Enacting Dialogue Through an Architectural Model

Research Essay

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Research Practice Module

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Abstract

The author's DPhil research focuses on how people use and experience today's domestic space in relation to accumulated material possessions within an architectural discourse. In order to assess this, a sensory ethnographical research method, using a physical object to facilitate discussion, has been identified in the literature as beneficial (Boehner et al.,2014), as the dialogue created around the model becomes a design intervention that incites and exposes reactions from the participants. This creates a thought-provoking record that can benefit the researcher's reflection of their own research (Hemmings et al., 2002). However, the architectural model in particular, as such an object, has not yet been tested in this context. This study, therefore, provides a much needed exploration of the effectiveness of the architectural model as a means of implementing a sensory ethnographical research methodology. The model has been used as a catalyst to facilitate a dialogue amongst field experts, in order to create a design intervention event that will capture stimulating material (Hemmings et al., 2002). The dialogue has been recorded and photographed, and written notes were taken by the researcher as participant-observer. The effectiveness of this catalyst has been critically analysed. The findings identify the strengths and weaknesses of the method, and will inform the author's approach to future research.

Introduction

The author's research investigates how the accumulation of material possessions impacts today's domestic space in order to inform future design solutions. By exploring the ways in which people use, accumulate, collect, store and organise their possessions (as well as what is discarded) in the everyday domestic environment, the researcher aims to identify new approaches to design future domestic spaces.

The DPhil uses a rigorous mixed-mode methodological approach, which combines a sensory (visual) ethnography (Pink, 2007; Pink, 2009; Pink, 2011) with well-defined design research (Frayling, 1993; Murray, 2013). It answers questions about how inhabitants use and experience space (sensory ethnography) and how this should inform design (design research). Sensory Ethnography is a methodology established as a means to understand people's lives and experiences. Design Research is a methodology which has been applied by many to rethink an architectural problem from a different perspective. Both methodologies are explorative and reflexive (Pink, 2011;Rendell, 2004; Murray, 2013), which can make them appear dynamic. While the sensory ethnography draws out people's experience of space, design research methods explore the physical nature of space.

In order to investigate particular aspects of this DPhil, a novel combination of the two methodologies has been developed, whereby a sensory ethnographical methodology is augmented with an architectural model. This has been done by others in the past (Boehner *et al.,*2014; Hemmings *et al.,* 2002) using 'domestic probes', but an architectural model has not yet been tested in this context. This study, therefore, aims to provide a

much needed insight into the effectiveness of the architectural model as a means of implementing a sensory / visual ethnographical research methodology.

This essay begins by discussing the background to the development of the methodology being tested and identifying key architectural precedents for the approach taken. It then describes in detail the model created as part of this study and the framework of the 'domestic event' carried out to test its effectiveness. The observations and recordings of the event are then summarised and analysed, along with the author's own critical reflections on the process. Finally, lessons learned which will be taken into account during future DPhil research are also discussed.

Situating the use of a model within the methodological approaches

In ethnography, research methods have been developed in order to understand people's lives and experiences and to explore new ways of expressing them beyond the traditional observational approaches (Pink, 2009). Visual ethnographic methods generate visual materials as a way of exploring research questions (Rose, 2014). The researcher becomes central in developing visual material, and in some instances the participants also generate visual material (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2014) that needs to be analysed by the researcher. The visual material produced is '…*used actively in the research process, alongside other sorts of evidence generated usually by interview or ethnographic fieldwork*' (Rose, 2012). Furthermore, Rose (2014) argues that this method becomes an effective tool to generate evidence that other methods alone, like interviews or surveys, cannot, since they lack the visual materials needed to provoke a

reaction. However some still remain sceptical of how the researcher remains objective (Buckingham, 2009; Dicks *et al.,* 2006). The visual material becomes more emotional when combined with dialogue (Rose, 2014; Bagnoli, 2009), as it channels a sensory experience of an environment (Banks, 2008; Pink 2007; Pink 2011). Dialogue created with visual materials allows the researcher to explore the 'taken for granted' in the lives of the participants (Rose,2014), and can therefore reveal hidden aspects of their lives (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004).

In this study, a physical artefact (the architectural model created as part of the research) is examined and interrogated through a domestic event (focus group) in order to incite and provoke a reflective dialog amongst a group of chosen field experts. 'Inspirational data' is captured during the event (Hemmings, et al. 2002) creating a design intervention (Graver, 2001).

In both sensory / visual ethnography and design research, critical reflection is what differentiates the process from what a designer would do in practice (Fraser, 2013).

