

# Aesthetics in displacement – Hmong, Somali and Mexican home-making practices in Minnesota

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## Abstract

Personalizing a residential environment has long been recognized among the dimensions of home. Little research though has focused on understanding the home-making process of aesthetic construction under conditions of displacement. Questions still abound: What does the notion of aesthetics entail in displacement? Do immigrant groups construct a sense of *difference* in the home, and if so, how? And, what can impede their efforts? Answering these questions sheds light on the opportunities that arise when interdisciplinary connections between architectural, housing and consumer studies are formed.

Using data from in-depth interviews conducted in the homes of three displaced groups now living in Minnesota (Hmong, Somali and Mexicans), this paper explores the above questions and proposes theoretical and practical directions for supporting diverse housing needs. Delving into the living and socializing areas, the discussion uncovers the material and immaterial forms that aesthetic constructions can take: from decorative objects to colours, textures, materials, light levels, furniture placement and type as well as sound and smell. Interviewees varied in the number of cultural expressions they employed and degree to which they invested time, energy and funds to personalize their homes. Their efforts though were often purposive: a means to connect to a homeland, pass down one's cultural traditions to future generations, foster alliances with others from the same cultural group and a form of constructing *difference*.

Particularly insightful are the impediments those interviewed endured in constructing an aesthetic they resonated with. Factors like spatiality, religious beliefs, regulations, income limitations, construction norms and availability of objects to purchase often suppressed their attempts to transform the spaces they lived in into places they can relate to, threatening in the process the group's cultural identity definition and creating stress in their lives. Given that home-making is found to be inextricably tied to consumer studies through behaviours like purchasing products, the paper closes with the implications of rethinking aesthetics as well as directions for future research.

## Introduction

As diversity is inherent in the American cultural landscape, understanding how people with different cultural backgrounds use the spaces in which they live has both theoretical and practical implications for fields ranging from architecture and interior design to consumer studies. When it comes to displaced groups however, the body of knowledge around home-making processes is rather limited. Studies have often involved one cultural group at a time, making comparisons and generalizations difficult (Mehta and Belk, 1991; Hadjiyanni, 2002). Housing needs are also typically discussed amidst other challenges minority groups face, limiting the opportunity for a thorough examination of housing's role in their daily functioning (Mazumdar *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, many such studies stem from non-design perspectives (Low and

Chambers, 1989; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003), lacking the specificity designers need during the design process. Examples of such design decisions include: who is likely to share bedrooms can help determine the number, size and location of sleeping areas; the types of foods cooked, method of cooking, number of people involved and equipment used can be translated into linear feet of counter space, a particular kitchen arrangement and types of equipment; and knowledge of the kinds of items stored can inform the type, size and location of storage areas specified.

Expanding this research area from the design perspective has a sense of urgency as studies show that mental, emotional and physical health problems abound among displaced people who lose their cultural connections (Bammer, 1994; Adler, 1995; Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2004). With a home's spatiality hosting many cultural practices and impacting social change (Pader, 1993),

designers, facility managers, affordable housing providers and policy makers who are cognizant of how the built environment relates to culture and identity can create spaces that meet diverse needs and support various ways of living, that is, *culturally sensitive housing* (Hadjiyanni, 2005, 2007; Hadjiyanni and Helle, 2008).

Although multiple ‘voices in architectural education’ have called for more research and education around cultural differences from an architectural perspective (Dutton, 1991), according to Tom Fisher ‘architects talk a lot about the benefits of good design for people’s lives, but we do very little to quantify those benefits or to document their effects’ (1996, p. 42). Theoretical frameworks stemming from anthropology help set a trajectory for how to approach the problem of responding to culture in design. Stuart Hall, for example, posits that cultural identity is defined by both *similarity* and *difference* (Hall, 2000). Therefore, exploring how residential interiors relate to what makes us *similar* and *different* from each other is a step towards a broader understanding of the dynamic among design, culture and identity under conditions of displacement.

