

## Reflective Writing - Research Description

Plenty, and then some.

Plenty space, and then some.

Plenty objects, and then some.

Plenty experiences, and then some.

People make spaces and spaces make people. Cohabitation is a concept subconsciously practised even in its austerity. What exists shall co-exist alongside other lives. In general terms, the words “cohabitation” and “co-existence” merely define the relationship between animate objects. However, my research attempts at challenging this “generalized” perception by personifying my space and the elements that help create its identity. Through this autoethnographic research, I have attempted to highlight the value of identities, cultures, experiences and memories in place-making.

Blinded by privilege, I only happened to realize the unparalleled importance of personal space during a six-month-long lockdown amid a pandemic. My home in India, comfortably roofed as an emotionally stable shelter is a space that I share with my parents. Like many others, I too have a comfort spot here, it is my spot of balance. It is a place within a home that identifies me, my culture, my values and my way of existence. I occupy it with my physical presence, while I identify it because of the other inanimate presence (here, objects.) Strangely, through multiple design eras, career changes, emotional breakdowns and geographical relocations, this spot of balance remains to be my study desk.

Name: Study Desk

Location: Glasgow

Form: A slab – horizontal, drawers, shelves, a pegboard,

Switchboards – 2, plugs – 4,

A router & I – study desk

Function: Space of study and dining

Objects seen in context: Laptop, mobile phone, chargers, mouse pad and mouse, stationary, food containers, water bottle, mug, books. Calendar, photos, sticky notes, to-do lists, miscellaneous.

‘Personal space can be defined as an area around the person in which intrusion causes discomfort and arousal.’<sup>1</sup> The initial research explorations take the form of an autoethnographic review of this personal space, my desk. The local restrictions helped my research position by allowing me more than usual time to navigate through my desk. I began mapping the movement and placement of my objects through drawings in the form of maps; and eventually analysed the plausible reasons behind the particular positioning of these objects.

The mapping of object-related movement was referred to from Dining Disorder by Nicola on [www.ediblegeography.com](http://www.ediblegeography.com). Nonetheless, these drawings were raw and failed to reflect meaningful conclusions. They lacked categories. There was a lack of distinction between place-making through memories and that through experiences and culture.

Reflecting on my initial steps, I realized the mundaneness of my chosen space – my study desk. If it is a space that is occupied daily, then it must show repetitions, patterns. To visually evidence my reflection, I photographed my study desk thrice a day - morning, late afternoon and night, with complete honesty to understand and conclude my spatial occupation. The visual documentation represented a series of repetitive images which eventually narrated the process of place-making. It showed how I constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed my study desk with my objects. As a result, I began understanding my space visually and emotionally, but also as a user. I wrote what I saw and what I did not see, how it felt and how differently I occupied it every day. These documented visuals began showcasing patterns.

Alyssa Grossman, in her article about Sophie Calle, an autoethnographic researcher and artist, mentions, 'Her images and texts are invariably as self-reflexive as any contemporary ethnography aims to be, acknowledging her own position in situating her objects of scrutiny, and the biases in her interpretations.' Sophie Calle, in her intervention "Talking to Strangers", takes the position of a 'participant observer'<sup>2</sup>, immersing alongside studying her subject. Her documentation looks like 'a detectives account'<sup>3</sup>. My piece of autoethnographic research is conducted using a similar position, using my physical presence along the study desk as a point of participatory observation.

Stepping aback and questioning the "belongingness" of particular objects, for instance, an unconventional coffee mug against a conventional study desk object like a diary and the "arrangements" of some, created a line of enquiry relating to personal identity. Which objects and their respective placements identify my study desk differently from others'?

*"Why is my laptop always placed off the centre towards the left?*

*Is it because of my right-handed use?"*

*"Is a filled coffee mug sitting beside my laptop a reason of my anxiety?"*

*"How have I affiliated myself with the colour hierarchy on my pegboard?"*

Adi Barak's "My Childhood Neighbourhood: A Critical Autoethnography" inspired me to explore a physical space with history, memory, performance and meaning. The formative research adopted two of these elements – meaning and memory. The autoethnography critically viewed the variety of spatial experiences and ways of perceiving spaces. While the author's experience formed the primary part of the text, they also reflected on the experience of others occupying the same, normative space – their 'modulor'<sup>4</sup> home. It clearly depicted that a normative space may be a "spot of balance" for some, however, the author did not deny their own experience. The critical reflections that followed every part of analysis bore thoughts that questioned larger norms. My research approach, similar to Adi Barak's, analysed my position in my own space, while my critical reflections questioned the position of others with respect to their space. It focused on questioning how different people identified their study desk.

