Constructing 'independent women' through space: a case of the women's refuge

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Introduction

This paper explores the relevance of space in the transformation of a particular population in transition. It does this by drawing on data from a women's refuge currently in operation in Southeast Queensland. Specifically, the information presented here describes the significance of the spatial domain in the production of 'independent women'. This is managed by examining a small segment of data from an independent refuge model. Findings from this examination illustrate that space is a key constituent in the production of 'independence' and that managing space in a particular way is an important activity in the construction of the 'refuge culture'. Illustrating this relationship is an important step in the generation of theory, which clearly describes the way space contributes to the production of social worlds. This kind of information is largely omitted from theory in the field of design. (T. Heath, personal communication, 20 May, 1997) In order to begin this discussion this paper sets the scene by describing what the refuge is about. Then it describes the methodological approach and associated methods used to undertake the study that informs this paper before turning to an examination of data. Following this, this paper highlights the importance of data findings in relation to literature about the spatial domain and its importance in everyday life. At this point, however, the institution of the refuge is described.

Background

The refuge is a complex social milieu. It is an environment primarily established for women and managed by women who actively legitimise feminist ideals in order to produce 'independent women'. It is an interpretation of the ideals of 'liberation and independence' from dominant relations of the family, that largely defines the internal logic of the refuge and informs daily practice. This logic seeks to institute the production of an 'independent woman' as a legitimate refuge practice. What is apparent from the literature documenting the 'refuge culture', is that daily practice is oriented to the notions of 'empowerment' and 'home' in order to facilitate independent living (Hopkins and McGregor, 1991; Hughes, 1991; Cohen, 1992; Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Loseke, 1992; Patel, 1994; Wileman, 1995; Crowell and Burgess, 1996; Nunan and Johns, 1996; Peled, 1997; Stout and McPhail, 1998; Hughes, 2000).

Refuges were initially established in the 1970s to provide protective, regenerative environments. At this time, refuges were seen to afford an opportunity to unite people exposed and opposed to domestic violence, and to reinforce the feminist ideology of 'empowerment'. As Loseke (1992) writes:

> [s]uch places, … should offer (a) an environment empowering the woman whose troubles stem from her powerlessness, (b) an environment encouraging independence for this woman who has only known dependence, (c) an environment supporting this woman who has been isolated and ignored, and (d) an environment encouraging high self-esteem for this woman who always has blamed herself. (p. 34).

Although refuges still provide this kind of service, current practices are now oriented to the notions of 'empowerment' and 'home'.

Most of the literature discussing the provision of temporary accommodation and services to support women and children escaping domestic violence, however, presents conflicting opinions on what accommodation model provides 'a home' and facilitates practices of 'empowerment' in order to produce 'independence'. International literature advocates that the communal accommodation model is more likely to ensure transformation (Bowker, 1983; Clifton, 1985; Beaudry, 1985; Binney, Harkell and Nixon, 1988; Refuerzo and Verderber, 1990; Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Loseke, 1992; Charles, 1994). This is because the provision of shared space is perceived to address the generic conditions of loneliness and isolation and thereby reduce the likelihood of women returning to their previous environments (Beaudry, 1985; Charles, 1994; Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Ferraro, 1983; Loseke, 1992; Schillinger, 1988).

Traditionally, these particular accommodation models have been appropriated houses, where the subdivision of existing rooms afforded a communal style living arrangement. Typically this included separate sleeping areas alongside a shared kitchen, bathroom, laundry and entertainment area. This kind of spatial layout reflects early British accommodation trends – with a priority upon the provision of a secure environment, free from violent men. Thus, this setting is advocated as a suitable accommodation model type because it facilitates the feminist ideals of 'liberation and independence' from the family by restructuring existing power relations. Arguably therefore, the provision of this kind of accommodation is also seen to alleviate the '… common experience of oppression under patriarchy' (Nunan and Johns, 1996, p. 55) that women who populate these refuges share.

