



**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
EXCELLENCE IN THE HOME**



SUSTAINABLE LIVING
PROFESSIONAL APPROACHES TO HOUSEWORK



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Modern society has elevated the family and household matters from their formerly private position to that of concerns of the political institutions. The emergence of society, seen by Hanna Arendt in the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems and organisational devices, has moved the home from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere. It has not only blurred the old borderlines between private and political, but has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen (Arendt, 1958:28). Housing policies, management of households and professional rules of home workers are a few discrete examples of how the institution of the society interferes in the matters and system of the home. Hence, we are entitled to pose the question as to how far the institution of home is relevant to the professional life of our contemporary society. This was one of the questions addressed by the third international conference of the Home Renaissance Foundation *Sustainable Living: Professional Approaches to Housework*.

In a world where it seems young professionals have completed their takeover of the core of our cities and declared their dynamic centres a family-free zone, the individual-centric urban core is no longer supportive to institutions such as the family and the home. This would confirm the predictions Jane Jacob made five decades ago: the harsh environment of modern cities, the priority of the individual over the family and finally the loss of moral values within our urban environment (Jacobs, 1962). The spatial proximity of work and life has been broken and the spatial transformation of the modern city is becoming a reality that is forcing families to live outside its urban core (Massey, 1994).

A quick look at the housing layout of most European cities shows clear signs of accelerating displacement of the family from their urban centres towards the peripheries. There is increasing segregation and distance between places of work and living spaces, lengthier daily journeys between work and home. In the search for good careers, young people live in shared accommodation near their workplaces in the centre. People with families have to live at greater distances from work and provide alternative means of caring for their house and children, especially if the wife goes out to work. Such spatial segregation between where people work and live has resulted in a decline of support from within the family and has increased the demand on outside care services, be it domestic workers, childminders, or care for elderly people. Hence, other forms of professional relationships have been brought into the home at a time when homeowners are experiencing a greater distance between work and home. Therefore, we should not make the mistake of saying that the institution of home is in decline, and neither can we afford to ignore its presence and needs.



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However, to take this issue seriously, we need to be clear about what we mean by home. Home is an everyday notion that carries subjective clarity as well as collective ambiguity. Are we talking about the home of the family, the home of the collective group of individuals, or are we talking about larger institutions such as the community? In the subjective sense, the home could be where you stay at night, being part of a family, or not. Maybe it is your work desk or your laptop (with all your private photos, files, Facebook access, internet chat rooms or online TV channels) and multi-facility iPhone with endless links to friends, news and chat lines. We are living in an ever more dynamic and mobile environment where our activities overlap and the traditional boundaries of privacy have become blurred regarding where a certain activity stops and another starts. There is one fact about the modern way of life, namely that there is no one form of home, but rather a multiplicity of homes, of which some are not such private domains as they used to be. Homes could host professional and work activities or provide medical services. Contemporary homes are about living; particularly sustainable living.

In the light of this understanding of the New Home, the papers presented at this conference were instrumental in emphasising the urgent need to revisit our conceptions of the home, family and work. Professional approaches to housework are essential to our sustainable living and to survival of the home in a time when mobility is of the essence. In their own ways and from their different fields of expertise, the speakers suggested that we can no longer live at home in isolation from our professional lives or, when at work, ignore our responsibility towards the home and housework. Recent studies have provided evidence that domestic responsibilities and housework affect the income of the household and therefore their standard of living. What this conference and its proceedings try to underline is that we are living in a world that is continuously changing, and hence we can no longer afford to ignore the fact that homes are places of living and working, intimacy of private life and public interaction through professional relationships.

Following the two previous successful Home Renaissance Foundation conferences, the focus on professional approaches to housework as a catalyst for sustainable living was a timely step further forward from the sociological and spatial investigations of the 2010 conference, *From House to Home*. The home promoted by HRF is a complex organisation, it is more than an institution; it is a realm that encompasses professionalism and ethical values as well as a sense of belonging, support and protection. It is the home of a family that reflects the needs of a progressive society in the face of an increasingly aged population. Hence, the home emerges as an institution of human experience that is capable of recreating itself within its boundaries, rather than falling prey to obsolescence.

