Objects in Purgatory:
How We Live with Uncherished Gifts

Julia Keyte

ABSTRACT The personal and emotional aspects of living with buildings and things are high on the agenda in recent architecture and design. One established area of industrial-design research connected to this shift is concerned with creating long-term emotional attachments to products as a way to encourage sustainable consumption. In this paper, the author looks beyond products’ physical attributes to consider how practices of keeping things in the domestic interior can influence attachment to a possession. The research examines conflicts in attachment associated with uncherished gifts, and how owners may feel compelled to keep even those with negative associations. In particular, it looks at how and where these troublesome possessions are kept in the home, and how recipients’ efforts to overcome gifts’ negative associations are supported by the domestic interior. The research brings thinking in spatial and industrial design together with literature on expressing the self through the home, to
suggest an alternative way for designers to understand products’ emotional longevity.

KEYWORDS: domestic space, practices of keeping, attachment, possessions, value

Introduction

Recent architecture and design have seen a movement away from the concerns of the designer and the desires of the consumer, towards the personal and emotional aspects of living with buildings and things. A well-established area of design research connected to this cultural shift is concerned with creating long-term emotional attachments to products, as a means of encouraging sustainable consumption. This research tends to focus on the physical (material and visual) qualities of the products and on the initial stages of engagement with the product, rather than the changing value of an object once it has been absorbed into the home.

In this paper, the author looks beyond the physical attributes of the product to consider how the domestic interior can influence an attachment to a possession. In order to gain an insight into the matter, the research undertaken here examines conflicts in attachment associated with uncherished gifts, which despite their negative associations for the owner are still kept. In particular, the research seeks to find out how and where these troublesome possessions are kept in the home, and how the recipient’s efforts to overcome a gift’s negative associations are supported and made possible by the domestic interior.

The vehicle for examining uncherished gifts and their associated conflicts in attachment is a first-hand research project called the Campaign for Objects in Purgatory. The Campaign took the form of a live event and exhibition, to which visitors were invited to contribute their uncherished gifts and associated narratives. The event and exhibition created an open and discursive environment, in order to explore and understand visitors’ views and experiences as well as to gather data on uncherished gifts, their location in the home, and the emotions associated with them. The research is an empathetic means of finding out what the issues really are surrounding the keeping and disposing of possessions. What happens to an object’s meaning and value once it has been absorbed into the home? How do we face the challenges of creating meaning in commodities?

This paper starts with an overview of research in architecture and design emphasizing the individual and emotional aspects of living with things in interior domestic spaces. This is followed by a review of research from design, anthropology, and psychology on the construction of the domestic interior and self through possessions. In particular, the author discusses the visibility and accessibility of possessions in relation to their value and meaning. Practices of
storage and display can tell us a lot about how an object is valued. Gift exchange is the social context for the research, and of particular relevance are the obligation mediated by a gift and the practices of gift giving that add personal meaning to commodities.

The practical element of the Campaign for Objects in Purgatory (the live exhibition) is then described, together with the decoding of the data collected at the event. This precedes a discussion of the key findings and observations relating to the practices of and strategies for keeping gifts that are associated with uncomfortable feelings and experiences.

**Making Room for the Personal and Emotional in Design**

In architecture and industrial design there has been a recent movement towards more human-centered practices, away from the supremacy of the designer’s vision and consumer-centered approaches. In architecture this cultural shift is reflected in *Architecture of the Everyday* (Berke and Harris 1997), in which the authors invite architects to consider the ordinary, quotidian rites and practices of daily life, carried out by the building’s users. More recently, architect and writer Jeremy Till (2009) proposes a reconstitution of flexible practices of architecture that acknowledge the mixed social and institutional demands placed on designing and constructing a building, including the idiosyncratic and emotional appropriation of the space by its users.

A parallel shift in industrial design towards more empathetic and sensitive methods of understanding the personal and emotional aspects of living with products is reflected in two recent design-journal special issues. These are Design and Empathy, published by *The Design Journal* (McDonagh and Thomas 2011), and Design and Emotion, which was published by the *International Journal of Design* (Desmet and Hekkert 2009) and brings together research examining the presence and role of emotion in user-product engagement.

