JETTISON
ALL STORES

Experimenting with Our Relationship to the Physical

Alyssa R. Mayo
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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Industrial Design in the Department of Industrial Design of the Rhode
Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by Alyssa R. Mayo
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For my mother and father, who have a healthy sense of detachment from objects and a raging sentimentality for them, respectively.
Abstract

At the start of this project I set out to explore the concept of ownership, if and how it is changing and what that meant for the work I would do in the future. In the field of industrial design, matters of ownership are important considerations we must grapple with. Things, the products of our design process, are 1. Subject to new (or maybe not so new) models of ownership, responsibility and maintenance, and 2. No longer limited to forms that are owned in a traditional, physical sense that is easily understood.

The matter of form – physical vs. digital vs. virtual – ended up playing a large role in this project. Industrial designers are accustomed to how the form evolves in step with technological advances, but today the state change feels particularly pronounced – to the point that the form could disappear completely, literally slip out of our hands. The digital and now virtual eras have brought about a dematerialization and convergence of many solutions that do not require any physicality aside from the interface (if even that). Will the physical form of products of industrial design soon be obsolete, or a luxury or nostalgia item? If so, what will we lose? If not, is there anything digital and virtual products can learn from the power of the physical?

This project approaches these questions through experimentation with sentimental objects and the memories they conjure, concrete examples where the physical form still dominates. People are still attached to physical things, often things that have negligible monetary value and no practical purpose in the physical world. By trying to understand this phenomenon through the lenses of those who are driven or required to part with things frequently or en masse, this project identifies and stress-tests a set of unique strengths belonging to the physical as a channel for interaction.

It then proposes an opportunity for how, in the case of certain sentimental objects, the meaningful information might be extracted from the material form, and leaves the reader with a suggestion of how new value might be created through new experiences powered by that metadata, in digital, virtual or hybrid spaces that have yet to become everyday.
Introduction

I’ve always been fascinated by the human relationship to physical things. When I think about my house growing up, images of so many items and objects cross my mind: the textures, the shape of things and so many books – piles and piles of books. Every time we were asked to clean out and bring our things to Goodwill, crates of books would go, but at least as many would come in. My mother tried, but the rest of us were not very good at letting things go.

At the same time, I find peace in the absence of things, in the lightness of not having to tote or maintain them. This phenomenon is well-documented and recently manifested in popular movements such as the Minimalists, Tiny Houses, the Sharing Economy. These are aspirational trends because for many of us, minimalism and shared ownership are at odds with human materialism and the notion from Material Culture that our personal belongings help bring us mental stability.

For this project I first set out to explore the concept of ownership: if and how it is changing, and what about that feeling is fundamental to the human experience as opposed to a byproduct of the constraints and conditions of the time. What do we own? Why do we feel ownership? How is that changing?
In the field of industrial design, matters of ownership are important considerations we must grapple with. Things, the products of our design process, are 1. Subject to new (or maybe not so new) models of ownership, responsibility and maintenance, and 2. No longer limited to forms that are owned in a traditional, physical sense that is easily understood.

I started experimenting to understand what home means for people today, which was sort of an instinctual mechanism for exploring human ownership. As a lifelong “homebody” and a newly minted 30-something, home ownership was starting to seem like a nice idea, if a remote one. But it was also a little ridiculous. Thinking about it logically, that scale of ownership seems irrelevant to my lifestyle, and in the future lifestyle I imagine for myself and people like me. We love to travel, we work a gazillion hours away from home, we work from home but we’re always plugged in, we make meals from boxes and kits (if we cook at all), we’re addicted to the convenience and on-demand everything that only works in urban settings, we generally don’t know how to fix anything. But still, most people I spoke with plan to own a home eventually.

These initial experiments also included speaking with older adults, who may not move frequently but make moves on a much larger scale, usually after decades
in a space many times larger than where they are headed. I also spoke with a few formerly homeless people to understand the topic from different extremes.

I learned that for the frequently or recently displaced, objects play a pivotal role in establishing a sense of ownership, belonging and comfort. All I had spoken with reported and showed me various lengths they had gone to preserve and protect their things. Tom was homeless, paying more than $100/month for his things to remain in a storage unit. Many could describe in detail the provenance and importance of every object in sight. Karen, a recent transplant to the Laurelmead Cooperative, an independing living community of condos for older adults, “couldn’t imagine living in this white box” until her things were there. Now she is quite at home and a walking advertisement and recruiter for the community.

