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Raissa de Albuquerque Gameleira
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Museum

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The Architecture of the House as an Expression of Identity: Topoanalysis of Guilherme de Almeida's Historic House Museum

Raissa de Albuquerque Gameleira

University of Lisbon

Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte

Abstract

The architectural elements and interior design choices observable within a historic house museum of an intimate memory can express an identity. Such institutions often build narratives about the home, relating the moment when the honouree had inhabited the house to the cultural aspects of the visitors of the museum. In this sense, a physical and visible world (aspects related to the architecture) reflect intangible, abstract elements (non-physical aspects related to memory). The home thus transcends its sense of shelter to denote traces of personality and functional habits. When transforming a house into a museum while preserving the physical elements, institutions will do well in recognising such aspects as sources of information about the former residents. For that matter, this paper suggests a phenomenological analysis as the means to understand identity traces in spatial elements of a preserved home. As an example of the existent relations between physical and non-physical aspects of architecture and memory, we present a literature review and the analysis of a single case study: the Historic House Museum Casa Guilherme de Almeida, located in São Paulo, Brazil. This study is part of the doctoral thesis developed by the author, which integrates other cases and methods.

Keywords: historic house museum; architecture; home

Introduction

A historic house museum that aims to preserve its domestic and intimate memory can be called an "intimate memory house" (Afonso, 2015). This museum typology recognises the organisation of the house as a reflection of the honouree's identity. As a consequence, the narrative usually portrays the original representation of daily and intimate spaces to tell the story of its former residents (Reis, 2006, 2013; Costa, 2012; Carvalho, 2013, 2015, 2018; Ferreira, 2015; Puig, 2018; Ponte, 2019). We then posit the question: how may researchers deal with both the physical and non-physical aspects of historic house museums?

We understand that houses everywhere serve the same basic needs of living, but a look at the types of space appropriation (Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Hanson, 1998) reveals the variety of ways in which dwelling activities can be accommodated, in different homes, periods, and cultures. The appropriation mode of such spaces can be understood as expressions of individual representation, i.e., their poetics (Bachelard, 1974). In this sense, the morphology of housing spaces manifests itself as a form of language that communicates identities, settings, and values whether by encompassing social or individual aspects (Arnheim, 1988; Dondis, 2015; Bachelard, 1974; Dovey, 1985; Lawrence, 1987; Cooper, 1995; Brandão, 2002).

Within this framework, this paper discusses the role of housing architecture and interior decor as expressions of the individuality of their owner, by relying on the case study of "Casa Guilherme de Almeida", located in São Paulo, Brazil. This historic house museum aims to preserve the memory of the poet Guilherme de Almeida through the lastingness of the house in which he lived.

This work thus combines the analysis of the intangible aspects of Guilherme (his individual manifestations and personality), the physical aspects of architectural composition, and the relations between both the invisible and the visible cues – the topoanalysis. In other words, we have

conducted a "phenomenology of the imaginary" (Bachelard, 1974), through which we recognise qualitative values that are made accessible to those who physically experience the selected historic house museum.

The Historic House Museum as an Instrument of Topoanalysis

When we enter an "intimate memory house", we enter directly into an individual's intimacy and into the systems of their domestic life, perceived in the flow through the preserved rooms and their objects (Ponte, 2007). The personal space becomes a public space that portrays intimate memories.

A phenomenological analysis can contribute to recognise identity cues within the elements in historic house museums. Dovey (1985) points out that one of the most important contributions of the phenomenological approach to the experience of a given environment is the suggestion of a complete reinterpretation of the concept of space. At the heart of this reinterpretation lies an important distinction between conceptual space and living space, resembling the difference between house and home. The conceptual space is abstract, geometrically and objectively measured, a type of context within places, people and things. The inhabited space, in contrast, is the preconceptual and significant spatial experience of what phenomenologists call "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962).

In a phenomenological study on intimate values in interior spaces, the house is an instrument for topoanalysis, which, according to Bachelard (1974), consists of the systematic psychological study of the physical places of our intimate life, also called "phenomenology of the imaginary".

