



The Picture-Perfect Home: A Case Study of a 49-Year-Old Woman in Residential Treatment

Michael J. Hanes

To cite this article: Michael J. Hanes (2023): The Picture-Perfect Home: A Case Study of a 49-Year-Old Woman in Residential Treatment, Art Therapy, DOI: [10.1080/07421656.2023.2240679](https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2023.2240679)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2023.2240679>



Published online: 28 Aug 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



brief report

The Picture-Perfect Home: A Case Study of a 49-Year-Old Woman in Residential Treatment

Michael J. Hanes 

Abstract

The symbol of the house has not been explored in contemporary art therapy. This case study describes how a 49-year-old woman constructed what she described as the picture-perfect home made in 18 art therapy sessions over a six-week period during a residential stay. The client's structure had two notable components—a facade and an interior—one corresponding to her public self and the other to her private self. Her artwork exemplifies how the house may be an ideal symbol for the synchronization of public self into harmonization with innermost psyche and intrafamilial relationships.

Keywords: House; public self; private self; case study; art therapy

For over 8,500 years, the house has furnished a physical structure for domestic behavior – a dwelling of virtual privacy for daily activities from the public realm and a place where, in many cultures, they are born, live, and die (Beck, 2011; Marc, 1977). Subsequently, the concept of house has become deeply entwined in our sense of self, well-being, and connectedness. Heathcote (2012) concurred and stated of the home, “Our home is our base, a place that roots us to the earth, to the city or the landscape; it gives us permanence and stability and allows us to build a life around it and within it” (p. 7).

I have practiced art therapy for over three decades, 15 of those years in gender specific residential settings with co-occurring substance use disorders and trauma. Many of the women in these settings have experienced domestic abuse and violence. Consequently, housing is a crucial issue, as these populations are particularly susceptible to housing instability and homelessness (Edwards et al., 2022). This reality may explain why the house

motif has been a reoccurring theme in my clinical experiences. Yet, I believe contemporary art therapy literature has written little about the significance of house imagery should it emerge as an impromptu topic. I offer this case study to better acquaint the reader with possible implications of the house motif.

Art therapists frequently defer to literature on the House-Tree-Person (H-T-P) when examining the importance of house imagery and how it may relate to a person's identity and sense of self (Hanes, 2019). Initiated by Buck (1948), the assessment required participants to draw each subject on a separate sheet of paper. The house tends to summon associations concerning home life and intrafamilial relationships (Buck & Hammer, 1969). For married adults, the rendering of a house may represent the person's domestic situation in relation to his or her spouse (Dryer, 2018; Oster & Montgomery, 1996). Regrettably, Handler (2014) has determined there is comparatively minimal literature on the house when compared with the tree and person, thus moderating the assessment's usefulness for exploring the implications of house imagery in art therapy.

Over the last century, a pattern has emerged throughout psychoanalytic literature that firmly establishes the house as an unconscious channel to the conscious world and universal human conditions. Subsequently, the house has become a narrative device with the potential to embody struggles, changes, and events taking place in and around it (Turner, n.d.). Mallett (2004) was of similar thought and stated a person's house can be an expression of his or her identity and sense of self. Heathcote (2012) concurred and stated the house is a “vessel for containing meaning,” thus a person's life can be read through his or her home and its content (p. 10).

In 1902, psychoanalyst Jung first highlighted the intimate association of house with the self. He proposed the house, and its various levels were an archetype of the mind. Each floor represented a level of human awareness. The upper story represented consciousness, the lower story the personal unconsciousness, and the subterranean level the collective unconsciousness. (Cooper, 1974; Huskinson, 2013; Jung, 1963). Furthermore, Jung asserted the house, like the human psyche, has two notable components—a facade and an interior, one

Michael J. Hanes, MAT, LPC, ATR-BC, is Associate Director of Clinical Services at HOPE Community Services, Oklahoma City, OK. Correspondence concerning this report should be addressed to the author at mhanes62@att.net



Figure 1. Façade of House

corresponding to the public self and the other to the private self. For Jung, the house was the perfect metaphor for the integration of our outer lives into harmony with our innermost desires. Similarly, Cooper (1974) stated:

The house façade and the interior design seem often to be selected so that they reflect how a person views himself both as an individual psyche, and in relation to the outside world, and how he wishes to present his self to family and friends. (p. 136)

Wilson (1988) agreed and suggested the boundaries of a domestic space create a symbolic division between the public and private space allowing some control over information and behaviors revealed to individuals outside the physical unit, thus creating a symbolic division between the public and private self.

Aubrey

Aubrey (pseudonym) was a 49-year-old, married, White female. She initially presented at the treatment center with moderate symptoms of alcohol withdrawal and extreme depression. The setting was a voluntary residential treatment center located in the mid-west U.S.



