House & Home

Armchair psychology

APRIL 3, 2009 by: Emily Backus

What does your home say about you? I started thinking seriously about this after a visit to an elderly neighbour's flat a few years ago. She lived below us – in a space identical to ours in terms of square footage, ceiling height and other architectural particulars – and I'd gone down to inspect a leak from our kitchen into hers.

Our own apartment was sun-filled, open and recently renovated. Its main room served as a foyer, living room and home office, while a spacious kitchen doubled as an informal dining area, TV room and children's crafts space. Our walls were white, punctuated by modern artwork; our furniture was colourful, eclectic and mostly minimalist; and we co-existed with toys and clutter.

Our downstairs homologue was, by contrast, a dark, heavy hybrid of Bavarian mountain chalet and 1960s bourgeois aspirations, its layout sliced into conventional compartments that shut out light and closed in space. Impeccably maintained fittings and furnishings – velvet drapes, lacquered wooden furniture and baroque-framed figurative oils – spoke of dwellers that preferred sombre solidity over cheer or whimsy. One bedroom bore traces of a young adult who had left 15 to 20 years previously. The kitchen, which had a footprint mirroring our own, was a nearly vacant service space, with a small Formica table, a white enamel sink and other ageing basics. When my neighbour despaired about how hard it would be to touch over the concentric brown water stains in the ceiling, I had to agree; the white paint would be impossible to match as it had turned sepia.

How could our two flats be so different? Matteo Abis, director of research for Milan-based Makno Consulting, has spent the past few years investigating such issues. His term for the sort of static, conservative preserve occupied by my neighbour is *casa bunker*, or bunker home – a place sheltered from the outside world, open to only a few close relatives and friends. And, apparently, the type is far more common in Italy than a morphing, multipurpose nest like mine.

Over the past decade, Makno has surveyed thousands of people in Italy and western Europe in order to categorise homes and chart aesthetic tastes and consumption patterns. It then sells the findings to appliance makers, furniture manufacturers and residential developers, offering them not only a look into our collective drawing rooms but also an insight into what we want to buy.

According to the company's ongoing Housing Evolution study, 31 per cent of Italians, or about 18.6m, live in bunker homes. These are typically elderly people with limited means so the last house refurbishments date back to a more prosperous time, with correspondingly dated decorative details and colour schemes. (The prevalence of such properties might testify to Italians' fiscal conservatism and sputtering fertility. Most are reluctant to run up debt; four in five own their homes; and people aged 65 outnumber children under 15 by more than 40 per cent.)

My own apartment appears to be closer to Makno's definition of a *casa focolare*, or hearth home, with some attributes of its wealthier relative, the *casa forum*, or forum house. (I can't be sure because I didn't take the test, which would have required a home

visit and long interview.) According to the study, 26 per cent of Italians, typically young families, live in the former category of functional, affordable, dynamic, intimate spaces with warm, traditional furnishings and pastel colours. The forum, accounting for 15 per cent of Italian residences, is what the hearth becomes if a family climbs a few socioeconomic rungs and cares about entertaining.

Another 15 per cent of Italians live in what Makno refers to as an office house, a place for doing things. Take the small apartment in Milan that Francesca Maggioni shares with her doorman husband, two adult daughters and a grandson. "We pursue a thousand hobbies in this house," says the 56-year-old housewife. "I sew, knit, stencil, bake cookies. My husband and I often sit in the kitchen together; he'll read while I might work on a wreath." The toddler plays and their daughters spend much of their time on computers.

The next most popular category of homes in Italy – at 13 per cent – is the theatre home, a stage-set through which wealthy owners express themselves and their status, often with help from architects and interior decorators. Last are marginal categories: the tent house – a perfunctory space, easily set up and taken down, like a bivouac for students and highly mobile young adults – and the commodity house – a step up in terms of cost and stability but still an indistinctive dwelling occupied by a professional whose real base is elsewhere.

Although Makno has not conducted such a detailed study outside Italy, it has surveyed 3,000 people across six European countries to evaluate how they feel about, use and decorate their dwellings. Satisfaction with one's home was viewed as a primary indicator of emotional investment and, by this measure, Spaniards ranked highest, with an average score of 7.7 on a scale of one to 10, compared with ratings at or just over 7 for the UK, France and Germany. Russians felt the lousiest about their homes, ranking them a 5.3, and also reported living in the smallest quarters, just 65 sq metres on average. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the content Italians and Spaniards enjoyed the roomiest spaces, with an average of 108 sq metres and 103 sq metres, respectively. The study also found that Italians and French are most likely to express themselves through their homes and open them to guests, while Spaniards and Russians use them as family gathering places. UK homes scored high on receiving guests but their furnishings were conventional; and in Germany, where more than 50 per cent of people rent, residences tend to be functional and insular, places where people eat, sleep, work and rest.