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The conference papers largely acknowledged the depth of the challenges facing our changing society and the way housework, despite its connotations of private life, has redirected the home towards a new frontier of social, legal, and political worlds. The economic consequences of this development have become even more significant in a society marked by the centrality of economic power. The conference addressed the new challenges that face our future homes lucidly which can be provisionally categorised under three headings: socio-political issues, economic and legal frameworks; and technological aspects.

Sergio Belardinelli's keynote speech focused primarily and succinctly on the central position of the family within society, stating that the family encapsulates the human being's anthropological significance. Failure to take into account the "relational" or "familial" nature of the individual results in the creation of a being who is abstract, hypothetical, de-naturalised – an individual who in reality does not exist. He was vocal in his criticism of public policy, the illusive vision of individualistic modernity and its negative assertion of liberal society as rooted in the individual's liberal rights, and divorced from the institutions that enable it to thrive. Belardinelli's analysis represents a call for public policy to be decisive in its support and even promotion of work at home and the familial nature of mankind. For him, the family and home are institutions that are crucial to ensuring that the ethos and values of a liberal and democratic civilisation are strengthened and perpetuated from one generation to another. The individual-centric view of modernity and the subsequent pluralised forms of family have devastating consequences of fragmentation, nexus between democracy and demography.

With regard to practical considerations of the role of the family and home within society, Belardinelli asserts, "In any event, a pluralistic and liberal society cannot survive on contractual relationships alone." Ignoring the centrality of home would have a detrimental effect, as strategies to build self-sustaining societies through integration of local and macro organisations and their shared interests would cease to be affordable, especially in the light of dwindling national and governmental resources.

Evidence to support Sergio Belardinelli's argument could, perhaps, be best seen in Aggie MacKenzie's account of her show *How Clean is Your House?* which in effect highlighted the relationship of housework to the values and social behaviour of family/household members. On many occasions filth and dirt in a house were a reflection of the family's lack of hope, will or belief in a better future. Changing such a mentality and providing hope within the family could turn the lives of its members upside down, and change their attitudes towards their association and participation within their communities and the larger society: "Children from disorganised homes with a lack of routine are more likely to be rude or antisocial." MacKenzie's message

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is simply that home matters and housework have to be organised and managed collaboratively, with the participation of all family members, especially young children. Home is where children learn and develop skills and positive or negative attitudes towards others and towards society. The experience of a chaotic home is reflected clearly in the behaviour of the carers, who are significantly less responsive and less vocally stimulating towards their children, leaving a lifelong negative legacy.

The professional consideration of the social aspects of house planning and design in Hong Kong was illustrated in Ada Fung's introduction of Hong Kong's experience of community participation, planning and development in a high-density, high-rise environment, where the focus was on developing an authentic sense of home with real residents. It centred on enhancing social cohesion through workshops, talks and discussions aimed at all groups within the society, which then informed the development of shared community spaces with seating areas that enabled them to sit together and mingle, an exercise area for the elderly and a heritage gallery with a relaxation area to encourage the community to form the habit of enjoying collective meal times.

While the socio-political discussions on change were placed rationally within the mainstream views of modern culture and current public policies, the discussions about economic and legal frameworks for the sustainable future of homes and housework were both quite radical and genuinely serious in requesting significant changes to the existing systems. Helen Kersley, researcher in the Valuing What Matters Team at the New Economics Foundation, suggested that the home is crucial in preventing social problems from happening and proposed a rethink of the distribution of work and time in order to prevent the incurring of a very high bill later down the line. She challenged the commonly accepted view that work should be valued proportionally to the payment it is rewarded with and claimed that as part of the core economy, housework deserves greater recognition. Professor Michael-Burkhard Piorkowsky continued this theme and argued that other important functions of the household, such as regeneration, procreation and socialisation, and human capital, are produced primarily, if not exclusively, in the home.

