
Bounded Choices: Somali Women Constructing Difference in Minnesota Housing

Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, Ph.D., University of Minnesota

ABSTRACT

Coming to Minnesota to escape a devastating war, Somali refugees found themselves living in rental units that had little resemblance to the dwellings they left behind. Interviews with eight Somali women in their Minnesota homes reveal the difficult choices they had to make in order to preserve Somali cultural traditions and practices amidst strong American influences. As a way to construct the Somali sense of difference, women appropriated their living environments by relying on all five senses and various forms of cultural expressions that range from burning unsi to adorning the walls with Somali handicrafts. Unwilling to let go of valued Somali institutions, many had to make bounded choices like cooking while veiled in open kitchens, limiting children's play to accommodate formal impromptu visits, and restraining their social gatherings to the bedrooms to continue the tradition of gender separation. By proposing design solutions to the housing problems revealed through the study, this paper hopes to alert those who work with refugees and other immigrant groups that, with a little extra care, a house can be transformed into a home that fosters a sense of belonging and eases the stresses of adjusting to new life circumstances.

Introduction: Toward Culturally Sensitive Interiors

Fleeing political or ethnic persecution in search of safety for themselves and their families, refugees suffer a multitude of losses. Among them are their houses, the domestic interiors that once constituted and supported their family structure, status, social relations, culture, traditions, religion, and sense of self—or, in one word, their identity. Because the built environment is often permanent and fixed in place, it is not among the possessions refugees manage to salvage during their displacement. Replicating a lost architectural form in their host country is not feasible because of architecture's ties to environmental, technological, political, social, and cultural norms (Altman & Chemers, 1980). In parallel, the limited funds allotted to refugee re-housing programs are often tied to low quality temporary accommodations (Miyares, 1997). As a result, after their relocation, it is not uncommon for refugees to find themselves living in dwellings that have little (if any) relation to either the houses they were forced to abandon or the acceptable housing standards of the host society (Hadjiyanni, 2005).

As cultures are living organisms that evolve and adapt to different situations (Camino & Krulfeld, 1994), some

form of cultural change is bound to ensue when refugees find themselves in new circumstances (Shryock & Abraham, 2000). Nevertheless, few studies have examined the impact that a new domestic architecture might have in the adjustment process of refugee groups or in their struggle for a new identity definition. Given the selective (Karam, 2000) and appropriative (Pilkington, Omel'chenko, Flynn, Bliudina, & Starkova, 2002) nature of cultural change, displaced people have to choose between: a) changing their living environments to support their way of life; b) changing their behaviors and cultural expectations to adapt to their new spatial boundaries; or c) doing nothing. All three options can be sources of stress, increasing the pressures on families already overburdened with concerns like obtaining language, education, and employment skills. It therefore comes as no surprise that mental, emotional, and physical health problems abound among refugees who have lost their cultural connections (Adler, 1995; Adjukovic, 1998; Papadopoulos, Lees, Lay, & Gebrehiwot, 2004).

Understanding how choice relates to the dialectic between human behavior and the built environment is particularly important in the case of women from cultures where the home remains the primary site of their social and cultural practices, such as Somali women—the focus of this paper. Partly because of the time they

Partly because of the time they spend inside their homes, women were found to experience the home as a stronger anchor in their lives than men...

spend inside their homes, women were found to experience the home as a stronger anchor in their lives than men (Saegert, 1985) and to be more affected by its loss (Fried, 1963). Accentuating the effects of losing their home is the women's role as safekeepers of traditions (Shami, 2000). Content to safeguard their definition of cultural identity from being taken over by western values and ideals, women from marginalized groups transform the home into a site of resistance (Hooks, 1990; Hadjiyanni, 2002). The residential environments of immigrant groups therefore attain additional dimensions of meaning that go beyond those commonly associated with the notion of home, such as family and friends, self identity, privacy, continuity, personalized place, activity, roots, and physical structure (Hayward, 1970).

Because the United States is now experiencing one of the largest waves of migration in its history (Masnick, 2002; Stodghill & Bower, 2002), designs that respond to cultural differences in housing needs on both the programmatic and conceptual levels can lead to culturally sensitive housing—that is, housing that supports diverse ways of living. However, typical design solutions to the problem of responding to culture under conditions of displacement tend to converge on the replication of exterior architectural elements, like columns, roofs lines, and ornamental motifs (i.e. San Francisco's Little Saigon). Even though such responses have been noted as helping produce a sense of continuity between displaced people and their past (Mazumdar, Mazumdar, Docoyanan, & McLaughlin, 2000), they perpetuate stereotypes of what belonging to a particular group entails. Furthermore, limiting responses to a building's exterior does not account for cultural traditions practiced inside the home (Rapoport, 1998).

Cognizant of how the built environment relates to cultural change, architects and designers can develop designs that foster a sense of continuity between the past, the present, and the future, thus easing the refugees' resettlement process and increasing their chances for a successful adaptation (Tollefson, 1989). An architecture that bridges refugees' former and present ways of life can help refugees construct new

identities that connect their pre- and post-relocation identities, allowing houses to be turned into homes. The question is, how can designers begin to understand cultural differences, a problem typically dealt with in fields like sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies?

Building on the theoretical premise that identity is constructed through difference (Hall, 2000), this paper theorizes that understanding how members of marginalized groups construct and nourish their sense of difference in the home is the first step toward achieving culturally sensitive housing. According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is a matter of becoming that which is constituted by both similarity and difference. As such, identities are constantly changing, affected by the "ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p. 23). It is this relationship—between the built environment and the process of reconstructing the past, adapting to the present, and producing the future—that the current paper seeks to understand.

Drawing from interviews with eight Somali women in their homes in Minnesota, this paper explores how residential interiors affect the practice of cultural traditions and delineate the direction of cultural change. The analysis sheds light on how members of cultural groups choose to appropriate their homes, uncovering practices supported and suppressed by the new architecture they find themselves living in after their displacement. Through this focus, the paper begins to define the parameters that must be considered in the design of culturally sensitive housing as well as the areas in the home where intervention might be possible in a way that meets both mainstream and minority cultural needs.

