

Perceived Gendered Rooms in American Suburban Homes as Told
by *House Hunters*

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Introduction

When families look for homes in American suburbs, many factors can influence how they determine which location is right for them. While some families may look for locations closer to work or stores, others may look for locations that are closer to public transportation, in a desired school district, or close to family. Although each family is different, one universal truth remains; people who buy their own homes tend to want enough space to make their own, which at times leads to divided territories for different family members in the household. Most people may enjoy the company of their families, but sometimes they just need to get away to be alone for a while, and buying or renting a home with lots of space can lead towards the accomplishment of this goal. By observing the awarding winning HGTV sitcom, *House Hunters*, we as viewers are able to get a glimpse into the ideal world that is owning your own home for a family but also having your own space away from people, which also lets us see how individual people view the uses of specific rooms and assign specific gendered territories to these spaces in an American suburbia.

In 1992, Ken Lowe had an idea that would drastically change the trajectory of public access television at the time. Lowe's idea for a public cable channel solely dedicated towards renovation shows and home gardening programs hit the airstreams on December 1st, 1994, reaching up to 6.5 million homes on first broadcast¹. Called the Home & Garden Television Network, or HGTV for short, this network was one of the biggest channels on TV at the time that was not owned by a megacorporation such as NBC, CNN, or FOX. While channels like ABC were owned by Disney, HGTV was a small and privately-owned channel that told the stories of

¹ HGTV Corporation, (n.d.) *Top 20 Moments in HGTV History*. HGTV.

how people lived their lives in this everchanging world. Although there were many shows on at launch, none stood out above the rest in terms of quality. When I think of HGTV, the shows *Room by Room*, *Gardening by the Yard*, or *Design by Design* aren't the shows that I immediately think of, despite how immensely popular they once were². Things changed on October 7th, 1999 at 7:00pm when the reality show *House Hunters* aired its first ever episode on HGTV.

Probably the most recognizable show HGTV has ever produced, *House Hunters* breaks the mold by being a show with no hosts, no recurring cast members, and no set location. The show follows families, roommates, groups of friends, or individual people as they search for a home in the area. By looking at three houses with different price points that also give different combinations of amenities, people watching the show are able to see what it's like to purchase a home and how people deal with the stresses that come with it. *House Hunters* has resulted in a multitude of spinoffs, including but not limited to *House Hunters International*, *House Hunters Renovation*, *Tiny House Hunters*, *House Hunters: Off the Grid*, and *House Hunters: Outside the Box*, to name a few. In total, *House Hunters* has had 16 different spinoffs, leading to HGTV to pivot away more from "Home and Gardening" to more of an emphasis on "Home"³. Although all these shows are entertaining, they all give a glimpse into the stereotypical American suburb. One major theme explored through these shows is the concept of personal space and how that can lead to gendered territories throughout different homes. By observing *House Hunters*, I was able to research how different families view their homes and what they consider to be a "shared space" and what they consider to be the "woman's room" or the "man's room". I used existing

² Merrill, A. M. C. (2020, December 28). *HGTV: 10 Throwback decorating Shows You Forgot You Loved*. ScreenRant.

³ Foster, T. (2019, February 28). *How Many Shows Are in the House hunters HGTV Franchise?* TVOvermind

literature to help my understanding of what to look for when categorizing different gendered territories in different homes.

Literature Review

The concept of studying gendered spaces in the context of *House Hunters* is a very awkward idea, something that I will to change through the use of this paper. Although the topic is narrow, there are still a few studies online have addressed how the show alters people's attitudes in the suburbs, changing it from a place to live in to representing a part of their identities, allowing them to find a place to belong. Most studies follow along two paths of research regarding *House Hunters* and reality tv shows: the perfect domestic lifestyle, the concept of wanting a normal, quiet life in the suburbs with your family, and how their own personal territories and decisions factor in the greater neighborhood or their own homes and how each family member may carve out their own spaces. By analyzing these two points, I gained a better understanding on different lifestyles can lead to what each person's homes look like, such as income levels from different jobs and personal hobbies, and what can lead to personal territories in their everyday lives.

