Dwelling With Design

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ABSTRACT   Most studies of design focus on designers in their studios, in industry or in the commercial phase of design. In contrast, this paper looks at what happens to design after it leaves the shop. The paper reviews literature on art and design in everyday life, builds on Herbert Blumer's interactionism, and reports the key results of a longitudinal study done between 2004 and 2007 in Helsinki, Finland. It describes how people define design, how they relate to it, and how their definition of their home creates the environment in which design is either foregrounded or backgrounded.

KEYWORDS: design, home, domestication, symbolic interactionism

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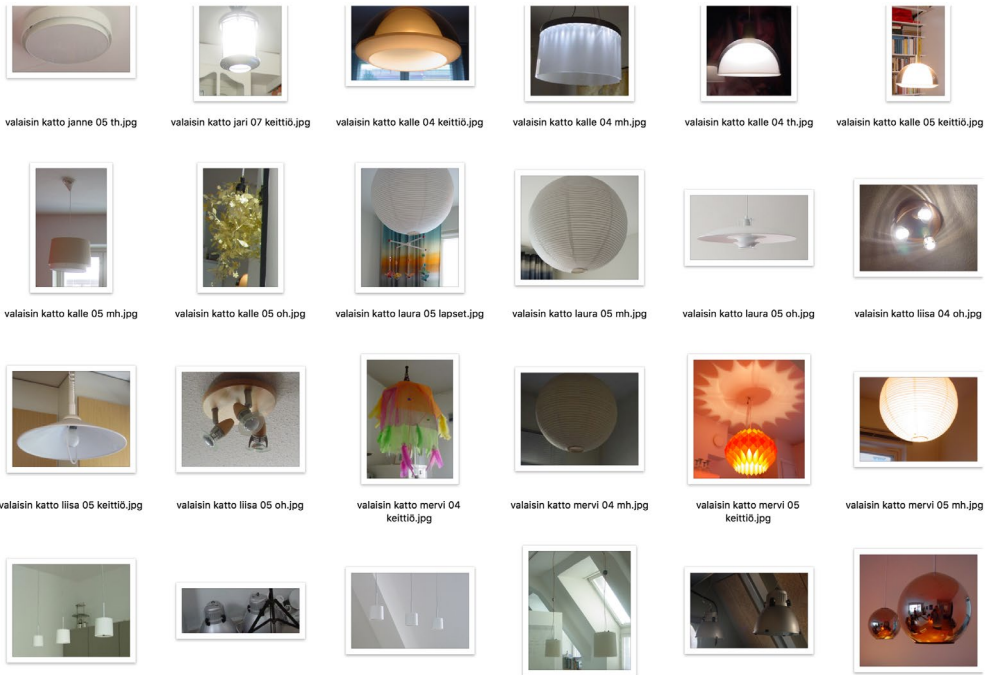
Figure 1
Photographs of some of the lighting designs in homes.

Beyond Consumption

This paper is about what happens to design objects at home. It builds on a longitudinal study of design between 2004 and 2007 in which a group of householders were interviewed and their homes photographed repeatedly in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. The aim of the study was to probe how people interpret design objects, and how their interpretations direct the way in which these objects end up being used or unused at home. Throughout, we tried to understand design from the participants' point of view instead of imposing our definitions of design on them. The method was interpretive and contextual, aiming to uncover the meanings of design in life as it is lived. The study built loosely on Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

From the beginning, we tried to go beyond three dominant concerns in design research and practical literature. First, there are dozens of studies of design in the studio (for example, see Coles, 2012; Lawson, 2005; Moore, 2006; Paley, 2010). Second, even more research is targeted at design in production, management and marketing (see Heskett, 1989; Kicherer, 1990; Verganti, 2009). Third, yet another well-studied area is the purchasing process, which has been studied using techniques and theories from consumer psychology (for example, Leonard and Rayport, 1997; Mugge *et al*, 2005; Rhea, 1992).