This type of inquiry is especially important when an investigation is entrenched into the study of practices that are understood as ‘universal’. Personalizing one’s own space according to a preferred aesthetic is a practice that everyone engages in (Bourdieu, 1984) and has long been recognized among the dimensions of home (Hayward, 1977; Després, 1991; Moore, 2000). Questions though still abound: What does the notion of aesthetics entail in displacement? Do immigrant groups construct a sense of *difference* in the home, and if so, how? And, what can impede their efforts? Knowledge of the difficulties encountered in home-making processes can inform attempts to work towards culturally sensitive housing, easing immigrant groups’ adjustment to life in displacement through *houses* that can be turned into *homes* that foster a sense of belonging. Using data from in-depth interviews conducted in the homes of three displaced groups (Hmong, Somali and Mexicans) now living in Minnesota, this paper uncovers theoretical and practical directions that shed light on the opportunities that arise when interdisciplinary connections between architectural, housing and consumer studies are formed.

## Cultural identity and aesthetics

With cultural identities being like living organisms that evolve and adapt to different situations, some form of change is bound to ensue when displaced people find themselves in new circumstances (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994). Discourses on cultural change have long identified its selective and appropriative nature (Pilkington *et al.*, 2002). According to this work, members of cultural groups actively choose *which* elements of their culture to change and *how* to change them. Cultural expressions like language, food and music are more likely to be appropriated and adapted to a group’s own ideals than cultural values like religion (Karam, 2000).

The challenge then to anyone involved in environment-behaviour scholarship is to better understand these processes of change and how they are impacted. The creation of a preferred aesthetic under conditions of displacement is one such process. Philosophical discourses around aesthetics have long recognized its value in making ‘a distinctive contribution to human under-

standing’ (Graham, 1997, p. 2). Typically employed in discussions around the philosophy of the arts, aesthetics is a complex term, used to denote anything from taste and beauty to safety and cleanliness (Ureta, 2007). Material culture is closely intertwined with aesthetics, as decorations and artefacts are among the primary means by which families and individuals personalize their homes (McCloud, 1996). Through the experiences of three displaced groups, this paper contributes to interdisciplinary discourses around displacement by uncovering additional dimensions of aesthetics, ones that go beyond physical manifestations and instead speak to both the material and immaterial dimensions of home.

Inherent in aesthetics are also power, authority and moral/social values (Driskel, 1990). In fact, Bourdieu (1984) was one of the first scholars to highlight the power relations embedded in aesthetics. In his book *Distinction – A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu argues: ‘Taste is a match-maker; it marries colours and also people, who make “well-matched couples”, initially in regard to taste’ (p. 243). By positioning aesthetics as a means for the political and economic domination of one class over another, Bourdieu opened the door for a rethinking of the role of domestic environments in processes of domination. Since then, more studies have revealed the multiplicity of ways by which power dynamics can present themselves in displacement. Some discourses follow the ‘home as a site of resistance’ paradigm (Hooks, 1990), exemplifying the active role of home occupants in constructing an aesthetic and the reasoning behind their practices. Mehta and Belk’s (1991) study of Indian immigrants with high educational and occupational status in the US documented how the creation of a preferred aesthetic, through the use of decorative objects, served as resistance to change and a means to nurture an ‘overidentification’ with the Indian identity. Similarly, Hadjiyanni’s (2002) study of Greek-Cypriot refugees also points to the significance of cherished possessions the refugees brought with them, like embroideries and stamp collections, in transferring knowledge of the lost places to younger generations.

Studies also bring to the foreground displacement’s potential to accentuate the differences between aesthetic practices and consequentially, different cultural groups. Van der Horst and Messing’s (2006) study of Dutch people’s perceptions of immigrants and their ‘closed curtains’ is an excellent example of the disconnect between immigrants and members of the host culture that can happen when expressions of aesthetics in private, interior spaces spill over into the public areas. Such findings call for the need to delve deeper into understanding differential aesthetics and devise ways to bridge differences and create community connections, this paper’s purpose.

