

Ideology, Space, and Social Control: The Russian-Mennonite Family in Historic Manitoban Domestic Architecture

Roland Sawatzky, *Mennonite Heritage Village*

Introduction

From 1874 to 1930, much of the domestic architecture constructed by Mennonites in rural settings in southern Manitoba was based on concepts of Mennonite “housebarn” design. This design was common in their homelands of South Russia and northern Europe before the 1874 migration, and the dwellings in particular had specific spatial use attributes that extended into the 20th century.

Household architecture is the setting in which families play out their life cycles. In the three to four century history of housebarn construction and use, Mennonites made their dwellings an important part of their larger social and religious lifestyle. This paper examines the Mennonite housebarns of southern Manitoba between 1874 and 1930 as a setting for the inculcation of Mennonite family “values”¹. Vernacular, domestic architecture² is treated as a setting for practicing the values and structures ascribed to the family, or the “household unit”.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed that the domestic house is a structured setting that is used to inculcate *habitus* (1977, 1979, 1992). *Habitus* is defined as a set of durable dispositions toward decision-making, action and deeply held beliefs about social interaction. Childhood and youth is the time when these values are most forcefully inculcated in relationships with family members and in household activities. Vernacular architecture and the material objects it houses are the setting of the social household. At the same time this architecture is actively structured by the changing activities and needs of the inhabitants. It is structured according to social activities and beliefs, while structuring those very activities and beliefs as changes occur. Vernacular architecture both reflects and reifies household social activity and its underlying habitual dispositions.

The household is an important locus of social control. Activities and architectural changes are guided by adults; this process teaches and reifies daily, rhythmic lessons about gender, age relations, identity (individualism and communalism), the public versus the private, and so on. These social structures and categories are in turn part of the larger societal range of controls, as defined by church and community. It is as Pierre Bourdieu writes:

The world of objects, a kind of book in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all others and from which children learn to read the world, is read with the whole body, in and through the movements and displacements which define the space of objects as much as they are defined by it (Bourdieu, 1992, 76).

History of the Mennonite Housebarn

The Mennonite housebarn as it was constructed in Manitoba has its roots in Northern Europe. The basic Medieval Lower Saxon longhouse form was the predecessor of the Mennonite housebarn; it was common from the Netherlands to Northern Germany, and included Frisian, Saxon, and Brabant variations (Zahle, 1998a, 1998b, 1368-1380). Mennonites migrating from these regions to the Vistula Delta of the Poland/Prussia region in the 1500s built in this tradition. Three basic divisions run the length of the structure: human dwelling, stable, and shed (See Figures 1 and 2).

The dwelling area was based on the widespread North Germanic *Flurküchenhaus* design concept, which included “the use of two or more unequally sized rooms around an off-centre central chimney stack” (Ennals and Holdworth, 1998, 174; see also Upton, 1996, 24).

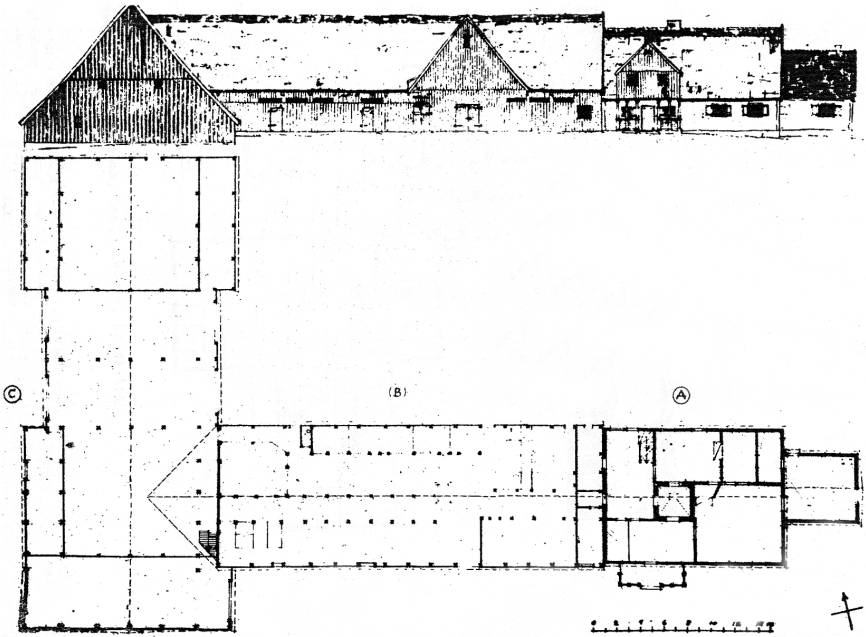


Figure 1. House of Fritz Wiehler, Markushof, Marienburg, 1700s: elevation above, floorplan below. A. Dwelling B. Stable. C. Barn. (Kundzins, 1949, 3).



