

Living 'from' home: older people looking beyond the house

Article

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Living *from* Home: Challenging the perspective of life indoors.

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Abstract

This paper puts forward the view that an important aspect of ‘homeliness’ is the capacity for the home to act as somewhere you leave, and not only somewhere to reside. As a result of conversations with a group of older people, based on their own priorities and in their own words, we describe some of their perceptions of the home. This includes a view that the home loses its significance as a personal statement, or a reflection of identity, and becomes more important as a base for planning activities outside the immediate confines of the house. With the onset of old age and its consequent limitations in loss of mobility and energy, the difficulties of going beyond the doorstep become more apparent. Despite this, our participants were determined to maintain social and environmental contacts, switching their perspective away from the interior of the home and to the world outside.

Introduction

This paper puts forward the view that an important aspect of ‘homeliness’ is the capacity for the home to act as somewhere you leave, and not only somewhere to reside. This observation comes from conversations with a group of older people about their perceptions of home and home life. It was significantly noticeable that the participants in our study group did not see the home as a place that they felt drawn to; instead their perspective was more akin to restraint or even disinterest. Common interpretations of the concept of home are as a container for possessions, a reflection of identity, and a secure and controlled environment, which combine to provide the bare essentials of social occupation (Easthope 2004). Homeliness is created by augmenting this basic concept, through traditions of decoration or

symbolism, reflecting the owners' personality and background. For our participants, as the restrictions associated with ageing come into play, many of these concepts are overturned as the occupants lose control over the physical and symbolic aspects that create a home. They are left instead with a place that forms the base from which they conduct their life, switching perspectives from the outside-in to the inside-out. The key point of this paper therefore, is an attempt to demonstrate circumstances that switch the perception of the home as a place to go *to* (to relax, escape etc.), to instead seeing the home as a place to go *from*.

To do this, after a brief description of the research project, the paper is divided into two parts. First, how the older people in our study see their homes, and then secondly, observations about the obstacles that keep older people at home and the significance of maintaining contacts with the world outside, both social and environmental.

Methodology

This is an output of 'The Living Futures' research, within the Participatory Design project at the University of Reading. We aimed to investigate perceptions of home and expectations from living environments for a group of people over the age of 60. A deliberate orientation was to better understand older people's lived experiences through their own accounts, things that are difficult, and those that could be better as these arise in conversation, rather than problematizing ageing in the framing of the research. Perceptions of home and its relationship to routine activities are brought into focus through the expression of individual views on their home life now, and their thoughts as they look to the future.

To investigate this we recruited a group of older people, aged between roughly 70 and 90, all of whom lived in their own homes, some with more assistance than others. In keeping with

our aim to put their views at the centre of our research, we drew inspiration from the ‘cultural probe’ method (Gaver et al. 1999), one key element of which was to give participants more responsibility for the direction of their responses: “We wanted to lead a discussion within the groups toward unexpected ideas, but we didn’t want to dominate it” (1999:22). The original approach also made explicit a desire to take account of the generational gap in designing for older people, by rejecting stereotypes and aiming to document their reported experiences – something that chimed with our own objectives. Each person was given a series of questions and a disposable camera, with a request to answer each question with four images that in some way reflected their response. The questions were deliberately ambiguous and open-ended, as pointed out to participants in an introductory conversation this was to allow them to answer the questions in whatever way they liked. In the course of the follow-up interviews, the photographic prompt method also proved beneficial for other reasons. First, it caused the participants to engage with the research exercise for longer, since there was an inclination to combine spontaneity with deeper consideration. Second and perhaps more relevant to this demographic, the images acted as reminders: countering the effects of delay and the wide-ranging nature of subsequent discussions. Finally, the resultant images varied from hasty snapshots to carefully constructed assemblages of objects, all of which provide additional data to the transcribed recordings (excerpts of which are included in the text below), and are used as the illustrations here.