Figure 2. Backside of Potted Plant

Clients were age 18 and older with a primary Substance Use Disorder (SUD) diagnosis often with co-occurring disorders and/or trauma. Art therapy was scheduled for 90 minutes, three days a week. It was required for all clients to attend. Group membership in art therapy changed as participants were discharged and new individuals were admitted; size varied from 6 to 8 clients. Time was provided at the end of each session for patients who wished to share and discuss their imagery. Aubrey provided consent for her imagery to be photographed for presentation and publication.

Aubrey was timid, insecure, and soft spoken. She was a college-educated professional, but unemployed at the time due to the debilitating effects of her substance use and co-morbid conditions. Her current husband of 3 years was retired from the military due to persistent struggles with trauma and mental health. She described their relationship as “tumultuous” and stated he was emotionally and physically abusive. At one point, they had victim protection orders against one another, which they later dropped. Aubrey’s three children from a former marriage reside with their biological father because of past difficulties providing a stable home environment. She recently began drinking heavily due to heightened domestic abuse, increased isolation, and diminished support. Additionally,



Figure 3. Backside of Shrubbery

Aubrey was experiencing increased guilt related to separation from her children.

I approached art therapy from a psychoanalytic perspective with the hope of creating a potential space that permitted personalized work, symbolizing the clients' unconscious processes and life experiences. A non-directive approach encouraged clients to employ the art materials according to their own choices and needs without restraint and boundaries. Furthermore, an unintrusive method allowed clients to experience "total control" in one area of their life which was important given that many of them struggled with addiction and domestic violence, both of which involved absence of control. Additional benefits of using the psychoanalytic approach included circumventing rigid defenses and denial, fostering insight and awareness, and encouraging emotional expression.

Aubrey participated in 18 art therapy sessions over a period of six weeks. In her initial session, I showed her around the room and introduced her to the materials and space. She was hesitant to engage in the image-making process but ultimately gravitated to a pile of cardboard boxes resting on the floor. After carefully examining the containers, she discovered a box that reminded her of a house. Aubrey spent the next six weeks focusing solely on the construction of what she identified as "the picture-perfect home." Her structure had two notable components—a facade and an interior—one corresponding to her public self and the other to her private self and the inner workings of her home.

Public Self

Aubrey began her art process by constructing the façade of her structure which seemed to project her public self and the persona of the ideal suburban home (Figure 1). "It looks like the picture-perfect home, but it isn't," asserted Aubrey. When approaching her house, the first thing observers notice is the carefully manicured landscaping. Aubrey used wool felt to create the illusion of a neatly trimmed green lawn. Additionally, she employed magazine pictures to fashion cardboard stand-ups of a potted plant and well-manicured bushes. Aubrey stated the manicured lawn and shrubbery gave onlookers the belief her home was "perfect and flawless." She asserted, "I intentionally made them look fake It looks perfect ... but it really isn't."

On the backside of her potted plant (Figure 2), Aubrey cut individual letters from magazines to write, "Your words like a fist punch through my soul." Additionally, on the flip side of her shrubs (Figure 3) she composed the statement, "Words so loud I can't move, think, [or] speak." Her use of letters with random typefaces created what appeared to the author as, a ransom note effect. I shared my observation with Aubrey, and she responded, "I feel like a hostage in this house He controls everything."

Aubrey's suburban home was painted in a peculiar bright red. She asserted, "I was trying to make it appear bright and cheerful ... but it also reminds me of all the anger." Aubrey employed a picture of a stone sidewalk



Figure 4. Posterior of House

lined with flowers to create a hospitable path to her front door and a welcoming first impression. Her front door was covered with mirrors. Aubrey stated the mirrors prevented people from seeing what is really happening inside her home. The nature of the door itself is to create a barrier between two distinct areas. Marcus (2006) proposed the door controls social engagement and regulates communication between elements of the outside world and those of the intimate internal space of the house. Hence, I felt Aubrey's mirror treatment suggested less comfort with the interaction of inside and outside worlds. At the foot of her door, she placed the words "a better life." Aubrey explained, "The words are upside down, so you have to read them as you walk out the door." To the upper right of her door was a porch light with the word "HOW" overlapping it. Aubrey associated the light with insight, and stated she was struggling to find a way out of her domestic situation.

Aubrey placed a window to the far-right edge of her structure. The window oddly portrayed a view of the outdoors, thus thwarting access to the private interior space of her home. Windows have several significant roles. Huskinson (2013) proposed windows are thresholds that permit us to simultaneously view equally inside and outside. Heathcote (2012) was of similar thought and stated, "Windows are the apertures through which

we communicate with the outside world, but they work both ways," (p. 99). Thus, I suspected her window treatment suggested a fear of being examined by others and/or a fear of perceiving the outer world. Aubrey placed a picture of a sun above the window and explained how sunshine gave visitors the impression that her home was "happy and warm."