In comparison with production and commerce, relatively few studies have looked at design at home. Evidence is mostly ambiguous in its implications. In an important precedent to our study, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) studied how people create meanings to material objects at home. Objects of action were important for children and young adults, while objects of reflection were more important for more senior people. In media studies, domestication studies have looked at how objects become appropriated to everyday life in terms of the moral economy of the household rather than monetary (Lehtonen, 2003; Silverstone *et al*, 1992). The sociologist David Halle (1993) studied art at home in metropolitan New York, and Pierre Bourdieu and several of his followers have studied how the use of cultural objects reflects economic, intellectual, and cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1994; Lamont, 1992). Anecdotes of professional designers and architects suggest that occupational knowledge leads an appreciation of design (see Naylor, 1999). Julia Keyte's (2013) work on how keeping things at home is related to attachment to possessions, and her analysis of how owners feel compelled to keep even uncherished gifts is closer to our interest. Another interesting piece is Raahauge's (2007) analysis of how middle-class Danes keep the feeling of their homes uncluttered with the rule telling 'something in means something else [must go] out' and 'what comes in must be activated.'

Thus, although literature tends to have a strong bias towards production and consumption, there are enough cues in literature that suggest that by looking at what happens to design in real-life contexts after it leaves the shop, we may learn how changes in social organization are reflected in how people treat design. It is the social organization rather than objects or brand values that change (see Hebrok, 2014). It was this observation that led us to respecify design as a social process. Understanding design from professionals' intentions rather than from the myriad of events and processes that create the surrounding of design once it enters the domestic interior would be what the philosopher Don Ihde has called the designer's fallacy (Ihde, 2009; see also Woodward, 2001, 2003).

Design At Home

When we looked at design in sociological terms, we came up with three expectations regarding its fate at home. Herbert Blumer's interactionism gave us the bedrock for interpretation (Blumer, 1969). We conjectured that the fate of design at home indeed depends on what kinds of meanings people give to it in interaction in the grind of everyday life, in which design is one thing among many other things. Following Blumer, our research task was to explicate these meanings, much like Halle (1993) did in his study of art at home. If design is like art, it can be anything from a fleeting, barely noticed concern to the key organizing theme of the home; its role depends

on how people define it (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Paavilainen, 2013).

A more strategic view came from Erving Goffman, another Chicago school sociologist, whose theatrical metaphor in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life helped us to understand how some areas of the home are built to give a good impression to visitors, while others remain the messy 'back region' where outsiders have no access (Goffman, 1959). Some indications in literature speak for this insight. For example, Halle (1993) described some catholic families that kept catholic imagery carefully out of sight so as not to offend friends and acquaintances. If we follow this insight, design works as a technique of impression management.

Pierre Bourdieu and his followers, in their part, taught us that taste for design is related to class (esp. Bourdieu, 1994). For them, design is a way to communicate class position, be it based on economic, cultural, or social capital. Those with lots of money curate their home to impress others with signs of wealth, while those with lots of 'cultural capital' impress others with their knowledge of culture, which includes design. Following Bourdieu, these judgments of taste may be so habitual that they happen as if they were second nature. Yet, these 'habituses' communicate class positions. Again, few pieces of literature suggest that this view may be correct (see Naylor, 1999), and interior decoration monthlies are filled with stories of homes in which practically every object is from a famous designer.

Each one of these views decouples design from designers' intentions and occupational practices, and sees appropriation in terms of what people do with design. These researchers tell us to dive into homes to understand what design means in these homes, and how design is put to use. If Blumer is correct, it is just one among many things that define the home. If Goffman is correct, design is carefully curated to create impressions in the front region, which is radically different from the back region. If Bourdieu is correct, design is used to communicate the class-based habitus of the dwellers. What kinds of roles design gets is an empirical question.

Data And Methods

This study is based on data consisting of interviews and photographing 17 households in Helsinki metropolitan area. Most interviews were done in 2004 and 2005, and 13 of the households were interviewed twice. The interviews were half structured, aiming to collect product biographies (Kopytoff, 1986) about things that interviewees themselves defined as 'functional designed product'. Interviewed individuals and families are listed in the Table 1. As the table shows, we first interviewed people unfamiliar with design and then people who were familiar with it because of their occupation or family background. After having analysed these smaller samples, we did

Table 1. Interviews and photographs.

