Storage and Clutter

Discourses and Practices of Order in the Domestic World

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This article examines discourses and practices of storage and clutter in relation to the social construction of the home in contemporary Britain. The role of storage practices has been overlooked in much of the literature on consumption, material culture, design and the home. And yet, especially since the 1990s, there has been an explosion in popular cultural forms of discussions and representations of the home. While much of this has explored the domestic worlds of design, decoration and DIY more generally, a large number of books have focused specifically on storage as the antidote to what is perceived as the growing problem of clutter in the contemporary home. Through an analysis of these storage texts we show that even though they wrap up their ideas in a popular psychology of personal therapy, they do provide some insights useful for discussions of issues related to consumption, material culture and domestic design. More fundamentally, they reveal that the home needs to be conceptualized not simply as a place for living, but also as a set of spaces, channels and flows, as objects and people find their way into, through, and sometimes out of, the home. We argue that at the heart of these discourses is a limited conceptualization of time and space and a desire to make spaces and objects present and manageable. We then contrast these discourses with everyday practices of storage and clutter in the home. Based on original research data, we argue that time and space need to be analysed as multiple and layered, as objects are subject to various practices of dispersal, divestment and displacement in the gaps between consumption as acquisition, use and their eventual disposal. As a result, clutter needs to be understood not merely as the underside of storage, but also as part of an iterative spatio-temporal ordering of home and identity that follows the traces left behind by the dynamic of storage.

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Introduction

This article explores the discourses and practices associated with domestic storage and clutter in contemporary British society. While storage has been neglected in social theory generally, we see it as a fundamental dimension of social life. Indeed, storage is key to understanding how people create order in the home and in the world. By examining practices of storage we can see the hard work involved in ordering the world, and the inevitable instability of the resulting orders. Therefore, storage is here seen as a major means of ordering things in space and time. Yet storage is only one aspect of the ordering of things in the home. There is also the need to examine clutter: the seemingly disordered, unkempt array of objects that are found around the home, almost invariably out of place and blocking the flows of everyday life. Indeed, the various discourses that we analyse in this article almost ceaselessly refer to clutter as the underside of storage. Our examination of the practices related to clutter, however, leads us to argue that they constitute another aspect of the ordering of time and space in the home. Hence, a discussion of clutter must be placed at the centre of an analysis of contemporary domestic storage.
In the first section we briefly discuss contemporary theories of consumption, showing how they emphasize presence, visibility, use and display, and hence miss out the part of many objects’ lives when they are hidden away and stored. The second section provides a close reading of a number of contemporary texts about domestic storage. We demonstrate that beneath the breadth and scope of such texts there is a coherent discourse about clutter and storage. This discourse constructs clutter as a social and personal problem and storage as providing the key to overcoming it. This key is based on principles of opening the home up to vision and systematic knowledge so that the spaces and times of the home construct an order of flows in which everything is made present.

Based upon current research on how people transform houses into homes in the city of Lancaster in the north of England, the third section contrasts the discourses of storage texts to everyday storage practices. In this we find that the singularized notions of time and space advocated by these texts are in sharp contrast to practices of clutter and storage; these practices reveal how conceptions of time and space are multiple and layered. Furthermore, in contrast to the idealizations of total storage systems and of good habits for permanent de-junking, as discussed in the storage manuals, this empirical research highlights the diverse and heterogeneous moments of tidying, sorting and storing things. To this end, they also reveal that absence, forgetting and remembering are central elements in the hard work of ordering the contemporary home.

In making this analysis we are less interested in pointing out the limitations of these popular DIY, home-making and lifestyle texts than in developing the central place that they have accorded clutter and storage within contemporary culture. This is an issue that has largely eluded writers on consumption and the home in the social sciences. By examining popular storage advice and DIY books and then comparing them with domestic practices, certain issues related to the materiality, spatiality and temporality of consumption and the home are highlighted.

The invisibility of storage

The last two decades have witnessed an exponential growth in the social study of consumption. Indeed, the structures and practices associated with the way people consume goods and services have become central to recent strands of social theory. Sociological approaches to consumption have privileged the moments of acquisition and use. Hence, in terms of acquisition in particular, there is a wide literature on shops and shopping, marketing and advertising, and the sign value to which the consumer object is attached. Similarly, ‘use’ is most commonly associated with visible display. This is why consumption has been analysed, for the most part, in terms of its communicative function. Whether communicating social class and social position, or expressing meanings associated with cultural or subcultural values, identities or belonging, consumption is logically analysed as conspicuous consumption.