In parallel, unequal power relations have been shown to infiltrate a home’s interior spatiality. These discourses align with recent conceptualizations of home that ask for scholarship that explores how ‘people come to see their lives as formed through the influence of the home itself’ (Miller, 2001, p. 10). Such an undertaking is all the more critical given studies that showed that immigrants’ choices are often ‘bounded’, partly due to the spatial constraints families encounter in displacement (Hadjiyanni, 2007). Instead of having the choice to appropriate or adapt their living environments to support their way of life (perform religious rituals and customs, dress according to their cultural norms, eat foods with familiar tastes, decorate according to a preferred aesthetic, etc.), families often must choose between changing their

behaviours to adapt to their spatial boundaries or doing nothing. Either scenario can be stressful, as the inability to practise cultural traditions can impact cultural logic, the glue that holds different cultural elements together (Fischer, 1999), leading to the loss of a culture and/or its related elements. Ellen Pader took this argument further in her study of Mexicans living in the US to pose that conflicting conceptual and spatial frameworks become a means by which the dominant society assimilates and controls subordinates, a new form of colonialism (Pader, 1993). Uncovering the impediments displaced groups encounter in transforming their living spaces into places they can associate with, the paper expands on Winters' call to use aesthetics to better understand 'the place architecture occupies in human affairs' (Winters, 2007, p. 4).

## Background – Hmong, Somali and Mexicans in the US

The US demographics have changed drastically in the last few decades in areas that in the past did not boost diverse populations. Minnesota's influx of Hmong and Somali refugees, along with the ongoing northward migration of Mexicans, have re-defined the work of architects, interior designers, affordable housing providers, facility managers and policy makers. Responding to the needs of diverse consumers is now more important than ever – 5.3% of the state's population is foreign-born and 8.5% speak a language other than English at home, approximately 439 203 people (Minnesota Quickfacts, 2000).

Hmong and Somali refugees found themselves in the US after escaping devastating wars in their homelands (Pfaff, 1995; Gundel, 2002). The Hmong arrived in Minnesota in the 1980s, whereas the Somalis in the 1990s. The Twin Cities currently have the largest concentration of both Hmong and Somalis in the country – in terms of refugees, the area has three times the national average. An estimated 10% of the country's total Mexican population now resides in the Midwest and Minnesota's Latino population has more than tripled since the 1990 census to just over 175 000 (US Census Bureau, 2001; Minneapolis Foundation, 2006). As the fastest-growing minority population in the state, these numbers are expected to continue to grow.

All three groups face a host of challenges in their adjustment process from lacking language and job skills to racial discrimination. These challenges contribute to emotional distress and acute homesickness, hindering their chances for societal and economic advancement (Adler, 1995; Inui, 1998; Dion, 2001; Thornburgh, 2006). Low incomes and regular remittances to their home countries (Levine, 2007) leave little money to procure appropriate housing (Mattessich, 2000; Robillos, 2001). In the case of Mexicans, the lack of legal status further exacerbates adjustment problems.

## Methodology

The study draws from in-home interviews, conducted between 2002 and 2007, of Hmong, Somali and Mexicans living in Minnesota's Twin Cities' metropolitan area. The intrusive nature of ethnographic studies that rely on home visits made the identification of subjects more difficult (accepting someone they did not know in their homes constituted invasion of privacy). However, visiting the home enriched the researchers' understanding of how

residential environments relate to cultural identity construction. In addition to talking with at least one adult, home visits allowed for the documentation of house plans, furniture types and placement, observations by the researchers, as well as photographs of interior and exterior spaces.

Interviewees were heads of household over the age of 18 and were identified using the snowball sampling technique via contacts with community organizations and institutions. There were 10 interviews with Hmong, 8 with Somali and 25 with Mexicans. To include diverse perspectives, interviewees were pre-screened to solicit men and women of a range of ages, incomes, marital status, educational levels, years in the US and types of accommodation (rental/owned, apartment/single-family house).

Verbal information collected included demographics and descriptions of past and current housing characteristics and preferences, traditions the interviewees value and wish to pass down to their children, activities taking place in the home, as well as solutions to the housing problems identified. Both closed and open-ended questions were used allowing for both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis (Zeisel, 1991) – the quantitative being a simple descriptive analysis, such as the mean number of bedrooms and bathrooms. In terms of the qualitative, it should be noted that this paper heavily relies on the narratives provided by the interviewees. Even though their viewpoints may not be representative of all members of their cultural group, their experiences allow for a glimpse into the opinions and housing problems of displaced groups. Furthermore, given the paper's focus on *difference*, part of the analysis zooms into those cultural expressions noted as *different* by the interviewees themselves. Readers of this paper must thereby keep in mind that: (a) it is beyond the paper's scope to comment on the validity of the interviewees' perceptions; and (b) although the paper focuses on *difference*, *similarity* is of equal importance. With homes serving as mediums through which interviewees navigated between tradition and modernity, it was not uncommon for them to engage in behaviours like displaying both traditional and mainstream artefacts in their homes or eating both traditional and typical American foods, like cereal for breakfast and pizza.