When phenomenology is applied to architecture, the topoanalysis becomes fundamental to the comprehension of an inhabited three-dimensional space, as defined by Heidegger (2001). Since the architectural space is an experienced space – and not a mere physical space – it can "transcend geometry and measurability" (Pallasmaa, 2011, p. 60). Therefore, the phenomenology of the house must encompass the basic principles of the

construction, as well as their relationship with the formal articulation and the identity of the place. When appropriated by its residents and filled with personal objects, the house can communicate habits, experiences, and intimate life. In this sense, the architectural elements form a language of their own, being able to express meanings, evoke memories and tell stories. The message is "communicated through association" (Unwin, 2013, p. 58).

Within a broad understanding of this phenomenon, Pallasmaa states that a series of isolated images is not enough for a full experience of architecture, and it is necessary to integrate "its material, corporeal and spiritual essence" in the built environment (2011, p. 11). That is, an architectural work

offers pleasurable shapes and surfaces moulded for the touch of the eyes and other senses, but it also incorporates and integrates physical and mental structures, giving our existential experience a strengthened coherence and significance (2011, p. 11).

Observing the architecture of houses, Arnheim (1988) refers to the character and the meaning of each environment that is accentuated by the surrounding spaces. A descriptive analysis of a given *sequence of rooms* and their functional *zoning* allows the understanding of hierarchies, the importance of each room in the house system, the essence of each room, as well as habits and preferences of its residents. As an example, Barros and Couto (2012) state that the public and private spheres are recognisable in a house, with public spaces (such as the living room) and spaces of intimacy (such as the bathroom).

Other messages can be communicated by horizontal and vertical circulation arrangements. Arnheim (1988) affirms that the simplest model of existential space of any person is in the horizontal movement, because it can promote a free interaction, by the ease of advancement. On the other hand, a vertically oriented arrangement accentuates hierarchy, isolation, ambition, and competition. Ching (2008) adds that the physical

characteristics of a staircase can provide a visual clue to its public or private nature; wide and short steps can serve as an invitation, while a narrow, steep staircase can lead to more private places. From these assumptions, we might infer that the pattern of hierarchy experienced in the architecture of the house communicates the social, cultural, and psychological patterns of its inhabitants.

According to Pires (2013), the study of visual axes, alignments, areas of influence, and their orientation, has great importance in the design of spaces destined to scenography, in which the bond between the (re)created scene and the visitors depend on vision. Therefore, the understanding of the form and its influences in the inhabited spaces is essential to the studies of historic house museums that recreate domestic places as a resource for the representation of intimate memory.

Unwin (2013) states that alignment gives importance to the distant object and the observer. Thus, alignment implies a contact line – an axis – between the observer and the distant object, causing a sense of recognition of the connection in the observer. When we direct the investigation to visual alignment, we propose to analyse, consequently, the axis. The axis is, according to Ching (2008), the most elementary way of organizing shapes and spaces in architecture. It is a line established by two points in space, in relation to which the shapes and the spaces can be arranged in a regular or irregular way. Although imaginary and not visible, an axis can constitute a dominant and regulatory resource.

Unwin (2013) adds that the lines of vision can influence both the placement of important objects and the path of those who experience space. Hillier and Tzortzi (2006) seem to sustain a similar thought and claim that intentional views and axes that reinforce each other serve to induce movement or to highlight a particular piece for the collection. The placement of paintings in strategic locations at the end of long lines of sight or in the deeper spaces can create such an effect.

Unwin (2013) also highlights the existence of the "modifier elements of the place" that permeate architecture, in addition to its "basic elements". The author states that the basic elements of architecture and its respective places are modified by light, sound, temperature, air movement, properties and textures of the materials, use, scale, and by effects of time. These modifying forces are also considered architectural conditions and can be perceived as elements that identify places. The author exemplifies: a room can be gloomy when illuminated only by a dim lamp due to insufficient sunlight entering through the window, whilst sounds can be diminished by curtain fabrics or reflected by rigid surfaces.