Background: The Somali Diaspora

Somali people make up the largest ethnic group in Somalia. Their unity as a group is broken, however, by clan affiliations that are extremely important to their identity and way of life. Following colonial rule, clashes between Somali clans led to a devastating civil war that destroyed the small nation in the Horn of Africa (Sahnoun, 1994; Samatar, 1994; Gundel, 2002). Western perceptions of Somalia are thereby predominated by war images of poverty, hunger, and anarchy. Stemming from

*Life after displacement has not been easy for Somalis,
and particularly for the women...*

movies such as *Black Hawk Down*, which documents the mopping of American forces in Mogadishu and the 1992 famine that followed the conflict, such representations offer a one-sided view of a country that, even now, consists primarily of nomads who scrape the countryside in search of green pastures for their animals¹ (Cahill, 1980; Library of Congress Country Studies).

Used to migrating (Cahill, 1980; Metz, 1993), Somalis had to join the millions of refugees around the world who are forced to move in search of safety and economic opportunity, making them among the world's largest diasporas (Lorch, 2002). After experimenting with various countries and parts of the US, thousands of Somalis came to the Midwest (Karaim, 2000) and Minnesota (Mattessich, 2000) in the early 1990s. The Twin Cities area currently has the largest concentration of Somalis in the country and, with over 30,000 Somalis, it earns the title *SomaliLand*. Even though Somalia is primarily rural, most of the Somalis in Minnesota came from the city of Mogadishu, which is Somalia's largest urban center.

Somalis in Minnesota enjoy amenities such as the Somali Mall, a cluster of shops that provides the Somali population with goods such as food clothing, jewelry, and rugs, and opportunities to gather and visit with other Somalis. Uncomfortable in public venues like parks or museums, Somalis prefer to mingle with other Somalis (Mattessich, 2000). Determined to succeed in their new life, many displaced Somalis take advantage of the local organizations that have sprung up to facilitate the Somali community's transition; additionally, they register in the English classes offered to newcomers, and they send their children to higher institutions (Robillos, 2001).

Yet in spite of their seemingly successful integration into the Twin Cities' cultural landscape, many Somalis intend to return to their homeland (Mattessich, 2000). However, almost twenty years after the war, Somalia is still underdeveloped, lacking a central administration and an economic base (Metz, 1993). With obstacles such as "no public utility services, no electricity, no communications, no health services, no schools," Somalia's future is uncertain (Sahnoun, 1994, p. 29). Concerned Somalis in America resort to sending remittances that are crucial to the

country's survival and potential for rebuilding (Gundel, 2002).

Appropriation versus Acculturation

Life after displacement has not been easy for Somalis, and particularly for the women (Robillos, 2001). Moving into the western world, Somali women come face to face with being different for the first time. Excepting the coastal areas, Somali people live in a harsh desert habitat, relatively isolated from contact with other cultural groups (Cahill, 1980). Upon relocation, they have to reevaluate their race, religion, and cultural traditions, in the process creating a new sense of defining identity, partly as a way to overcome discrimination (Berns, 1999; Dion, 2001).

Historically, Somali women held 'outsider' positions within their culture, with marginal and ambiguous roles that have taught them the skills to maneuver between facets of identity such as clan, civic, national, and religious affiliations (Kapteijns, 1994). This skill serves them well in their displacement, where they have to negotiate between keeping traditional Somali ideals and coping with the demands of their host countries. Instead of being acculturated and trading their culture for that of the host country, Somalis are noted for "integrating their own beliefs into new circumstances" (McGown, 1999, p. 159), thereby appropriating their cultural practices to the host country's expectations.

Three Somali cultural institutions have remained anchors in the lives of displaced Somalis, holding the culture together and keeping it from dissipating under the pressure of adjustment. The first is Islam and its five pillars, which prescribe many of Somalis' behaviors: to believe in one god, to pray daily, to give to the needy, to fast, and to take the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca if they are able (Metz, 1993; Chebel, 2000; Abdullahi, 2001). Introduced to the country in the 10th century, Islam enforces a loyalty that separates Somalis from many of their African neighbors who thrive on indigenous traditions and faiths. Almost all Somalis are Sunni Muslims, and Islam defines their daily life, their gender relations, and the many aspects of their behavior, such as handshaking, dress, food, and national holidays.

Leaving behind a traditional way of life and moving into the western world, Somalis found themselves coping with unfamiliar architectural forms.

The second cultural institution takes the form of the high value Somalis place on maintaining family and community connections. Examples include the fact that if a friendship is formed, it is meant to last for life (Robillos, 2001), while a typical prayer says, "God, do not isolate me from my community."

The third cultural institution is gender separation, which has historically been constructed by keeping men and women's domains separate. Traditionally, Somali women's domains consisted of their homes and families, whereas men held political power and dealt with issues other than the domestic ones (Abdullahi, 2001; Kapteijns, 1994). As an old proverb said, "Your woman should be in the house or in the grave." It was only upon marriage that women were granted governorship of a household and had complete freedom over managing it (Abdullahi, 2001).

Among the expressions of culture that have been reevaluated in displacement is the Somali dress, which is one example of women's ability to appropriate western practices into their own cultural beliefs. As Muslims, many Somali women opt to wear the *hijab*—the veil used to cover their hair when in the presence of unrelated males (i.e., any man they can marry except their father, brothers, father-in-law, and husband). Often construed as a sign of oppression, to many Muslim women the veil is a signifier of modesty and womanhood, an affirmation of cultural identity, a strident feminist statement, and a tool of resistance from colonial legacies (El Guindi, 1999; Bullock, 2003). As a facet of identity, the veil, in cases of extreme change such as displacement, has been reevaluated accounting for factors like "ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, citizenship status, marital status, employment possibilities, political values, interactions with Somalis and non-Somalis, memories of Somalia, available materials, and even personal aesthetics" (Akou, 2001, p.112). Somali women of the Diaspora can therefore choose among various extents of covering that range from the westernized scarf that covers one's hair to the *hijab* which covers the head and the upper body, allowing only the face to show, and the *garbasaar*, which wraps around the entire body (Akou, 2001).

