

A Cross-Cultural Study of Holiday Decorations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which cultural beliefs influence the lifestyles of the residents and environmental activities, especially decorations on the fronts during holiday seasons. The relationship between holiday displays and cultural values are investigated in the study. This research conducts a case study of two ethnic neighborhoods to understand cultural identification, attachments and environmental decoration. The neighborhoods were visited and their activities were observed during the holidays including Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween and Christmas from 1992 to 1995. Exterior decorations were measured by a field survey of the frontal areas of 200 houses. This study confirms that the fronts are recognized and evaluated as cultural communications. The holiday decorations and celebrations are intimately related to cultural dimensions. Distinctive groups use different environmental elements in the celebration of holidays. Each culture is distinguished by its own rituals constituted by the interweaving of space and activities.

Keywords: Home, Culture, Identity, Holiday Decoration

1. INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have suggested that the environment in which an individual lives is a major factor in his self-perception and in the image he presents today. Duncan's work on landscape taste as a symbol of group identity illustrates how landscape communicates social status. His findings are developed into a theory of reading the landscape as a communication about social relations (Duncan, 1973). Rapoport places emphasis on the designed environment as a communication system. According to him, environments communicate social status, roles, personal identity and ethnic identity (Rapoport, 1990). Previous researches have been useful; however, few works have examined the experimental qualities and functional characteristics of environments associated with culture.

The main purpose of this research is to examine the lifestyles of residents and holiday decoration activities based on cross-cultural analysis. This study explores how cultural differences influence the holiday celebration behaviors in distinct groups. Holidays are culturally defined events with commonly used decorations. Holiday decorations on the housing facades are examples of environments where the values and beliefs of a culture are reflected. Holiday decorations are examined across neighborhoods as a general symbol of cultural identity.

It is assumed that individuals within a particular culture or subcultures will have different lifestyles and preferences. Therefore they will celebrate their holidays differently. Implicit in the present study is the assumption that holiday celebrations are symbols, with consensual meanings for various groups of people.

This research explores the ways in which people variably respond to their celebration of holidays. This study stresses the role of cultural variables and uses examples from distinct cultural groups to allow more valid generalizations to be made. Cultural differences are expressed in holiday decorations on home fronts. The home environment in which an individual lives is a major determinant of

his/her self-perception and image, so we can identify different cultural groups on the basis of their activities.

2. ENVIRONMENT AS CULTURAL ARTIFACT

For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that "culture" refers to the ways of life and the systems of meaning established by groups of people. Within cultures, there are subcultures, social groups and individuals. People who share a lifestyle are seen to share similar values, usually rooted in similar backgrounds (Low, 1989).

In cultural theories, environments are considered as cultural artifacts. They are therefore indicators of larger configurations of cultural traits. People express their values through the medium of a cultural artifact. It has psychological resonance and social meaning. People represent their identity to others in a way that conveys messages about themselves. This presentation of self occurs through speech, dress, actions, possessions and use of space (Goffman, 1959). The development of identity over the course of a life span results from continuing interaction with others within various social networks and social worlds.

The environment reflects the life-style of its residents and reinforces their identity. Environmentally, identity can be communicated by buildings, furnishings, decorations, locations, gardens, and so on (Rapoport, 1993). Each environment reflects the ideas and values of its residents. The environment can be viewed as symbols that are part of the language of gestures that individuals use to communicate with each other. The environment, being a fixed and fairly permanent piece of sign equipment, may be regarded as a significant tool employed in the performance of its users. By manipulating the spatial arrangement of the setting and the symbolic significance of the props, performers may exert considerable control over the amount and type of information that the audience receives.

Home environments reflect the identity of occupants and their bonds with the larger community and culture.

The home depicts the uniqueness and individuality of its occupants, that is, their personal identity as individuals and as family, along with their ties, bonds, affiliations with the community and larger culture of which they are a part. People decorate their homes so as to make themselves distinct from others and so as to display their social bonding.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Methods

The design of the present study is based on cross-cultural analysis using observation and interview techniques. This research explores holiday decorations on the housing facades among distinct cultural groups. Two ethnic groups are selected to investigate environmental and cultural differences, particularly with reference to major activities during the holiday seasons. The ethnic neighborhoods were visited and their fronts were observed during the holiday seasons including Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween and Christmas from 1992 to 1995. Subjects in this study are 200 houses in typical neighborhoods. The sample includes 100 houses in an Irish neighborhood and 100 houses in an Italian neighborhood for comparative purposes. The case study allows tests of differences in values across the groups by environmental experience.