Private Self

The posterior of Aubrey's structure seemed to embody her private self and intrafamilial life (Figure 4). "The backside shows everything we are trying to hide," asserted Aubrey. The roof was heavily damaged and most of its structure was missing, exposing the intimate internal space of her home. The rear wall appeared scorched, and boards had been torn from its side potentially creating additional exposure, vulnerability, and damage. Referring to the backside of her structure, Aubrey stated, "The house is falling apart It has collapsed ... it's ugly ... it hurts terribly." Aubrey referred to the words "departure from my reality" and "I can no longer separate the truth" and explained that she had trouble distinguishing falsehoods from reality due to her husband's persistent lies.

I questioned Aubrey about the words "Leave, Don't Leave." She described how her husband would fly into a rage and demand she leave his home only to then beg her to stay. Aubrey drew my attention to the word "Whore" and stated her husband would often accuse her of infidelity and betrayal. She referred to the words "Scared, Pretend, [and] Cannot be safely ignored," and acknowledged she could no longer overlook the threat of remaining in the home. She pointed to the word "shame" and divulged she was embarrassed to be back in treatment and ashamed she let her family fall apart. Lastly, in the center of her posterior wall was the word "Stop." Aubrey asserted, "This craziness has to stop!"

The interior space of Aubrey's home (Figure 5) revealed more about her private self and the inner workings of her home. The floor of her structure was covered with sand. "It's like being in quicksand I feel like I'm sinking ... the harder I fight the more he pulls me down," stated Aubrey. She placed several wooden planks over the quicksand to "create some stability and truth." She painted the interior rear wall (Figure 6) with a black and white checkered pattern. Aubrey stated it reminded her of a chess board. She revealed her husband often play mind games. "I'm always trying to anticipate his next move," stated Aubrey. Additionally, she associated the black and white hues with her husband's dichotomous thinking. "It is his way or no way," asserted Aubrey.

Aubrey referred to the words "Our Story Together" and asserted the rear interior wall told the history of her marriage. The wall read from left to right and started out with the words "In love" and "Magical." Aubrey pointed to the words "I need" and a picture of a map, along with a couple forcefully embraced. She explained



Figure 5. Interior Space

how her husband began to smother and control her which led her to rebel and seek more autonomy. Her story proceeded to the words “CRUSH YOU.” Aubrey reported her husband made several attempts to destroy her career, along with her efforts to become more self-reliant. She placed multiple pictures of mirrors throughout the wall and associated these with her husband’s self-absorption and arrogance. Her wall ended with the words “Continue telling the story.” Aubrey stated she could no longer stay silent and needed to reveal the true workings of her intrafamilial life. Lastly, she erected three columns to support her story wall. She labeled the columns “Fear, Pretend, [and] Lie.” Aubrey asserted, “This is what holds up our marriage.”

On the East interior wall (Figure 6), Aubrey placed magazine pictures of children and maternal figures with the words “Parts locked away.” Aubrey explained she missed being a mother to her children. At the bottom of her wall, Aubrey placed a picture of a door and used individual letters from magazines to write “Where did I go.” She stated she had lost her identity as a mother and wanted to open that door again. On the West interior wall, Aubrey placed the words “I have a promise to children who need a mother.” Aubrey revealed she had vowed to her children they would one day be a family again. She explained, “Even though I have failed my children, I hope I can be there for them in the future.”

On the south interior wall, Aubrey used collage to create a picture of a figure gazing out a window. Above the

window is the phrase, “I am a person” and below the window is the word “Worthy.” She disclosed that she felt trapped in her home and stated she deserved to be treated better. She referenced the phrases, “How to tell the truth” and “A life with uncertainty” and described how her husband was filling her head with lies and self-doubt. She pointed to the words “I am ready for peace” and disclosed her hope to one day have a calm and serene home.

In her last art therapy session, Aubrey constructed a backyard for her structure that consisted of pine trees fashioned from cardboard standups and a pond filled with murky gray water. I pointed out to Aubrey that her trees appeared stunted and unhealthy. Aubrey referred to the pond and stated, “The water is poison ... it’s slowly killing the trees ... soon everything will be dead.” She associated the toxic body of water with alcohol and how her addiction was harmful to her home and its surroundings. Lastly, Aubrey placed a picture of a stone bridge traversing the toxic pond and asserted, “I will get over this ... life will get better once I cross this difficult point in my life.”