Studies that give in to the domestic lifestyle theme of reality television show how lifestyles change and evolve throughout history in addition to showing how people's roles in society morph to fit the world around them. Sauter and Chambers, in *Creating a Voyeuristic Utopia in House hunters International*⁴ and *Cultural Ideals of Home*⁵ respectively, focus on ideals of what makes a family unified in a home and how that can interact with those wanting to

⁴ Sauter E., & Sauter, K. (2019). The Myth of the Perfect Place: Creating a Voyeuristic Utopia in House Hunters International. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 238.

⁵ Chambers, D. (2020). *Cultural Ideals of Home: The Social Dynamics of Domestic Space*. Routledge

achieve financial stability, such as on *House Hunters International* (2019,2020). These ideals allow for a better understanding in how many people view reality in the suburbs, a goal to end at that allows for you to have your own space, both here in the United States and abroad. To really view how ideals have changed and morphed, we can look at the women's equality movement towards equal opportunity and how that impacts the studies done by Fraiman, Ryan, and Druick in *The Right to Coziness*⁶, *Lifestyle Media in American Culture*⁷, and *Financialized Femininity*⁸ (2022, 2018, 2017). When observing how women's equality led towards more representation in the work life, it allowed for more of a central role in their domestic lives. By creating a more diverse world, people have also perceived the suburbs a more feminine location, while many see the city as a more masculine location, something noticeable in more modern episodes of *House Hunters*, as discussed later. While the prospect of more equal living conditions for all does seem enticing, we are also able to acknowledge that sometimes it can lead to more members of the family having tension over the lives they live, a fact brought up in the second theme of the studies found, territory around the house.

When observing the articles that show a higher emphasis on personal territory towards families and individuals, it is important to note that all articles are written in a pre-COVID world, showing that these problems existed before then, leading to a greater emphasis on the want and need for them today. By reading *Gender Territories*⁹ from White, we are able to observe how different family members use different spaces, setting boundaries for who uses certain spaces.

⁶ Fraiman, S. (2022). HGTV's House hunters and the Right to Coziness. *Canadian Theatre Review* 2022 191:, 20-24

⁷ Ryan, M.E. (2018). *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinarity* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁸ Druick, Z. (2017). Property TV: Financialized Femininity and New Forms of Domestic Labour. *European Journal of Cultural studies*, 20(5), 560-574.

⁹ White, M. (2013). Gender Territories: House hunting on American Real Estate TV. *Television & New Media*, 14(3), 228-243.

Although White's article did prove useful in this paper, the fact that it was published in a pre-COVID world indicated major changes due to many families being isolated together, retroactively nulling certain observations made by her (2013). One clear example can be seen in Moisio & Beruchashvili's article, *Mancaves and Masculinity*¹⁰, showing that even within the three year gap many men in the suburbs required their own areas in their homes, creating a "man's space" in a "female area", further giving into the ideal that suburbs are inherently a feminine location. Through domestic conflict, as outlined in *A House Divided*¹¹, another article by White, readers are able to observe how each family reacts to tensions, leading to a more isolated lifestyle in homelife's (2017). By having more tension in households, such as minor arguments between family members, the creation of spaces solely designed to be isolated in become more commonplace, such as mancaves or she-sheds. The creation of these spaces is further expanded upon by the last article from White in 2013, *House Hunters, Real Estate Television, and Everyday Cosmopolitanism*¹²; this elaborates on how *House Hunters* can lead others to believe in a more cosmopolitan life, which is defined as a more fantasy and perfect, cookie-cutter life in her article, allowing for observers of the show to be drawn in to the lifestyles many people lead. White highlights the stereotypes that many people feel towards certain areas throughout the homes connect to how they view cosmopolitanism, leading many to want the perfect lifestyle and the faults that may come with it. From the kitchen being a more predominately female focused space to the garage or backyard being more male orientated, there

¹⁰ Moisio, R. & Beruchashvili, M. (2016). Mancaves and Masculinity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 16(3), 656-676.

¹¹ White, M. (2017). A House Dvidided. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(5), 575-591.

