Pru is 90 years old. We spent two days with her in her home in County Cork, Ireland, and asked her about the various material objects around her home, including the small TV in her bedroom:

Anthropologist: ‘Do you watch a bit of TV up here?’ Pru: ‘Not TV. I haven’t connected it yet. Much like the walking stick. That’s when I won’t be going out so much. When I go to sleep now, I read and I might go to bed asleep. But if that was on, I’d probably … I couldn’t go and do the other things. Keeping it all together for the time when I won’t be as strong. Isn’t that a good idea? … Looking to the future.’

The unused television is not a relic of the past, nor intended for the present, but is an echo of future possibilities. As we progress in life into our seventh, eighth or ninth decade, there can be a pressure to strategise in everyday life, as we find ourselves the focus of ‘compassionate questions and well-intended considerations of other people around us’ (Marcoen et al. 2007: 38). Pru looks for affirmation that her strategic placing of the television is a good idea, as if in anticipation of some unspecified concatenation of health crises or slow deterioration of the body. This is a field that is currently receiving immense attention by design and ethnography, as a part of a project of independent living in later life, through deploying the material world of the home as a social, cognitive and physical support.¹

Our research has comprised an investigation of ‘ageing in place’ in Ireland, through discussing with people the material culture of their homes. The research was conducted by anthropologists in Intel’s Digital Health Group, and has been part of a wider set of projects that develop ethnographically founded dialogues between older people and product designers and engineers. Very few of the people with whom we have worked are as explicit as Pru. Only on occasion does someone state so clearly that an object is conceived, designed and located as a part of

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1. For more information on this project, see Marcoen et al. (2007).
planning for future ageing. Even when one is 90 years old, ageing is something that will happen in the future, and is generally unexpressed. Nonetheless, we propose that the few expressly ‘future-oriented’ objects we found represent a wider theme.

There are several positions that we, as anthropologists, can choose to take on this situation. One position is that this is a methodological problem: that many aspects of culture do not exist in spoken form but that most research methodologies nonetheless depend heavily on the spoken word. If we take this position, then ethnographies of material culture, and of domestic practices and routines, may help fill the gap by providing answers. Yet, we are making unwarranted presumptions about informants here, that they share the motives and cultural meanings of the (design) anthropology project. Can ethnographies of material culture sustain the idea that people explicitly plan with objects, think of themselves as designing (being the ‘user-as-designer’), aim at independent living or evaluate themselves as ‘healthy’? Thus, a second alternative position we can take is that the aim of the research is to question and evaluate the underlying validity of our own ideas about our design-oriented project, through a contextually based exploration. If we take this second position, however, there remains for the design anthropologist the problem of engaging with designers and engineers, and assisting them with their questions on ‘how’ to design for later life.

In this paper, we wish to advance the role of material objects in critical engagements between anthropology and design. We first propose that objects can be considered as concepts or ideas themselves, not as mirror images of concepts, because thinking itself is a physical activity (following Holbraad et al. 2006). Second, we propose that this means we can bring forward an agenda of an ‘archaeology of dissonance’ (Tilley 2001) within anthropology, meaning that the act of academic critique is advanced through an engagement with material forms and substances (herein we see design anthropology resembling archaeology, in that it is a study of an object, and more specifically an archaeology of possible futures, not pasts). Third, we propose that a route for doing this is through engaging in artistic creative engagements with informants, of a type that is becoming increasingly established in both anthropological and design practice.

Our research had two main stages. In the first stage, we spent a day in the homes of our informants, learning about everyday life, personal histories, daily routines, health issues and talking about a range of material objects around the home. The material we gathered was explored collaboratively as a series of case studies. In the second stage of research, we developed a range of activities to explore with informants the issues that had emerged. The appropriateness of activities varied with different informants according to specific social, personal and health circumstances, but might include videotaping performative activities (e.g., ‘making a cup of tea’), role playing or prioritising of objects. We asked some informants to produce artistic collages using photos of objects in their homes (see Figure 1), around the themes of health and independence.

In this paper, we wish to evaluate these collage exercises as tools for anthropologists. Although they risk appearing as positivistic methodological tools, maps of pre-existing meanings, they are actually critical in nature. They are exploratory dialogues produced in the moment, not answers or structures. While they do not wholly debunk the dominant contemporary ideology that health equals independent living and vice-versa (see Lloyd 2000), they challenge and stretch this presumption, both by stretching out the meanings of ‘health’ and ‘independence’, and the ways by which they conceptually interact. At the same time, the collages can be useful in addressing the question of how to design. The unexpected forms and shapes in the collages can
challenge conceptualisations of the materiality of independent living. To put this more simply, the material forms are supposed to stand for themselves, their explication would be highly contingent. They are self-evidently small, limited abstractions of the wider arrays of domestic objects – the home itself being in some sense like a collage of objects. We discussed the collages while informants were producing them – making the collages was clearly for our benefit, and would make little sense done independently – but subsequent discussion of them was constrained because it would imply that the material artefacts can be ‘explained away’. It would be methodologically inappropriate to ask someone to select five object images for a collage of ‘health’, and then ask what those objects mean, as if trying to elicit the simplistic message ‘they mean health’ (see Bourdieu 2005). It is not inappropriate, however, to try to take on board the specific material forms of certain objects as a way of informing the physical design of future material forms that are supposed to support the notion of health. The conception of health in the design lab may tend to be ever more defined, and risks overdetermination, but conceptions and experiences of health across many homes are almost infinitely varied and complicated. It is the contingent appropriateness of these collages for particular anthropological work that is our focus.