National literature, however, advocates that independent style living is the preferential accommodation model type (Queensland Department of Family Services, 1995; Keys and Young, 1998; Queensland Shelter Inc. and Ecumenical Housing Inc., 1998; WESNET, 2000). This is because recent literature in Australia argues that the implementation of private accommodation facilities, clustered around a central resource unit within a shared housing block, is more likely to facilitate transformation. In these environments, the kitchen, bathroom and living room facilities are contained within each unit. The shared areas include a laundry and playroom/living room, with the staff quarters removed from the residential area, but located within the complex. This type of accommodation is seen to promote independent living. That is, the independent refuge model, because of its physical layout, is perceived as supplying a more successful formula in the facilitation of a temporal move from a state perceived as 'dependent' to another seen as 'independent' (Jerome, 1999, pp. 220–222).

Despite these contradictions, international and national literature nevertheless highlights the importance of the spatial domain in the provision of an environment intent on empowering women (Bustamante, 1983; Eyres, 1994; Refuerzo and Verderber, 1990). As Loseke (1992) posits '…the shelter goal of transforming a battered woman type of person into the antithetical type of 'strong woman' is constructed through the environment' (p. 36). Existing literature, however, does not explore the relationship between the physical design of the refuge, and the way it facilitates independent living. Instead, studies that claim to investigate this relationship, isolate the spatial environment from other mechanisms operable in the refuge. These studies are recognised as typical of design related studies. (T. Heath, personal communication, 20 May, 1997) The following examination of data from an independent refuge model, however, explores this relationship. Specifically, it demonstrates the relevance of the spatial domain in the production of 'independence' and the way the notion of 'home' contributes to the process of 'empowerment'. That is, it uncovers the ways space contributes to the production of the social world of the refuge. Before turning to an exploration of the data, however, this paper describes the methodological approach underpinning the broader study and the relevant methods.

Methodology

An ethnomethodological ethnographic framework is used in the broader study of the refuge in order to comprehend the relevance of the spatial domain in this institution and the way it facilitates 'independent living'. At all stages in this study ethnomethodological theory informs the methods used for analytical inquiry. This is because it provides a way of looking at everyday interaction and a means to search for patterns. 'Since its early development

ethnomethodology has concerned itself less with the apparent objective reality of the social facts than with the methodic ways in which that apparent objectivity is practically and reflexively accomplished' (Davies, 1981, p. 20).

This particular framework posited by Garfinkel had its origins in the work of Goffman (1961). Goffman describes the social world as an ongoing accomplishment and seeks to comprehend the way in which locally produced order contributes to everyday experience. The existence of a locally produced order is presented as a distinct domain in its own right and is known as 'the interaction order'. The notion of the 'interaction order' is different from traditional social theories because it emphasises the way individuals and social structures attend to a 'public order' in order to produce a commonsense social world. Goffman (1981) is adamant that the existence of a 'powerful cognitive and moral order at the level of everyday of action' deserves to be examined in its own right in order to account for everyday practice (Adkins, 1997, p. 60). Through observations of the mundane activities of everyday life and attention to establishing a set of relations that produce these activities, Goffman is able to demonstrate that this kind of exploration of social interaction is a substantive domain of social inquiry. The ethnomethodological perspective is used to describe the set of relations that produce this order through an examination of everyday experience. Although this primarily occurs through an exploration of talk, in keeping with Goffman's work, the study of the refuge also employs the technique of participant observation to document everyday experience.

Interestingly ethnomethodologists perceive talk as a likely medium to explore because it is recognised as action. This perspective has led to the development of particular methodological and analytical innovations. One of these innovations is the technique of conversation analysis, henceforth (CA). It was Sacks, along with his colleagues Schegloff and Jefferson, who developed this method of analysing talk in order to elicit the 'interactional accomplishment of particular activities' through the analysis of language (Drew & Heritage, 1998, p. 17).

