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Happy Homes: Placing people and their 'Stuff' as the focus of the Interior Design and Architectural process

This paper will argue that using anthropological methodologies such as placing people and their 'stuff' (Miller) as the focus of the Interior Design and Architectural process, will create more emotionally durable new homes for people to live in.

Currently in the UK, new home building is a priority as demand vastly outstrips supply. This paper will argue the long revered Le Corbusier mantra that residential buildings are 'machines for living' is now defunct and a more socially aware and inclusive process is needed to ensure the well-being of new inhabitants and aid the establishment and longevity of communities in high density city areas.

Specifically, this paper will focus on Interior Design process as the medium by which institutional architecture and detached occupants can conciliate. The paper takes as its primary case study a research project conducted with first year undergraduate students who were moving to University accommodation as their first 'home away from home' (Cieraad). It discloses the efforts and dilemmas new occupants of purpose built institutional accommodation face in their endeavours to make a 'home' and establish a community for the first time. It compares the experiences of these students to those living in other institutional places such as council estates or prisons (Clarke, Miller et al). Drawing on these findings, it suggests that designing interior spaces with people and their possessions is key to establishing harmonious communities and better relationships between occupant and landlord.

Prologue

Having worked as professional Interior Designer for 17 years, how people occupy space is at the forefront of my design process. Indeed, to my students I describe Interior Design as the remodelling of existing spaces, how they are occupied, used and ultimately experienced by people. However, working in the commercial realm for large brands and developers, I was conscious this process was not always the priority for paying clients, where space efficiencies, budget and profit took precedence.

As I repositioned my career in academia, my focus came back to people, occupation and space and I was determined to work in a more philosophical and compassionate manner.

At this time, I bought a derelict house in a South Manchester suburb, which my Architect husband and I set about designing and renovating what would become the family home for our two young boys. The obsession with home owning and making our 'castle' seems to be a particularly British phenomenon, but as a designer and architect, our modernist fantasies were played out to the full, making our aspirational and, perhaps, archetypical 'white and glass box' to live in.

Fast forward a few years to my annual trip to Northern Ireland, which is what cultural anthropologist Irene Cieraad would describe as my 'home home'. My then 94 year old Granny had decided she would probably be dead by the next time I came 'home home' and she needed to pass on some of her worldly possessions. A brooch, a blown glass vase and a collection of plates to start with, then more jewellery, crockery and ornaments followed. In true Granny fashion, she was of course still alive and kicking by my next visit and the next after that, and so on, and as time wore on I gained a growing collection of her possessions in my home; none of which were to my taste, or were sympathetic to the aesthetics of the white and glass box we now live in.

And so my dilemma was born; what to do with Granny's stuff, that holds so much sentimental value and stories of my 'home home', but doesn't aesthetically or physically 'fit' the modern, functionally efficient and aspirational home I have designed?

In observing and contemplating this, I began to question my process as a designer and the priority order by which I designed.

The modernist architect Le Corbusier would call our home 'A Machine for Living' and the emotional attachment to Granny's stuff 'a crime'. However, the anthropologist Daniel Miller would call Granny's stuff 'ghosts', with reference to heirlooms we collect or the building we occupy, as agencies that haunt and unconsciously shape our domestic environment.

It intrigued me as a designer that I hadn't acknowledged, or yet known, about these 'ghosts'. My Art School training and commercial practise experience hadn't prepared me for such hauntings.

The 'ghost' authority of modernist architecture, the 'ghost' of granny's stuff, and as my children grow, the 'ghosts' of the sentimental stuff they generate too.

Ultimately, these were non-functional possessions but they somehow turned our house into a home. It bothered me that in the design process, I had considered how my family would functionally occupy our home but it didn't occur to me how we would 'emotionally occupy' it.

By 'emotionally occupy' I mean making a place for everyday objects and possessions that don't have a function or use but we can't part with; the stuff that identifies who lives there and provides a narrative of our lives. The stuff that provides comfort and makes us happy.

Back at University, I had been asked to comment on the interiors for new student accommodation at Manchester Metropolitan University's Birley Fields campus.