A short example may illustrate the arguments. Pru’s television appears to show how she is engaged in planning for a future of independent living in her own home. However, she does not actually say this, it is only implied, and a future in which she is bedridden is only hypothetical in any case. Specifically, verbalising the possibility of health decline is just as unjustified at 90 years old as it is at 80, 70, 60 or before. Compare this with the TV presented in Figure 1. Hugh and Bertha have here produced a collage in which their television is at the ‘unhealthy’ end, while their TV satellite dish and radio are located as more ‘healthy’. This act of collaging does not ‘reveal’ the meaning of a TV, that TV = unhealthy. Although we could see this TV as a ‘symbol’, having spent time with the family we know that this is not necessarily a symbol to them. Sometimes a TV is just a TV (Holbraad et al. 2006), and also each of the objects represented by photo-icons in the collage has its own unique story. The generalisability of the category, ‘television’, is a product of the second stage of research through the use of photos that become iconic. The collaging is an exercise in challenging the pertinence of the category ‘healthy-unhealthy’ itself for the specific informants at that time. Because this challenge is through material forms, the collages can be seen as, in Tilley’s words, an archaeology of dissonance.

We continue by discussing the literature on how intentionality and materiality are seen to converge in ageing homes, and show how this picture of convergence is problematised by projects such as our own – problems of meaning-in-context (see Dilley 2000). Two case studies from our initial phase of research illustrate the difficulties. We then present the collages we later produced with these same

**Figure 1:** Hugh (81) and Bertha (78) develop a collage of objects around their home, along themes of healthy/unhealthy and independence/dependence. They do not just group the objects in four categories, but interrelate the two dimensions.
informants, and end by critically evaluating these approaches.

**Home as the convergence of intentionality and materiality**

An object such as a television in an upstairs bedroom could be interpreted in many alternative ways to illustrate its role in the creation of culture. In many instances, the domestic object is seen through the paradigm of appropriation (Miller 1987), consumed and worked upon in ways that are endlessly creative of identity, personhood and sociality itself. A lot of work has been conducted on the role of objects in making a ‘home’ (e.g., Hockey and Chapman 1999; Shove et al. 2007; Miller 2001; Shove 2000; McCracken 2005). Conceived of in Maussian terms, the domestic world may be a map of mind(s) (following Gell 1998).

Within the anthropology of design, meanwhile, the object may either manifest as cognitive plans of future possibility or be a facilitator of instantaneous action (Suchman 1987). The traditional approach in the field of ‘usability studies’ to domestic objects is to treat them as straightforwardly useful tools – this is the main forum where engineering has engaged with social science, generally on its own terms (see Dourish 2006, 2007).

Within the literature on ageing, approaches to the material culture of home likewise incorporate social and functional perspectives. Some work is simply evaluative – of competence, of capacity to adapt, of the efficacy of persons themselves in their work of existing (e.g., see Dittmann-Kohli et al. 2001). Peace et al. (2006, 2007) point out how, historically, the physical and cultural home has been underplayed in ageing research: by seeing ageing as a body-and-mind experience, it becomes a pan-cultural human universal. This problem is being increasingly addressed by work on questions of attachment between the person and the environment (Rubenstein and Parmelee 1992). The roots of this work are in Rowles (1983), who explores how and why homes fit people in later life ‘like a glove’ (p. 114). The most thorough recent work has been that of Peace et al. (2006). They argue that, in broad terms, as we get older, concern with the structures of daily and weekly routines is transformed into a concern with the organisation of the material environment.

In various ways, this literature binds people who are somehow ‘ageing’ and their homes into a circle of mutual construction: consciously ageing persons create ageing homes, which then identify those people as ‘ageing’. There are degrees of problematisation, and considerations of State policy in particular. It is not a wholly harmonious circle, but an ideal of independent living implies that where problems occur, they belong within the domestic circle, and are owned primarily by the household. We think this ‘harmonious’ circle to be problematic.

