Broken home: The house plays a neglected role in divorce

There are at least three parties to many divorces: the husband, the wife and the house.

"We don't take the house seriously enough as a factor in divorce," said Kathryn Anthony, a UI architecture professor who has examined the problem. "We also fail to realize that the house continues to play an important role long after the split-up, both for the couple and for the children."

Attitudes about one's house often are a reflection of the current status of the relationship, Anthony said. And sometimes the house itself causes problems: Choosing it, paying for it and adjusting to its particular features all can lead to family stress. Consider a couple who bought an old house and drew up a five-year plan for fixing it up.

"The house was always dug up," Anthony said, "and this put an enormous strain on the marriage. The wife got fed up and left after the fourth year. She was tired of living in a mess."

The moral of the story? "For one thing, don't try to move or remodel when there's stress in the relationship," Anthony said. "Also, it helps to know who you are. Are you the type of person who likes to do long-term remodeling, or do you just want to move in?"

Recently divorced women have a special set of house-related problems. "Many women have not had to deal with certain aspects of running the house before, like hiring a plumber or refinancing the mortgage," Anthony said. "These kinds of things can be terrifying, especially at such a volatile time."

On the other hand, the house provides needed stability and continuity. "Most women feel, 'Well, at least I didn't have to give that up,' " Anthony said.

Housing has an effect on the children of divorce, too, she said.

"In many cases, the departing parent cannot afford to give the kids a room of their own," Anthony said. "They may even wind up sleeping in sleeping bags in a corner of the living room. This reinforces the kids' tenuous relationship with that parent."

Having such a small place also puts pressure on the parent to take the kids out more than they would otherwise.

"Many kids really just want to hang around home, but they can't," Anthony said.