Like Garfinkel, Sacks believed that meaning is an active accomplishment. He also believed that the ordering of talk, in particular the sequence of utterances and the relational ties between words, is the way meaning in everyday life is constructed. The significance of developing a systematic way to account for everyday action and the production of commonsense worlds is exemplified in his study, Hotrodder: A Revolutionary Category. This investigation explores why 'kids' make up labels for cars and then use them to make assessments of other drivers (Sacks, 1979, p. 8). It involves a lengthy description of the importance of deconstructing commonsense rhetoric in order to comprehend social worlds. For example, it emphasises that

the fact that kids have 'fifty-seven categories of cars means that they're much more than interested in cars' (ibid, p. 14). As Sacks (1979, p. 14) concludes:

> *the fact that kids have such categories, and focus on those categories, can be ways that*
> *more or less fundamental attacks are being launched against a culture which is stable*
> *by reference to everybody seeing the world for what it is, without regard to whether*
> *it's pleasant or not, whether they come out on top or not, and not seeing that they*
> *can do anything about it.*

This example exemplifies the kind of investigations that led Sacks to the development of a procedure that makes it possible to create a picture of how members make sense of and experience everyday life and construct particular social worlds. (Jerome, 2001, pp. 73–75)

The method of data analysis used in this immediate study is associated with the analysis of talk-in-interaction between agents in everyday contexts. It treats language as a resource not as a topic. This sociolinguistic approach includes an exploration of the way connections between utterances and the sequencing of words accomplishes meaning. It combines the technique of 'membership categorisation analysis' with the later development of 'sequential analysis' and addresses the contextual sensitivity of language use in order to comprehend everyday meaning and the methods members use to sustain a commonsense world and social order. These techniques are used in this paper and are briefly outlined here. In order to do this, the following two sentences that Sacks (1992) used to demonstrate the importance of the connection between words and the production of commonsense meaning, are presented:

> *The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.* (p. 248).

One of the questions that Sacks asked of these utterances was: 'Why do we hear the "mommy" as the mother of this "baby"?' (ibid, p. 236). This kind of questioning led him to speculate and eventually demonstrate, that this relationship is possible because the categories 'baby' and 'mommy' are perceived to come from a collection of categories that we nominate as 'family' (ibid, p. 238). These kinds of connections make it possible to comprehend the member's methods for producing descriptions and constructing commonsense meaning.

Furthermore, the deliberate sequencing of these utterances also helps to make these connections and present a story. For instance, if these utterances had been presented as 'The mommy picked it up. The baby cried.' – although the categories of 'baby' and 'mommy' are likely to be perceived as oriented to the collection of categories of 'family' – the meaning would certainly change. This is because of the sequencing of words. Thus, the way words

are positioned in talk is highly relevant to the way talk is understood and continues. This demonstrates why Garfinkel (and, later, Sacks) stress that meaning is locally produced, and that understanding the way words give shape and give meaning to settings is very important. (Jerome, 2001, pp. 109–110)

Methods

As previously highlighted, the interest in this study is explicating the methods or procedures refuge members use to participate in everyday life, demonstrate what set of relations participants are 'attending to', and the way these accomplish an ordered social world. In this examination of the refuge the theoretical framework of ethnomethodology informs the way ethnographic methods are used in this investigation. This study combines the method of participant observation along with the informal interview methods of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The data presented in this paper is a result of participant observation episodes in the independent refuge model and a focus group discussion with refuge staff from this refuge model. The physical layout of the independent refuge model is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

The ethnographic technique of participant observation was employed to begin to construct the patterns of everyday meaning and interaction from the 'insider's perspective' (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 13). This is because the method of participant observation seeks to:

> uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense out of their daily lives. In placing meaning of everyday life first, … [this method] differs from approaches that begin with concepts defined by the way of existing theories and hypotheses. (ibid, p. 15)

The use of participant observation techniques commenced with the activity of 'walkthroughs'. This activity was used as a means of orientation and familiarisation with the refuge setting. Following an introductory meeting with staff members, children residing in the refuge settings took the researcher on a tour of the refuge. Having obtained basic floor plans of each setting, it was than possible to map the path of exploration, develop the floor plans, and record the conversation that accompanied these tours. The diagrams provided in this paper are a direct result of a series of participant observation sessions held at the independent refuge model.