The starting point for the project discussed in this paper is existing research examining user-product emotional bonds. Research in design (van Hinte 1997; Chapman 2005; Mugge et al. 2006; Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim 2008; Niinimäki and Koskinen 2011) seeks to encourage strong emotional attachment to products as a means of prolonging product lifespan, and is motivated by a widely held understanding that we need to slow consumption and that we create waste by discarding functional products we no longer desire (Cooper 2010).

The founding principles of emotional attachment as a factor in the designing of sustainable products have been interpreted in several fields of design research, including human–computer interaction (HCI) (Odom et al. 2009), textile and fashion design (Niinimäki and Koskinen 2011), and industrial design (Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim 2008). These authors seek to identify the
attributes of attachments to products that are kept for long periods. Those identified by Niinimäki and Koskinen (2011) include the utility, performance, and physical quality of the object, memories and other positive associations (such as other people), investment of self (e.g. through making), and connection to self-identity. Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim (2008) identify memories and enjoyment as the only factors to contribute positively to the degree of attachment. Odom et al. (2009) recognize factors associated more closely with the material quality of the object: physical engagement, histories (materials preserving memories), augmentation (e.g. modification), and perceived durability.

These authors all examine objects that have engaged strong attachments. They identify attributes of attachments that relate to the user’s physical interaction with the product and their experiences directly connected to it. This product-centric view excludes the broader context for the user-object relationship, such as the spaces and domestic practices the object inhabits once it has been absorbed into the home. In further work on digital possession, Odom et al. (2010, 2012) articulate relationships between self-identity, the storage and display of possessions, and emotions associated with them. Their research discusses teens’ self-expression and self-construction through their bedrooms (Odom et al. 2012) and the storage of digital data connected to a bereavement (Odom et al. 2010). Although this work is concerned with the design of digital artifacts, it hints at the value of considering the relationship of practices of keeping things in the domestic interior to emotional attachment to material possessions.

Identity, Possessions, and Domestic Space
Research on material culture and the home, described below, addresses the development of the self through acquiring home possessions and constructing the domestic interior through practices of storage and display.

Construction of self through possessions and the home
Seminal research studying the construction of self through possessions posits the material culture of the domestic interior as a mediator of meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981) and views attachments to possessions as integral to attachments to other people (Miller 2008). Literature building on a Jungian frame of reference addresses the home as a kind of material framework for memory (Bachelard 1958; Cooper Marcus 1995; Graves 2012). For Cooper Marcus, making a home is a continual process of becoming a whole self, in which possessions are the key. Possessions we can move and manipulate are liable to become more closely allied to the self, as we are able to exercise some control over them (see also Prelinger 1959; Belk 1988). Research in human geography (Gregson et al. 2007) addresses the acquisition and dispossession
of possessions as a continuous process of self-construction on which an object we cannot control could make an undesired impact and “destabilize” the “self-narrative” (Gregson et al. 2007).

Our possessions are active agents in interpreting us to ourselves and others: “We create our environment and then contemplate it and are worked on by it” (Yandell 1995: xv). Similarly, McCracken (2005) sees the construction of the material culture of the home as the means through which the family projects itself to itself and the outside world. Goffman, in his sociological work on the performance of the self (1959), examines how we are interpreted by others through and with our immediate environment. He discusses the performance of the self through “front regions” (public spaces) and “backstage” (private spaces).

**Location of objects in the home**

Self-expression through the display of commodities in the home has its roots in the social and cultural change of the Victorian era and the 1960s. Writers concerned with the symbolism of home identify the 1960s with a pivotal shift from home as a representation of shared family and moral values to an expression of self (Baudrillard 1968; Cohen 2006). The cultural change resulting from modern production and consumption gave rise to social and emotional liberation from past values. As a consequence, individuals’ relationships to possessions have become more transient, and we have become “more self conscious about home as a vehicle for communication and display” (Cooper Marcus, 1995: 9). The display of strategically accumulated commodities in the home as an outward projection of personal values and status saw an earlier advent in the Victorian period, in association with the surge of industrially produced household goods (Bronner 1989).