These investigations helped me identify my main user group: young urban nomads who move on a somewhat regular basis, who frequently set up homes in new spaces.

We are deeply attached to our things, yes, but from speaking with so many people on the move, it seems we’re most attached to the things of little material value, usually with no practical function, that are often kept tucked away for various reasons. It is interesting and, as one can imagine, quite inconvenient for the people with whom I was concerned.
These observations led to research and design activities including: investigations in replicas and three-dimensional archival; photo diaries, focus groups and games; a catalog and field guide for what I call “Troublesome Objects” (those non-functional, sentimental artifacts from which we find it so hard to part); a speculative process and infrastructure for documenting, reflecting upon and getting rid of your physical things.

I’ve collected my insights and toward the end, distilled what I have observed about the physical that makes it a uniquely compelling channel for interacting with the personal memories, relationships and accomplishments that make us feel content.

All of this is to say that this project is, at its core, about understanding the fundamental human attachment to the physical, but not necessarily solving it or attempting to replace physical things with virtual or digital ones.

I hope the analysis can serve as both a case for new physical products of industrial design (an answer to “couldn’t that just be an app?) as much as a set of criteria for how we might imbue new forms with the magical powers of the physical object.
WHO IS “WE”?

A NOTE TO THE CONTRARIANS AND OUTLIERS:
It should be noted that in the course of this book I will use the pronoun “we” not only for the sake of simplicity but because I am truly part of this population. I do not wish to overly generalize or carelessly conflate you, the reader, with me or with my user.

I welcome and hope to find disagreement and provocation. The needs and insights discussed in this project are most certainly 21st Century “champagne” problems and nothing is too precious. Debate is what it’s all about.
It is said that for most people in America, a house will be the largest purchase you will ever make. Financially and spatially, the most significant thing you will ever own. This was true for my parents’ generation and their parents’ generation. Is it the same for us? Has the relationship between that scale of ownership and personal identity changed?

The movements I was reading about at the outset of this project mostly had to do with styles of living, domesticity and ownership of space and things. I had a hunch this went beyond the benefits and efficiencies of the “sharing economy” to deeper motivations around sustainability, work-life balance and personal financial security for a generation not-so-welcomed into the working world at the peak of the Great Recession.

To learn more about this from my peers, I created a card game inspired by a domestically-oriented childhood favorite
called M.A.S.H. (Mansion, Apartment, Shack, House) that generates potential futures for each player. (It is interesting to me that the future was so defined by what we would “have”.) To play M.A.S.H. the group makes lists of options in different categories of their future lives, for each player, a number is randomly generated and then used to methodically strike options from the lists until you are left with one hilariously implausible combination: *you will be a BMW-driving lawyer living in a shack, with your husband Jonathan Taylor Thomas, your 54 Kids and pet rattlesnake.*
1. Home Now
   What is good, bad, wish

2. Home Later
   What is good, bad, wish

3. Home Eventually
   What is good, bad, wish

4. What is missing?
   What really makes “home”?-

5. Describe a time you were or felt home-less.

6. What will your last home be like?
The game I created included categories for Dwelling, Household Makeup, Work Life and the type of Home Financing. The options included familiar situations as well as some new that I had discovered in my reading and researching new living styles (e.g. Values-Based Co-Living).

I wanted to provoke my user with both traditional and new-agey arrangements, find out what is really relevant and better understand her style of ownership.
PLAYING THE GAME

1. Home Now
   What is good, bad, wish

2. Home Later
   What is good, bad, wish

3. Home Eventually
   What is good, bad, wish

4. What is missing?
   What really makes “home”?

5. Describe a time you were or felt home-less.

6. What will your last home be like?
EXPERIMENTS 1 - FINDING SCALE

Tiny Home
Suburban
Rural

15-Year Mortgage

w/ Romantic Partner

Telecommute

Small Single Family Home
Small city
Suburban

Inherit from Family

Multi-Generational

Multiple Gigs
Uber/Lift
Task Rabbit
Avkredi
So,

From the M.A.S.H. game I learned that most of my users had somewhat traditional aspirations of ownership when it comes to their eventual home: they want to own a home one day, and live in it with their nuclear family.

What was interesting was how very far off it seemed, how many other experiences were more important for the foreseeable future, and how flexible they were with their in-the-meantime homes.

Young & Nomadic

Many ‘lateral’ moves; frequently making decisions around what to keep vs. what to get rid of.

Older Adults “Out-of-place”

Large-scale dramatic moves, usually after decades in the same place; making many decisions around what to keep vs. what to get rid of.