The Lost and New Architecture

Leaving behind a traditional way of life and moving into the western world, Somalis found themselves coping with unfamiliar architectural forms. Building types vary across Somalia from the *aqual*, the nomadic hut prevalent in the rural areas (Prussin, 1995), to the courtyard-type housing in the urban areas (Abdullahi, 2001). At a glance, the two types of lost architecture appear to be very different. The *aqual* is portable and movable; it employs curvilinear lines; it is made by hand with branches and roots; and it is constructed by the women who take pride in their ability to finely weave the mat coverings. The *aqual* actually belongs to the women, as it constitutes part of their dowry (Prussin, 1995). The urban courtyard house, on the other hand, is permanent and fixed; it is rectilinear; and it is made with hired labor and materials such as stone and brick—although concrete is now becoming fairly common (Abdullahi, 2001).

However, both housing structures support Somali ideas of home as an oasis from the outside world, a place where families can be free from being seen by passers-by. The notion of an oasis is constructed architecturally, with means of enhancing the perception of enclosure, sanctuary, and security. One of these involves light control—with few openings, Somali dwellings have dark, shady interiors that resemble the security of a womb. Another enhancement in both building forms is their relation to the Somali cultural institutions of collectivity and gender separation; both forms use spaces that support community connections while being sensitive to women's needs. The *aqual*, for example, is accessible only to family members, and is inaccessible to male guests. Visitors end up gathering at the men's fire corner or *ardaa*, an area inside the traditional nomadic settlement; despite the delineation of gendered space, the acceptance of complete strangers into their home compounds is an important cultural value by which Somali collectivity is constructed. In the city, the *ardaa* is transformed into an inner courtyard, an area protected from outside view through high fences and walls. Men socialize with strangers in the courtyard while women spend time inside the home in the dining/sitting room (Abdullahi, 2001).

Having few options but to rent, Somalis find themselves living in units that are too small for their large and extended households.

Finding affordable housing that relates to these ways of life is among the biggest concerns of Somalis in Minnesota, alongside employment, education, family issues, and cultural support (Robillos, 2001). The unwillingness of Somalis to compromise cultural practices—for example, paying mortgage interest to attain home ownership²—restrains the choices available to them in the housing market. Having few options but to rent, Somalis find themselves living in units that are too small for their large and extended households. They are noted for not abiding by occupancy laws that limit the number of people who can live under one roof, which results in conflicts with landlords and the refusal of contracts (Robillos, 2001).

Purpose and Methodology

Data for this paper were collected as part of a residential design studio class in the Department of Architecture of the University of Minnesota in the fall of 2003. Students were asked to design culturally sensitive housing for Somali refugees, the Twin Cities' newest immigrant group. Because the author recognized the limited availability of knowledge from which to define the programmatic requirements that housing should meet in order to support Somali identity definition, the pedagogy used was one of integrating social science research into design education. Such an approach increases students' cultural competency and gives them the tools to seek answers to the design questions they encounter.

Guided by the author, the 14 students in the class reviewed the literature on the Somalis, helped restructure an existing interview instrument, accompanied the author to interviews in the homes of eight Somali women who now reside in the Twin Cities area, analyzed the findings, and devised their projects' conceptual and programmatic direction. The resulting design proposals were exhibited at two local venues—the Hennepin County Government Center and the Hennepin History Museum—as a way to raise awareness among policy makers and the general public about differences in housing needs and the potential tied to culturally sensitive housing.

The verbal narratives collected throughout the interviews included demographic information and descriptions of the traditions the Somali women want to pass on to their children, of their housing in Somalia, of the problems they face because of their current living conditions, and of possible solutions. Both closed and open-ended questions were used in the focused interviews, allowing for both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis and thus enriching the research (Zeisel, 1991; Babbie, 1995).

It should be noted that this paper relies heavily on the narratives provided by the interviewees. Even though their viewpoints may not be representative of all Somali people, their experiences allow for a glimpse into the opinions and housing problems of Somali community members. Furthermore, confirming Stuart Hall's premise that identity is constituted through difference (2000) some of the narratives compare American and Somali traditions and values. It is beyond this paper's scope to comment on the validity of the interviewees' perceptions. Instead, the analysis centers on the behavioral and spatial implications of Somalis' perceptions of difference.

Additional data collected included plans of houses; types and placement of furniture; uses of space; decorative items; exterior and interior photographs; and observations by the researchers. The visual imagery enabled us to share the interview experiences with the rest of the class as well as with colleagues at conferences, with the general public at the exhibits, and with students in future classes. Having access to this additional data is one of the benefits of in-home interviews, counterbalancing the fact that, because of privacy concerns, being interviewed in their home made interviewees more reluctant to be identified.

Sample Description

The sample included women of a diversity of ages, marital statuses, educational backgrounds, and income levels. These women also had varying numbers of children and had spent varying periods of time in the US. Their ages ranged from 26 to 52 years old, with the average age being 38.22 years; they had been in the US from 5 to 28 years, with the average being 9.11 years. All but one of

Residing in rental properties designed to cater to the individualistic nature of American society, Somali women found themselves caught in a collision between two of their important cultural values—community connections and gender separation.

the interviewees came to the US as refugees in the 1990s, following the beginning of hostilities in Somalia. Half came from the urban center of Mogadishu while the other half came from rural towns; none of the interviewees was a nomad prior to the exodus³. Among the eight interviewees, five were married with children, two were single-mothers, and one was single.

Household size ranged from one to seven, with the average being 4.22 people. The number of children ranged from 1 to 8, with the average being 3.16 children. In contrast to the extended family structure most predominant in Somalia, our sample found primarily nuclear families. Only two of the eight families had elders living with them; one family hosted other relatives as well.