Literature from design that addresses the display and storage of possessions in the home relates the location of the object to its meaning and value. In HCI, Odom et al. (2010) discuss the need for bequeathed objects embodying powerful emotional conflicts to be kept in “deep storage” to prevent an encounter. Petrelli and Whittaker (2010) relate the accessibility and visibility of mementos in public and personal domestic spaces to the meanings and memories they embody for the respondent.

The availability of certain sorts of storage spaces allows value to develop in possessions that might otherwise be discarded. Fisher and Shipton (2010) investigate the opportunities provided by the domestic interior for value to develop in used packaging. They use the term “twilight zones” to describe spaces such as garages or cupboards under sinks, where an object can be stored out of sight on the chance it will fulfill a later need. They refer to research reflecting on identity and dispossession (Gregson et al. 2007) that discusses “liminal,” “border” zones where objects reside but are not quite thrown away (Fisher and Shipton 2010: 116). These definitions
suggest a kind of physical manifestation of purgatory or limbo for objects not yet disposed of, which may yet have an opportunity to fulfill their potential.

The development of the concept of habitus by Bourdieu (Hillier and Rooksby 2005) provides a further means of considering the relationship of an object’s environment to the way we acquire and keep possessions. Some spaces in the home, such as mantelpieces, are constructed to accommodate displays of objects and allow for (perhaps set up an expectation of) the acquisition of small decorative objects.

**Obligation and reciprocation**

An uncherished gift can be a challenging object to deal with, because it mediates an obligation to reciprocate. In his seminal work on gift exchange in small-scale traditional societies, Mauss (1950) identifies the obligation to reciprocate with an equivalent, or more excessive, gift as a powerful motivating force. He expands his ideas and findings to consider exchange in more complex and fragmented Western societies and sees the obligation to reciprocate as the root of people’s development as “exchangers of goods and services” (Mauss 1950: 17).

In Mauss’ study, the gift, once received, embodies the giver and as such is a mediator of the obligation. The recipient can experience this as a burden (Mauss 1950). In the contemporary context, Belk (1988) sees a gift as an imposition of the giver’s self; to receive it, the recipient has to release some control of their own self-image. In his extended reading of Mauss’ study, Carrier (1991) identifies an obligation to keep and appreciate a gift rather than to reciprocate with an equivalent gift. He explains that the bond to the giver, experienced through the object, is at the root of the discomfort felt by recipients wishing to dispose of a disappointing gift. A rejection of a gift is a rejection of the giver, and the relationship.

In Mauss’ study of small-scale societies, gifts are integrally linked to the giver’s self, in clearly defined systems of exchange, whereas in modern Western societies gifts are usually appropriated commodities. This presents a challenge to gift givers, as commodities, on the surface at least, seem impersonal (Carrier 1993). Carrier sees a tension in the gift, expressed by widespread concern in the USA about the materialism of Christmas giftgiving. To deal with this tension, we engage in rituals and practices (such as gift wrapping) that separate commodities from their roots in commerce and invest them with personality. Products bought as gifts often have a luxurious or frivolous quality, to distinguish them from the utilitarian objects we would usually acquire through a commodity exchange.

**The Campaign for Objects in Purgatory**

In order to gather data on uncherished gifts, and to create open discussion on how they are located in the home, the author undertook an
exploratory exhibition called the Campaign for Objects in Purgatory. This live event and exhibition collected uncherished gifts and their connected narratives by inviting audience contributions in a discursive environment. Visitors were invited to describe their object and its location, to enter into a discussion about its story, and to exhibit their submission in the exhibition. Each contribution took the form of a physical object, photo, sketch, written text, or recorded audio narrative. The dynamic format of the exhibition simultaneously provided a creative method for collecting data and a means of encouraging audience engagement.

The exhibition took place in the Sheffield Institute of Arts Gallery over eight days in May 2011. The majority of participants were university community members, although the public also visited and contributed.