As noted above, the choice and layout of the objects composing a scene at a house reflect unique characteristics of the residents, or the period the museum curators wish to portray. Bosi describes the relationship between objects and their bearers by suggesting that, "more than an aesthetic or useful feeling, objects give us a nod to our position in the world, to our identity" (1994, p. 441). Scarpeline (2012) states that when an individual needs to organize the internal spaces of their home, they are directly looking for an ideal organization to better develop the biological, cultural, and mechanical activities. At this point, freedom and creativity are exercised when the person transforms a house into a home. When visiting a house containing someone's daily-life objects and equipment, then, we can acquire knowledge about their cultural and social practices. Donnelly (2002) adds that the house and its objects are not the whole story, but the surviving tangible parts which provide information to discover life as it was in a particular place and time.

The home, therefore, is both a "declaration" and a "mirror", socially and individually developed, reflecting both collective ideology and authentic personal experience. Dovey (1985) points out that the understanding of home as an identity is not limited to a self-made worldview; it also implies that the place itself is an important component. We not only give a sense of

identity to the place we call home, but we also draw our identity from the significative aspects of the place.

In these so-called intimate memory houses, Donnelly (2002) notes that visitors can easily identify the spatial arrangement of the house, such as the distance between the kitchen and the dining area, or where the sleeping areas were. They can relate the colours of the rooms, the amount of lighting, the way the furniture is organized, and the habits of the former residents. These aspects reveal the personality traits and daily activities of the previous owner, elements which may not be accessible in other institutions.

The phenomenology of the imaginary suggested by Bachelard (1974) does not deal with describing the house and the things that inhabit it but tries to locate the feelings that move the resident and particularizes their home. When a home becomes a historic house museum, visitors speculate about these aspects, departing from the memories present in the vertical movements of ascent and descent, in the divisions of the rooms, in the furniture, the objects, the textures, the smells, the sounds, the books, and everything that occupies the space, because, as Bachelard (1974) points out, the poetics of the house must integrate thoughts.

The House of Guilherme de Almeida

The Historic House Museum *Casa Guilherme de Almeida*, located in São Paulo, Brazil, occupies a property that testifies to the expansion of the city in the 1940s (Barbosa, 2016). The building, constructed in 1944, presents traces of the simplified neo-colonial language that predominated in the occupation of São Paulo neighbourhoods such as Perdizes and Higienópolis. Bought by the poet, translator, journalist and lawyer Guilherme de Almeida (1890-1969) directly from Companhia Sumarezinho (the company responsible for the creation of the allotment), the house was built as a prototype for the new neighbourhood, which offered a “new [modern] way of living”. In 1946,

Guilherme and his wife Belkiss de Almeida moved to the Sumaré neighbourhood in São Paulo, where the house is located (Barbosa, 2016).

Tápia (2015) reports that Guilherme and his family were the first residents of Macapá Street. Originally built on two floors, the house underwent one single modification: the addition of a new space, the mansard (or *mansarda*, in Portuguese) (see Figure 1).