'It is only through critical reflection of a process as it is being done, that design knowledge can be unpacked and made available to others' (Fraser, 2013)

Situating the architectural model within the architectural discourse

In the 1950s post-war era of frugality and scarcity of goods, husband and wife architects the Smithsons developed and tested new ideas for housing design based on how ordinary everyday people lived and stored their possessions within the home (Van Den Heuvel and Risselada, 2004; Smithson *et al.,* 2005). In 1956, they were asked to design

the 'The House of the Future' for the London Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, thinking

25 years into the future to visualise how people would be living in a fast changing world

(figure 1). The house they built as part of the exhibition became a stage, where actors

showed the public how they would be living in the future (Godfrey *et al.* 2014; Van Den

Heuvel and Risselada, 2004). The performance became an interactive installation

watched by visitors through carefully considered apertures. The author views the house

and its performance as an example of relational art (Dezeuze, 2006). The boundaries

between art, architecture and the everyday activities were fluid, where the carefully

considered performance transformed itself into art that was widely recorded through

photographs (figure 1).

Figure 1: Smithson, P. and Smithson, A. (1956) [prototype house] 'The House of the Future' – Performative Exhibition at the London Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition

A modern version of the Smithsons' approach has been explored by the architect Andre

Jaque (2011) in *IKEA Disobedient* (figure 2). Through this participatory exhibition in the

MOMA New York, Jaque invited the community to perform their everyday activities

within an architectural framework of what he called 'hacked' IKEA furniture (MOMA,

2016). The IKEA furniture became the everyday set by which discussion was encouraged

(figure 2). The exhibition demonstrated the impact of everyday objects on our 'lifestyles', as the participants did not follow the architectural experts' values (MOMA, 2016).

Figure 1   Jaque, A. (2011) [performance] 'IKEA Disobedient' – Performative Exhibition at the MOMA New York

These events have been hugely influential in testing approaches to housing design. They showed how users of domestic space could be engaged in a discussion about the ideas presented, changing their attitudes and preconceptions. These investigations of the use and experience of domestic space, explored through prototype models with consumers as participant-observers, are the foundations on which this study is based.

The Making of the Architectural Model

The model created for this DPhil takes inspiration from the qualities explored above in order to capture and communicate the research findings to date. Since part of the DPhil investigates the historical perspective of how housing has changed over time in response to the acquisition of material possessions, the model must capture this historical narrative, as well as the social, technological and cultural factors that have influences home design.

The representation of design thinking as part of the making of architecture is the most important operation that articulates theory and practice (Dunn, 2007). The model is the medium by which 'certain relevant characteristics of the observed reality' (Echenique, 1974) are enhanced and abstracted. In order to create an architectural model it is therefore necessary to be highly selective of the information it will contain (Dunn, 2007). It is left to the maker, or in this case the researcher, to identify the relevant features for abstraction.

For this study, the architectural model should articulate a narrative, by which the qualities of the domestic space, in relation to accumulation of material possessions, are richly portrayed, in order to construct and communicate a research argument. The model also needs to capture the historical changes, both in the fabric of the building and in the use and experience of the space within.

The architectural model, titled 'Undressing UK Housing', articulates what lies behind the public face of the desired urban house through time. The model uses historical and current information from two distinct phases of the DPhil. Firstly, it uses the historical information collected as part of the author's overarching study exploring the major changes in UK housing over the last 200 hundred years. This information was summarised in five timelines identifying the social-economic, technological and political factors that have influenced home design and the way people inhabited their homes. Secondly, it uses an analysis of over 200 photographs that were collected as part of the author's participatory exhibition at the Architecture Centre, Bristol (figure 3). The exhibition was used as a mechanism to explore a new perspective on the ordinary, by understanding the collections of every day prosaic objects and how they currently