My line of enquiry was easier to reflect upon after categorizing these objects based on one, permanency of existence and two, personal possessive value. The first category was identified corresponding the photographed patterns. However, the latter required a personal experiment. Removing a few objects off the space without replacing them followed emotional reactions. For instance, a hanging wooden peg that used to carry a personal photograph didn't feel right, while an emptied pen-holder didn't matter. The resultant, the most permanent objects being laptop charger, photo frame and pen holder, while the most temporary objects being water bottle and mobile phone. In contrariety, the most possessive objects being photo portraits and the least being pens.

I then used memory to further define my research. I wrote and compared to understand which elements, tangible or intangible, kept my belongingness constant through these years. Was it the presence of a well furnished table? Or was it the fact that I did not share it with others? Is it because of the similarity in table layouts, placements of switchboards and pegboards, the materials used or simply my personal belongings that identified it?

This phase of my research was particularly challenging because of my contradicting personal position; my role of an observer clashing with that of a participant. Subsequently, some opinions were biased. Although the formative research only captured my personal space, sharing it meant expanding the boundaries of my privacy. Though there weren't any unethical implications, it was upon me to share my personal experience, visually and verbally.

*"Which objects resonate the feeling of comfort in a space?"*

*"Why does familiarity relate to the feeling of belongingness?"*

*"How do we define familiarity differently? How do we feel familiar in spaces?"*

*"How do cultural spaces affect this feeling for some?"*

Spatial identities are characteristics that distinguish experiences of people within the same space. Anticipating the fact that a study desk is not always the most definable spot for all people, each one would have unique values attached to it.

'Why do we feel that we belong in some places and not in others? Place and identity are inextricably bound to one another. The two are co-produced as people come to identify with where they live, shape it, however modestly, and are in turn shaped by their environments, creating distinctive environmental autobiographies, the narratives we hold from the memories of those spaces and places that shaped us.'<sup>5</sup> 'The ways in which place and identity intertwine both confuse and allow us to make sense of the worlds we inhabit.'<sup>6</sup>

'A sense of place identity derives from the multiple ways in which place functions to provide a sense of belonging, construct meaning, foster attachments, and mediate change. The place identity of a person can inform their experiences, behaviours, and attitudes about other places.'<sup>7</sup>

'Autoethnography is typically defined as an approach to research that puts the self at the center of cultural analysis.'<sup>8</sup> Starting a research using autoethnographic and investigative methods led to both, issues and benefits. By documenting my experience verbally and visually, I was able to evidence it. Since it was more like a self-reflection, the research rarely challenged what I derived

from my primary analysis. By placing myself at the centre of my spatial analysis, I could openly compare my experiences with the present and past experiences of the others. However, I faced difficulties with relating the lingo of my primary research to the contextual/archival material. Since my autoethnographic research highlighted experiences that were unique solely to me, it was challenging to find the right contextual material. If I had the chance to, I would expand my very streamlined subject of study to include not just private, but also the place-making elements of mundane public spaces. This would give me a chance to connect my studio project, that defines spatial choreographies through familiarity and speculation, to my autoethnographic review of spatial occupation. Nonetheless, my personal liking of the subject of my study ensured a frequent negotiation with it. By critically reflecting on routine events, objects, situations, etc. without necessarily seeking for answers, I hope to adopt autoethnography as a regular research practice in my area of study and beyond.

---

<sup>1</sup> Heiko Hecht, Robin Welsch, Jana Vieho, Matthew R. Longo, 'The shape of personal space', *Acta Psychologica*, 193, 113-122 (2019), in 'ELSEVIER', <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychology/bodylab/docs/hechtEtal-acta-2019.pdf>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Grossman, 'Suomen Antropologi', *The Anthropology of Sophie Calle*, Vol. 43, Issue 1 (2018), p. 28-35.

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa Grossman, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Adi Barak, 'Qualitative Enquiry', *My Childhood Neighborhood: A Critical Autoethnography*, Vol. 26(6) 667–673 (2020), in 'SAGE', <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419843565>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Jen Jack Giesecking, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, & Susan Saegert (eds.), *The People, Place and Space Reader, Section 3: Place and Identity*, <<https://peopleplacespace.org/toc/section-3/>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Elaine De Botton, *Architecture of Happiness*, Vol. 43, (United States, Vintage Books, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Jen Jack Giesecking, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, & Susan Saegert (eds.), *The People, Place and Space Reader, Section 3: Place and Identity*.

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Roulston, *What is Autoethnography?*, <<https://qualpage.com/2018/11/15/what-is-autoethnography/>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020].

## Research Proposal

How do personal experiences and objects define belongingness and familiarity in a mundane private/public space?

My formative research has been focused on questioning the role of objects in place-making. By experimenting with my personal space, I have attempted to depict an investigative reflection of how objects define it. Mapping placements and positions of these objects on my study desk provided me with a starting point to study the necessity of “familiarity” in defining belongingness. This formative research has placed the user/occupant, me, in the centre of a spatial experience while aiming to understand how specific objects and their positions lead me to uniquely identify my study desk. By reflecting upon the tangible elements of my personal space, I wish to understand how and what makes people feel belonged in a particular place. Further, I hope to develop this research to expand its permeability to include private as well as urban contexts.

