

The Minimum Home

Dr Ersi Ioannidou

Abstract: This paper is an exploration into the role of objects in the creation of the domestic interior and the establishment of a sense of 'at home'. It argues that personal possessions create an itinerant domestic interior and proposes that this interior represents a place-unbound meaning of the home – the minimum home. The paper investigates this hypothesis by project and text. The project applies archaeological methods of research to an existing domestic interior. It is a study of modern material culture, which probes the relations between the objects, their owner and a specific site. The text continues this exploration through a theoretical analysis on the relationship between an individual and his personal possessions that draws on the fields of anthropology, philosophy and psychology. Project and text attempt to understand the material 'at home' constructed by one's personal possessions and the immaterial 'at home' created by their relationship to their owner. The paper uses these two forms of inquiry to argue that personal possessions are the minimum material means necessary for the individual to create a sense of 'at home'; they represent the minimum home.

Introduction

This paper explores how objects build space. In particular, how material mobile personal possessions create the domestic interior and establish a sense of 'at home'. My argument is that personal possessions create a transferable domestic interior that represents a place-unbound meaning of the home. This hypothesis is pursued by project and text. The project: 'Excavating Home' is a study of modern material culture, which probes the relationships between the objects, their owner and a specific site. By applying methods of archaeological excavation and documentation to an existing domestic interior, it tries to unearth the material and immaterial layers that have constructed this interior and built the relationship of the home. The text: 'Objects Build Space' further develops and supports this exploration by a theoretical analysis on the relationship between an individual and his personal possessions. The project precedes the text and sets the main focus of the research; that is, to understand the material 'at home' constructed by one's personal possessions and the immaterial 'at home' created by their relationship to their owner.

Project: Excavating Home

'Excavating Home' conducts an archaeological rescue excavation on an existing domestic interior. The methods used in an archaeological excavation reveal the successive processes and layers of materials that have constructed a site; in the same way in my project these methods examine how a gradual accumulation, arrangement and layering of objects construct the domestic interior. To this purpose, 'Excavating Home' follows the procedure of a standard archaeological excavation step-by step.

The site of the excavation was a room I occupied on Bethnal Green Road in East London. The choice of the site was spontaneous. I was about to move out of this room and ready to pack my things when this idea came to me that mobile possessions were building materials that formed the innermost layer of the house. They create the domestic interior and in my case they create a portable domestic interior that I re-build in each room I occupy in various locations. With this idea in mind, instead of simply packing my things I decided to 'excavate' the interior I had created; that is, to pack my things in a scientifically structured and recorded way.



Image 01 Excavating Home. The west wall: the excavation grid is indicated by a red thread.

The excavation of the room was partial. Only the west wall was examined. I chose this wall as it was almost fully covered with mobile possessions and presented the most interesting and promising location for my investigation. [Image 01] I started my excavation campaign with the laying out of a co-ordinates grid – as in a traditional archaeological excavation. The grid divided the site into 1mx1m squares; each designated with a letter-number prefix. [Image 02]



Image 02 Excavating Home. The west wall divided by the grid

The function of the grid was to facilitate the recording of the site and the finds. Following the standard procedure of an archaeological excavation, I first drew a complete plan and section of the site (scale 1:20) in order to establish the limits of the excavation. [Image 03] Subsequently, I recorded and excavated the squares of the grid one by one. I drew each square on a unit sheet in detail (scale 1:5), [Image 04] photographed it and registered it on a photographic record card.

