# A space of their own: a case study advocating appropriation of the domestic interior for well-being

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**Key words**

COVID-19; Dramatherapy; Embodiment-Projection-Role (EPR); Interior; Narrative; Psychoscenography; Scenographic; Telehealth

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## Introduction

This chapter discusses how scenographic (Hann, 2019; 2021) and design practices coupled with narrative concepts offered a means of 'voyaging' beyond the confines of living-spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. It does so through a French case study, which is conceptualised using the Embodiment-Projection-Role (EPR) model of dramatherapy (Jennings, 1998), and draws parallels with literary precedents. Employed in a programme of telehealth workshops, EPR was used to reconceive the domestic interior, supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children in precarious socio-economic circumstances. Telehealth refers to all uses of telecommunications technologies to increase equality of access to healthcare (Collie & Čubranić, 1999). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, use of tele-therapy has become commonplace as doctors and therapists turned to digital spaces to support patients and clients during periods of legally imposed 'stay-at-home' orders and curfews. Online interactions change the relational dynamics between therapist and client. Participants engage differently with the digital format and the content of the session or workshop; for example, asynchronous (pre-recorded) content enables them to progress at their own pace and convenience.

Children often play in special spaces chosen for their reassuring qualities, on the borders of their world and the world around them: a tree house, cupboard, attic, cardboard box, or under a table. Through the appropriation of space, part of the psychic self is projected into reality, which demonstrates aspects of identity to others, symbolized in and by that space. In creating imaginary worlds, the physical space is transcended, becoming a psycho-social and emotional place. Fiction for both children and adults often feature confinement or separation, sometimes both. In C.S Lewis' allegorical fantasy *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, the youngest of four siblings, finds the eponymous wardrobe in the spare room defines a liminal space. It is a portal from a world filled with adult uncertainty and the terror of helplessness, to

another world besieged by magic but allowing the children to exercise agency. Lewis' readers follow the fictional children's triumph over adversity, embodied in the defeat of the adult-like figure of the White Witch. Their adventures create a bridge between childhood and adulthood (Turner 1967, 1982; Van Gennep 1960). In dramatherapy, tales provide a liminal space between reality and imagination, where potential change can happen. We conclude with Sweeney's proposition for '*psychoscenography*', a neologism that denotes the 'understanding of the effect of scenography on the psychology and behaviour of individuals and groups' (Sweeney 2021, after Debord 1955), and speculate this might be developed further to re-imagine living spaces benefiting families in over-crowded and precarious environmental conditions.

**Safe as houses?**

Gaston Bachelard proposed the twin notions of imagination (representation) and reverie (daydreaming) as tools for the poetic re-reading of home (1958). Choosing a broadly positive interpretation of the symbolic value and meanings of interior spaces, he reassures the reader that any darker associations can be transmuted, just as telling ghost stories safely rehearse and diffuse fears. For Bachelard, 'home' represents a refuge; '[the] house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (Bachelard, 1958, p. 28). Yet corners, cupboards, and 'nests', are not always secure places for reverie in the lived reality of many adults and children, they 'lose [their] protective function' (Nemet Pier, 2006: 222). As John Fletcher sardonically noted in the seventeenth century, 'Charity and beating begins at home' (Fletcher, 1639).

Interviewed for television, Christophe Robert, general delegate of the Abbé Pierre Foundation in France, recalled testimonies of children doing their homework in stairwells, toilets, or the back of a car. True of pre-pandemic times, it became more evident during the confinement of a 'lockdown' (Mansour, 2020). Physical isolation from friends and teachers makes children

especially vulnerable to hidden domestic abuse and increases susceptibility to mental health conditions. Living in over-crowded housing offers little opportunity for privacy, exacerbating intra-familial tensions between parent and child, siblings, or adults in a household, leading to heightened states of emotional behaviours: irritability; acting out; aggressiveness; violence; or alienation, depression and anxiety. The National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies in France, document overcrowded accommodation affects only 2.3% of households in towns and districts with less than 10,000 inhabitants (Bernard et al., 2020). This rises to 13.7% in the conurbation of Paris. Household composition also strongly influences instances of domestic over-occupation: 9.9% of couples with one or more child under the age of 10 live in overcrowded housing, increasing to 25% for single-parent families with one or more child in that age group. Precarious living environments, combined with confinement; illness; stress; unemployment; loss of social support (for example, school closures), can make life especially difficult for children with pre-existing psychological, behavioural, emotional, or learning difficulties.