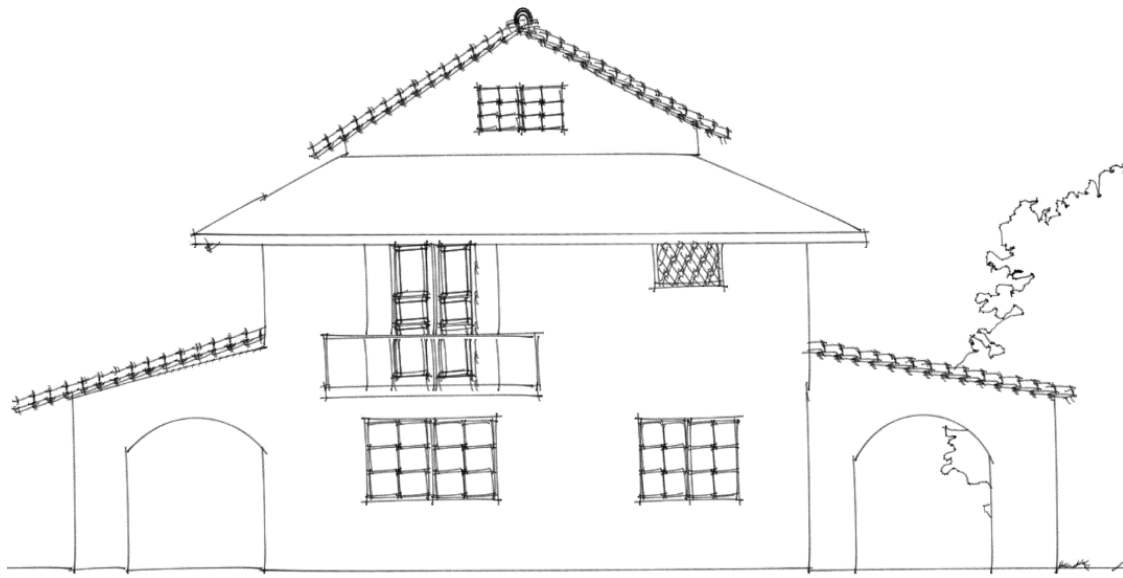


Figure 1: Casa Guilherme de Almeida (drawn by Raissa Gameleira, 2022)

The poet commented upon this change in a newspaper chronicle entitled “A Casa da Colina” (which translates as “The House on the Hill”) in 1958, in which he also discussed his feelings about the neighbourhood. The author began his chronicle by stating that his friends were surprised with the choice of location of his new residence, since it was considered distant from the centre of São Paulo. The chronicle ends with Guilherme explaining that this distancing was purposeful. Interestingly, in his first years of residence, there were much fewer residences and urban infrastructure surrounding the house than there are now.

The three-story house, located on an area of 360m² (approx. 3900 sq. ft), presents clearly defined sectors per floor. A hierarchy between public and private areas is noticeable through the house's vertical organisation. The service area is in the backyard, outside the house, in a level below the entrance and can only be accessed by a long staircase. The ground floor contains a kitchen, a dining room, living rooms, the winter garden and an "intimate room", which functioned partly as an office.

An analysis of the floor plans shows that the main entrance of the building does not allow immediate access to the social area, though directing to the three areas of the house; it is possible to access the kitchen, the living rooms, or the bedrooms upstairs, without going through corridors or other transitional spaces. This layout seems to enable greater control of privacy between rooms. From a configurational analysis of the spaces, we may also point out that the social areas are preserved from the view of the main entrance. Inaugurated as an institution in March 1979, the historic house museum now displays a collection composed of objects that belonged to the poet.



Figure 2: Casa Guilherme de Almeida's Floor Plans by Raissa Gameleira 2022

The Historic House Museum of Guilherme de Almeida

The experience of those who visit Casa Guilherme de Almeida as a historic house museum begins in the old garage of the house, where a security guard asks the visitor if he would like to visit the house and informs the guides. This reception model draws attention to an unusual approach without a formal reception; like in a house, we are invited to enter.

When opening the door of the residence, a narrow entrance hall directs the gaze to the view in the backdrop, leading to the living area, with some closed doors to the right and a staircase to the left. Directed by the structuring axes formed by the architecture itself, the portrait of Belkiss – or *Baby*, as she was known – is the first image that welcomes the visitor.

This setting leads the visitor towards the social zone. A vast number of Baby's portraits decorates the room, invigorating her presence in the house and in the life of Guilherme (see Figure 3). These portraits were painted by the couple's close friends Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, Tarsila do Amaral and Anita Malfatti amongst other great artists of the Brazilian Modern Movement. The Casa Guilherme de Almeida is indeed part of the modern movement.