**Related work**

The exhibition followed existing recent projects that have actively engaged the public in recording and exploring meaningful personal narratives attached to possessions. Key examples from journalism, academia, and fine art include the BBC Radio 4 project *A Shoebox of Snow*, aired in 2011 (*A Shoebox of Snow* 2011–last update); the *Totem* project (*Speed* 2010); artist Keith Wilson’s *Things* (*Wellcome Trust* 2010); and the *Museum for Broken Relationships*, undertaken by artists Grubišić and Vištica (*Museum for Broken Relationships* 2012). *A Shoebox of Snow* focuses on cherished possessions, while *Totem* and *Things* collect a much broader range of objects and meanings. The *Museum for Broken Relationships* explicitly aims to collect objects that are associated with an experience that is likely to be negative – the ending of a romantic relationship. The aim of this project is to provide a cathartic experience for participants by marking the passing of the relationship, and it engages its audience by enabling a collective discussion on a shared experience. While all four of these projects have a creative and discursive emphasis, the *Totem* project also collects data as a basis for academic research. *Totem* examines the possibility of revealing the social histories of objects, by using the internet to record the experiences of an object’s past and present owners.

Academic research methods placing artifacts at the center of open discussions between designer and stakeholder are also relevant. In a “critical artifact approach” the artifact is utilized as a prompt for critical reflection among stakeholders, as a means of understanding their views and experiences (*Gaver et al. 2004; Bowen 2009*). The value of engaging stakeholders in open discussion, in an exhibition reflecting on an intimate domestic interior space, is discussed by Chamberlain and Yoxall (2012), in connection with the Future Bathrooms project. The exhibition utilized artifacts to prompt discussion between visitors, and included several mechanisms for visitors to record their responses to the artifacts encountered. The
results show that this method for creating focused discussion is a means of capturing material content and data not elicited through more traditional research methods.

**Processes of audience engagement**

The *Objects in Purgatory* exhibition was advertised prior to its launch through local press, radio, posters, flyers, and internal emails. The invitation to submit an object was a straightforward and open process encouraging participation and discussion, in keeping with the critical artifact methods described above, allowing themes to arise through visitor participation. At the exhibition, visitors encountered the exhibition posters with their short explanatory text, the exhibits, and then an exhibition assistant who provided a short verbal explanation of the project’s aims and attempted to engage the visitor in a semi-structured dialog. Visitors were offered a choice of methods of recording the object and its story in order to prompt dialog in different ways. This open process encouraged participants to talk about their objects as they recalled them and helped to develop trust and engagement.

It was evident through interaction with visitors that the submitted artifacts prompted and inspired them to reflect on and vocalize their own experiences. Enjoyment of the act of contributing came through in the consideration and care given to the quality of drawing and layout and in the entertaining and humorous narratives. As the exhibition evolved and its visual impact increased, it developed an identity and agency of its own that propelled data collection.

**Effectiveness of submission methods**

A total of seventy-two objects and accompanying narratives were submitted through the exhibition process (see Table 1 for a breakdown of submissions). Annotated drawings formed the majority of submissions and were key to the effectiveness of the exhibition, as they allowed visitors to make immediate responses and for a

| Media Used          | Count |
|---------------------|-------|
| D                   | 40    |
| D, A                | 12    |
| D, P                | 2     |
| D, P, A             | 1     |
| P                   | 3     |
| O                   | 2     |
| O, A                | 7     |
| A                   | 4     |
| N                   | 1     |
| **Total:**          | **72**|

Key: D = annotated drawing; P = photograph of the object in situ; O = physical object; A = audio recording; N = written narrative only (no physical or visual representation of the object).
quantity of submissions to build up. Drawing and writing facilitated personal expression, but objective information about the object and its location was limited. Photographs contained more objective information on location but they were not a popular method of submission, possibly because they required activity beyond the exhibition. Recorded audio narratives usually contained more detail about the object and its story and enabled self-expression through language and vocal emphasis. Physical objects provided very useful focal points for discussions about their context (Figure 1).

All visitors were asked for information on the location of the object, however, ten submissions contain no information; it may be that it was not regarded as essential information to the visitors when they were engaged in telling their stories. Most visitors volunteered basic information on the giver and the reason(s) the object was “in Purgatory.” This was not explicitly asked for, but was seen by visitors to be a key part of the narrative.