As COVID-19 spread throughout Europe in March 2020, across France, schools, workplaces, and extra-curricular activities including therapeutic programmes and support groups, closed overnight. Families found themselves juggling work or unemployment with home-schooling. Being unable to withdraw to a separate space can create or amplify tensions where intrusion can be psychologically, as well as physically, invasive. Psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, Lyliane Nemet Pier, recalls a client's observations:

> *It was my room, but it wasn't protected. Anyone could enter it at any time. It was not a well-defined territory. It was a corner of mine, but fragile, a jar made even smaller by the furniture that encumbered it. I was not allowed to put things on the wall so as not to mark the wallpaper.* (2006; p, 215)

**Case Study**

Early in 2019, Sweeney was leading an arts-for-wellness programme in a lower socio-economic quarter of Paris, in partnership with child protection and social services. Children between five and seven were invited to join the programme due to a precarious domestic situation, their social environment and case histories, coupled with presenting developmental, behavioural, emotional and/ or mental health needs. The programme was designed to boost self-esteem, strengthen communication and relational skills, promote individual potential for creativity and emotional expression, and to reinforce resilience, as well as offer a safe space to express, master, and transform their emotions.

In-person sessions were halted abruptly with the first lockdown. Countering the loss of routine and the sudden absence of the face-to-face, arts-for-wellness workshops, Sweeney proposed a telehealth programme, to address the children's anxieties arising from the national response to the pandemic, including fears of a novel virus, wearing face-coverings, isolation, and from the loss of relationships and social bonds. Utilising the concept of scenographics (Hann, 2019; 2021) - defined as the crafting of objects, the creation of atmospheres, and the qualities of place-orientation within a specific space - Sweeney responded to the needs critical for the wellbeing of these children and their families in adjusting to domestic confinement and COVID-related limitations.

The three objectives for participants were to:

1. **Create** a sustainable safe space, an appropriated territory of their own, away from the gaze of other members of the household, where they could safely explore fears and anxieties

2. **Explore** the affordances offered by their physical environment, imaginatively 'going out to play' without actually leaving the domestic space

3. **Reduce** fear and anxieties related to the virus (masks, illness, and isolation)

We elaborate each of these objectives below.

**Methods**

A sequence of twenty-minute videos, entitled *Exploration in Space,* were pre-recorded, affording households the flexibility to access the programme via the internet at convenient times. The video files were kept small so they could be played on any electronic device. The frequency of the sessions was accelerated (from weekly when face-to-face, to a new video link sent to families every four days) to encourage motivation and commitment to the therapeutic process.

The programme's content was framed with reference to the Embodiment-Projection-Role (EPR) model of dramatherapy (Jennings, 1998). EPR is based on empirical observations which Jennings asserts are 'value free' (see Table 1, middle column). The three stages can be integrated with any therapeutic or educational model, and methods applying EPR demonstrate their relevance with participants of any age. Sweeney proposes engaging first in P/projection can help to ease participants' transition into the therapeutic process. As this facilitates a slight psychological distancing at first, participants are more willing to respond creatively, rather than react defensively, before entering into E/embodiment. As the scenario becomes more familiar and participants are more comfortable in the therapeutic setting, EPR provides the opportunity for clients to enter their estranged world of imagination and symbolism, through dramatic play. The *Exploration in Space* programme centred on the archetype of an astronaut and the metaphor of their journey framed by EPR (see table 1, right hand column). The stages of EPR play were

modulated throughout the videos and imaginative improvisations repeated during the period of domestic confinement.

[insert **Table 1** around here]

[caption] **Table 1. EPR framing of the *Exploration in Space* programme**

| developmental stage: | general descriptor | application in programme |
|---|---|---|
| **E/embodiment** | movement and sensory experience | awareness of physical movement and controlled breathing |
| **P/projection** | engage with the world beyond the boundaries of one's own body | creative writing, self-portraiture, costume-making and 'set' design |
| **R/role** | identifies with relationships to and with others | inhabiting the astronaut's character within the narrative |

## Create

Implicitly, networks of relationships traverse and unfold in space, in which the subject is caught, and which also constitutes the self (Sweeney, 2014). Nemet Pier proposes the family dynamic is defined by the (re)arrangement of space, through the processes of appropriation, visibility, and limits. Spatial relationships are a non-verbal means of communication used by a family or couple, which must be decrypted and understood (2006: p. 223). Living in domestic situations where not every person is able to assert their individual personality can be a cause for increased tensions and conflicts. It becomes a matter of urgency to propose solutions to domestic spaces that will encourage living well together.