*Looking at the extremes: always an interesting approach to understanding a problem
KAREN S.

OBJECTIVE
Swing to the other end of the spectrum and learn about older adults’ attitudes and behaviors around ownership, home and living spaces.

METHOD
Contextual inquiry: I spent a day at a local independent living community where residents own individual condos but share common spaces, facilities and many convenient amenities.

In January 2017, I visited Laurelmead Cooperative, a local independent living community in Providence, RI, on a referral from a friend, who told me that the people she had met there had interesting perspectives on Home. I had already been thinking that older adults were an interesting population for my topic, because changing their homes and lifestyles is not only common but extremely acute: in downsizing, or moving for care, the change in scale of their living space is dramatic, and they are usually coming from a place they have spent decades accumulating objects at little spatial cost.

I spent the better part of a day with Karen that first time I met her, she took me on a thorough tour of her
cooperative and advertised the perks of living in such an active and caring community. When we got to her apartment, an airy and serene one bedroom unit overlooking a leafy landscape, we really got into the experience of moving here.

From speaking with Karen I learned how much personal effects really matter for someone who is new to a place or space. She had been forced to part with so many objects, make so many decisions about what to keep and what to let go of, that she was left with a sort of skeleton crew of things so emotionally-loaded that they have the power to turn a white box into the best home she has ever had. Now, every object within sight is deeply important and carries a web of stories and personal associations.

For the displaced, personal effects are Home. She can look at any physical object in her apartment and spiral into a web of people, anecdotes and emotions. The objects carry the stories and memories.

It is hard for Karen to think of any drawbacks to these objects, other than the cost of keeping and maintaining them, but their pure physicality is potentially troublesome. As a self-described “visual person” Karen does articulate a fear of losing her eyesight and what that will mean for her ability to recall the stories and information that make it all so important and comforting to her.

The impending isolation of being disconnected from your things was not something that had occurred to me.

Left: Karen demonstrating some design flaws of her new home; right: the great room at Laurelmead Cooperative.
“If I don’t have it then I don’t have those stories...”

“I realize it’s not about reading the books, it’s about being brought back to the time when I was reading the book, or when had purchased the book...”

“I live in a visual world...I’m hoping that image of my Japanese print is forever in my mind. When I start to lose my sight, I wonder, can you take that canvas and touch it and still know what is in it?”
So,

For my user, home as a container is a flexible thing, but personal effects are extremely important in establishing a sense of home. She has moved out of and into new homes frequently and is used to calling new spaces 'home'. Bringing important things from place to place, arranging them just so, and having them in your life is home.

What if we could replicate that? Insure it, or back it up? What, as a designer could I do to relieve some of these material anxieties for people?
As someone so frequently on the move, it can be hard to decide what to keep and take, and hard to care for important personal objects. Functional objects such as appliances and electronics, beds and furniture, are necessary for daily life and the effort to move and maintain them is easily understood. But what about all the other stuff that accumulates?

Users had shown me how sentimental things accumulate in their environment, and they explained why they had trouble simply disposing of these objects. In many cases, the most interesting thing to me was how the items we claim to cherish the most, the ones we could not imagine parting with, are often so fragile, unique or just plain odd that we don’t even display them: we don’t get to experience their delights as much as we could while they take up physical and mental space in our lives. For us nomadic young people trying to live light, I found this keeping behavior problematic.
I began to create 3D archives and replicas to address the different issues I saw with my users’ keeping behavior. I was wondering: What about a more aesthetically-pleasing version, or a consumable version? If a replica could be techy and magical, could it be even better than the original? Or, could just knowing you could remake it exactly the same if you ever wanted to be enough?
EXPERIMENTS 2 - UNDERSTANDING SINGULARITY
On the Internet I came across a really easy way to simulate a holographic projection using a smartphone and an acrylic pyramid. I made and used holograms as stimuli to start thinking about objects in virtual, augmented and/or mixed reality, and to see if simulated physicality was a compelling form for cherished things.
Left and above:
Doing my best to future-proof my archival process by using high-resolution 3D scanning technology at RISD’s Nature Lab.
So,

While the cement and wax replicas were pretty fun to make, fun to handle and of interest to most of the people I spoke with, they weren’t really a sufficient replacement for the original, and they certainly were not “better than” the real thing.

If anything, people reported wanting them in addition to the original. I thought that was interesting because it seems the replica can absorb at least some of the meaning of the original. For me personally, the replication relieved a bit of the anxiety and barrier to display when it came to my jade turtle. The jade version went back where it came from, but now I had the cement and wax versions displayed everywhere I turned.