Interviewees ranged in educational levels from those who lacked any formal education to those who were university graduates. Reflecting the difference in education levels was the range of income levels, with most of the families we interviewed (six of the eight interviewees) having household incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000. As most families sent money back to Somalia regularly, they spent more than the recommended 30% of their remaining income on living accommodations.

Because paying interest is not supported by Muslim religious beliefs, all interviewees resided in rental properties. Half lived in townhouses in the suburbs and the other half in city apartments, like Ralph Rapson's Cedar Riverside apartment building. Their units had an average of 2.44 bedrooms and 1.50 bathrooms, confirming prior studies that Somalis live in housing that is too small for their large and extended households (Robillos, 2001).

Discussion: Constructing Difference Through the Built Environment

In spite of their varying ages, marital status, number of children, years in the US, incomes, and educational levels, the eight Somali women interviewed shared a similar concern: How could they sustain Somali cultural identity and pass it down to future generations while adjusting to American life? The challenges involved in

preserving Somali family values, connections to community members, traditions, language, religion, and way of life are explained by one 30 year-old woman. "We have no choice here... For instance, if your children attend public school and they are gone seven or eight hours a day, you see them less hours and you have no control of what they do or the culture they follow. This is not Somalia where everyone is the same, where everyone has the same culture, religion, language, traditions, values, and morals... It is not realistic to expect the children to keep *all* [emphasis added by interviewee] your traditions."

Our Somali interviewees recognized that they had to choose which traditions to fight for and which to let go. The following analysis walks us through the houses of eight Somali families, elaborating on the role of the built environment in the process of cultural change. In their struggle to construct a Somali sense of difference, women appropriated the spaces they lived in and adapted their own behaviors, enduring many difficulties in the process. Residing in rental properties designed to cater to the individualistic nature of American society, Somali women found themselves caught in a collision between two of their important cultural values—community connections and gender separation. As we will see, this collision resulted in the women having to make a choice between changing their living conditions, changing their behavior, and doing nothing. The environments they lived in bounded many of their choices, limiting their ability to abide by some of their culture's primary practices, threatening their collective identity, placing constraints on their behavior, causing stress in their lives, and reframing the parameters that sustain their cultural identity definition.

The following discussion is not broken up by subject, activity, rooms, or cultural expression. Instead, it reproduces the experience of moving through the house of a Somali family, in order to illustrate the interconnectedness between the facets of cultural identity and underscore their dependence on one another.

Cultural Appropriation of American Housing

Even before entering the living spaces of a Somali family, we, the visitors, knew we were coming upon something different. The corridors of the Cedar Riverside apart-

Additional evidence of the Somalis' collective definition of identity was the lack of individualization and variability in the way homes were decorated, particularly the formal living areas.

ment building had a distinctive strong smell. It was the smell of *unsi*, an incense made of sugar, perfume, and spices that is burnt on mostly electric machines that can be purchased at the Somali Mall (Figure 1). Somalis use *unsi* to refresh the house and, according to a 38 year-old woman, to let visitors “know that Somali people live there.”

After knocking on the door, we were in most cases greeted by a veiled woman, as all but one of the women we interviewed wear the *hijab*. (Later, we will see that fre-

Figure 1. Burning *unsi* gives a sense of connectedness.



(Photograph by author)

quently women had to remain covered even inside their homes.) Our interviewee would lead us to the formal social area, which was often the only gathering area in the house. Once there, we could both see and feel the sense of difference. Double and triple layers of lush curtains covered the windows, creating dark and shady rooms that appealed to the Somali aesthetic, as is noted by this 26 year-old interviewee: “[We like] large windows with heavy curtains. We like the room dark. It is a custom to have curtains. Somali families have two or three layers of curtains, we do not like blinds... And these are not typical J.C. Penney curtains, I got them at the Somali Mall!” To the visitor, this darkness felt uncomfortable, leaving us wondering whether we would be able to take notes during the interview (Figure 2).

Intensifying the rich texture of the formal living area were colorful oriental rugs covering the floors.

Figure 2. Triple layers of curtains cover the windows.



(Photograph by author)

Furniture, such as couches or middle-eastern type seating around the walls,⁴ was also upholstered with velvety fabrics of bright colors and ornate patterns. The darkness, when combined with the soft, lavish textures of the curtains, rugs, and seating pieces, reproduced the familiar shaded, cool feeling engendered in the *aqual* and the urban courtyard house.

As renters, these families had little, if any, option for painting the walls of their rooms, and so most vertical surfaces were of light, neutral colors, like white. However, favored hues included earth tones similar to Somalia's landscape, like beige, brown, and light green. Similarly, preferred materials were brick and stone, partly because they were perceived as safer and stronger than wood-frame construction—which, according to our interviewees, can be easily blown-away by tornadoes or burn in a fire.

Additional evidence of the Somalis' collective definition of identity was the lack of individualization and variability in the way homes were decorated, particularly the formal living areas. All of the families we visited had similar decorative themes to adorn walls and tabletops. Prominent objects were handicrafts from Somalia, such

Because of their tight social relations, the houses of Somalis are supposed to be open to family, friends, and community members for impromptu visits.

as milk containers, wedding baskets, drums, baskets, combs, and rugs (Figure 3). Another theme included religious items, like framed excerpts of the Koran and metal plates engraved with Islamic poetry and verses (Figure 4). As visible and tangible reminders of the past and of difference, these objects were teaching tools that could be used to transfer the value of lost places to children (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Hadjiyanni, 2002). Meanwhile, for adult Somalis, physical manifestations of difference help form identity and connectedness, as this 30 year-old interviewee explains: "When I enter my apartment I feel at home [as in Somalia] because of all the stuff I put on the walls, they are all objects from Somalia... It took me years to collect all this stuff." Even though she was very proud of the way her walls were decorated, she refused to let us take pictures because she felt she would lose her privacy, and thereafter be easily identified.