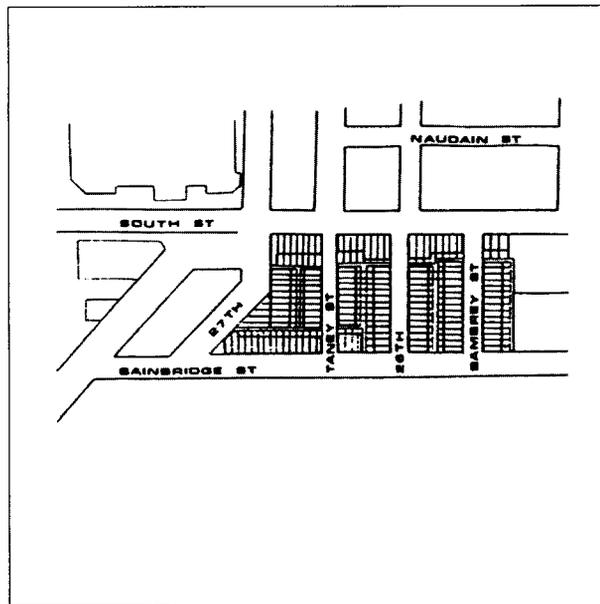


Figure 1. Irish Neighborhood

This research examines environmental behaviors, or the ways in which people decorate and care for their homes. The decorative elements on the home fronts during holiday seasons are recorded to investigate the differences. The elements include various holiday signs, ornaments and decorations on the front of the houses. The number, size and types of decorations on the door, windows and porch are recorded in an observation checklist. Decoration in-

volves various paper-cut signs, wreaths, candles, stars, lights, curtains, witches, Jack-O-lanterns, Santas, and so on.

The residents' attitudes towards their homes are further assessed by an interview with regard to their preference for simplicity versus variety, desired similarity with neighbors, reasons for decorations, and neighborhood attachments.

3.2 Research Settings

This study is carried out in two distinct ethnic neighborhoods in Center City Philadelphia. The Irish and Italian neighborhoods are chosen for comparative purposes (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2). The residents in both neighborhoods are largely Catholic and of the working class. The members are homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and class composition, with a strong sense of group orientation. They have shared their own values and attitudes with special social ties.

The neighborhoods are also chosen because they initially contained the same row house type. The Philadelphia row house was a modification of the London row house and has become the dominant type since the 18th century. It is cheap, quick and easy to build, and produces high density. The typical row house is a brick house built on a rectangular lot, with narrow street frontage and substantial depth. The street facade generally varies from fifteen to twenty feet in width.

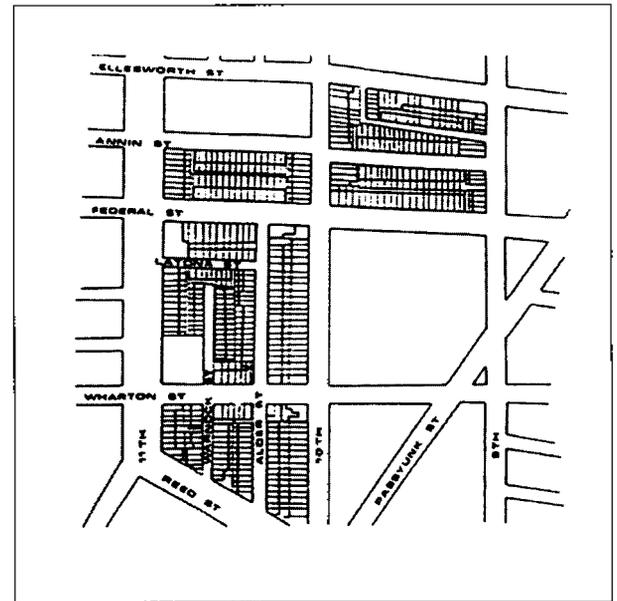


Figure 2. Italian Neighborhood

These early houses are between 2 1/2 and 3 1/2 stories; the entrance and circulation is to one side, with 2 or 3 windows on each floor. Each house has a garden or yard at the rear, usually opening onto a service alley.

Philadelphia contains hundreds of variations of the basic row-house-type. The row house has over time undergone modifications and redesign. The row house has an impressive amount of decoration on the facade. Each unit is in

harmony with those around it. The succession of various architectural styles has resulted in a tasteful composite of row houses in the old city. These rows of houses dominate the Italian and Irish neighborhoods.

The Irish neighborhood called "The Pocket" is located in southwest Philadelphia. It was formed in the 1830s and has a history of more than a century. Despite many changes, the neighborhood has astonishing continuity and consciousness. It is basically well-integrated and is a cohesive community.