## Discussion – difficulties encountered in constructing an aesthetic

Concerns about 'standing out' prevented many of our interviewees from visually expressing their sense of *difference* on the exterior, publicly seen parts of their homes.<sup>1</sup> Instead, intangible cultural expressions, like smell, were most often the primary signifier of *difference* to both insiders (like other Somalis) and outsiders (like the researchers) in public domains. In the Cedar-Riverside high rises, impersonal, long corridors were punctuated by the smells of the burning *unsi*, an incense made of sugar, perfume and spices, notifying us, the researchers, that we were about to enter a unit occupied by Somali. When asked how her home shows this is the home of a Somali, a woman said: 'The smell. We use something called *unsi* to refresh the house (she showed us the machine used

<sup>1</sup>Although studies like Van Der Horst and Messing's (2006) thoroughly explain how the closed curtains of immigrant groups are a visual and outward expression of difference, it is a practice undertaken in the interior of a home that has exterior manifestations.



**Figure 1** Aesthetics is reduced to smells in the corridors of rental properties.

to burn the *unsi*). When you pass by apartments and you smell this, you know it is Somali people living there.' (Fig. 1) The means to construct these immaterial connections among Somalis were typically purchased at local Somali malls. In fact, having access to Somali stores is a reason many Somalis, like this 30-year-old woman moved to Minneapolis: 'I am in America but also in Somalia, I can get anything I want – the grocery stores we have, we now have over 30 restaurants, we have four Somali malls, it is almost like home. If you go to a mall, it is set up just like in Somalia, clothes hanging on top, and there are no prices, you think you are in a third-world country, because you are negotiating prices! You are in Somalia with all the amenities [here in the US]. I tell everyone, this is Somalia, you have to come!'

In the homes of Hmong and Mexicans, it was by the smells of foods cooking that we knew we were coming upon something *different*.<sup>2</sup> Spices used in traditional cooking along with preparation techniques like frying and inadequate mechanical/natural ventilation in cooking spaces made smells overpowering for many interviewees – particularly when the smells and grease from cooking permeated the rest of the house, like bedrooms and closets. When asked how her home shows this is the home of a Mexican, a 50-year-old mother of three said: 'You go in and you smell the Mexican food cooking. And when you go out, YOU [emphasis added] smell like the food!' Although many interviewees enjoyed the aroma of foods cooking, mediating the smells and limiting them to the cooking areas – through, for example, separated and well-ventilated cooking areas – was preferred by almost all interviewees. This spatial arrangement, however, was something difficult to find in mainstream American homes designed with the open-plan ideal, where kitchens are typically connected to the social areas.

Once inside the home, *difference* was strengthened from the decorative objects that enlivened the living and socializing spaces

<sup>2</sup>For scholarship on the importance and meaning of food in displacement, see Lockwood and Lockwood (2000), Petridou (2001) and Hadjiyanni and Helle (2008).



**Figure 2** Negotiating identities through aesthetics.

and infused them with meaning, significance and value (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Richins, 1994). In spite of the diversity among the interviewees in terms of ethnicity, history, background, age, gender, marital status and educational/socio-economic level, the message was the same – that it was very important to keep their traditions and cultural identity definition in spite of living in the US. The efforts of some of the interviewees to pass these traditions to future generations while adjusting to American life materialize in this Hmong family's living room. Here, the American flag is prominently displayed next to the traditional Hmong musical instrument, the *qeej*. In the words of the father: 'We try to nurture them [children] to be bilingual. . . . We give them a Hmong name and an English name, to enter the mainstream society, the community, we want them to be on both sides. We watch television from Laos and find out what goes on. It is tough for the young because they don't speak Laotian. They learn the Hmong language and culture everyday, to maintain that. We bought the *qeej* for my son and he loves it. When he is five we will take him for lessons, it is a way to maintain the tradition' (Fig. 2).

