stay or pay... it'll never be mine." Carol, however, is quite sure that her apartment is her home, though she would not have been so sure upon first moving in. "After a while," she states, "we, you know, we were like this is ours... this is our place, where we stay, where we live, where we love each other... it's our home." This actually came as a surprise to her:

> I'm surprised because when you first [asked] me about this [interview] a long time ago, I was like I don't really consider my apartment my home and I think it was just kind of a new thing and getting it lived into and now I look back on it and think, how could I have not considered this my home.

Each of these informants, as well as others, views time as an important element of home-building. For Hal, the finite amount of time he will live in the apartment limits his ability to think of it as home. Carol, on the other hand, demonstrates that the passage of time in the apartment has changed her mind about her apartment being a home, leaving her surprised in two ways: first, surprised that an apartment can be a home and second, that she ever thought it couldn't be.

Life stage salience. The position an individual occupies in his or her life course may also impact how he or she perceives home in an apartment. For instance, Schwartzberg *et al.* (1995) indicate that individuals in their 20s are still closely tied to the family of origin which may also mean that they are still tied to the home of origin. Furthermore, individuals in their 30s who have never been married and do not have kids may be less prone to engage in what they perceive as adult activities. If the construction of one's own home is perceived as an adult activity, it may follow that unmarried individuals without children may also be resistant to building a sense of home in an apartment. Some researchers have also shown that elderly individuals may have a greater sense of place attachment than their younger counterparts (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b; Rowles, 1978; Rubenstein, 1987).

Bruce is firm in his assertion that his apartment is his home, which is understandable considering he has lived in the apartment for 33 years and will live in the apartment until he is unable to do so. Though he has lived in the apartment for a long time, Bruce's stage in the life cycle also plays a part in his consideration of his

apartment as home. He is retired from the military, has never remarried after his divorce 33 years ago, and helps to take care of some of the other long-term, elderly tenants in the complex. In contrast, Mia is 27 years old and remains extremely close to her parents and expects to own her own house, tying her notion of home to her expectations to find a husband and have kids. She is in a very different stage of life than Bruce. For that matter, they are also in a very different stage than the single mothers with whom we spoke. They were quite adamant that the apartments they occupy with their children are very much their home. For Dianna, she is concerned with making her daughter feel at home. When asked about the first thing she did to make the apartment feel like a home, her response was "the living room and Jade's bedroom so she can feel more at home."

It is clear from these informants and others that there is a temporal dimension to the notion in the process of building home. That dimension involves not just the length of time one has lived within the apartment but the length of time one expects to live in the apartment as well, playing upon our perceptions of particular constructs such as home. Furthermore, our perception of where we sit upon our own life's timeline also impacts our perception of such things as the volume and style of the music we listen to, our consideration for other individuals, and our perception of what constitutes a home. But, again, time alone is insufficient to make an apartment, or any other structure, a home. Other factors must also play a part, including the spatial processes mentioned previously and the relational element explored in the next section.

The relational element: family, neighbors, and landlords
Some have argued that home is all about our relationships with other people: both the people that live within the home as well as those individuals who live outside of the home but may have some impact upon those dwelling in the home or the home itself. For Arthur, one of his main criteria for considering his apartment, or any place, a home is the people that dwell there. Arthur agrees with researchers who suggest that home involves relationships with other people. He considers familial relationships in these terms, but there are also other types of relationships inherent within rented spaces that may also affect an individual's perception of whether or not the rented space is a home. Those general relationship types are familial, neighbor, and landlord relations.

Familial relations. For Hal, his conceptualization of home is intimately tied to his wife and son. They are the people that make a place a home for him. Selina echoes this sentiment. A home for her had everything to do with her house and her parents. When asked what distinguished a home from a place to live, her answer dealt with people and, specifically, with family:

> I don't know, I mean, I've lived in a dorm but it wasn't home, I mean I definitely couldn't picture myself being there for the holidays or anything like that. I mean, a place to live is somewhere to sleep and cook some dinner maybe but [. . .] a home has people, you know other people, and things and I don't know [. . .] You can't have memories in a place where you live versus a home.