¹² White, M. (2013). *House Hunters, Real Estate Television, and Everyday Cosmopolitanism. A Companion to Reality Television*, 386-401.

are many stereotypes' people hold on rooms in their homes, something I noted to be more evident on *House Hunters* episodes in a post-COVID world.

In the year 2020 the world was a part of an event that killed millions all over the world, COVID-19. Due to the pandemic breaking out, everyone was required to stay indoors and isolate for months on end, leading to many families being in the same area for longer periods of time, in some cases for the first times in their lives, rather than if there was no pandemic going on at all. During this time, many family members were met with a challenge; create a loving and caring environment for their families or let tension build, resulting in the need for more personal space and a place to isolate in the household. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many people subconsciously chose the latter option, outdating certain articles previously mentioned. By also being an ongoing issue, COVID-19 also changed how I viewed *House Hunters*, allowing me to observe which facets of the show ended up staying the same and which has changed in more modern episodes.

Although many of these articles were written before the world completely changed, they provide a good narrative towards viewing how a domestic lifestyle can lead towards the creation of more gendered spaces throughout homes. These facts can only be more certain in this day and age as many families had to stay in close quarters together, which ironically could've ended up driving them further apart. By observing more recent episodes of *House Hunters*, I noted a more emphasized desire on having personal spaces in homes, leading that to be higher on each person's list of must-haves. Though most episodes were more recent, I was also able to watch episodes in a pre-COVID world, allowing for me to acknowledge how people's desire for a domestic lifestyle and what that may entail has changed, as that will be discussed in the Methods section.

Methods

Starting with episodes that aired during season 150 of *House Hunters*, I began working my way through time to catch up with present day episodes in season 223. As I'm a college student, I had a timetable to work with and decided that I'd have to exclude a large number of episodes, but it also allowed me to notice a more drastic change in what I was observing versus what white noticed in 2013. By watching episodes that began closer to present day, I was able to watch around 975 episodes of *House Hunters*, with only a minimal number excluded as they were not on demand in my network provider, Sling TV. While watching the show for almost 48 hours, I noticed multiple consistencies happening virtually every episode, something I was able to notice thanks to categories provided by BuzzFeed News.

One aspect I noticed that happened in every episode was how the family's complained regarding the location to their neighbors, often stating they were either too close or too far, never perfectly in the middle. Another example I noticed was how often couples seemed to be disappointed by the amenities (or lack thereof) in homes they tour. In almost 75% of the episodes, couples would often ask for matching appliances, granite countertops, or double-sinks, stating the property has "potential" if they do not end up with all three of these items. By acknowledging the abundance of these requests, it's fair to say that most *House Hunters* episodes follow the same formula regarding the people on the show. When watching *House Hunters*, I also noticed that many people ended up being disappointed in the homes they've selected, leading me to wonder why choose the location in the first place? After watching enough episodes, it became clear that most members of the family didn't hate the house, they hated the idea of sharing the house with others. Upon this realization, I noticed more and more people

utilizing the space given in their homes, creating an unconscious bias in the establishment of gendered territories, determining who gets to have certain spaces while others gained other areas.

Gendered Territories Findings

When researching gendered territories in peoples' homes, it's important to acknowledge the stereotypes regarding the lives that people may live, such as the idea of a kitchen being a female space and the garage being a male area. Gendered territories are the concept of having specific areas assigned to people of certain genders, allowing for them to have their own designated areas to be isolated rather than be in social gatherings, mostly consisting of people who identify as male or female in the situation of *House Hunters*. By allowing people assign themselves to certain areas in their homes, the producers and stars of *House Hunters* have reinforced stereotypes in the form of repeated lines of dialogue, jokes, and allowing certain people to assign certain areas as predominately male or female. As told by controversial news outlet, BuzzFeed News, many jokes and stereotypes are repeated and recycled enough to warrant a spot on the unofficial *House Hunters* drinking game¹³.