Literary works present these familial and domestic dynamics through the metaphor of space where we can grasp, symbolically if not literally, the ways in which our environment shapes and informs relationships, thoughts and feelings, social conventions and politics, and mental and physical health. The leitmotifs, 'five hundred [pounds] a year and a room of one's own', in Virginia Woolf's influential 1929 essay act as symbols for the autonomy and self-determination historically denied to women by societal conventions, economic circumstances, and in law: 'The lock on the door means the power to think for oneself', she asserts (2002). Lack of privacy can be emotionally difficult for everyone, where the gaze and the incursion into the private space can be felt as invasive. Nemet Pier notes, 'the impossibility of being able to appropriate a space is often experienced as an abuse of power, a domination, or a negation of oneself from which the subject suffers' (2006: p. 218).

[Insert **Fig. 1** around here]

[caption] **Fig 1. A scenographic spaceship: table with recycled materials and personal belongings. (SM)**

*Exploration in Space* was designed to encourage dramatic play within the child's domestic space responding to the complexities of finding a 'room of one's own' during confinement. Invited to create a 'spaceship' - a scenographic environment - the children appropriated a domestic space using whatever materials could be readily sourced: dining room tables covered in tablecloths, bunk beds and bed sheets, toilet cubicles decorated with cushions, chairs in a square formation with a picnic blanket thrown over them, under desks, in a giant cardboard box, and even a bath were all used (fig. 1). The children were encouraged to kit-out their spaces with personal items including drawings, objects, toys, blankets, cushions, and anything else that made their spaceship feel safe, fun, homely, and comfortable to be in. Thus, for the children

participating in the telehealth programme, the appropriation enabled an act of personalization exercised consensually in a communal family space.

The scenographic place becomes the portal: a liminal space between the domestic, inside space and the world of possibilities and adventure outside of the everyday. In their imaginations, the spaceship takes the children 'out of the world', without them ever leaving their living room, by mediating between their psychic and real environment. The children also made space helmets, using materials recycled from around the home (fig. 2). Putting on the helmet provided a threshold for the child to transform into their astronaut persona. The helmets represented safety for the astronaut and signified their character's bravery. Symbolically they took the place of the surgical masks worn by the children in public spaces to protect them and others from passing on the virus. The creation of the astronaut's costume allowed children to identify the wearing of a mask as ludic, adventurous, imaginative. Each helmet was imbued with the identity of the individual and worn with pride. Parents reported in post-workshop reflections that, following the creation of the helmets, the children's anxieties around wearing surgical masks outside of the home had diminished.

[Insert **Fig. 2** around here]

[caption] **Fig. 2. A space helmet: paper grocery bag, aluminium foil, coloured card stars. (SM)**

**Explore**

In many children's fictional narratives, the protagonists are transported beyond their bedrooms via their imaginative transformation of domestic spaces into a 'wilderness', best exemplified by Maurice Sendak's illustrations for *Where the Wild Things Are*, '[that] very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew – and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became

the world all around' (Sendak, 1963). Thus, in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) the Pevensie children enter Narnia through a wardrobe, and in *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911) the Darling children fly out of their bedroom window to Neverland. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max re-enacts his familial dynamics in first encouraging the wild rumpus and then sending the Wild Things to bed without their supper, mirroring his own misbehaviour and punishment. In the process, he intuits something of the loss of spontaneity and loneliness in assuming adult authority, before also experiencing the solace of unconditional love and forgiveness: after sailing through night and day, in and out of weeks, and for almost a year, he finds his supper awaits him… 'and it was still hot' (Sendak, 1963: no page numbers).