The Italian neighborhood is located in south Philadelphia. The migration chains and the resettlement patterns produce an elaborate and varied proliferation of "Little Italy". The community allows the immigrants to retain their identities and values.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Ethnicity as Reflected in Holiday Celebration

The Irish and Italians originally inhabited the same kind of row houses at the turn of the century. Through the slow process of modification and renovation, the two communities become visually distinct from each other. The Irish prefer uniformity and simplicity whereas the Italians like variety and change. The ways they decorate their homes and celebrate holidays are considerably different. The Irish express introverted attitudes and appreciation of traditional, formal and modest arrangements, while the Italians are more expressive and communicative than the Irish.

In the Italian neighborhood, holiday decorations are present not only in greater percentages, but in more variety as well. Most of the homes in the Italian neighborhood have various colorful decorations, whereas the homes in the Irish neighborhood display simple and small elements on their fronts. Overall, 95% of the target homes are decorated in the Italian neighborhood, while 68% are so in the Irish neighborhood (Table 1).

According to the observation, many Italians have more than 4 decorations on each front, whereas the Irish have an average of 2 decorations (Table 2). In terms of size, the Italian put large ornaments and figures in front of the house, while the Irish have small displays on their doors and windows. The Italian use whole fronts for their holiday celebration (Table 3). The Italian use the porch as their stage of display with figures, whereas the Irish rarely use the porch for their celebration. The most highly decorated season is Christmas.

Table 1. Houses with Decoration by Holiday (Percentage)

	Irish	Italian
Easter Decoration	59	91
Halloween Decoration	67	98
Thanksgiving Decoration	57	92
Christmas Decoration	89	99
Total Mean Decoration	68	95

Table 2. Number of Decorations on Each Front (Percentage)

	Irish	Italian
0	32	5
1 – 3	53	2
4 – 6	15	34
7 –	0	59

Table 3. Houses with Decoration by Area (Percentage)

	Irish	Italian
Door Decoration	49	94
Window Decoration	41	93
Porch Decoration	2	36

The Irish neighborhood presents a simple and neat, but rather monotonic environment. The Irish maintain the integrity of the neighborhood by using unifying colors and elements. They mostly use white trims on their fronts. The facades in the Irish neighborhood form a holistic entity by their rhythmic repetition. The way they celebrate holidays is consistent with their beliefs and values. They use just a little decoration on their fronts (Fig. 3). The Irish gather holly for Christmas without much decoration. This may be explained by the fact that the Irish view themselves as parts of the group and the personal self-esteem is more a function of the larger whole than the individual's house. The Irish would like to see a movement towards a simpler and more natural life style. The Irish are more respectful of paternal authority and more conservative in religion, in morality and in views on work and the family. According to the interview with the residents, they want to create a clean and unifying atmosphere in the neighborhoods. They don't want to have a deviant front in the block.

"I want my house to look clean and neat. I put some decoration on the door during the holidays, but not many things. I don't want to be different from others in this block."

"I don't put many decorations on the front during the holiday seasons. I don't like to have too many things on my door."

"We have painted my shutters white. It looks neat! Most of the houses on my street use white paint. We are all happy."

"I want to have a traditional, clean and well-maintained home." (Irish Lady)



Figure 3. Easter in the Irish Neighborhood

The Italian neighborhood has extensive decorations and festivities throughout the various holidays. This attracts many people who come to the Italian Market to shop. The Italians exhibit variation in facade decoration, with various signs, ornaments and decorations (Fig. 4). Various holiday decorations appear on the facade. They put ornaments and large signs on the fronts on special holidays such as Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. The facade in the Italian neighborhood reflects the personality of its residents. They use great freedom and experiment with diverse elements. The Italians are famed for the picturesque festivals that are also known and celebrated everywhere they live.

Fronts follow the seasons as culturally defined by changing colors and weights of the curtains and ornaments. Seasons are still differentiated by colors and curtains, but holiday fronts have become more elaborate with Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, calling for bright arrangements of common decorative elements. Christmas is everybody's day. Christmas symbols are displayed with candles, stars, angels, lights, candy canes or small gifts (Fig. 5). In those days, they have red velour wreaths with

some green leaves and holly. Everyone put a wreath in every window-up and down. The lace curtain comes out beautifully starched wreaths and a tiny Santa in every window.

Holidays are times when the boundaries of public and private tend to be broken down, when doors are more freely opened, and when otherwise blank portals or yards are decorated with greens or Jack-O-lanterns and scarecrows. The boundaries of the windows are similarly dissolved, with decorations extending out onto the steps, the house front and the street. A witch climb up the side of the house, or an angel sits on the steps. Gardens are decorated where people have them. The porch is a stage. People design their windows as theatrical spectacles, introducing lights, moving figures and sometimes music, and taking care to position the figures so that small children can see.

