

Essential Objects and the Sacred: Interior and Exterior Space in an Urban Greek Locality¹

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Introduction

This paper examines aspects of the relationship of urban Greek women to their immediate physical environment through investigating the house, its interior arrangement and its immediate surroundings. The house is obviously an appropriate focus for the analysis of female activities and spatial organisation – the ‘woman-environment’ relationship (an area usually called ‘man-environment studies’, see Rapoport, 1976) – for the domestic *locus* of Mediterranean women in general has become a truism. Most often it carries implications of deprivation and of exclusion from the mainstream of life, but these negative and pejorative connotations may be questioned (Sciama, this volume, Hirschon 1985) for, as we shall see, in their domestic activities Greek women are concerned with the most vital aspects of physical and social life.

The case of Yerania is an interesting one. The houses were originally designed as units for single family residence, but they have been progressively subdivided through time. This arose from a complex of social, historical and political factors, among the most important being the provision of dowry for a daughter’s marriage. Here, dowry takes the form of separate living quarters in the parental home. Nevertheless the independence of each nuclear ‘family’ or ‘household’ is maintained; it is manifested in the creation of a separate kitchen, the realm of each housewife.

Most houses are thus shared between several households related through women, or have been in the past, and they are characteristically overcrowded. In this context, certain recurrent items of household furnishing might seem to an observer to be eminently unsuitable. We find, on consideration, that, although they serve some obvious practical functions, their particular form and their placing in the house can only be understood through the realisation of symbolic attributes and of their ‘sacred’ connotations. Here the presence of the ‘sacred’ is embodied in

the large dining-table, the double-bed and the *iconostási*, some of the 'essential objects' of Yerania homes.²

In the wider context of social life the fundamental dichotomy of the 'house' and the 'road', the inner and outer realms, is the point of orientation for interaction between women in the neighbourhood. This spatial and symbolic division is mediated, however, by two items – the kitchen, which is the diacritical marker of each conjugal household and the exclusive area of each married woman, and the movable chair. The latter is taken out in the late afternoons when people sit on pavements passing the time in conversation and observation of neighbourhood activity. The opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' is bridged through these two 'marginal' items. On the one hand, food brought into the house is processed by the housewife in her kitchen; on the other, social exchange takes place through the extension of the inside realm as the chair is moved out onto the pavement. The association of women with spatial arrangement and objects in the home, and thus with the symbolic order, is seen to be an integral part of their daily activities.

Yerania is a poor district of the city lying a few miles north of the harbour of Piraeus. It was established in 1928 as part of a massive housing programme for over one and a half million refugees from Asia Minor who fled to Greece in the early 1920s. The refugee settlements are today totally integrated in the physical fabric of the city and can be distinguished only where the original housing remains. In Yerania there has not been much rebuilding despite the great number and variety of modifications which have taken place over five decades, and the standard size and pattern of the houses provides a base line for comparison. In the face of severe economic constraints, modifications to living space have made manifest, in material form, the priorities of each family which were ultimately culturally defined (Hirschon and Thakurdesai 1970).

The original structures were prefabricated, single-storeyed houses ('prefabs') made from panel board under pitched tiled roofs. They were semi-detached, containing two separate houses, mirror images of one another, under one roof. Each house had two main rooms (3.2m x 4m), third smaller room intended as a kitchen (2m x 3m) and a toilet (Figure 4.1), and was set in a courtyard, the size of which depended on its position in the block. The 'prefab' district as a whole covered about 80,000 sq.m over 32 blocks. The crowded conditions characteristic of the locality were already apparent from the earliest days: 550 Yerania houses contained over 650 families at the outset. In the next forty years, densities increased and few houses remained in single-family occupation over this period. Though census figures indicate a decline in density in the late 1960s there were still over 1,000 households and a total popula-