Use of and engagement with the Somali language provides another way these displaced Somali families connect to their community and country. Partly because Somalis lacked a written language until they adopted Latin in the early 1970s, the culture relies on oral expression and poetry to teach respect, tolerance, nationalism, and clan-based principles to children (Afrax, 1994). In the American home, language connections

were created through activities like watching television and gathering with friends and family members. The television, which was mostly placed in the formal social area, was used to watch Somali programs via satellite. Therefore, according to an interviewee, it "is usually on 24 hours in a Somali house... Even if Somalis have no food in the refrigerator, they will have cable. The kids watch television all day and even if they have visitors, like with you now, the television would be on as well."

However, socializing with other Somalis was not easy for many of our interviewees because of the limitations of their living spaces and the cultural need to separate the genders. Because of their tight social relations, the houses of Somalis are supposed to be open to family, friends, and community members for impromptu visits. We actually experienced an example of this informality during one of our interviews. Upon arrival, we found out that our interviewee's family members were in the middle of shampooing the carpets of their apartment. The interviewee then walked down the hall to a neighbor's apartment, knocked on the door, and asked if she could use that family's living room to hold the interview!

On the one hand, impromptu visits such as the one described above create collectivity. On the other hand, though, the visits create stress because they dictate that

Figure 3. Traditional objects.



(Photograph by author)

Figure 4. Religious objects.



(Photograph by author)

Having at least two social areas would enable families to separate children from adults for both playing and studying.

social areas must be formal, clean, and orderly at all times. Because typical Somali families include several children, the experience of living in units with one primary social area means that children's play has to be restrained to "quiet" and "clean" activities like cards and television viewing. In the houses we visited, it was striking to notice the absence of children's toys and equipment such as rockers and swings. The need to control play caused undue pressure in mothers with young children and a lot of frustration in the children themselves, especially when they were confined indoors during long Minnesota winters. In the words of a young mother of two, "The biggest obstacle here is not to have a family room. Rental units have only one living room. With the big sofas [in the living room] there is not enough space for kids to play, we have too many furniture pieces. They get to watch television [in the living room] but they are not allowed to bring their toys here. The bedrooms are also too tiny, they are not accommodating to the children."

Part of the reason bedrooms in Somali residences did not lend themselves to play areas was that families preferred to have two children in each bedroom, sleeping mostly on separate twin beds, which left them little room to play or study. Having at least two social areas would enable families to separate children from adults for both playing and studying. Because they see education as the way for their children to succeed in American life, almost all of our interviewees wanted to provide them with separate and quiet study areas, since the social areas were often too noisy for children to concentrate.

Exacerbating the problem of accommodating children's needs was the fact that many families lived in high-rises or in suburban townhouses that lacked a private yard. Therefore, women like this 44-year-old mother of eight, did not consider allowing children to play outdoors an option. "[In Somalia] there was more freedom, children are imprisoned here, there is no one to help. There, children were outside playing, we had a lot of relatives to help us, we were not afraid for our children, for someone to kidnap them. Here, they are always inside the house, it is like a jail." Having access to an outdoor play area that can be supervised from inside the house would ease the lives of mothers. Furthermore, encouraging women to venture outside by creating connections to the outdoors

would lend continuity to the way of life to which Somalis are used. According to a 38-year-old woman, "It is like a box here. Back home the weather is good, we have a big garden and big trees, most of the time we are outside sitting, but here it is like a box. We are not used to staying indoors all the time."

An additional stressor in the lives of women and children was the cultural tradition of gender separation—that is, the need for men and women to socialize separately. Somali gatherings range from large assemblies on special occasions like Ramadan to impromptu visits by unrelated males, typically friends of those men who lived in the house, be they husbands, brothers, fathers, or sons. During the month of Ramadan, the families we interviewed fasted all day and shared a family feast at night with an average of eighteen guests. Faced with the dilemma of choosing between uncomfortable crowded conditions or the social faux pas of not inviting certain relatives and friends, Somali families limited both the frequency of these forms of interaction and the number of guests invited. However, restricting social activities can put at risk the gregarious Somali communal connections that are fostered through common language and the shared social network.

Gender separation also meant that since most homes had a single social area, men, who are at the top of the hierarchy, were the ones who got to use it. In open-plan situations, where kitchens were open to the formal living area, women and children had to gather in the bedrooms, often sitting and eating on the beds. Having a closed-off kitchen would mitigate this disparity, giving women a space to call their own. Most of our interviewees preferred a separate kitchen but had difficulties finding one when choosing rental units. In addition to serving as a gathering area devoted to women, a separate kitchen would enable veiled women to cook uncovered during visits by unrelated males. (Cooking while veiled is both dangerous and uncomfortable.) Furthermore, separation would better contain the smells of frying and spices, allowing women more room to cook Somali traditional foods.

Cooking is one way by which connectedness and sisterhood is constructed. As explained by a 26-year-old

...design that accommodates multiple cooks in the kitchen would facilitate the practicality of cooking for large numbers of people, and, therefore, the adjustment process for this displaced group.

interviewee, "Two people cannot be in the kitchen at one time. Somalis have big families and two or three people want to be in the kitchen cooking together and apartment kitchens can't handle that. I don't have my family over for dinners, because everyone wants to help me and I tell them to get out of the kitchen and they get upset." Therefore, design that accommodates multiple cooks in the kitchen would facilitate the practicality of cooking for large numbers of people, and, therefore, the adjustment process for this displaced group.

Because in the US it is common for men and women to work, the gender divide is fading in some aspects of Somali lives. Most of our interviewees held full time jobs; in their situations, all family members shared housework and cooking. During one visit, the husband and sons of the woman we interviewed were vacuuming the apartment while she spoke with us. Another woman with three young children explained, "I do most of the housework but everyone helps: the kids take turns, they vacuum, the girls help in the kitchen, they do their rooms, dust, organize, mop the floor, and clean the cabinets." Her husband added that he had just cleaned the bathrooms. Other traditions also changed to accommodate changing schedules. As described by one interviewee, "Back home no one eats until the husband comes home. But here we eat when we want."