Figure 2. Mennonite housebarn on the Kamp of the Island of Chortitz, South Russia. Courtesy of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg MB.

Interior spaces were arranged in a circular pattern around the central brick oven, although the entire structure was conceptualized as a strict rectangle. Each room connected to the next with a door. If a hallway existed, it was found between the kitchen area and the barn, but this feature was rare in poor households. Entrances were on the long sides of the house, with one door leading from the kitchen area to the stable.

The Mennonite housebarn found in Manitoba was the product of over three hundred years of habitation and interaction in the Vistula Delta and South Russia (now Ukraine), and came to represent Mennonite ethnicity and family practices to various degrees. Although not the only form of dwelling and barn built by Mennonites, it became a major variant in rural, agricultural areas. It was a combination of Dutch barn construction, Northern European *Flurküchenhaus* design, and Slavic (Kashubian) traditions, including the brick heating oven and “black kitchen”, a small room in the centre of the home which received little light and housed the oven, stove and cauldron setting (Dick, 1984). It was the design of this dwelling structure that was carried to Russia after 1789, where it was further standardized by zealous agricultural reformers.³ This standardized housebarn form was transplanted to the Americas after the migrations of 1874. It was built in varying forms on the Canadian prairies from 1874 to about 1930, after which this vernacular building tradition died out completely.

The first housebarns built on the prairies utilized historic Mennonite dwelling design concepts: three main options were available to the builder (See figure 3). In a pioneer setting, the need to build houses quickly and with limited resources resulted in the construction of housebarns that were small, thick-set, and inexpensive, constructed with locally available logs. Housebarn construction after 1880 generally reflected the wealth or poverty of their owners through size and interior spatial divisions and thus mirrored status differences in the village. This “first generation” of housebarns, built between 1874 and 1900, were usually constructed perpendicular to the main village street with the barn stretching out behind it. Experimentation with housebarn form began around 1900-1905. Some existing dwellings were repositioned so that they were parallel to the village street with a front door facing the road (an adoption of Anglo-Canadian tradition). House and barn were in some cases increasingly separated, often with merely an exterior hall (*Gank*) connecting the two. By the 1920s a new form quickly appeared, in which an Anglo style prairie barn with a gambrel roof actually enclosed various dwelling rooms at one end (See Figure 5a,b). By 1930 housebarns were no longer built in Canada. These post-1900 experimentations were physical representations of rural Mennonites’ changing perceptions of their place in Canadian