As previously highlighted the conversational data presented here was gathered from the informal interview method of a focus group discussion with refuge staff. This scenario provided access to the collective representations of refuge staff. These 'socially acquired
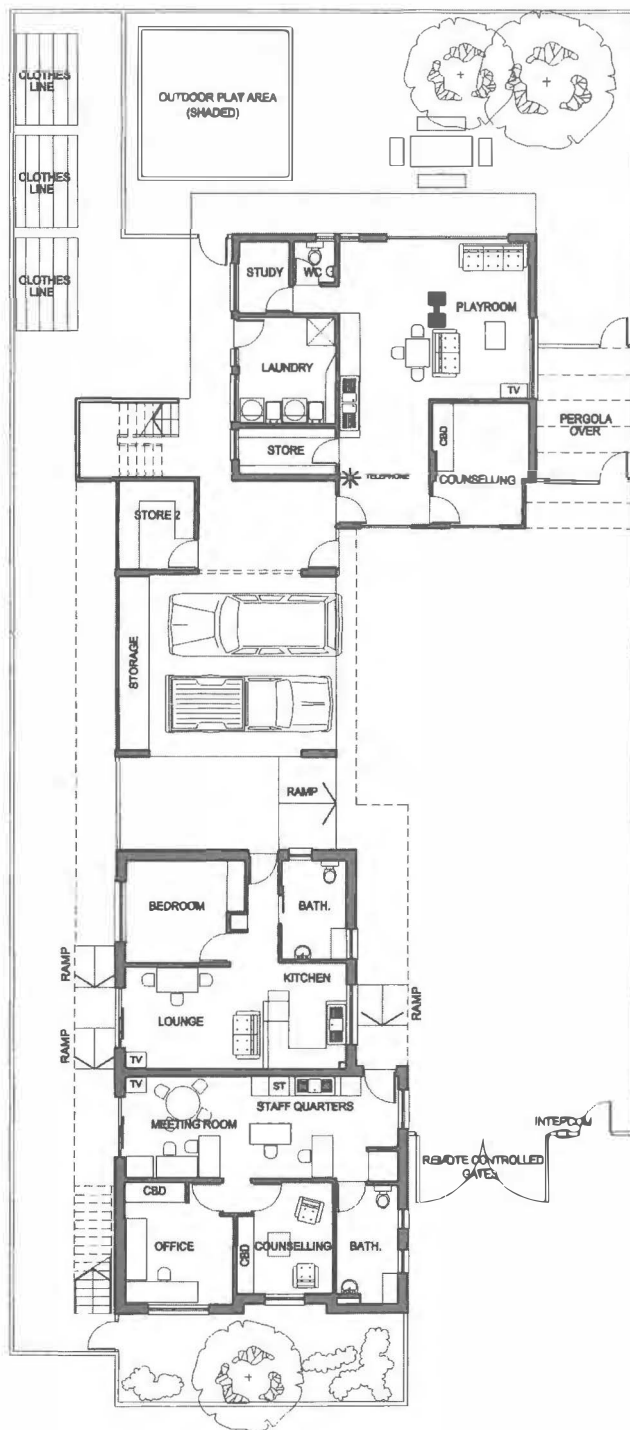
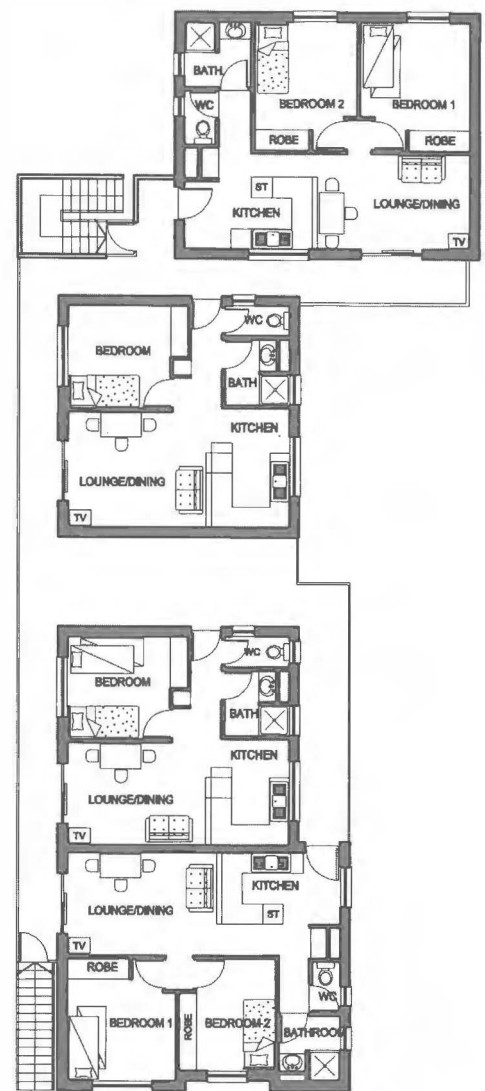*Figure 1: Independent Refuge Model
Ground Floor Plan*

