

Location, Location, Location How To Use A House Map To Tackle Cat Behaviour Problems

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There is no doubt it would be extremely distressing should your cat develop a 'behavioural problem'. Fortunately most owners now know that help is available; the veterinary practice team being the first point of contact. If no physical cause can be found for the unusual, undesirable or acceptable behaviour you and your cat would be referred to a pet behaviour counsellor or clinical certified animal behaviourist with particular interest in working with feline patients.

Extensive history taking is essential to establish the chronology of the problem and find the cause or motivation for the behaviour. This consultation process involves active participation on your part; the best results are achieved if you both work as part of an investigative team. It is a lengthy process involving questionnaires, dialogue between you and the behaviourist and observation of your cat or cats in their home environment. Every behaviourist will have their own unique style or technique when working with cat problems but one common tool is the house map. This is a two-dimensional floor plan of a home, drawn on a piece of paper that is not unlike the sort of diagram shown on sales brochures for new properties that shows room sizes, windows, doors, radiators, staircases and other fixtures and fittings. In the case of the behaviourist's house map it also includes furniture to give a true representation of the lived-in home. This will ultimately give a bird's eye view of the layout of the property that can be used in a number of ways, including establishing the following:

- The location of resources* in relation to doorways, windows, thoroughfares (hallway, stairs etc.)
- The locations where the problem behaviour (e.g. inappropriate urination, defecation, excessive scratching or urine spraying) takes place
- How each cat in the household uses the space available within the home (referred to as 'space utilization analysis') to aid in establishing the extent of each individual's territory

****Resources are those objects or provisions that are essential for a cat's survival (or those that are enjoyed), the main ones being:***

- ***Food bowl***
- ***Water bowl***
- ***Litter tray***
- ***Bed***
- ***Scratching posts***
- ***Private areas/hiding places***
- ***High perches***
- ***Toys***

Once all this information is translated to the 'house map' the behaviourist can then see the whole property, and how it is used by the cats, in a series of simple diagrams. A complicated form of board game then takes place to interpret the implications of the layout and its impact on the cat's behaviour. At a glance, the behaviourist will be able to see that, for example, one cat predominantly remains on the first floor, only coming downstairs to eat and use a litter tray, while another spends a lot of time on the stairs or in the hallway. This may suggest, together with other information gleaned during the consultation, that the 'downstairs cat' is preventing the 'upstairs cat' from gaining access to important resources at times. The behaviourist may also discover that food and water bowls are positioned adjacent to full-length windows, for example, and that the cats may feel more secure if they were further away from locations where they can be observed by cats outside. It also gives you both the opportunity to discuss suitable positions for the water bowls (to be placed away from the food bowls) and the ideal places to put the litter trays. Once the information gathering is complete, the challenge then is to alter the layout, add some resources and relocate others, to create an environment that gives the cats in the household an increased sense of security and a perception of abundance of important resources in accessible places. In theory this is always the part of a behaviour modification programme that underpins any other advice specific to the individual circumstances.

If the behaviourist involved works from a clinic rather than visiting the home then these maps are an essential part of the fact-finding process. However, even those that work in the cat's home environment may appreciate the benefits of working from these diagrams. They may request them to be prepared at the time of the consultation but, in my experience, it is often better to work on them in advance of the appointment to give you, the owner, plenty of time to produce a complete and reasonably accurate set of diagrams. Often by setting everything down on paper it