occupy space in our homes. Visitors to the exhibition were asked to participate in the research by sending photographs of their collections of everyday objects in order to give an insight into how people use and experience today's domestic space in relation to accumulated material possessions.
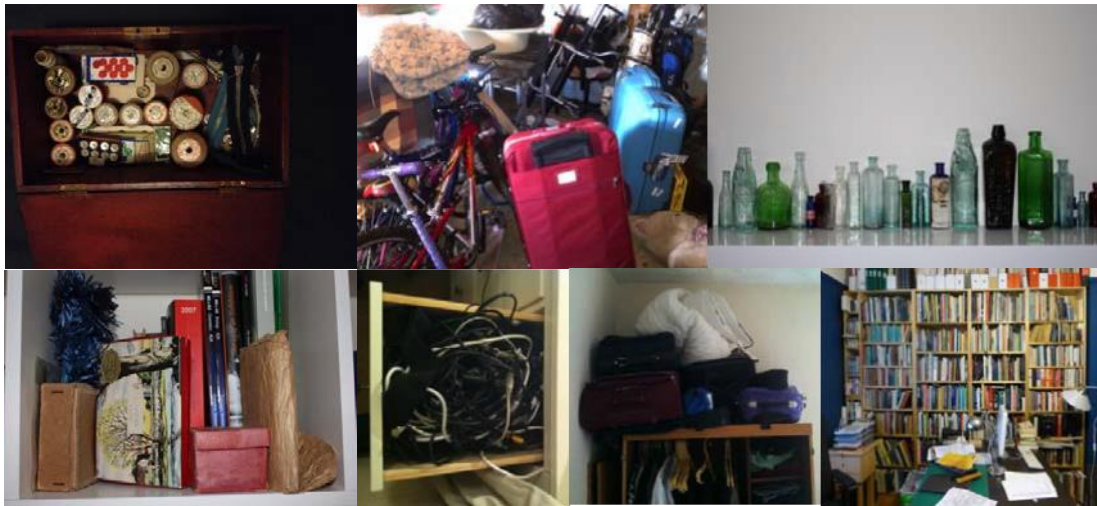

Figure 3   Sample of photographs of material possessions collected by the researcher

The model has been designed in four standalone parts, exploring the Regency, Edwardian, Victorian and the Modern terraced house. These are the four most common terraced typologies, and encapsulate the times in history when housing demand was at a peak (Muthesius, 1982; Ravetz, 1995). Each period has been deconstructed into twelve layers, each made of 5mm thick laser-cut acrylic, and each layer has been divided into two halves, one left and one right (figure 5). One half has been carefully laser-etched to represent the past. Looking through the twelve layers together creates a three dimensional effect of how it would have been to live in the house during that period (figure 5). The repetitive nature of the layers is a reminder of the cyclic nature of the everyday. The other half of each layer has been collaged, using images from catalogues and magazines printed onto acetate and glued onto the acrylic to represent a more

contemporary domestic space. These carefully constructed collages have been designed using the findings from the analysis of the photographs collected though the participatory exhibition (figure 4). The collages show a layering and juxtaposition of objects creating a series of fabricated spaces that represent today's domestic space and its accumulated possessions. A key precedent was Richard Hamilton's photomontages (Godfrey et al., 2014; Tate, 2006; Stonard, 2007), as he constructed an architectural space where material and technological possessions took centre stage.

Figure 4   Example of the fabricated collages as part of the model that have been created from the collected photographs