In a typical *House Hunters* episode, most people searching for a new home are white, heterosexual couples looking for a place to lay down their roots and start a new life together. As is often the case, most couples are looking to start a family or have multiple children around the time they purchase a home. In almost every episode observed, families searched for homes in the suburbs, away from the city center and the hustle and bustle that comes with it, hoping to live a semi-quiet lifestyle. When hunting for houses, most families tend to tour homes with two floors, a garage, three separate bedrooms, a master bathroom separate from the full bathroom for

¹³ Galindo, B., & Abarca, J. (2013, September 27). *The Ultimate "House Hunters" Drinking Game*. BuzzFeed.

the children, a walk-in closet, and a spacious kitchen/ dining room, all while having a spacious front and backyard for children and the possibility of a pet to run around in. Even this description assigns territories to certain members of the household, showing that observing the show for the right amount of time can lead to a bias in assigning spaces. Although there are many rooms in the typical home, there are also many areas that belong to one member of the household, while other spots “belong” to other members, leaving only a few spaces to be shared by the whole household. By reading the results I collected below, you should gain an understanding into how different stereotypes can lead to the creation of different isolated spaces around the typical American suburban house, rather than a shared space for all, and how they have changed since the publishing of White’s article. They are as follows:

1. Starting outdoors, the general consensus is that this is more of an area for children or pets, unless the male figure of the household decides to cook outdoors using their grill, similar to White found.
2. If given enough property, the establishment of individual sheds becomes more commonplace, allowing for the female figures of the house to gain spaces outdoors in the form of a she-shed, a concept that’s become increasingly popular in recent years.
3. Deviating from what White found, the outdoors is primarily shown as a “male dominated” area, when the introduction of a patio is brought into play the space either becomes more female orientated or more of a public space.
4. On a stereotypical first floor, I will be using a Centex brand home as an example from hereon out, only the living room and dining room areas are assigned as a shared space for

everyone to utilize¹⁴. This brand of home will be used in Figure 1 and Figure 2, mapping out how each family on *House Hunters* seems to use their spaces.

5. The unspoken rule of *House Hunters* seems to be that if there is a kitchen, odds are the wife will be cooking, which is a VERY sexist ideal to write on paper but is shown to be how most people think on this show. Although, it is worth noting that in more modern episodes (2018-present) see more male figures of the household working in kitchens, indicating a shift from gendered territory to shared space, something White acknowledged being a rising shift in 2013, now becoming more commonplace in 2022.
6. More likely than not, if a home has an office it is mostly the territory of the person who does the most at-home work. This area can also be attributed to the member of the household who makes the most money, as it is more likely for a corporate job to have a virtual position rather than a part-time retail cashier to.
7. If given the opportunity to have a two-car garage, most male members of the household will also use this area as a toolshed of sorts, often using this area for DIY projects as well as store vehicles.
8. When given a lounge or study space, this area seems to lean more towards a female-orientated area, giving a space on the first floor outside the kitchen to get away from the shared common spaces of the living and dining rooms and can often be used as a hobby room.
9. The loft area of the second floor is often used as a shared space among the residents of the household and can raise the property value of a home by 20-25%, making it more

¹⁴ Centex Foundation. (n.d.). *Aspire in Fuquay Varina, NC at Hidden Valley* | Centex. Aspire Hidden Valley.

commonplace in modern homes¹⁵. This area serves as a second living room of sorts on the higher floor of the home for people to take advantage of. It is very often the case that you don't see this area in the "Where are they now?" portion of the episode.

10. All secondary bedrooms are individual spaces made solely for the people who reside in them. This allows for people to have space on the second floor to be alone without any disruptions.

11. Although the secondary bedrooms are made for individual use, the master bedroom is often joked about as the primary female-orientated room. Anytime a couple walks into a walk-in closet on a house tour, the conversation almost always goes "Wow! This area is so big, but honey, where are you going to put all of YOUR clothes!?" followed by the family and relator laughing.

Although each house is different with only some homes including basements or sheds in backyards, these eleven facts have seemed to be consistent through all episodes observed of House Hunters. Despite the fact that not every point appears in each episode, every possible combination is shown in different episodes, whether that be just one gendered territory being discussed or even nine stereotypes coming into play.

Many areas in the home, both inside and outside, seem to lean closer towards a male territory than a female or shared space. From the outdoor grill areas to the workshop two-car garage, many men consider these their spaces, a fact only reinforced by the discussions on *House Hunters*. When discussing how to use a space in a prospective home, many men will discuss these spaces as if it is already theirs to own, often using "I" in their comments, rather than "we".