Name	Age group	Occupation	Location	Design knowl-edge	2004	2005	2006	2007
Liisa	30	New media researcher	Suburban	Low	x	x		
Sanna and Kalevi	30, 35	Pastor, IT	Suburban	Low	x	x		
Tiina	40	Marketing	City centre 2004, suburban 2005	Low	x	x		
Ilmari	45	IT researcher	City centre	Low	x	x		
Theo	50	Police inspector	Suburban	Low	x	x		
Hannele	50	Journalist	City centre	Low	x	x		
Janne	40	Political scientist	Suburban	High	x	x		
Rea	50	CEO, journalism	City centre	High	x			
Olavi	40	Investor	City centre	High	x	x		
Sakari and Liisa	30, 30	Designers	Suburban	High	x	x		
Kalle and Emma	30, 30	Designers	City centre	High	x	x		
Mervi	30	Designer	City centre	High	x	x		
Anniina	30	Designer	City centre	High	x	x		
Laura	30	Designer	City centre	High	x	x		
Family Ylinen	65, 65, 20	Police, nurse, student	Suburban	Low			x	
Jari	40	Master builder	Suburban	Low				x
Asta	50	Journalist	Suburban	Low				x

extra interviews with three families to test our initial interpretation. Names of the interviewees have been changed.

The sample consists of households surrounded by a comparatively diverse design market, which is Helsinki and its suburbs. Though relatively small, Helsinki is a design-savvy town in a small country home to design companies like Artek, Arabia and Marimekko, among others. We found lots of design objects in every household we studied (see Figure 1), and were fascinated by how much variation in orientation to design we saw. In part, this was explained by our interviewees: they were well educated, they had professional expertise and they had lots of what Bourdieu (1994) calls symbolic capital. Some of the households even had an abundance of all three types of symbolic capital – social networks, financial means and cultural know-how to engage with design.

In the two rounds of interviews, the first author collected about 1500 product biographies. One of the surprises was how much design intensive action there had been between first and second round of interviews. Of the 17 households, three had moved during data gathering, 10 had done a major renovation (meaning that walls had been taken down, floors opened, etc.), four had had or were just about to have a baby and one had built their whole house from scratch. In addition to these major changes, nearly everyone had done some minor projects. Of the 17 homes, only two had not had any changes in their apartment or in the living conditions between 2004 and 2005.

Analysis built on analytic induction (see Koskinen, 2003). When answering a question, the first author went through all the materials she had collected, identifying relevant instances, classifying them, and building collections of cases around them to see whether they could be fitted under previous categories, or whether they warranted a new category or revising an older category. The process went on until the category system was saturated. The structure of this paper also came up the same way. It captures three key variables explaining how design is dealt with at home, and variations within each of these variables.

Definitions Of Design At Home

The first problem people face in defining their relationship to design is how to understand it. Although our photographs showed clear signs of many types of designed objects and technologies at home, the participants' definition of design was close to the media image of design. When we asked people to tell about design objects at their homes, they talked about textiles, ceramics, lighting, and furniture and excluded technological products like television sets, mobile phones or stereos. This held true to our design-savvy consumers and even professional designers, to whom, however, design could also mean models and prototypes that functioned as furniture. We

also learned that although design was sometimes seen in terms of the designer or the company, design was more typically defined in terms of categories that related it to practice rather than to its industrial, historical, or stylistic origins, or to its market value.

The main categories in our data were 'great designs', 'to-do designs' and 'distant designs.' Great designs were things interviewees introduced as delightful to have and use on daily basis but also on special occasions. In the sample of product biographies, great designs were mentioned repeatedly, including a very good, comfortable and robust bed and the bedding, which are easy to take care of; a complete (and complicated) set of tableware, which is only used during celebrations; a set of kitchen bowls in different sizes and colours that have withstood use and time without turning ugly; and even a robust and reliable aluminium boat that was easy to drive and take care of. Some of the things had also gained the status as favourite objects.

Some other things were placed onto a to-do list. No one in the household expected to have any use for these products unless something was done to the product or the dwelling. In the sample, these kinds of to-do designs included, for example, a pair of impractical but fabulous-looking chairs waiting for a new dining table to materialize; a vintage dress, bought in the 1970s, still waiting for the occasion when it would be used; and a Milanese wooden bowl of excellent craftsmanship that was looking for its rightful place. A good example is an old pop-antique radio that Kalle, one of our interviewees, had saved from the trash. It was waiting for the acquisition of a summer home.