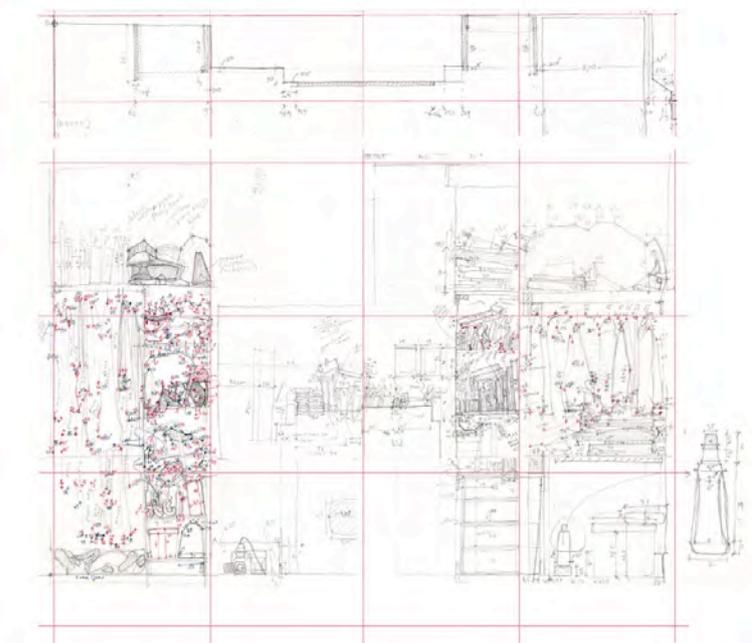


Image 03 Excavating Home. Pencil sketch of the west wall

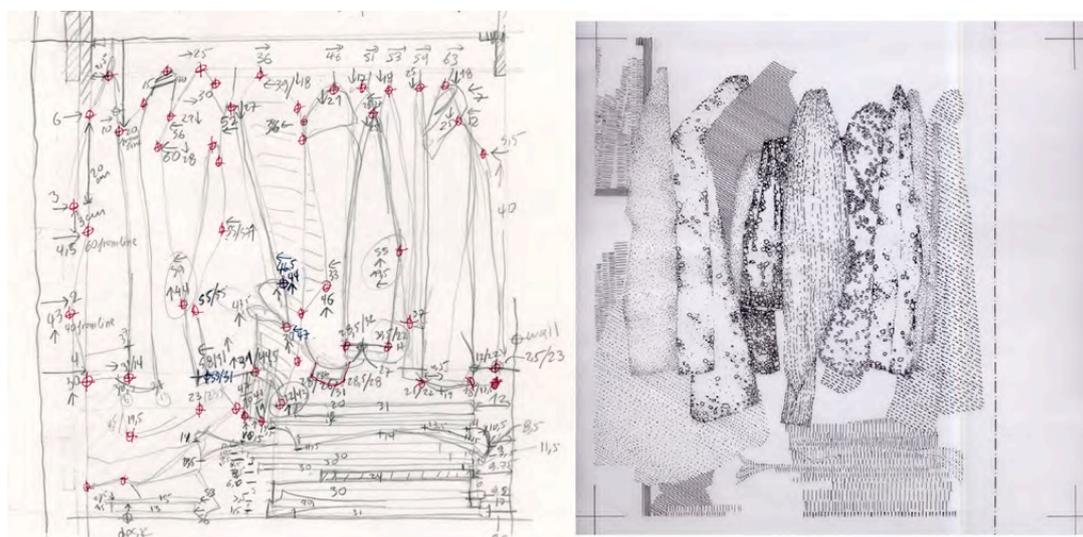


Image 04 Excavating Home. Recording the west wall: pencil sketch and its corresponding ink drawing of square B04.

These first recordings dealt with the material presence of the objects in relation to the site. Drawings and photos registered the dimensions of the objects and the position of each object on the site. I proceeded by removing the objects from the site and recording them one by one. Each object was recorded with an entry in the finds register, photographed and notes if any on its story and derivation were taken. Later a photographic record card was produced, which

In the latter stages of the excavation campaign, the detailed recording of individual objects dealt with the material qualities of the finds: photos kept a record of their shape and colour; samples revealed materials and textures; the finds register measured the accumulation from find no 0001 to find no 0350. My method was to take the objects encountered on the site as they presented themselves. No original assumption of what they signify or represent was made. The use of scientific ways of registration was an attempt to achieve a clear and objective presentation of the information recorded. Of course, the objectiveness of these methods was compromised as the site was my room and the objects were my personal possessions. Dealing with my personal possessions, I could not possibly be an objective viewer and investigator. Yet, this meticulous and exhaustive recording helped me to think through the objects on their role in everyday life.

The spontaneous and compromised choice of the site was a lucky choice in many ways; first, the room was inhabited by a single person – me – so it allowed the project to focus on the relationship between one person and her personal possessions. Second, the site of the excavation being my own room, almost every find had a special meaning. The archaeologist creates a narrative around the objects found in an excavation making assumptions on their use and meaning. Here, there was no need to guess these hidden qualities; just record them. Nevertheless, the process of sorting, classifying and registering brought their special meaning and value to the fore. Here are a few examples:

- Object: white protective overalls

The note on its record card reads: 'costume for London Roof Event, Trafalgar Square, London, August 2002.' A mundane object gains value due to its association to an event in the past.

