Chapter 14

The archaeology of alienation

A late twentieth-century British council house

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Part I: The excavation

In July of 1997 we were allowed two days' access to a recently abandoned council house; the project started from an idea of exploring the theme of alienation from a dual perspective of the material culture of a marginalised and socially disenfranchised person or family in the late twentieth century and the process of marginalisation and alienation that we, as archaeologists, effect on the people we study - whether now or two thousand years ago. This latter issue will not be directly addressed, but it is inherent in everything we will discuss, as we both were constantly provoked into thinking about our presence in that house, and what our reactions were to the material culture in which we were immersed. We hope something of this will come out in our discussion, however obliquely.

The project was conducted as if it were a normal archaeological site. In short, the 'excavation' involved the usual processes - starting with base planning of all the rooms and photography of all the 'deposits' prior to disturbance by us. Following that, we proceeded room by room to record all the contents and their position within the room using a simple database, inputting straight onto a laptop. In addition, sampling of micro-deposition on floors and a record of the sequence of decorative schemes on walls and woodwork were taken through random spot samples.

Each item was categorised loosely on broad consumption divisions, such as one might find in a department store or the different shops on a high street or in a mall. Where appropriate, age and sex attributes were also assigned to an object - this was based not on supposed use but commercial identification so that, for example, an item of clothing defined as male is based purely on the fact that it may be labelled as a man's garment and come from a male clothing store. In the analyses that we will present therefore, one must bear in mind that some of the patterns may not show the true picture, especially as, for example, items of clothing can be used by either sex, either because the item in question displays minimal sexual differentiation (such as T-shit) or it is being actively used to subvert stereotyped sexual identities.

What characterises this study above all, is the archaeological context in which the work was done; there were no informants - just like an archaeological site, the people had left, leaving only their material culture behind. As such, the event of abandonment pervades the interpretation of the house, and forms an important part of how the material culture will be studied and will have particular resonance when we discuss the wider context of abandonment in relation to issues of housing and homelessness.

The house

The property we entered was a two-bedroom 1960s house with a ground and first floor, front drive and back garden. On the ground floor, as you come in, there is a small hall and staircase leading up to the first floor; straight ahead is the living room while moving to the right one enters another living room or dining room and then into the kitchen. Going upstairs onto the landing, a small bathroom lies ahead and to the right, two bedrooms (Figure 14.1). We want to ask two questions through the material culture we encountered in the house - who lived there and why did they leave?

Figure 14.1 Plan of house with proportions of male and female objects according to room. (Courtesy: Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas.)
Who lived there?

There was a kind of dual process going on in the way we explored these questions – one was through our own familiarity with the material culture and our everyday ability to read it, the other a more conventional application of archaeological methodology where understanding comes, ironically, by almost de-familiarising the house in terms of our everyday perception, and reconstructing it as an archaeological site, making it familiar under another guise. In what follows, the interpretations are very much a product of this dual process and we will not attempt to try to pull them apart although at times it might appear that one approach is taking precedence.

Over the two days we spent in the house it seemed fairly obvious that it was occupied by a family unit of some sort; a child or children were present and a male and female adult. This much we gleaned from the kinds of objects we found – toys, adults’ and children’s clothing, a bedroom decorated with Flintstones wallpaper, and so on. A statistical breakdown of one category of material culture, clothing, corroborates this. A rather neat picture of the archetypal nuclear family perhaps. But is it? If we look again at this breakdown, it does not just show woman, man, girl and boy; why do women’s clothes account for half the total and twice as much as the man’s who in turn is represented twice as much as either child? Are there two women living there or does it say something about consumption of clothing? There are many questions raised by this one figure which lead on to examining the material in other ways, which in turn can raise new questions. Thus in looking at the consistency in the size and style of the clothing and shoes, it seems most likely that only a single woman is represented, but this also revealed that the boy was probably older than the girl. We do not think we need to labour this point, suffice to say that so far, we still do not really know anything of who lived at the house, beyond an approximate body count. How do we go further and investigate some of the dynamics of the family that lived there? To try to take this a little further we want briefly to focus on two relationships within the family; that between the children and the adults and that between the two adults.

The children

Taking a very broad breakdown of those objects that can be defined as adult or child room by room, we get a picture of ubiquitous child presence across the house. However, the converse cannot be said; adult objects are common in all rooms except one: the back bedroom of the upper floor, which was also clearly the children’s bedroom. This shows quite an interesting picture of the children’s position in the home, in that it was deemed quite important for them to have their own space – that while they could occupy any room of the house, they also had their own exclusive sphere, in contrast to the adults who appear to have no exclusive space – not even their bedroom, which with the living room, contains the next highest number of child-associated objects.

