The Memory Model Project

An investigation of three-dimensional models as catalysts and monitors of recall

A proposal by Jörg Jozwiak, 2016

Part IV: *Home*: Domestic Space 'through Memory through Model'

The works produced in the *Memory Model Project* cannot be divorced from their specific topic. This creates the opportunity, if not the obligation, to consider issues of domestic space and its representation in memory. On the one hand, memory models can be assessed through findings and theories from other disciplines that have dealt with this topic; on the other hand, the project itself might contribute to the study of the concept of home.

Domestic space as a research topic

What constitutes a home and how it shapes our way of living, thinking, and feeling has been a subject of research in anthropology, sociology, psychology, human geography, architecture, philosophy and other disciplines (for an overview see Mallett 2004). This section will briefly review some pertinent issues from related debates.

Types of Home

One type of dwelling referred to as a home particularly often is a person's place of childhood, traditionally the parental home. Drawing on philosopher Gaston Bachelard, anthropologist Michael Jackson describes this place as one that *"shelters our daydreaming, cradles our thoughts and memories and provides us with a sense of stability"* (Jackson 2000, p.86); Bachelard himself assures: *"[O]ver and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us"* (Bachelard 1994, p.14).[1] As such, it provides the material of narratives we tell and live by (McAdams 1993) and is often accompanied by feelings of nostalgia when looked upon in hindsight (Tucker 1994).

The second popular notion of home concerns a place one has purchased, decorated, or furnished for oneself and often one's own family. Since the *Memory Model Project* focuses on the home in memory, it will probably yield more examples of the first type than the second. However, a home once owned or rented and now left or lost, can of course also be the subject of reproduction. Having said this, it is clear that contemporary notions of home comprise far more than what fits neatly within these

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[1] Describing the house she grew up in in her memoir *They Left Us Everything*, author Plum Johnson states graphically in this vein: *"This house with its setting is part of me, seared into my bones like fossil on rock"* (Johnson 2016, p.267).

two categories. Patchwork families, living in shared houses, increased residential mobility, issues of global migration, etc. produce multifarious connotations of home (Rapport & Dawson 1998; Morley 2002; Nowicka 2007). Furthermore, some people might identify atypical places as their home. An orphanage, a caravan or a boat, and perhaps even a work place, may be felt to be one's home.

The Home as a Formative Place

Homes are experienced and fashioned in contrast to other people's homes, making them mirrors of social status and lifestyle. As children, we realise at some point that we live in a social housing estate, a row home, a mansion, a loft, a shared house, a studio flat ... and we also realise what that means compared to where other people live. As adults, we choose, as far as our financial means allow, a dwelling and an interior decoration that best fits – and represents – ourselves. In effect, the home makes a most powerful impression on, and allows for an expression of, the self.

Despite the diverse understandings of home in contemporary Western societies, the notions of the 'place where one grew up' and the 'self-furnished dwelling' (both in close relation to family life) continue to be its dominant connotations. Anthropologist Shelley Mallett summarises that this notion of the home is

> *clearly differentiated from public space and removed from public scrutiny and surveillance… [T]he private realm of the home is typically understood as a space that offers freedom and control … and scope for creativity and regeneration … It is an intimate space that provides a context for close, caring relationships*. (Mallett 2004, p.71)

Although often connoted positively, none of these factors necessarily are so. The home's privacy protects power relations and consolidates gender roles (Bowlby et al. 1997; Madigan & Munro 1999; for a review of recent studies see Rezeanu 2015). Both can engender very negative experiences and, tragically, the family home is often experienced as a place of fear and violence. *'Caring relationships'* not only means mutual benevolence but also the psychical and physical strains of dealing with a family member's illness or impairment. Naturally, being ill or impaired oneself creates other distinct experiences of the home space (Imrie 2004). All in all, the home may be described *"as a crucial 'locale' in the sense that it is the setting through which basic forms of social relations and social institutions are constituted and reproduced"* (Saunders & Williams 1988, p.82). For most people, the home is thus probably the most salient of places for forming self-image and habitus. Reflecting on one's own home and the way other people remember their home can thus be truly enlightening.