**Problems**

An anthropological engagement with the ageing experience is perhaps one of the most difficult possible, and mediation of ageing and design reveals the problems. Some of the difficulties are compounded within an Irish context, especially by specific Irish traditions of orality and self-representation. The main problems are as follows:

1. Many people do not conceive of themselves as elderly. The collective ascribed identity of ‘elderly’ can obscure pertinent personal circumstances.
2. Approaches to the ageing experience are characterised by excessive division between the subjective (internal to the person) and/or the objective (observable), especially in Ireland.
3. This situation heightens the general problem of depending on spoken reports in research. Are the spoken representations revealing or concealing?
4. The future is entirely unpredictable, including future health; consequently, the future is an intensely social and constructed phenomenon.
5. It is often argued that subjective anticipation of health difficulties (by individuals or by design projects) is actually medically detrimental.
6. When designed objects are specifically for ageing, they may also be considered socially stigmatising.
7. The material integrity of one’s own home is generally seen as a social and cognitive support for independent living, and changing it in any respect can be problematic.

As Bertha (aged 78) commented to me, she dislikes elderly people. She used to help out at a care home nearby, bringing the people her home-made buns, but she stopped doing it because she couldn’t take the complaining. Bertha does not see herself as old because, for a start, she’s not yet over 80 but, more importantly, she is not ‘narky’. Her implication is that being elderly is a state of mind. Her self-perception is, according to the literature, well-founded: ‘… it has been suggested that the critical variable is internal to the individual – that is, that a person’s worldview or enduring aspects of personality, such as an optimistic or pessimistic disposition, determine evaluations of his or her current state of well-being.’ (Keith et al. 1994: 108).

Although no researcher can see inside their informants’ heads, nonetheless, in ageing, there is the recognition that there is some extra ‘variable’ at work in notions of well-being. In most cases, addressing this magic cognitive variable means asking people directly about how they feel. In practice, responses are subject to re-interpretation. For example, Jeanette Dickerson-Putnam (in Keith et al. 1994) notes the distinctive ways well-being is reported in Ireland: ‘What is remarkable about the Clifden data is the amazing uniformity and stability of well-being scores … Furthermore, from the investigator’s point of view it was initially surprising that given the hard lives of a substantial proportion of the Clifden population, scores were nearly as high as in Swarthmore (in the USA)’ (1994: 122).

Having noted the role of welfare and health service, the authors of this multi-country study of ageing experience note cultural factors:

A … factor that may serve to equalize and inflate self-ratings is a specifically cultural one. A glance at the reasons Clifden residents provide as explanations for their well-being reveals the ‘stiff upper-lip’ attitude mentioned earlier in connection with the English. How else is one to interpret a rating of 4 that comes with the comment, ‘Not much you can do about life – you have to take what comes’ or a rating of 6 that comes with the comment, ‘just have to put up with what you have’? These are hardly strong positive statements, but they may accurately reflect the ethos of the stoic Irish countryman. (1994: 123)

As the authors themselves say, how else is one to interpret these comments? This study effectively highlights a research problem, particularly for ageing, particularly for design engagements and particularly in Ireland. Even when people report feeling content, the words do not ‘speak for themselves’ but seem to demand second guessing by researchers. The indices of re-interpretation seem to be in the surrounding material world. In some instances, exterior materiality is privileged by ethnographers above interiorised cognition. In the above research, the spoken testaments of informants are counterpoised against their ‘hard lives’, and there is an implied tension between the two: to which should the researcher ascribe the higher truth value, the verbal or the material evidence on wellness? Keith et al reflect insightfully on the methodological
difficulties of their work: ‘The interview situation itself ... may be sociolinguistically awkward per se’ (1994: 139).

Verbal and material research data are entirely different types of data, testament to the multiple ‘truths’ available. There is no reason why the messages they convey should converge. What is interesting is the dialogue between the two. Aiming research towards a single category of meaning – such as ‘wellness’ – may obscure such dialogues and the unfolding of the ageing experience through time, unless we somehow unpack the polysemy of the field of ‘wellness’.

In acknowledgement of these difficulties, much ageing research focuses on ‘experience’ – that is, incorporating the meaningful and influential elements of bodily ageing around ‘problems’ or ‘needs’. Predicting needs can be done for populations, by the likely range of health issues that are liable to confront a sample group, but not any particular person. This difficulty of the future presents itself to any person who engages in trying to ‘design’ their own life. It is a problem common to professional design circles, where it is discussed in terms of the ‘requirements problem’ (see Alexander and Stevens 2002). It is the problem of the meaningfulness of the unknowable.

Ascribing meanings to unknown futures is anticipatory, but the act of anticipation can be measurably medically detrimental, because it impacts upon the wellness-as-positive attitude that we discussed earlier. Westerhof and Tulle note how ‘... a view of ageing as physical decline may function as a self-fulfilling prophecy’ (2007: 250). Levy (2003), in laboratory-based work, found that ‘priming’ people with negative stereotypes about their own age group meant that they then performed worse on a series of cognitive memory tasks and motor tasks. Anticipation can be stigmatising. Unfortunately, conducting fieldwork with seniors can affirm an ‘elderly’ identity, as can any engagement with specifically designed products or services. Assistive technologies do not evoke readings of liberty and choice, but rather of the incompleteness of the person. These technologies are embodied not as tools but as unwelcome appendages.