Perceptions of Home

The meaning of ‘home’ has come under considerable scrutiny, based on the realisation that the building itself is more than simply a container for possessions, or a stage for the performance of everyday tasks. By both these basic reckonings, the home is the *inside* of the building, usually referred to as a house. Reviewing the significant strands of research that

have gone into interiors, Penny Sparkes sees three: architectural, decorative, “...(and arguably the more influential) conceptualization of the modern interior grew out of the social, cultural, and psychological links between interiors and their modern inhabitants, focusing on the private arena of the home and the requirements of modern life...” (2010:8). The easy separation of the home as the space indoors, distinct from the world outside is the concept we challenge here. To give full consideration to the concept of home requires us to take serious account of the emotions and perceptions of the people who inhabit them – to view the home as their construction, and not just a shell that they adopt and populate. To accommodate these two strands (what a home *is*, if it is more than just a container; and what a home *is for*, if it is not just an arena for domestic practices) requires us to assume a position sympathetic to the views of the inhabitants. Manzo (2003) describes the relationship between people and place as being a mixture of emotional, dynamic and socio-political influences, from which we see the home as being made up of the structure, the activities that go on in and around it, and the notions of inhabitation that the occupants embrace.

Living ‘at home’ must be seen as a creative process, individually attuned and ever-changing according to personal circumstances. ‘Home’, in other words, does not depend on the structure of the building, nor does it depend solely on the assemblage of things within it, but it depends on the people who live there and how they interact with their immediate surroundings. Mundane life, seen through the lens of the house, can be revealed as complex, personal and socially constituted. Daniels for example, in her exposition of the material culture of the Japanese house, uncovers the “contradictions and complexities of everyday life behind closed doors” (2010:4). To do this, she has taken the stereotype of rigid minimalism, assumed for much of Japanese society, and shown a messy reality made up of confused and creative private practices. As that book sought to successfully question the cultural ignorance

of perceptions of home in Japanese society, so too should we turn a similar focus on to stereotypes of our own society.

Imrie's account (2004) of the homes of disabled people acted as something of an inspiration for our study, since he demonstrated how domestic practices, taken for granted by the able-bodied, were fraught with unseen difficulties. His example showed that perceptions of home are conditioned by specific situations and that the occupant's viewpoint is something that can provide insights into our understanding, and a corrective to our presumptions. He questions the popular portrayal of the home as "...the focus of convivial social relationships and a source of human contentment..." and draws on previous authors to suggest that "...the meaning of home is unstable and transitory" (2004:746-747), depending on the make-up of any particular household. The responses of our participants therefore, are specific to their situation, but it would be wrong to dismiss this as idiosyncratic and irrelevant to the wider discussion of how homes could develop in the future. The nature of our method meant that discussions were wide-ranging and guided as much by the participants as the interviewer, so that in what follows, the general themes we have identified have come about as a result of our collation of comments on a variety of topics, and in many cases were not explicitly identified. In common with Dourish (2006), we do not suggest that a method grounded in the ethnographic approach is a means for providing hard data suitable for house designers of the future, but rather that a study of the complexities of life at home such as this, as he says, "provides models for thinking about those settings and the work that goes on there" (2006:9).

Privacy and Control

I mean, I must say, one thing I don't do now, I don't tend to climb up outside in the garden when there's no one around, because it's a big garden and if people don't know, especially between the two sunrooms, if they're not in there, I could fall and no one would know.

Loss of mobility and increasing frailty means older people are more aware of the home as a risky place. Rather than a safe haven, it becomes a place where everyday tasks (like gardening and cleaning) present difficulties and dangers. Being conscious of the potential risks, such as the likelihood and consequences of falling in the garden, leads to changes in behaviour and strategies for coping (Porter 1994), including most commonly increasing reliance on outside help. "When older people experience the onset of functional limitations, they can lose their home as a private territory – it turns into a working place where many persons come and go". This is how Dahlin-Ivanoff et al (2007:26) describe the increase in traffic into the older person's home as a result of the need for healthcare and assistance. In many cases this requires the home to be opened up to visitors whose positions are neither friend nor invited guest, but instead an enforced social contact as a means of coping with the difficulties of going beyond the home.