The adults

Using the same coarse breakdown by room as for adult/child objects, the ratio of adult male to adult female objects shows that female objects dominate in all the rooms – in fact male presence is very minimal, including the adult bedroom and the main living room which further builds on the idea of a single-parent household. Indeed, the two rooms that show anything of a greater presence of male objects, are the two rooms that are perhaps most associated with someone who comes and goes – the hall and the bathroom. In the hall this consists of coats, in the bathroom, toiletries. It suggests a picture of a man not permanently living there but whose presence is ephemeral and perhaps temporary. What, then, was the relationship of the man to the woman?

While the presence of toiletries indicates overnight visits, there are lots of more explicit material references to sexual activity in the house – condom wrappers, K-Y jelly, a lover’s guide video and several items of erotic underwear, all pointing to the relationship being a sexual one. Certain documentary details collated from within the house seemed to confirm that the man was the father of the children; subsequent discoveries of methadone prescribed to the partner and father of the children lent weight to the suspicion that the man was also a heroin addict.

Taken together, examination of these two themes in the dynamics of the family inhabiting the house points to a single mother raising two children with a non-co-habiting father who is however still in a sexual relationship with the mother and probably a paternal relationship to the children. The question now remains, was this state of affairs the norm, or was it a recent development within the family; in other words, how does this pattern relate to the ultimate abandonment of the house? Why did they leave?

Why did they leave?

Examination of the quantities of material from room to room, shows quite a varying pattern, some being packed, others quite empty. However, to put this into some kind of context, it was immediately apparent upon entering the house that the material in the living room was stacked up in preparation for removal while that in the kitchen and main bedroom, as well as all the other rooms, had
been already either sorted through or simply left as it was. What this provides is quite a crucial insight into the valorisation of material culture by the occupants, that a process of selection was conducted in terms of what was deemed most important to take and what to abandon.

Part of this process is obscured by the fact that we do not know what was already removed, although we can guess; certainly some things were notable by their absence (e.g. beds) and the intention at least was to return and pick up the rest which had been gathered together in the living room. For whatever reason, this material was not collected, but this fact does suggest some urgency of abandonment and a reluctance to return to the house afterwards. In looking at the material then, we can use the distinction of the rooms to shed light on what was valued and desired to be kept and what was not.

The kinds of things selected for removal which occur in the living room include certain items of clothing and furnishings, as well as tablewares, memorabilia, books and videos. Almost all of the latter in fact were found in the living room with few examples elsewhere in the house. Conversely, a large selection of clothing and furnishings as well as toiletries, household goods, foodstuffs and kitchenwares were abandoned. Again, most of the latter occurred in the kitchen or bathroom with few examples in the living room. Just from this, one gets a certain sense of what items are regarded as more valuable and in many ways the choices are perhaps unsurprising. However, to try to provide a more personal dimension which may also help in understanding the cause of abandonment, we want to look at two of the classes in more detail, clothing and furnishings.

Clothing – the clothing that was selected for removal included a coat, several jackets, a dress, a two-piece woman’s suit and a few other items. In contrast, the clothing left behind was mostly jumpers and T-shirts as well as all the underwear of which almost all was of the erotic kind mentioned earlier.

Furnishings – the furnishings selected for removal were predominantly household decorative items – curtains, vases and figurines, while those left were mostly Christmas decorations.

The intention to remove much of the more personal domestic items such as the interior furnishings, books, tableware etc., suggests a need to take the home out of the house as it were; clearly the sense of the house as a home is very strong with a lot of care and investment given to its creation. Conversely however, many personal items, particularly of clothing, were left and in this respect the abandonment of the material references to sexual activities such as erotic underwear along with the binning of the lovers’ guide video might suggest a breakdown of the sexual relationship, and this may well be closely implicated in the event of abandonment.

Why they left is, of course, almost impossible to know in all its details, as are the special dynamics that operated between the four people we have been discussing; however, we can place their lives and the house in a broader social context which adds another, and still personal dimension to the material culture we encountered.

Part 2: Context

Later on we went to the housing authority to find out more about the house we had just excavated. The authority could only say that the house had been occupied since 1991 by a single 25-year-old mother of two children aged 4 and 6. She moved into the house just after giving birth to her first child. She was on full income support and housing benefit. The fact that the unit was suddenly abandoned caught the housing authority by surprise. The household was not in arrears, there was nothing to indicate that there might be any trouble that would result in abandonment and the creation of what the authority called a ‘void property’.

