Homes: things and senses

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ABSTRACT

This report draws on findings of the ethnographic research I did from February to July 2019 in Pistoia, northern Tuscany. It was an exploration of the material culture, the behaviours and the consumption practices in homes. Three families of three and four members each and two young and single boys were involved in the research. Reflecting on what can be a 'home', the attention initially focused on what was inside them. 'Things' are surely the staple of the domestic world and must all be considered: from the most ordinary ones to the most unusual. The nature of the relationship between the owner and the item was also taken into account and is very significant to this research. Then, as the data was being gathered, another aspect that came to relevance as an invisible and constant presence was 'senses': the mostly unconscious means with which people experience the domestic sphere. All these areas of the research ended up being strictly connected, as different facets of a prism through which we can observe the same reality: the homemaking process.

KEYWORDS

home, senses, material culture, ethnography, Tuscany.

BIO

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Things and senses

Doing ethnographic research in homes is a complex and gradual pursuit. Not only because the domestic environment is what most intimate can be, but also because it's inevitable, at some point, to face intricate and delicate familiar dynamics and personal matters that require great care. Most of these aspects are often expressed through the material world in many forms. For all these reasons, the tangible aspect of the house it's the point from which this research began.

Domestic objects are what immediately attracted attention. They were everywhere, a lot different from each other and changed their use or position for apparent no reasons. The most common groups of items found in every home were those from the heritage of the Tuscan sharecropping-era and those in some way related to technology and electronics. What changed continually were the entanglements of relationships that things and their owners were implicated in. However, there were other objects surely less evident to a stranger's eye but a lot more crucial for their owners: the ones in which people were most emotionally engaged. For these things, two main behaviours emerged: their apparent absence or their strategic display.

Franca, an 89-year-old woman who lives with her son and her daughter-in-law, has a violet blanket her mother gave her when she married, more than sixty years ago. She has never used it. It's still in its plastic bag inside a drawer in her bedroom. In her opinion, using that blanket means ruining it and ruining the blanket is like losing the memory of her mother. Franca's objects of affection are all hidden inside her wardrobe so nobody can see or touch them. By protecting those things, all the memories that are tied to them are safe.

Claudia, a 51-year-old woman who lives with her husband, her son and her daughter, has the opposite behaviour instead. Her most important objects are those made by her father, who was a foundry owner and died when she was a teenager. She is certain that the only manner to keep alive his memory is constantly seeing, touching and using those things. That's why they are scattered around the home and the garden.

But what happens when the violet blanket is transmitted to Franca's descendants? It will become a family good. This means that the affection she now feels towards it can decrease and the value it has in the present can change in the future. Inheriting family goods means inheriting also the obligation to take care of their story, even if these things have insignificant economic value or debatable usefulness. Also, family goods are objects in which the affection is shared and handed down, almost forced. When memories become less vivid and the time distance between the first and the last owner of that object increases, the emotional attachment fades, the value is re-evaluated and the drive to take care of that object is perceived as an obligation. Besides, being that the material transmissibility is most of all cultural, through the objects are transmitted some important cultural factors that can have been transformed in the meantime.

Consequently to these reasons, old and new generations have shown different perceptions of value and tend to differ when it comes to deciding what to do with an item they inherited. In these circumstances, all the objects that are made to keep family members together, creating a sense of belonging, are the same that can create family separations instead. This kind of objects turned out being a fundamental and also contradictory category.

However, distinctions emerged also about the use and the display of the ordinary things that are common and required in the domestic environment. Every domestic object, from the most useful to the purely decorative, has, in fact, a reason why it is where it is (Kopytoff in Appadurai 1986: 64-90) and builds a dialectical relationship with its owner through the time (Miller 2010: 102-186). Objects are a matter which is alive and with which people enter into dialogue.

One of the first definitions people involved in the research gave of themselves, as inhabitants of their own houses, was being 'tidy' or 'messy'. They told me one of these two words in a very definitive way, showing me a specific place and the way objects were placed in it. They were tidy or messy just because they were born like that and their houses were the tangible proof of their words. But why this definition was so set in them?

Every time I entered their houses something had changed. Some objects were in a different position, some were new, and others were broken, decorated or disappeared. Also, some pieces of furniture changed their shape, their colour or their usual spot. What was true in people's definitions was the fact that everybody dealt with the constant and inevitable change of life being more or less organized. This behaviour, however, didn't always coincide with the definition they gave of themselves.

