

Edited by
Salman Akhtar
M. Nasir Ilahi
Rajiv Gulati

ATTICS AND BASEMENTS

The Evocative, Expressive and
Embracing Functions of Homes
and Other Human Dwellings



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*Salman Akhtar, M. Nasir Ilahi,
and Rajiv Gulati*



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To

The future generations of psychoanalysts of South Asian origin

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Acknowledgments

This book is an outgrowth of the annual dinner meeting of psychoanalysts of South Asian origins that has taken place in New York City ever since 1997. With members from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (and keeping its door open for future entrants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal), the group had remained mostly focused on collegial warmth, mutual support, and a modicum of nostalgia. However, one could sense that it also harbored a subterranean, if furtive, search for meaning and transcendence beyond friendly banter over sumptuous meals. One actualization of that striving is the book in your hands. While nine of the group's members are responsible for editing and writing it, the "holding" function of others can hardly be denied. Mention also needs to be made of Jeremy Vera for skillfully preparing the manuscript in its final polished form, Anita Mason for guiding us through various stages of publication, James Darley for his masterful copyediting, and Kate Pearce, the psychoanalytic publisher par excellence for lending her prestigious imprimatur to our work. To all these individuals, we offer our very sincere thanks.

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Murad Khan, MD, is a psychiatrist at Yale Mental Health & Counseling and a candidate at Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis. They received their BA from Yale University, MD from Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and completed their psychiatry residency at Yale University. A former APA Division 39 Scholar and APsA Teachers’ Academy Fellow, they have presented on the mental health concerns of QTBIPOC for the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the Association of LGBTQ+ Psychiatrists. Their writing includes a chapter on gender and sexual identities in *The Psychiatry Resident Handbook*, *Re/calibrating in ROOM: A Sketchbook for Analytic Action*, and a forthcoming reflexive qualitative study exploring psychoanalyst perspectives on gender and sexuality in *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*.

Milan Patel, MD, is an adolescent and adult psychiatrist based in New York City, where he maintains a private practice offering both medication management and psychotherapy. He graduated from Wabash College with a dual degree in psychology and music, attending

on a prestigious full scholarship from the Eli Lilly Foundation. Dr. Patel earned his medical degree from Indiana University School of Medicine and completed his residency training at Mount Sinai Hospital. To deepen his expertise, he pursued advanced psychoanalytic training, completing the two-year Intensive Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Program (IPPP) followed by a four-year psychoanalysis program at the William Alanson White Institute. With nearly twenty years of experience as the lead psychiatrist of Congregate Care at Catholic Guardian Society, Dr. Patel has dedicated much of his career to supporting children and adolescents in group homes and foster care, with a focus on chronic developmental trauma and neglect. His diverse cultural clinical experience includes working as a psychiatrist in Kona, Hawaii, in both inpatient and outpatient settings, as well as serving as a traveling ACT team psychiatrist providing home visits throughout Harlem and Brooklyn. He has extensive experience in psychiatric emergency care and has served as a clinical instructor at Mount Sinai Hospital, as well as remaining on the voluntary faculty there. In addition to teaching courses at Mount Sinai Hospital and Teacher's College at Columbia University, Dr. Patel has shared his expertise at numerous conferences. Beyond his psychiatric practice, he combines his passion for music and mental health as a member of The Shrinks, an all-psychiatrist jazz quartet. In his private practice, he specializes in working with artists and musicians.

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Nidhi Tewari, MD, is a child/adolescent and adult psychiatrist based near Philadelphia. She earned her undergraduate degree from SUNY Stony Brook University before pursuing her medical education at the Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University. Dr. Tewari completed her adult psychiatry residency and child/adolescent fellowship at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital. During her residency, she was

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Introduction

That the individual psychic self has an ecological dimension also is by now a well-accepted notion (Akhtar, 2001; Spitzform, 2000).

This dimension makes its appearance, in its most rudimentary form, with the infant's acquisition of the animate-inanimate distinction along many vertices; these range from the most simple perceptual one to the far more complex one of conceptual and motivational interpretation (Lichtenberg, 1983; D. N. Stern, 1977). With increasing consolidation of this function, the capacity for "object permanence" (Piaget, 1936) evolves; the resulting stability of representations, initially restricted to the objects in the immediate surround, gradually spreads to cover a larger psychophysical terrain. Frosch's (1964) "reality constancy" (the capacity to tolerate environmental changes without the destabilization of the core veracity of perception) and Pacella's (1980) notion of "waking screen" (the background of expectation that scans, accepts, rejects, or modifies all new perceptions) now become important.