All eight of the Somali interviewees also adorned their living spaces with prized possessions from Somalia. A single Somali woman, who proudly displayed her collection of traditional handicrafts from Africa and Somalia said: 'When I enter my apartment I feel at home [Somalia] because of all the stuff I put on the walls. They are objects from Somalia. When you walk into my apartment, you know it is ethnic, even if you don't know that these are objects from Somalia.' Accumulating these possessions takes years and commitment – most have to be purchased abroad as they are not available in the US. This Somali mother of two explained: 'My sister travelled back to Somalia and I asked her to bring me handmade things. She brought me back some things and I have them in the kitchen. I have a milk container, where you put milk





**Figure 3** Access to decorative objects is difficult.

to eat from, and some combs (Fig. 3). I hope to bring back more decorations when I go to Somalia for my husband's brother's wedding in January.'

Getting access to decorations and furniture pieces was equally difficult for some of the Mexicans we interviewed. There was however, wide variability among the homes' level of embellishment, which was often a reflection of the diversity among the Mexican immigrants in the US – 13 of the 25 interviewees were undocumented immigrants who lacked legal status; five were second or third generation Mexican-Americans; the rest were Mexicans with legal status, either citizens or permanent residents. With few possessions, undocumented Mexicans used relatively inexpensive and easy to acquire things like a Mexican flag and a calendar with the Virgin of Guadalupe to personalize their homes. On the other hand, Mexicans with legal status invested in complete furniture assemblages, Mexican-themed paintings, and ceramics. According to a 42-year-old, third generation Mexican-American woman: 'I just finished a room upstairs in what was the attic space. I plan to decorate it with more of a Latin-style décor and colours. I was inspired by stuff in New Mexico and Taos last year when I went to visit there. I brought back a whole box of ceramic tiles for the walls. I'll probably buy furniture in that style too. Some of it I can probably buy here in Minneapolis, but some things I may get online, or make another trip to New Mexico.'

Although decorations were displayed everywhere, from shelves to walls and built-ins, the spatiality of the homes in some instances limited interviewees' ability to showcase important and sacred possessions like collections of photographs. Lacking a large, continuous wall surface, a Hmong family used the studs of an unfinished wall in the basement to pay respect to ancestors (Fig. 4). Spatial restrictions extended to the placement of Hmong altars – a small, rectangular piece of wood with feathers and a shelf where incense is lit. Many Hmong are Shamanists and believe that objects contain spirits that are the guardians of a family's welfare and can be called from the altar. According to tradition, altars must be placed on the wall across from the entry door so that the spirits can easily find it. Correct placement of the altar though, was not always possible in mainstream homes or split-level houses.



**Figure 4** An unfinished stud wall displays photos of ancestors.

In the Mexican experience, aesthetic differences included the spatial arrangement of rooms. The typical courtyard-type home prevalent in Mexico, where all the rooms are arranged around an open-air courtyard, is uncommon in Minnesota where winters are frigid and long. This Mexican woman translated her preference for a courtyard-type house into an indoor 'courtyard', alluded to through a painted sky on the ceiling: 'I'm working with a Latino architect now, and I have plans for a second storey addition to this house. I'm really going for a more hacienda-style house, which is a house with a central courtyard. That's what I was going for in here, with the painted sky ceiling and the archway to the kitchen' (Figs 5 and 6).

Colour on the walls was also employed to accentuate a preferred aesthetic, particularly in cases of home ownership. Somalis though, as paying mortgage interest is not supported by their Muslim religious beliefs, resided primarily in rental properties. Although most interviewees preferred earthy colours, like light brown, almond green, deep red and yellow, painting over the white walls of their rental units was not an option. Instead, Somalis employed colour and texture as aesthetic constructors by covering windows in triple layers of curtains, floors with richly adorned rugs and living areas with lush, velvety furniture, often the Middle Eastern-type sitting that lines the walls of a room. When asked how her home shows it is the home of a Somali, a 26-year-old mother of two said: 'The curtains. . . . These are not typical J. C. Penney curtains. I got them from the Somali Mall.' Although the curtains recreated the dark interiors Somalis are familiar with, mould and moisture, which collect behind the curtains, cause problems with landlords. Their demands that Somali families either open or remove the curtains to 'air' the space behind them creates daily stress in the lives of many Somalis (Fig. 7).

