

HOME: THINGS & BODIES

A thing-based exploration on contemporary ways of living.

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“Habitualisation devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war.”
Art as a device, Viktor Shklovsky, 1917.

Home is a complex and inseparable relation between material, social and poetical meanings. It is the house, but also *everything that is in it and around, the inhabitants and the feeling of well-being that it brings* (Rybczynski 1986: 62). To attend to the historical construction of home is to attend to the history of an increasing intimate interaction with a material world of one’s own, that can mediate between oneself and the changing world beyond it, *a house of care that appears to have been built and rebuilt from the interior (...)* *with walls and furniture in equilibrium* (Bachelard 1957: 101).

At home, we live with objects. The everyday mediation of our material objects allows us to participate in society, to achieve inner warmth and joy, and to construct our own identity. They are not merely functional devices, value holders or metaphors and representations; they are crucial entities for understanding specific social practices (Miller 2001: 1-23). Reflecting on the things that we live with gives us the chance to reflect on ourselves. The material culture within one’s home is reckoned as both one’s problem and solution; reproduction of prejudices and social conventions, but also opportunity for resistance, revolution and transformation.

As we spend time with objects, they embed in our everyday, melt in our routines and disappear, becoming harder to perceive and evaluate (Shklovsky 1917). *As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects, but we only catch a glimpse of things* (Brown 2001: 4). It is only when an object stops working for us that it asserts itself as thing, referring to a particular subject-object relation rather than to a particular object –what it does rather than what it is–, manifesting its “thingness” as material and social entity that can only be approached through its relational and performative qualities.

The closer our things are to us, the more we shape them while being shaped by them (Bachelard 1957, Miller 2001, Brown 2001, Law 1992). Things are neither what we think they are, nor are they fully autonomous. They exist in constantly shifting networks of relationships with other not-only-human materials, defining social situations together. This means that things have agency to *authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid and so on* (Law 1992: 72); they invite affordances but also compel. Therefore, if design is a form of making things, it is also a means for shaping agency.

I am interested in the daily practice of inhabitation in relation to typological notions and layouts in space, and I concentrate my design work on big objects and small spaces that encourage active interaction and support body experiences. My proposal is an exploration of contemporary ways of inhabitation through a series of design studies which register people-objects behaviours within a specific domestic realm, transforming the results into new things. My investigation stands for the vital role of our material home in understanding and transforming the domestic experience, and it claims for this home –that has a voice– to be listened, so that one can depict how one actually lives, and consciously decide how one wants to do so. It aims to problematise the notion and balance of design standards in architecture and related fields by approaching the domestic experience as a holistic more-than-human practice, addressing the responsibility of the architect as an agent of social transformation.

To develop a method that enables the discussion on how everyday things are truly used, my proposal resolves on one hand, what is the best mode of attention to them, and on the other, what is the most powerful tool to represent their uniqueness. The goal is not to redefine standards but to investigate hitherto-hindered alternative domestic practices. To avoid generalisation, I decide to obviate the macroscopic attention to the whole and to concentrate on the microscopic attention to the particular case. My research relies on the ordinary as extra-ordinary source of original creativity and critique. To bring this information to light, I

choose to use “estrangement” –so its strangeness can be recognized– as a tool for defamiliarization to fight habitualisation, reactivate perception, trigger new readings and generate reactions (Shklovsky 1917).

My study is based on a “thing-ethnological” method that starts in the body of the inhabitant, and that navigates through the domestic network, connecting with other things. Since it is concerned with uses – rather than identities–, it places things in the centre of the process to obtain fruitful information. Whereas traditional user-centred design methods assume that creativity is exclusive to people, already integrate the notion that people shape things as much as things shape people. A thing-centred design method –as argued by various research projects such as the Thing Tank on digital fabrication and business development, or the Object Research Lab on materially-engaged artistic practice– makes this interrelation visible by relying on the collaboration with things as a way of solving problems. In my proposal, the use of a thing-centred design method means that a thing captures the people-thing-interaction data, which is made visible through its “estrangement”, that in turn reconstitutes it as “some-thing” which transforms the way of relating to it.

On the search for media that allows the distracted interaction to be articulated, I experiment with different fieldwork documentation media: mappings, drawings, photos, videos, interviews, writings, etc. All these practices result in a lack of attention to one or another aspect, and only the juxtaposition of different material provokes an “estrangement” of the experience that allows for legibility. The disruption of one element by another does not offer a total representation, but challenges the authority of any media and allows problematizing the representation of the domestic everyday complexity and multiplicity (Highmore 2002: 19-24). Likewise, none of the findings offer a monolithic solution for the domestic problematic, but the juxtaposition of findings leads to an “estrangement” of the thing that triggers the necessary critique and reaction for the intended transformation.

Juxtaposition of medial practices becomes the main recording tool to recognise alternative ways of relating to things, and juxtaposition of findings, the main designing instrument to envision new ways of living together. In the upcoming CA2RE+ conference I want to share the material produced during a complete process, from the access to the domestic network to the “estrangement” of the thing and its effects, in order to discuss the relation between tool, translation of the discordance, and integration of the behaviour into the existing system of relations.