**Limitations**

It should be noted that a project of this kind cannot achieve the richness of a large-scale anthropological research investigation.
However, it generated a quantity of responses and threw up a rich and diverse range of situations grounded in gift exchange. A small number of submissions provides a greater level of detail on the journey of the object through the home and, together with rich seams of unrecorded data revealed by the submission process, indicates potential for more in-depth studies in the future. Audience engagement processes were kept open in order to encourage participation and for this reason it is not always possible to make exhaustive quantitative readings. However, it is possible to identify patterns and focal points for future research.

The process of participation was voluntary and from informal observation it appeared that a small number of participants were reserved in divulging memories and experiences, out of concern for exposing their feelings and hurting the giver. However, the findings show that the majority of submitted objects are from close family members or friends, rather than acquaintances or associates, suggesting that the anonymity attached to contributing made it possible for visitors to discuss a subject that is normally taboo — as discussed by Chamberlain and Yoxall in relation to *Future Bathrooms* (2012).

**Data Analysis**

The drawings, photos, and written narratives collected through the exhibition were cataloged and the audio interviews were transcribed, and a two-stage coding exercise used to identify patterns and themes in the material collected. The first stage sought to categorize the more straightforward descriptive data (e.g. object, giver, location) and to identify the themes addressed by the participants and suggested by the submissions (e.g. the reason for disliking the object, or conflicts over the value of an object between family members). The second stage sought to interpret and categorize expressions of value and emotion connected to the objects. This included analysis of descriptions of location and the apparent visibility or accessibility of the object.

The following discussion of the findings provides an overview of the conflicts in attachment associated with the objects submitted, and the emotions integral to the conflicts. The analysis of the objects’ locations that follows provides an insight into how participants have dealt strategically with their troublesome objects. It is structured through the following themes: Peripheral Spaces is about the role of rooms and furniture in delineating and ordering space, and providing transitional zones; Limiting the Visibility of Uncherished Gifts discusses practices of display and concealment; Practices of Appropriating Uncherished Gifts concerns the proactive appropriation of gifts to make them appropriate to display; and The Role of the Location in the Development of Value over Time illustrates how an uncherished gift can grow new value by virtue of being kept for a long period.
**Findings**

**The presence of conflict**

As might be expected, nearly all the uncherished gifts collected are associated with a conflict in value; most participants expressed a reason for keeping a submitted object alongside a reason for not valuing it. The data analysis also revealed emotions integral to this conflict.

A diverse mix of factors impacts on each conflict. Negative values include expressions of distaste or dislike (25%), differences in taste and style (22%), and unfulfilled usefulness (22%). Where more detail is provided, distaste is expressed alongside disappointment with a fake brand, perceived material cheapness, or with a style conflicting with that of the home interior. In some cases an object’s status is compromised because it is valued differently by people living together in one space.

Submitted objects are most frequently valued for their positive associations, particularly their connections to memories (15%) and important people (17%). In 18% of the submissions, value is created through some kind of personal investment such as making the object personally (usually the giver) or significantly modifying it (the recipient).

Participants usually felt unable to divest themselves of the gift. Not all identify a reason for this, although sometimes it’s clear that they don’t want to hurt the giver’s feelings (and so reject them: Carrier 1991). The brief overview of the conflicts evident in the submitted narratives suggests that positive associations such as memories, family ties, and personal investment can be powerful enough to encourage the recipient to keep the gift, despite the failure of the gift to contribute positively to self-perception or ideology, or to offer utility value.

For example, this is reflected in the narrative submitted with the drawing of the owl ornament in Figure 2. The recipient received the gift (a small ceramic owl wearing a mortar-board hat, in a box) from her mother on graduating from university, and although she expresses appreciation of the gesture, she feels that it does not express her tastes. She describes it as “tacky” and says that she hates it, but acknowledges that her mother would consider it an expensive gift. The object mediates a positive association and this compels her to keep it: “[it] conjures up this image of my proud Mum on graduation day, so I can’t bring myself to throw it away or give it to a charity shop.”

Although participants keep their gifts, they often experience uncomfortable emotions in association with them. Both written and recorded audio narratives use language and vocal or visual emphasis to express dislike, frustration, bewilderment, or disappointment, and occasionally love or care. The recorded emotions can be grouped into three categories: emotional responses directed at (1) the giver:
“I am still bewildered as to why he thought the … top would fit me!”; “We kind of feel we can’t do anything with [them], like we daren’t even use them”; or “we really don’t like looking at her, as we think she’s (a) ugly and (b) a bit weird.”