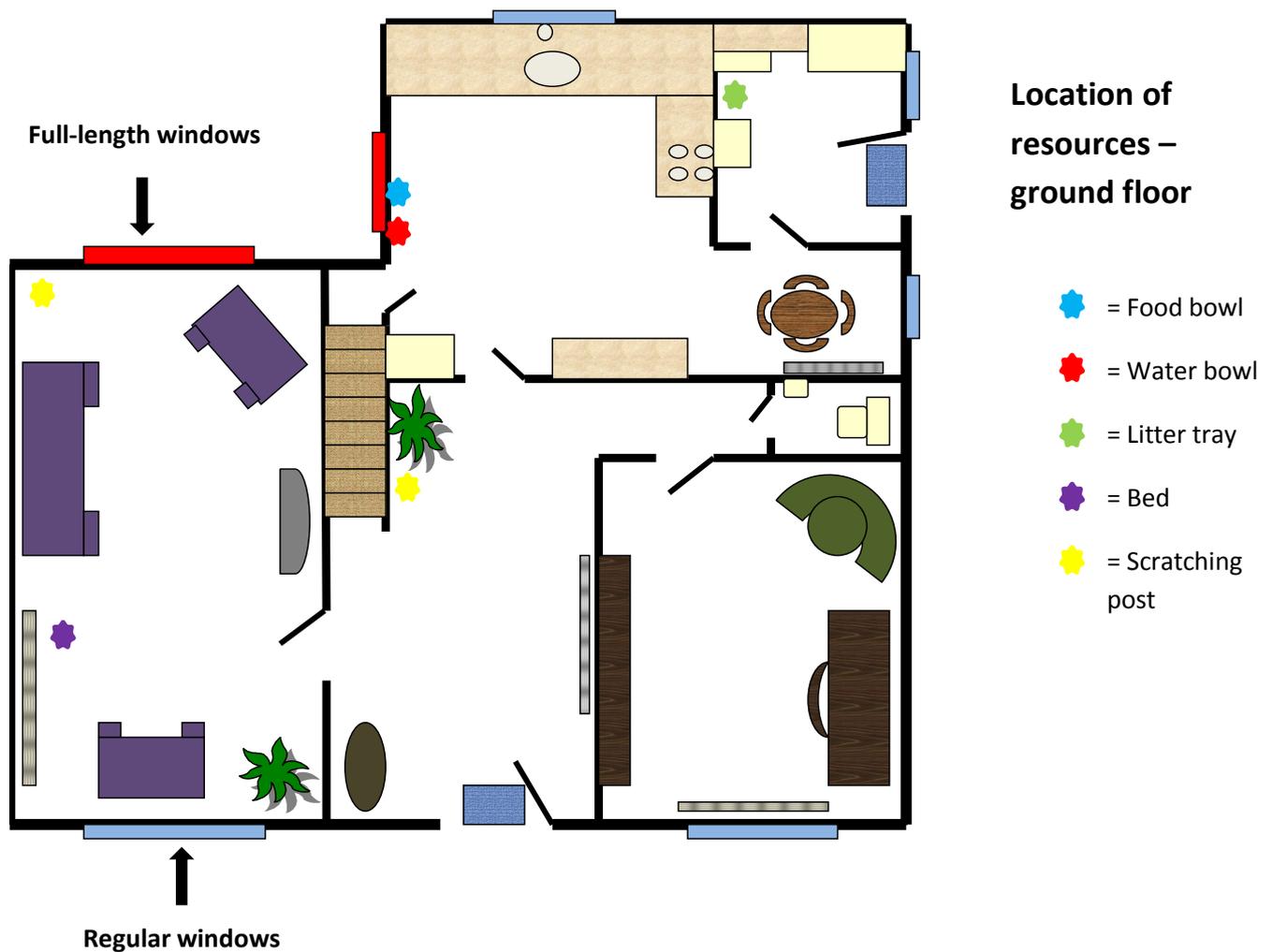
creates “Eureka!” moments as it becomes clear why certain things may be happening.

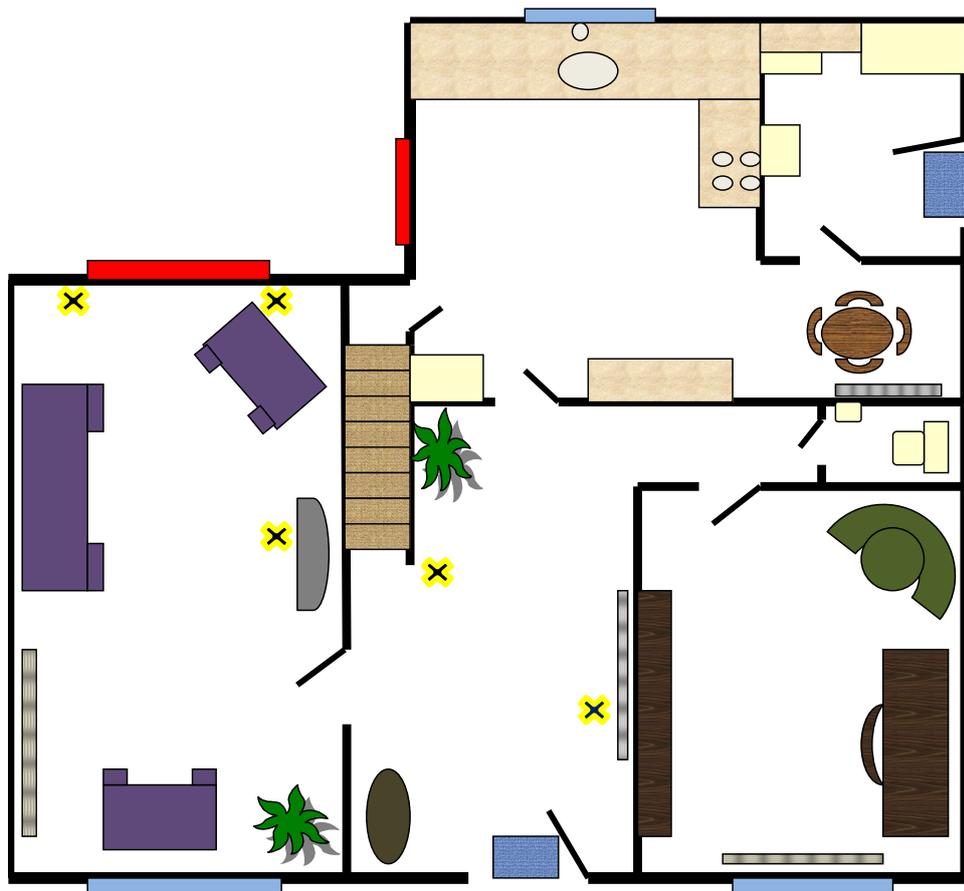
Even if you never need to call upon the services of a pet behaviour counsellor there may still be occasions when it would help to view your cat’s environment from this unique bird’s eye perspective. I would suggest that it is probably a useful thing to produce, when you have a little time on your hands, just in case!