The act of eating was another way of forming connections to other Somalis. Eating on a rug on the floor and from a large plate in the middle is reminiscent of life in Somalia, and engaging in this form of dining strengthens bonds among participants in this study. As noted by this 30-year-old interviewee, "If you want to feel more at home, you put a mat on the floor, a big plate in the middle and sit in a circle around it... Americans love food, for Somalis it is not the same. Food is something you share... For instance, if we have a wedding or a bridal shower, you don't come for the food, you come for the gathering, the dance, the closeness to the community. Americans, all they talk about is food; they will say how the meal was nice at a wedding. Food just has a different definition between the Americans and the Somalis." Once again, however, while men use the social/dining area to eat around a rug, women end up eating in the bedrooms, sit-

ting on the beds. This jeopardizes women's ability to share food in the way dictated by their culture, thereby creating their own connections. Most interviewees noted that having two eating areas, one in the kitchen and one in the living room, would better support separate men and women's gatherings.

The Somali difference in how food is consumed and what it means brings to light how careful researchers must be when studying another culture. As most of the homes we visited had dining sets, we inferred that they were typically used for eating, until a 26-year-old mother of two clarified her table's use for us: "This table you see here is for decoration, we don't use it, we eat on the floor. We have it for the children to do homework, play a game, do coloring."

Tight connections to family also meant hosting extended family members, often for an undetermined length of time. The 26-year-old single mother we interviewed provided for her sister and brother. In her two-bedroom apartment, she shared a double bed with her sister while her brother slept on the bottom of a bunk bed set with her two boys sleeping at the top. She felt she was doing what she should be doing. "The most important Somali value is family, staying close to family... We believe we need to be there for each other, taking care of each other. I raised my brother and sister. I got married at 16, but we can't abandon each other."

Extended family members hosted by different interviewees included their elders, often the women's parents, who typically shared the children's sleeping area. Two-story units with upstairs bedrooms and bathrooms were difficult for elders with physical limitations, as explained by this interviewee: "My mom is legally blind and she is coming to live with me for 2 months. I don't know what I am going to do. I worry about her falling down the stairs, tripping on furniture, or hitting her head on the closet door [a door that opens into a corridor, blocking the passage from the living room to the kitchen]."

The accommodation of out-of-town guests was also expected of Somali families, who had to be creative in determining where guests stayed and for how long.

Creative design responses, such as including a shared space that families could rent for a minimal fee, could provide alternatives...

Solutions ranged from living areas transformed into guest rooms (sometimes for families of seven) and hosting duties shared with other Somali families. Because typical Somali households include the parents, children, elders, extended family members, and out-of-town visitors, it is very difficult to know who is living in a house at any given time. This complicates programming decisions, such as determining the number of bedrooms and bathrooms. Most of our interviewees felt that having at least four bedrooms would help accommodate the needs of their large families and significant number of guests. However, rental units typically have one to three bedrooms, limiting the ability of those who wish to act as hosts. Creative design responses, such as including a shared space that families could rent for a minimal fee, could provide alternatives that mediate this concern.

The responsibility for supporting one's family extended to relatives living outside the US. Almost all the families we interviewed sent money back to Somalia on a regular basis. Given that many have incomes in the range of \$20,000 to \$40,000, making ends meet without the funds sent home is an added consideration for affordable housing policies. Once remittances are accounted for, the amount of income left for housing became smaller than the recommended 1/3 of earnings, thus shrinking the housing choices available to Somalis in the market.

Lastly, the Somali women interviewed experienced difficulties practicing their religion. Daily prayers are among the primary means by which Somalis connect to God and to one another. Taking place five times a day, prayers can only be performed when physical and spiritual safety is assured, and they are most effective when done in groups (Chebel, 2000). As few gender-segregated mosques exist in Minneapolis, women mostly pray in their homes. Our interviewees noted that as long as they had a clean place to pray, facing east, they could fulfill this religious dictum, and such a space could be provided anywhere from the bedroom to the living area.

However, the act of washing prior to praying—a ritual called *wudu*—presented women with some difficulties, particularly elderly women, and created moisture problems in the homes. Washing involves the hands, face,

feet, ears, and mouth. One interviewee described the washing ritual. "First, you clean your hands three times. Then, you put water in your mouth and gargle, again for three times. Then, you wash your nostrils and your face, everything is repeated three times. After that, you wash your arms three times, from the nails to the elbow. You start with the right hand and then the left hand. Then, you take some water and wash your hair and ears, the inner ears. Finally, and that is when most houses get water all over, you put your feet in the sink, and wash from the nails to the ankle... Again, wash the right foot first, then the left foot." Design solutions that support *wudu* could include low sinks with wall-mounted faucets, similar to those found in mosques; hand-held showers in bathtubs; walk-in type shower stalls; a floor drain to remove water splashing from washing feet; and windows in the bathroom that help water evaporate.

Closing Comments

The above discussion highlights the fact that, in spite of the challenges they endured, Somali women maintained the status of safekeepers of tradition, using their homes as sites of resistance to mainstream values and ideals. Women's struggles to endow their children with their traditions and their connections to homeland and community resulted in the use of residential environments in ways that spoke of difference. Recognizing that limited time with the children required the creation of intense and repeated experiences, Somali women constructed Somali identity using all five senses and various forms of cultural expressions. By smelling, seeing, feeling, hearing, and tasting difference, children not only learned of the Somali culture and aesthetic but also of where they came from and where they belong. Smelling *unsi*, Somalis can identify their own people; seeing veiled women, they can confirm their cultural and religious ties; using the Somali language and oral traditions, they can teach the young how to conceive the world; feeling the darkness inside their homes, they can produce a distinct aesthetic; and tasting Somali foods on a carpet on the floor, they can create collectivity and support.