- Object: shells

The note reads: 'shells from Samoa Islands, present from Melania, Summer 2001.' The shells gain significance due to their association to my friend Melania.

- Object: flowery skirt

The note reads: 'bought by my mother as present the summer I graduated from school / worn at the good-bye dinner of the school.' An old skirt works as a memento of a past summer and its events.

And so on. If we go through the finds register and the record cards, we observe that the notes relate objects to stories, people, places, experiences and other objects. In other words, they reveal the role of personal possessions as records of habits, personal histories and the passing of time.

These objects can be simply useful (e.g. detergent), simply mnemonic (e.g. photos), just in case things (e.g. the telephone directory), everyday life detritus (e.g. cloths tag from ZARA), and even 'not mine' (e.g. Hlynur's collection of recipes in Icelandic), but in most cases their role in everyday life is ambiguous. A piece of clothing can be at the same time useful and mnemonic – as we have already seen in the example of the skirt – as it might function as a memory cue to events, people or places. Of course, this categorisation of personal objects according to their role in everyday life can never be exhaustive. One might go on and on and compile a list as absurd, personal and fascinating as Jorge Luis Borges's a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia'. This apparent impossibility of thorough objective and definite classification of personal possessions according to their role in everyday life indicates the complex and individual relationship between objects and their owner.

The material collected through the various methods of recording of the project: 'Excavating Home' captures the space interwoven by the material presence of the objects and by their function as a system of personal references and suggests that personal possessions build the domestic interior both with their material presence and with their immaterial value and meaning. This speculative conclusion of the project is the starting point for a text-based research which elaborates on the theme of 'Excavating Home'; that is, how objects build space and in particular how personal possessions construct the domestic interior and within it a sense of 'at home'.

Text: Objects Build Space

A vast body of work in the fields of Anthropology, Philosophy and Psychology investigates the role of objects in everyday life and suggests possible ways of categorisation. In *The System of Objects* (1968), for example, Jean Baudrillard suggests a possible way of classifying objects according to their role in everyday life. He writes that every object has two functions: to be put in use and to be possessed.¹ These two functions stand in reverse ratio to each other. When an object is simply possessed, like an item in a collection, it is abstracted from its everyday function and acts as a visual representation of the collector. When an object is strictly practical – a refrigerator for example – it is not possessed as it refers its owner to the world. In *The Meaning of Things* (1981), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton make a different distinction; they argue that objects have two main opposite roles: to be used and to be consumed. When an object is used, it becomes a means to an end; when it is consumed it becomes an end in itself.² More importantly, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue that even the most practical objects are not divested of symbolic meaning due to their role in socialising a person to a certain habit or way of life and in representing this way of life. These classifications – use, possession, consumption – are not mutually exclusive and give only a few possible interpretations of the role of objects in everyday life. Most objects, as 'Excavating Home' suggests, have an ambiguous role in everyday life. Of course, in modernity, commoditisation and consumption reduce the symbolic meaning of objects. However, very few objects are purely used or consumed; a large number of objects one possesses are perceived by their owner as tokens of past experience, remembrance, love, future goals, enjoyable sensations and so on.

Mobile personal possessions 'are more than mere "things"', as Anat Hecht eloquently puts it in 'Home Sweet Home', 'they are a collection of appropriated materials, invested with meaning and memory, a material testament of who we are, where we have been, and perhaps even where we are heading.'³ Each personal object is attributed a symbolic meaning; it becomes a material transcription of its owner's history and identity. Together, personal possessions form a framework within which the individual constitutes one's consciousness. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton explain, the objects someone uses, owns and surrounds oneself with become signs of one's identity and history. But, they do not merely reflect aspects of the owner's personality; they are inseparable from who one is. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton refer here to Hannah Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* that objects have a stabilising role in human life; objects due to their durability construct an artifice of stability and solidity which is very important to a man as man is an 'unstable and mortal creature'.⁴ Arendt further explains that men 'retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity by being related to the same chair and the same table.'⁵ Thus, objects build a durable refuge for the self. Objects as symbols of durability and continuity help their owner deal with the passing of time by functioning as a witness and register of the past. At the same time, objects at the base of a

network of habits involve the individual in repetitive sequences that do not imply continuity but discontinuity. Habits, as Baudrillard notes, break up time and thus alleviate the anxiety provoked by the temporal continuum and the singularity of events. In this dual role, objects build a protective screen between the continuous irrevocable time and the individual.