As a whole, Europeans favour warm colours, traditional furniture and soft lines, like arched doorways, over the cold, minimalist fare displayed in interiors magazines. Even in Italy, the world capital of contemporary design, 70 per cent of domestically sold furniture is classical in style, Abis notes. Only the Spanish and the French actually like sleek, designer kitchens.

Predictably, many home-focused manufacturers find such data invaluable. "This research not only deepens our understanding of lifestyles but allows us to 'enter' homes," says Graziano Lazzarotto, the Italian head of marketing for appliance maker Electrolux, which helped finance Makno's study. The company has, for example, developed more products with rounded lines because the research showed that "cold, rational environments belong [only] to a wealthy niche", Lazzarotto says.

"Most people [by contrast] tend to recycle the environments of their childhood in later homes. First homes tend toward white laminate [kitchens] but when people no longer feel the need to escape the past, they recreate it."

Charles Jones, head of marketing at Whirlpool, another appliance maker, agrees that analysing how people use their homes and ferretting out cultural differences is critical to his company's success. In India, for example, Whirlpool boosted its market share from third to first place in three years by developing festive, expressive products, including pink refrigerators, following a survey of Indian families that included a question about their favourite colours. "Within the company, there was scepticism. 'A pink refrigerator?

Give me a break,'" he says. "But we convinced the mother organisation to put out a small number of these refrigerators [and we sold] half a year's worth of product in less than 30 days."

Like Makno, advertising agency Young & Rubicam conducts lifestyle research to give its corporate clients a window into our lives. Using a conceptual framework, it calls the Cross Cultural Consumer Characterisation, or 4Cs for short, that is based on work by the late US psychologist Abraham Maslow, it has categorised 1.5m people across 48 markets by seven dominant needs, which determine personality and lifestyle.

Although the system has yet to be applied to domestic spaces, Charlotte Mordin, head of Y&R's 4Cs programme, believes it could be. In the home of an intellectual, anti-materialistic "reformer", for example, "I would expect individual items chosen for their own character; a mixing of shabby and new; natural fabrics; good-to-feel textures; investment in colour, whether rich or subtle; lots of books", she says. "Reformer furnishings fit around your life and way of living, a kind of organic growth rather than an organised plan. Reformers are at ease with some degree of chaos ... They hate to be confined and would love a place with big windows and high ceilings, light and space, lots of cupboards."

Anna Bottasso, an Italian economist living in Milan, took the 4Cs test, scoring strongly as a reformer, and the two-bedroom apartment she shares with her neurologist husband and son uncannily fits Mordin's description. It has large windows, numerous built-in wardrobes and a mix of rustic and refined furniture, none of it branded. Upholstery is in pony or leather; a side table is improvised out of crafted steel cubes and raw planks of wood; the dining room table, based on a 1918 geometrical design by Charles Rennie Macintosh, was made by "a man in La Spezia for about half the price you would normally pay"; and vividly coloured abstract art hangs on the walls. The only missing element is a trace of chaos.

Some companies reject the sorts of generalisations that stem from studies like the 4Cs and Makno's, however. Valerio Di Bussolo, spokesman for Ikea in Italy, sees home trends seeping from one part of the world to the other, spreading between cities where lifestyles coincide. He says his company's success depends largely on such cultural convergence, since it only varies its product offering by 10-15 per cent among geographic regions. The challenge it faced upon entering Italy 20 years ago was consumers failing to accept its signature natural wood finishes, articulated indoor lighting, fixed upholstery and simple kitchen tools. But its fortunes improved as Italians began to appreciate a more northern European aesthetic and when other markets adopted furniture covers and elaborate food preparation. Today, he says, "a house in Milan is more likely to resemble a house in Hamburg or Barcelona than a house in Rome".

I, too, see something problematic about reducing people and their homes to type. Characterisations are seductive but how far can you trust them? In Makno's terms, my flat, which I share with my real-estate consultant husband and three small boys, seems to fall between categories. But Abis might say that's fitting given our place in cycles of life and work. With respect to the 4Cs, Bottasso's apartment had many reformer elements to it but so do the homes of almost everyone I know, including my own. Then again, perhaps my friends are all reformers, attracted to like-minded people. In fact, when I took the 4Cs test, that's how I scored.

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Comments have not been enabled for this article.