[Victoria heats up your dinners in the microwave, doesn't she?]

Oh yes, she does, I mean, she comes in she just switches that on and puts the food in there, you know.

As with the home-help, who each evening 'cooks' a meal, and in other cases we heard about, the chiropodist, hairdresser and so on, these are not necessarily intrusive, but represent an active strategy. Although Dahlin-Ivanoff et al. describe this process as one where privacy is

lost through encroaching healthcare needs, another view, as put to us, is that as long as these visits can be controlled, then they are welcomed. Family members, especially children, neighbours and friends all formed part of the flow of visitors, so that the loss of privacy is not necessarily seen as a negative effect of ageing, rather it is accepted as part of the social process that feeds into life changes happening around this time.

I mean, I'm here, and if I need help I can get it from David, or even from Di, you know...

[Di's Dave's wife. Yeah, and Darren. And there's Jim over the road, that nice young man over there]

Jim?

[Yeah, over the road there]

Oh, Mrs Mack's husband.

[No, he's dead]

Yeah, I know he's dead.

[No, Jim's the young man that lives in their house now]

Oh, yeah, but they're friendly with Dave...

Figure 1: The door as a conduit for access

However, encouraging or accepting visitors brings with it the risk of loss of control, which seemed to be a more significant concern for our participants than changes to the nature of privacy. Whilst privacy within the home was accepted as being compromised, loss of control and increasing dependency seemed to be either resented, or accepted grudgingly.

And what else have we got? Well, we've got a house which is private and individual, and we've got good neighbours. This chap here, we don't see at all. And we're behind very high hedges, but he's a very nice chap, all the same.

Thus there is a growing paradox: wanting to retain the home as a private space, whilst accepting the need for a greater degree of interference. This is a tricky balance to achieve, and one with which all our participants continually wrestled. Wanting to remain on good terms with a neighbour for mutual reassurance, but at the same time not wanting to be forced into false companionship; welcoming health and care services in to the home, but not for too long; keeping the children close, but not so close that authority and control are lost, and so on.

Aesthetics

[Are you bothered about things like this - where they put the new wires in, and the wall hasn't been painted?]

No, I'm not concerned about it, as long as it's working, the switch is working and the lights are working, I'm not really all that bothered.

Our participants described loss of mobility in various ways. The most common were deteriorations in strength and flexibility, often affecting their ability to perform once simple tasks, but also an awareness of limited energy. This was described as being like a battery running out of charge, which either required 'recharging' during the day, or adopting energy-saving policies. This made them alter their priorities as to how to apportion the limited energy they had. Ordinary domestic practices become less important, as did the need to follow

fashions, or ‘create an impression’ as far as their home was concerned. That is not to say that our participants were resigned to living in squalor, indeed there was no appreciable lack of domesticity in the people we visited. However, by their own admission, there was a recognition that maintaining the interior as a measure of personal standards was no longer necessary or relevant. Life’s concerns moved away from the opinions and pressures of others to the need for greater self-interest. This change in focus happened not because they were being particularly rebellious, but because a new perspective on their own mortality led them to see it as unimportant.

I want time and I don't want to waste it on all this stuff ... it's boring. I mean ... I intend to have another 30 years, but the thing is I think it puts stuff into perspective when you get older and I actually don't want to go round and dust again and clean up again.

Figure 2: The burden of domestic practices

Associated with these new domestic practices, is the shift away from seeing the home as a reflection of identity, and the need to continually recreate identity. Other authors have described the power of the interior to act as a reflection of identity (e.g. Olesen 2010; Friedman 2010), and the intentional attempts occupants made to create an impression, or in Friedman’s terms an ‘atmosphere’. However, this sees primarily conscious decisions and deliberate acts, and not necessarily the accidents and apathy, or the coincidental bringing together of the home to create as less than coherent design concept (Brown 2007). This seemed to be the case in our study: possessions and styling were seen less and less as a matter

of significant choice, the home developed an air of anonymity, overtaken by the practical aspects of managing to live at home.

