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Article in IOP Conference Series Earth and Environmental Science · June 2020

DOI: 10.1088/1755-1315/503/1/012016

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# Long Live my Objects: Silent Practices to Avoid Obsolescence

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**Abstract.** Today specialists agree on the importance of studying the practices of reuse and reduction or slow consumption in the domestic space. In response to this need, this research seeks to understand the extent to which daily consumption practices influence the life trajectory of objects. Specifically, the project seeks to recognize, analyze and value everyday practices related to the use, care, repair, reuse and storage of objects of daily consumption, which favor conservation and influence the willingness to consume new replacement products. The ethnographic study, uses in-depth interviews, participant observation and use of audiovisual tools to investigate the relationships that a diverse group of people have with their everyday objects. Limiting the study to people who reside in different communes of the city of Santiago.

## 1. Introduction

At a time in history when the footprint of humanity is determining the future of the planet [1], and large-scale consumption and industrial production undermine nature as a whole, it is essential to study those daily actions that have the capacity to reverse or slow down the processes of loss of value of the objects of consumption, and their transformation first in thing and then in garbage; in other words, those specific cultural forms of a place - practices and knowledge - that prolong the value and meaning of the objects' life, stimulating them to be preserved and thus generating more sustainable and responsible lifestyles.

The literature distinguishes various practices aimed at the conservation of objects, such as care, maintenance, repair, reuse and storage. This research aims to explore these practices in households of different socioeconomic status in order to analyze the importance they have in the configuration of forms of domestic consumption. For this purpose, 18 interviews were conducted in households located in areas of different socioeconomic characterization in Santiago (high, medium and low) and a photographic and planimetric registry of households was also carried out.

## 2. Domestic consumption and the life of things

Currently, conservation practices, and the possibility of reducing consumption should be analyzed in a context where discourses about storage and clutter, have become central concerns in many contemporary homes [2] [3]. The excessive consumption of goods has motivated some authors to talk about 'obese houses', overflowing with things that are not needed. Before cleaning or throwing away, many people end up buying new things to deal with excess [4]. The existence of a lucrative market that aims at constant replacement explains, in part, that in 2017, the Swedish company IKEA, dedicated to the sale of furniture and household items, conducted a study on more than 22 thousand homes in the world, concluding that the main cause of stress would be related to the amount of things and the sustained desire to order and reduce their number [5]. Paradoxically - in metropolitan contexts - progressive and sometimes involuntary acquisition of products occurs in smaller and smaller households [6].



However, although the number of objects in homes has increased, their useful life has been reduced [7]. The loss of the initial value attributed to these things - be it aesthetic, functional, symbolic, technological, religious, etc. - coincides with its assimilation to new fields of meaning that facilitate its disaffection, disengagement and finally its discard. This process is directly related to consumption dynamics and identity construction processes that operate under the slogan of constant renewal, and under which the global ecological crisis scenario in which we are inserted has taken shape, which forces us to ask ourselves how to promote sustainable lifestyles in contexts of capitalist reproduction.

### *2.1. The life of things as an object of study*

The relationship between consumption, domestic space and everyday objects has been widely studied from a cultural perspective, analyzing the role they play in the reproduction of the social. Although since the second half of the last century different authors interested in this field can be distinguished [8] [9] [10], an important shift in the position attributed to objects is produced from the studies of science and technology towards the 1980s. Especially relevant is the contribution of [11], who attributes to objects the ability to be active agents in the construction of social reality, as well as other rather dialectical views [12] [13] [14]. It is also essential the work of Kopytoff [15] who argues that questioning the biography of a thing allows us to understand how it is perceived in a certain cultural context and not only as an exchange good.

Based on a procedural approach that recognizes the changing nature of the object and its relations with the subjects, the approach developed by Fernando Domínguez is essential for this project. Although the author agrees with the idea that objects would be endowed with agency [16] [17], he warns that this position must understand objects not as given or self-evident realities; but on the contrary, as entities that transform, deteriorate, break or decompose; that transgress, ignore, reinterpret and resignify in time. In other words, he calls to think about the issue "ecologically", from practices, material and discursive conditions; considering temporality, fragility and change as the starting points for studying objects and social reality [18]. Based on this, Domínguez proposes to redefine the relationship between thing and object. While the first would consist of material processes that unfold over time, objects would be moments or phases in the lives of these things: physical and semiotic positions that things acquire to participate in different value and meaning systems.