Sweeney introduced the scenario of *Exploration in Space* through storytelling. Drawing on tropes of Joseph Campbell's archetypal, hero's journey structure, the narrative describes an astronaut preparing to go into space, putting on their spacesuit and helmet, saying goodbyes to family and friends, launching the rocket, exploring unknown planets, overcoming a challenge, returning to Earth, and reuniting with loved ones. The story was a prompt for exploring the validating qualities of astronauts: bravery, health, intelligence, strength, and innovation. The children were encouraged to think of other qualities which had not been mentioned; to enact these physically, vocally, and emotionally in play; and therefore, reinforce an identification with these qualities in themselves. The video sessions developed through creating their spaceships (P/projection), to the children beginning to E/embody the astronaut in readiness for R/role play. The children drew and wrote narrative texts and followed this with movement exercises. By walking as 'lightly' as astronauts in zero gravity increased awareness of their body in relation to space around their home. Consciously varying their breathing, which accompanies the slower movement, decreases heart rate and regulates anxiety, providing a playful form of relaxation.

The final stage of the programme was to incorporate all the elements into a long improvisation:

> *Settling into the scenographic spaceship, helmets on, preparing for the big adventure, the children engaged with my video, one spaceship to another (I was also under my table/ in my spaceship on the video recording). We counted down to zero and lifted off into outer space… Upon landing, the astronauts bravely stepped out into the unknown wilderness of the 'new planet' to explore every room, space, corner, and piece of furniture. Reimagining each anew, these domestic spaces and objects were transformed into a 'wilderness'. One child visited Neptune, formerly their kitchen, where a battle ensued between the heroic astronaut and the terrible refrigerator demon (recounted by a parent). Another traversed their couch, which became like sinking sand (as told by the child in debrief). The control panel was once again engaged, and the astronauts all returned safely home. This ended the play.* **(ES)**

**Reduce**

Processing difficult emotions through the archetypal narrative of the hero's journey, positively reaffirmed in the children the magical-imaginative belief that they were as brave as astronauts. The spaceship and the helmet metaphorically embody protective functions, allowing a sense of agency to be asserted over fears arising from the virus itself and the inexplicable losses of routine, social and relationships bonds. They also function practically, by enabling the child to experience time away from the gaze of other family members. Instrumentalising the spatial 'othering' re-enchants their home environment.

**Pyschoscenography**

Theatre is a heightened and immersive space where anything can happen, reverie and nightmares come alive to be rehearsed emotionally, yet are contained within the duration of the

performance. Therapeutic space typically is defined by familiarity, regularity, and order. Often a neutral place, freed from the normal progression of time and external influences or judgement, it is a container trustworthy and resilient enough to withstand whatever emotional storms arise within. Both spaces are predicated on *scenographics.*

From empirical, phenomenological observations of ‘theatre-therapy space’ (Sweeney, 2014) and practicing ‘therapeutic scenography’, Sweeney proposed the neologism ‘psychoscenography’ to describe an emerging understanding of the implicit role that spatial appropriation and place-making, through scenographic practices, plays in human development and wellbeing. Beyond simply observing, ‘visualising’ or ‘thinking about’ spaces, psychoscenography engages participants in an embodied experience of space and practices making place, for ‘communicating’ and ‘transforming’ feelings which might not be easily articulated through words. Psychoscenography invites participants to touch, smell, see, hear, and even taste fabrics and materials to create environments which project their interior, mental spaces into the material world. This encourages us to think beyond the programme detailed here, about ways our multi-disciplinary knowledge in design, architecture, scenography, and therapy, could facilitate individuals and communities in re-imagining their lived spaces. Domestically, this might contribute to promoting health for families living in over-crowded and precarious environmental conditions. Collectively, this can encourage a communal agency in their built environment.

## Conclusion

In times of crisis, harnessing available resources are key to survival. This chapter presents a case study where domestic space became that resource for wellness needs. The perspectives developed above offer a unique insight and new methods for addressing the intersectional issues highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. Through the metaphorical narrative of space exploration,

the implementation of a telehealth programme offered a liminal space between the interior of the participants' dwellings and the psychic-emotional place they created of and within it.

Teachers noted an increase in attention span during online home-schooling amongst those students who participated in the programme. One parent noted her son's anxiety had decreased when leaving the house for his daily, mandated hour of outdoors exercise. The children reported finding it easier to concentrate, and expressed increased agency over their circumstances, which enabled them to feel better while unable to see their friends. They identified with the astronaut's characteristics and experiences – remaining isolated with the same people for many months in a spaceship – mirroring their confinement and social separation during the pandemic. The families voiced the benefit of imagining their home in different ways, thus allowing them to find wellness solutions in rearranging, appropriating (Nemet Pier, 2006), and re-thinking domestic spaces in ways they had previously not, and offering each child the opportunity to mark their territory, to have a space of their own.

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