You know, yes, it would be lovely to have a newly fitted kitchen. It would be wonderful to have a newly fitted bathroom, but I don't hanker after it in the least. And, in fact, I think it would be very silly because whoever buys this house is going to knock it to pieces.

I could take [my possessions] with me to the next house almost exactly ... I could almost exactly reproduce it, the last house I lived in, the one I'm living in now [laughs], and the one that I'm going to live in, in the future.

The overwhelming attitude to the home became one where the inhabitants liked to have things organised in a familiar way to allow for their continued accommodation in the same place. Loss of mobility and physical strength means that the motivations that drive elderly people in the maintenance of their home become less focussed on the fabric of the structure, and change to provide them with a desire to expend their energies on continued engagement with the world at large. Hence issues such as house-work, gardening, decoration and general maintenance became less important to our participants.

The View From Inside

As seen by our respondents, the home was characterised by lifestyle changes imposed by the restrictions of ageing. Issues of privacy, risk and aesthetics come to the fore, changing the concept of home from a place of personal choice to one in which the inhabitants were encouraged or even forced to remain inside. For our participants, this created a fundamentally different view of the world, one in which the perspective was switched away from the

interior, which was losing its capacity to provide choices, and towards the view outside the house, which offered significant opportunities to enhance their lives, and maintain social and environmental relations. The physical structure of the home lost its significance, through mechanisms such as those described above, and instead, the home became a place from which the occupants made plans to escape. We have described elsewhere (reference here) how escape can be facilitated by the use of technological 'portal' objects that allowed those within the house to connect with the world outside in a more virtual way, and suggest here that a similar process happens as a strategy for adapting to the ongoing flow of life. The older people we talked to were explicit about their desire to maintain a relationship with the world beyond the doorstep, but also very aware about the problems associated with accessing it in a meaningful way. Despite the problems they encountered, the most important factor seemed to be the relationship between the person and their environment, operating at different levels including the interior of the house, the geographic neighbourhood, and a broadly construed social situation (Mah 2009 describes a similar attachment to locale, in equally difficult circumstances).

Well, I don't particularly like this concept of 'for elderly people', because it implies that a house is being specifically designed for the elderly, and life being what it is, you would have to build an estate of those houses, wouldn't you? All built for elderly people and you'd only qualify for it when you were 80 or something. A community speaks for itself. A community is for people of every age and description. I mean, there isn't a single child walking up and down this road.

This is a concept that has been explored by human geographers, many of whom have concluded that home is not only socially constructed, but also cognitively constructed, what

Reinders and van der Land call “mental geographies” (2008:3). In the context of an exploration of the notion of ‘home and place’ they present a series of papers that combine to argue that it is not just what people *do* that shapes place, it is what they *think* (2008). For the older people who participated in our study, the notion of home was the result of a combination of intuitive opinions and deliberate conceptualizations. They are active shapers of a dynamic environment (Manzo 2003:57), which might be physically diminished, but remains expansive in their minds. The home acts as a point from which the limitations of ageing become apparent, but provides a place from which they are able to plan their engagements with the wider world.

Barriers

Oh, yes, I can still get around a bit, but it's getting more painful all the time, you know, I'm sure I need a hip replacement or something like that. Yeah, and arthritic, you know, just one of those things. Nothing ever gets better, does it, and it just gets a bit worse ...

Figure 3: Arthritic joints: a barrier to engagement with the world

The degree to which the older occupants in our study interacted with the world outside was determined primarily by the extent of their physical deterioration. The ability to move around in a safe and controlled manner was essentially the limiting factor in how and whether to leave the home. They became increasingly aware of the importance of basic actions such as observation, walking and carrying, and of their vulnerability as those skills were reduced or lost. One participant, who with her husband was a long-time fan of angling, described a walk

along a river-bank during which she lost balance and was unable to prevent herself gradually falling into the river while her husband watched on helpless. This led to an explicit realisation of some of her physical limits, and led her to question the wisdom of, for example, crossing the road.