The uncomfortable and sometimes conflicting feelings and experiences associated with the object present a challenge. An object that doesn’t adequately represent an aspect of an individual’s developing sense of self threatens to divert the process of becoming (see Cooper Marcus 1995). The locating of the object appears to be a means of dealing with the challenge, exercising some control.

Figure 2
Annotated drawing and audio recording: owl ornament, still in box, kept in loft. Reproduced with the permission of the participant. Photograph by the author.
over the troublesome object (see Prelinger 1959), and limiting the damage it could do. The conflict associated with the owl ornament described above is played out in its location: “It’s still in its box, it’s currently living in the loft … It’s moved around the house, on various bookshelves, and in various hidden corners, anywhere where it can’t be seen. … I can’t put it on display, but it’s moved house with us various times.”

Finding out where and how an uncherished gift is kept can reveal the strategies an individual employs to keep an object without having to encounter it, and to prevent it from undermining their sense of self. The majority of participants appear to find opportunities in the domestic interior to keep the object without having to notice or encounter it. In some cases this is through locating the object strategically, and in others the locating of the object appears to be a subconscious act of concealing it. In other scenarios the object is subjected to a practice of appropriation (such as modification) which makes it acceptable to display in the home interior. The following subsections describe practices and strategies of keeping the gifts, identified in patterns arising from the data.

**Peripheral spaces**

*Rooms.* In response to questions about location, some participants cited specific rooms, while others referred to particular spaces in relation to items of furniture. Rooms included those usually regarded as private (bedrooms), as family space (kitchens), or as storage (attics and lofts). No “social” spaces, such as living rooms, were specifically mentioned. A notable number of the rooms referred to are peripheral to the main home spaces, and include workshops, studies and offices, spare rooms, and sheds (see Table 2).

Living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms are at the center of home life and are key vehicles for self-expression (Bachelard 1958; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Living rooms and kitchens are often the location for displays of possessions through which people articulate their sense of self and relationships to each other (see Whincup 2004; Miller 2008). Uncherished gifts don’t usually reside in these prominent locations. It may be that rooms

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**Table 2** Rooms referenced by study participants.

| Room             | Count |
|------------------|-------|
| Bedroom          | 8     |
| Attic/loft       | 5     |
| Kitchen          | 5     |
| Bathroom         | 1     |
| Hall             | 1     |
| Rooms and spaces peripheral to main living spaces: | 11     |
| (Workshop, study/office, parental home, studio/office, converted garage, garage, room next to garage, shed) |
peripheral to the main living rooms are less vital as facilitators of self-expression through possessions, allowing for more flexibility of self-expression.

Furniture. The spaces within a room are delineated by the furniture it contains. Items of furniture referred to in the submissions include both items usually associated with display – bookcases and mantelpieces – and storage – cupboards, wardrobes, drawers, and boxes (see Table 3). Where an item of furniture is cited, the object’s location is often described in relation to it, e.g. “bottom of,” “behind,” “on top of,” implying miniPeripheral zones within and around an item of furniture, beyond the parts of it that are accessed most.

Table 3 Items of furniture cited more than once by study participants.

| Furniture            | Count |
|----------------------|-------|
| Bookcase/shelf       | 8     |
| Mantelpiece          | 2     |
| Cupboard             | 11    |
| Wardrobe             | 7     |
| Drawer               | 5     |
| In a box             | 5     |

Certain ubiquitous items of furniture have clearly designated ordering functions (such as wardrobes, chests of drawers, and sideboards) which have remained largely unchanged for centuries. They bring with them age-old expectations of how we should use them (Graves 2012) and how we should practice everyday and family life (Baudrillard 1968). Some uncherished gifts are kept inside their designated items of furniture. For example, a hairclip that jars with the recipient’s sense of style and taste is kept “right at the bottom” of a box of hair products, and a set of china given as a wedding gift is kept unused at the back of the kitchen cupboard. The locating of these objects appears on the surface to “disguise” the objects as used and valued possessions, perhaps representing a less conscious obligation to invoke use or show appreciation for them. Bachelard (1958) describes spaces internal to “openable” items of furniture (such as wardrobes, chests of drawers, and caskets) as intimate worlds of reflection that support the self in its process of becoming. It is possible that within these spaces there are zones of accessibility; it is logical that an object associated with discomfort, that doesn’t readily support the self, is kept in the outer reaches.