The material culture of ageing thus itself challenges the integrity of the meaningful categories with which our project aspires to engage – wellness and independence. It is accepted wisdom that routinisation around a familiar material space is a support for independent living as one gets older: ‘the ability of an “area of comfort” to maintain and develop well-being’ (Peace et al. 2006: 9). That is, there is no individual item, tool or element that by itself supports independent living; instead these constitute a processual package. Consequently, if one element is changed, the risk is that the whole may be compromised. There is a powerfully conservative argument in designing for ageing, based on social science research, to hold back from any intervention at all.

However, one missing ingredient in this equation is that people themselves enact change continuously, usually not as lone individuals but dialogically in multiple relationships. That is, futures and change are conceived as a mutual project of meanings, integral to the idea of home itself. The anthropologist’s role comes to the fore firstly in gaining an understanding of how the domestic cosmologies of multiple informants relate to key design concepts. Secondly, we need to gain a sense of how people mutually have a sense of progress in their lives. Different homes may change in different ways – through gradual accumulation of material, or through marked transitions at defined stages of life, such as ‘retirement’.

The following two case studies from the first stage of our fieldwork are chosen because they counterpoise ways of planning with objects. One family moved into an entirely new home on retirement, a wholly fresh canvas on which to develop their new, ‘intended’ material culture; the other couple, by contrast, has lived
in the same home for over 50 years, which manifests an accretive material culture over many decades.

**Michael and Martha**

Michael and Martha live in a notably smart penthouse apartment in one of Dublin’s more prestigious suburbs. A fountain plays in the cul-de-sac, among well-developed shrubberies. The time when they agreed to take part in our research was a watershed. Their youngest child had moved out the week before, and Michael had only retired recently. They were alone together in their new home, for the first time. As we talked about their home making, it seemed a tension occurred repeatedly between the attempt to make real in a material sense their conception of a lifestyle fitting to retirement and the un-knowability of the imminent future.

They lived for many years in a large house nearby, surrounded by its garden, but had little to say about the years of raising children and paying off the mortgage. Martha’s story seemed to begin in 1991–92, the year she finally arranged for her mother to move into a retirement home, with regret and relief. She had tried for years to help her mother live in her own home, regularly shopping and cooking. But a worsening cognitive condition meant her mother might immediately forget what she had done. Perhaps some days she ate nothing, other days continuously. She developed a fear of theft and loss, and began to hide things (soap, clothes) in case someone broke in; then, forgetting where, she’d say they had been stolen. ‘When they reach a certain age, they begin to hide things’ said Martha, as if this is inevitable for everyone. Martha’s brother, meanwhile, had been institutionalised in 1988, with a different condition related to Alzheimer’s. He used to go jogging. On one occasion, he jogged for 20 hours straight with no rest, until stopped by a policeman who noticed something strange.

Only a few weeks after her mother went into a home, Martha was struck with a debilitating fatigue. She blames the stress, the physical constraint of a long plane flight to New York and poor air conditioning. Four years later, a diagnosis of ME was given, and she has never quite recovered. Her awareness of her bodily health manifests itself in her constant detailed awareness of the home environment: seating, where to walk, light and air. She modulates the volume on the telephone carefully. She tests her memory deliberately and habitually.

In brief, Martha is a lively, active, sociable mother, and, in spite of ME (which affects all ages), she exhibits no bodily signs of ‘ageing’. Martha negotiates ageing in her material environment (Rowles 1978). Ageing is also for her a social phenomenon, transactable in relationships and affecting multi-generational groups. Loss of mind and personality seems present in the form of a possibility, like a shadow. Ageing is something we inherit.

The form of Michael and Martha’s home is a Celtic Tiger phenomenon. In an Irish context, living in an apartment is unusual and historically recent. They first had this novel idea in the 1990s, when they bought a holiday apartment in Spain. When Michael retired, they immediately began looking for a new place for themselves, informed by the Spanish experience, and simultaneously for an apartment for their daughter. Finding homes became a collective family business.

From the time they moved in, the apartment was fully kitted out and everything worked perfectly, and it had not lost its sheen. The designers fashioned much of the décor, such as a metallic sculpture on the living room wall. One large main living area incorporates sitting room and kitchen, with a glass dining table in between. The sloping ceiling gives a deceptively intimate feel to a large area. A
mosaic table on a small balcony echoes Spain. This room is where they now spend their days, although they both play a lot of golf (separately, in gendered groups), and Michael goes to mass daily.