¹⁵ Cottrell, A. (2021, February 9). *The One Home Improvement That Will Add the Most Value to Your Property*. Home and Gardens.

As discussed by England, the concept of suburbia is often considered to be a very feminine ideal, making men of the household more fragile and desperate to prove their masculinity¹⁶. By being assigned to spaces that are more public, more outdoors, such as the garage or yardwork, it is shown that men living in the suburbs tend to try and have their own spaces to prove to themselves that despite not living in the city and living with a family, they still want to be considered a “man”.

If an area of a home is not considered a “male” territory, odds are it is perceived to be a “female” space as told by the subtle clues and jokes put into conversations when touring homes, such as who gets the biggest closet in the master bedroom or who is the messiest in the master bathroom. The main areas being the kitchen and bedrooms are often the most talked about territories, with the general consensus being the fact that these are primarily feminine rooms where most people believe tasks only carried out by men are done, because men don’t sleep. Reinforcing old and negative stereotypes, families often make the kitchen the female space of the home because they assume that only women cook for the men, however it is worth noting that in more recent episodes of House Hunters, many ideals are changing, and that more men have ended up cooking more often, leading to this space becoming more shared. By assigning these areas more towards women, it is also giving into early 1900’s ideals that men belong outside and women belong inside, making more people perceive the suburbs as a predominately feminine space that men happen to live in, as described in *Back to the City, the Kitchen & the Suburbs*¹⁷.

¹⁶ England, Kim V. L. (1993). Changing Suburbs, Changing Women: Geographic Perspectives on Suburban Women and Suburbanization. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 14(1), 24-43.

¹⁷ Thrakrar, U. (1970, January 1). *Back to the City, the Kitchen and the Suburbs: Trends in Residential Settlement, Food Culture and Domestic Labour Practices since WWII*. Academic Commons.

Through the mixture of new ideals coming into life and many couples wanting to challenge the status quo, more and more shared spaces have become more commonplace in the forms of the living room, dining room, and loft areas. With the suburbs having such a focus on family dynamics, many people move out of the city center to better connect with their relatives, and there's no better spot to do that than in shared spaces. When given these areas, many people often use it for their day-to-day lifestyles and that allows for them to become better connected with the people around them. The appeal of these areas is not really to have a shared space with other people, but more to better appreciate the individual spaces given to you that you can use in your free time. While some members of the family may end up staying in the living room more than the dining room and vice versa, because so many people end up using these spaces it's impossible to tell if it leans more male-orientated or female-orientated, creating the perfect shared space for all.

Although there is a balance of how people view different rooms on House Hunters, as shown in *Figure 1 and Figure 2*, the inclusion of gendered spaces can lead to the creation of a mental map for how each house is divided and what areas are created for specific people and what is designated as a "shared space". As shown in *Figures 1 and 2*, by observing the different dynamics on House Hunters, I was able to make a layout of how most families divide up certain rooms, leaving very little free space that can be utilized by everyone outside of the living, dining, and loft rooms. While there are some specifics mentioned previously in the paper, there are some areas that rely on other external factors to determine who uses the space more, such as who's bedroom belongs to whom and what could be located on the patio, a grill or patio furniture. Due to these external factors, it is difficult to assign these areas without knowing who ends up using these spaces more. The figures are as follows:

Figure 1:

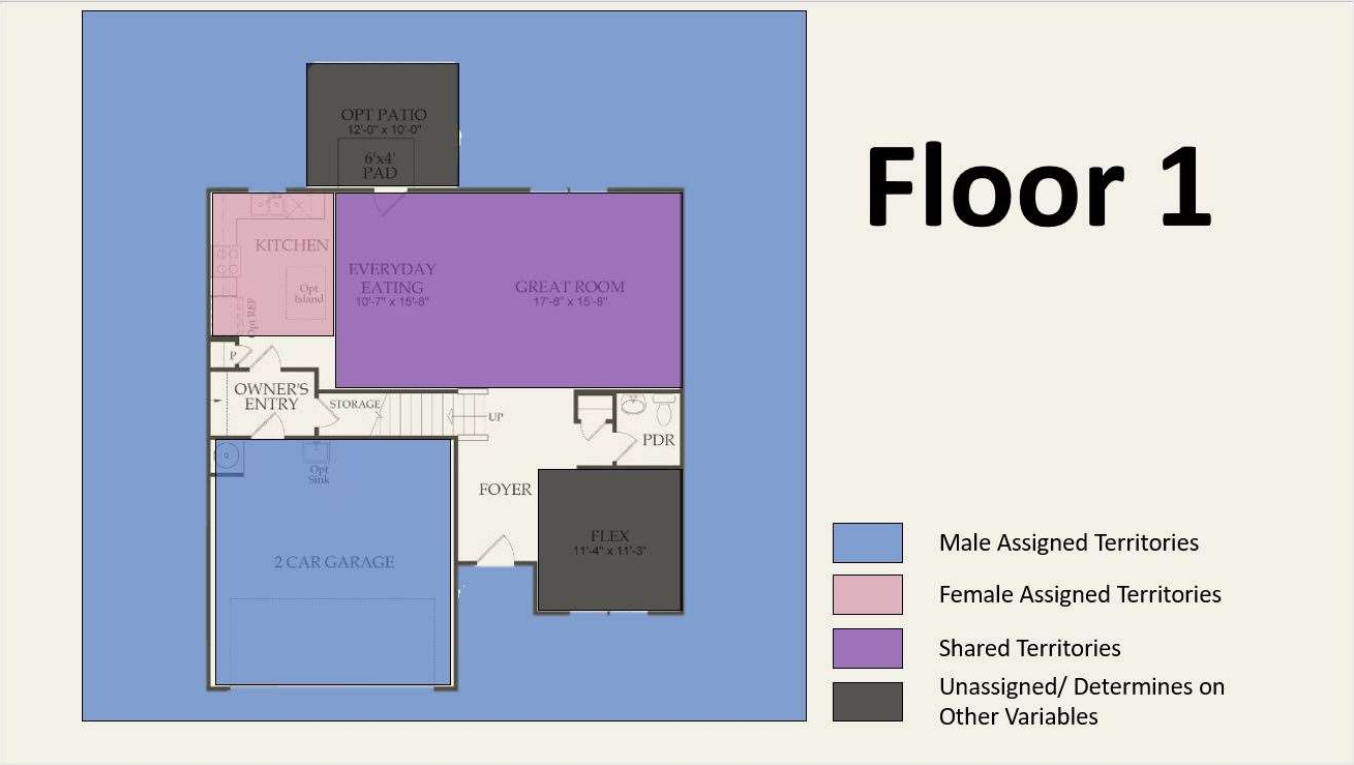
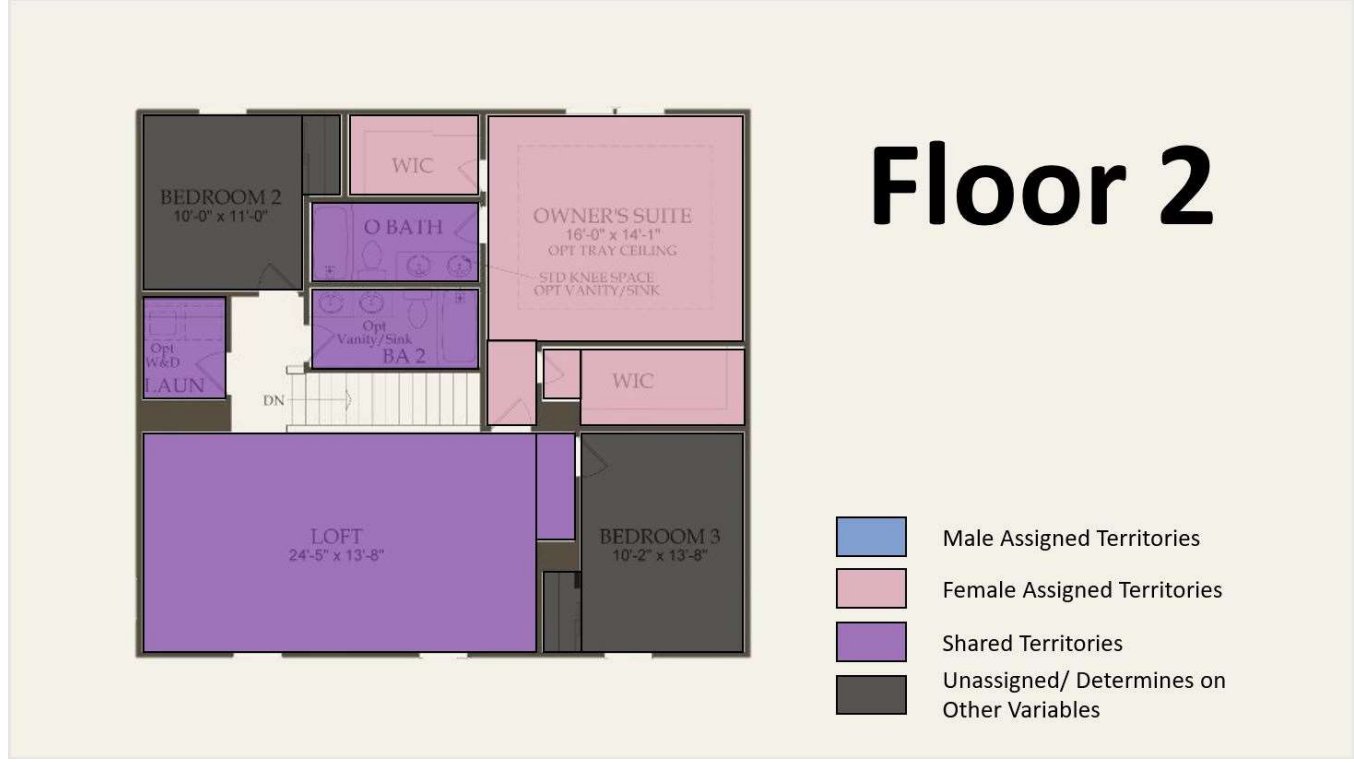