### *2.2. Approaches from design: The user as an active agent*

During the last two decades there has been a growing interest in the durability of goods as a key factor for sustainability [19] [20], under the agreement that the longer duration of objects decreases the frequency with which these are acquired and discarded and, therefore, generates a reduction in the consumption of natural resources and in energy expenditure [21] [7] [22]. Now, what variables influence the lifespan of an object? From the design discipline, approaches such as "Emotionally durable design" [23] or "Product attachment" [24] have been developed. These views seek to incorporate durability as an attribute that can be designed and planned, based on the management of the meanings and affections that develop between people and artifacts. With the focus on the consumption phase of the good, these approaches question the role of consumers in the durability of their products. This necessarily implies entering the daily life of consumers and studying the relationships they establish with their things, their position in the social structure, their ideologies and their ethics of consumption [25] [26] [27].

The ability of consumers to be active agents in the modification of consumer goods has also been addressed by countless studies in design in recent years. These include approaches such as "Non intentional design" [28] or "Design by Use", which focus on the study of the daily redesign of the world already designed, undertaken by the users themselves during the consumption phase [29]. In line with these approaches, Daniele Perra has developed the concept of "Low-cost design" to refer to how territories, with their economic, social and cultural specificity, also favor forms of spontaneous creativity that subvert the conventional project of objects, reflecting collective projects [30]. On the other hand, under the term "Objects in Flux", Scott Mitchell [31] refers to the daily modification of objects by users, not necessarily as a response to scarcity, but as a way to resist the alienation generated due to the

overabundance of objects of mass consumption. Modification, appropriation, misuse or reuse would be ordinary practices that allow us to develop a new relationship, committed to the world [31]. Also from a European context, where resource scarcity has receded compared to other social problems, Thompson and Whittington [32] share with Mitchell that these conservation measures have lost their benchmark in economies of scarcity and are now gradually resigned by artists, designers and activists committed to alternative forms of sustainable development.

### *2.3. Maintenance, repair and reuse*

Addressing the actions that the user undertakes to intervene in the trajectory of domestic objects implies an understanding of the always transitory and mobile nature of these; It implies conceiving the world in a permanent becoming, where individuals are potential creators with the ability to modify, adjust and change the environment they inhabit [33].

Based on the fact that both the home and those objects it contains constitute matter in evolution [34], and that the capacities and properties of matter are permanently altered by non-human and human agents, actions such as maintenance and repair are some of the most common strategies that arise as a response to their stabilization [35]. Paraphrasing this last author, persistent, repetitive maintenance and eventual repair should be understood as processes that stop the decay and devaluation of our environment, while providing value and a powerful illusion of durability; with them, failure and obsolescence are postponed.

Although it is increasingly common for objects that fail physically or symbolically to be discarded and / or replaced [36], in recent years there has been a special interest in studying everyday practices that seek to extend lifespan through different practices. One of the works that opens the field, from an urban approach, is that of Graham and Thrift [37]. They place maintenance and repair as essential practices for the functioning of modern societies, for which they make visible a series of historically relegated practices, highlighting their role in counteracting the constant decay of the environment. Simultaneously, the authors affirm that "Maintenance and repair can in themselves be a vital source of variation, improvisation and innovation" [37].

Gregson et. al. [34] specifically address maintenance and repair practices within the domestic space, understanding these as integrative actions that allow objects to remain in that place, while their absence would lead to disintegration processes. The study of different maintenance and repair experiences lead the authors to conclude that these actions are a means through which objects can be mobilized between different value systems in the home, which translates into constant processes of revaluation or devaluation. When seeking to understand the trajectories of objects it is essential to attend to the critical periods that involve the total or partial loss of some attributes of these objects, and the attempts to reverse this situation. Redström [38] proposes the existence of a "design after design" that arises to the extent that the users themselves are responsible for completing the products that designers create, sometimes in a desire for customization, sometimes in response to failures that the products present in their initial conception. Thus the use generates use, and the design generates new design, this continuum being a constant that encourages the birth of new and better products, but at the same time of new "unfinished" objects that motivate and await the intervention of its users [39].