Beyond clearly designated items of furniture lie other spaces whose purpose is not so clearly defined, and which are open for more idiosyncratic interpretation (Graves 2012). The corners of rooms, for example, are excess spaces created by the geometry of architecture (Bachelard 1958) which do not have a prescribed use. “Unofficial,” undesignated spaces include small gaps between
and behind furniture which we don’t need to consciously recognize as spaces (see Figure 3). Graves (2012) discusses undesignated spaces as potential containers of clutter, disordered collections of possessions that are “saturated with memory” but whose precise value is not yet clear and which represent the “mobile and fluid part of self” (Graves 2012: 19). We can use the informal spaces in our rooms to contain or store objects whose value is ambiguous or uncertain, or that we would rather not think about for a while, until the memories and obligations are less powerful.

More clearly defined transitional spaces, such as cupboards under sinks, are described as “twilight zones” (Fisher and Shipton 2010) or “liminal, transitional zones” (Gregson et al. 2007), where objects can be kept without quite being disposed of, eventually to be reused or thrown away. Transitional spaces can also be found in the childhood bedrooms of four of the participants, who are all students...
or recent graduates. This use of space reflects their particular transitional phase of life (Cooper Marcus 1995); it enables them to keep uncherished objects while they establish a more secure sense of self (see pair of blue vases in Figure 4).

**Limiting the visibility of uncherished gifts**

In some submissions, the use of more prominent spaces on and around furniture appears to help an object seem appreciated while preventing the recipient from experiencing regular confrontations with it. Thirty-one percent of the objects are displayed, but in half of these submissions their visibility has been limited. This is illustrated by the clock in Figure 5, which is kept in a visible location on a bookcase in the office area, where it is not always noticed because attention is focused on the computer. On the surface, it bears the appearance of a “frontstage” statement of attachment (see Goffman 1959), but in fact demonstrates an effort to prevent a misreading of identity. It could be read as an act of limiting the object’s impact on development of the self and preventing it from making an inappropriate projection of identity to other people (see Yandell 1995).
Other objects whose display is negotiated or compromised are the subject of a conflict between people living in one house. For example, an Easter Island ornament from a friend is valued by the participant but not his spouse. The ornament is kept behind a photo on the sideboard.

Whilst most objects are discreetly visible or accessible, 35% of the submitted objects are not likely to be visible in daily life. This could reflect ambivalence towards the object, but a small number of participants (13%) used more active and descriptive terms to communicate the relationship of the object to its location, such as “buried away” or “stuffed right at back.” This indicates a desire not to encounter the object, which may reflect the undermining effect on our sense of self of an object we feel misrepresents us (Gregson et al. 2007). “Deep storage” is a means of preventing an encounter with an object associated with negative emotions (see Odom et al. 2010) and of “hiding” a part of one’s self (Bachelard 1958).

**Practices of appropriating uncherished gifts**
A minority of participants have taken a proactive approach to dealing with problematic gifts. Rather than engage with subtle nuances of storage and display, they have engaged in practices that make
the uncompromised display of the object possible. In Figure 6, the participant actively overcomes the inadequacy of the gift by personalizing it. She alters a gifted shawl she doesn’t like in order to make it acceptable to keep and display on a shelf. She has taken a creative step in interpreting the shawl tassels as interior decoration.

A ceramic ornament in the form of a lady on a goat is the subject of a humorous family ritual, in which both giver and recipient acknowledge the inappropriateness of the gift. It seems likely that this ritual helps create circumstances for the object (thought “ugly” and “weird” by the recipients) to be kept and displayed on the mantlepiece.

**The role of the location in the development of value over time**

Most submissions provide an interesting view of how an object is located in order to deal with the discomfort associated with it, but as most submissions were immediate and relatively limited, they usually reflect a single point in time. A small number (13%), however, contain evidence of the duration of the ownership of the object impacting on
its value. The more detailed and reflective of these demonstrate how an object’s value develops over a period of time, and in relation to the spaces in which it is kept.