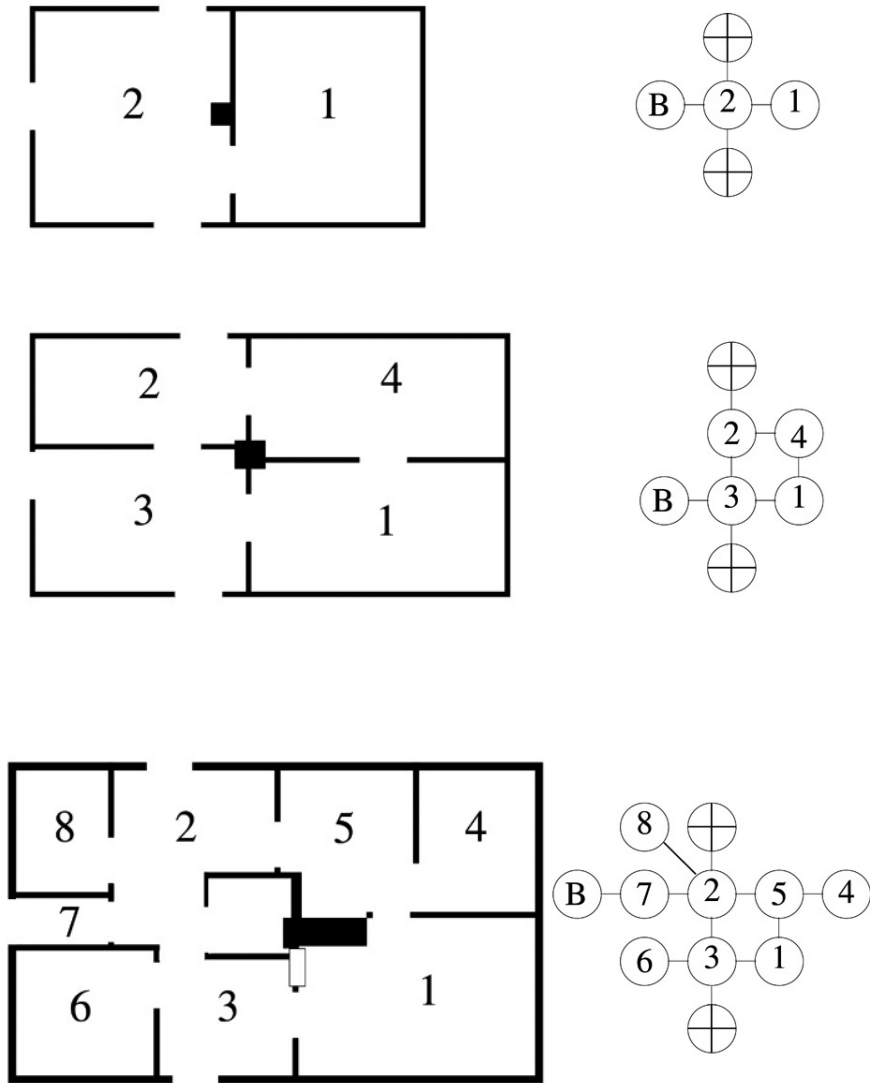


Figure 3. Options for Flurkuechenhaus floorplan design, with corresponding spatial linkage patterns: 1, Formal Parlour; 2, Back of the house (dining room, kitchen); 3, Front room; 4, Corner room; 5, Small room; 6, Summer room; 7, Hall; 8, Pantry; B, Barn.

society and the changing role of families and family members. The new building forms were settings that helped structure new values for the household, values that are always both domestic and public.

Household Life Cycles

Historic Russian-Mennonite household life cycles followed the generalized three-phase human pattern: expansion (union and procreation), fission/dispersion (marriage and exit of children), replacement (gradual assumption of social power by younger generation, death of parents) (Fortes, 1969; Goody, 1969). Mennonites followed a neo-local residence pattern, in which a newly married couple settled in a house with sufficient farmland to begin a family. Fortunate couples would hire farm hands and maids until children were old enough to do chores. These hired servants would often live in the couple's house. Children would begin school at age six or seven, but would work on the farm through much of year, contributing to the household economy. All profits from the farm industry were controlled by the parents until the children were married. According to informants in this study, a newly wedded couple could live with one set of their parents for a period of one to six years after marriage.

"When they got married they usually moved into the father's house for one to three years until they found something of their own. They got a heifer, pillows, a commode, and a chest to start with." (Interview with Mary Penner, 6 Dec. 2001).

"In those days, when you got married, the first four years, five years, six years, you would stay in the same house as your mum...When you had the money you were expected to strike out on your own. That's what happened here. If there was room in the village you'd do it in the village." (Interview with Henry Kehler, 19 July 2002).

The death of one parent was often quickly succeeded by re-marriage. The success of the household economic unit, and the retention and care of children, practically demanded it. The youngest sibling of a family was often expected to marry and remain in the parent's household with the new spouse.

This life cycle is only a generalized summary; in reality residents and habitation histories could vary greatly from this pattern. If they followed the ideal neolocal residence pattern, a young couple would move away from the parents' residences and establish their own household. The independence implied in such a residence pattern was limited to household economic activities and decision making since many couples moved nearby, often in the same village, and retained many of the previous obligations and relationships. Despite this ideal, variations based on financial restrictions existed. Mr. Henry Hamm recalled three "families" living together in a single storey housebarn, including one couple with three children, one couple with one child, and Henry's father and aunt (Interview with Henry Hamm, 28 Nov. 2001). And while marriage was the usual cornerstone of a productive

household, it was possible to thrive as a widow in charge of a large farming operation, as occurred in both Reinland and Neuberghal (Sawatzky, 2005, 158).

