

# **'It's a Part of Me' — The evocative potential of our possessions and surroundings**

**Mary Galvin**

School of Applied Psychology, UCC

---

## **The Move**

You are moving house. With dread you line up the cardboard boxes that you've salvaged from the nearest grocery store, trying to will all of your possessions in to them in the hope that you will be spared the time, effort and pain of having to physically pack up everything yourself.

Inevitably, with resignation you begin packing, finding that the further you delve into your wardrobe and bookshelves the more objects you find that you had forgotten you had. Pieces that you haven't used or even seen in years. The little bits of paper with scribbles on them, the shells you picked up on that walk on the beach, the random box that you 'might use in the future' and of course the favourites — the pieces that you could simply not leave behind you, the favourite mug, photo, pen, scarf. . . the list continues.

But ask yourself why, why are these objects so important? Why when one of your friends who sympathetically offered to help you pack asks, albeit with some annoyance, 'why are you keeping that?' do we reply with 'It's a part of me! I couldn't throw it out!'.

## **Evocative Objects, Personalisation and Me**

Daniel Miller, a London based anthropologist, researched how new tenants of identical apartments decorated their homes over a period of ten years and he surmised that what we are exists not through consciousness or body but as a material environment that habituates and prompts us. Essentially what this means is that all of the possessions we use to personalise our space are a means of expressing who we are. The physical space of a house becomes the stage and the objects we decorate that space with are the props that allow us to perform our memories and identity to our audience, that is, the people in our lives, and indeed ourselves. Sherry Turkle called these items evocative objects and my own research set out to find exactly what these objects are evoking within us.

Having completed numerous tours of dwellings and lengthy interviews with their respective dwellers, I discovered that our identity was indeed a performance and that this was

supported by three main themes generated by the discussions around these objects; Memory and Experience, Part of me, and Transcience. Below are some of the direct quotations from adults aged between 25 and 35 five that I interviewed, all were living in rented accommodation.

### **Memory and Experience**

'It's someplace that is very important to me so having those shells.....Probably two or three of the most important things that ever happened to me in my life have happened to me in the village where that beach is... so it's very important.'

'It's memories I suppose, it's people that are important to you and the majority of the photos are like good times in your life or like times that you want to remember and that's why you put them up because you want to remember, it kind of brings you back to that place and that time...'

### **Part of Me**

'... they'd be representing different people in my life like and I suppose... a large part of them would be kind of the essence of me too...'

### **Transcience**

'.. After that everything serves a function and if you lose it or break it sure what harm... what I have wouldn't be the measure of me.... I would've been very materialistic like but....if you can get over that you can get over anything. You realise that everything is replaceable like'.

So what became apparent was that our life stories are being expressed through how we personalise our space. Our material environment plays a large role in who we are but, at the same time, as we see from the above quotes, sometimes we lose and break our possessions and sometimes they just come to a natural end themselves, for example, the ink fading of a personal note on the back of a photograph. This doesn't mean that we have lost the memory; it just means that we have lost the ephemeral container that we assigned it to. However, what happens if we lose the memory also? If the evocative object is gone and what it evokes is gone, where do we go from here?

### **Digital Design**

So far we have seen how our possessions can enable and maintain our sense of self and how we can turn an empty house into a home through personalisation, but how does someone losing their memory maintain their sense of self through the aid of their material environment?

I am hoping to answer this question by researching the evocative potential of digital media in the context of Dementia, those suffering from Dementia, as well as their carers and loved ones. An interesting point from my previous research was that items falling under the title of technological or digital were not mentioned. They were seen as functional objects, almost as containers for our evocative objects; for example, the camera is where our photos are — losing the photos matter, not losing the camera. So how can we capture this evocative quality in order to design digital pieces that are as richly valued in our experience as our corporeal possessions?

An example of this is a piece by Jayne Wallace, a digital jewellery designer who has worked closely with an elderly husband and wife, the wife suffering from mild dementia. Jayne designed a jewellery box which houses dress broaches made from pieces of fabric cut from clothes that were meaningful to the elderly woman. These pieces of fabric were from dresses that she used to wear in her younger years, in particular when she attended dances with her husband. Each piece has a simple technology attached to it (a Radio-frequency identification ampoule) and once placed inside the jewellery box it plays different recordings of memories, stories, or even music that is associated with each piece of fabric. The box facilitates the recording of these pieces so her loved ones can record whatever snippets they wish. This piece is highly material, the digital component embedded within. However, this piece would not have the same evocative potential, or indeed be of any use, without this digital component. This is a perfect example of interaction design that supports the psychological processes of memory and identity and the evocative nature of our cherished objects from my previous research.

What is important is capturing the materiality of our favourite possessions and what they evoke within us and using this to design pieces that can aid those trying to hold on to their sense of self, and indeed encourage communication between them and their loved ones.

So, at last you seal up the final box of your possessions with the battered sellotape and now begins the loading up of the car with this cardboard cargo. What you are leaving behind has become an empty space and what you are about to walk into is equally empty, but you are armed with all you need to make it your new home. Now you face unpacking it all again, but perhaps this time you may look at how you do this and reflect upon why these 'little bits of worthless pieces' hold so much worth to you.

Thanks to my supervisor Dr. John McCarthy, School of Applied Psychology and the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions Cycle 5 under which this PhD in Digital Arts and Humanities is being funded.