The "waking screen" at the deepest level, the "reality constancy" at the mid-level, and the "average expectable environment" (Hartmann, 1939) at the highest level form the triadic basis for the child's relationship with the external, material world. The use of physical objects is at first for psychic integration and structuralization, then for ego-motivated

instrumentality, and only after these two modalities are established, it is for the containment, concealment, projection, and expression of drive-related curiosities and fantasies.

Criss-crossing these intrapsychic developments is the growing child's relationship with his or her or their homes. Dim, unintegrated, and unmentaled at first, this "relationship" later comes to include many psychosomatic realms: perception, imagination, fantasy, projection, primal scene, optimal distance, separateness, boundaries, smells, sounds, cloisters of intrigue and fear, and cabinets of curiosity and excitement. Side by side with such phenomena, the feeling of being "at home" evolves; this is at first anchored in the "thoughtless" entitlement over the parents' minds and bodies and the physicality of the home itself, but soon begins to be internalized and give rise to the future capacity to feel "at home" most anywhere in the world.

Another dialectic now emerges. On the one hand, the childhood home is deeply incorporated in one's psyche and persists, throughout life, as a fond prototype, an object of nostalgia, and—via the "second look" (Novey, 1968)—a source of ego-replenishment. On the other hand, that very home has to be left and with the passage of time new homes are to be found, formed, and left. Such "biography" of homes includes transient residences of youth, college dorms, first apartments and flats, marital and family homes, downsized residences of late middle age, retirement homes, nursing homes, hospices, and urns that contain our cremated remains and graves that house our buried bodies. Far from such linear progression are traumatizing homes, foster homes, and orphanages where searingly painful as well as defiantly triumphant scenarios of growth and development unfold. And, then there are monasteries which embody the human striving for detachment, silence, and contemplation in a turn away from a world of earthly relations to spirituality and transcendence.

Our book covers all such matters. Its approach is fundamentally psychoanalytic but borrows significantly from anthropology, history, architecture, religion, and general psychiatry. The result is a harmonious gestalt of understanding the dialectical relationship between man's internal world and his external reality, especially in terms of the four walls and a roof that provide him shelter and earn the designation of his home.

Finally, an admission: our book's title, *Attics and Basements*, is inspired by a letter of Sigmund Freud in response to a congratulatory message on his eightieth birthday by the renowned Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger. In that letter, Freud wrote: "I have always lived on the ground floor and in the basement of the building—you mention that on changing one's viewpoint one can also see an upper floor, housing such distinguished guests as religion, art, and others. You are not the only one; most cultivated specimens of homo natura think likewise. In this respect, you are the conservative, I the revolutionary" (letter dated 8 October 1936, cited in Fichtner, 2003, p. 132). It is our sincere hope that our book on homes illuminates both the "attics" and the "basements" of the human experience in all its sadness and horror as well in all its splendor and majesty.

Salman Akhtar
Philadelphia, PA

‘This wide-ranging and profound book on homes and other human dwellings is well worth a read and a re-read. It is comprehensive in what it covers: childhood homes, marital homes, nostalgia for lost homes, orphanages, retirement homes, monasteries, and much more. Along with such breadth, the book delves deeply, through historical reportage and psychoanalytic deconstruction, into the external realities it considers and the internal state of affairs they embody and represent.’

JOSEPH FERNANDO, MD

Training and Supervising Analyst, Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis
Author of *A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Trauma*

‘From the womb to the cemetery, this timely book explores the multiple facets of home. The three-year-old girl plays house, acting out all the characters in her family. The oedipal child makes forts out of pillows and blankets. The latency child decorates the room with multiple collections, dreams of growing up, and the adolescent isolates herself in her room where fantasies of leaving and building one’s own home seem both exciting and terrifying. This book contains all this and much more. It is extremely important at a time when so many in our country might lose their homes!’

ANN SMOLEN, PhD

Training and Supervising Analyst, Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia
Author of *Six Children: The Spectrum of Child Psychopathology and Its Treatment*

‘*Attics and Basements* explores the multi-layered meanings of the notion of “home,” from our bodily beginnings in the womb and infancy to the challenges of old age and death, from the development of a sense of internal stability to existential threats. The book explores actual physical locations, the challenges of homelessness, and the notion of a secure base. In addition, the volume is infused with poetry, both in the use of language in the chapters themselves, and in the multiple references to poets and their creations – Rumi, Bachelard, T. S. Eliot, and Akhtar himself. This is a gem of a book, a pleasure both to read and digest.’

JULIAN STERN, MD

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