The front is the first, most formal and most symbolic stage: in it, the family presents itself to the neighborhood suggesting taste, prosperity, care and community values. Fronts communicate not only by providing an order read as aesthetically pleasing, but also through confirming neighborhood cultural conventions and sending family and individual messages within those conventions. Decorating the fronts is a sign of participation in the life of the neighborhood. The fronts also allow scope for individual expression. For those who live in Italian South Philadelphia, decorative fronts are welcome signs of individual creativity and certain marks of participation in the community.

Within a block or a neighborhood, women tend to imitate each other's window, developing neighborhood styles. Favorite objects and motifs are repeated from window to another with a cumulative effect on the passing viewers. Rivalries sometimes develop between women who pride themselves on their taste, or their homes.

Peaceful coexistence has sometimes required groups to camouflage themselves; and sometimes, through contact over the long term, it has caused groups to learn from each other without the pressure to assimilate. Some Italian families celebrate St. Patrick's Day and St. Anthony's Day with enjoyment, each in the appropriate style.

The Italians have a greater psychological attachment to their homes and neighbors and have a strong feeling of pride and excitement in holiday decoration. They spend a great deal of time out on the street with their neighbors and are observed to decorate their homes in an elaborate and effortful manner. The members of this group express a strong sense of community, spend time outside, are visible to neighbors, and care what their neighbors think of their families and their homes. Care and decoration are linked to factors that might be construed as psychological commitment to the home and a concern for what the neighbors think. They have a strong feeling and attachment toward the block.

"I want to make a wonderful front! It's Me!"



Figure 4. Halloween in the Italian Neighborhood



Figure 5. Christmas in the Italian Neighborhood

"We have lived in this neighborhood since I was born. We know each other very well.... I want to make my house look lovely, something different from others."

"I usually prepare many things for Christmas. We put many decorations so many years. It is like a tradition in my family. We really enjoy doing this! Our streets are so great during the Christmas seasons."

"The lady next door always decorates the fronts very nicely. I want to put a nice decoration like her during the holidays."
(Italian Lady)

Group membership becomes an important motivator, influencing the perceptions of Italian- and Irish-Americans. The community as a whole carries on a series of activities and upholds certain collective representations. The lack of structural assimilation leads to the persistence of the Italian and Irish subsocieties. The Irish and Italian immigrant communities are groups of people who follow a distinctive way of life or patterns of behavior. Although there are many similarities in social status and religion, the Italians differ from the Irish in a number of ways.

The observation suggests that whereas the residents in the Italian neighborhood are active, enthusiastic, and more involved in decoration activities, the residents in the Irish neighborhood are less involved with decoration on the front. It may be due to the fact that the Italians are more extroverted and expressive than the Irish. Environmental decoration reflects different aspects of residents' values and lifestyles. Environmental displays are more important for some groups and societies than for others. This finding confirms that the exterior, as it was defined and measured within the study, coincide with cultural identity.

The symbols that enable people to develop shared schemata for action communicate the group identities, statuses and values of the residents. The use of architectural elements for purposes of social control and self-expression requires both individual and collective action. Individuals choose, modify and decorate their homes for these purposes. They also cooperate with one another to establish homogeneous neighborhoods that convey collective messages. The symbols contained in an individual house are reinforced by those of surrounding houses and by the homogeneity of the blocks and the neighborhood. While not formally articulated, these principles of construction are learned through observation and imitation within the neighborhood. This result suggests that holiday decoration may not only communicate an environmental message about certain residents' characteristics, but may function as an ecological mechanism indicative of group membership and domain.

5. CONCLUSION

The environment of human interaction is a symbolically

defined environment; communication depends upon a shared symbol system. Using this symbol system, individuals engage in acts of self-presentation that are aimed at establishing, maintaining or redefining a particular identity or image in the minds of others.

This study confirms that the holiday rituals and celebrations of an environment are intimately related to a range of cultural dimensions. Residents varying in cultural groups respond differently toward their celebration of holidays.

Ethnic groups are associated with distinct subcultures - with values, norms, beliefs, customs and skills - that distinguish these groups in certain respects, from other groups in a society. The ethnic neighborhood has its own structural, as well as cultural, identity. Two distinctive ethnic groups have been observed to use different environmental elements for holiday decorations. It can be concluded different types of decoration and celebration activities are associated with distinct subcultures.

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