> Kalle: That [burgundy-coloured radio] is there on the shelf, but that is, too[(pause] because I think it is a fine object and that's why I bought it … [it] is practically speaking waiting in case there might come a time to get, let's say a summer house, that would be the world's coolest radio to have there.

We also heard many examples of displeasing objects people wanted to keep at a distance. Although some of these objects were still in use, the interviewees had discarded most of them. Examples of these distant designs were a Marcel vase, Lundia bookshelves, and a fluorescent lamp. These objects failed to meet the household's aesthetic and functional standards, and no one wanted to take care of them. These products were often either gifts or objects from former relationships or, in some cases, left by the previous residents. People did not believe that these objects would become valuable to the household, and many of these ended up in the dumpster (see also Hebrok, 2014) or in less visible places at home (Keyte, 2013). For example, Anniina told us how she threw away old candleholders instead of selling them because 'no-one deserves things like that.'

This analysis suggests that a Blumerian interpretation of design hits the target. The fate of design depends first and foremost on how people define it. This view also receives support from literature. In particular, Ian Woodward (2001, 2003) pointed out how interior decoration is typically studied from the point of aesthetics only. In contrast, he argued that home is defined and experienced more often as a comfortable place of everyday activities as opposed to an aesthetic space of contemplation.

Care For Design

After defining design, people need to define whether to take it seriously and how to use this category in shaping the home. Design is just one of the many concerns of everyday life that compete for attention with numerous other concerns. Just like many other things, design requires an investment of time and cognitive energy and, for that reason, is ultimately a question of moral economy (Silverstone *et al*, 1992). For some, the home is a place to sleep and needs to be run on minimal investments. If it is the very centre of life to someone else, its centrality justifies major investments in money, time and care. The question, then, is how much attention people give to design in contrast to other concerns?

There was a sharp line between those who cared about design and found it a meaningful category and those who did not care about it. Another relevant distinction was between those who saw design as a simple and straightforward thing, and those who spent a lot of time thinking about it and its implications at home. Every household we studied had design objects, but the way in which they were placed and used varied along these two lines. This line was not related to knowledge of design.

For a few people, design objects arrived at the home with little thought. When they bought plates, chairs or vases for flowers, they paid attention to price, material, colour, and so on, but not to more sophisticated qualities of design like its form or its place in design history. For example, we found people who were perfectly willing to let their spouse and relatives decorate their homes. As the home was construed, things appeared in it, and these things typically became a source of amusement. In these households, there was no agreed-upon policy to guide decisions about decoration. For instance, Jari, a former professional athlete and now a building contractor, only thought about the performance of objects, not their design value, and was happy to let his children and wife decorate the home (Paavilainen, 2013). The result was a mishmash of styles, a collage-like interior experience in which there was little attention to consistency.

Some people paid attention to design at a detail level, but saw it in isolation rather than in terms of its implications to the whole home.

For them, design was a pleasant way to spend time and money, but it was not an overwhelming, complicated matter. They did not feel any need to take into account outside pressures like relatives, architectural standards, or interior trends. They just consulted their own taste when making decisions regarding design. For example, Kalle and Emma, a designer couple, were happy with how their renovation turned out, but they were even more pleased with their collection of assorted pop antiques, and mentioned several times how these old design pieces had a huge 'vibes value' for them.

> *Kalle & Emma:* *For example that white TV, which has great vibes value, but it's not in use. In fact, it's bit broken, or, the image is bad. So it is a completely useless object in that sense but, it's also that it has got a powerful vibes value.*

We also met people who were methodical about design and its place at home. These people did lots of research regarding design and were willing to pay a lot of attention to detail to get things right. Design, however, was not an overall concern that was used to organize the whole home: these people typically limited design to certain objects, rooms, or themes. For example, the political scientist Janne told how he enjoys browsing vintage magazines and photographing architecture in order to find inspiration for his project of renovating his house according to its original style. Even so, his children could decorate their rooms however they wanted, irrespective of any existing style. For people like him, aspects to be taken into account ranged from finding the best value for money to finding perfectly fitting ethic and aesthetic connotations in products, materials and manufacturing techniques. The outcome was a dwelling in which some spaces and areas of life were organized with design in mind, while some others are barely touched by design.