Just as the family life cycle could vary, so too could the notion of family, and who was included. Often considered “part of the family”, hired hands and maids tended to come from poor or very large families, and hiring oneself out could be a negative experience. Jake Fehr of Reinland, Manitoba recalled his parents wanting to find the children farmsteads so they would not “have to go to other people to work as part slave – doesn’t sound good but that’s how it was in those days” (Interview, 12 Sept. 2002). These hired workers often slept in the home, anywhere from a bench in the kitchen to a bed with the children.

The architectural floor plan of the Mennonite dwelling was well suited for containing such a varied configuration of people, with its lack of individually defined space, its lack of hallways (which create individuated cells), and multiple use areas.

Activity Areas and Material Symbolism: Gender and Age

Despite all these people, or because of them, dwelling space was defined, and contributed to a sense of order and social control in the house. It was this control that was part of the ideology of the home



Figure 4. Veranda on housebarn in Neuberghal, circa 1915-1920. Courtesy of Mennonite Heritage Center (Peter G. Hamm Collection).

(complimented by a Christian faith), the church and community organization. In other words, the private space of the home reflected the public space of the community by hewing to the regulated, structured, and thus controlled social reality of village life. Order in the home was largely structured around age and gender categories rather than individuals and was reified by the manipulation of space. Order was enforced to prevent chaos in large families. Because this type of order, or *Ordnung*, was highly structured and considered necessary (it is not in all societies), it served to instill basic values and concepts about appropriate social relationships and social power.

The gender identity of an individual works to structure worldview, social interaction and behaviour. According to Bourdieu, a child's relationship to its mother and father only structures the self and the world insofar as "that initial relation is set up with objects whose sex is defined symbolically, and not biologically" (1977, 93). In other words, gender is structured symbolically as a set of activities in a defined setting, rather than being the natural outcome of biological status. In the historic Mennonite housebarn dwelling, labour activities, the division of girls and boys in sleeping arrangements, and the arrangement of sexually symbolic items assisted in defining gender categories and identities.

Adult males and females in Mennonite homes had distinct labour roles, which were based in large part on traditional, public lines of authority: men were able to participate in public affairs of power, such as church and civil organization, and landowners were able to vote on village and colony issues. Women were barred from all these avenues of power. They were instead considered central figures in the home, and their public activities were largely restricted to worship and hospitality. The activities of men and women in the household generally mirrored the official dichotomy of gender roles: men were active in the public realm (the field, transportation, trade), and women were active in the private realm (the house, garden).

"Dad was in control, very much, and mother respected that...like she didn't try to change that...but they were very distinct roles, some were women's jobs, some were men's jobs. But I don't recall that my dad ever really helped my mom, and mother did a lot of work." (Interview with Rose Hildebrand, 30 May 2002)

Different labour roles produce different activity areas, and space becomes associated with gender. Women and children were generally associated with the kitchen, the house, and the garden, and took pride in the appearance and function of these spaces. Men were associated with the fields and workshop. These spatial associations mirrored their place in the larger society: men were considered the public voice of the household (in Russia holding the village vote if a landowner), while

women were considered the anchor of the home. Girls and boys, being involved early on in these labour activities and spaces, learned the place of men and women.

In the first two generations of settlement, sibling males and females were separated according to a customary Mennonite conceptualization of gendered space. In the houses built before 1910, few upper attics were renovated for habitation, and everyone slept on the main floor. As infants and toddlers, both sexes slept in the parents' room. Once children were five years of age, they slept in any room where space allowed, but were divided by gender. In the fully articulated Mennonite home, in which all the divisions considered appropriate for a well-to-do family were realized, adolescent boys usually slept in the *Somma Stow* (Summer room), which was closest to the barn and usually lacked a heating connection with the central brick oven. Adolescent girls would sleep in the *Tjliene Stow* (Small room), between the parents' bedroom and the kitchen, a room directly in contact with the central oven. Their place was more centralized around work areas and parents, and could be easily supervised, while the boys were given their own somewhat disconnected (and colder) space. Housed in a frigid and marginalized room, the boys were being symbolically propelled towards the outside world. Girls remained intimately linked with kitchen work, child rearing and the centre of the home, and the parental control this entailed.



Figure 5a. Rempel Housebarn, Sommerfeld, Manitoba, 1928 (photograph 2002).