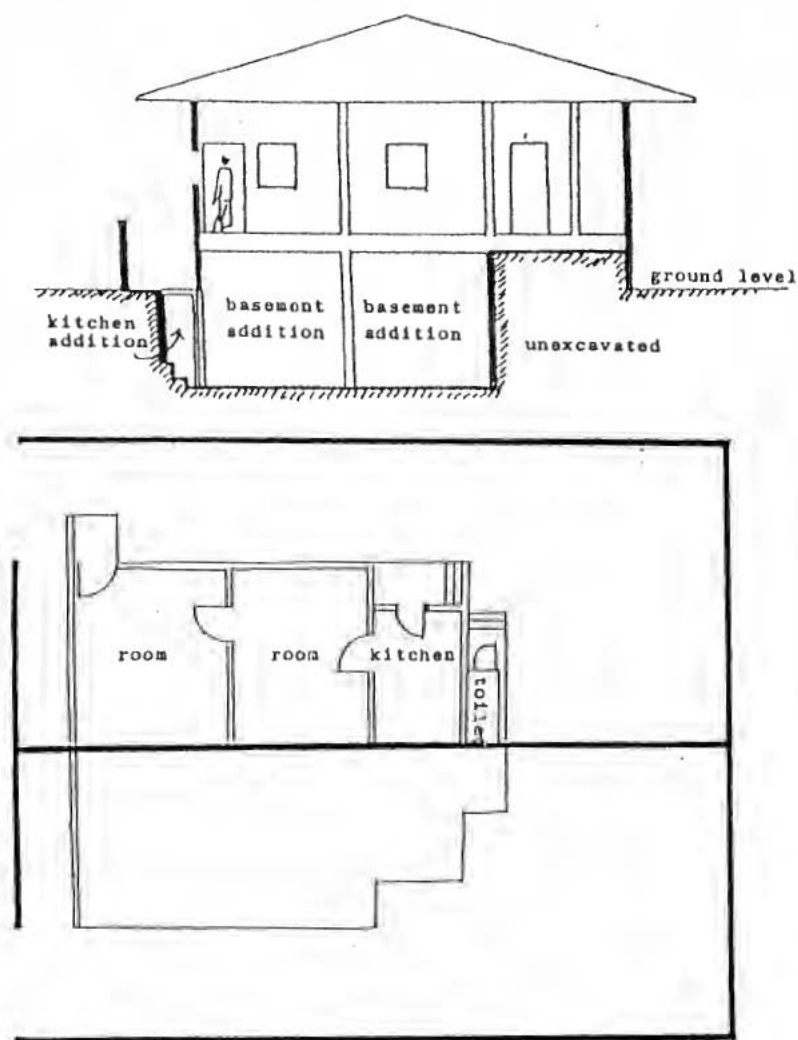


Figure 4.1: Yerania House

top – Section showing basement and kitchen additions
bottom – Plan of original house

tion of 3,500 persons in 1971 ('National Census', Statistical Service of Greece, unpublished).

The Dowry in Yerania

The subdivision of the houses for several households and the continual pressure on living space must be understood as a response to the custom of providing daughters with dowry on marriage. Yerania houses have thus to be seen in the context of wider cultural features and conditions. In Greek society it has always been customary for the bride's family to provide some form of material wealth for the new household/family. The exact nature of this wealth varies depending on the community – fields, olive trees, poplars, sheep or gold coins, besides the household items themselves (linen, kitchen equipment). But in the city, and increasingly for rural families, the girl's dowry is categoric and explicit. It should be a 'house' (*spíti*) or, more accurately, separate living quarters (Loizos 1975). Obviously there is much variation: a wealthy family may provide a villa in spacious grounds in an Athenian suburb or a pent-house apartment on the slopes of Mount Lykavittos. More usually, in the middle-income range, a dowry residence is a three- or four-roomed flat in one of the residential areas around the city centre, its exact size and appointments determined by their means. For some families who have capital and own a plot of land a possible solution is the construction of a small family block of flats of two, three or four storeys, each floor being a self-contained apartment. The parents' home with unmarried children will be on the ground floor, the oldest daughter (properly the first to marry) takes the first-floor flat as her dowry, the second floor goes to the second daughter, and so on. Observant visitors to the city are sometimes puzzled by the many unfinished buildings with their protruding reinforced concrete rods, and many of these cases can be explained by the unending obligation of Greek parents to provide housing for their female offspring. The resulting pattern, a vertical arrangement of older and younger families is also to be found in Yerania, not through increasing the height of the building but through underground excavation and the creation of basement rooms (see below).

Two interesting consequences result from the emphasis on a separate residence as dowry. First, the considerable capital outlay entailed in providing a daughter with a dowry appears to have affected family size, and acts as a most effective means for limiting the number of children after two daughters are born. Girls are seen as a heavy financial burden, an economic liability, and are wryly referred to as *grammatia*, literally 'promissory notes', but more aptly rendered as 'mortgages'. Certainly, family size has decreased in Yerania over four decades, as elsewhere in

Greece in recent times (Safilios-Rothschild 1969). Secondly, the provision of a house as dowry results in the physical clustering of families linked by female kin, so that households related through women live in close geographical proximity, even in the same dwelling. In Yerania, the co-residence of households related through women under the same roof has interesting repercussions on family relationships (see Hirschon 1983).