How to make a house map

1. Graph paper is perfect for the task as it allows you to draw straight lines in any direction. Don’t worry about working to scale as this would become extremely complicated but the basic layout is important. Showing that the living room is larger than a cloakroom for example is essential so the aim is to get an idea of the relative size of the rooms you are drawing. If you don’t have graph paper, regular lined paper should suffice.
2. Draw the basic outline of the house, to roughly fill the size of the paper. Mark on the outline the position of the external doors, windows and any full-length glass windows or doors, using different colours or symbols to differentiate between them. It may help this initial process to walk round the external walls and note whether your home is a box shape or a more complex shape. If you live in an upper floor flat you can view the ground floor and use that basic shape (the equivalent of the part of the building that you inhabit) to form the outline of your floor plan.
3. If there is more than one floor to your property, create one drawing for each level.
4. Mark the internal walls and doors to show each room and mark accordingly. Any staircases should also be shown (drawing a series of parallel lines usually works to denote stairs) together with radiators and other fixtures such as fitted wardrobes.
5. If the kitchen has fitted units and appliances they should also be shown.
6. This will give the basic outline of each room which then needs to be filled by showing the location of furniture.

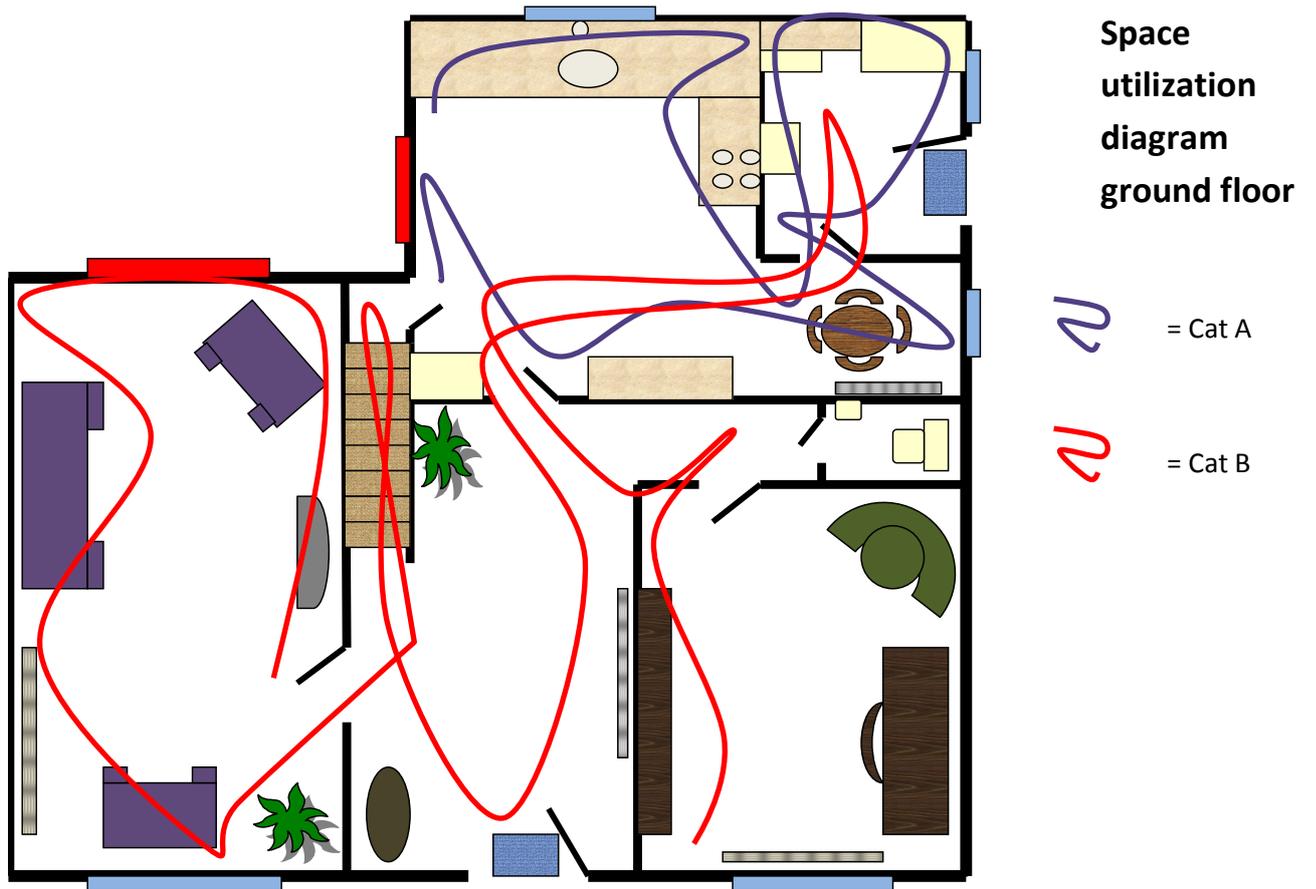
7. Once complete this gives the basic plan for each floor of the property.
8. To avoid over complicating each diagram it would be useful to photocopy each plan to provide one to show location of resources, another to show the sites of the problem behaviour, such as urine spraying and (particularly for multi-cat households) a final one to show how each cat uses the space within the home.