At the heart of this developing analysis of consumption is the valorization of the skilled and creative consuming subject who, far from being duped by a consumer society manufacturing ‘false needs’, is conceptualized rather as a bricoleur. These creative subjects of contemporary consumption actively use objects, signs, images, indeed whatever material comes to hand, to constitute themselves, their lives and their identities. These approaches have been criticized for their emphasis on more spectacular forms of consumption, emphasizing style and image, playfulness and the presentation of multiple identities. These critics have in turn focused on the mundane and routine aspects of consumption. In addition, they have examined issues of utility in the form of what people do with the goods after purchasing them.

This departure has not signalled, however, an effective break with the dominant perspective that emphasizes the visible and active dimensions of consumption: they still lack a discussion of what happens to things when not in use or when no longer displayed, and yet before they are removed from the home. In this gap we find the alternative time-space of storage and clutter. Storage and clutter are aspects of the invisible dimension of social life systematically overlooked by consumption theories, which are almost invariably concerned with purchase, use and disposal.

On the other hand, recent work has turned towards such issues as keeping things and the dispersal and divestment of objects. While this is significant for our discussion here, these studies have tended to focus on keeping things as a conscious decision, as
objects signifying other people and relationships. Indeed, they examine the sort of keeping that would fit within the logic of the popular storage texts that are the subject of the next section. While recognizing and discussing the importance of living with things in this way, we also want to examine storage and consumption as processes of living with things without being stored or displayed, but just put down, piled up around the paths of our daily routines, where things fall out of use, and so often out of our conscious awareness. Thus our analysis is part of the recent move towards focusing upon and exploring the materiality of things, which has allowed symbolism and sign values to fade, to some degree, into the background.

That discussions of home and consumption have focused upon display and use, and have failed in the main to think about clutter and, especially, storage, parallels popular British TV programmes, such as ‘Changing Rooms’, which have also focused upon spectacle and the aesthetic. Other popular cultural forms such as books and magazines have seen clutter and storage as important for over a decade now. 

Television is only now starting to catch up on such concerns, as exemplified by the BBC2 series ‘Life Laundry’ and ‘House Doctor’ on Channel 5. During the last decade or so, interior designers have teamed up with the fields of ‘DIY’ and homemaking to provide home consumers with a tantalizing number and variety of books specializing in the problems of home storage. Moreover, recently storage, or ‘clutter’, consultants and firms have also sprung up. This indicates a sharp rise in our fascination with, but also anxiety about, storage issues. Storage now constitutes a large part of the business of well-known retail giants in the field of furniture and interior design, such as IKEA. It is to these texts that we now turn in order to analyse their conceptions of and discourses surrounding home and consumption as related to storage and clutter.

Popular discourses of storage and clutter

While our analysis is centred on contemporary dimensions of storage and clutter in the domestic environment, it is important to mention some of the historical contours of that development as the general background to our analysis. In the Victorian period, there was a penchant for the exotic and the eclectic. The ordering of these objects was important as their display, even of what might be termed ‘clutter’, was part of the manifestation of not only a gendered world, but also a middle-class work ethic. Thus as Walker and Ware note in their analysis of decorating in abolitionist Victorian households, even an album of prints was left open for ‘instructive diversion’. Moreover, the house should be ordered ‘as if the person using the room[s] were employed in some way’. Hence, that which may be seen as clutter by today’s eyes could then be seen as productive or as marking productivity, for women as well as men. Yet others saw a cluttered household as a problem. Charles Dickens’ character Mrs Jellyby in Bleak House was a woman who was so concerned with the public good that she failed to look after her own home, leaving it dishevelled, untidy, even dirty. Clutter here signified a problem, the woman of the household taking on issues beyond her proper domestic sphere.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Richard Hoggart briefly characterized the working-class homes of his childhood earlier that century as cluttered, but here this signified warmth, familial orientation and gregariousness. Yet the twentieth century also saw ideas of orderliness and clean lines become more important. This was particularly signified at mid-century by the fashion for ripping out old fireplaces, boarding over doors, and sticking Formica to worktops and other surfaces. Indeed, over the last century changing fashions have led to a decline in certain forms of storage, such as the sideboard, dresser and dressing table, and a shift towards open plan and flexible shelving and, particularly in the kitchen, fitted cupboards. While the rise of a modernist aesthetic had only a limited impact on the UK in terms of architecture and design, it can be seen that it was an important point of reference, informing the discussions, discourses and sensibilities of interior design and decor of the period. Thus conceptualizations and practices of storage and clutter have been context-dependent, contingent and unstable. Therefore, the reality of clutter cannot be assumed, as it has often been used as a metaphor for certain moral values that the authors wished to represent and instil.