Living in a dorm, even though she had roommates whom she now considers as "like" family, was not living in a home. Her current apartment, on the other hand, feels more and more like a home for her as her parents continue to help her make it "homey" and livable. Her father hangs every picture on the wall and even helped to pick out and set up a bed she recently purchased. So, family living within the home as well as family living outside the home may also help to make the living space feel like a home.

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However, Kara had a different experience with her roommates. Additionally, the proximity of actual family may increase an apartment's homelike quality. For instance, Tim feels much more comfortable in his apartment because his family lives in the area, saying that "the further I am away from my family, the less like home it feels."

Neighbor relations. One of the most glaring differences between most houses and most apartments is the proximity of one's neighbors. In an apartment, an individual may be completely surrounded by other apartments that abut their own; hence, the neighbor relationships may be a key part of whether or not an apartment feels like a home. Getting to know one's neighbors may enhance the sense of community that one feels as in Bruce's case where he rattled off the number of individuals he knows in his apartment complex:

> Well let's see, you and Janice above and below, Michael, what's her name across the hall, Tina Smith, and of course Felicity, Emma who's one of the original residents. She's the longest resident and I'm the second longest. She came in 1970, and I came in July of 1973. Emma's also 82. Ashley who's down in the 1200s and who's also a good friend of Michael's. I met her through Michael. I didn't keep count so I don't know how many [. . .] the thing is that all the people I named with the obvious exception of you are all non-transient. I mean Ashley's not going to move, Michael's not going to move, I'm not going to movie. Janice isn't going to move, Emma isn't, Felicity isn't, Felicity will die in that apartment. The other people, the people that I don't know, I don't know them because they're not here long enough for me to get to know, and the only thing that the apartment complex offers today that provides any commonality for people is the pool and if you're not a pool person then you don't meet your neighbors.

For Bruce, all these long-term residents are neighbors and friends, and they help provide that sense of community which enhances his sense of home within his apartment.

Neighbors can also be a disruptive force when it comes to the home-building process. Arthur recently moved into a new apartment after living in another apartment for a short amount of time. He states, "my neighbor down below was a bit noisy and I didn't like that too much. They had the TV on during the night in the bedroom and their bedroom was right below my bedroom so I could hear the TV." When offered the opportunity by the landlord to move into a different apartment, he jumped at the opportunity and now feels much more at home in the newer apartment. On the other hand, a disruptive neighbor may also provide a unique character to the apartment as well. Selina's neighbor, an older man who has to wear a hearing aid, often plays his classical music or his television rather loud so that he can hear it. The sound of the music sometimes creeps into Selina's apartment, but she finds it endearing:

> *Selina:* Yes, one thing I notice, and it makes me laugh and smile is late at night when I'm getting ready to go to bed and I'm in my bathroom I can always hear orchestra music, classical music, blaring from Michael's apartment [. . .] that's great.
>
> *Interviewer:* It's great? How's that great?
>
> *Selina:* I don't know. He's just the cutest little old man [. . .] listening to orchestra music at 11 o'clock at night. It's adorable.

So neighbors may enhance an individual's sense of home and community within an apartment complex through shared relationships and experiences or a shares sense of communitas. Neighbors can detract from the process of building home by becoming disruptive in some fashion, or they may enhance the process by adding character and flavor to the experience of living in the rented space.