Finally, some households we studied had also developed a set of general principles that guided their decisions about design. These principles governed the way in which the whole dwelling took shape. The principles could be open, like tuning the interior of the home seasonally, or trying to make the dwelling consistent with the prevailing style of the neighbourhood. Knowing these required intensive research and also significant investments of time and money. These principles could also be fixed, like taking cues from the apartment's or the building's architecture. If so, building and maintaining a home might even start to resemble historical restoration. A good example is the investment banker Olavi, who took much pleasure in how his careful selections of designs had proved to be just as great as he had anticipated. This approach makes design decisions elaborate, but at the same time, there are principles that help to find direction to design.

The Home As A Hotel, Museum And Gallery

The third problem people face in defining their relationship to design goes beyond objects and design. Hovering above all these orientations was yet another organizing category, that of the home. It is a 'master category' that shaped decisions about the household and created the context in which decisions regarding design took shape (Vihma, 1995) [1] Depending on how the home is defined, design was either backgrounded or foregrounded. Seen through design, we could identify three broad definitions of the home. We called these ways of being at home hotel, museum, and gallery.

Running the home as a hotel was about creating and maintaining the infrastructure and related practices that facilitate basic human needs. When a home was acting as a hotel, it was used for cooking, eating and sleeping; for taking care of personal hygiene and exercise; and for meetings, parties and other forms of socializing like get-togethers. From the domestication point of view, this links with the acquisition and the management of, for example, dining table and chairs, dishes and cutlery, food ingredients, beds, bed linen, towels, detergents, toiletries, cleaning equipment and conditioners for keeping materials fit. All of these items (and many more) form the basic infrastructure that facilitates dwelling. The design that relates to the running of the 'hotel' is often anonymous and uninteresting (to the interviewee). The products form the basic infrastructure, which typically gets noticed only when something breaks.

In contrast, a home run as a museum was kept going because there is some future potential in objects, even though the things were not personally pleasing and may not have been displayed either. The social aspect of a museum was not so much about entertaining visitors but, rather about having an intimate bond with one's closest friends and family members, especially in cases where things were being stored for future generations. Hannele's explanation for why she kept displeasing designs in home illustrates this way of feeling about products:

> Hannele: Now these are something I have an awful lot of, and now we've got more of them, Finnish buttermilk bowls and …
> Interviewer: Where do they come from?
> Hannele: Well we just got some more from my mother's house. So now we've got this rice-grain porcelain and here are those buttermilk bowls. And then I have, although I don't need them myself, I have kept them for my children so that they'll have them at the point when they have room.

Finally, when a home worked as a gallery, it was a place which was curated to create a place for spiritual recreation. The best examples were the investment banker Olavi and the CEO Rea, whose homes

were open modernist spaces decorated with a minimum number of quality objects selected for their aesthetic and brand value. At first, we saw their homes as expressions of impression management and maybe also class position (Goffman, 1959: Bourdieu, 1994), but the stories we heard did not match this interpretation. When we studied these homes closely, we realized that the purpose of a gallery-like environment was to create a space that would forefront things that were personally pleasing and interesting and would therefore create a feeling of harmony and enjoyment. For example, Rea was happy with the renovation of her family's apartment as it allowed her collection of art and design to enter into an exciting dialogue with the apartment. Her whole apartment was as a gallery in the sense that almost nothing in it is irritating or distracting; it pushed art and design to the foreground, where they became a source of private pleasure.

Every home in our study had features of all three curating practices. For example, even in the purest of gallery-like homes, we found objects that were out of place and irritating. Yet, these offending pieces had reasons for being there. They could be there for practical reasons, but equally well, they could be there because of their historical value. Much of what was done in a home made use of three types of curating skills. Of course, we should not stretch the curatorial analogy too far. When professional curators run hotels, museums and galleries, they can be seen as striving to fulfil some sort of branded vision of perfection. Homes rarely reach an easily discernible level of perfection precisely because the home is not a professionally run branded hotel, museum or gallery; instead, dwelling is managed through combining often incompatible practices.