In terms of efficiency, though, the physical replicas obviously fail. And the replica that did achieve efficiency via convergence (the hologram objects that could carousel between projections within the same display) failed in that once their novelty wore off they were no more on display than their analog originals. And now they required electricity, deliberate action and dedicated use of my iPad.
I knew getting rid of things was quite relevant to older adults, so I was excited to team up with my classmate Hanna McLaughlin to host a day of focus groups at the MIT AgeLab. Hanna, whose thesis was focused on life transitions and accepting the aging process, had learned there was a group of articulate and engaged 85+ older adults called the Lifestyle Leaders, who met regularly to share their experiences on various subjects.

We called the day “Sense of Home” and learned about these older adults’ experiences changing homes, creating new ones and how they deal with the volumes of things they are forced to let go of in the process.
Hello! We are...

Hanna McLaughlin
Designing tools for life transitions

Alyssa Mayo
Understanding emotional attachment to objects of home
MIT AgeLab
Focus Groups

OBJECTIVE
Gain a deeper understanding of the emotional significance of objects over one’s lifetime.

METHOD
Engage MIT’s AgeLab for a survey and focus groups with their Lifestyle Leaders, an articulate group of older adults who are 85+.

1. Online & paper survey (18 respondents).

2. Presentation of our research topics and general discussion.

3. 4 focus groups (24 total respondents).
“Papers are particularly interesting because they’re almost all useless. I still have the legal records of the house I bought in 1950. I could throw those away. No one will ever ask about them. It’s the only record of the fact that that happened.”

“It adds value if you can annotate, document dates, names stories of the people in the photos and letters.”

“The day of the move was so hectic that they left behind boxes of correspondence from WWII, lost family history.”
HOME IS WHERE MY STUFF IS

When asked to document “Home” users provide mostly images of collections of their things. Many mention how it is hard to see a new apartment as Home until it is filled with all their stuff.

Materially, Home is more of a collection of important things my user has amassed than the space that holds them.

We’re used to calling new places Home, but young and old alike feel isolated when distanced from their personal things.

MATERIALITY AS THE CHANNEL OF INTERACTION

Everyone liked the replicas, and many expressed a desire to have a cement or candle version of their favorite things – but in addition to the original. The holograms were something of a hit, but more for the novelty of the form than for the existence of the projection itself.

Physical replicas have a power all their own, but they are not sufficient replacements for an original. Virtual replicas seem to fail when they are focused on the capture and re-display of physical-visual information.
Important posessions have narratives that exist in the space between item and owner, and they weave together a hypertext of our personal histories, accomplishments and relationships.

A man in one of the focus groups at the AgeLab even had a friend help him make a documentary of the important things in his home, in which he describes the provenance of every meaningful item. It is many hours of video tape, edited and ready, as he joked, to “bore anyone to tears.”

This information is often non-linear and seemingly endless. When you really consider all it represents, perhaps the object is rather efficient!

Because the value lies implicitly with the owner, the value of objects is often lost between owners and subsequent generations. Owners have the feeling that unless they continue to care for an item, no one else will.

But it also leaves recipients and heirs with the burden of sorting through estates full of stuff that is hard to assess.

Hearing about this fragile meaning from both sides – the original owner to whom the item is quite meaningful, and the people who inherit house–fuls of mysterious junk, left me with the feeling that unless the meaning of these items is better documented, stored, shared and experienced, there really is no reason to keep them at all.
THE KONMARI METHOD

Japanese Organizing guru Marie Kondo rose to minimalist celebrity status helping the American public understand the “life-changing magic of tidying-up.”

She recommends asking yourself: “does this object spark joy in my heart?” and if the answer is no, you can get rid of the item.

For most Americans this approach might be a helpful revelation. But for us I’m left wondering: What if you’ve been doing that all along? What is the next step when too much sparks joy in your heart?
Object Hierarchy and the opportunity for new, potentially mass-less channels of interaction with the things that “spark joy in your heart.”
Design Opportunity

At this point, I knew a few things: Home is a really good thing, and in lieu of a permanent place to call home, personal effects can take on the role of Home; For my user, young relatively nomadic people, personal effects are home; These personal effects are loved for the memories they carry, and they make people feel connected to their personal and interpersonal histories. However, the objects themselves are problematic for various reasons, including the simple burden of moving them from place to place. Digital archival is a cheap and unsatisfying consolation prize for parting with sentimental things. Users spoke of losing or overzealously giving something away as though they were grieving a loved one.

