

Abstract: “Imagine a house, imagine a home”

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Drawing, art-therapy, imagined homes, “flow”, community, mental health

In a psychiatric hospital workshop, I turn to a group: ‘Let’s draw together. Each of us is going to imagine a house, any size, colour or shape...’ For more than 25 years, I’ve been saying these sentences, playing, drawing and making, as a clinical arts therapist specialised in mental health, and as a lecturer and consultant using creative techniques. Guided by artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Jackson Pollock, I facilitate groups and individuals to spontaneously tap into what phenomenologist and philosopher of play Eugen Fink calls the ‘peach skin of things’.

This paper calls on decades of clinical drawing experience, inspired by paediatrician and psychoanalyst Winnicott’s unstructured squiggle exercises, finding our tactile way on the page, moving from outside to inside, lines to meaning, from house to home.

Specifically, we’ll be focusing on an exercise, “Imagine a house” that I conceived and propose when a new adult psychiatric art-therapy group begins. This paper will also draw on my memoir, *Home is Where we Start* (Fig Tree, Penguin 2024), which interweaves the story of my childhood in a utopian commune, and turns to leading thinkers in philosophy, sociology and anthropology to examine the many meanings of home.

In a workshop, paper covers the whole table, in the centre are pots of pens, pencils. In different groups are participants who have severe depression, personality, substance use and bi-polar disorders, schizophrenia and who are on the spectrum. Weekly, the closed groups meet in an outpatient facility. Over several sessions, a man draws a manor house with turrets, a young

woman draws a house coloured in purple and pink. Another woman traces the lines of a tiny shed. As they draw, the groups talk, get to know each other, through verbal language and pictorial presentation. It is a drawing conversation. Slowly, we move from house to home, imaging each room, placing windows and doors. Next, we imagine our immediate surroundings creating narratives with fences, trees and walls, openings and enclosures. After a while, I suggest we link our houses, and we create bending roads and winding paths.

Drawing together, we move from individual buildings to community, from locus solus to shared territory. Finally, we sketch the environment round our homes: parks and libraries, shops, mountains and swimming pools. At the centre of the paper all our paths meet, and the group decides what will be at this point.. Over the years, groups have met at parks, fountains, and cafés, connecting in our invented world. In the final stages of the exercise we embellish our landscape, adding bushes, blades of grass, rail tracks and roads. Each participant leaves their house and moves around the table, adding drawn texture and depth. After two months, our world covers the entire paper, our shared imagined home.

The definition of home entails geography, architecture and people, but also involves emotions, we feel “at home”. “Imagine a house” is an exercise in topophilia, a term coined by geographer Yi-Fu Tian, describing the affective bond with our environment.

In child development theory, drawing a house or home, begins in Schematic Stage (5–9 yrs.) where a child draws a pattern and then labels it as a representation of things. Therefore, getting adults to draw a house, could be seen as an archaic activity. Yet it pulls us back to the notion of shelter, represents a kind of foundational narrative of holding. The participants in the art-therapy group have often struggled with ‘home’, may have experienced forms of homelessness, and/or suffered from the stigmatisation surrounding mental illness. Some have symptoms dysmorphophobia, felt alienated from their own bodies. The institutional hospital space, can

also be dehumanizing, difficult to inhabit. In this exercise we draw a house that becomes a home, a subjective experience within a potentially alienating space.

A home also implies time, Bachelard writes, “**the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts**, memories and dreams “. In this exercise we root ourselves chronologically in a new imagined experience of home. If Louise Bourgeois wrote, “You pile up associations the way you pile up bricks. Memory itself is a form of architecture.” one of the goals of this exercise is create new territories, new memories of an imagined lived space, for home implies a past, a present and a future. This exercise occurs at the beginning of an art-therapy cycle, as T.S Eliot wrote “Home is where one starts from.”

Drawing, the act, as Klee said, of taking a line for a walk, means we trace new spaces, architecture. Yet, many thinkers and philosophers who write about the play/ art-therapy seem to ignore that a leap in the dark requires trust. Winnicott underlines the importance of this safety, identifies play as happening in the ‘transitional space’ between the imagined and the real. He suggested that, if we play safely with danger, we can cope better with rejection and loss. Therefore, in the workshop participants are encouraged to draw freely, confront the blank page, that there is no “perfect” house. We build homes anew and gain new kinaesthetic, embodied experience, creating “flow” defined by Csikszentmihalyi’s words, as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.”

During “Imagine a house”, we relocate the subject in the house they have created. It is a home they can dream in, built in an embodied positive experience of “flow” a kinaesthetic, aesthetic and emotional memory that can be recalled. Yet importantly, this sense of home is not just individual but allows a group to emerge, rooted, located in a drawn, experiential community. In Old English the roots of the word home take us to a gathering of souls. Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*: ‘When the image is new, the world is new.’

Susanna Crossman works internationally with hospitals and organizations as a clinical arts-therapist and lecturer. She has been visiting professor in numerous universities including Sarah Lawrence College, NY, Université Rennes1 et 2 (FR), and Kangwon University, Corée du Sud. At the Faculté de Médecine de François Rabelais (FR), she has trained and supervised French arts-therapists. Her research work is published with Elsevier Masson. Susanna is also an essayist and fiction writer. Her memoir, *Home is Where We Start*, will be published by Fig Tree, Penguin, in 2024, exploring her childhood in a utopian commune, and dealing specifically with the notion of home. Her novel, 'The Orange Notebooks', will be published by Bluemoose Books in 2025. She has recent work in *Aeon*, *Paris Review*, *MAI Journal*, *Neue Rundschau*, *Repeater Books*, *3:AM Magazine* & more. *L'île Sombre* (Dark Island) was published by La Croisée/Delcourt (2021). A 2022 Hawthornden Fellow, she was winner of the 2019 Love Reading Short Story award. Co-author of the French book, *L'Hôpital Le Dessous des Cartes* (LEH 2015), she regularly collaborates in international hybrid arts projects, such her interview series for *Lucy Writers*. Born in the UK, Susanna Crossman has lived in France for over half her life.