Paola is a 29-year-old woman who lives with her parents and her younger brother. She cleans and tides her home every day. She also cooks, does the laundry and irons the clothes for everyone. When her family moved to their actual home, more than twenty years ago, she was a kid. Her parents decided to assign her the biggest bedroom of the home, while her brother took the smallest. The reasons for this choice, however, were not so innocent. Because she is a female, her parents reserved her the role of future housewife. They also predicted her future discontent for doing all the domestic works. Giving her that big single room was a way to reward her effort. Also, her parents were used to host many relatives in certain periods of the year and because they didn't want to sleep with others, they passed on the bigger bedroom, indirectly forcing their daughter to often share her room with someone else. Growing up, Paola reacted to this situation by continuing to do domestic works as always, except in her bedroom. Her wardrobe is now full of things and the wood of her desk is quite invisible. Most importantly, the sofa-bed reserved for guests goes almost unnoticed because it's covered by clothes, shoes, books, papers and every other kind of stuff. So, is Paola tidy or messy? Both of them. She uses cleaning and organizing practices to demonstrate how good of a daughter, sister and hostess she is. At the same time, she uses mess to impose her presence and her will. Her bounded mess is a way to define her space of privacy and freedom from all other areas. Here she can be herself, without taking any role.

On the other hand, Elena, Claudia's daughter, is 15 years old and is sure to be tidy. She spends a lot of time tidying and cleaning the whole house, spontaneously. In doing so, she's the only one who can find the objects her relatives are searching for. No surprises there when I noticed that her nickname was 'Miss Perfection'. Elena has learned to see herself as an extremely tidy person and pursues behaving in this way. In this situation, the question that immediately comes to mind is: What are the origins of Elena's behaviour? The answer is evident looking at the shape and the structure of the home where she lives. Elena doesn't have a bedroom of her own. When she was born, her brother was 9 and refused to share his room with his sister. Since then, Elena has always slept in her parents' room. Growing up, she showed the need to have her space and intimacy but her home isn't big enough. This is why being tidy is not only a trait of her personality. Tidying is her manner to control and protect her things and spaces containing the ones of others. But facing a constant daily mess, made by other family members, Elena can't choose a particular system of organization and maintain it. Moreover, if she could have her bedroom, she would still be this tidy?

Seeing both sides, it's evident that everyone is tidy and messy at the same time, each in his or her own different way. Being 'tidy' or 'messy' is not a permanent trait of our personality, but a dynamic way to explore, build and express our own identity.

Going back to the initial question of this topic, we can say that what creates a definition of ourselves as inhabitants are the relations and, more often, the contrapositions between each family members' behaviour and between our inherited or new domestic skills and the outside world's norms (Douglas 1993).

Here's the point: things are not just things. Domestic objects are tangible means of inner forms of living in which a lot of complex factors are involved: culture, family, historic epoch, society, habits, and projections. Why we choose some objects instead of others, why we use or not use them and why some are organized and others messy are questions that need to be answered keeping in mind the factors listed above, which are the ones that make each way of living unique, personal. Just like a house is an environment where nothing can be unalterable, people's behaviour transforms as time goes by, as the priorities and moods change, as family dynamics are created or altered. It's also affected by the space available and the influences from the outside world. In this perspective, spaces and things are strictly also connected with all the intangible dimensions that are usually ignored. The light, the sound and the smell, in particular, are what most affect our entire way of life. Each of us has a particular sensorial priority with which approaches to life and also to his home (Pink 2017).

Giosuè, for example, a 28-year-old man who lives alone, is a visual person. He needs to see everything to be sure of having control over it. His things are accurately tidied up and cleaned. Everything is sorted by colour and category and finds its specific spot in the open and minimal space. He grew up in a very chaotic home and with the purpose to get rid of the mess from his life he decided to be extremely tidy and to act as a complete opposite to his mother. Most of all, he likes luminous and airy rooms and these are the reasons why he loves his home, that has many windows from which the light comes. His needing of natural light pushed him to move some of his domestic activities in the proximity of the windows that have become space of relaxing, gardening, working and laundry. In some ways, his purpose is to let the

outside world enter inside his home. Not only the light but also the sounds and the smells are free to come in. While he cooks or cleans the rooms, he constantly pays attention to the sounds coming from the street or smells the food just cooked by his neighbour. Giosuè lives in a home where, metaphorically, there aren't walls, windows or doors. Everything that's inside comes from the outside and this means that, in a certain way, his home doesn't have its voice or its smell. He doesn't live *in* his home but *from* his home.