Economic constraints have always been severe in Yerania and the housing situation has been complicated by legal issues related to the 'refugee' status of the original inhabitants (Hirschon 1989: 70–76). The provision of dowry, therefore, posed specific problems and it was fortunate that these prefabricated houses facilitated the rearrangement of living space. By excavating under the house it was possible to create basement rooms and in this way almost to double the family's living area (Figure 4.1). So effective a solution was this and so great was the need to provide additional rooms that over 80 per cent of the houses have been modified in this way (based on a sample survey).³ Even so, a daughter's dowry is usually not more than a portion of the family plot, one room or possibly two, either in the original prefab house or in the courtyard where a small house could be constructed (always illegally and often by the family members themselves). The general pattern which has emerged is one of subdivision through the generations: the ground-floor residence is parcelled out between married daughters together with any courtyard additions, while the parents' quarters are invariably in the basement. Far from being ideal for the infirmities of old age, their residence in the basement is based on the rationale of parental sacrifice, the subordination of comfort to the interests of their children. Although the basement rooms are not considered suitable as dowry in themselves, they have allowed for the provision of a 'dowry house' for daughters, adapted to the particular features of housing in this locality. As is common elsewhere in the city, bonds between mothers, daughters and sisters are maintained through physical proximity. The local group is composed of parents, unmarried children, married daughters and sons-in-law. This does not, however, constitute an extended or joint family, but a grouping of co-resident independent families, for marriage creates a separate nuclear family headed by the husband whose authority over his wife and family is undisputed (Hirschon 1983). The autonomy of each conjugal unit is revealed not only in the conduct of everyday life, but also in a physical and particularly graphic form, by the separate kitchen.

The Kitchen

Besides the need to provide separate quarters as dowry for daughters,

Yerania houses. This is the creation of a separate kitchen, however small, for each married woman. The close kinship relationship between co-resident housewives, that of mothers, daughters, sisters, and the chronic pressure on space in these dwellings, might suggest that food preparation and cooking could be a communal task, or that a single kitchen would be shared by the co-resident families. On the contrary, however, each nuclear family has its own separate cooking area; since most of the houses are subdivided, there are commonly two or three kitchens on any one plot, and even four or five.

The original kitchen provided in the Yerania prefab, a small room of 2m x 3m, has of necessity been converted into a living or sleeping area (in none of the houses studied was it used solely for cooking). The kitchens created subsequently were notably small in size, accommodated in nooks and crannies, in basement alcoves, stairways and even partially excavated under the sidewalks. Their average size is around 2 sq.m, several being no more than 1 sq.m, but a number were more spacious at around 5-6 sq.m (sample survey).

The space then is conceived of primarily as a cooking area; the kitchen is not for communal or shared use, nor is it for family activity. There was only one case of a shared kitchen known to me, between mother and two married sisters, the three households being closely united in a state of open conflict with another family co-resident in the same house. The shared use of kitchens and the communal preparation of food by women who are not kin occurs in other Balkan societies where households are based on patrilocal extended families, and co-operating women are related by marriage to brothers (in the Serbian *zadruga*, among Sarakatsani shepherds). In Yerania, however, marriage confers independent status upon each woman regardless of her close kin in the same dwelling: the autonomy of each household is a central tenet of social life with the kitchen its physical marker.

The significance of the kitchen must not be underestimated in spite of its minimal size. Since its primary use is for cooking, the kitchen is the domain of the housewife, for in Yerania food is handled and prepared for consumption solely by the women; rarely do men even purchase food, which once supplied to the home is the concern of the women. In this community culinary ability is highly prized, being one of the main criteria for assessing a woman's worth. Food, its provision and preparation occupies the housewife's thoughts and actions for much of the day (Hirschon 1978: 82-84). Interestingly, the emphasis on preparation of food by women is highlighted in the case of edible raw foods - the abundant fruit of Greece, for example, usually eaten once a day, is never served 'untreated' in its 'natural' form. Oranges, apples, pears and peaches are not offered whole from a bowl but are first peeled and

sliced, then offered on a platter by the woman of the house whose task this is.