Having bought what was essentially a blank canvas on which to materialise their idea of what retirement comprises as a lifestyle, they emphasise the evidence of design and planning – the centralised music system, with speakers and controls in every room; the similarly centralised pre-programmed lighting system; and the heated bathroom mirrors that do not steam up. The idea of control over the environment is asserted, equating with a definiteness of conception of lifestyle, and knowledge of one’s own mind.

Various objects intrude on control, however, or reveal tensions. A small ledge near the door tends to acquire mobile phones and keys, which Martha tidies away. Their glass-topped dining table is wrong: they imported one from their Spanish apartment, which broke. The square table they found to replace it is almost right, but not quite yet. Michael has hung a picture of the sacred heart near the dining table. On my second visit, Martha accused Michael of foisting it on the new place and says it was not in the old house. He says it was. She says it was not, the frame is wrong, it is in the wrong place and that she is not religious: ‘You don’t put a picture on a blank wall’, she asserts, ‘you try to bring out the space with an appropriate object’. It is not clear if she objects to the casualness, the ideology or her husband’s intervention into the home.

The designed kitchen is the one thing in the home that neither Martha nor Michael can say will remain the same, or be changed. Everything else evokes opinion or debate. The designer kitchen evokes silence, as if it lies beyond their temporal remit, outside of their capacity to plan and act.

The parallel world to the tidy apartment is a large garage, packed with stored boxes and objects. Everything in storage evokes plans and intentions – work files, furniture, toys, all are things that have possibilities for the future, but no place in their current contemporary conception of their lifestyle.

Thus, we can see that the material culture of Martha and Michael’s home provides for a range of ways of intending and planning about possible futures. These ways of intending are privileged, such that their entire visible home is like one big declaration of the intention of ways of living. However, although the material renovation of their home coincides with retirement, it is not framed within ideas of ageing. Rather, it seems a part of a pan-generational Irish experience of owning second homes and shifting ideas of ‘lifestyle’. In response to the particular tension between the mutual absoluteness of ‘retirement’ and the unknown future, their planned future takes a form that is timeless, unchanging and designed.

**Hugh and Bertha**

You get up in the morning, you plan your day to the best of your ability

Hugh and Bertha married in 1954, and live in the same house now as they did then. They both grew up very near, and have never moved away. Hugh went abroad once – a weekend in Wales, which was ‘okay’.

Their old house in Wexford is a pastiche of decades of living. Hugh never throws anything away. Over the phone, he says the ‘people in the town’ will tell me there was a man who changed address without changing house. This would be Hugh himself. In the 1960s, he converted what had been the front hall into an indoor bathroom, and had a new front door installed around the corner. Their address changed street. Every part of the house (the kitchen, the partitioned upper floor, the wiring) has a story like this, about what the family
needed when, and who did what for whom. The whole place is a testament of motivation, of doing things for one another. ‘I made sure that, anything I was doing, there was the wife and children’, says Hugh. For example, when Bertha said the kids needed to be driven, he learned to drive and got a car.

The house is rented, and they could never buy it now at current prices. The company Hugh worked most of his life for went bankrupt in the 1980s, taking most of his pension with it. He was due £2000, but only received £400 two years later, which he used to re-upholster their sofa and armchairs.

The Dourishes’ front room seems packed with armchairs. Framed pictures are scattered across the walls with no obvious plan. Some are actually old Christmas cards or poems from grandchildren, and include photos of grandchildren who died less than a week old. There is loosely an area of wall for each child and their family, and they are especially proud that all their children are married. The pictures celebrate marriage.

The latest grandchild was born the day before my first visit. The conversation runs on quickly. Hugh comments that Irish hospitals are not as friendly now, and when Bertha chips in, he unwisely asks how would she know. Bertha points out that she had four children in different hospitals, which she lists, and had to have her teeth pulled out during one pregnancy, so she knew hospitals. Hugh points out he knows about pain as well, and was once knocked out on the sports field with a hurley, but it is a passing shot and he submits to her opinions on the hospital system.

In this way, the banter continues through the two days I spend with Hugh and Bertha. I mostly sit either with Hugh in the sitting room or with Bertha in the adjacent kitchen. As we talk, each of them calls through to the other for affirmation or contradiction – ‘would you say different, Mrs Dourish?’ ‘isn’t that so, Hugh?’ The day is punctuated with a morning walk and two shopping trips – Hugh in the morning, and Bertha in the afternoon – when they invariably bump into ‘people in the town’ and catch up on the news. Twice a day we pause for the Angelus prayers, to the sound of the nearby church bells. Every time we set foot outside, Hugh meets someone he knows, from the church or GAA (Gaelic Sports Association), or the brass band. Their social lives are packed with these community events, and highly routinised. They know where they are going each day of the week, and have not needed to keep diaries since 1999, when Hugh stopped driving.