The University's contractor was looking for ways to reach its BREEAM targets and wanted feedback on whether the students' interior environment, in particular the colour and furnishings, would affect how sustainably they would use the building. In short, they wanted to know if a set of red curtains or red painted walls in the living spaces would make the students feel warm and therefore not turn the heating on.

Having failed to find any quantifiable academic research on this topic, I thought back to my own home and the observations I was making about how I lived via my design process; I immediately knew the issues were more complex and of course the Universities 'red curtain' theory rather spurious. Every person is different and will have different responses to an environment, determined by any number of factors such as class, culture, gender, environment, mood or even what they had for breakfast that day!

I spent some time in the proposed student accommodation (which at that time was a mere shell) with members of Residential Services who manage the Halls and I was drawn to the blank identikit boxes the students would be provided with to live in.

The 'ghost' authority of the University and the architect were palpable, white walls and glass, order and institution.

The Halls were to be managed by very specific rules about what furniture students could or could not have in their room; a university standard desk, yes, posters on walls, no, and what they could or could not bring with them. Whilst this would allow the University to run the Halls safely, efficiently and with control, I found myself asking how the students would successfully make these spaces their home with such limitations? I wondered how they would make decisions about what 'things' they were to bring with them and what was left behind? What place and space is there for their possessions and 'stuff'? As I had discovered myself, if our

stuff provides comfort and happiness, how might a lack of it affect the students' experience, success and importantly, well-being whilst at University?

According to the Times Higher Education, the dropout rate before the 2nd yr of university has increased for the second year in a row¹, mental health issues are rising steeply and with that, suicide too. It made me consider how a students' emotive relationship with their environment could have more serious consequences.

I also speculated that with such evident 'ghost authority' in the Halls of Residence, how could students successfully make their 'home away from home' when they, as occupants, were invisible to those making the spaces.

This notion likened the design of student accommodation to that of council estates, hospitals, prisons or asylum centres, whereby the occupier rarely has a voice in the physical design and arrangement of their interior environment, it being already predetermined by a designer, architect or other authority, with different motivations.

Miller recognised the tension that can be created in the domestic environment and the impact on relationships between identity, space and object. For example, while studying the occupants of council housing, he identified that living with such 'ghost authorities' could lead to feelings of frustration, alienation and animosity amongst inhabitants. (2001)

So if we view the design of student accommodation and social housing as similar entities, it becomes clear that these are not ideal living quarters for 1st yr undergrad students who would be dealing with the many new challenges of University life, from making friends and finding their feet socially, to pressures of fees, finances and 'doing well'.

Such personal complexities were never considered in Le Corbusier's Machine's for Living because, I would argue, they might put a spanner in the works...

The problem with Le Corbusier

In his seminal text 'Towards a New Architecture', Corbusier vented his frustration about the lack of innovation in architecture. Together with other Modernist manifestos of the time (Gropius, et al..) he desired to see design and architecture as an evolving and progressive part of the Industrial era, rather than a mere service to replicate what had gone before.

Corbusier felt architects were lazy, looking backwards to static and pastiche Classicism, instead of forwards towards evolving new materials and systems of construction as found in engineering, like the pioneering emergence of the car and aeroplane.

In aligning architecture with engineering, Corbusier was embracing a higher mathematical order to solve the problem of mass produced housing. In Towards a New Architecture, he states,

"...the standard of the house is a question of practical and constructive order..."

and goes as far to say that room proportion, furniture, rugs and carefully curated objects are part of this order too. Ornamentation or wall coverings were deemed superfluous and lower in order, and any emotional investment in these objects was scorned. He said,

".....a chair is in no way a work of art; a chair has no soul; it is a machine for sitting in...."

In echoes of Adolf Loos' 1921 manifesto 'Ornament and Crime', Corbusier goes further to state that:

¹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/dropout-rate-young-uk-students-rises-again>

“Decoration is of a sensorial and elementary order, as is colour, and is suited to simple races, peasants and savages. Harmony and proportion incite the intellectual faculties and arrest the man of culture. The peasant loves ornamentation and decorates his walls. The civilised man wears a well-cut suit and is the owner of easel, picture and books”

I would argue, Corbusier and his associates effectively alienated the inhabitants of the spaces they designed. They did this by inciting a pseudo intellectualism to the aesthetic order of our homes and Corbusier's influence was such, that his methods set the philosophical doctrine for how mass produced housing, which includes Student Accommodation, are still designed nearly 100 years later.