*Figure 2: Independent Refuge Model
First Floor Plan*

frameworks for organising and making sense of everyday life' were later found to mediate the individual experiences of other refuge members (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 116). Informal conversations conducted during participant observation sessions clearly highlighted this. Each focus group session lasted approximately an hour and, although the intention was to 'observe interaction as a topic', this was largely managed through a detailed exploration of the recorded data (Morgan, 1988, p. 17). This was because staff participants engaged the researcher as

Figure 3: Plan of Staff Quarters/Meeting Room in the Independent Refuge Model

a contributing member in the discussion, rather than a moderator who largely presents questions and oversees the dynamics of the group discussion (ibid, p. 48). The focus group discussion was held in the area allocated as the staff quarters, and included four staff members along with the researcher. Specifically, it was held in the downstairs section of a block of units in a room allocated as the staff quarters/meeting room. This area is illustrated in Figure 3. Having outlined the methodological framework and associated methods, this paper now turns to an examination of the data.

Discussing the data

In the following excerpt, ID4, the worker, (W2A), and the researcher, (P), are present. Here, W2A posits that the independent refuge model is more likely to produce 'independence' by comparing two different examples of refuge model types and the way they facilitate 'independence'. An exploration of this conversation segment through the application of CA demonstrates the way the notion of 'home' is embedded in the logic of the refuge and how staff construct a particular practice of 'home-making' – oriented to space – as an appropriate refuge experience. In this instance a particular spatial design – and the interaction it affords – is presented by staff as a better model for the production of 'independence'.

Excerpt ID4

	W2A:	=And I think it's easier to: in the transition
2		from being in a house or a home to come here
3		and still have that feeling of ho:me. And then
4		it's easier to then move out, whereas I've

5		*noticed in other refuges they become far far*
5		*more attached to the workers, far more attached*
6		*to being in a refuge so far more*
8		*institutionalised into that sort of system .h*
9		*and when they leave, it's it's extremely*
10		*traumatic.*
11	*P:*	*Ohh okay [that's interesting*
12	*W2A:*	*[They feel like they're losing a lot.*
13	*P:*	*Hmm.*
14	*W2A:*	*Whereas here it's cause they're still in their*
15		*house they still have their kitchen, they still*
16		*have to keep that clean, ya know do their oven*
17		*and their own fridge and buy their own fo:od.*
18		*It's far more normal, far more usual, far more*
19		*what they're used to, than um the other style*
20		*of refuge. So it's easier to go onto your*
21		*independent living.*

This conversation segment indicates that particular spatial strategies are more likely to produce 'independent women'. It does this by offering a comparison of the independent and communal refuge models and the way different understandings of what constitutes 'a home' produce different refuge experiences. Overall, this conversation segment presents the spatial setting of the independent refuge model as better, because of the way it facilitates a particular practice of 'home-making'. That is, this description successfully institutes a particular spatial setting as a crucial factor in the creation of a social milieu seen to be conducive to the production of 'independence'.

From line 1, W2A introduces the notion of 'transition'. This is followed by a description of the probable stages a typical resident encounters. The first stage is seen to originate from the 'house or a home'. Then, the independent refuge model is presented as the next point of contact. In this instance, 'that feeling of home' is retained. The final stage of transition is then described (in lines 1 to 4) as 'moving out'. Thus, this section of conversation presents the process of transition experienced by residents as discrete stages that are unimpeded because the 'feeling of home' is ensured throughout the journey. The way this is manifested becomes apparent from line 13. Prior to this, however, is a description of other refuges.