‘You only feel old when you can’t do something’, says Hugh. Their house is a measure of feeling old, an index of ageing. Paint pots stand in the hall, reminding Hugh of how he used to paint the house top to bottom once a year, covering up the damp patches that recur since there is no central heating. There came a time when he became dizzy when raising his arms, and could not stand on a chair to paint. He never used to think about it, but now the thought of the unpainted damp walls keeps him awake at night.

Both Bertha and Hugh have a range of physical problems, developed progressively over the years, and take a range of medications. A stoical attitude seems to prevail. Talking about her ulcerated leg, Bertha had terrible trouble until ‘people in the town’ directed her to a more severe nurse. ‘They have to be rough with you’, she says disconcertingly.

Hugh and Bertha illustrate how the temporal framework that surrounds attitudes to ageing is important. They have a clear set of ideas about ageing, a day-by-day stoicism that seems wedded to the form of their home. Their clarity of thought does not mean that they aspire to a defined idea of ‘retirement’, as Michael and Martha do. This pattern may reflect both socio-economic factors, and also the difference between being 60-something or 70-something, but that does not necessarily mean money causes attitudes. For Michael and Martha, the home appears as a strongly bounded field, temporally and physically distinct and
manifesting an idea of a future lifestyle. For Hugh and Bertha, a day-by-day planning attitude is evidenced in a layered material culture of the home. Future health and independence may appear as more complex fields than as a designer may at first think.

Routes forward

For both these families, the research problems we previously outlined are evident. No one here is ‘old’, and intruding into their homes with specifically designed products or services can be stigmatising. Anticipation of problems is important to them both from a health perspective (especially for cognitive issues), but paradoxically can cause problems. The question of an interiorised ‘worldview’ or ‘attitude’ is evidently a factor, and yet impossible to precisely define: the respective philosophies seem not wholly interiorised, existing within the individual mind, but shared by couples in their relationships. Consequently, the line between ‘experience’ and ‘attitude’ is unclear. When Hugh fixed an assistive handle beside their front steps for Bertha’s birthday one year, does it show her difficult experience of the steps or an attitude to living marked by what type of birthday presents one gives and gets? To a certain extent, both apply, but for our purposes it may not be worthwhile stating either; we do not necessarily need to read ‘behind’ the object for more abstract meanings. Rather, we only need to note that the simple object reveals many aspects of a complex situation.

Much anthropological work leaves its case studies at that. At the current moment, we have presented some elements of what we have ‘found’. Martha and Michael, Hugh and Bertha, stand as subjects of anthropological inquiry and interpretation. An engaged anthropology, however, realises that ‘knowledges are made, not found’ (Tilley 2001: 75), and increasingly aims at the amelioration of informants’ situations (Fontana and Frey 2005). This is especially the case in design anthropology. Rather than suggesting that informants have the problems (found by anthropology) and designers have the solutions, it is better here to make the anthropological exercise one where problems and critiques are mutually produced and owned. We draw on the work of Tilley (2000, 2001) and Holbraad et al. (2006) in pursuit of a more dialogical anthropological design project.

Tilley (2001) synthesises a lot of his past thinking on the issue of materialism as an archaeological commentary. Materialism does not simply mean studying objects, it is a philosophical or epistemological position. He argues for a more ‘dissonant’ materialism. Critique and argumentation, which are the acknowledged ways of advancing knowledge, are mediated through the object world, and can be seen to happen subjectively within the encounter with objects: ‘The ultimate, unrealistic and idealistic goal of all archaeologies produced to date is one in which we should all be striving to produce consensus, shared aspirations, ways of working, frameworks for understanding … The materialist alternative I want to advocate is to explore the tension, feel the friction’ (Tilley 2001: 74).

Design, both professionally and in everyday life, comprises the presencing of possible futures in a fashion comparable to how archaeologists must presence possible pasts. In this sense, design is an archaeology of futures. One way to do this is in art, and in a more recent work, Tilley and others (2000) have used artistic means to attempt to probe how the materiality of archaeological sites is experienced. This means, for example, photographic and performance art in ancient settlement sites on now-deserted moorland. The presumed inviolability of the material archaeology of social life is, here, ironically challenged in ways that do not change its form in the long term, but temporarily envisage potentialities. This current of materialist thinking has moved in
recent years to the suggestion that we may see objects themselves as concepts (Holbraad et al. 2006). The act of thinking does not necessarily precede the object, nor is the object necessarily a residual trace of thinking, but comprises the thought.