As Lévi-Strauss has suggested, the transformation of the raw into the cooked represents a conversion process from nature to culture. The association of women with nourishment, the concept of the woman as a source of sustenance and her enduring association with food is a theme running through Greek culture (and indeed may have universal expression, cf. Ortner 1974: 80). Transposing the nature/culture opposition to the context of Yerania, it is the woman who, in 'dealing with the raw 'natural' substances of the 'outside' world, acts as the agent in the cultural process and by extension, the man is designated to 'nature' through his activities outside the home.

The transformation of food takes place on a daily basis in the tiny kitchens of the Yerania homes which provide in this sense the space where the 'inside' world, that of home and family, intersects with the products of the 'outside' world. The kitchen can thus be seen as a zone of transition: it is significant in this respect that the kitchens, among the many modifications in Yerania houses, are always added externally, tacked onto living areas. The association of pollution and cooking may be inferred from this external location of the kitchens (cf. Raglan 1964: 44, 75); certainly, if nothing else, a marginal quality is suggested, as one might expect. The kitchen conveys a sense of its ambivalent character in its peripheral location while in the emphasis on a kitchen for every household it is the physical expression of central cultural notions relating to the family as a unit and to the woman's role within it. It has therefore the force of a major 'condensed' symbol (Douglas 1973: 29-30). Something of the ambivalent character of the kitchen is shared, albeit in a less emphatic way, by the standard chair common in these houses (see below, pp. 81-82); both link the 'inside' with the 'outside' and provide, or cross, the threshold between these two worlds.

Interiors

Several striking features characterise the present state of Yerania houses: in the first instance continual pressures have resulted in the creation of new living areas, and calculations show that there has been an increase of built-up floor area by about 117 per cent. Since only 18 per cent of the structures have been demolished and rebuilt (in 1972) this has come about mainly through unauthorised modifications and additions to original dwellings. The excavation of basement rooms and the construction of extra rooms in courtyards are two common solutions which, as we have seen, are specifically related to the need to provide

dowries for daughters, and separate kitchens for each married woman.

Despite the increase in living area, pressure on space has always been extreme, and a second characteristic feature of Yerania is that the original rooms have in the vast majority of cases changed to multipurpose use. The original kitchen has been converted into a bed/living room, while the two main rooms, originally provided as a reception and bedroom respectively, most often accommodate both these as well as other functions. They are simultaneously bedrooms, living-rooms and food-storage areas, but most important, the main room is presented as a formal reception room. The mixture of furniture displayed in these crowded rooms indicates the various uses, producing an immediate impression of highly congested, functional confusion which suggests a haphazard approach to the problems of living space.

This impression of impractical disorder is reinforced by the fact that much of the furnishing is unwieldy; it conforms to a standard pattern. One might expect that pressure on space would have long ago produced a practical attitude with foldable tables, convertible beds and easily stored items (as found in Japanese homes). On the contrary, space-saving furnishings are far from common: the housewife who was complimented on her spacious reception room with its low coffee-table instead of the large dining-table was embarrassed, explaining this inadequacy – they were saving for the full dining suite, for ‘How can you receive people into your house without it?’

The main room, into which the newcomer is ushered on the first visit, is thus inevitably crowded: typically it contains the central dining-table, six matching chairs, a buffet-display cabinet filled with rows of glass and china, one or two sofa-divans (beds for children) and a clothes alcove in a corner (Figure 4.2). Alternatively a main room may contain the central dining-table, its six chairs, a single bed, a wardrobe, the refrigerator and some occasional chairs and tables. In a home with even less space, the main room may contain the double-bed of the couple, the dining-table, chairs and a wardrobe. The most important item of furnishing, however, is the central dining-table, where all formal gestures of hospitality are performed. In terms of frequency and duration of use, this room may be a child's bedroom or food-storage area, but in terms of significance it is the formal reception room and is presented and preserved as such by the family.