There must also be consideration of the house as a place of professional activities such as hospitality, nursing of elderly people, or domestic work. In particular, domestic workers face poor working conditions with long hours, low wages and no benefits, according to Peggie Smith. It was really informative to learn of the significant contribution of domestic work to the national economy, and the prospect of it becoming one of the major sources of employment in the years ahead. However, the absence of clear contractual and legal frameworks for such professional work in the home is problematic and renders domestic workers vulnerable to poor working environments and conditions. The absence

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of pension schemes for domestic workers is a big drawback in this type of employment, leaving many ageing workers without financial resources after retirement, especially immigrants from abroad. In general, training must be provided for people involved in domestic duties and/or work, whether paid or unpaid.

The third theme dealt with the role technology could play in enhancing people's quality of life and their attitudes to their homes. A number of strategies were presented for sustainable housing design and materials while other contributors discussed innovative research and technology designed specifically to improve the social experience at home. David Prendergast, a lead researcher of Intel Corp., presented a comprehensive socio-cultural investigation into problems associated with care of the elderly, which is becoming of critical importance due to the ageing population. To allow a greater level of companionship for the elderly, visual communicative devices have been developed to allow immobile elderly citizens to communicate with their friends and family and to develop local social networks. Where sociable home environments are unachievable due to inaccessibility of friends and family members, online social networks such as Facebook have been seen to provide viable alternatives. If 'home' is a feeling, as Mauri Ahlberg suggested, then it is one brought about by being in the company of people who make us happy, around whom we are comfortable and who we trust to look after us.

The diversity and broadness of the papers presented at the conference confirm that the home is still relevant today to discussions of our lives. It is, despite the apparent simplicity of its meaning, a very complex concept, and further research and investigation is required. Evidence presented from the fields of sociology, psychology, architecture, anthropology, law, economics, public policy, technology, hospitality, media, political science, and social policy confirmed that the influence of the institutions of family and home cuts across almost everything we do on a daily basis. Despite the low profile accorded to them in today's world, the home and the family are powerful assets and vehicles for development of sustainable and progressive societies.

Looking to the future, the intellectual discussions and practical investigations of professional approaches to housework can be summarised in a preliminary manifesto to provide an urgently needed agenda for the new home; the home that is suitable for the twenty first century, venue for modern social relationships, flexible and resourceful enough to host a combination of activities, including work, studying, housework and family interaction. The new home is dynamic, sustainable and responsive. Bearing that in mind, the most discrete conclusion, it must be said, is to call for open societal discourse to agree on what we will require from our future homes in terms of their capacity and response to emerging needs. How can we support the professional approaches to housework that play a crucial role in sustaining the

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lives and resources of the family and the household?

Hence, if we are to consider an agenda for the new home, it should address the following basic issues:

- The position, role and capacity of the family as an asset in modern societies and its influence on building sustainable communities and a just social system.
- Possible means of financial and technical support for home-based professions, businesses, and self-employment.
- The ability of technology of future homes and systems to support the needs of disadvantaged households/individuals and minimise the burden on public services.
- The legal systems and frameworks that are required to cover the special professional relationships at home.

When the chairman of the Home Renaissance Foundation, Bryan Sanderson CBE, said in his opening speech that the role of housework in our society needs a fundamental rethink in order for it to be recast as a professional activity and a valuable resource, the aim was to address the need for a deep and coherent understanding of home as a venue of sustainable living: “The word housework does not have good connotations in the world. For the work in the home to be recognised as a vital part of our society there will need to be much thought, study and discussion, which does not happen very often.” In the late 1980s, the sociologists Peter Saunders and Peter Williams called for a new agenda for the home, a reappraisal of what home means and how it really works in modern society (Saunders & Williams, 1988). Three decades later, it seems policy makers are yet to realise that home has become a need and prerequisite to the survival of Western society.

In conclusion, the above three themes were explored through empirical research papers and professional discussions whose coverage deserves much more space than this short summary can offer. This conference provided an invaluable theoretical and empirical base for the new home, a home that, while supporting the importance of the family and its position within society, encompasses innovative approaches to domestic work, activities and relationships.

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