Design research has long used artistic methods, drawing on psychological ideas. Saunders (2002) describes as ‘make tools’ ways of looking at what people make, not only say or do. Such methods are increasingly used within a design’s own ethnographic traditions (see Schuler and Namioka 1993; Heath et al. 2000). It is fashionable for anthropology too to deploy performative (Alexander 2005) or artistic (Finley 2005) methods. Since this involves asking informants to do things they would not do otherwise, they should be preceded by more traditionally ‘open’ anthropological approaches (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

As previously noted, in the second stage of our research, we used collages in some homes – for example, in households where we saw the material home as an index of ageing. Informants were first asked to make a simple collage, choosing five domestic objects that help them to live independently, and five that worry them the most. We then did a more complex collage that had two dimensions – healthy/unhealthy as against independent/dependent. By their artistic re-spatialisation of objects in informants’ homes (around categories initially suggested by researchers but verified in early ethnography), the collages force a re-thinking of health and independence in other terms. Subsequent viewers (designers, anthropologists) were made to question which sort of object they thought was about health or independence. The collages therefore probe ‘health and ‘independence’ as meanings that are being made, not found (an informant might, we think, produce entirely different, contradictory collages on different days). In particular, they look at how these dissonant meanings might be made with objects.

In our original work, we produced annotated versions of the collages, giving some of the stories behind objects, quotes from informants or rationale for their inclusion. These rather packed creations are too crowded for reproduction here, but the principle is illustrated in Figure 2.

### Designing for living

Meaning exists in communication rather than exclusively in the interior of the mind. This is the same in conversations with Hugh or Bertha, which were always three-way: they call out to one another from the kitchen or from the living room. Their words echo through the day, down the short corridor between the rooms, seeking affirmation or contradiction. It makes little sense to ask what independent living means as individuals. Their social lives are framed by the home as a unit, more than by the corporeal confines of their bodies and minds. The images in the collages have meaning in dialogue, like Hugh and Bertha’s words, and each collage is like a constructed corridor, attempting to frame meanings within the notion of home.

What becomes evident is the way in which the collaging exercise is a temporal one. The photograph-collage act, revealing objects as concepts, necessarily involves thinking about futures, about possibilities and about intentions.

The collages can be used to illustrate assorted critiques, some of them unsurprising ones. Hugh and Bertha confirm the notion that being unhealthy and being independent are not ideas that necessarily overlap, and leave a large white space on their collage (Figure 1). A project on independent living for unhealthy people might aspire to fill this gap in the collage with designed objects, or it might choose to produce designs that resonate with Hugh
and Bertha’s own point of view, evoking well-being and dependence.

A simplistic notion of independence vs dependence is also challenged by the attempt to ‘materialise’ these ideas as meanings. ‘Dependence’ can mean dependence on things or on people. The field of dependence–indepen-dence itself is not an integral one here, but revealed as a field that has meaning in its negotiation, and the perceived dualism of person–object is central to this.

There are multiple ways to explicate every object in the collages, and it is not possible to elaborate on the rich, idiosyncratic stories behind every choice. Nevertheless, we can highlight some questions that the forms presented evoke. For Martha and Michael, issues provoked by the collages (Figures 2 and 3) include the following:

- Their inability to evoke materialisations of ‘worry’, or limit objects manifesting ‘independence’ to five between them.
- Their need to include representations of money, although the fieldwork produced no manifestations of something called money in their home.
- Debates and negotiations included whether to use the word ‘health’ (Michael) or ‘wellness’ (Martha); whether vitamin

**Figure 2:** Michael and Martha were asked to select five objects illustrating ‘independence’, and five which worry them. They chose eight for independence, and none at all which worried them. We then annotated the collage.
pills and supplements were about ‘wellness’ (Martha) or being ‘unwell’ (Michael, who never took a sick day in his entire working life); and whether money is about independence (Martha) or dependence (Michael, who referred to his childhood on a farm).

For Hugh and Bertha (Figures 1 and 4), some tensions include the following:

- Hugh’s tuba (‘independence’) contrasts with the dress suit he wears while playing it and marching (‘worry’). The moment of use does not itself explain independence or worry. The two material forms may help provide an insight into worry, by unpacking the dimensions of the moment of use.
- Several everyday objects and surfaces are sources of worry, as routine activities and cleaning become experienced as problematic indices of physical ageing – the kitchen floor, the bath and the paint for the walls.
- Bertha’s egg holder in the form of a hen house expresses ‘independence’, challenging the sleek technological forms often envisaged by designers. Its form fragments purist visions of independent living as simple living.
- Wall pictures of living relatives evoke the burden of dependence, while a free-standing digital collage of deceased relatives evokes independence.
- Ubiquitous religious objects (including Lourdes’ holy water and a picture of St Martin de Porres hung alongside a wood saw) are essential to ideas of health coinciding with independence (Figure 1).

Because people plan change around objects, but will not tolerate objects that do not ‘fit’ into their homes, the envisioning of forms and reforms entails both conservatism and fragmentation, both of which are to be found in equal measure here, and are often coinciding. As individual commentaries, these collages challenge the integrity of the initial design vision, and unpack some of the possibilities it offers in specific instances. This act of collaging necessarily implies visions of future lifestyles. While anthropological work in this field needs to conceive of peoples’ present circumstances, it also needs to evoke how they see change happening. Even if design visions of the future are largely appropriate, and might improve the quality of life, the material form of the home matters. If the process of material change in the home is envisaged in a way that does not resonate with informants, then clearly design engagements will never be taken up.