The Design Opportunity I saw in this was to understand how one might better connect people to the memories, stories and people that make us each feel connected, accomplished and content. We may do this now by keeping and storing physical objects, but for many, it fails. We have too much stuff, we store too much of it rather than display or interact with it, which often defeats the purpose of keeping it in our lives. The opportunity seemed to be to explore the idea that one
day soon, in our era of evermore modern, lightweight and flexible new media, there could be new channels of interaction/ *a non-object thing* that could be as powerful as the physical object. I wondered: *what would that be like, and what would it have to get right?*

At this point I felt I needed to isolate, to more precisely define the items in this category. I knew they were non-functional, of negligible market value, and they’re sentimental yet burdensome. But what are these things? I still needed to understand more granularly the actual items we’re having so much trouble parting with, to really understand the unique power of these items’ physicality.

I sought to define the power of physicality as the channel for interaction with our memories. Then I wanted to try and pull apart the metadata from the material, and ultimately propose a speculative process for exhibition.
TROUBLESOME OBJECTS
A Field Guide

Alyssa R. Mayo
From my first few experiments it became clear that there are important divisions and hierarchies within the set of objects we keep, now it felt like the time to really classify and break down just what we have so much trouble parting with.

Based on my research I created a field guide for identifying and categorizing these objects, and sought to really parse out the benefits and burdens of physicality for each item type.
Troublesome Objects

- Things Passed Down
- Souvenirs
- Tokens of Accomplishment
- Things Treasured by a Past Self
- Gifts from Loved Ones
- Parts of a Whole
**Things Treasured by a Past Self**

Childhood treasures comprise most of this category. Owners recall how much they admired this item and why it was so important.

These objects seem to be a physical history of the owner's identity.

- **More benefits of physicality:**
  - Stability, Independence: Embedded in physical form, these objects will not be forgotten until the owners take them off.
  - Identity: These objects often have a sentimental value that may not be enjoyed, such as items that were received from a significant other.

- **More issues of physicality:**
  - Quality: The more the owner remembers the object, the more likely it is that the object is real.
  - Aesthetic: These objects may be viewed from various angles, sometimes highlighting the aesthetic value of the object.

**Gifts from Loved Ones**

Anything an owner stores by recalling who gave it to him/her. These objects may or may not be a pleasant reminder, but they are always a pleasant thought that comes to mind. Owners often recall how hard they were to earn or how good it felt to receive.

These items are usually kept in parents' homes, stored away or otherwise kept out of sight. Some may be displayed in a less public space such as a home office.

- **More benefits of physicality:**
  - Identity: Embedded in physical form, it evokes the emotions of the owner.

- **More issues of physicality:**
  - Aesthetic: These objects are often things-looking cold and inanimate by some standards.

**Souvenirs**

Objects obtained from important places in one's life or during meaningful times. These objects may reflect the owner's tastes or be meaningful to the owner. They are often used for emotional reasons. These objects may be sentimental or worth money to the owner or to be passed on to others.

- **More benefits of physicality:**
  - Stability, Independence: Embedded in physical form, these objects will not be forgotten until the owners take them off.

- **More issues of physicality:**
  - Quality: The more the owner remembers the object, the more likely it is that the object is real.
Trouble Factors Observed:

- Fragility
- Aesthetics
- Remembering
- Forgetting
- Responsibility
- Identity Dissonance
- Joint Meaning
- Other
many of the objects are prone to breakage or decay

the objects have a visual look that is not aligned with the owner’s style of decor

It is hard to always remember everything about each object

the objects remind us of things we’d rather not think about all the time

some objects associated with past family cause anxiety around loss or damage

some objects reflect preference/values with which the owner no longer identifies

some objects mean something different to people other than the owner
**Questionnaire**

**Please list and describe the places you consider “home”:**
- My parent’s home
- My apartment
- Where I lived as a child
- My current home at Burbank

**How many times have you moved in the past ten years?**

**How would you describe your general relationship to possessions?**

**Do you have any objects of emotional significance? Please describe.**

**Why is this object important to you? Could you share a story about this object?**

**Is there an emotionally important object that you could never get rid of? What is it? Where does it live/how do you keep it?**

**What do you do with this object? What did you do with it last?**

**Do you have any concerns about the object?**

**Do you have any objects like this in your life? How do you deal with them as you move around?**

**Trouble Factors Observed:**

- [ ] Ignoring
- [ ] Avoiding
- [ ] Reorganizing
- [ ] Expressing
- [ ] Evaluating
- [ ] Adjusting
- [ ] Delegating
- [ ] Preserving
- [ ] Losing
- [ ] Other
OBSERVATIONS & INSIGHTS

SOUVENIRS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

What stuck out to me most after this experiment was our attachment to daily ephemera: tickets, cards, maps, etc. All of my respondents shared images, stories and piles and piles of everyday ephemera that for some sentimental reason they just couldn’t get rid of.