The past (etching) and the present (collage) cohabit the architectural model to illustrate their influence on today's domestic spaces. Colourful contemporary collages collide with ghostly etched acrylic to communicate a reality of the everyday at a given point in time. The combined collection of models gives an overview across time and space, with the static physical framework of each period home contrasting with the dynamic array of objects and activities that they contain (figure 5).
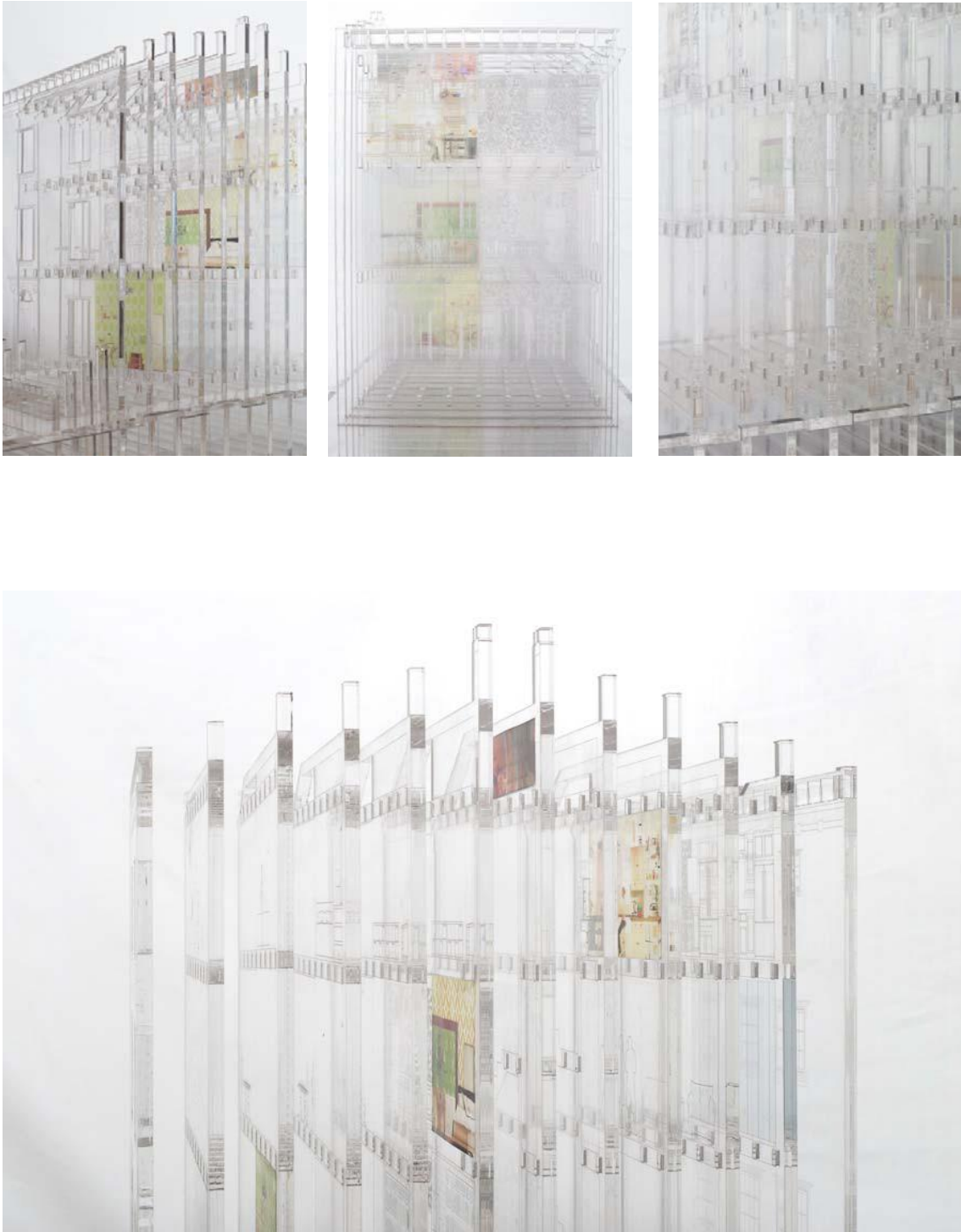
Figure 5   Marco, E. (2016) 'Undressing UK Housing' © Justine Frost

Testing the model in the context of the methodology

In order to test the effectiveness of this model as a means of implementing a sensory ethnography, five key experts from the fields of Architecture, Photography, Film and Architectural History were invited to take part in a domestic event. The experts were chosen for their specific research interests and their expertise in using design research and visual ethnographic methods. The participants were asked to engage in a critical discussion of how the architectural model added to a sensory ethnographic methodology and helped to communicate the research argument.

Prior to the domestic event a pack was sent to each participant, in which a written and photographic summary of the DPhil project was given, along with information on how the event itself was to be conducted and recorded. Three A5 cards were also included, on which the participants could reflect, record and sketch their thought processes beforehand.
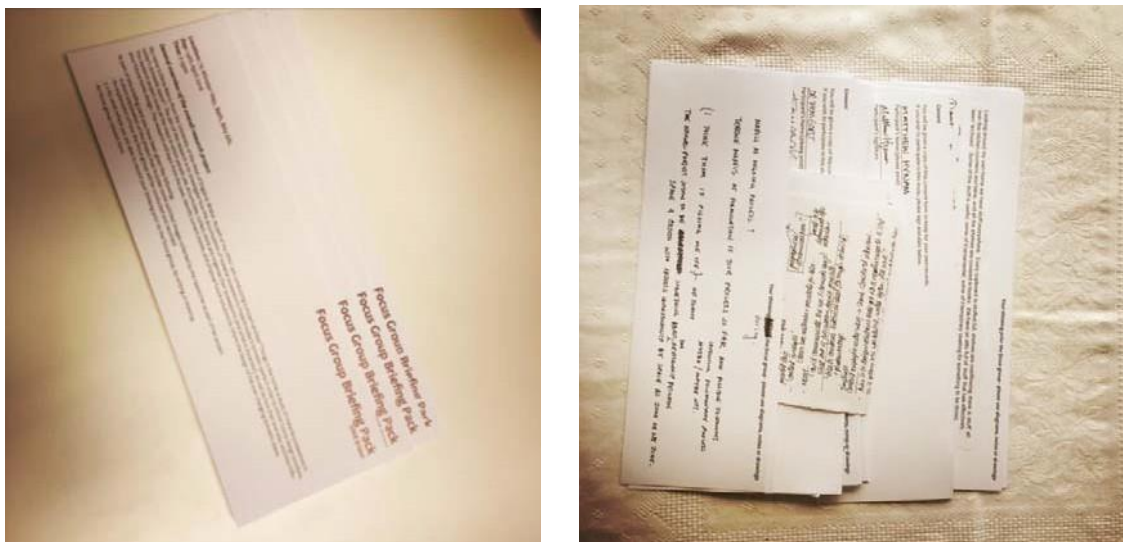