Matteo, instead, a 29-year-old man who shares an apartment with a friend, has an auditive attitude. He necessarily has to listen to some specific sounds. The music he likes is the most important one. Nothing that happens outside his home's walls can enter inside. The sounds coming from the streets or those produced by his domestic appliances are noises that need to be covered by something more familiar and enjoyable to him. Also, the natural light is not allowed to cross the shutters, always closed, and the main lights of the house are constantly switched off because they are too bright to him. Matteo orients himself thanks to the few soft lights he has around the house and to the lights coming from digital devices. Living in a dark environment, the perception of the domestic space necessarily changes and so do his movements and activities. This is why he doesn't pay attention to the disposition of objects. He needs just a bunch of horizontal and vertical surfaces on which lay or hang his stuff. For this reason, the definition he gives of himself is 'messy', even if his multiple piles of objects are divided into categories, arranged in specific areas and are singles parts of a bigger and organized system of piles. He doesn't see the mess; he serves it to know where to go and to have his things at hand. With specific sounds, soft lights and a lot of 'organized-messy' objects Matteo has completely isolated his home from the external world. The home itself, though, is lived and perceived mostly through its auditive and tactile parts. Material and sensory aspects are qualities that Matteo uses not to stay in his home but to feel it.

What's clear through these examples is that sensorial dimensions must be considered not only as important as material dimensions, but also as 'things' that intervene in our way of living with massive impact. In manners that we can't always be aware of, sounds, sights, smells and tactile surfaces can modify our entire way of moving, thinking and making decisions about our home. In fact, not only they push us to stay in front of our window or to turn on a scented candle, but they also guide us in our little or big daily choices. It's because of the soft light that we love that we move in a certain way and buy a light curtain or a warm light bulb. And it's because of our hate of food smells that we keep our windows open, clean frequently and buy some air freshener. In well-established and unaware ways, senses guide us in many forms. They influence our preferences in terms of domestic behaviour, of care of the home and, most of all, of consumption. Our sensorial approach is what determines the material world around us.

Conclusion: homes

Reflecting on objects, on senses and, therefore, on domestic behaviours, a 'home' turned out to be something that, with its position, dimensions, structure and shape, can affect people's daily life. But a home resulted being a much more than that. It has fragile boundaries, materially and culturally. Inside and outside are not noticeable so easily and, most of all, their definition cannot be immovable. In this perspective, also material and abstract dimensions are strictly connected. They are at the same time the cause and the result of each other.

The main distinction between homes that at the beginning was almost obvious ─ bigger and property houses with a courtyard for families who prefer peripheral areas, and small rental apartments in the city centre for the two young and single boys, has proved not so right and, most of all, useless. The distinctions in ages, responsibilities, desires and needs of every household were inevitably reflected not in each house's type but in each way of homemaking. Each person, even when living with others, thinks, perceives, lives and projects his home in a peculiar way. Besides, the individual homemaking is also a continually on-going process, producing always new distinctions and needing of adaptation. Matteo, Giosuè, Claudia, Paola, Roberta and their respective families, who accepted my presence in their homes, are examples of all these possible differences, adaptations and visions. In each case, they confirmed that mental and material homemaking (Cieerad 2010) are processes that inevitably refer to familiar memories and relate to the future projections of everyone. In conclusion, turning a house into a home is a complex and endless project that, in material and sensory ways, finds its roots and its developments both in cultural and emotional spheres and it always mirrors the building of the self-identity.

PHOTO 1: A statue made by Claudia's father and placed in her living room

PHOTO 2: The living room of Claudia and Elena's home

PHOTO 3: The entryway of Claudia's home; this is the mess that her daughter Elena has to face every day

PHOTO 4: The skylight of Giosuè's home: this is his favourite window

PHOTO 5: The window in the kitchen of Giosuè's home: outside there is a plant of basil; inside, the shelf has become a desk