Originally I did not think I was really concerned with the two-dimensional, I assumed it was easy to satisfactorily document such things. *Take a photo of a plane ticket, and you don’t lose as much of the item as you do with a photo of a seashell...right?*

I realized that this is actually the purest example of our attachment to the physical; materiality is the only thing that is missing from the replica.

MATERIAL VS. METADATA

These souvenirs of everyday life are also a sort of “silent killer” when it comes to clutter because of how frequently, unintentionally and costlessly they come our way.

There is a hierarchy or different classifications of important objects in our lives: Sometimes the materiality is most important, other times it is more about the information or origin story behind it.

For most of the physical, non-functional or no-longer-functional things that clutter our lives, particularly the 2D / paper things – it seems that the metadata is usually what we care about. Few things have meaning to us in their physicality, but that physicality is a convenient and powerful channel for interaction.
The unique strengths of physicality as the channel for interaction with memories:

**Glanceability**

As a channel for interaction with our memories, physical objects have an advantage because they take up the same sort of space we do. No need to have power or seek the thing out. No need to find the right file. If we turn our heads, they can be right there.

**Tactility**

As a channel for interaction with our memories, the physical often has a sensory connection that is deeply reminiscent, much like a smell. Certain materials, forms, textures are pleasing to us to the point of where we would actually miss not being able to handle it, feel the texture and the weight of it.
Stumble-ability

With a physical artifact we can literally and often inadvertently bump into it. Like when packing up to prepare for a move. We are rarely forced to sort through the digital, stumble upon the item and experience the memory. Occasionally we may run a search and come across an old email that brings us back, but as search features become more advanced such serendipity gets designed out of the experience.

Curation

As a channel that takes up real space in our lives, there is an (often-tested) upper limit to the items in this interaction channel. Since it is zero-sum, items within it are easily noticed and their value is routinely considered – perhaps every Spring. Space in digital channels is effectively infinite, so individual items become increasingly hard to taste in the “digital soup” (as my advisor Richard Banks calls the obscurity of our digital possessions).

Singularity

Physical objects have a granular uniqueness and take on a specific patina that cannot be perfectly replicated. It has been famously proven that even the most mass-produced mug immediately takes on a greater value the moment it comes under your ownership. This is quite dissimilar from digital things, of which we often have multiple identical copies of on the same hard drive, making it hard for a digital item to really feel so special.
THE CLOUD

SCAN 'N' SHRED

1. Write your name here
2. Stick to your paper
3. Put it in the cloud!
As we saw in the last section, “souvenirs of everyday life” are not usually cherished for their material qualities, but more often for the metadata they represent.

After coming to understand the benefits of the physical as an interaction channel for memories, it became clear that if there were any opportunity to execute a satisfactory virtual archival process with the tools at my disposal, it would be with this two 2D ephemera.
Let me capture that for you
Through photos, scanning, interviews and surveys I began capturing as much information as I could about people’s daily souvenirs, focusing mostly on the 2D. What was kept, what was important to remember, what would be the salient attribute used to recall it, etc. I set up an IFTTT (If This Then That) to send responses to a Tumblr blog: objectmemoryproject.tumblr.com
Left and above:
A series of questions for the 2D ephemera being documented. Kasia at the documentation station.

Opposite Page:
Kasia sorting through her box of collected souvenirs: tickets, cards, maps, airline tickets, checked baggage tags, matchbooks, napkins, etc.
Seashell / Kate Brandy

Name
Kate Brandy
E-mail
katebrandy47@gmail.com
What is this object?
A seashell, of the king variety
When is it from? When was it most relevant in your life?
Sanibel Island, found it on the beach when I was little walking with my family.
It’s most important when I’m away from family and been working really hard it’s
nice to hold and look at for at least my imagination can escape to that happy
place
Does it need to be physical? Why?
Hmm I like the tactile part of it that triggers my memory what it’s also the look
of it that triggers. So it’s more about the senses rather than the real object
How does it make you feel?
It makes me feel more connected to my family. It reminds me of why my family
is so important. For the reason that when I’m with them I feel strong and full of
discovery
Which sort of replica might be a satisfactory replacement for this object?
a story
a video
Tactile aspect?
Description your interaction with the object
I run my fingers across is arches. It’s smooth juxtaposition to its points is
satisfying. I can hold it with my eyes close to think or look at its shine.
Who does it remind you of?
My mom, dad, sister and maternal grandparents
How far have you gone to protect this object?
I hide it away in pockets and then pull it out when I know it can stay awhile :)
Please take a photo of your object
http://ift.tt/2panqEw