Typically, single mothers on income support are probably among the most vulnerable members of British society as are single elderly women. In terms of being housed, they are also the most problematic for a number of complex reasons. Unmarried women are the most reliant on state housing. Forty-nine per cent of divorced and separated women depend on state housing as opposed to 33% of men in the same situation (Sexty 1990: 29). Households headed by women are twice as likely as households headed by men to be found in council homes (42% compared to 21%) (Sexty 1990: 30). The unmarried and young are particularly in need. By the age of 23, two-thirds of young men and women move away from their natal homes needing to be housed when they can least afford it.

Despite these figures, housing policy is geared to assist established heterosexual married couples. This continues despite the fact that married couples represent the smallest group of council tenants (Sexty 1990: 30). Otherwise, priority is usually given to the ‘vulnerable’, usually defined as people who become homeless as a result of catastrophe, mental or physical disability or when escaping documented and strictly defined domestic abuse in addition to single mothers with dependent children and single expectant mothers like the young woman of this abandoned household.

Thus young unmarried women are particularly vulnerable in securing housing and under greater threat of becoming homeless. The primary cause for women’s vulnerability to homelessness according to studies conducted in the past ten years is what observers term as ‘relationship breakdown’ between the woman in question and her family or her partner. In the last quarter of 1989 17% of all homeless households were made homeless as a result of ‘relationship breakdown’ (Sexty 1990: 54).

Ideally, the state strives to ensure that young women are not lost to social services and made homeless as a consequence of ‘relationship breakdown’. Before
the 1985 Housing Act, individual housing authorities were not guided by any regulations as to how to cope with such a situation. Housing authorities dealt with the problem on an ad hoc basis. This meant an uneven and haphazard response to the situation which was highly infltrated by local concerns, and social mores particularly regarding domestic violence. Though unratified, some recourse was possible on an individual basis and vulnerable women in that position might be able to be re-housed and enjoy continued support.

The 1985 Housing Act changed all that. It was worded in such a way as to explicitly protect heterosexual married women in nuclear families experiencing documented, violent and physical abuse, typically at the hands of their husbands with whom they shared a house. In attempting to rationalise the procedure with which the housing needs of such women were assessed, a specific norm was invoked that meant that women who did not fit into that category were not catered to by housing authorities. There were no longer ad hoc procedures which might respond to individual situations and needs. Rather there is now a bureaucratic procedure enshrined by an act of Parliament that ensures that only women who fit a very specific profile can enjoy any assistance in housing following a ‘relationship breakdown’. However, women in these situations are protected only in terms of a specific definition as wives and mothers, they are not protected in terms of their status as women in general. Single women, unmarried women co-habiting with opposite-sex partners, lesbians and the elderly all lose out according to the 1985 Housing Act’s constitution of women as only wives and mothers.

Under part III of the 1985 Housing Act, housing authorities are obliged to accept women escaping domestic violence as officially homeless. But there is the problem of evidence of that violence usually involving physical proof in the form of police reports and documented injuries before a housing authority might act. Some authorities would only recognise a woman leaving an abusive situation as ‘legally homeless’ after she has exhausted all possible legal remedies such as going through the lengthy and daunting procedure of getting an exclusion order, or initiating divorce proceedings (Charles and Jones 1993: 10). One report found that a London council would wait until it was taken to court before acknowledging its duty to rehouse (Charles and Jones 1993: 10). Almost all local authorities would not accept a woman as legally ‘homeless’ with priority for alternative housing if she has ‘only’ suffered mental or emotional abuse (Charles and Jones 1993: 10).

Proposed new guidelines have called for a re-assessment and expansion of these criteria in order to catch those women who fall through, who are the most vulnerable and in need of housing assistance. As it stands now a woman would only be considered for alternative housing in the case of ‘relationship breakdown’ if she was violently abused by a live-in husband and had legal and medical proof of that violence. In the case where the woman is single or lesbian, many housing authorities would not recognise an abusive partner residing elsewhere. If the woman has children, that is when she is defined as a mother, where the legal concern is not so much for her as for the safety of the children, then she can only be re-housed in cases where there is documented physical abuse particularly towards the children. British law and housing authorities have been very slow in recognising other forms of abuse, both physical and psychological. Only in 1991 was rape within marriage acknowledged and considered prosecutable, let alone any psychological abuse a woman might suffer at the hands of her unmarried partner.

Considering these difficulties women are often reluctant to leave or apply to local housing authorities for help. They are caught in an impossible dilemma. Unless the reasons for relationship breakdown can be shown to accord with the rather strict definitions of abuse recognised by the Housing Act, where a woman is protected only in terms of her identity as a wife and mother, then there is little recourse and assistance. There are refuges, but they are crowded and only temporary; women often return to the old households they are fleeing from because there is no other place to go. The national re-housing scheme, which rehouses women fleeing abusive partners to other parts of the country, usually has to assert a ‘local connection’ before re-housing a woman in a particular community. An abusive partner would often know that ‘local connection’ and follow the woman there.