Figure 3: Baby's portraits



Figure 4: Intimate office

The intimate office-like room helps to make up the image of the intellectual man (see Figure 4). The collections of books displayed in the shelves and bookcases are the same ones from the time of residence. In this space, the institution creates a scene with the suit on the chair, the gloves and the hat on the couch, making it appear as if Guilherme had just returned home. Despite being a small space, it presents a sofa and a couple of chairs in addition to the seat that would be used by the poet, denoting the idea that more than just an office, this was a space to greet and chat with people.

In the bookcase, the first editions of several books authored by Guilherme can be seen in special bindings. It is worth mentioning that a book with the coat of arms of the Portuguese imperial family has been put in the spotlight by the patron himself, with the cover facing the front of the shelf. The structuring axes provided by the room's shape direct the gaze towards the shelf.

The route then continues to the winter garden, where the institution uses sound resources; a song composed and sung by Guilherme himself played on his old victrola. The floor clock, which still works, is centred in the symmetrical view between the works of Tarsila and Samson, and chimes at the full hour. A photograph of Guilherme with his pet dog is displayed next to the window. Here, the institution highlights the love Guilherme had for his dogs, Minnie and Ling-Ling, marking the presence of the family pets. This combination of elements, with the surprising sound coming from the clock, the voice of Guilherme, and the photograph of the poet and his pet, brings the home to life. This room thus conveys the message that this was a space that Guilherme would go to rest.

The small dining room, in turn, has acrylic barriers that limit the circulation of visitors. Unlike the other rooms, we see the scene as a frozen moment that cannot be travelled to, only observed. In a cabinet with open doors, on the left, porcelain dishes are arranged. The main view is symmetrical, with an image of Guilherme on the left and, on the right,

another portrait of Baby. The symmetry is completed with porcelain dishes distributed on the walls, and candlesticks similarly arranged on additional furniture.

In this scene, we notice an emphasis on an oriental ornament centred on the dining table, which seems unusual given the function of the space and the large relative proportion of the piece to the dimension of the table. Although they did not know for sure the value of this piece to Guilherme de Almeida and his wife, the educators explain that it had been present in the couple's life for a long time. The interviewed representative of the institution pointed out that the table and the oriental piece had served different functions in the entrance hall of a previously owned house, as seen in couple's photograph collection. In this room, there is also a closed door,¹ which would give access to the residence's old kitchen, thus connecting service spaces within the social space.

The visitors then return to the entrance of the house and take the first set of stairs. The staircase separates the social spaces from the intimate ones. This can be related to the theoretical implications of Barros and Couto (2012), Arnheim (1988) and Ching (2008). The bedrooms are on the upper floor of the house. However, the transformation of the home into a historic house museum involved the remodelling of the son's bedroom into a library/study room for researchers.² By contrast, the couple's bedroom has been preserved, representing the parent's presence through the display of perfumes, clothes and glasses on the bedside tables.

The observer's gaze is directed towards the remaining clothes through a focus light more intense than the room's lighting. The institution changes the clothes in the closet according to the season, which allows for the collection to be maintained, but which also makes it seem as if Guilherme

¹ During the process of transforming the house into a museum, the institution chose to remove some rooms from the visitor's circuit, such as the kitchen, the child's bedroom, and the bathrooms. The institution states that, for the most part, everything is organized as Guilherme and his wife lived.

² See the author's PhD thesis for more analysis on the visitors' perception on such transformations.

himself were present in the house, changing outfits with each season. This gives the room life and movement. Visitors can circle the room and see the accessories used by the couple up close, such as the perfumes arranged in the built-in closet.

Finally, in counterpoint to the depiction of Guilherme as a common man, special attention is given to the attic, to highlight the poet-side of the patron. The top floor (mansard, attic, or *mansarda*) is central in the design of this house-museum, as it also served as the isolated work office conceived by Guilherme himself (see Figure 5). The narrow staircase leading up to the room guarantees the perspective of a particular, intimate environment, important for the honouree (see Figure 6).

This was not a place visited by the intellectuals he would welcome into his house. It has a smaller, cosier ambience, giving a sense of an intimate space of inspiration. For the poet, the *mansarda* functioned as an isolated lookout, on top of a hill, with two small windows overlooking the blooming city of São Paulo and its busy nightlife from a distance.