PHOTO 6: This is the laundry area near the window in Giosuè's home

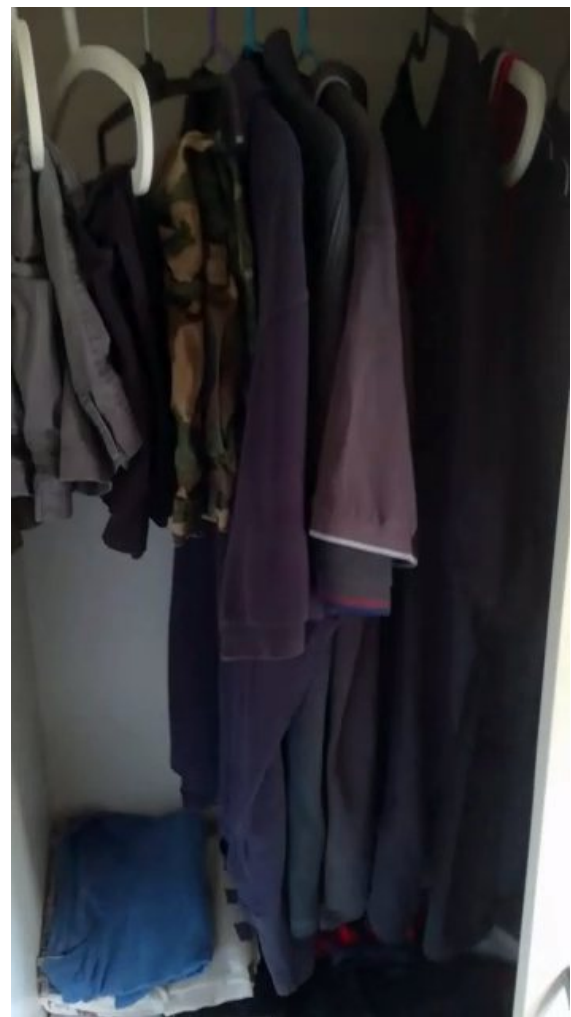**PHOTO 7:** This is the breakfast kitchen cabinet in Giosuè's home

PHOTO 8: This is the dark colours section of Giosuè's wardrobe

PHOTO 9: This is the pile of shoes in front of Matteo's bedroom

PHOTO 10: These are Matteo's piles of stuff in his bedroom

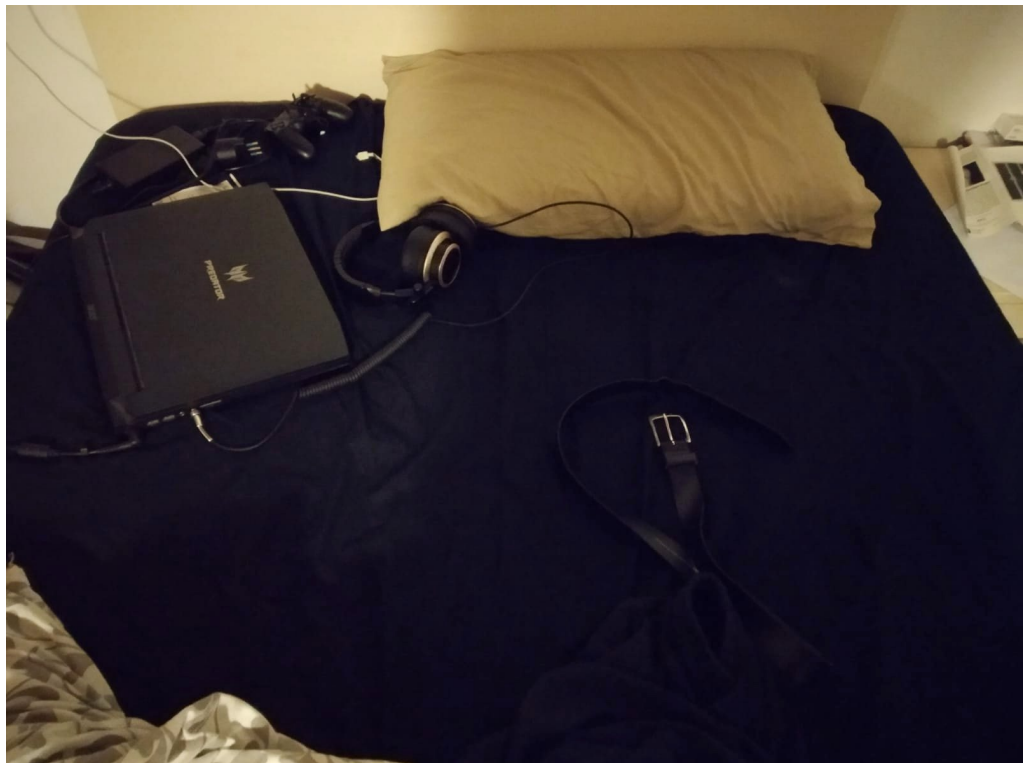**PHOTO 11:** The bedroom's window of Matteo; this is the only way in which the light from the outside can enter is his space

PHOTO 12: The laptop and the headphones on Matteo's bed; he's used to sleep with his devices

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