From line 4, W2A provides an account of the way other refuges are seen to impede the process of transition and, subsequently, hinder the production of 'independence'. These

particular settings are described as fostering a social milieu where residents 'become far far more attached to the workers, far more attached to being in a refuge, so far more institutionalised into that sort of system.' That is, the kinds of interactions fostered in other spatial settings are perceived by W2A to accentuate interpersonal relationships and, therefore, to accentuate the process of institutionalisation and hinder transition. Furthermore, as W2A states (in lines 9 and 10), this kind of experience makes leaving 'extremely traumatic'. Thus, the forged social and spatial relationships of other refuges are seen to traumatise residents because 'they feel like they're losing a lot'. What these utterances offer is a comparison of different kinds of transition. The social milieu of one particular model, which is later revealed to be the communal refuge model, is presented in marked contrast to the independent refuge model. In the independent refuge model, an unimpeded journey is described.

From line 14, W2A then provides a description of the spatial strategies of the independent refuge model, seen to produce 'that feeling of home'. This is managed by describing these strategies as replicating the experiences of 'home'. In this instance, the spatial setting is presented as a significant constituent in the maintenance of ceremonies of domesticity. These ceremonies are described from line 15 'they still have their kitchen, they still have to keep that clean, ya know do their oven their own fridge and buy their own food'. These kinds of activities are presented from line 18 as 'normal' and, therefore, more likely to produce 'independence'. Thus, it could be argued, at this point, that staff of the independent refuge model seek to replicate the social relations of residents' previous homes in order to better manage women in transition. The independent refuge model, because of its spatial design, is seen to be an appropriate venue in which this can be more readily attained.

What is significant here, is that W2A describes how activities reminiscent of the 'home', need to be implemented, and then managed, by residents of the refuge in order to ensure transformation from 'dependence' to 'independence'. In this setting residents are required to engage in these particular spatial strategies, based upon perceived activities of the 'home', and to replicate relations of domesticity in order to become 'independent'. That is, in order for particular kinds of residents to secure 'independent living', they must participate in the practice of 'home-making'. This practice involves managing the spatial domain of this refuge in a particular way. In the independent refuge model the ceremonies of domesticity are centred around the spatial domain of the

Figure 4: Plan of Residential Kitchen Area in the Independent Refuge Model

kitchen. This area is illustrated in Figure 4. Thus, ceremonies of domesticity, along with the spatial design of the independent refuge model, are presented as important contingencies in the production of 'independence' and construction of an ordered social world.

The analysis of the conversation segment presented here also demonstrates the way the notion of 'home' is often implicitly embedded in refuge talk, in order to justify the provision of particular practices in the production of 'independence'. Here, perceived practices of the communal refuge model are presented as inferior to those of the independent refuge model. In this instance, 'the communal refuge model' is used to highlight the benefits of the independent refuge because of the way the latter is oriented to the notion of 'home'. Arguably therefore, this reference to 'home' aims to 'sanction and sanctify' particular spatial strategies as legitimate practices (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 119) in the social world of the refuge. It also provides refuge staff with an opportunity to highlight the significance of the spatial domain in the production of 'independent women', and the likelihood of fulfilling the feminist ideology of 'liberation and independence' from the family.

It is worth noting, at this point, that the intention to create a kind of 'home' in 'rehabilitative organisations' is also reflected in literature on halfway houses. Weider (1974, p. 48) writes on this point that administrators of these kinds of settings are keen to implement practices that generate a normal and home-like environment; efforts generally extend to the implementation of a minimum number of rules and a small or non-mandatory program (ibid). In this instance, however, space is not described as an explicit component in the management of these kinds of organisations. This is unlike the case of this refuge, where it is acknowledged as a key constituent in the production of this social world.