Figure 6 – Focus group pack before and after the event © Elena Marco

The experts then came together, led by the researcher to ensure the brief was followed. The model was placed in a specific domestic space, the kitchen, in order to create a 'place-event' where the research narrative could be enhanced (Pink, 2009) and to strengthen the dichotomy between the reality of space and its abstraction (figure 7). The event was designed to provoke a reflexive dialogue amongst the participants by placing the model (a 'domestic probe') inside a physical domestic space (Hemmings, et al.2002).
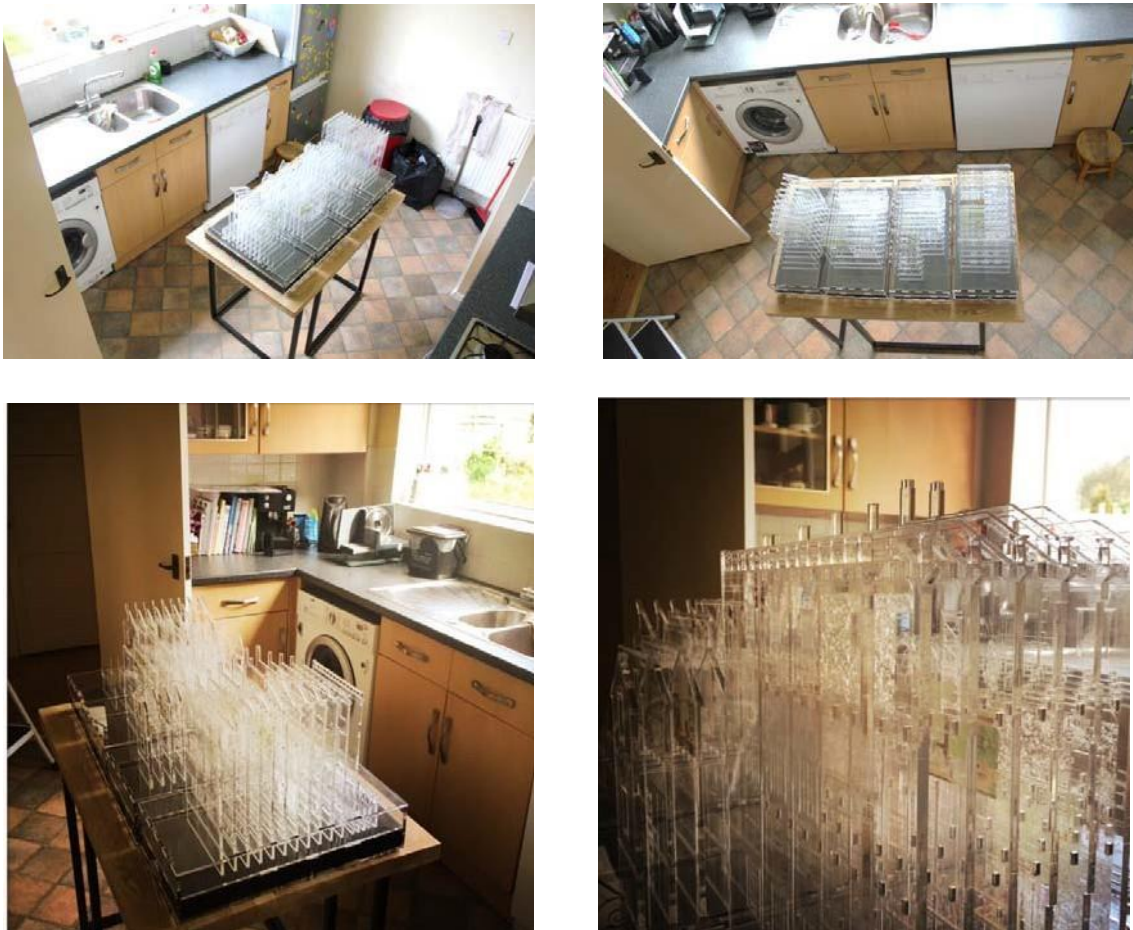

Figure 7– Placing the architectural model in context © Elena Marco

The focus group started with a 30 min briefing where the background to the project was outlined and questions arising from the briefing pack were addressed. The event lasted

2hours from start to finish (figure 8). It was audio and photographically recorded, and the hand-written notes of the participants and the researcher have been analysed.