Share on Facebook, Twitter
Like Reblog 1 month ago #Object Memory April 7 #2017 at 08:46AM
3673928106222363911
Little Elephant / Kevan M.

Fame

E-mail

What is this object?

It is a little elephant. I had it at my wedding.

When is this object most meaningful in your life?

I got it as a gift from my grandfather. He was a great man and he loved his family. He gave it to me because he knew how much I loved elephants.

Describe your interaction with the object

I always carry it with me when I travel. It reminds me of the good times we had together.

How does it make you feel?

It makes me feel happy and nostalgic.

What sort of replica might be a satisfactory replacement for this object?

A small toy elephant.

Object Memory

Kala Walker

E-mail

What is this object?

It is a small statue of a bird.

When is this object most meaningful in your life?

I received it as a gift from my mother on my 18th birthday.

Describe your interaction with the object

I love to watch it and it always makes me feel happy.

How does it make you feel?

It makes me feel happy and nostalgic.

What sort of replica might be a satisfactory replacement for this object?

A smaller version of the same bird.

Object Memory

Jada Turtle / A. Myers

Fame

E-mail

What is this object?

It is a small seashell.

When is this object most meaningful in your life?

I found it on a beach trip that I took with my family.

Describe your interaction with the object

I like to keep it as a reminder of the fun we had on that trip.

How does it make you feel?

It makes me feel happy and nostalgic.

What sort of replica might be a satisfactory replacement for this object?

Another small seashell of the same type.
**Material**

**PROCESSING THE MATERIAL**

Images and text captured in the Object Memory Project surveys revealed the categories of information associated with each of the items.

- Maps & Postcards
- Brochures & Programs
- Invitations & Announcements
- Ticket stubs
- Receipts
- Business cards
- Matchbooks & napkins
Users enjoyed the process of sorting their ephemera and being asked to reminisce ("It made me happy to think of all those things, I remembered more than I usually do") but after a number of entries, it becomes tedious. They often wondered what would happen to this information, and noted they wanted to be able to experience it both accidentally and deliberately, as they do in the physical form. What strikes me most is how no one focused on the physical-visual capture of the object.

I’m left wondering if this is because of the low quality of the scan, or if the metadata, even in the primitive form of a survey response/diary entry is possibly already more valuable that the physical form of this type of Troublesome Object...
For the outcome and exhibition of all this work I was torn between trying to address the issue head-on (i.e. come up with a set of feasible solutions) and creating more experimental designs that could make the larger questions of my thesis project accessible in an exhibition setting.

Fortunately, conversations with my advisors encouraged me to pursue the latter plan, to try building out some prototypes of various memory machines that I had been sketching. The idea started as a pretty literal translation of my previous activity into a bricolage machine that would actually scan and capture the user’s objects, allow them to reflect on it, digitally record that information, and then let them decide whether or not to let it go. I wasn’t sure I liked where it was going, but started building.
PHYSICAL CAPTURE

NARRATIVES NOTES META DATA
MACHINE I: 3D Object Disposal

Through more experimentation and conversation, my Outcome evolved to become an extremely simple set of “machines” that quite brazenly suggest to the viewer that all their problems will be solved if they follow a simple protocol for disposal.
OBJECT DISPOSAL PROTOCOL

For the safe and proper disposal of sentimental objects

A. Identify objects in this category. Usually stored or tucked away, but sometimes on display.

Including but not limited to those objects known as stuff, mementos, souvenirs, tchotchkes, treasures, crap.

B. Approach the machine, wait for the green light and lift the lid. Place object in the center and close the lid.

Note: once the latch is locked you legally surrender this object, and you will not be able to retrieve its physical form.

C. The machine will automatically capture physical attributes of the object

Users are advised to stand at least 10 feet from the machine while it is processing the object.
A. Simply process the object.

10’ min.

D. While processing, your smart device will display a series of questions, selections and settings related to the object.

You may save your progress at any time.