NOTE: In the text the term *object* is used to designate a human-made material artefact, and *thing* to designate an object that is at the same time material and social entity, emphasising its relations with other objects and subjects, and its potential to shape them while being shaped by them. With the same intention, the title deliberately avoids the term *people* –subjects in clear opposition to objects–, and instead, it uses the term *bodies* –as vital materialities that interact with things and participate of this reciprocity of agency. In *this home, the body is a thing among things* (Brown, 2001: 4).

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Keywords:

domesticity, things, juxtaposition

Design Driven Research:

My research is based on a “thing-ethnological” method initiated in the body of the inhabitant, and that navigates through the domestic network, connecting it with other objects, of which I elaborate “object-portraits” that include conventions as symbol (what it evokes or represents) and signal (what it prohibits or allows), particular object life and sentimental value for the inhabitant, and justified exchange value. During a defined period of time, I register their interactions, and I select the thing(s) that presents the highest variance between discrepancy and coincidence with its portrait, which becomes the centre of the design. In a second documentation exercise and using a different media, I concentrate on the nature and effects of the mismatch, and I juxtapose the resultant material to the first documentation. The combination of material is processed and translated into a some-thing –a possible “estranged” version of the thing(s)–, which is placed within the domestic network –if reasonable, including the original object(s). I record the interactions through the same media as initially used, and again juxtapose the mismatch material. Lastly, I process the new combination and compare it with the first one. The comparison evaluates the level of raised awareness about the concerned people-things behaviour, and the adjustment of the earlier variance achieved by the “estranged” thing through its relational and performative qualities. In other words, it assesses the extent to which the terms of interaction have become intentional and reciprocal, ultimately enabling conscious transformation.

Bio

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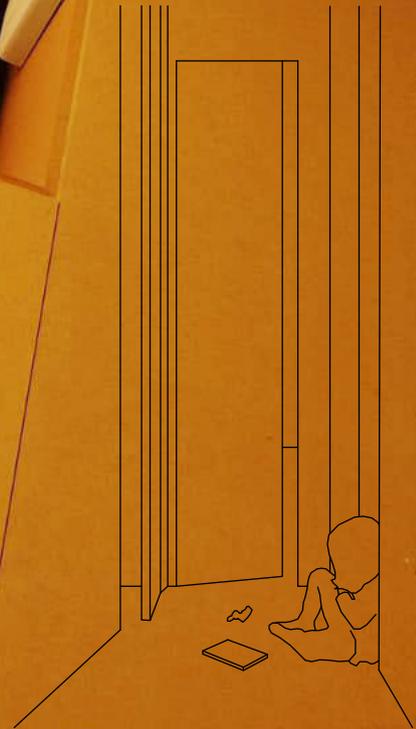
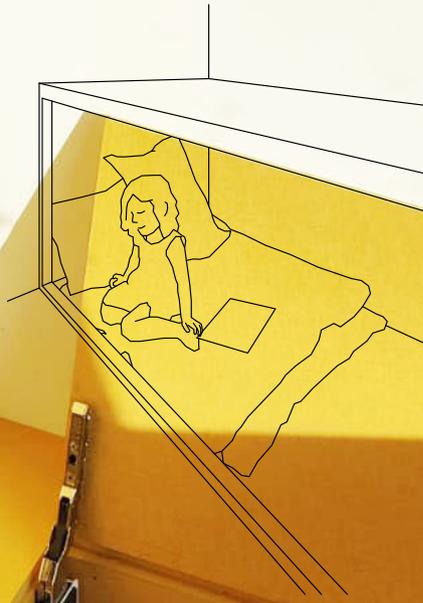
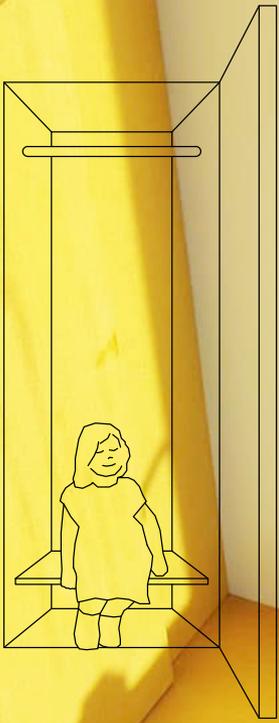
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Marta is a Spanish architect focused on teaching work and research on contemporary ways of inhabitation by capturing and transforming specific things-bodies relations. In 2012 she joined the office June14 Meyer-Grohbrügge & Chermayeff in Berlin, and during 5 years she worked as a head designer in different projects, including a housing building in Berlin, Kurfürstenstraße 142-143, currently under construction. From 2017 to 2019 she worked as professor assistant at TUBerlin, and currently she is teaching member of the Design Studio Brandlhuber at ETHZürich, using time-based media and storytelling to communicate architecture as a discipline that affects the everyday.

a room of her own



a thing for herself