Atmosphere

People that share the experience of a place often agree that it has a specific 'feel' or 'character'. Yet it is difficult to reach unanimity, let alone to define standards, to measure it. A place's *atmosphere* is nothing esoteric, however. It has been acknowledged as a relevant factor in architecture (Böhme 2005; Zumthor 2006) and for the home space (Pennartz 1999; Olesen 2010). Atmospheres become manifest by influencing people's moods whilst simultaneously being the screen for their emotional projections.

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Philosopher Gernot Böhme thus defines the phenomenon as *"the relation between environmental qualities and human states"* (Böhme 1993, p.114). The problem that atmospheres are impersonal in that they belong to places or situations and yet are sensed as intensely personal has led to some interesting philosophical debates (Böhme 1993; Anderson 2014; Griffero 2014); however, it makes it difficult to study them empirically.[2] To fully 'get' a place's atmosphere, one probably has to be physically present as Böhme (ibid.) suggests but, arguably, it also endures as one of the most salient features in people's home-related memories.

The Model as a Medium of Home-related Memories

Representing spatial aspects is germane to the model, and spatial elements of homes (room arrangement, corners, furniture, doors, windows, etc.) can be important anchors of our memories (Bachelard 1994; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Due to the fact that memories are the resource by which we interpret the world around us as well as ourselves, *"by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms', we learn to 'abide' within ourselves"* Bachelard argues (Bachelard 1994, p.xxxvii). This, however, pertains rather to the catalytic than the monitoring function of memory models and is thus irrelevant if the model is used as an instrument to elucidate issues of domestic space (in memory). Like any investigation of memories, research into the recollection of homes faces the problem of how to 'access' a person's mindscape. Common strategies revolve around interviewing people and the scrutiny of existing records such as written memoirs. Sometimes photographs and other mementos are used to elicit memories (Kuhn 2007) but such sources cannot be summoned on demand to flash out a certain space or event. Thus, they are used to *catalyse* memories, not to *monitor* them.[3] Model-making, by contrast, is hypothesised to be capable of both. Concerning home-related memories in particular, modelling seems promising in at least three ways to tackle relevant issues.

First, remembering home often has a nostalgic character. Models are a congenial medium to reflect and express related thoughts as their production is likewise often linked to nostalgia (Stewart 1984; King 1996). This may not be true for all modelling (for a critique see Krasniewicz 2015) but certainly for *"models that in some way are related to or remind one of a beloved spot of time and space in the past – or at least of a time and space in which one had some intense experience"* (King 1996, p.194). The second argument applies the general claim that personal memories can be accessed through models to the specific realm of domestic space. *"Studying the effect of the domestic on and through auto/biographical practices"*, literary scholar Kathy Mezei argues in line with the humanities' perspectives on the home outline above, *"deepens our knowledge of how selves are imagined, constructed and represented"* (Mezei 2006, p.82). Making a memory model is an auto/biographical

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[2] Sociologist Paul Pennartz (1999) suggested some socio-psychological and architectural variables of *'pleasant'* and *'unpleasant'* home atmospheres, ranging from the kind of communication taking place there to the form and physical enclosure of rooms. These may be interesting for the sociologist or architect but eventually the atmosphere of a place is far too complex as to be exhausted by the category of pleasantness.

[3] Compare *Part III: Memory: Models as Catalysts and Monitors of Recollections*, section *Therapeutic perspectives*.

practice and provides a supplement to verbal reports. It is expected that memory models will yield visual and haptic testimony of what features of homes are especially salient in (the participating) people's memory. A third and directly related benefit of models is their potential to convey atmospheres. Visual artists have demonstrated that model-making holds many options for suggesting a place's feel or character.[4] Whilst textual descriptions (prose or poetry) of atmospheres can be powerful in inspiring the viewer's imagination, a three-dimensional model can, hypothetically, *show* them. This would make it a more suitable medium for documentational purposes in this respect. It is acknowledged that the representation or staging of atmospheres is difficult (Bille et al. 2015). So whether the *Memory Model Project* will indeed yield good examples remains one of its most exciting questions.

