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Report

The significance of the window

- a qualitative, anthropological study of what the window means to people

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Executive summary

Basis for the study and the identified themes

This project studied 13 Danish families in various homes and from various age groups, all residents on the island of Zealand (in both towns and the provinces). A total of 24 respondents were involved. The theme was what the window means to them, how they use it in daily life, and what they value and do not value about it. Analysis has revealed the general understanding of the 'good window'. The report thus puts words and pictures to what the window means to ordinary people and gives new insight into the value of the window. It is important to stress that the window is far more than a purely functional tool only used to air out the home. The analysis found six themes that all describe what the window signifies to people – and what they do with it.

1. Daylight and kinds of light
2. View out and view in
3. Following the sun¹
4. The staging properties of the window: window frames, curtains and decoration
5. The role of the window in social life: absence and closeness
6. Safety and functionality

All themes were present for *all* informants, though 1, 2, 4 and 6 particularly so.

What people find most important about the window:

The social, functional and bodily properties of the window.

When people talk about their windows and express what the window means to them in their daily lives, it becomes clear that there is a strong relationship between residents and the windows in their homes.

The window gives people access to the world about them and the opportunity to stay in touch with the dynamic, social life and the course of nature. Precisely by providing people with this access to the world, the window creates a bond between people and their environment. This is why we may talk about the 'social values of a window'. In social terms, the window seems to be about providing people with a border – a threshold they can control. It provides both distance and proximity to the surroundings (can also, depending on the size, steal the public space).

The high status of the window in people's perception relates a lot to the influx of daylight. Daylight is in great demand by the interviewees because it contributes:

- life and energy, joy of life and inspiration, health and cleanliness (thereby reducing the risk of winter depression)
- a daily and seasonal rhythm by being able to follow developments in the immediate surroundings because of the provision of daylight
- light to see by
- character to the form and colour of the room.

For the average people, the 'good window' has the following characteristics:

- gives maximum daylight

¹ In themes 3 and 6, indications were seen of the importance of being able to open the window for the sake of airing out and feeling the air as well as an emergency exit. These issues are discussed in a separate study on ventilation (Hauge 2010, 2011).

- provides a view that is (preferably) beautiful or displays social activity and, thereby, allows the home owner to follow the course of the year and seasons
- must function as a safe border to the world outside (which explains the reason for the home owner wanting control over the view in)
- must be able to withstand the climate and keep cold and damp out – and function trouble free
- must be easy to maintain
- must be openable (for ventilation) and yet have various ways of closing
- must be placed correctly, according to the size of the house and the heights of the residents
- must not dominate the public room (must not have glass facades that are too large)
- must fit in with the style of the house and the rooms in which it is installed
- has a window sill.

Others also speak of the beautiful glass in old windows as something desirable in a window.

The window sill turned out to be interesting because of its flexibility, as described by most women as an important part of the window, because it:

- is an alternative storage possibility (to shelves, drawers and so on)
- is very functional because of the access to daylight and the various geographical orientations (certain flowers/species must be placed strategically – N/S/E/W)
- has a purely aesthetic value, a ‘showroom’ that can be played with and used as territorial marker
- can be used as an extended play area by children, if within sight
- allows for seasonable variety of use (decoration on festive occasions, a seedbed in spring and so on)
- is a talking point.

One informant described the window sill as “the site of temporarily placed items”. This gives the window sill a special status and character – that of the dynamic. So in popular perception, therefore, the window is more ‘real’ or more ‘normal’ if it has a sill; that is, a window sill appears to be part of a ‘good window’. This is precisely because the window sill has a multitude of functions, imparts a degree of flexibility, and provides the residents with an opportunity to express their individuality.

The window’s problematic properties

But discussions about the window do not always reflect a rosy picture. Many informants refer to the fact that the window is fragile, that it may be a source of danger; a broken window with needle-sharp splinters; a window that can be shattered by a lightning strike, the possible entry by a burglar. So the window contains a duality: on the one hand, the window gives people the much-desired daylight and controlled access to the external surroundings; and on the other, people are perfectly aware that the window is associated with certain risks; and that it requires the same maintenance – painting and cleaning – as many other parts of the house – neither of which assumes a particularly high priority on the informants’ ‘things-to-do’ list.

The window as an important threshold

Another form of duality is seen in people’s desire for a view *out* but not a view *in* – or at

least one that is under control:

“It’s all about screening. I mean, it’s nice to be able to look out, to have some sort of contact, wave to people you know passing on the road. But there are no obligations because you’re on your own territory. You don’t need to get involved in conversation. It keeps you at a convenient distance from where you can still smile and be polite and show interest.” *Ginette*

The statement underlines the importance of the window’s function as a threshold. The border between outside and inside is a central issue for people, and also indicates the concern with large shards of glass: People feel uncomfortable if they stand too close to large glass facades as the residents, sitting behind the windows, may feel they are prying. Thus it is possible to say that large glass facades ‘steal’ public space as the border between house, window and the surroundings is, to a certain extent, broken down.

The window’s relation to ‘comfort’ and knowledge

The study shows that the window is important to the informants’ experience of ‘comfort’ in their own homes. People do not use the word ‘comfort’ but talk more about ‘well-being’, feeling ‘at ease’ and, occasionally, ‘comfortable’. The ‘well-being’ people refer to is especially linked to the window’s importance to the body and senses – that is, the themes of daylight and following the sun. That a window has these characteristics is confirmed indirectly by studies on fresh air outside and into the home, where people vividly express the physical joy of opening a window to feel the wind and weather, to experience the smells and sounds of their surroundings (Hauge 2010, 2011). Special practices associated with the window, illustrated by statements about the importance of the window for waving goodbye, and the importance of small displays on the window sill, also demonstrate the status of the window in people’s lives, and that it even has an identity-creating aspect.

As provider of daylight, a view and prospect, the window is naturally of importance to people’s experience of well-being – but the window is about more than well-being, joy and practical use in everyday life. It has a direct bearing on the knowledge people acquire – for example, about the course of the sun, the importance of the seasons for planting, and in decorating the home. People do not decorate and furnish their homes purely in terms of getting maximum sunlight, but also to avoid being dazzled by glare or preventing the furniture from fading. This relationship with the sun and daylight – and thereby also the window – anchors people in the world they inhabit as active human beings engaged in constant interaction with their surroundings. But the window also incorporates a degree of uncertainty among people who are very aware of its fragility, both in terms of the glass and as a possible means of access to burglars. So the window embraces a duality of meaning, though with overriding positive connotations and a high status among the informants as a “window onto the world”.

Archetypical behaviour involving the window: four narratives

From the conversations with the 13 Danish families about their windows, certain patterns of behaviour came to light. Apart from the value of the window in providing residents with the pleasure of a view and daylight, the ability to follow the seasons and a means of airing out the home, some *general* applications of the window appeared. These actions have been compiled as narratives in order to illustrate how the window has become part of people’s daily lives and family activities. They show that the window is far more than a functional element in the home; it is a social and dynamic part of human life that helps anchor us in the world, especially through everyday-life rituals and through the window’s

delimitation between outside and in, view out and view in, normal day and feast day, light and dark.

The four narratives are:

Narrative 1: scenes from a window sill

Narrative 2: the 'waving goodbye' window

Narrative 3: we shut everything when we leave home, and draw curtains and pull down blinds when evening comes

Narrative 4 (from 'extreme case'): daylight as a blessing