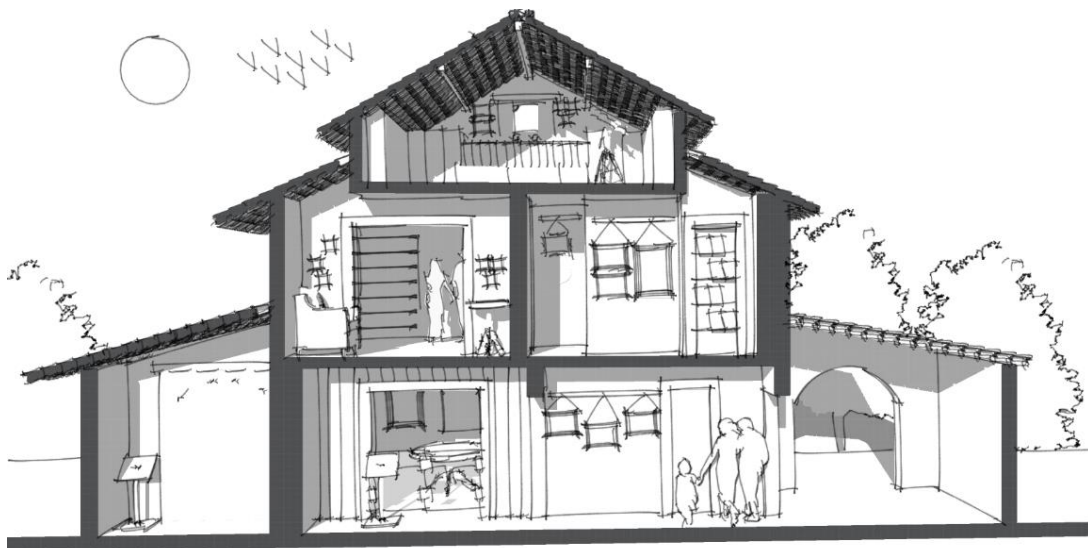


Figure 5 – Mansard at Guilherme de Almeida's Historic House Museum. (Author)

Enriching the experience of the museum visit, the institution guides show the visitors a poem written by Guilherme about the staircase to the attic, freely translated below:

Stairway to my mansard
Steep, narrow, dark, and curved is the stairway that goes up to my mansard.
Capable of dampening old cardiac breaths, it never, however, intimidated my already long-lived heart. On the contrary: it takes me lightly, winged like the angels on Jacob's ladder.
I never regretted having gone up. I've always regretted taking it down. Because it is really an ascent to go up its steps: a detachment from the low, in a yearning for stillness, isolation and dream, towards full entry into my Inner Paradises. (...) (Column "Yesterday - Today - Tomorrow", in the newspaper *Diário de S. Paulo*)

After climbing the narrow staircase, the mansard is portrayed with a sense of emphasis as an exhibit resource. Guilherme's work desk is centred in the room, while the rest of the collection surrounds the space, giving a visual prominence to the first scene perceived by those who enter the attic (see Figure 7).



Figure 6: Stairway to the poet's mansard by Raissa Gameleira 2022



Figure 7: Guilherme de Almeida's work desk by Raissa Gameleira 2022

The work desk displays a crystallized organization of objects and personal items, protected by an acrylic dome. This feature protects the collection and gives a sense of value, both for the objects and for the way in which they are organised. It feels as if Guilherme had just passed by, for the table is filled with the poet's belongings: the centralised typewriter, a pair of glasses on the left, letter openers and a magnifying glass on the right, and small books around the table. There are also some pens and small pieces of paper, as if they were ready to be used.

Only one of the two small windows is displayed with open curtains. The light it brings in illuminates the mansard, but mainly the poet's old work desk. The institution uses this natural light as a lighting resource, as well as the artificial light from original lamps. The guide explains that the curtains are only opened when there are visitors, in order to protect the collection as much as possible. As we approach the window, we can see the view of the city of São Paulo, one of Guilherme's sources of inspiration.