Conclusions

This paper is based on a study that followed several households for several years in an effort to make sense of how households understand design, what kinds of meanings they give to it in everyday life, and how these meanings shape its fate. This study has shown that when we situate design objects and design as a category into everyday life (Blumer, 1969), it looks quite different from what it is in its earlier stages of its life cycle in design studios, production, or showrooms. Data for this paper is from 2004–2007, and although the contents are certainly old by now, the validity of the argument lies in the interpretation rather than in data. To our knowledge, the only major changes in the marketplace since the study are in information technology, where a new generation of smart phones wiped out the preceding generations. This is an empirical detail, though, rather than something that would threaten the argument and the methodology.

The original impetus for this research was an observation about design literature. We observed that it almost exclusively focused on either what we called the production phase of design in the studio

or in industry (see Verganti, 2009), or on the consumption phase of design (see Mugge *et al*, 2005), in which design is a matter of consumer preference. Instead, we decided to take our cue from those few studies that have tried to understand objects in everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Keyte, 2013; Raahauge, 2007).

This change of theoretical background led to novel observations. As expected, we learnt that when design enters everyday life, its meaning changes from what it is in the studio, the factory, or the showroom. This is what we saw clearly in our study: regardless of the interviewees' backgrounds, it was the definition of design that mattered most. Following Blumer (1969) opened our eyes to diversity in how design works at home. Goffman's theatrical metaphor (1959) seemed to be less helpful in making sense of design: we found design objects from attics and wardrobes just as we found them in the front regions of the home. Bourdieu's (1994) analysis of taste in terms of class position helped us to understand a few cases like Olavi and Rea, but to others design was a minor part of life rather than a means to convey refined taste. Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' may play a role in explaining design, though: for example, Olavi's loft defined his habitus in broad terms, and other decisions regarding what got in it or what went out were clearly consistent with his moneyed and educated habitus (see also Raahauge, 2007).

Here we have to note that studying design in Helsinki may set some limitations to our argument, however.[2] Like Copenhagen, Helsinki is one of those few towns in which practically every household has design objects and classics from companies like Arabia, Marimekko or Artek. It is ubiquitous. Also, Helsinki does not have the extremes of wealth of a Hong Kong, a Hamburg, or a Chicago; rather, design is *un art moyen* in Helsinki. We suspect that these reasons help to explain why we did not find much support to the idea that design and class are connected, and the impression management argument was not important either. If everyone has design objects, they do not underline wealth or education, and they do not form a means of communicating identities. This is not the case in Jakarta or Los Angeles.

Methodologically, we learned that to understand design after it leaves the shop, we need studies that track its history over so many years that we see changes in families. When we see houses being built, marriages in ruins, new jobs in a new country, we learn to see how design functions in practical situations. To understand design in life, we need contextual methods that go beyond the purchasing process. Designers' and design researchers' categories and theories at best predict weakly the fate of design in everyday life. At best, they maintain the designer's fallacy Don Ihde (2009) has described; at worst, they lead us to a severe misrepresentation of design in terms coming from marketing and sales.

Here, in some ways, our agenda aligns with Julia Keyte's (2013) analysis of how people keep gifts even when they are uncherished, and with Raahauge (2007) analysis of rules Danes use to curate their homes. It also joins the agenda of critical design, which pushes design outside the market (Dunne and Raby, 2013). Our study is critical in another sense as well. We want to pay attention not just to the bias towards consumption in design literature, but also to its bias towards production. There is no lack of research on how design is done in the studio or within company walls. Yet, production is only one phase in the life cycle of a design object. From the standpoint of a man on the street, it is not even the most relevant phase. By paying attention of what happens to design at home over the years, we can provide a perspective that corrects for the biases towards production and consumption in literature. To get a fuller picture of design, we need more studies of what happens to design years after it enters the home.

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Notes

1. Following the sociologist Everett Hughes (1984), the design semiotician Susann Vihma has talked about 'master products' that designers cannot get rid of when designing future products. Like skin colour and gender, they dictate how others see products regardless of their other characteristics. For example, Sony Walkman defined portable music players for almost two decades.
2. This paragraph is in debt to Roger Silverstone. In seeing the first author's data in London in 2004–2005, Silverstone suspected that in Helsinki, design is not a mark of social capital because the town has a relatively flat social hierarchy.

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