Figure 8– Participants being briefed in the living area as part of the domestic event © Elena Marco

Analysis

Opinions were divided amongst the field experts as to whether the model was an effective way to present research findings. Reactions were generally positive, but a number of questions and limitations were identified, that will need to be addressed if this methodology is to continue to be used as part of the DPhil.

The value of making as a way of thinking through design was seen as beneficial for this DPhil. It was therefore suggested that it would be a good idea to construct different models for different purposes and different audiences as the DPhil progresses.

One of the weaknesses of the model from an architectural perspective was that, whilst it was a 3D piece, its layers made the information seem flattened, recorded and '*stored*', and it therefore lost its three-dimensionality. The elaborate crafting of the model was

also considered distracting, as the physical fabric of the building was more readable than its *'stuff'*.

However the experts agreed that model has characteristics that *'start to work when [the model] describes the [historical] peculiarities of space'* like the high ceilings or original features, and that it shows how the space would be used today through its fabricated collages.

Figure 9– Participants during the domestic event © Justine Frost

Both the model and the collages were viewed as carefully constructed spaces that record and store the progress of the DPhil, showcasing how the project has developed and trying to abstractedly communicate the research findings so far. This initiated a

discussion on the role of model within the DPhil. One expert argued that the model had done its job within the context of the DPhil and now needed to be archived.

'I would recommend you to 'archive' or 'park' the models as you presented them, although they are a valuable record of a key stage in your process.'

In contrast, two of the other participants saw the model becoming a valuable storage medium for the research and suggested the model should continue to be developed throughout the DPhil in order to archive both the process and the findings, becoming a carefully constructed record of the DPhil process.

'…. the model is something to read because it is visual….instead of reading a text you read a visual recording of the research'

The dichotomy between the '*perfect architectural model*' and the '*imperfect reality*' was discussed at length, especially within the architecture and architectural photography contexts. It was noted that when architecture is photographed, people and stuff are usually removed, '*but the house is brought to life when you add these things*'.   The participants debated whether, since the research aims to look at material possessions, this model is '*too legitimate*', by which they meant too perfect or crafted.   They concluded that the research needs an '*illegitimate model that rebukes architectural space*'.

'Seeing an empty house, devoid of belongings and personal effects is like seeing a skeleton. The life of a house comes from the presence of people within it, their possessions and the marks they make (wallpaper, paint, etc.)'.   Therefore, whilst the model was considered beautiful, it was at the same time considered static, almost like a piece of art, albeit one which has value as part of a process.

The participants agreed that continuing to explore the DPhil through the construction of models (legitimate and illegitimate) would be of benefit to the researcher as a way of addressing the dichotomy between the architectural space (legitimate) and the accumulation and storage of material possessions (illegitimate).

Figure 10– Observing the model from different perspectives © Justine Frost

On the question of whether the architectural model was effective in creating a sensory ethnography, both the both experts and the researcher-participant-observer were overwhelmingly positive. The architectural model was successful in creating and promoting dialogue amongst the group (figure 9). It was observed from different angles and heights, creating a dynamic and engaging dialogue (figure 10). The model also generated personal moments where three of the participants in particular discussed where they have lived in the past, as the physical form of the model took them back to their personal experiences.

The participants agreed that an architectural model could positively contribute to a sensory ethnography. However, the consensus was that it should '*not be this model*'. They felt that the model examined was too '*beautiful and structured*' and '*too crafted*' to contribute to the methodology. They concluded that a different type of model, where

the 'illegitimate' elements of the research were expressed, would be of more benefit to the sensory ethnography methodology, because people would not be afraid to touch it, move it and even change it as part of the dialogue.

Differences of opinion arose, however, when discussing what type of model would be most suitable for the specific research of this DPhil. In order to communicate the use and experience of domestic space in relation to material possessions, two possibilities emerged from the discussion. One suggestion was to use a *'larger-scale, less detailed model of space'* in which participants might *'play'* at placing various items of *'clutter'*. *Another suggestion was to use* a 'digital' or 'cinematic' model that could be morphed with time so as to become temporal, like material possessions are themselves. During discussions of both suggestions, the term that kept occurring was the importance of *playfulness* as a means of engaging the participants that take part in the sensory ethnography.

'I don't necessarily agree with [Participant A] that a digital or cinematic representation of space would help. For my part, I would be very interested in seeing you develop a larger-scale, less detailed model of space (we called it a 'cardboard box' model) in which participants might 'play' at placing various items of 'clutter'. This would address what I believe is the very important distinction between 'architectural' space (the spaces represented by architectural photographers, or even the IKEA catalogue) and 'cluttered' space.'