It has been argued that issues of storage in the home have become increasingly important in popular
culture over the last two decades because of wider social changes and processes that have taken place in contemporary capitalist societies. They reflect anxieties about social fragmentation, globalization and the network society. Indeed, the seemingly irreversible growth of consumption in the post-war years has meant an increasing array of things such as clothes, papers, junk mail, foodstuffs, entertainment technologies and souvenirs flowing into our homes. The ever-rising quantity of rubbish left for refuse collection, and the great rise in the number of charity shops and car boot sales are testament to the amount of ‘stuff’ removed from the home. This begs the question of how much stuff remains there, contributing to an increasingly overwhelming need for more storage and more space. Storage and other domestic practices could therefore be seen as ways through which people try to regain a degree of control in their lives.

This is, in broad lines, the background to contemporary discourses of domestic storage and clutter, a discourse primarily concerned with the relationship between personal therapy and spatial organization: if people can clear their homes of the detritus and junk that continually invade them, then they will be happier and healthier. Storage and de-cluttering are key to this well-being. This discourse has been drawn upon by the domestic storage industry in its various forms, and articulated most clearly in the volume of storage books and manuals that have become available recently. Stylish photography accompanies lavishly illustrated tips, suggestions and designs for reorganizing domestic space from the point of view of storage requirements. They invariably feature room-by-room assessments of storage needs, plus detailed explorations of their storage potential. Taken as a whole, these books present a number of surprisingly clear-cut, essential principles of domestic storage. In guiding their readers to better, healthier lives these texts stress the importance of imposing a total order upon the domestic world, opening up everything within that world to knowledge, analysis and evaluation, and consequently allowing people to live closer to their true selves. It is the task of this section to draw out this discourse of storage by examining its constituent elements as defined and discussed primarily within the storage books. These are: shrinking space, irrational consumer habits, the problem of clutter and personal well-being.

First, there is a concern with the apparent shrinking space of modern homes. There is an underlying perception that people in contemporary society are being slowly but steadily starved of living space. In her book Creating Space, Elizabeth Wilhide argues that ‘space is precious . . . the feeling of spaciousness is equally important . . . In the late twentieth-century world of traffic jams, crowded supermarket check-outs, and bustling open-plan offices, space spells the ultimate in comfort.’ In the domestic environment this lack stems from the articulation of three basic processes: architectural changes in modern house construction and the economics of house-building that drive these, modern consumer practices and, finally, inappropriate storage habits. Storage is deemed to be the only achievable key to the problem.

Not only will it work towards curing inappropriate household habits, it will also throw light upon who people are and what they need, allowing them to focus on their ‘current lifestyles’, and ‘let go of the past and live in the present moment’. In this way it will rationalize our irrational consumer practices, and so ultimately negate the small spaces of modern housing by using them more rationally, leading to an opening of the hidden and wasted space of the home.

Indeed, as Gilly Love states in Storage Solutions, ‘in today’s smaller homes, it’s essential to make the most of every inch of available space.’ This element of spatial reorganization informs the discourse of domestic storage and is intimately related to consumption practices. Storage is not just about organizing space, it is fundamentally the organization and storage of things. The ‘gurus’ of the storage revolution bemoan our consumer habits, our over-indulgence in both collecting objects and keeping them at home. As is clear in this quotation, the discourse of storage typically defines clutter as problematic. Good storage habits are seen as the corollary to the chaotic nature of modern consumption. Jeff Campbell, branded as the ‘unrivalled master of modern home cleaning and organization’, and author of the best-selling book...
Clutter Control, describes clutter as nothing less than ‘a universal irritant’, while emphasizing the etymological root of the word as meaning ‘clot’ or ‘lump’. He goes on to argue that ‘just as a blood clot stops the flow of vitality in the body, so household clutter blocks the proper flow of a home.’ The authors considered here constantly call upon people to reassess their needs, to match them to those essential possessions that can find purposeful use in the house, and to get rid of everything else.