It is only after several visits to these houses that one begins to discern a pattern underlying the apparent lack of order. In the face of functional confusion there is a remarkable persistence of vision based on a sense of symbolic clarity. Extreme pressure on space has dictated the coincidence of several functions in each room, but if the Yeraniots could have

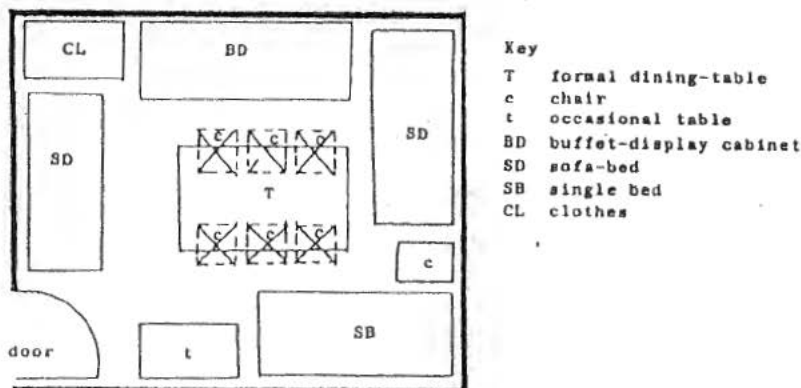


Figure 4.2: Reception Room (with other uses)

their way, there would be separate rooms for reception, for sleeping, eating and food preparation. These rooms must be understood, therefore, as reflecting two different levels of perception: on the one hand there is the mundane, everyday use, on the other the ideal or symbolic form, and this latter predominates and is expressed in the central dining-table/suite.

There are also other objects which recur regularly in the Yerania home. These 'essential objects' without which the home is incomplete are, besides the large dining-table, the double-bed, the *iconostási* and the standard wooden chair. Their particular significance, as we shall see, is that they evoke a dimension beyond practical or rational considerations in the organisation of space, for each, in a different way, provides a link with the metaphysical realm through its sacramental associations, thereby embodying a 'sacred' quality. And each item has a specific connection with the activities of the woman of the house.

The Dining-table

A formal dining-room suite *trapezarfa* is held, ideally, to be an essential part of every home's furnishing. It is an important item in a girl's dowry (which does not consist only of a 'house' but also of most of the furnishing and electrical appliances). A properly equipped house is one in which hospitality can be offered in an appropriate fashion, that is: centred round a large table. In fact, over two-thirds of the houses had the large dining-table (average proportions 1.3m x 1.5m x 0.8m), if not the

complete suite, including six chairs and a buffet-display cabinet. A large sturdy table could of course provide a useful working space (for ironing, food preparation) but in the present arrangement of Yerania homes it is not used in this way, since the kitchens are now situated away from the main rooms (which alone can accommodate an item of furniture of this size). Thus in most homes a smaller folding table which has a purely utilitarian function is found in the kitchen, or the room nearest to it. Its purpose is stated graphically by the bright plastic covering, usually printed with designs of fruit, fish on a platter or other edible items. The dining-table, in contrast, is always covered with a textile cloth of fringed velvet or hand-embroidered cotton.

The room with the large table is used for the formal reception of strangers to whom the housewife offers the customary *kérasma* (a home-made sweet preserve, a small cup of coffee, a glass of water). It is also used for festive meals (celebrations of family life-crisis rituals such as baptisms, weddings, funerals), and on the name-day of a family member. It is significant that the preparation of a formal meal is idiomatically expressed as 'we make a table' (*kánoime trapézi*) or 'making a table' (*kánontas trapézi*), which suggests that the ritual offering of hospitality through food and drink in some sense 'constructs' the table. The physical object is revealed to be somehow incomplete for only through a functional enactment, in the expression of its symbolic correlates, does it fully 'become' itself.

Since the dining-table is not used on a daily basis but irregularly on formal family occasions and when strangers are received into the house, it should be understood as a ritual object and not simply as a three-dimensional item occupying an unnecessarily large area of floor space. The table evidently represents values beyond those of practical necessity alone; it has symbolic significance comprehensible in the wider context of Greek beliefs. In Orthodox Christian practice, the Eucharist or Communion Service, in which the common participation in food and drink is sanctified, is the greatest sacrament, and, like every meal, the formal festive meal is in fact patterned on this sacramental act.⁴ Significantly, in Yerania houses, an icon of the Last Supper hangs on the wall near the table and, before eating, the sign of the cross is customarily made. At all meals bread is served; pieces which remain are not thrown away, and in other ways it is treated as a special substance. The table in Yerania, as the place of the formal meal, becomes endowed with the symbolic attributes of the activity, and itself becomes imbued with 'sacred' elements.