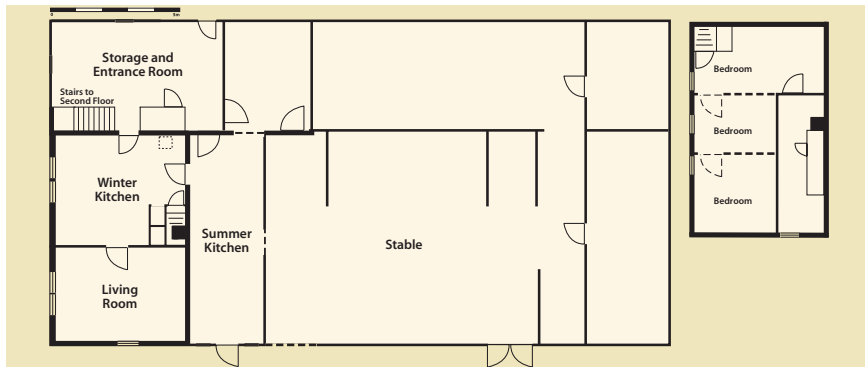


Figure 5b. Rempel Housebarn floorplan, Sommerfeld, Manitoba, 1928. Rempel Housebarn floorplan, Sommerfeld Manitoba, 1928. Left: Main floor dwelling and barn. Right: Second floor of dwelling located directly above Winter Kitchen and Living Room.

As construction and renovation changed the Mennonite house over time, the separation of young people by gender took place in less standardized spaces. A renovated second floor often acted as the private space of older siblings and newlyweds, but the parents remained on the main floor, usually in the *Atj Stow* (Corner room) or *Groote Stow* (Formal parlour).

The most formal arrangement of sexually symbolic materials was the use and placement of the glass wall cabinet (*Glausschaup*) and the corner cabinet in the *Groote Stow*. The *Groote Stow* was a room set aside for formal social occasions and special visitors, and was used for presentation rather than daily activities. The wall cabinet was the only piece of furniture that was built directly into the wall, and was located in the innermost corner of this room beside the extension of the brick oven. It contained the most prized possessions of the household matriarch, which were gifts from grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. The cabinet acted as a status symbol for the benefit of the visitors, and items within were rarely if ever used. The corner cabinet, or *Atjschaup*, was usually located in the opposite corner of the room and contained the few private possessions of the head male, such as money, accounts, passports, tobacco and liquor, medicine and religious texts. This cabinet was strictly off limits to the children, as the *Groote Stow* was in general.⁴

Sexually defined space, symbolic material culture, and labour all helped to integrate the ideals of family life, with its distinct gender roles, with daily reality. Sexually defined activities in gendered spaces inculcated individuals with appropriate notions of personal identity, roles, and ultimately, what kind of power they could expect to wield.

Age categories were important for the placement of the individual in the spatial and social order of the household. The relationships enforced in this order were essential to preserving attitudes toward authority, economic opportunities and privilege. Age categories were structured in the home through the control of space, which was a form of power. As noted, the *Groote Stow* was largely off limits to children and thus acted as a tool of parental dominance and control.

“It was more for the parents; when they had visitors then we stayed out of it; the parents even closed the door. There was glass in the doors to the living room, and we always used to look through there at the company.” (Interview with Mary Penner, December 6, 2001)

The mother coordinated labour activities in the home for younger people while the father controlled the labour of the boys in the family. In the earliest generations the social relationships created between individuals in different age categories were life-long structures while in later years these were deconstructed and often reversed.

“We had a dad. Order was in the house. He was a nice dad but a sharp dad. Mom was a kind-hearted woman. When the boys grow up they want to be the boss too, but dad always stayed boss on his property. It’s not like that now; dads slide off and let their boys take over. Dad had a strap in his drawer...had to honour his idea about how kids should behave.” (Interview with Peter Driedger, July 10, 2002).

Mennonite categories of age and age relations were intimately linked to baptism, marital status and gender. Baptism acted as a rite of passage into the community and was necessary as a precursor to marriage. Marriage in turn provided one with power over domestic space; newly married couples could expect their own room (to be shared with their expected progeny).