...we don't have a lot of traffic, only in the morning and in the evening. But even so, I don't think an old person, even as old as me, I'm not very good at mobility and, I'm not very good at balancing and walking, so I would hesitate to walk across the road to talk to somebody. I might get stuck halfway...

Difficulties such as balancing, or walking safely, exaggerate the physical barriers that are present in the outside world. As mobility is reduced, barriers decrease in size and increase in number. Crossing a busy road is something that many of us would find challenging, it is not something restricted to older people - it applies equally to for example children, someone with an injury, mothers with pushchairs and so on. However, the range of hazards experienced by our participants, as elderly people, was frequently commented upon, usually in the context of the lack of sensitivity or selfishness of others. The distance to a bus-stop or local shops was a significant concern, exacerbated by the condition of pavements and their obstruction.

The footpaths, over the years, have been broken by the weight of vehicles on them and, you know, could be quite dangerous, but it has to get quite bad or someone has to fall over and hurt themselves before anything's done about it.

In this case, cars parked on the footpath had caused the slabs to distort and crack, creating a trip hazard, but also the cars blocking the pavement meant that pedestrians had to walk around them onto the grass, which was a surface more likely to cause a slip or fall. Simple inconveniences became substantial risks, and acted to deter the older people from venturing out of their home. The proliferation of barriers in the outside world means that the development of social relations is driven by new mechanisms. In particular the need for the home to be a place from which the older person can access those in their social group, either being able to visit locally or virtually, or allowing access to the home for people who visit. The home becomes a base, the place from which life is organised and not necessarily the place that reflects personality. That concept has been diluted and dissipated so that the home is seen as a place from which to look out, rather than hankering after development and change in constant pursuit of renewed meaning, such as that described by Cieraad (2010) for younger adults.

Maintaining Contact

For our participants, the consequence of reduced mobility and increasingly numerous barriers was that their experience of the world was mediated by framing devices. ‘Framing’ is meant here in a fairly literal way, since the difficulties of getting out of the home mean that vistas are experienced through the window or via a screen. These things are necessarily restrictive, and alter the experience of the world as a fully immersive encounter. This is an obvious point, but it is important to treat it seriously, since it was seen as such by our participants.

And, you know, sometimes I look out of the window at night and I say to you, don't I, "God, can't somebody have a row [laughter]? Can't we have to ring the Police or something?" Something exciting.

Figure 4: The world outside ‘framed’

The perspective of the occupants is definitely looking outside, rather than reflecting on what is inside. Despite the fact that they are more confined to their home, in many ways they find it a difficult environment and seek to maintain an engagement with the outside world, more so than spending their time and energy on the interior. The difficulties inherent in ageing were seen as part of the continual process of adapting to the circumstances of living; as the home become more restrictive, and more containing, relations outside the home become the target of deliberate and considered actions. One of the primary aims of the older people in our study was to maintain social, and to a lesser extent environmental, contact, usually by relying on public transport. Social contact generally, and friendship in particular is individual and personal, so the act of mediating this relationship, by surrendering control of access, puts them at risk of becoming more remote and less intimate.

As well as social contacts, environmental contact also becomes restricted. Whilst information technologies mean that contact with people can be continued in a different form, the experience of the outside world is inherently and necessarily one that depends on actually leaving the house, to maintain connections with “...meaningful places that [are] geographically scattered” (Manzo 2003:50). It is this combination of a desire to continue social relations in a real and physical manner, and the experiences of being in the outside environment that prompted the need for planning.

I mean, I've got a friend down in Wales that I go and stay with and, I mean, yeah, but I couldn't do all of that by train, I know, but then there's people, like I've got a friend at Melksham in Wiltshire, which is much more difficult to get to...