'I am very attracted to the idea of a 'game' in which participants can 'play' at placing clutter within a model.'

Once the group agreed that the model had a role within the sensory ethnography, the researcher noticed that participants began to draw and animatedly discuss the design of the '*other model*' (figure 11). This raises an interesting question about whether the model should be 'wrong' on purpose, in order to stimulate a discussion about what the 'right' model should look like.
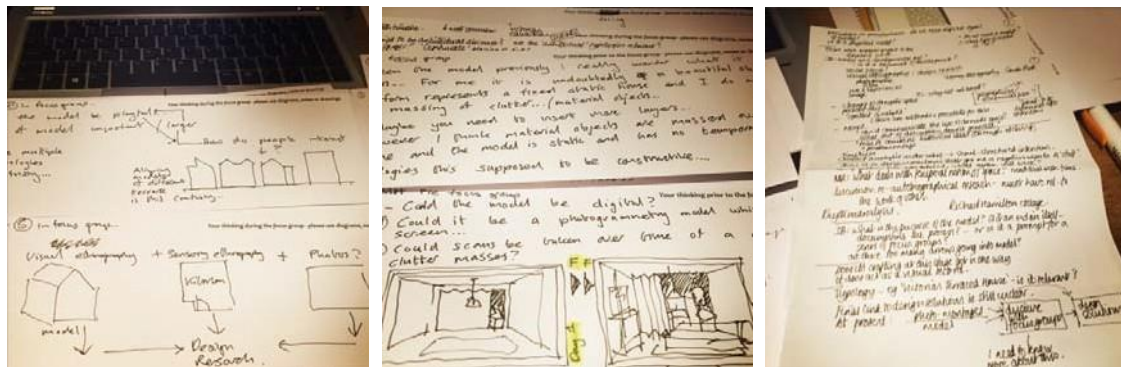

Figure 11– Sketches and notes taken during the domestic event showing how the 'other model' could be designed © Elena Marco

There was an agreement that the '*other model*' should be designed and constructed with the '*various items of clutter*' derived from the already collected photographs, and that it also needed an element of '*play*'. In order to include the clutter in a methodological manner, the experts felt it was important that the collected photographs led to the creation of a '*taxonomy of stuff*'.

'*When I say 'various items of clutter', I am thinking these might be derived from a detailed analysis and taxonomy of your photos. You say you have a very large sample of these - maybe they could be classified into categories such as 'dirty' or 'clean'; 'useful' or 'symbolic'; 'contained' or 'dumped' etc etc. You could then use your groups to better understand how these various forms are accommodated within the home.*
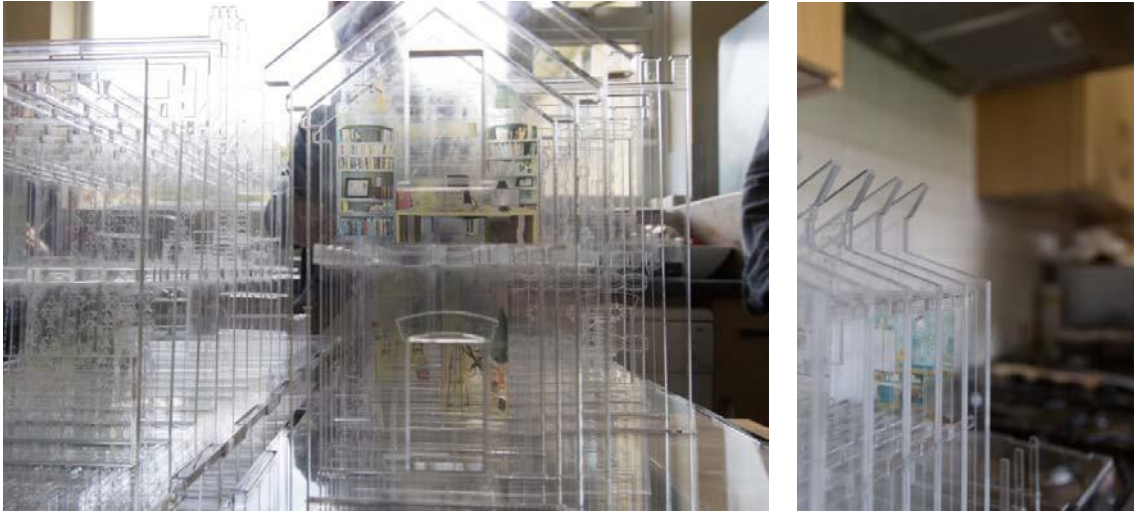
Figure 12– Exploring the model in the domestic space © Justine Frost

It is interesting to note that, about half way through the event, the participants came to the realisation that, as a group, they held very specific expertise and their dialogue was '*very academic*' in relation to the methodology. They questioned whether '*a much more practical discussion',* involving non-experts, would lead to different conclusions about the suitability of the model for this methodology. This is an important point, which the researcher will need to consider in more detail as the DPhil progresses.