The occupants are purely treated as part of the order, to fit into the machine; their possessions pastiche and opposed to the architects' higher intellect and authority. To quote Le Corbusier again,

“Demand bare walls in your bedroom, your living room and your dining room. Build in fittings to take the place of furniture, which is expensive to buy, takes up too much room, and needs looking after.....Buy only practical furniture and never buy decorative “pieces”.....’

It could almost have been written by those who commission University student accommodation!

Ultimately, this led me to think about the role of the designer and architect in such a scenario; are we facilitators of the 'ghost' as Miller would say, rather than collaborator with the occupant? Has our ingrained pseudo intellectual doctrine for function and economy, vastly outweighed our basic human instincts for empathy and happiness in design?

Although there has been much work done on participatory design processes, see for instance the written work of Wendy Gunn and the social engagement projects of Turner Prize winning collaborators Assemble, I have recognised there has been little work that addresses the philosophical relationship between intermediaries, such as architects and interior designers like myself, and theories of actual inhabitation. This ethnographic research is clearly relevant to designing interior spaces but has yet to make any methodological impact on the design process of the discipline so far. Furthermore, Interior design practice is often deemed an aesthetic or functional exercise only and so, I recently set out to reveal the complexities I've highlighted, by undertaking a pilot ethnographic study of 1st yr Manchester Metropolitan University students, living in the Birley Fields Halls of Residence. My intentions being to design more 'emotionally durable' 'happy homes' for students to occupy when they move to University.

The Packing Project

I decided to use purely anthropological and sociological methodologies to inform my ultimate design decision making process to try to reveal the subtleties, nuances and tensions of shared living.

With the intent of using focus groups, I set up the Packing Project as a means to attract prospective student participants to the project via social media and then, once a focus group had been established, employ cultural probes as a tool to gather tangible material, with which to make better informed interior design responses.

A Facebook page was set up and the project named 'The Packing Project' in order to create a 'student friendly' aspect for the project. 'The Packing Project' page introduced me as a researcher, what the project is about and what I would need from potential participants. It was launched at the start of August, timed to coincide with A-Level results, when students would be confirming their places at university and therefore also their student accommodation. This time frame was critical as I was keen to capture the initial stages of preparation; who might

help, what were the key concerns, and ultimately, how and what 'transitional objects' would the group bring to their university accommodation.

Easier said than done.

Initial interest was good, with the site attracting 7 eager participants however requests to meet drew a blank response. This reticence was a concern as my next methodology was to action the cultural probes.

It became apparent as the weeks wore on, the focus group was going to be harder to establish than I had anticipated. I noted engagement with the project on social media was no more than as a fleeting observer – 'window shopping' perhaps and upon further reflection, it became evident that 18 year olds were not going to blindly share personal information about themselves. Social media allows a person to portray an image of him or herself in a controlled manner, but they did not want to reveal anything further - to a complete stranger, about at a stage in their life, when they are making the daunting transition of leaving home for the first time.

I decided I needed to create an arena where trust between myself and the participants had already been established.

Inspired by the work of Wendy Gunn, I devised a workshop for incoming 1st year students to BA (Hons) Interior Design, as this is the course I teach on and the students would have met me before. Also, by virtue of their subject, I was hopeful participants would take a keen interest in looking at their environments more closely. The challenges to this scenario were again, to reassure participants they weren't being judged and secondly, this was not an exam and they were not being assessed!

I developed two methodological strands for the workshop.

The first, to conduct 'object interviews' as anthropologist Sophie Woodward developed in her on going work for the project '*Dormant Things*'.

Woodward states "Dormant things explores items people keep in spaces in their homes such as cupboards and attics which they do not currently use (or never have). Understanding dormant things has implications for understanding memories, life and relationship changes"

And so students were invited to bring a number of items to the workshop in order to stimulate a conversational interview. They were asked to bring:

1. a printed out image or drawing of the place you call 'home home' ie. where you feel you are from/most yourself.
2. a printed out image or drawing of where you are living in order to attend University.
4. an object (or two if you wish) you've brought with you from 'home home' to your new home.
5. an object you can't live without

The second methodology employed was 'accidental ethnography' which is often used by sociologist or political scientists, whereby a researcher may glean useful data via the unplanned or accidental moments in a given situation or context. This method proved very insightful as the students started to relax and open up about their stuff.