These twin problems identified by the discourse of storage, namely unrestrained consumer habits and uncontrolled clutter, are said deeply to affect the level of well-being experienced by contemporary people in their homes. Shrinking space and piling clutter are behind the pathology that Jeff Campbell calls ‘clutteritis’, a contemporary syndrome characterized by, among other things, feelings of depression, anxiety, desperation, an insatiable need for new things, self-denyion, chronic conflict with others in the household, and being ashamed of entertaining friends at home. Storage can thus be seen as a veritable panacea capable of healing many of the physical and psychological evils associated with modern living and domestic consumption. The idea of proper flows is again drawn upon in the book accompanying the BBC series ‘Life Laundry’, according to which we need to clear away sentimental objects that ‘may be causing emotional blockages to physical wellbeing’. Dana Walter and Helen Chislett argue that ‘organized living is about quality of life—the difference between constantly being surrounded by turmoil and being able to relax and enjoy your surroundings.’ Storage is then typically viewed as a kind of latter-day elixir that is sorely needed in order for people to regain a measure of well-being and satisfaction in their domestic lives. Storage is said to provide the promise of relaxation, tranquillity and freedom.

Storage thus provides the means to organize space and control clutter in order to enable proper flows through the home, and indeed the body, and, ultimately, to enhance our well-being. For this to happen, what storage experts are suggesting in the form of a cocktail of storage methods is nothing short of a complete re-ordering of our domestic lives.

The production and imposition of domestic order over such ‘wild things’ requires the design and production of storage systems. ‘A system,’ Elizabeth Hilliard reminds us, ‘is a means of separating a great mass of things into many smaller types or categories and keeping them that way so that they are protected, yet accessible.’ The imposition of such systems is necessary, since, not only must the home be organized with appropriate forms of storage for different types of things, but its inhabitants must be organized as well: their minds and bodies need to be disciplined and trained. Hence Tessa Shaw, in Home Front Storage, says that ‘dealing with clutter is as much about deciding what to do as it is about actually doing it. As long as you decide on a system and stick to it, it will work.’ Storage is fundamentally about training both the mind and body through the adoption of good organizational routines. It is not only about putting things back in their place, but also knowing from where everything can be retrieved.

Discourses of storage emphasize discipline beyond merely putting and throwing things away; they also provide modern consumers with an injunction to streamline their consumption habits. The storage writers are adamant that people should adopt a simplified lifestyle, where non-essential objects are treated as such, and also refrain from piling up the debris of their consumer lives in their homes. This reordering of life and inculcation of good domestic and consumer habits represents the desired triumph of conceived space over the chaotic lifestyles of contemporary domestic living. That is, people must open everything up to knowledge and vision in order to make everything present in the here and now. Such an emphasis on presence works to simplify or singularize time and space. The time of now and the space of here are the only ones allowable when everything becomes visible and known. In these books, presence is vital as the emphasis is upon ridding the home of rubbish and clutter. The effect of making the home a home of presences is that nothing goes absent on a deeper level, thus becoming unknown. The uncanny, the ‘unheimlich’, must be expelled.

Spatially, a properly conceived home will mean that clutter does not pile up and impede the smooth flow of goods, materials and people through the dwelling. The places and practices of storage foreground the ordering, fluidity and mobility of the domestic sphere. What the advice books on home storage do is to construct the home as a perfect series of flows. Improper practices combined with poor
storage systems are deemed to lead inevitably to imperfect flows, clots and blockages, that is clutter.

Temporally, it is assumed that once such a system of storage and retrieval has been implemented and order has been achieved, it will take minimal effort to maintain. In the storage equation, time is partially erased as cleaning, tidying and clearing things away become a function of the adopted system. Furthermore, memories and pasts wrapped up by, and signified in and through, particular objects are also erased. Elizabeth Hilliard makes this point well when she advises her readers: 'Be brave. Be realistic. Put yourself first (the person you are now, not the person you were 10, 20 or more years ago) . . . Are you ever going to read your schoolgirl diaries . . . ?' Therefore, clutter is at its most destructive when it confuses people's identities and when its symbolic nature is so strong that they cannot escape the past. In the cluttered society, the storage texts argue, the material nature of the past becomes so weighty that people cannot live fully in the present.