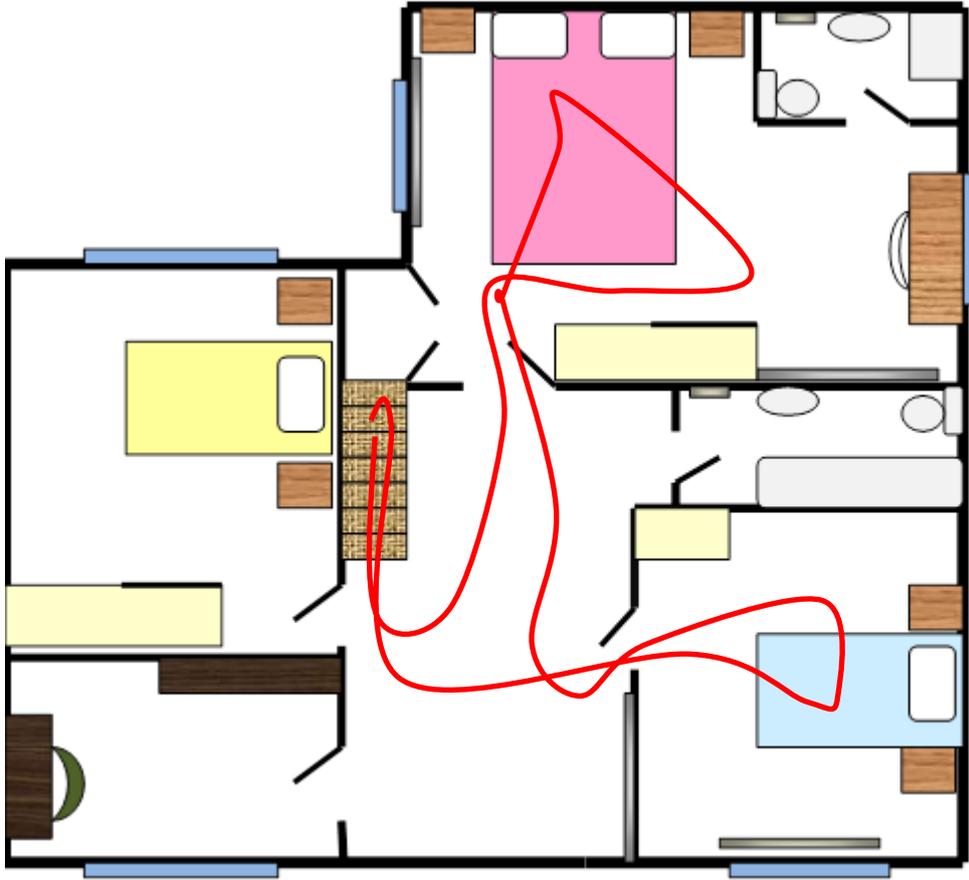




Sites of problem behaviour, e.g. urine spraying, ground floor

✘ = Site of urine spraying - if the order in which the marking took place is known it can also be shown here, e.g. ✘ 1st, 2nd etc.





First floor
diagram
example

Red scribble = Cat B