Meaning was engendered through views to the outdoors as well. Hmong, whose culture evolved in the tropical forests of Laos, nourish ancestral spirits with natural views. However, in the US, access to greenery and yards was not possible for families living in apartments and duplexes off the ground. In such cases, families resorted to painting interior elements a dark green



**Figure 5** The courtyard feeling is recreated with a painted ceiling over the living area.



**Figure 6** The arched opening in the cooking area accentuates the courtyard feeling.

colour and using posters with tropical scenes and waterfalls to nourish the spirits. Meanwhile, interviewees with yards, like this 37-year-old man, had difficulties complying with the mainstream aesthetic of mowed lawns: 'I am concerned about the regulations. You have to keep everything clean. . . . Once, I didn't cut my grass and I had to go to court. If the grass is 12 in or higher, they give you a notice.'

Aesthetic clashes extended to materials that incidentally were also linked to perceptions of safety. Some of the Somali interviewees for example, accustomed to brick homes, found wood construction too light. Caught in the web of aesthetic differences, this 30-year-old woman explained: 'I don't feel safe when I see them building these houses, they are not very solid, they are very flammable, you can hit the wall and get a hole.' A Somali man elaborated, tying thin walls to concerns with privacy and noise:



**Figure 7** Mould and moisture collect behind these lush curtains.

'We love music and we play it loud.'<sup>3</sup> See, watch this [he goes to the other side of the wall and knocks – we can hear the subtle sound]. Next thing you know, we have a war with the neighbours.' This sensitivity to neighbour relations is supported with studies that raise concerns about feelings of discrimination and a lack of sense of belonging among immigrant groups (Dion, 2001). For floor finishes though, material preference was typically tied to cleanliness and five of the eight Somalis we spoke with preferred wood floors because they are easier to clean.

All of this careful orchestration of re-constructing their cultural identity definition while in displacement was undertaken amidst technological gadgets like large television sets, stereo systems, computer stations and collections of CDs and DVDs. The sounds and visual imagery coming out of these media complemented family gatherings as technology was embraced as a means to teach the native language to the youth, create memories and strengthen associations with the homeland (see for example Karim, 2003; Bailey *et al.*, 2007). In the two-bedroom apartment of an undocumented Mexican family, the living room hosted the television on one corner and the altar on the other (Figs 8 and 9), while in the two-bedroom unit of a Hmong family of three, the computer station was adorned with baskets with tropical flowers (Fig. 10).

## Summary and conclusions

Using the experiences of Hmong, Somali, and Mexican immigrants in Minnesota, this paper examines what aesthetics entail in displacement; if and how immigrant groups construct a sense of *difference* in the home; and the impediments they endure in the process. The findings shed light on the diversity of aesthetic practices prevalent in the American cultural landscape and on the multiplicity of ways by which home-making can occur. Uncovering the difficulties these displaced groups encounter in creating an aesthetic that relates to their sense of *difference*, the paper unearths aspects of the home-making process that can inform the theoretical and practical direction of fields ranging from design to consumer studies.

<sup>3</sup>Somali gatherings often involve loud playing of drums and singing.



**Figure 8** Technology and tradition compete for space.



**Figure 9** An altar in the home of undocumented immigrants.

According to the above analysis, under conditions of displacement, aesthetics encompass a multiplicity of constructs from objects, colour, texture, smell, sound, views and light levels to spatial arrangement and furniture placement. In the process of creating a spatially visible and felt sense of *difference*, our interviewees employed cultural expressions like decorative objects from their country of origin, colours on walls, textures in curtains and rugs, smells from foods cooking and sounds of their native language through televisions and stereo systems. Varying combinations and degrees of engaging these cultural expressions were witnessed as some interviewees relied on a single item to personalize their living spaces while others undertook extensive remodelling to align their spatial reality to their aesthetic conceptions. The findings call for expanding the notion of aesthetics to capture both the material and visible/perceptible elements of *difference* (such as decorative objects and colours) as well as those immaterial means by which aesthetic experiences attain a holistic character (such as smell, sound and feel). Operating from within this framework, retail establishments that cater to the needs of immigrant groups (providing them with anything from objects to decorate to spices to use for cooking) are reconceived as adaptation



**Figure 10** Modern technology is accompanied by a traditional aesthetic.

mediums – by serving at the junctures of the material and immaterial, they can determine one's successful adaptation to life in displacement.