Figure 5: Journey planning

Social contacts, such as the friend in Melksham, were the source of some concern since at some stage in the not-too-distant future, it would no longer be possible to visit or be visited. Here is where families and neighbors become more important, as access becomes dependent on their assistance. Whereas at present they are typically dependent on their own abilities to drive, this is an activity that is likely to draw to a close, and for many there is an awareness of this process beginning. Driving considerable distances is something that they would tend to avoid, and for some even driving relatively short distances was becoming difficult. Social contacts move from being a part of life that falls within the control of the individual, with the convenience and reliability of personal transport, to a part of life that depends on others, usually family members or public transport systems.

I wish I was less dependent on the two girls, you know, I think to me self, oh, yeah, I could get in the car and drive off, but I have to more or less depend on you and Bren [her daughters].

Figure 6: Maintaining contacts by adapting to new circumstances

The issue of dependence played on the minds of some of our participants with a certain amount of resentment: a conflict of wanting to get out of the home whilst at the same time realizing that control was slipping away from them. Reluctantly coping with the need for greater assistance, meant in part trying to use closer local amenities. To be able to keep a dog as a companion for example requires access to nearby suitable spaces within the urban environment. The same was said of a number of different facilities and activities, including healthcare, a variety of shops, the hairdresser and so on. Despite the difficulties of getting out of the house, this was a key objective for all of our participants, to the extent that they gave considerable thought to how they would be able to continue living from home. They talked at some length about the ways in which they had to plan their journeys, including decisions between public transport and driving, fitting in with the daily routine, levels of energy and health, whether and when a local alternative was available and so on.

They have a farmers' market here once a month, and then they have a fairly typical market (on Saturdays)... In about five or six minutes you could walk up to there. I suppose it was envisaging if I didn't drive, 'cause I mean, there will come a time when I can't drive.

Figure 7: The increasing importance of local amenities

In effect the need to maintain social and environmental contacts, despite the problems of overcoming increasingly numerous barriers, was a key part of living at home, even though these were activities that took place outside the home.

Conclusion

The key message of this paper has been to suggest the need to literally re-orient our perspective: Home as a point of departure, as much as a destination. In the words of Hazel Easthope, discussing the relevance of concepts of 'place' for housing research, homes can be understood as "particular nodal points within a complex web of social interactions which stretch around the world" (2004:129).

These examples show that older people make considered decisions about how they can continue to interact with their social and environmental neighbourhood. Interest in the home as a destination wanes – there is less concern with the way it looks, or what people think about it; an acceptance that the personal and private nature of the interior is diluted as various people come inside; a sense that the home no longer holds romantic or emotive associations, and loses its significance as a reflection of the future. It has become redundant as a way of measuring life, and reverts to an impersonal shell, gradually stripped of its occupant's identity. In this particular situation, the home becomes a place from which the occupants plan their activities, and not a private haven. This is of course specific to the demography of our group of participants, but demonstrates the point that to effectively engage with occupants we need to understand their view of the home (Imrie 2004), and how they use it to access the world outside. For them, everyday difficulties were part of the ongoing process of living in the world, but by no means an over-riding preoccupation.

And that [photograph] is still being able to go to the theatre, to go to cinemas; those are theatre and cinema tickets ... it's supposed to be like a relaxing sort of picture, so, balancing

it with tranquillity and time. So, busy stuff, stuff with people; contact with people - 'cause when it boils down to it, people are the most important thing in all of it, really [laughs].

Other types of occupier no doubt have other perceptions of home and ideas of what is important (housewives, students, home-workers etc.) The proliferation of engagements with the concept of home therefore suggests an equally broad number of possible concepts: planning a journey is no doubt just as important to a mother with young children for example, as it is for the older people we talked to. But to return to our starting point, rejecting research into the elderly as necessarily predicated on ageing as a problem, it must be true to say that a closer understanding of the perspective of occupants provides a more realistic research agenda.

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