On Human Remains: Excavating the Home Archive

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ABSTRACT

In this talk I will be discussing some of my recent fieldwork, which has sought to explore the relationship between people and objects. I have been actively engaged in fieldwork in 11 family homes exploring how people accumulate, store and otherwise live with sentimental artefacts and memorabilia, both physical and digital.

From previous research which explored the work that went into organising, collating, storing and editing of both photos and videos in the domestic space (see Kirk et al, 2006, and Kirk et al 2007), variously otherwise referred to as 'home-mode' practices (Chalfen, 1987), I have come to realise the importance of the physical and the tangible in people's lives and the ways in which this is entwined with practices of memory. This research work was then an effort to begin to explore the kinds of sentimental objects people keep in their homes, to understand where they keep them and most importantly, why they keep them, investigating people's burgeoning relationships with these objects over their life-course. From exploring people's relationships with 'objects' of sentimental value, both physical and digital, I hope to be able to inform the design of devices, which might enrich our experiences of archiving memories[1].

Through the fieldwork we have begun to observe some patterns of behaviour, in terms of artefact storage and display, which have outlined for us the importance of place and space in curating the home. Of course here the term curating is used intentionally to reflect on the fact that our adopted research methodology of site visits and guided tours inevitably led to the production of accounts for objects 'found' or shown to us within the home. We feel however, that observation of this accounting of objects and the commonalities between accounts of different objects as discussed by different people in different homes has revealed a set of common concerns as to the ways in which we currently use objects as tools of reminiscence. And, the ways in which we as home owners attempt to (which might be the wrong phrase, perhaps 'inevitably' is more appropriate) embody ourselves in our private spaces, creating what Gonzalez (1995) refers to as autotopographies. Our approach however, with its hopefully more

sensitive concern for family life, highlights how the use of a phrase such as autotopography[2] over-emphasises the unique contributions of one individual to a given environment. Through our fieldwork therefore we seek to draw out the ways in which the home is made a home, through family-life, in a more negotiated fashion (after Taylor et al, 2007), perhaps suggesting a more dominant paradigm of familia-topography. To which end we explore how memory artefacts archived in spaces are used to construct, reinforce and otherwise negotiate concepts of family.

In the talk I will briefly highlight a couple of 'meaningful objects' from the field and talk through how they elucidate some of the concepts that our research is currently attempting to explore. The talk will hopefully resonate with the themes of the seminar by exploring the role of mundane artefacts in structuring evocative experience. It will draw parallels between photos and other forms of memory artefact and it will explore how such objects are used to communicate not just from place to place and person to person, but also demonstrate how experiences of objects and their relative values change over time and by perspective of the many disparate members of a family, creating an ecology of evocative traces in a familia-topography.

A relevant point for discussion that this work might raise is the extent to which 'contact work' might commonly draw on digital as opposed to physical resources and perhaps as a larger point we might therefore address the dichotomy between the physical and the digital, considering the valences of each and ultimately exploring how in existing practices/the future they might be sensitively intermingled in home archives and domestic spaces.

REFERENCES

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[1] It is worth noting here, that of course, archives are used for various purposes, not just for the reliable retrieval of information (such as might be considered in a Gordon Bell-esque notion of archiving), but also for the protection of the contents, for the elevation of status of the objects held within, for the use of objects over time as communicative tools, for the self definition of the archive owner and in some cases for the removal from consciousness of items worth forgetting. In all instances herein we observed such values at play in 'home archives' and sought to draw out the associated practices, meanings and intentionality behind these actions.

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[2] Gonzalez deriving her thoughts about the nature of Autotopographies from primary considerations of the curated and archived objects of specific individuals in museum exhibits.