The variability in cultural expressions employed and degree to which one invests in the personalization of private spaces is accompanied by variability in the reasons behind these actions. What is intriguing about the above analysis is the active role of those we interviewed in the creation of a preferred aesthetic. All of the 43 interviewees, to various levels and degrees, devoted some time, energy and funds to consciously transform their living environments to places with meaning and value. Their constructions of aesthetics were purposive – reasons ranged from making a space beautiful to connecting to a homeland, passing down one's cultural traditions to future generations, fostering alliances with others from the same cultural group, and differentiating themselves from the mainstream and other cultural groups. Aesthetics then under conditions of displacement can be what Connerton (1989) calls a form of *performative memory*, a means through which 'societies remember'. Through an aesthetic that pays tribute to *difference*, interviewees navigated between tradition and modernity and between familiarity and 'the new', while at the same time remembering where they came from.

Lastly, by focusing on uncovering the impediments interviewees endured in creating an aesthetic, the paper exposes the duality behind aesthetic practices – that immersing one's self in what is familiar and comfortable does not always come easy. The spatial reality of these immigrants' houses, religious beliefs, regulations, income limitations, construction norms and market restrictions, such as availability of decorative objects to purchase, were all factors that suppressed their attempts to create a preferred aesthetic, threatening in the process the group's cultural identity definition. It is by unravelling this web of intervening factors that the above analysis enriches our understanding of consumer behaviour and reinforces its relevance to notions like social justice and unequal power dynamics. Home-making processes are inherently intertwined with behaviours such as visiting retail venues and purchasing products – from decorative objects to foods, furniture,



window and floor coverings and satellite television. If these are not locally available, the questions are: 'Where will ethnic groups find what they need in their daily lives?'; 'How far will they travel to get it?'; and 'How much more will they have to pay for it?' A clearer understanding of the linkages between processes of consumption and home-making can influence design approaches as well as policies that support for example the provision of ethnic markets.

The significance of this study's findings is enhanced by their potential to inform the direction of future studies in varying disciplines. As women have long been positioned as safekeepers of homeplace, future studies can delve deeper into uncovering the role of women in the creation of a preferred aesthetic in displacement (Hooks, 1990; Shami, 2000; Hadjiyanni, 2002). Re-conceiving the media as aesthetic constructors can also inform disciplines such as communication studies, which already position media as integral parts of the domestic environment and the migrant experience. Comparative research projects are additional avenues for future research in this arena. First, given the large number of cultural groups in displacement, further studies can raise awareness about the aesthetic preferences of other ethnic and minority groups, enlarging our vocabulary and understanding of aesthetic practices. Second, with this study's setting being an American mid-Western state, expanding inquiry into other American states as well as other Western countries with large immigrant populations would lend further insights and approaches to the problem of immigration. Unlike the US where public education is secular, in the Netherlands for example, immigrant groups like Muslims can send their children to schools that also teach religious principles (Ogan, 2001). Do displaced groups in the Netherlands rely less on the home for the retention of traditions, and if so, what are the differences between the American and Dutch domestic experiences? And third, comparative studies can also investigate the similarities and differences in aesthetic practices between displaced members of a cultural/ethnic group and those back in the country of origin. Are the aesthetics one was familiar with in the country of origin those preferred or the most embodied ones?

In closing, on the practical level, accounting for the diversity of aesthetic practices can take the form of programmatic guidelines for residential designs. Culturally sensitive design solutions for domestic environments include flexible space plans that can be adapted to various uses and aesthetics; wall space to be adorned; built-in display and storage areas; and wall and floor surfaces that can be easily maintained. What is fascinating here are the opportunities that arise when research agendas are infused with interdisciplinary collaborations such as those among architectural, housing and consumer studies. Enriching knowledge around the notion of aesthetics, the perspectives of different disciplines can chart the discovery of new avenues by which to cater to consumers' needs.

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