Conclusions

We have two levels of concluding comments: about designing for independent living, and what this type of work means for anthropology more widely. The present study is highly specific in its remit, an example of specific practices for specific purposes, and shows one way anthropological work engages with design and engineering.

For the field of design, the aspiration of independent living in old age is itself negotiated. The vision of independent, healthy living can
be unpacked by the dissonance of meanings around objects. Our informants undermine, in specific ways and at specific moments, a coherent, inevitable design vision. Health and independence apply in different ways to different people.

At the same time, the material objects are considered as an archaeology of futures. They reflect the intentions and time frames with which people are working. Informants’ own approaches to designing-for-living are diverse here. Sometimes (as in the case of Michael and Martha) they may emulate the culture of future-oriented action, which product design does. In other instances, they do not. Our informants are often retired but physically and socially very active, predominantly in their ‘third’, not ‘fourth’, age. With a lifetime of learning, they have the liberty and capacity to set about the projects they have always wanted to do, and to do something about potential problems before they happen.

What, then, does the project of design comprise? It is a project that involves both professionalised product design culture and the idea of user-as-designer. Thirdly, however, there is the home itself – although it does not possess intentionality, it nonetheless consistently embodies intentions. While only certain objects express intentions in everyday life, by artistic collaging, we can frame the wider home as a vehicle of intentionality. In our collages, what we have established is a moment of three-way dialogue, which aims to defuse potential polarisation in the design process.

The anthropologist engaged in design is here aiming to maximise and multiply the dialogues involved, reducing the polarisation of design. There are problems both with seeing people as highly self-aware designers in dialogue with their homes, and with seeing design as a politically graded dialogue between professional and amateur designers. As Tilley (2001) suggests, the agent-like qualities of objects are one way to creatively access this realm of dissonant meanings. Anthropology attempts to harness the design project to embed it within dissonant and specific cultural situations.
As anthropological work specifically oriented to design, this research shows some of the implications that design involvement has for anthropology as a whole. Sociality is often pre-figured as a quest for certainty, and the material world is often seen as an inviolable anchor for this. Traditionally, anthropology has seen as anathema the idea that one might somehow alter the material worlds of informants. This inviolability has been convergent with notions of ethnographic conduct, which, as far as possible, leave no footprint. As a pre-eminent symbol of that which we study, that is, ‘culture’, the material world seems sacrosanct, the grand anthropological taboo. In some senses, and in some anthropologies, quite old epistemologies of materialism are adhered to without questioning them (see Dilley 2000).

In stark contrast to this position, epistemological developments in anthropology over the last two decades mean that ‘engaged’ methodologies in which anthropology has agency are increasingly demanded rather than avoided. Many anthropologists would critique policy and inequality, implying the overturning of entire social cosmologies based on hierarchy, but never risk comment on the arrangement of houses where such cosmologies are enacted. In contemporary anthropology, there is an ethical pressure to actively engage with aspects of life that may detrimentally affect informants and communities, and move outside of an analysis for a purely ethnographic audience to seek out and inform audiences who have influence over field sites. This is seen as part of the strong mutual bond binding the anthropologist and informant.

Design is one of the main ways anthropology has an articulation with the world beyond the discipline. As is well known, many of the technological elements that shape our world (the PC, e-mail, the internet, Windows) were conceived by teams with a strong anthropological element. This tradition is continuing and growing, in large measure through the efforts of companies such as Intel. The work on culture and society that is being done in this domain can no longer be talked about dismissively as belonging to other vocations (‘design’ or ‘engineering’). Anthropology can take this project on board, and own up to this element of its heritage, in order to evaluate, critique and renovate it. It is not safe to entrust material engagements to other disciplines when they affect the worlds of our informants; we need to inform and critique these engagements. Engagement of a materialistic kind is indeed risky, potentially detrimental and must be taken seriously.

There is therefore a need in anthropology today for exploring how anthropology can engage with the material worlds of informants in socially sustainable ways. Anthropology needs to recognise the democracy of design, and that not only companies but the people and communities with whom we work intend and enact material innovation. Consequently, some anthropological projects, where appropriate, should feel able to ‘have designs’ in the same fashion – emulating in many cases, we presume, the designs of informants themselves. The same ethical pressures to inform policy as it affects informants also apply with respect to informing design. Informants’ material worlds will change, and anthropology as a discipline is uniquely positioned, whether it likes it or not, to challenge and inform this change.

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Notes

1. Subsequent to the research presented here, Intel has developed one of the largest design-research projects in the world of any kind, TRIL (Technology Research for Independent Living), a project largely led by ethnographic findings from anthropologists.

2. The figures are intended to illustrate the process, although the detail may not be entirely clear for reasons of space.

References