In this context, we understand why projects such as John D. Freyer's *All My Life for Sale* (2001) and Michael Landy's *Break Down* (2001) have the power to shock. In these projects the artists aspire to liberate themselves from all material possession. In *All my Life for Sale*, Freyer auctioned all the items contained in his apartment on eBay. Freyer saw the project as an opportunity to liberate himself from all ties, escape and start again. He also hoped that the sale would provide him with the necessary means for this escape. In *Break Down*, Landy recorded and destroyed all of his 7.227 personal possessions in a very public and systematic way in a defunct department shop on Oxford Street, London. For the efficient completion of this task he used a large bespoke machine and a team of helpers. Poignantly Landy confesses: 'One way or other I'm trying to get rid of myself, so it's a kind of the ultimate way without actually dispensing of me.' These projects trigger contradictory feelings of liberation and fear; a sense of liberation from all material possessions and fear because of the feeling of homelessness 'life without objects' suggests. The process of getting rid of all our possessions leaves us with no material inscription of our history and identity and no refuge for the self.

Personal possessions construct a personal order in space, in time and within the self. This personal order is manifested in the way personal possessions occupy the domestic interior. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), Michel de Certeau gives a vivid description of this occupation; he writes:

the most modest home reveals the personality of the occupant ... the game of exclusions and preferences, the arrangement of the furniture, the choice of materials, the range of forms and colours ... an open book, a newspaper lying down, a racquet, ashtrays, order and disorder, visible and invisible ... and even more so the manner of organising the available space, however cramped it may be, and distributing throughout the different daily functions (meals, dressing, receiving guests, cleaning, study, leisure, rest) ... – all of this already composes a 'life narrative'⁶

de Certeau's description illustrates how objects create an intimate world within the interior of a place-bound house. There is an assumption that the domestic interior and the sense of 'at home' are created in relation to a specific location; in other words, that the personal order of the domestic interior is place-bound. However, this is not necessarily true. As already suggested in 'Excavating Home', personal possessions create a transferable interior that carries a meaning of the home. In support of this speculative proposition, authors such as Mark Cousins and Kimberly Dovey argue that people carry in them 'a kind of spatial repetition'; that is, they tend to create the same spatial configurations when they relocate from one place to another. This is not of course the exact recreation of an interior but rather 'an analogy between two rooms'. This analogy repeats a set of spatial relationships between objects and the emotions they evoke. The personal order manifested in the arrangement of personal possessions is transported and translated as their owner moves from one location to another. Through this repetition, as Dovey explains, the individual tries to recreate the experience of the home. These unconsciously repeated spatial patterns carry the familiarity from other places in past experience; specifically, they have their roots 'in the experiences of childhood

... the homes of our past.' This suggests that one's personal possessions, the references they carry and the spatial configurations they repeat create a domestic interior that carries the meaning of home; a meaning that is not necessarily place-bound.

Conclusion



Image 07 Excavating Home. The west wall

Going back to the initial stage of the project: 'Excavating Home', I suggest that we take a second look at the west wall viewing it this time not as an excavation site but as part of a domestic interior. [Image 07] My project and text have tried to retrieve the tools to analyse and discuss this apparently disorderly accumulation and arrangement of material mobile personal possessions – as the west wall may have originally appeared. The project tried to unearth the material and immaterial layers that construct the domestic interior and the meaning of the home. It stressed the role of objects as fragmentary references to memories, people, places, narratives and experiences. It exposed how personal possessions construct the domestic interior out of the material and immaterial sediments of the ongoing process of living. The text sought to underpin theoretically the speculative finds of the project. It confirmed that personal possessions reflect a special relationship between objects and their owner and suggested that one's collection of personal possessions, the information they carry and the spatial configurations they create build a transferable domestic interior that carries a place-unbound meaning of the home. Project and text put forward the proposition that personal possessions are the minimum material means necessary for the individual to create a sense of 'at home'; they represent the minimum home.

Endnotes

¹ Baudrillard, Jean (1968), *The System of Objects* p

² Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly and Rochberg-Halton Eugene, (1981) *The Meaning of Things* p

³ Hecht, Anat () 'Home Sweet Home' p

⁴ Arendt Hannah, () *The Human Condition* p

⁵ Arendt Hannah, () *The Human Condition* p

⁶ de Certeau, Michel (1974), *The Practice of Everyday Life* p

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