This is not to say that all eight women and their families undertook these tasks in the same way or on the same level. That is, not all interviewees engaged all five senses and

In constructing a sense of difference, women's appropriation of their living environments required a balancing act between choosing which traditions to fight for and which to let go.

used the same form or number of cultural expressions. There was an inherent variability in how the women chose to use their homes to construct an association to the Somali culture and to their definition of difference. This variability ranged from some subjects having triple-layered curtains in all the rooms, while others had curtains only in the bedrooms. Some had rugs and traditional objects covering all the floors and walls in the public areas of their homes, whereas one had just a handful of decorative items above the kitchen sink. Reasons for this variability among subjects included the length of time families had been in the country, the amount of time they had been living in the particular rental unit, and the number of times they had moved. For example, families who had recently settled into a unit might not have invested in curtains for all the windows.

In constructing a sense of difference, women's appropriation of their living environments required a balancing act between choosing which traditions to fight for and which to let go. It was these bounded choices that added stress to the lives of our interviewees. Some, for example, chose to cook wearing the *hijab* in open kitchens rather than give up the veil; others chose to socialize with other women in the bedrooms rather than abandon the gender separation tradition; and all of them opened their small homes to family and friends rather than adopt individualistic attitudes.

Overall, the project showed that certain Somali cultural prerequisites have to be incorporated into a typical American house in order for the house to foster a sense of belonging to the Somali community while smoothing the adjustment process to the American culture. Programmatic requirements that ease women's lives include: providing for a kitchen that can be closed off so that women can cook without the veil and the house can be protected from the smells of frying and spices during cooking; incorporating separate social and eating areas so that children can play apart from adults and women can socialize apart from men; and including a low sink for the washing of feet prior to praying. (See Table 1, next page, for a summary list.) Reaching a balance of traditions in design can transform the house into a

bridge that connects Somali and American identities.

With change being an essential aspect of the adjustment process, programmatic responses that consider variability must support culture while also enabling adjustment. Such a design approach requires determining the extent to which a house will need to respond to traditional cultural practices in addition to western ideals—a task that places designers in the position of making decisions with political, social, and cultural implications. Some of this paper's design recommendations involve religion and gender, which means designing in ways that support Muslim religious dictums and gender separation. The political implications of such design responses are obvious for affordable housing, which is often publicly funded. Policymakers who consider the impact of the process of cultural adjustment are better positioned to debate the future of affordable housing policies.

The purpose of this paper has been the exploration of how the built environment relates to the practice of culture and to the inevitable cultural change that follows displacement. The experiences of our eight Somali interviewees reveal that the dialectic between culture and the built environment changes more than the two notions in themselves. The culture indeed changes as elements of it are adapted to American life; instead of traditional Somali foods, for example, many families shared pizza on a rug on the floor. Similarly, the built environment is transformed in that a room that would typically be full of light coming through floor-to-ceiling windows becomes, with the use of curtains, a dark space. Yet what also changes is the individual definition of identity and the parameters that define the production of a new identity. Some of these parameters are linked to human behaviors and the meanings behind the words used to describe these behaviors.

Based on these conclusions, the findings point the way to a need to redefine programming, beginning with an expansion of the definitions used to describe behavioral activities. "Play," for example, does not necessarily involve toys like Barbies and Legos; it can mean running in the corridor. "Eating" does not always entail sitting around a table and using placemats, plates, and silver-

Table 1. Summary of programmatic responses that support specific activities.

Socializing	At least two social areas to separate women from men and children from adults. Use materials that are easy to clean to enable the formality tradition.
Eating	At least two eating areas to separate women from men. As eating takes place primarily on the floor around a rug, allow for an open space—this could be the area where a mainstream family would place the dining table. An eating area in the kitchen can be used by women and children.
Cooking	A kitchen that can be closed off so that women can cook without the veil, and so that the house can be protected from the smells of frying and spices during cooking. Accommodating multiple cooks allows for sisterhood connections to form.
Sleeping	Bedrooms must accommodate two twin beds for two children to share. Enough bedrooms must be provided for family members, guests, and elders—at least four bedrooms. The master bedroom should be close to the children's bedrooms for family togetherness.
Studying	An area for children to study must be provided—if not in the bedrooms, in another quiet location. Allow for a computer station.
Playing	A separated area for children to play would ease mother's stress for keeping a formal and clean house. Outdoor play areas should be easy to supervise from the house. If possible, this area should be screened from neighbors' views to enable mothers to be outside without the veil.
Hygiene	At least two bathrooms with separated fixtures to allow for multiple users. Include a low sink for feet washing prior to praying.
Praying	A clean space to pray facing east—if possible, design in a way that designates the eastern direction. Bathrooms should allow for feet washing.
Storing	Storage must be provided in all areas of the home. Built-ins allow for traditional items to be displayed while closets enable the storage of food, clothing, shoes, etc out of sight.

ware; it can mean sharing food from a plate on the floor. "Praying" does not prescribe kneeling by one's bedside at night; it can be a ritual by which one connects to God several times a day, after having cleansed oneself and placing a rug facing east. Responding to the specifics of cul-

ture compels reevaluating programmatic decisions by asking questions that account for variability in the meanings of home among different ways of living.

Given the multiplicity of cultural groups prevalent in the American cultural landscape, how do designers begin to

Collaborations with affordable housing providers who can build culturally sensitive housing will allow researchers to evaluate the feasibility of programmatic guidelines.

pinpoint where walls, floors, and ceilings will meet? Where rooms will form? Which spaces should be connected, what activities to support, and which occupants to house? The answers to these questions are dependent on further studies with other immigrant and minority groups. These efforts can increase our understanding of the dialectic between design, culture, and identity, and of how members of cultural groups appropriate the built environment. Collaborations with affordable housing providers who can build culturally sensitive housing will allow researchers to evaluate the feasibility of programmatic guidelines. Until then, the bounded choices faced by our interviewees highlight the fact that policies that prioritize putting a roof over one's head also lengthen the adjustment process of new immigrant groups, limiting their ability to create a home away from home.