Landlord relations. One of the relationships that occurs within rented spaces that is unique to rented spaces is that of the landlord-tenant relationship. Tenants deal with the landlords or the rental agency at least on a monthly basis when it comes time to pay rent, but they may have more dealings with them as a result of a variety of reasons (noise, plumbing issues, etc.). Each of our informants acknowledged the importance of the landlord in terms of fixing any problems that may occur. Hal considered them to be responsive to a problem he had with the lock on his door even though they did not do anything to change it. Cassandra finds that if something is wrong in the apartment, the landlord or his son comes over and fixes the problem right away, and in addition, the landlord has also made small changes to the apartment to make her feel more comfortable. Arthur comments that his landlords are "nice people, and that makes it comfortable to know they are nice." A good landlord-tenant relationship, it seems, enhances the sense of safety and security that one feels within the apartment. Bruce has certain expectations associated with the management in his complex because of his feelings about the apartment:

> And so this is home [...] which is one of the reasons why a lot of the managers around her have not liked me because I consider this my home and I expect them to keep it well kept. And if they do not do a good job on the lawn, I tell them because it's my lawn, those are my shrubs, and it's my pool.

His relationship with the individuals who manage the company is greatly influenced by his sense of home and his feeling of possession concerning the apartment instead of the other way around. Since he has taken possession, not only of the apartment but also of the common areas, he expects a certain type of relationship from the landlord.

Relationships also play a definite role in the development of a sense of home within an apartment. These relationships may involve individuals who live outside the home such as neighbors, landlords, and maintenance personnel, or even friends and family who are invited into the home or, at least, have an impact on how the apartment is perceived. These relationships may also involve others who live in the home such as children, spouse, platonic or non-platonic roommates, or even temporary guests. But again, relationships are not by themselves sufficient to create that sense of home. In fact, none of the process described here – spatial, temporal, or relational – may necessarily lead an individual to consider the apartment a home. What then does?

Home as choice

To this point, the findings have mirrored those provided by other researchers, providing support for their assessment of home; however, the notion of ownership is decidedly missing from the definition of home provided by these informants. Granted, several of these informants do not consider their apartments or other rented spaces to be a home even though they have engaged in the elements listed above. They have rooted themselves in place through various exchange, possession, and grooming rituals; they have navigated both temporal and life-stage salience in regards to their apartment; and they have developed the relationships both in and out of home that are important for home building. However, they still do not feel that their apartment is a home. What is the difference between them and those that do feel that their apartment is their home?

Simply put, the process of constructing home in an apartment requires the choice to do so. The individual tenant must be willing to make the apartment into a home in order for the process to succeed. Hal feels that his apartment is his space where he can

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feel comfortable while working or reading or listening to the radio; however, he is not even concerned that his apartment does not feel like a home. When asked if anything could be done to make it feel more like a home, he shrugs off the question and claims disinterest. "No," he says, "I'm not into the idea of buying a cat or buying a doggie or you know that type of [stuff] . . . I can't be bothered." He has made the choice to not make his apartment into a home, to not feel a sense of home for one reason or another. We expect, since his time is limited here because of his student status and because his family is in China, Hal does not build a sense of home because he may see it as wasted and unnecessary effort.

Selina, who has all the elements working within her apartment in terms of her sense of self and her orientation within the physical confines of the apartment, her temporal regard for living in the apartment (she expects to live there for the foreseeable future), and her relationships with her neighbors and the landlord as well as with her family, still does not consider her apartment to fully be a home. She likes it but, in her own words, "You know I mean it's definitely no comparison to my home home, but, you know, I'm glad to come back to it." Furthermore, when asked directly if her apartment is her home, her response was "Yeah . . . it's my home . . . I don't consider it home like my house where I grew up but . . . ." Such comments suggest that there is definitely an element of choice associated with an individual's sense of home.

Tim, on the other hand, actively chooses to consider his apartment a home. Home, as he sees it "is where and how I choose," distinguishing it from a place to live which he believes "would be under someone else's conditions, such as a dorm room when you can't pick the room or the roommate." Dianna also actively chooses to consider her apartment a home. In fact, she does not distinguish between home and a place to live; they are the same thing. For her, home is "where my daughter is, where I live, where my stuff is . . . where I sleep."