Rites of Passage

The housebarn and yard were common sites for certain rites of passage, including birth, marriage, and death. Rites of passage are an important part of the life cycle of individuals and the family, and produce continuity in society. The spatial placement of these events integrates the consequences of the rite (status, identity, social change and continuity) with other social actors in a physically replicable manner. This makes the rite a physical as well as a social ritual, thus increasing its efficacy.

Mennonite marriage and funeral events often took place in the home and were well attended by crowds of local villagers, friends and family. Marriage could only take place after baptism and often occurred *very soon after* a baptism. Baptism took place exclusively in

the church building. Baptism and marriage were rituals of induction into adulthood, and their linkage in sequence and time suggests a communal understanding of holiness in the creation of a new household. In an interview, a woman from near Altona stated that an engagement party would often be held at the groom's home and the wedding would take place at the home of the bride. Weddings often took place on Thursdays. The wedding could also take place in the church, with a simple binding ceremony at the end of the service, but there was no exclusivity of place for such rituals. Likewise within the home these rites could take place in any room. The event could occur wherever it was deemed appropriate and realistic for the family and the visiting community. Benches and chairs would be carried in from around the village to accommodate the crowds.

The house among early Mennonites in Manitoba was also the locus for important communal events surrounding the death of a community member. This was not accompanied by the temporary creation and use of a sacred space in the home but was expedient and malleable according to the needs of the community and desires of the family. The house acted as the location of the rite itself and as the spatial focus of intense social activity where people worked and visited together and with the family.

The practice of these social rituals was personal and interactive with little or no emphasis on sacred or supernatural elements. The site of gathered people was the site of sacredness, and the act of gathering, visiting and eating was determinative of spatial use, rather than the other way around.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, births, weddings and funerals were all eventually excluded from the home and entered the realm of the hospital, church building, or funeral home. There are a number of related reasons for this shift. The increasing use of the automobile allowed families and friends from far and wide to attend funerals and weddings, and this required larger spaces that churches could easily accommodate. The rise of increasingly accessible specialized institutions such as hospitals and funeral homes made them an option for Mennonite births and funerals. There was also at this time a shift toward more urban settlement for Mennonites where these institutions were located. The Mennonite church began to take on some of the governance structures of such institutions and began to be perceived as a specified institution for the treatment of spiritual issues, rather than a central part of a spiritual society. Weddings, funerals, and baptism were considered spiritual affairs and the church was thus the "place" for them. Finally, the surrounding Anglo-Canadian culture was practicing faith in this manner and Mennonites were increasingly involved in this world. All of these factors were directly related to the shift of social

control in Mennonite society: the household was becoming a more distinct and private unit rather than a socially observable and economically independent one, while public Mennonite society was becoming politically and socially integrated with the wider Canadian society.

The separation of public rites of passage from the home ground accompanied the separation of domestic life from communal religious practice. The house was becoming private, a place where the concept of individualism could be most fully expressed and experimented with, while the church was becoming the location for sanctioned and formal presentation of religious belief. This shift signaled the loss of exuberant engagement parties (which could include dancing and drinking), as well as the loss of familiarity with birth and death that was so physical and immediate when the new infant literally entered the home, or the corpse of a family member lay in the kitchen.

Demographics, Individualism, Privacy

Social concepts of individual space, privacy or spatial possession have repercussions for the conceptualization of identity and the individual. Informants in this study all depicted their home as lacking in personalized rooms for individual young people and hired workers. Many people mentioned the crowded conditions of houses. "According to the standards of those days, this was a very large house, nobody ever said they felt cramped or wanted privacy or anything, that's just the way it was." (Interview with Norma Giesbrecht, 28 May 2002) In the four-room house from Hochfeld now located at the Mennonite Heritage Village, Katherina (Hamm). Thiesen gave birth to 16 children (10 survived), with two successive husbands, between 1877 and 1915. These large families, along with hired workers and extended family, were not uncommon, and people slept where space allowed and worked in every room except the *Groote Stow*.

The room a person slept in was not "their room" but was shared by others in a variety of ways, and changed as the inhabitants grew older. Rooms were multi-purpose and communal, and sleeping arrangements did not define personal space. These arrangements, however, did help define one's position in the social order of the home and the community. Among Mennonites generally only married couples and sometimes the elderly had their own rooms. Sleeping space and personal space were thus linked only for full adults (married couples and the elderly) and functioned as a type of control of space unavailable to young people or workers.