Georges Perec’s *An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris* effortlessly describes “everything” as seen by the author at Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris at a particular time. ‘The force of his attempt is founded on the coherence of his stance as a neutral onlooker.’<sup>9</sup> Perec’s style of neutral observation could be adopted to highlight the starting point of this thought experiment. It would help to map and place people and built environment in public spaces.

Contextual studies and social interventions with respect to spatial experiences would help to better understand this line of enquiry. Firstly, translating past experiences and memories of people occupying the same space would be able to highlight the importance of tangible elements in place-making. The idea is to combine various familiar objects that are general enough to be constant through one’s life and observe how they occupy it. Artist Justin Bettman’s *#SetintheStreet* for Times Square Arts 2015, originally designed to advertise cinema, assembled a set of living room objects in the middle of the street. It was intriguing how the mundaneness of these objects created a feeling of belongingness and familiarity. Deriving inspiration from the said intervention, my project would identify similar familiar objects and place them in unconventional situations. For instance, combining a telephone booth which is a popular public space object and a cushioned bench, a familiar homely object. Familiarity, in this part of the research, would be categorized primarily by the types of materiality of objects (a cotton fabric or a metal bench), functionality (standing, sitting, storing), atmosphere (natural and clear lighting) and their definition in the user’s life. Observing how different ‘flaneurs’ (a French term for urban strollers) would interact with these objects in different ways would provide a potential subject of contextual study.

However, these interventions could attract ethical issues relating to social privacy. Photographing people around said objects, tracing and tracking their movements and reactions might not be perceived as ethical by potential stakeholders.

These stakeholders will include primarily me, taking an observatory position, people acting as participants, people acting as observers, local authorities involved in using public spaces for interventions/experiments and other spatial artists and researchers. Additionally, spatial occupation of people in private spaces will have to be documented after prior permissions. Although, by following an ethical enquiry where possible, the proposed research will help widen the existing knowledge of phenomenology in interior design; which refers to an autoethnographic study of a sensory experience of navigating a built environment. It will not necessarily answer, but further develop critical questions related to people and their ways of spatial occupation and the tangible elements that contribute to generate a “familiar” public or private space experience.

---

<sup>9</sup> Christian Licoppe, “An Attempt at Exhausting an Augmented Place in Paris’: Georges Perec, Observer-Writer of Urban Life, as a Mobile Locative Media User’, *The Afterlives of Georges Perec*, (2017), in ‘Edinburgh Scholarship Online’, <<https://edinburgh.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474401241.001.0001/upso-9781474401241-chapter-012>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

## Bibliography:

<sup>4</sup> Barak, Adi, 'Qualitative Enquiry', *My Childhood Neighborhood: A Critical Autoethnography*, Vol. 26(6) 667–673 (2020), in 'SAGE', <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419843565>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

<sup>6</sup> De Botton, Alaine, *Architecture of Happiness*, Vol. 43, (United States, Vintage Books, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Gieseeking, Jan Jack, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, & Susan Saegert (eds), *The People, Place and Space Reader, Section 3: Place and Identity*, <<https://peopleplacespace.org/toc/section-3/>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

<sup>7</sup> Gieseeking, Jen Jack, William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, & Susan Saegert (eds), *The People, Place and Space Reader, Section 3: Place and Identity*, <<https://peopleplacespace.org/toc/section-3/>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

<sup>2</sup> Grossman, Alyssa, 'Suomen Antropologi', *The Anthropology of Sophie Calle*, Vol. 43, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 28-35

<sup>3</sup> Grossman, Alyssa, 'Suomen Antropologi', *The Anthropology of Sophie Calle*, Vol. 43, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 28-35

<sup>1</sup> Hecht, Heiko, Welsch, Robin, Vieho, Jana, Longo, Matthew R., 'The shape of personal space', *Acta Psychologica*, 193, 113-122 (2019), in 'ELSEVIER', <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychology/bodylab/docs/hechtEtal-acta-2019.pdf>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

<sup>9</sup> Licoppe, Christian, "An Attempt at Exhausting an Augmented Place in Paris': Georges Perec, Observer-Writer of Urban Life, as a Mobile Locative Media User', *The Afterlives of Georges Perec*, (2017), in 'Edinburgh Scholarship Online', <<https://edinburgh.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474401241.001.0001/upso-9781474401241-chapter-012>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]

<sup>8</sup> Roulston, Kathy, *What is Autoethnography?*, <<https://qualpage.com/2018/11/15/what-is-autoethnography/>>, [accessed: 28 November 2020]