The table's other use, for the reception of visitors, is similarly suggestive of its symbolic function. In many cultures and since antiquity

among the Greeks (Hocart 1969: 78), the stranger has received special treatment. Whether this is to be interpreted as a response of fear or of reverence (cf. Pitt-Rivers 1977: 162), or whatever other reason (cf. M. Herzfeld 1987), hospitality in Yerania involves an invitation into the home, an area normally closed to outsiders as well as to neighbours and casual acquaintances. The stranger to whom hospitality is offered is an 'extraordinary' being, for through his or her presence in the home the divide between the 'inside' and 'outside' worlds has been bridged.

The dining-table must be seen therefore as the embodiment of a set of notions interweaving the divine associations of commensality, family unity, the values of hospitality and the opposition of 'inner' and 'outer' realms.

The Double-bed

In Yerania homes, each couple has a double-bed, its size and immovability remarkable features in the context of available space. The double-bed may occupy as much as a third of the room's area and never less than about 20 per cent. It is highly significant that it is never used for extra seating; people are ushered onto sofa-beds, or extra chairs are brought in, but the double-bed is treated as an object 'set apart' (Durkheim 1976: 41). Furthermore, it is the centre of a ritual.

Before the Greek wedding ceremony, one evening is spent in communal celebration around the double-bed which the couple will share. Young people are invited to the new home 'for the bed' (*yia to krevditi*). They gather round as the bed is made up by young unmarried girls, friends and relatives of the couple, and as one man attempts to undo it, the sheets are struggled over. Once made, the visitors throw money onto it, and then a little boy is brought and dumped on the bed amid cheers. Sweetmeats and drinks are then served. These ritual actions suggest the farewell to virginity (the young girls, the struggle for the sheets), the wish for prosperity (money gifts) and offspring from the marriage (the little boy), and they underline the role of the double-bed in the marriage. As the *place* of conjugal union, in itself a bond of sacramental significance, the double-bed is also a sacred place. This bed symbolises the unity of the marriage, for to sleep in separate beds or for one spouse to leave the bed because of a row is considered a serious violation of the relationship.

The prevalence of these large beds is explicable in the context of ideals relating to marriage, procreation and conjugal unity, and its sacred character is revealed in the initiatory rituals as well as in the avoidance for mundane purposes such as seating.

The Iconostási

Every home in Yerania has its *iconostási*, a shelf on which icons and other sacred substances are kept. The icons vary in number, while the degree of attention paid to this area depends on the religious commitment of the housewife. The oil lamp suspended in front of it may be lit every evening by devout women, or only a few times a year at major religious festivals, or, as in the homes of most of the older women, every Saturday evening. Each house in Yerania is a religious community, the spiritual world being present in the family abode, and, though the *iconostási* does not take up any floor area, it is a place – or sacred space – of concentrated spiritual presence. The *iconostási* should properly be in an eastern corner, preferably in the bedroom. In Yerania homes it is obviously found in a room of several purposes but its position matters far less than the fact that no house is without one and that through this presence, the house itself 'becomes a temple' (Raglan 1964; du Boulay 1974: 38, 54; Stahl 1976). The responsibilities for religious acts fall on the woman of the house; she is the intercessor for her family, caring for the spiritual needs of both living and dead members. Her role as intercessor is patterned on that of the Mother of God and her devotions in the home and outside parallel the role of the priest in the community's church.⁵

The Standard Chair

The kind of chair referred to here – wooden, straight-backed, rush-seated and uncomfortable – is familiar to all who know Greece. It does not stack or fold and yet these chairs predominate in all Yerania houses. They are sturdy, small and lightweight, which may account for their popularity, which is undoubtedly reinforced by customary seating habits and convention (Thakurdesai 1974). Once again the presence of these chairs strikes one's attention, not because of their size this time, but because of numbers. Households are well-endowed with chairs – an average of three chairs *per head* was calculated. One household with three persons, however, had sixteen chairs, another of four persons had thirteen. These are interesting figures in themselves, even more so in the light of the poverty of the inhabitants and the crowded rooms. One might expect that chairs have little importance under these circumstances but closer observation reveals that chairs are among the 'essential objects' of the Yerania home because they are used in everyday contact with the world beyond the house. These chairs are brought out onto the pavements every afternoon during the warmer months (up to eight months of the year) and here the social life of the community has its public expression.