## **3. Method**

This research is based on the assumption that the biographies of objects vary significantly, in terms of their durability and assessment, depending on the distinctive dynamics of each household. In order to access a diversity of households, a selection was made based on two variables: socioeconomic status and age range. Both configure distinctive universes of actors, conditions and materialities, with particular practices in relation to the life of objects. Regarding age range, households with members between 25 and 35 years old, and over 65 years of age were selected. To differentiate the socioeconomic variable, urban areas of the city of Santiago were chosen where elite groups (ABC1), middle class (C2 / C3) and lower class (D / E) were clearly represented. The cases studied correspond to households in the municipality of Vitacura; in the Población Huemul of the municipality of Santiago, and in the

Población Parinacota of the municipality of Quilicura, respectively. The combination of both variables gave a matrix of 6 types of cases and for each type three households were chosen.

The field work extended for four months and contemplated the application of varied data collection techniques. The central technique was the semi-structured in-depth interview. The main issues addressed in this instance were (i) the general characterization of the home, of certain daily practices associated with it, and of the relationship that the interviewee establishes with the objects that (s)he maintains in the house; (ii) the identification of specific practices that extend the life of these objects; and (iii) of practices that shorten it.

Additionally, in each of the homes a cadastre of intervened objects was made and the objects were registered photographically, as well as the enclosures where they were located. These photographs sought to place the objects in a larger context, tracing their relationships with the subjects, the environment and other objects.

#### **4. Preliminary Findings**

Regardless of the age range, the socioeconomic status and the neighborhood in which it is located, all households show, with different intensities, the existence of practices that seek to preserve objects in the home, either maintaining their original functions, adding new or Definitely transforming them.

However, conservation practices vary between groups. While in the homes of higher socioeconomic strata these are mainly limited to the care, maintenance and repair of objects (especially those of greater economic or affective value); Among the medium and low socioeconomic groups, reuse and resignification practices become more prominent.

These practices present two modalities that are distinguished quite regularly between these homes. On the one hand, there are reused objects that do not require further transformation (bottles, containers, wrappers, ropes, etc.) and whose alternative use is more or less common and known; and on the other, there are reuses that involve more elaborate creative acts and intervention processes. While the former go unnoticed and do not constitute objects of value or importance for the family group, the second modality involves a conscious act of production that requires certain skills or a trade that are generally perceived positively by the home environment.

In addition to the consciousness of the producer, the availability of raw materials (can be purchased materials or other objects with previous functions) and tools is decisive in these homes. This availability implies that the household must have the capacity - and the members the disposition - to regularly store and maintain things whose state is not completely defined. Parts, disused objects, containers and elements designed for single use, receive a space in homes generally small and that are already full of other things. This logic involves the construction of an aesthetic where the value of the correct arrangement and functionality coexist with beauty values.

The result of these environments is completely different from those observed in Vitacura homes. While reuse without intervention, although to a much lesser extent, is predominantly visible in those places destined for domestic work (kitchen, laundry) or storage, the most public spaces (access area, living room and dining room) show aesthetics that tend to minimalism, and meet certain standards of order, disposition and forms that work by exclusion. More exclusive notions about what is considered old, ugly or messy lead to thorough control over what occupies each place in the house, and therefore limits the entry of new objects only to those that meet these standards. On the other hand, maintenance and repair practices tend to be much more sophisticated and complex, since it must be ensured that the eventual intervention does not jeopardize the permanence of this object. This premise implies ensuring that the intervention is not visible and does not alter the image of the object and its relationship with the environment where it is located.

Although the research is about households in the city of Santiago, this demarcation does not necessarily imply a limitation on "urban" forms of consumption - access to markets, credit, advertising, services that facilitate the movement of goods, etc. -. When trying to identify possible factors that condition the way in which people relate to their household objects, the mark of a rural identity is evident, confirming some previous studies [40].

Typically, rural forms of consumption are characterized by an almost total use of available inputs, motivated both by a scenario of great material precariousness and by the partial disconnection to consumer markets. In that model, families use the few industrialized waste to repair and make household objects, such as lamps with coffee jars, nightstands with boxes of fruit or tablecloths with bags of flour, so that nothing seems to ever enter the condition of garbage, but at most remain suspended in that of a 'thing' or raw material [41] [42]. Many of these forms of repair and reuse survive today, especially among the lower socioeconomic groups of the urban world, and they could explain that rural areas of the Metropolitan Region generate 23.1% less garbage per capita than urban areas.

### Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, through its Research Scholarship “Fondart Nacional, Línea diseño, modalidad investigación, 2019”.

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