Figure 2:



Despite the fact that many families are happy with the lives they live together, more recent episodes of *House Hunters* have put more of an emphasis on people getting their own individual spaces in homes, no matter what form it may take. Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many people now have had the experience of being in close quarters with family members for very extended periods of time, leading to many people also appreciating the concept of “alone time”. By having to experience many months alone with their families, people ending up getting irritated by those around them, wanting to retreat to private spaces to recharge social batteries. These facts are more prominent in post-2020 episodes, showing that people now value alone time more, but at the cost of giving into stereotypes. If the argument was made that there wasn’t a heavy focus on gendered territories in a pre-COVID world, the argument could be made now the territories have become more apparent. The spaces many people searched for and claimed in *House Hunters* ended up being their isolated spots, further establishing a gendered territory dynamic throughout the typical American suburb. Men retreated to garages, women started working more in studies or lounges, and only when it was absolutely necessary did families convene in shared spaces. While it is impossible to tell how big of an impact COVID-19 will have in our future and future *House Hunters* episodes, it is clear that in 2022 many people choose to have their own areas, despite the fact that it often gives into stereotypes set decades ago.

Throughout its almost 25-year run, *House Hunters* has proven to be one of the most influential programs on HGTV, showing many people what it’s like to purchase their own home, despite the fact that it’s almost impossible for that now. By being easily accessible, many stereotypes are able to gain access to a wider audience easily, the biggest of which is the concept of gendered territories in the American suburb. When observing different *House Hunters*

episodes throughout different decades, it is clear that most people have a stigmatized view of how they perceive the homes they live in. Most people see certain rooms as male, female, or shared, creating solid dividing lines between rooms that can lead to a more divided family dynamic. This fact is only more reinforced by analyzing post-COVID episodes, showing that many people now often show biases towards what rooms they consider their own versus someone else's. By allowing different stereotypes to be more accessible to those watching, many people from now on will see different areas of homes as gendered spaces, but as the gender binary changes, so will the division of areas around the home and suburbs as a whole, leading to a more dynamic and fluid space for people to move to when leaving the city center for the American-built sprawl environment that we have created.

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