The Exterior

The neighbourhood as social space is primarily an area of communication and of reciprocal exchange where the relative prestige and rank of families is assessed. In this part of the city, neighbourhood life is well developed and of marked character, and the neighbourhood, like the house, is the particular domain of female activity. Thus women are the chief agents and actors in the exchanges through which the reputations of families are estimated. Women are both the assessed and the assessors in the competitive relations between families in the neighbourhood. The maintenance of the home is obviously a crucial area of competence and together with it the housewife's attentions must also include part of the pavement and street. This area, extending from her wall roughly to the middle of the road, is swept once or twice daily and, as if to establish clear boundaries, some women even mark the pavement edge and lamp-posts with a neat line of whitewash. Since the house is closed to outside scrutiny, a woman cannot demonstrate her housewifely abilities directly. Thus the pavement and the street are 'annexed' as extensions of the home so that any neglect of this external area suggests incapacity within the home itself.

Contacts between women are vital in connecting unrelated families, the exchanges creating a pool of information linking families throughout the district. These unscheduled and spontaneous meetings take place during the morning and afternoon, but depending on the time of day, are very different in style and form.

Mornings on Foot

During the morning, women meet in the vicinity of the home and these meetings have a transient and contingent appearance. They stand in small groups on street corners and pavements as well as in the neighbourhood shops, passing the time of day on apparent trivia. Domestic chores, food preparation, laundry, ironing and other matters of a routine kind are discussed, their significance resting in the way each woman conveys to others her commitment to domestic duties, her diligence and efficiency. Morning meetings must be brief though – a woman who loiters can only be neglecting the household chores which should fill her morning hours. Thus the contacts take place under the guise of some other activity such as buying fresh bread and shopping at the local grocer (cf. Bailey 1971: 1–2). Grocery shopping is particularly revealing as a pretext since many items purchased on a daily basis (sugar, rice, dried beans, tinned goods) are imperishables which could be more efficiently – but far less sociably – provided through a weekly shopping trip. It is

quite in order for a woman to visit the grocer once or twice a day to obtain such items and in the process exchange a few words with whomever she meets. Women, therefore, far from being in total seclusion, manage to combine a high degree of social interaction outside the home with their primary obligations as housewives.

Afternoons on Chairs

Afternoon gatherings are different in several respects. Though still informal and spontaneous, they include men as well as visitors from other neighbourhoods; the rhythm is leisurely, contacts last longer and conversational topics are broader. Significantly, too, the orientation of the group is not inward, as in the case of the morning groups of women but outward, directed towards the street. Passers-by are observed and stories and bits of information are told about them. Now the scene can be likened to an open-air theatre with the spectators seated on the pavements, though the spectators are also actors and part of the action (Thakurdesai 1974).

It is during these afternoon gatherings that the chair makes its appearance outside the house. At this time of day the woman is expected to have completed her housework and must 'take the air' (*na pári ayéra*) sitting outside her house for some hours. She comes out with a chair and a piece of crochet or embroidery, and sits facing her own door (inward) until she is joined by a neighbour or friend. Another chair or two are brought out and the seated group then begins to grow, facing outwards. A spare chair is usually available too as a foot-rest for the tray of coffee-cups, and it may be offered to any newcomer to the group.

The emphasis on sociability in this community is marked; it is an absolute dictate of neighbourhood life and cannot be avoided. To withdraw from patterns of social exchange requires conscious effort, incurs some cost and has little value (Hirschon 1989: ch. 8). The movable chair brought out by the housewife signals her participation in these values but the offer of a seat to any particular person is voluntary and not obligatory. As passers-by stroll along they greet those seated outside the houses, and if the offer of a chair is not forthcoming they move on. Thus the seated groups on pavements are based on selection, while in the brief morning gatherings, contact is indiscriminate, for any woman may join a standing group.

One can see then how during the afternoon the pavement takes on the aspects of the home, its barriers relaxed but not eradicated. It could be said that 'The house enters the street' for the chair, an item of *indoor* furnishing is brought *outside*. The offer of a chair to an outsider establishes an extension of the domestic realm – of the 'inside' world – in the

street, temporarily reducing the sharp distinction between the 'house' and the 'road', or outside world. The chair crosses the threshold, mediates in space, and provides a bridge between two separate realms. In this way the chair and the kitchen space have a common aspect, fitting into the gap between the separate realms of 'inside' and 'outside'.