The merit of using a kitchen as the 'event place' in which to hold the discussions was seen as overwhelmingly positive by the participants and the researcher (figure 10, 11, 12). During the event the participants acknowledged that the location generated a different conversation than that which would have taken place in a more academic space. They drew parallels between the 'real' kitchen and the 'fabricated' spaces of the model. As time went on, the model was changed, touched & moved, despite them suggesting earlier that its crafted nature made them reluctant to do so (figure 13 & 14).

Figure 13–Photographs showing the movement of the model © Elena Marco

Figure 14–Photographs of the kitchen after the domestic event finished © Elena Marco

Researcher's critical reflection

Overall I was very pleased with the outcomes of the 'domestic event'. A very rich discussion took place which made me think about the PhD, its methodology, and the role of the model within it.

Siting the model within a real kitchen worked surprisingly well. Despite the vast array of evidence from the literature, I was initially sceptical as to whether the informal and cramped nature of the kitchen would be the right space to promote dialogue and discussion. However, the kitchen instigated a dinner-table type conversation amongst the participants that was rich, fluid, dynamic and reflective. Since the DPhil is investigating the use and experience of today's domestic space in relation to material possessions, holding the event in a domestic space surrounded by material possessions allowed people to draw upon both the kitchen and the model to seek inspiration for their thoughts.

I found the idea of continually updating and adapting the model as a means to archive the DPhil findings to be inspiring. Since the research is about the accumulation and storage of material possessions, it seems particularly apt to use the model itself as a way of accumulating and storing my research findings. Not only will this allow the progression of the research to be recorded, but the very nature of creating the model will require me to process and rationalise my findings through critical reflection. The model will also serve as a means of communication the research findings to others through exhibitions.

Figure 15 Marco, E. (2016) 'Undressing UK Housing' photographed © Justine Frost

The discussion on whether the focus of the model should be *legitimate* or *illegitimate* made me think about whether I need to create other types of models as part of my research. I need to carefully consider where in my methodology they might contribute, as a design tool and as a way of engaging participants in a dialogue.

The experts themselves did not feel that this particular model was the most appropriate in adding to a sensory ethnography. However, the dialogue and engagement it provoked in them to talk about their own personal and professional experiences of material possessions in domestic space makes me conclude that it has nevertheless added to the methodology. This discussion has made me realise that I also need to test out the model with non-experts, to see what type of dialogue it provokes in them.

My willingness to expose my research to criticism at this early stage was seen as extremely brave. The participants' experiences of their own PhDs had been such that potential weaknesses in methodology were not exposed outside the supervisory team as I have. However, by doing so, I have generated knowledge and given more rigour to the process.

In conclusion, the architectural model has indeed been shown to be effective as a means of implementing a sensory ethnography. Such 'place-event' discussions will therefore form a part of the ongoing DPhil research plan.

(4285words)

Acknowledgements

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Figures

Figure 1 - Smithson, P. and Smithson, A. (1956) 'The House of the Future' [prototype house] In: Van Den Heuvel, D., and Risselada, M. (2004). Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

Figure 2 Jaque, A. (2011) *IKEA Disobedient* [Performance with Ikea objects] At: New York: Andre Jaque.

Figure 3 Sample of photographs collected by the researcher as part of the study [photographs].

Figure 4 - Example of the fabricated collages as part of the model that have been created from the collected photographs [collage]

Figure 5 Marco, E. (2016) Undressing UK Housing. [architectural model] © Justine Frost

Figure 6 – Focus group pack before and after the event [photographs] © Elena Marco

Figure 7 – Placing the architectural model in context [photographs] © Elena Marco

Figure 8 – Participants being briefed in the living area as part of the domestic event. [photographs] © Elena Marco

Figure 9– Participants during the domestic event [photographs] © Justine Frost

Figure 10– Observing the model from different perspectives [photographs] © Justine Frost

Figure 11– Sketches and notes taken during the domestic event showing how the 'other model' could be designed © Elena Marco

Figure 12– Exploring the model in the domestic space [photographs] © Justine Frost

Figure 13–Photographs showing the movement of the model [photographs]. © Elena Marco

Figure 14–Photographs of the kitchen after the domestic event finished © Elena Marco

Figure 15   Marco, E. (2016) 'Undressing UK Housing' © Justine Frost