I too brought in a collection of stuff, as did some of my colleagues, which was a good leveller for the group. I began the workshop by sharing the items I had brought, and indeed why they were the stimulus for my research project. I then invited the students to share the stories of their objects with a partner, while I listened in.

Findings

As I listened to the students' conversations, I noted the following observations:

- all objects were small and portable. Students had a low expectation of what they could bring to university and so small items of memorabilia were a theme, or items that could be easily packed up and moved on. By 'low expectations' I mean there was a general sense that they knew they couldn't bring anything sizeable, so didn't.

- there were few 'heirlooms'. The students didn't feel much attachment to family heirlooms. There was a sense of 'starting out' and wanting to establish their own space with their own stuff.

- no-one brought photo albums or photos in a frame. This was a surprise to me. When asked about why no one had brought any photo's of friends or family the response was, "...they're all on Facebook so I look at them digitally when I want to."

- International students, who were a long way from 'home home', brought objects of more sentimental value, bought or made by family members. I contemplated this difference with UK based students. Did distance from home mean there was a need for more stuff of sentimental value?

It was the case for nearly all students that a table for doing their university work was very important. Some even selected their accommodation on the basis of where the table was located in the room i.e by a window, or next to a wall. There was a sense that they didn't see the Art School studios as a place where they could 'bed down' and so space for doing their creative work was a factor in deciding where they would live.

Students also began to discuss their new flat mates; what it was like sharing with strangers and which areas and objects in their new home were places of silent or rising tension. The cleanliness of the kitchen was a point of contention, as well as 'their cup' being taken from 'their cupboard' and used by someone else.

Flat mates cooking smells, laundry schedules, laundry drying and differing sleep patterns were also causing stress. As a designer, I was intrigued; my mind was bustling with countless design solutions.

Indeed, the students revealed the biggest challenge about moving to university accommodation, was learning to live with other people and claiming their 'place' and identity in shared spaces. It was clear it was difficult to make a new home. I wondered if having more of their own possessions would help, or at least the freedom to choose their furnishings. That way students could make connections with 'home home' and perhaps with a safe and secure foundation in their possessions, feel more confident in their place. Irene Cieraad noticed this in a pilot study she conducted with Dutch students. She says.

"The room will be less of a home when the material conditions fail, for instance, when there is no choice of rooms, when the room is furnished by the landlord, when kitchen facilities are lacking, or when the shared bathroom is dirty."

The workshop session ended positively with a young man declaring he loved his new student accommodation. We will call him John. John immediately bonded with his flat mate over a shared love of the same beer, which he'd noticed whilst stocking the shared fridge. On closer inspection of the fridge several more coincidences and compatibilities were revealed, not just between John and his flatmate but amongst the six others too.

They celebrated their new found friendships by a fundamental shift in the arrangements of their stuff; moving from using their cupboards to individually store their own crockery and cutlery, to placing everyone's kitchen stuff together, as one would find in a family home. They celebrated this coming together and their new friendships with a 'flat meal' and of course, beer. The happiness factor had been revealed.

To conclude

So, to conclude, this small pilot project clearly illustrates making 'home' is a complex matter indeed. I would argue making any space where people co-exist, from interiors through to Cities, is a complicated matter. Each profession involved in such projects no doubt has their professional duty to respect budgets, safety and function, but I would argue too many of our buildings are being constructed to this priority level and the well being of people who live in these spaces and places is rarely considered. It concerns me what this will mean for the interiors, buildings and cities of the future.

David Miller says,

*"...interior design.....is actually a foundational attribute of merely being human."*²

If this is the case, then surely interior designers such as myself can be the medium by which institutional architecture and detached occupants conciliate, and I argue placing people and their stuff as the focus of this process is a good place to start.

² Clarke, Alison J. 2018. *Design anthropology: Object cultures in transition*. [2nd] ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

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