When a woman goes to a refuge for temporary housing, having been declared legally homeless, she is usually there for several months until which time she is given one chance of alternative housing (Sexty 1990; Charles and Jones 1993: 11). It is her only chance. If she does not accept she is considered to have made herself ‘intentionally homeless’ and no longer qualifies for assistance. Often the housing offered is of the worst quality, with few provisions for the improvement of the space to make a comforting and soothing environment after the ordeal of fleeing an abusive domestic situation and several weeks and months in a refuge.

Some commentators have noted that this disregard for providing a suitable home that could provide a modicum of shelter, flouts the ambivalent and conflicted attitudes women often have of the home, as source of pride, place of pain and conflict and shelter from the difficulties of the outside world. Many local authorities have removed ‘decorating grants’ so that women could at least turn sub-standard housing into something more habitable. Critics view this as insensitive to the needs of comfort and safety beyond just the provision of a roof over the heads of such women. As one woman in a study reported, ‘I just want my own place, just for me and my son, you know, just to shut the front door and that will be it’ (Charles and Jones 1993: 104).

Added to that, the privatisation of council housing during the Thatcher years has resulted in an exceptionally diminished housing stock available to house and re-house women who have become homeless as a result of relationship breakdown. Housing authorities’ reluctance to house adequately arises from the authorities’ need to ration the scarce resources of a diminishing housing fund, therefore they interpret their duties under current legislation as narrowly as possible thus exacerbating the situation of those women who are not accounted
for in legislation even further (Charles and Jones 1993: 12). Critics point out that the only way to alleviate the situation is to sell off less council housing stock and build more public-sector housing that is geared to the majority of women in need of assistance. To date there is little evidence to suggest such a turn in housing policy to alleviate the situation.

Studies have shown that because many women fear retaliation and stalking by abusive partners they simply stay in abusive situations and try as hard as possible to maintain the household, particularly when there are children involved. However, when services are not available and restrictively used, women either continue to endure an extremely bad situation leading to further abuse and injury, or attempt to flee, with the result that many women are lost to social services and end up homeless. Usually a woman would not be visible administratively as having a potential problem. Studies have observed that a woman is highly unlikely wilfully to accumulate arrears if she is planning on leaving a council flat, because she knows the accumulation of arrears would cause problems for any subsequent search for housing in the public sector (Davis 1993).

Additionally, a woman would often only leave an existing tenancy when she has secured an alternative one. This is very difficult as she would have to pay for the old tenancy while the new one is being finalised: a burden that many women already in a vulnerable position cannot afford. If a woman cancels her existing tenancy to live elsewhere, many authorities will view that as making herself 'intentionally homeless', and not house her again. In such cases the authority will have advised the woman to get an injunction against her abusive partner before they will re-house her. If she has children she must also take her children with her as well, otherwise it would be very difficult for her to get them back if she leaves them with her partner.

Conclusion

What we have described here is what is known about the context of an abandoned household (Figure 14.2). The woman who abandoned the site has, according to existing parliamentary legislation and housing policy, made herself 'intentionally homeless' for whatever reason and is not therefore eligible for aid any more if she asked to be re-housed, which she has not. She has entirely lost her local housing benefit and support from social services. She is very much on her own with two children when previously she was clearly in need, having had access to full benefits and housing support. There is nothing to indicate that she found an alternative means towards independent living. What we have recorded at the house and discussed suggests very strongly that we have recorded the remains of an abandoned household of a single mother in the wake of relationship breakdown.

The reasons for breakdown are unknowable. However, we know she left very suddenly. Her relationship with the father of her two children was tenuous. He lived on the other side of town. He seemed to have visited regularly, keeping supply of toiletries, clothes and methadone to help him overcome his heroin addiction. Seeing that his methadone supply was due to be renewed as late as May 5, just a little over a month before the house was reported abandoned by neighbours, suggests that this guarded, but ostensibly caring relationship was still being maintained just a few weeks before the woman decided to leave everything and take her two children with her. Coming upon the abandoned traces of the household it would seem to us that the pressure of maintaining the relationship with the father of the two children and the strained and tenuous family that was created while coping with heroin addiction was too much to bear. Being legally single, young, able-bodied, resourceful, but poor, like many women who are compelled to leave their homes as a consequence of relationship breakdown, she probably would have known that there were no state resources to help her. Taking her chances, scrupulously never having accumulated any arrears, while still packing, she suddenly got up and left.

References