E. The machine will take care of the physical form of your object, for you now have a virtual one.
RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN
Master of Industrial Design (MID ’17)
Pop-up show

May 5th, 2017
5:00pm-8:00 pm

Anita’s Way
135 W 42 ST, New York, NY

MACHINE II

2D Disposal

While Machine I proposes you dispose of 3D objects, Machine II focuses on 2D ephemera, the things I have earlier referred to as the “souvenirs of everyday life”.

Through the instructions posted, the machine promises safe and proper disposal of your sentimental papers, and that “a lighter more secure relationship to your memories awaits.” Papers inserted into the machine are scanned and virtually preserved in the cloud, along with the written information provided by the user.
A. Start with accumulated ephemera and 2-dimensional mementos, including, but not limited to: ticket stubs, birthday cards, postcards, love notes.

Note: these items may be found in shoeboxes, under beds, in closets, pockets, small and large piles, trays and other catch-alls.

B. Approach the machine and wait for the green light. Place your item in the slot, and the machine will automatically process the physical information of your item.

Note: once placed in the machine you legally surrender this item, and you will not be able to retrieve its physical form. Also, one item at a time, please!

C. Stand back. While processing, your smart device will display a series of questions, selections and settings related to the object.

Users are advised to stand at least 10 feet from the machine while it is processing the object.

D. Confirm the item has been successfully processed by listening for a cheerful “blup!”

Note: if you do not hear this sound, keep waiting.

D. Enjoy your new virtual artifact. The machine will dispose of its physical form.
THE VANDERHAY GRACE

Wishing you and your loved ones economic prosperity and good fortune in all your ventures.

Yours truly,

[Signature]

[Notes on the back side]
Conclusion

At the outset of this project, I had no idea where it would take me, but I think that was actually the most important criteria for my topic being a worthwhile one for me to pursue. Working under that degree of uncertainty is not usually my strongsuit, and I often have a hard time getting started until I feel I am smarter than the process, that I can see where it is going (and that I like what I am seeing). I did have a hard time getting started, and along the way, but I am happy I did not veer off into a more commercial, problem-solution area of inquiry.

At the thesis pop-up show my class put on in New York as something of a trial run for our defense and thesis exhibition, I got a lot of great feedback. Machine I attracted the attention it was meant to, drew viewers into a conversation with me about the things they are having trouble parting with, and gave me useful feedback I was able to consider for the final thesis show.

What I found most surprising was the diversity of people who were drawn to the subject. The most passionate responses probably came from established, non-
nomadic middle-aged viewers who described the pain and confusion of sorting through houses of their deceased parents’ things.

Their feedback made me realize that there really are more practical opportunities in this area. Simply asking yourself if the object “sparks joy in your heart” is just not enough! Viewers were asking what the experience would be like after capture, if the machines were real; they wanted to know what I would do to help with the anxiety of starting the disposal process. Perhaps this is an area for further research and prototyping.

At the same time, I am happy to wrap up and reflect on the project at this point. As my advisor from the Human Experience and Design team at Microsoft Research put it, there is a point where trying to capture everything you love about an object and all the thoughts and feelings it conjures can feel like trying to describe a joke. I definitely began to see this in the Object Memory Project. I could see there was new value created by capturing the useful metadata, making it searchable and potentially weaving it together in new experiences, but trying to
creatively destroy the physical was never my intention and seems as worthwhile as trying to get a computer to do the job of a comedian.

I, and I hope you, will take away potentially useful insights about the specific strengths of the physical artifact as a channel for interaction, as well as about how we might best design future interactions in digital, virtual or hybrid spaces that have yet to become everyday.

Finally I have to admit, as the author, designer and most critical critic of this project, I still cannot decide if this printed, bound and cataloged object you are holding (a copy of which I will surely keep until I die) is the ultimate piece of evidence or a cautionary piece of irony. Either way, thank you for coming along. I hope you have enjoyed this channel for interaction with my ideas.

www.alyssamayo.net
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Cards kept. Maggie Yolen, 2016.


“Greater Than, Less Than” show poster. RISD MID Students, 2017.


Cover Paper texture created by Freepik

Cover/Back Cover Analogue controls via typedeck.com / Flickr Group Pool “Control Panel”
BOOKS


FILMS


ARTICLES & PODCASTS


WEBSITES & PROJECTS


Above: Delivering work to the R.I. Convention Center.
First, thank you to my most loving, supportive and secretly-creative partner. Without you, I may not have gotten my admissions application in, had the confidence to go back to school for a design program or finished this thesis in one piece.

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