The texts analysed in this section provide a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary malaise of clutter, its symptoms and consequences for domestic life. They also suggest a number of remedies available for tackling both its purported psychological menace and social effects. Their narrative urges their readers to become rational beings and to organize their domestic lives and consumer habits around a (rediscovered self-identity. It is our contention that these texts singularize and disenchant space and time by urging people to make everything present, both spatially and temporally. On the other hand, by analysing such popular texts, we can gain valuable insights into modern constructions of home and consumption. We come to understand the home as a system of channels and flows, which typically require moments of rest and storage. Moreover, partly because of their emphasis on visibility and personal expression, these storage advice books share much the same bias that informs many of the cultural theories of consumption alluded to in the previous section, despite the latter's general silence about storage.

In the next section we build upon these insights by briefly exploring everyday practices of storage and clutter in people's homes. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of such practices but simply to point to some issues that have emerged through empirical research and connect them to the discussions of consumption found in the storage texts. In doing so, we wish to emphasize two main points. First, space and time are actually multiple and layered. In other words, the 'mobile' or 'fluid' home cannot be understood simply as a system of flows governed by rational principles of storage and retrieval. Second, clutter, the seemingly inevitable part of life that these texts aim to eradicate, needs to be understood not purely as a problem, but also as an ordering strategy that is part of the multiple nature of spaces and times of the home.

Practices of storage and clutter

The storage texts discussed above see the home as a space of flows through time—of objects flowing through, in and out of the various regions of the domestic unit. They also see the home as a space of flows of people, whose movements through the house may, but ought not to, be impeded by the accumulation of stuff that fails to make its way out. In fact, the home is fluid and mobile in other ways as well. For example, domestic time is also organized in terms of routines that follow a variety of rhythms. This is clearly seen in terms of tidying and sorting practices, whether these are performed daily or on the occasion of moving to a new home:

Katie: We try and tidy up every week, things get piled up on the table and that, but at least once a week we try to tidy the place up and make it look presentable . . .

Katherine: When we left our last house we had 36 bags of rubbish to throw away! We'd been there 18 years and had just collected so much stuff. But 36 bags!

Similar issues are raised in the context of both domestic and paid work routines:

Veronica: If I'm in on my own at the weekend, I'll pull the settee out closer to the fire, get some chocolate and a glass of wine and just slob in front of the telly.

Trevor: My laptop is OK on the breakfast bar for most of the day as I'll work there, but will have to move when we eat. So I'll just move it onto the chair or onto the desk in the office. But it's got no proper place.

Various objects such as furniture, televisions and computers move around the house in synchronicity with the temporal rhythms of home life. Objects are typically 'nomadic'; sometimes they will be regarded
as in place—or at least not out of place—in one particular space, while the next moment they have become 'clutter', even though they have remained in the same space. Indeed, objects often travel around because they do not have a proper place of their own. They are often moved from positions when their material presence confronts an alternative use of the spaces that they occupy. Therefore, space is also subjected to the rhythms of the home as different places move in and out of use at different times. For example, offices or office spaces are sometimes set up for various members of the household to work in. However, while such 'proper' places for work are often used for that pre-defined purpose, other places such as kitchen tables or the space in front of the television might be used as well.

Alternatively, some people go through phases of eating at the dining room table, often making a conscious effort to do this, but at other times they would just sit in front of the television with their meals on their laps.

Simon: *When we moved up here we said 'right we'll have that as the dining room and we'll eat all our meals in there'*. Katherine: *We do more often than not. When we get a Chinese take-away on a Friday night we tend to sit in here, that’s the only meal we have in here.*

Interviewer (later during the same interview): *So you’ve started eating round the table?*

Katherine: *Well, that was the idea. Originally it was all ‘let’s sit round a table and let’s all eat a meal’, but it hasn’t worked out like that. Lucy does shifts, Sarah is home at different times, some nights half five, some nights six, some nights seven, and we tend to have three lots of meals sometimes.*

Therefore, the various spaces of the home go through different phases in terms of how they are used and how central they are to the ebbs and flows of everyday life. As this happens, things are moved into these spaces and are often left or kept there. Therefore, the dispersal of ‘stuff’ leaves a set of trails and traces around the house. Moreover, as these places fall out of use in a particular way—dining tables, for example—they can become spaces for alternative uses, for instance as impromptu storage spaces:

Simon: *In the old place the dining table was just a flat surface, everything got put on the table, clothes that wanted ironing would be put there and get moved so we never used it as a dining room, did we?* Tabletops often become spaces for momentary placing of things, as do the tops of books on shelves, behind and under ornaments on mantelpieces and, indeed, the floor. Furthermore, occasionally certain spaces are adopted for impromptu storage for that which is seen as clutter, for example, just before entertaining visitors:

Lauren: *That’s what we mean by no storage. There’s nowhere that, when guests are coming round, you can bung all the stuff together that you’ve not known what to do with, and put somewhere out back.*

This phrase ‘out back’ is as much metaphorical as literal, and indicates that such storage occurs in back regions of the home as people try to present themselves and their homes via the front regions, keeping the latter tidy and presentable as well as comfortable for the residents. The phrase also indicates the marginality of many storage spaces. When things are put out back, it is not simply that they are put closer to people’s intimate or ‘true’ selves. Equally often, these spaces of casual storage or ‘cluttering’ are found in places such as corners, on chairs or under tables, although there are also more permanent ‘out backs’, such as garages and sheds, attics and cellars, under-stair cupboards, and back or spare bedrooms. This raises an important point: such a way of thinking about spatialization in the home problematizes the notion of front and back regions or stages. Back stages are not simply places of increasing intimacy and self-identity. They are also as likely to be spaces that are less used. So, while they may well be spaces where memories are kept protected and hidden, they are also spaces where clutter is kept, clutter as things no longer central to the lives and identities of the inhabitants of the house. It is hardly surprising that these marginal spaces of the home, such as attics and cellars, are often key sites in horror films. They are more likely to be understood as places of surprises and unexpected memories, and where ‘ghosts’ of our past lives, indeed of past times more generally, dwell and return to haunt us.

Hence, while it is interesting and useful to perceive the home as the organized and channelled flow of people and things, as the storage discourses analysed above do, this must be seen as an idealization of the home. In practice, there are multiple ways in which the home is fluid: the ebbs and flows of everyday life, front and back regions, core and marginal spaces, as
well as places of rest and movement. The home is not simply an effective system of storage and retrieval governing a rationally conceived structure of flows. Instead of everything being known and present to the mind and hand in such carefully designed systems, our research reveals diverse and heterogeneous moments and cycles of tidying, sorting and storing. As people and things move through the home and fabricate its multiple temporalities and spatialities, 'gaps' are opened into which stuff 'falls', and surfaces are cleared upon which things are placed. Clutter, we argue, is not just an almost inevitable outcome of living with things. It constitutes alternative modes of ordering the home based on practices, habits and routines that are complex, contingent, sometimes unconscious and often unexpected, and that cannot be subsumed under that rationalist gaze that conceives of time, space and objects as fully measurable and manageable entities.

Indeed, everyday living with things reveals the 'depth' of the practices of consumption. Alongside the practices of choosing and purchasing goods, there are practices of use and eventual disposal of things. As goods come into the home and their initial symbolic or sign value is tarnished and fades, they become subject to practices of dispersal, divestment and displacement. Things might be dispersed, for example, to particular places when people are relatively sure they want to keep them. Old photographs and articles of clothing, memory objects from family and friends, might be kept in the attic, or hidden from view in drawers and cupboards. Similarly, larger items such as cupboards, sofas, tables that are 'under negotiation' within the household are often placed in more marginal areas, such as offices, or spare rooms.

Harry: There's a sofa upstairs that's from my first marriage. We can't have it down here because it's not ours, it's from my past, the kids don't want it but it's too good to throw away and so it's upstairs in the spare room.

Other objects might be more subject to divestment, a process by which they become decreasingly needed or of decreasing interest and concern, and so are slowly moved out of the way. Rather than any absolute decision being made, the objects themselves become increasingly marginalized. They are taken out of the way as they move out of use and out of the daily routines of life, out of sight and into the metaphorical recesses of the mind. Finally, objects might be displaced, moved out of the main sites of daily life as their usefulness and their place have yet to be determined. Decisions may thus be deferred to some point in the future—tomorrow, next week, or next year—or to some other person whose choices they become, or with whom negotiation has to take place.

These practices of dispersal, divestment and displacement—overlapping, interweaving and never absolute—reveal that clutter is not simply stuff to be disposed of, things out of place that are indicative of a 'storage problem'. Moreover, clutter is not simply that which accumulates when there is not enough shelving or cupboard space, as if when it is finally stored it would suddenly emerge out from its dark existence. Clutter is better understood as an almost inevitable feature of consumption, of living with things. For Steve Baker, 'clutter resists, clutter is stubborn, is always there, still there, still in the way . . . Clutter is the object's revenge, on design and on the world.'