The circular arrangement of rooms, and the lack of hallways that help create "cells", made individual space nearly impossible: to

get from one side of the house to the other, another room had to be traversed. Hallways were introduced in some houses after 1915 to create single entrance rooms, resulting in greater privacy.

Profound change in this regard occurred after 1910, especially between 1920-1940. In Neuberghthal, about twenty couples were married in a space of about 10 years, but farmland was at a premium and many lived with their parents for a number of years. Many eventually left the village. It was at this time that the attics of housebarns were renovated for habitation in order to accommodate the new pairs. "It wasn't popular to take walls out. Only if a young couple got married, they would finish the upstairs. There were about ten or twelve houses that made upstairs for room for the young men." (Interview with Henry Hamm, 28 Nov. 2001) The renovation of an attic not only allowed more room for newlyweds but it also allowed for more privacy in general; in Neuberghthal it signified status. In four of the houses from this village, verandas with numerous decorative carved details were attached to the second floors (See Figure 4). At around the same time, after 1910, two storey and 1.5 storey housebarns were also being built.

Conclusion

The ethnic Mennonite household use of the *Flurküchenhaus* design and furnishings helped emphasize social order and control through age and gender categories and domains. These categories represented stable social structures of the "family" and the household economy. While household spaces were relatively undifferentiated in terms of personal ownership, they were nevertheless ordered according to social categories that reflected patterns of social control. Adolescent boys' spaces were associated with the realm of the public (social and labour), while girls were located in a setting of parental control and household centrality. Both configurations helped inculcate adult gender roles in young inhabitants. The *Groote Stow* was a presentation of all the powers and permanence of male and female roles in the household and society, made real through material objects and presented to the public on formal occasions. The independence and personal control of space afforded to older and married inhabitants was symbolic of their status in the family and society but also helped reify the "respect" parents and grandparents expected from their own children.

The fully articulated housebarn dwelling, consisting of up to 8 rooms on the main floor, represented controlled space. Social control depended on spatial control: the fewer divisions available to a family, the less control over space and people the couple were perceived to have. Control was linked to the status of the successful farmer because

only he could provide a house large and divided enough for maintaining concepts of civilized order. In this way, control in the domestic household became a public statement which was reified physically and visually both inside and outside the house. This was part of a larger system of social differentiation. The accumulation of wealth among certain families, over and against others, would be expressed in a number of ways including the ability to give employment (a form of social control), community "respect" resulting in local political and church power, the possibility of accumulating still more land and capital, and the acceptance of appropriate marriage to other successful families.

The maintenance of the social life structured within the home by its architecture and furnishings changed considerably over time. Changes to the household interior facilitated the relaxation of control by parents over their household inhabitants. The increased desire for privacy was a reflection of the strengthening concept of individualism. At the same time, the house as a whole was becoming a more private building. With the gradual disappearance of standardized floor plans, the interior arrangement of space, people, and material symbols also ceased to be common knowledge. Whereas the interior arrangement of earlier Mennonite houses was always understood at a glance from the street village setting, later homes with new facades and floor plans hid these interiors.

With the widespread break-up of Manitoba Mennonite farm villages between the 1880s and 1920s, the interior of homes and their ethnic social order became less relevant for presentations of community conformism and the reproduction of traditional gender or age categories and interaction. As farmers increasingly moved out of villages onto sections of land, their homes were moved, destroyed, or sold to others. With the exodus of successful farmers onto quarter sections (with mainstream Canadian houses) the fully articulated Mennonite housebarn of the street village became much less important as an interior locus of inculcation or an outward symbol of status.

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Notes

- ¹ This paper is based on dissertation research undertaken between 2001 and 2005 in the villages of Chortitz, Neubergthal and Reinland in southern Manitoba. This research included a survey and mapping of existing housebarns in these villages, oral interviews with former or current inhabitants, as well as a search of archival photograph collections.
- ² Vernacular architecture is here defined as houses made by and for the people inhabiting them, based on culturally prescribed design concepts.
- ³ Two articles, by Ph. Jaensch (1846) and Philip Wiebe (1852) instructed rural settlers in Russia as to appropriate building methods and materials, thereby attempting to both standardize a vernacular building tradition and restrict variation and individual expression. Both articles were influenced by the agricultural reforming practices of Johann Cornies.
- ⁴ For a detailed account of Mennonite furniture, symbolism and social practice see Janzen and Janzen, (1991).