Bruce has also actively chosen to consider his apartment a home. On occasion, he has thought about how he has, essentially, thrown money away by renting instead of owning, but he reasons through his decision each time:

> One of the things I've thought about a lot is the financial consequences of not being a homeowner. I could have sheltered an awful lot of money over the years by, instead of paying rent, making mortgage payments, but I chose not to do that because I didn't want to assume the responsibilities that go along with homeownership. Appliances wear out and have to be replaced, lawns have to be mowed, snow has to be shoveled, leaves have to be raked, I don't want to do that c**p. If something breaks, I call maintenance and they fix it.

He follows this by saying "Sure, I could go out and buy a house, but why would I want to go do that now? Then I'd have to go out and buy a lawnmower," and then he reiterates that the apartment he is in is his home.

5. Discussion: the process of building home

The central theme to arise out of both the literature and the data is that the construction of home is a process that consumers go through. This process potentially begins prior to taking possession of the domicile and continues as long as the individual lives within that particular location; and given the strength of the sense of home, that feeling may continue even after the individual no longer lives in that location. The stories told by these informants result in the model represented in Figure 1 and described in the following paragraphs.

The individual has a conceptualization of what home is and means for him or her, thereby providing the goal to be attained with the construction of home in the apartment or, perhaps, in any other living situation. This conceptualization then informs how the individual takes possession of the apartment once moving into it, including activities of exchange, possession, and grooming. Activities of exchange include the signing of leases, imagining one's possessions in the empty location, and even pre-purchasing items to go into the new home. Activities of possession include orienting one's belongings within the space provided and contaminating the rented area with one's self or with the familial identity. In effect, the renter writes his or her or the family's autobiography onto the text provided by the apartment. Through activities of grooming, the individual continues to build toward the conceptualization of home and, if reached, maintains that sense of home.

These possession activities may lead straight to a sense of home in the individual, but they also may be mediated by two distinct factors. The first is time. An individual may not initially think that an apartment can be a home, as Carol demonstrates; however, over a period of time, the resistance to a notion of home may be lessened and a sense of home will develop. Simply living in a location for a longer period of time allowing for the development of a pool of memories or simple familiarity may assist the process of building home. Additionally, the stage in the life cycle that the individual occupies may also play a factor in whether or not the individual considers the rented space a home. The second factor is the group of relationships that people either carry with them into the apartment such as those of family, roommates, or friends or those provided by the proximity of neighbors and the presence of the landlord.

This process is mediated by the choices that individuals make. The individual may need to choose whether or not to allow a sense of home to develop within the apartment they live in. Whether or not they make this choice may also involve the initial conceptualization of home the individual carries. For instance, if an individual's idea of home requires the presence of a spouse or can only be found in an owned structure, the individual may never fully develop a sense of home in an apartment if he or she remains alone in the apartment and never purchases a house. We have to want to have a warm, sheltering, and comfortable home that has life and identity beyond the walls, paint, carpet, roof, and other things that construct a house, an apartment, or any other dwelling. We have to want it, and we have to work at it in order to first define what our homes are and then to maintain that home and protect it.

Ultimately, on top of the spatial, temporal, and relational elements, it seems that home comes about as a conscious choice people make which may be linked to a sense of psychological ownership of the rented property. Psychological ownership is defined as
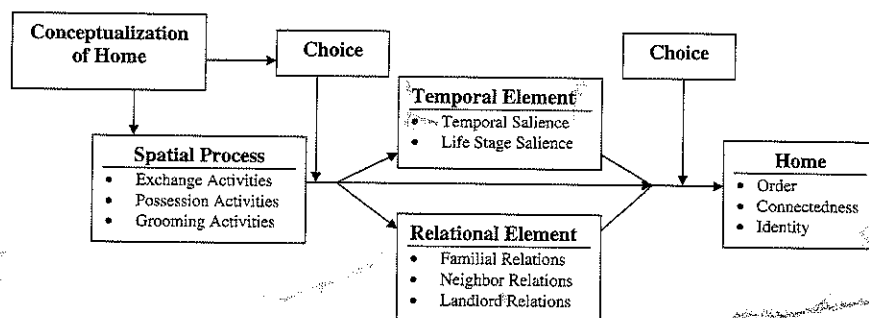