These materialities and ecologies create yet disrupt order, thus marking the gap between presence and absence. As things mark the trails of lives through the home, they become the traces of people's lives. The materials and practices of storage and clutter illustrate the hard work involved in creating a social order, here signified through a representational order of home, family and self. The integrity of such orders are maintained through defining certain objects or people as pollutants, dirt, or 'matter out of place', a process that serves to get rid of unwanted meanings, therefore stabilizing categories of belonging and notions of inside and outside. Disposal itself does not guarantee absence, however, for traces often remain. Hence people, places and relationships belonging outside this order may find their way in, yet remain hidden from some within the household. Gifts, for example, from past or current lovers and friends may remain 'hidden'. Or, alternatively, throwing away may lead to a heavy heart, a sense of regret and annoyance as someone later decides that a mistake was made. Everyday objects are often the props of personal narratives and stories. By excessively de-cluttering their lives, many people risk losing the materiality of their memory work:

Katherine: You've never looked at your magazines at all, have you?
Therefore, even an eventual disposal of things does not lead to complete absence or disappearance. It shows not just how the representational order can be breached, but rather that 'a stable and finite order can never be fully created and maintained'. What it also shows, moreover, is how order is continually being produced and worked upon, and how it is an outcome of a set of practices. It might be better, therefore, to speak of ordering rather than order.45

While things get disposed of and dispersed around the home, and in the process get lost and forgotten, they may often be stumbled upon, re-found, re-(dis)covered and remembered. While the storage texts, discussed above, conceive of objects as containing certain memories, or representing certain people and places, where the meaning of the object can be fully known and its value unambiguously judged, we wish to emphasize the act of remembering. Memories that are forgotten, 'stored' in objects, letters and keepsakes are often renewed and re-lived on retrieving these things. Remembering involves the connection between the person or people and the object, an act that is sparked often unexpectedly when stumbling across things, whether forgotten or not, whether kept purposefully or not.

Lara [laughing]: Peter's got a 'memory box'. He's got his winkle pickers in it. And he was showing me his swimming certificate before, that he got when he was eleven.

Despite the gentle mocking tones of a younger woman towards her older partner, the things in this 'memory box', recovered and remembered after moving house, are symbolic of his past. But they can also be metaphoric 'ghosts' of more general past times and other places, for example, of a certain period, such as the early 1980s and British youth subcultures of that time. Yet clutter also haunts metonymically: the connections are 'less transparent and referential'; clutter speaks to us indirectly, as sensuous knowledge rather than being instrumental, rational and literal.47 It is 'receptive, close, perceptual, embodied, incarnate'.48 Therefore, these shoes, or the swimming certificate, can imply much more than they directly represent.

Conclusion

In this article the authors have worked to open up the gap between acquisition and use, on the one hand, and disposal on the other. While the storage texts analysed here have been found wanting, with their mix of practical advice and pop psychology, they do provide a way in to that gap in the academic literature. For they see things as objects that hang around, get in the way, and seem to fill all available spaces. The materiality of things is central, for this means that as objects are moved and require being moved around and stored, they open up for analysis the multiple nature of time and space in the home. Thus objects, as they are stored and as they fall into the gaps and crevices of our habitual practices as well as the spaces of the home, are integral aspects of our dwelling in the contemporary world. It is a world full of things that can say so much about us, but so often get in the way whilst doing so.

In the final analysis, clutter is matter that no longer matters as much. It is disruptive of the representational order, because of its capacity to haunt and to connect the individual with the social. Yet the empirical study of clutter, as distinct from its conceptual analysis, also reveals that it is a central aspect of dwelling and the home, and the identities created therein. Clutter provides possibilities to see things, and to grasp the world beyond people's immediacies. It is a social relationship uniting and separating people in time and space, a sense-making activity based on sensuous knowledge, embodied practice, informal routines and the structures of the life-world. Together with being a 'universal irritant', clutter materializes a complex universe of social relations, past, present and future. It is those alternative spatial and temporal dimensions of everyday life that cannot be stored away. Clutter may represent, in the end, alternative forms of 'designing' the home, where things find their places in the contingent flows of domestic life.

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Notes

1 Earlier versions of this article have been presented at two events. First, a shorter paper was presented at the conference 'Navigating the Material World' (Living in a Material World III), University of Brighton, June 2001. Later, a longer version was presented at the History of Art and Design Research Seminar, Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton), November 2001. We would like to thank all those present at these events for their kind and insightful criticisms and comments, as well as the organizers for providing us with these opportunities to discuss our ideas. Being sociologists with a great interest in material culture and design, we greatly benefited from the transdisciplinary encounters that those events made possible.