In summary the conversation segment presented here shows that particular practices of 'home-making' are reminiscent of domestic relations of the 'home', and that staff perceive the reproduction of these relations as a good thing because it is likely to ensure the transformation of refuge residents. That is, these particular practices, when facilitated by a specific spatial environment, facilitate independent living because they are seen to offer a familiar experience. The analysis of this conversation segment demonstrates that there are different kinds of institutionalisation, and the one fostering attachment is seen to be counterproductive to the overarching rationale of 'empowerment'. Furthermore, an examination of this segment shows that the relationship between 'space' and the production of 'independence' is made explicit when the everyday activities of refuges are explained. Thus, this discussion illustrates the methods used for processing residents and the way the spatial domain of the refuge contributes to this process.

Discussion

In the independent refuge model, the practice of 'home-making' is connected to ceremonies of domesticity, which are primarily oriented to the preparation of food, maintaining a hygienic environment and organising a mealtime routine in the spatial domain of the kitchen. These activities require refuge residents to concentrate on the provision of services for others; that is, to reproduce a social reality that concentrates on domestic chores, which harvests stereotypes and particular family relations. Performing these ceremonies is perceived to constitute the generation of 'a home', and this is seen to produce 'independence' (Jerome, 2001, p. 208). That is, the practices of 'home-making', based upon ceremonies of domesticity, are perceived to more likely secure the transition of women from one kind of 'home' to another.

At this point it is worth highlighting that the concept of 'ceremonies of domesticity' has been formulated to depict activities connected to practices of 'home-making' in the refuge. Furthermore, it indicates that particular routines are seen to be critical in the construction of 'a home'. Loyd (1989) also emphasises the importance of this relationship. She calls attention to the role of women as 'caretakers of the home' and the serious level of commitment this task requires (ibid, p. 181). Loyd also stresses that women must learn their role as homemaker through socialisation (ibid, p. 182). This is important because it helps to comprehend the relevance of practices of 'home-making' in the refuge and the role of ceremonies of domesticity.

The practice of 'home-making' therefore, originates from an understanding of the socialisation practices of the family. The intention of this refuge practice is to reproduce experiences that contribute to the construction of 'a home'. In this instance, managing the spatial domain in a particular way constitutes the practice of 'home-making'. And competently managing these strategies, oriented to the kitchen area, is perceived as an attribute of an 'empowered' and 'independent woman'. This is because the refuge is about power and the struggle for empowerment.

Residents of this refuge are more likely to feel 'at home' in this setting and participate in a set of practices that aim to produce 'independence' by consciously adhering to staff interpretations of the way in which 'a home' is produced. The particular practice of 'home-making' presented here, is arguably, what the field of feminism sought to overcome. That is, these strategies do not facilitate 'liberation and independence' from the family, but present and preserve practices of domesticity to regulate and standardise a family model that is underpinned by patriarchal relations. In this instance, particular codes of conduct are

constructed through tasks oriented to the kitchen area. Furthermore, to ensure that women comply with a commonsense conception of what constitutes a family and 'a home' refuge staff monitor these ceremonies of domesticity. Thus, the independent refuge model and its spatial practices, is more likely to produce an 'independent woman' with the credentials condemned during the feminist movement of the 1970s.

Conclusion

The information presented here supports the observation that space is a significant constituent in the production of the 'refuge culture'. It highlights the way particular sets of activities, oriented to the spatial domain, are presented as significant constituents in the transformation of women from a state perceived to be 'dependent' to another state perceived to be 'independent'. Specifically, this paper illustrates that residents of the independent refuge model must actively engage in activities connected to the kitchen area in order to be recognised as 'empowered'. Thus, managing the spatial domain in a particular way is a necessary constituent in the construction of an 'independent woman'.

Eliciting the relevance of space in the construction of social worlds is generally 'overlooked or glossed over' (Franck, 1986, p. 66). The discussion presented here illustrates that it is possible to examine the way social worlds are constructed and the way space is embedded in this process. The design disciplines are noted for their paucity of rigorous empirical research that documents – or even acknowledges – this kind of relationship. (See, for example, Franck, 1986, 1988; Stimson, 1986, 2000; Lawrence, 1987; Deprés, 1991; Jobes, 1998; Crabtree, 2000.) Importantly, this paper demonstrates that space is a significant constituent in the construction of social worlds and the production of culture. It does this by teasing out the relationship between spatial strategies and the production of 'independent women' in an independent refuge model currently in operation in Southeast Queensland.

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