Figure 1.
Process model of building a sense of home

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"the state in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership (material or immaterial in nature) or a piece of it is 'theirs' (i.e. 'It is MINE!') and a feeling of 'being psychologically tied to an object'" (Pierce *et al.*, 2003, p. 299). Psychological ownership is distinct from the notion of legal ownership in that individuals may feel like they own an object or property without having any legal rights of property ownership which taps into the old adage that "possession is nine tenths of the law." The consumer may actually take psychological possession of a good and "feel" like we own it even though he or she may not have the legal rights mentioned by Christman (1994) and Cocutz (1953). Individuals who rent apartments or other dwellings do not have legal rights to the object; however, they may choose to take "psychological ownership" through a variety of means. As a result, it would behoove property managers to engage in activities that promote the notion of deciding to make an apartment a home. In doing so, they may promote a better overall retention rate and fewer vacancies.

6. Conclusion

Home is a complicated construct. To some, it is where the heart can be found. To others, it is where one hangs his or her hat. It is a man's castle and a woman's domain. According to Mae Doyle D'amato, Barbara Stanwyck's character in the 1952 movie *Clash by Night*, "Home is where you come to, when you run out of places." And, as Dorothy informs her family after her return from the great and wonderful Oz, there is no place like it. Rock musicians, poets, and artists have extolled the virtues of home and decried its sins. Adolescents have fought savagely to escape its stranglehold on their lives only to return to its cherished embrace as they create their own homes and families; and it is that place that informs our recollections of childhood and the freedom of youth. It can be a place of light and memory, but it can also be a place of darkness. Home, in its elemental state, is at the heart of who we are and what we aspire to be.

As we have explored, building a "sense of home" is a consumer activity that needs to be monitored closely by real estate agents, property management companies, and home construction businesses, as the way these entities do business is directly impacted by one's decision to rent the space in which she lives. The nuances of local real estate markets are things that local real estate agents pride themselves on knowing when potential clients seek housing. However, the additional insight gained as a result of this research will assist real estate agents and property managers in apartment complexes to identify the correct rented spaces for the correct type of households. One lesson learned is that property managers may prop up occupancy rates simply by changing a few rules regarding how renters can use the space inside the apartments (e.g. drilling holes, replacing light fixtures, etc.). As researchers, we need to continue exploring home as an activity in which consumers engage as well as a context in which a number of consumer behaviors occur. Doing so may provide valuable insight for researchers and practitioners of all types.

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  Calabrese, F.A. (2005), "The early pathways: theory to practice – a continuum", in Stankosky, M. (Ed.), *Creating the Discipline of Knowledge Management*, Elsevier, New York, NY, pp. 15-20.

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  Jakkilinki, R., Georgievski, M. and Sharda, N. (2007), "Connecting destinations with an ontology-based e-tourism planner", *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2007 Proceedings of the International Conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2007*, Springer-Verlag, Vienna, pp. 12-32.

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  Aumueller, D. (2005), "Semantic authoring and retrieval within a wiki", paper presented at the European Semantic Web Conference (ESWC), Heraklion, Crete, 29 May-1 June, available at: http://dbs.unileipzig.de/file/aumueller05wiksar.pdf (accessed 20 February 2007).

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  Mozier, P. (2003), "How published academic research can inform policy decisions: the case of mandatory rotation of audit appointments", working paper, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, 28 March.

* For encyclopaedia entries (with no author or editor): title of encyclopaedia (year), "title of entry", volume, edition, title of encyclopedia, publisher, place of publication, pages.
  Encyclopaedia Britannica (1926), "Psychology of culture contact", Vol. 1, 13th ed., Encyclopaedia Britannica, London and New York, NY, pp. 765-71.
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  Smith, A. (2008), "Money for old rope", *Daily News*, 21 January, pp. 1, 3-4.

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