References

- Abdullahi, M. D. (2001). *Culture and customs of Somalia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Adjukovic, M. (1998). Displaced adolescents in Croatia: Sources of stress and posttraumatic stress reaction. *Adolescence*, 33(129), 209-217.
- Adler, S. R. (1995). Refugee stress and folk belief: Hmong sudden deaths. *Social Science & Medicine*, 40(12), 1623-1629.
- Afrax, M. D. (1994). The mirror of culture: Somali dissolution seen through oral expression. In Ahmed I. Samatar (Ed.), *The Somali challenge: From catastrophe to renewal?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 233-251.
- Akou, H. M. (2001). *Rethinking 'fashion': The case of Somali women's dress in Minneapolis-St. Paul as an evaluation of Herbert Blumer's theory on fashion*. University of Minnesota Master of Arts thesis.
- Altman, I., & Chemers, M. (1980). *Culture and environment*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Babbie, E. (1995). *The practice of social research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Berns, R. (1999). *Muslims of the diaspora: The Somali communities of London and Toronto*. Toronto, Ontario: Toronto University Press.
- Bullock, K. (2002). *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging historical & modern stereotypes*. Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought.
- Cahill, K. M. (1980). *Somalia: A perspective*. Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press.
- Camino, L. A., & Krulfeld, R. M. (Eds.) (1994). *Reconstructing lives, recapturing meaning: Refugee identity, gender, and culture change*. Switzerland: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Chebel, M. (2000). *Symbols of Islam*. Singapore: Barnes & Noble Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981). *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Dion, K. L. (2001). Immigrants' perceptions of housing discrimination in Toronto: The housing new Canadians project. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(3), 523-539.
- El Guindi, F. (1999). *Veil: Modesty, privacy, and resistance*. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Fried, M. (1963). Grieving for a lost home. In L. J. Duhl (Ed.), *The urban condition*. New York: Basic Books, 151-171.
- Gundel, J. (2002). The migration-development nexus: Somalia case study. *International Migration*, 40(5), 255-279.
- Hadjiyanni, T., & Robinson, J. W. (2005). Incorporating cultural issues in sustainable housing design: The case of the Hmong. In Walter Leal Filho (Ed.), *The Handbook of Sustainability Research*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang Scientific Publishers, 69-95.
- Hadjiyanni, T. (2002). *The making of a refugee: Children adopting refugee identity in Cyprus*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Hall, S. (2000). Cultural identity and diaspora. In N. Mirzoeff (Ed.), *Diaspora and visual culture: Representing Africans and Jews*. London: Routledge, 21-33.
- Hayward, G. D. (1977). Housing research and the concept of home. *Housing Educators Journal*, 4(3), 7-12.
- Hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Kapteijns, L. (1994). Women and the crisis of communal identity: The cultural construction of gender in Somali history. In Ahmed I. Samatar (Ed.), *The Somali challenge: From catastrophe to renewal?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 211-232.
- Karaim, R. (2000). Little Mogadishu [Fargo, North Dakota]. *Preservation: The Magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation*, 52(1), 39-42.
- Lorch, D. (2002, Sept. 2). Following freedom's trail. *Newsweek*, 34.
- Masnick, G. S. (2002). The new demographics of housing. *Housing Policy Debate*, 13(2), 275-321.

- Mattessich, P. (2000). *Speaking for themselves*. Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Research Center.
- Mazumdar, S., Mazumdar, S., Docoyanan, F., & McLaughlin, C. M. (2000). Creating a sense of place: The Vietnamese-Americans and Little Saigon. *Environmental Psychology, 20*, 319-333.
- McGown, R. B. (1999). *Muslims in the diaspora: The Somali communities of London and Toronto*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Metz, H. C. (1993). *Somalia: A country study*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Miyares, I. M. (1997). Changing perceptions of space and place as measures of Hmong acculturation, *The Professional Geographer, 49*(2), 214-224.
- Library of Congress. Library of Congress Country Studies – Somalia. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sotoc.html>.
- Papadopoulos, I., Lees, S., Lay, M., & Gebrehiwot, A. (2004). Ethiopian refugees in the UK: Migration, adaptation, and settlement experiences and their relevance to health. *Ethnicity and Health, 9*(1), 55-73.
- Pilkington, H., Omel'chenko, E., Flynn, M., Bliudina, U., & Starkova, E. (2002). *Looking west? Cultural globalization and Russian youth culture*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Prussin, L. (1995). *African nomadic architecture: Space, place, and gender*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press and The National Museum of African Art.
- Rapoport, A. (1998). Using "culture" in housing design. *Housing & Society, 25*(1&2), 1-20.
- Robillos, M. U. (2001). *Somali community needs assessment project*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota.
- Saegert, S. (1985). The role of housing in the experience of dwelling. In Irwin Altman and Carol M. Werner, eds. *Home environments*, New York: Plenum Press, 287-309.
- Sahnoun, M. (1994). *Somalia: The missed opportunities*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Samatar, A. I. (Ed.). (1994). *The Somali challenge: From catastrophe to renewal?* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Shami, S. (2000). Engendering social memory: Domestic rituals, resistance, and identity in the North Caucasus. In Feride Acar and Ayse Gunes-Ayata (Eds.), *Gender and identity construction: Women of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Turkey*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 305-331.
- Shryock, A., & Abraham, N. (2000). On margins and mainstrems. In Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock (Eds.), *Arab Detroit: From margin to mainstream*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 15-35.
- Stodghill, R., & Bower, A. (2002, September 2). Where everyone's a minority. *Time, 26-30*.
- Tollefson, J. W. (1989). *Alien winds: The reeducation of America's Indochinese refugees*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Zeisel, J. (1991). *Inquiry by design: Tools for environment-behavior research*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

¹ The country's last official census was taken in 1975, before the onset of the civil war. At that time, nomads made up 59% of the population. That figure is estimated to remain the same even today, maintained in part by the poverty the country experiences due the lack of an effective government since 1991.

² Paying mortgage interest is not supported by Muslim religious beliefs.

³ The fact that most incoming Somali refugees are from urban centers speaks to the disadvantage of nomadic groups in terms of finances, connections, and the overall ability to leave the country in the midst of a civil war.

⁴ Middle-eastern type seating involves separated cushions in the form of armchairs that line up along the walls of a room.