On almost every wall we find the poet's personal library, books forming a vast set of references in varied languages. The museography of the mansard is supported by the reconstitution of the poet's intimate work environment, filled with several testimonies of his participation in the constitutionalist movement of 1932. Amidst so much information, the institution again uses emphasis to display the helmet, the gun, the bullets, and a statue in front of a uniform backdrop of books. We learn about the poet's favourite readings and his more private habits, for example, the presence of a washbasin and a bed associates a sense of permanence uncommon to a place of work but suited for a poet in search for inspiration and engrossed in his work.

Topoanalysis Findings on the Expression of Identity

By contrasting the bibliographic review, the historical research, and the experience of the guided visit, we realize that the institution uses its own architecture and collection to visually communicate with its visitors. Through the preservation of its architecture and the original (preserved or reconstituted) scenarios, we recognize that the Historic House Museum Casa Guilherme de Almeida emphasizes the character and meaning of a preserved intimate memory. The permanence of the house and personal objects communicates a unique experience, where the house determinedly influences the perception of the exhibition as a reflection of its residents.

The choice to locate his residence on top of a hill, physically away from the busiest places of São Paulo, also represents the necessary rhetorical distance from the object of his poems, the urban daily life of the city. On the other hand, by overlooking the city from a distance, in a simple house, the writer reserved his individuality from the spotlight embraced by other colleagues of the Brazilian Modern Movement.

We can also reflect on the portrayal of modernist works within the residential language. If they were in an art museum, the paintings of Baby would probably convey the aspects of their artistic quality and their temporal context within the early stages of Brazilian Modernism. Within the context of the house, however, these paintings represent the friendship between the Almeidas and other modernists. The domestic setting of the artwork also conveys the intrinsic message of which people frequented this house.

It seems relevant that the home had two workplaces, showing the social aspect of the writer's work and the representative uniqueness of the mansard: despite the presence of an office close to the living rooms, the attic is represented as the most intimate place to which very few people were invited. In addition, details such as the narrow sloping staircase and the presence of peculiar objects, such as a built-in sink and a sofa, show the writer's preference to stay in his favourite place.

From that, visitors might infer that it was a space intended only for the poet. The choice of Guilherme to house his vast and valuable collection of books in the mansard, as well as his own writings and thoughts, shows that his individuality is attached to those objects, to their guard and permanence. Within this topoanalysis, we may perceive that the expression of the patron's identity is intrinsically connected to the most intimate and segregated room of the house.

Final Considerations

This article has connected the interpretation of architectural elements of a home and the forms of spatial appropriation by its residents, within the experience of the Historic House Museum Casa Guilherme de Almeida. Using Bachelard's argument about the poetics of space, we sustained that a poetic look at the objects or the architectural elements might lend them more space than they objectively or morphologically have. In other words, the poetic look results in the expansion of its (already immense) intimate space.

Thus, by expanding the relative proportions of inhabited spaces, we understand that the materiality of a house, in addition to the conditions of its production, is a form of visual manifestation of an epoch, a social status and foremost a place. It is also added that the architecture of a house and its forms of appropriation explain personalities and day-to-day traits of its residents, making them important documents to be studied and preserved, in this case the memories of the honourees.

In a historic house museum of intimate memory, it becomes clear that the space, at the same time form and content, is one of the most important elements of communication. Both the architecture and the objects that fill it have relationships that communicate social aspects and need to be understood by an exhibition designer. Thus, we observed that the deeper study of the home and the person-environment relationship requires an

understanding of the characteristics of each house, and the dimensions they can achieve.

Curator methodologies have not been particularly addressed in this paper, as we have focused on perception and architecture. As this text is a fragment of the author's developing doctoral thesis, other reflections and methods can be brought to this broad comprehension of the home, where the process of curating, preserving and communicating a memory is portrayed and analysed within historic house museums.

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