Models' potential capacity to illuminate social aspects of domestic space can be invoked as a fourth reason to use models in order to monitor home-related memories. Houses and interiors are laden with cultural conventions and models may, it is hypothesised, elucidate social values underlying idea(l)s of a 'proper', 'interesting', or 'presentable' home. This aspect will be treated separately in the final section.

Model Homes: Social Aspects of the Home, Remembering, and Modelling

In the introductory working paper,[5] three functional realms of the memory model were defined: the 'actual' domestic space (secondary referent), its representation in memory (primary referent), and the model itself (expressive medium). All of them are structured by social factors. For example, homes' architecture and interior decoration reflect the taste, needs, traditions, and material situation of a certain historical and social environment. Furthermore, a home's spatial arrangement along with the kind and distribution of objects it contains are shaped by, and themselves shape, the way people act, feel, think, and develop. As a representation of such a structure, the memory model transcends personal recollection and points to a cultural context.

If we want to extract any socio-cultural information about an object through (someone's) memory we must take into account that this memory is itself conditioned by social factors. Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush begin their chapter on the *Socialization of Memory* in *The Oxford Handbook of Memory* explaining that this aspect of recall

> *implies that basic memory functions, skills, strategies, and practices are affected by*
> *social learning; that in some way and for some purposes memory is improved, generally*
> *in accord with dominant cultural values, through exposure to training or practices by*
> *socialization agents*. (Nelson & Fivush 2000, p.283)

Applied to the topic at hand, this means that *socialization agents* (parents, teachers, peers, media, etc.) have a crucial impact on the way we remember our home. Important factors are knowing about other

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[4] Various examples are discussed in *Part II (b): Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*.

[5] See *Part I: Introduction - The Idea*

people's (especially family members') memories and views regarding one's home and seeing photographs of it.[6] On the one hand, there will be case-specific issues, such as often repeated family stories that shape one's own perspective on the home. On the other hand, there are more general, culturally grounded values regarding what makes a 'proper', 'interesting' or 'presentable' home. Furniture shop displays, magazines like *HouseBeautiful* and home improvement shows on television present these values in the most obvious way. To be sure, there are national, regional and cultural differences and within a squatter community or a monastery people will certainly have quite divergent ideas of what makes a 'good' home (Chapman & Hockey 1999). Nevertheless, it would be interesting to investigate if such values – typical for whatever community – do in fact impact the reconstruction of an 'actual' home. This raises methodological questions that cannot be addressed here. At this point it suffices to note that when we look at a memory model as a display of home-related social values, they are filtered not only by idiosyncratic but also social aspects of memory (although these are difficult to disentangle).

A final aspect to consider – and another level of filtering – is that models have their own conventions. John Monk observes in the *Book of Models* that *"[t]he creation of new models is based on existing models and in this way successions of models form a genre"* and this *"genre becomes a body of work that affects those that create new models"* (Monk 2003, p.43). In the context of the *Memory Model Project*, two 'genres' suggest themselves: The architect's model and the dollhouse.[7] Whilst the former will appeal to the model-maker interested in reducing the home's representation to a sober and depersonalised structure, the latter is more likely to influence the one appreciating detail and atmosphere.[8] However, as they focus on the representation of a place defined by personal experience and social interaction, conventions associated with the dollhouse are the more obvious paradigm to guide the production of memory models.

In his book *Remaking the World: Modeling in Human Experience*, James R. King observes that many self-made dollhouses *"become reproductions of some aunt's or grandmother's house remembered from childhood"* (King 1996, p.23). This suggests a direct link between model-making and personal memories. However, it is questionable if an aunt's or grandmother's flat in a social housing estate or her messy living-room would act as the inspiration for a dollhouse. Rather, the model-maker will find orientation in the *aunt's or grandmother's house* if it complies with established dollhouse and home values such as cosiness, wealth or the 'good old times'. Poet and critic Susan Stewart thus posits that the dollhouse represents *"an interiority which the subject experiences as its sanctuary (fantasy) and prison (the boundaries or limits of otherness, the inaccessibility of what cannot be lived experience"* (Stewart 1984, p.65). This, however, does not have to be coupled with *'nostalgic longing'* as Stewart

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[6] Compare *Part III: Memory: Models as Catalysts and Monitors of Recollections*, section *Obstacle 1: The 'faultiness' of memory*.