Conclusion

This analysis of interior and exterior space in Yerania is founded upon the notion of the house as an exclusive precinct, that of the family, closed to outsiders except under special conditions such as the formal granting of hospitality. Neighbours who are involved in frequent interactions outside their houses seldom enter one another's homes. The house is thus to be understood as conceptually opposed to the 'road', an image for the 'outside' world, so that by extension a dichotomy of 'inside' and 'outside' is inferred. Although it is itself perceived as a locus of positive values, the house and the family would exist in potential isolation were it not for the clearly defined code of neighbourhood conduct, emphasising sociability, openness, and requiring frequent interaction from residents in the locality. Injunctions to sociability are explicit; in its absence social life and hence social existence itself ceases (cf. Hirschon 1978: 76). The woman's role in promoting contacts and in creating relationships throughout the locality centred upon her activities in the neighbourhood are thus to be understood as vital in maintaining social life. The object in which social contact beyond the home is embodied is, as we have seen, the movable chair which bridges the separation of the 'house' and 'road' by moving from 'inside' to 'outside'.

Movement across the threshold takes place in the opposite direction too, for food is brought in to be processed first in the kitchen, and then served in the house. The kitchen is thus a marginal zone where the conversion of 'outside' products occurs, and where the two realms intersect. In their activities in the kitchen, the women prepare food which on the one hand provides nourishment, and thus physical life itself is sustained through their efforts, while on the other they offer food at the table where, as we have seen, fundamental symbolic values are expressed.

The 'essential objects' of Yerania homes have been shown to represent central values in the lives of Yerania families – the double-bed represents marital stability, the dining-table reveals the importance of commensality and hospitality, and the *iconostási* marks the presence of the religious or metaphysical dimension in the home.

It is striking that Yerania homes are excessively crowded, largely as a

result of the dowry provision for women which also accounts for the concentration of female kin in a dwelling. In spite of the continual pressure on space, kitchens are not shared and notions of practicality and utility do not appear to be foremost. In the choice of furnishing, for instance, we have seen that certain 'essential' objects recur whose practical functions are secondary to their symbolic correlates. The 'essential objects' are set apart for special use, having sacramental associations, and partake of the quality of the 'sacred'. This manifestation of the metaphysical realm pervades the organisation of Yerania homes so that, in the organisation and use of physical space both within and beyond the home, the interplay of 'sacred' and 'profane' become evident. It is suggested that these houses can only be understood within a context of thought where sacred qualities permeate the objects and activities of everyday life. They are not to be seen simply as physical structures for they are patterned on the ideal world and 'rational' considerations are apparently subordinated to concerns of a symbolic kind.

In the creation of living quarters (the dowry) and the provision of domestic space (the kitchen) a primary consideration is the role and position of the woman in her family of marriage. In the life of the family, whose head is the husband, she is paradoxically the central figure through her association with 'essential objects' and hence the sacred dimension, while in the social exchange of the neighbourhood her role in mediating the opposition of 'inside' and 'outside' realms is crucial and unifying. The understanding of interior and exterior space, its use and organisation at the micro-scale, is dependent therefore upon specific attention to the most important elements of a woman's daily life.

Notes

1. This paper is based on material collected for my DPhil during fourteen months' fieldwork conducted in the early 1970s as well as on a three-month survey done with S. Thakurdesai, an architect, to whom I am indebted for numerous insights, technical expertise and diagrams. Much of the material is now published in Hirschon 1989.

2. It is well to emphasise that at the time of fieldwork the modern Greek state was organised in a non-secular framework. Church and state were not distinguishable in many areas of life (marriages and divorces were conducted by ecclesiastical authority, education and national festive occasions were joint concerns of Church and state, identity registration was through baptism). The separation of 'sacred' and 'profane' was not evident therefore in the most public and official aspects of life and this was a striking feature of life in Yerania. 'Sacred' is used here to denote a state of being 'set apart', as well as having sacramental attributes.

3. A detailed survey of the 62 households was undertaken as part of the fieldwork; much of the quantified data presented here is based on this survey.

4. Among Sarakatsani shepherds 'the sign of the cross is made before the members of

the family share in the communion of their common meal' (Campbell 1964: 341). du Boulay notes that in Ambeli the meal is an 'act of communion' (1974: 54-5).

5. The importance of these religious activities is multifold; in particular, their involvement in religious observances takes women out into the wider community where they have an obvious and defined 'public' role as representatives of the family. The notion of domestic confinement and deprivation is not borne out when this sphere of life is analysed (see Hirschon 1980). This, and other issues raised in this article have been further explored for rural Greece in Dubisch's excellent edited volume (1986).