For example, if an object can be kept for longer without intruding on the daily life of the recipient, it may have a later opportunity to be revalued. The stories of the two clocks below share similar narratives: conflicts in taste, concerns about authenticity, strong family bonds evoked by the gift, and a revision of the object’s value. The first example has undergone subtle transformations in value over time. In the second story, the recipient made a conscious choice to give the gift a second chance.

The participant believes the carriage clock in Figure 5 to be of little material value and probably acquired by the giver as a free gift. The clock was initially kept simply because it was felt appropriate to do so in acceptance of the gift. It was kept in a peripheral space – the office – on a shelf with books where it could be displayed discreetly. It was brought to the attention of the recipients every now and again as it was the subject of a commonplace ritual; changing the batteries. However, it was eventually superseded in its function by a nearby computer and the batteries were no longer changed. Following the death of the giver, the bond between person and object strengthened and it became harder to contemplate getting rid of it. Ultimately, its status has been elevated and its location referred to as “a bit of a shrine,” as a photograph of the giver has been placed nearby.

When the clock in Figure 7 was received, the participants thought it “garish,” and “its loud tick insufferable,” but kept it out of affection for the giver. It has the appearance of an antique but is recently
produced and battery operated. It was stored in the airing cupboard (presumably out of sight), then rediscovered after several years during a clearout. At this point the recipient made a conscious choice to give the gift a second chance, because a new office space beyond the house had recently been acquired which seemed suitable: a nineteenth-century gate house with an original fireplace and mantelpiece, where the clock is now displayed. The recipient hoped that the loud tick would now serve as a concentration aid, and although this hasn’t worked out, the clock is still there on the mantelpiece and has a new place in the recipient’s affections.

Conclusions
Inside the domestic interior we deal with the commodities we are gifted – and their often-uncomfortable associations – in such a way as to prevent them from intruding on the development of a stable and desired sense of self. The spaces we have available enable us to create meaning, to subvert meaning, and to communicate expected meanings, through practices of storage and display. Peripheral rooms (such as the office spaces in the examples above) seem to play a key role here, by allowing greater freedom to take a risk with an object that threatens sense of self. The findings suggest that we can be motivated to keep objects we don’t like, and that connections to memories, family ties, and personal investment, mediated by the object, can be powerful enough to overcome a challenge to the sense of self. Practices of keeping, in conjunction with particular sorts of spaces, allow us to keep them in the long term, and keeping them for longer can afford an opportunity for new value to develop.

Furnished interiors delineate a system of spaces that provides a kind of physical and emotional armature for keeping possessions and structuring the self. The system is populated with different types of spaces, some of which project clearly defined expectations for the kind of objects they should hold, and others that are more open to an individual’s interpretation. Within this are degrees of control and disorder, visibility and concealment, accessibility and deep storage.

The emotional sustainability of a product isn’t just about its design. The findings highlight the key role played by the domestic interior in shaping value and practices of keeping, and this suggests that the design of the interior architecture and furniture may be as important and instrumental as the design of the object. Habits and practices in the domestic interior are established at the start of life, and the impressions of our first homes stay with us for life (Bachelard 1958) and inform how we react to subsequent homes. The appropriation of space is both meaningful and idiosyncratic, and it may take new forms of interdisciplinary practice, bringing together spatial and industrial design, to engage with this challenge. Engaging with the structure of the domestic interior, while acknowledging its role as the emotional infrastructure of the home, may be a means for designers to influence the shaping of practices of keeping.
Looking closely at objects that are less secure in their value (rather than cherished) can help designers to better understand the journey of an object through the home from acquisition to dispossession, and the complex factors that influence the decision to keep an object or throw it away. Seeking to better understand the domestic factors that influence a product’s transitions in value can deepen designers’ understanding of why products are retained and how attachments form.

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Notes
1. These reasons for valuing or not valuing an uncherished gift reflect the attributes of attachment defined by Niinimäki and Koskinen (2011).
2. See Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Cooper Marcus (1995) for detailed analysis of family and self-expression through domestic space. C & R-H in particular discuss the display of possessions in “social” and “public” home spaces.

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