Termination

Before discharging from the treatment center, Aubrey decided to leave her structure in my safekeeping, which had several potential implications. I suspected discarding the structure may have been part of the termination process, marking the end of our therapeutic



Figure 6. East Interior Wall

work. Additionally, it may have indicated her public self and private self had been adequately understood and sufficiently integrated. Furthermore, by surrendering her structure, I surmised she may have been leaving behind a painful reminder of unfulfilled hopes and dreams, as well as her experiences of domestic abuse; both distressing reminders of her struggle to create the picture-perfect home for herself and her children. Lastly, Aubrey seemed to recognize it was not safe to take her structure home yet expressed the hope of one day returning to reclaim it.

Implications

The preceding case study has several practical implications for art therapy. First, the examination of Aubrey's structure expanded contemporary art therapy literature regarding the significance of house imagery should it emerge as a choice of subject matter during the art process. Second, Aubrey's structure seemed to confirm the house motif's potential to bring forth associations concerning home life and domestic relationships and could thus be a useful topic in art therapy for individuals experiencing interfamilial conflicts. Lastly, in contrast to a house drawing, a three-dimensional representation of a house may have greater potential to create a symbolic division –

one corresponding to the public self and the other to the private self. The preceding metaphor could be employed by art therapists to facilitate the integration of a person's outer life into harmony with their private and intrafamilial world.

Conclusion

Aubrey was able to use the art process to construct what she described as the picture-perfect home in 18 art therapy sessions over a six-week period during a residential stay. Her picture-perfect home may have been a response to the lack of permanence, connectedness, and stability in her intrafamilial life. Additionally, her house and its various elements became an expression of her identity and sense of self, as well as a reflection of her relationship with the outside world. Moreover, her structure seemed to act as a narrative device with the ability to embody struggles, changes, and events taking place in and around her home. Lastly, Aubrey's house seemed to have two notable components—a facade and an interior—one corresponding to her public self and the other to her private self. The dual components appeared to illustrate her fear of being examined by others and her attempts to control social engagement with elements of the outside world. Ultimately, her house became the perfect metaphor for the integration of her public self into synchronization with her private self and intrafamilial life.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Michael J. Hanes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5554-7762>

References

- Beck, J. (2011). *The psychology of Home: Why where you live means so much*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/12/the-psychology-of-home-why-where-you-live-means-so-much/249800/>
- Buck, J. N. (1948). The H-T-P Test. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 4(2), 151–159. [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1097-4679\(194804\)4:2%3C151::AID-JCLP2270040203%3E3.0.CO;2-O](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1097-4679(194804)4:2%3C151::AID-JCLP2270040203%3E3.0.CO;2-O)
- Buck, J. N., & Hammer, E. F. (Eds.). (1969). *Advances in house-tree-person technique: Variations and applications*. Western Psychological Services.
- Cooper, C. (1974). The house as symbol of the self. In J. Lang, C. Burnette, W. Moleski, & D. Vachon (Eds.),

- Designing for human behavior* (pp. 130–146). Hutchinson and Ross.
- Dryer, F. (2018). Prediction of psychiatric hospitalization, diagnosis, arrests, and violent behavior through scored drawings and associations. *Psychology Report*, 121(1), 4–25.
- Edwards, K. M., Wheeler, L., Siller, L., Murphy, S. B., Harvey, R., Palmer, K., Lee, K., & Marshal, J. (2022). Outcomes associated with participation in sober living home for women with histories of domestic and sexual violence victimization and substance use disorders. *Traumatology*, 29(2), 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000394>
- Handler, L. (2014). Administration of the draw-a-person (D-A-P), house-tree-person (H-T-P), the kinetic-family-drawing (K-F-D) test, and the tree test. In L. Handler & A. D. Thomas (Eds.), *Drawing in assessment and psychotherapy: Research and application* (pp. 7–16). Routledge.
- Hanes, M. J. (2019). House as a mirror of self: A case study of a twenty-one-year-old female in an inpatient psychiatric hospital. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 66, 101601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2019.101601>
- Heathcote, E. (2012). *The meaning of home*. Frances Lincoln Limited.
- Huskinson, L. (2013). Housing complexes: Redesigning the house of psyche in light of a curious mistranslation of C. G. Jung appropriated by Gaston Bachelard. *International Journal of Jungian Studies*, 1(5), 64–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409052.2012>
- Jung, C. G. (1963). *Memories, dreams, reflections*. Random House.
- Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review*, 52(1), 62–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x>
- Marc, O. (1977). *Psychology of the house*. Thames & Hudson.
- Marcus, C. (2006). *House as a mirror of self: Exploring the deeper meaning of home*. Nicolas-Hays.
- Oster, G. D., & Montgomery, S. S. (1996). *Clinical uses of drawings*. Jason Aronson.
- Turner, T. (n.d.). *Using the house as a symbol*. <https://ccwritersfellowship.org/using-the-house-as-a-symbol/>
- Wilson, P. (1988). *The domestication of the human species*. Yale University Press.