[7] As a third genre one might think of models in visual art; these are, however, far too diverse to be associated with specific conventions. See *Part II (b): Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*.

[8] Also, model-makers particularly experienced with either type might prefer it due to their routine.

and King assume. At least from a contemporary point of view (some decades after Stewart's and King's treatises were published), the collective idea(l)s expressed in dollhouses are far more diverse. This is evident in the products of the toy industry but also if one looks at people's do-it-yourself models showcased in online forums such as *Pinterest*. The spectrum ranges from, indeed, nostalgic mansions to stylish lofts to eco-houses – all representing specific social values of an 'ideal home'. Nevertheless, Stewart's general claim that *"the miniature world may always be seen as being overcoded as the cultural"* and her characterisation of the dollhouse as *"perpetual and incontaminable"* (Stewart 1984, p.68,62) still apply and it will be interesting to observe how far dollhouse conventions influence the production of memory models.[9]

In conclusion, memory models not only display a person's idiosyncratic recollections but also – and at a profound level – social values that shape homes, memories and models. What is remembered of one's home, what is selected for display and the way it is rendered can thus potentially yield insights into the socio-cultural fabric that underlies individual memory and its specific form of expression. Fig. 1 gives a tentative overview of the most important social factors influencing the production of the memory model.
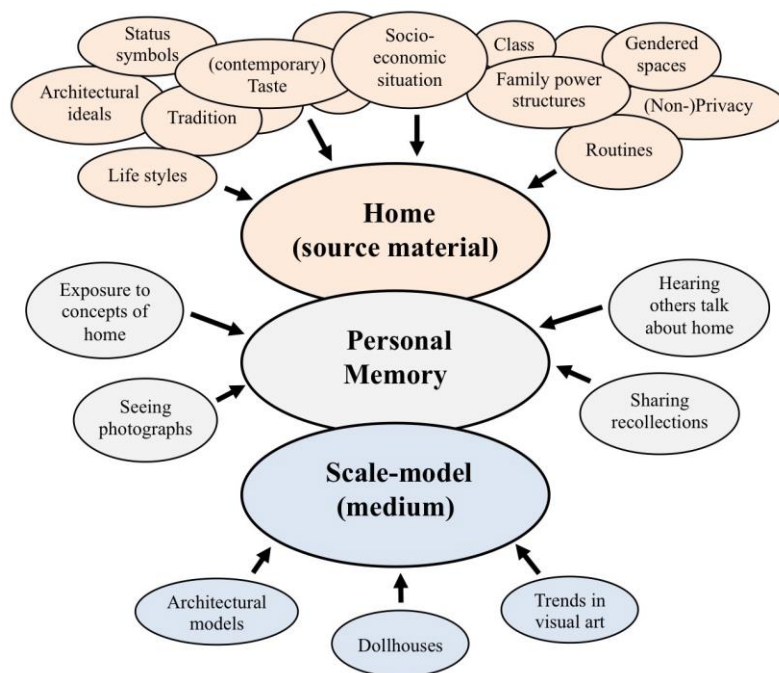

Fig. 1. Social factors of the memory model

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[9] Artists might question the 'incontaminability' of the dollhouse world. Robert Gober, for example, created a series of dollhouses between 1977 and 1980 that look unspectacular – even neat – on the outside but, as art critic Jerry Saltz observes regarding a representative example: *"Inside, the house looks abandoned, and the walls are covered with painted scenes of roads, landscapes, shapes of the states. Alarm bells sound. These are images of longing, loneliness, dreaming of other places, getting out, getting away. That empty closet, severed leg, and disembodied sinks all transform into Whitman's "phantoms curiously floating. This is someone's prolapsing life"* (Saltz 2014, para.6; for an account of Gober's dollhouses see also Huerta 2010, pp.98−105).

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