2 Here we use the word 'present' in both its spatial and temporal meanings. To store things properly and avoid the accumulation of clutter, it is immature, requires not only that things are made present to the eye or mind, but that they are rescued from their past or future oblivion and made relevant and useful now.

3 The empirical research for this paper was carried out by Alan Metcalfe as part of his Ph.D. at Lancaster University, entitled 'Moving stories: the transformation of houses into homes'. For the thesis, twelve households were randomly interviewed up to three times as they were in the process of moving, or had recently moved, into or within the Lancaster area. In the course of research, the idea of examining clutter as a central aspect of the contemporary home originated from the interview data themselves, literature about consumption and the home in the social sciences and the humanities, and discussions with Saulo Cwemer about the idea of storage. Details of interviewees referred to in this paper can be found below. It should be noted that the discussion presented here is defined by its British context, given that the research is based on interviews carried out in the UK, that the publications may be found in the UK book market and public libraries, and that it draws upon a largely British consumption literature, a literature that nevertheless makes a significant contribution to worldwide academic discussions of consumption.


7 See Hedghe, op. cit.


11 A survey of the British Library catalogue reveals a grand total of eight books published in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s concerned specifically with storage in the home, whilst in the last decade twenty-five books have been published. This does not include a whole host of 'coffee table' books largely unconcerned with the practicalities of storage.

12 See the papers in I. Bryden & J. Floyd (eds), Domestic Space, Manchester University Press, 1999.

13 L. Walker & V. Ware, 'Political pincushions: decorating the abolitionist interior', in Bryden & Floyd, ibid., p. 63.

14 Ibid.


18 Attfield, op. cit.


21 Ibid. p. 68.


24 J. Campbell, Cluster Control, Robert Hale, 1997, p. 11.

25 Ibid., p. 12.

26 Ibid., p. 50. Jeff Campbell's book is but one in a series of books that, although intimately related to the storage revolution, are not focused on storage systems, but on specific methods for getting rid of clutter. They provide more systematic advice about identifying clutter and de-junking homes. Among these books are S. Culp, How to Conquer Clutter, Betterway Books, 1989; D. Aslett, Cluster-Free! Finally and Forever, Betterway Books, 1995; and S. Wright, Good-bye Clutter: Organize and Simplify Every Room in Your Home, Citadel Press, 2000.

27 Walter & Franks, op. cit., p. 74.


29 Attfield, op. cit.

30 Hilliard, op. cit., p. 15.


All the names of the interviewees have been changed. Brief biographical information for the interviewees referred to here is as follows. Katie is a salesperson in her late twenties, who lives with her husband. Katherine is married to Simon, both are in their mid-forties, and have two daughters, Lucy and Sarah, one late teen, one early twenties, who still live at home. Katherine is a secretary and Simon a self-employed mechanic. Veronica is a teacher in her early thirties, who lives with her partner. Trevor is a writer, also early thirties and living with his partner. Lauren is a student in her early twenties, who lives with her partner. Harry is in his mid-fifties, and is a manager at a large company. He has remarried and has two grown-up children from his first marriage. Finally, Lara, a supply teacher, lives with Peter, and together they have a two-year-old daughter. In the course of the research, the respective partners have also been interviewed.


Hilliard, op. cit., p. 18. At this stage the authors wish to make clear that we did not set out to analyse the gender dimension of storage practices and clutter control. We acknowledge that much can be gained by looking at how the roles, identities and expectations of men and women in contemporary British households frame such discourses and practices. The same could also be said in relation to social class (especially as most contemporary conceptions of class tend to focus on income and consumption patterns rather than on positions in the structure of economic production), age, ethnicity and physical ability. We believe that our findings must be nuanced to accommodate these dimensions of social structure and group difference. Yet we do not think that remaining largely silent about them at this stage of our research undermines the validity of our interpretations. Similarly, while we would not want to make any claims regarding storage and clutter in other parts of the world, this paper seeks to inform and encourage cross-cultural studies that examine the practices of storage and the place of clutter in the processes of consumption and dwelling. Storage has not figured as an important topic in the social scientific study of households in contemporary capitalist societies, despite the fact that many historians and anthropologists have highlighted its importance for social structure and social organization in other societies and historical periods. See, for instance, T. Ingold, 'The significance of storage in hunting societies', Man, vol. 18, 1983, pp. 553–71.