Specific and Generic Domestic Space
– A Design Approach to Enhance the Ritual in Daily Activities

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Introduction

My thesis project had its start in a series of experiments on touch/momentary experience, movement/daily activities, and body/intention. Seemingly random and developed largely by instinct, somehow they linked together and ultimately lead me to the theme of daily activities in domestic environments.

Based on a hypothesis, the project developed into the spatial design of domestic interiors within a specific context setting.

During the two-week spring exhibition which is part of the thesis project, I exhibited a 1:1 prototype model, images and drawings of the spatial design, and a short film – daily rituals, Åsögatan 100 – depicting a normal day at my apartment, employing another method to explain the familiar/defamiliarization, and the intense and ordinary in daily life.

Abstract of the spatial design

Scale of time
William Empson writes that the length of a human life and the conscious moment are the two main scales by which the human mind measures time. With one too large to sense and the other too difficult to identify, my project instead uses the length of individual daily activities as units - eating breakfast is a time unit, cooking a lunch is another time unit – to help make time perceptible, to be aware of the present, and to experience the ritual in daily life. Not every daily activity possesses its own specific time span and therefore I chose basic everyday activities that do (eating, cooking, sleeping, etc.) and defined them as specific activities.

Activity modules
Based on informal surveys and my own everyday routine at home, I have defined 7 specific activities. Each specific activity has been given a customized moveable activity module to provide a place for that activity. The negative space created between activity modules within the project’s spatial framework I called generic space and is used for interstitial unintentional activities.

Spatial framework
Sarah Wigglesworth’s Straw Bale House and Go Hasegawa’s House in Sakurada represent two approaches to organizing space based on activities – combining and breaking down. My project takes a third approach by providing a spatial framework within which functional layouts can be rearranged. Each activity module can easily change location inside the spatial framework based on which activity is taking place.
I open the door and walk into my apartment, put the key and backpack on the bench; after taking off my coat and scarf and putting them next to the bag I sit on the bench and bend down to take off my shoes.

- Description of my daily activities in the hallway at home

I repeat these activities every day when I arrive home and the reverse version of the same when I leave. It contains a set of actions in a prescribed order since I’ve done it so many times, and becomes a special event and ritual in my everyday life. But it’s so trivial to notice the arm movements, the sensation on the skin or my state of mind during this event. Normally my mind would still be in the recent conversation with a neighbor I met in the elevator, or moving on to what’s left in the fridge that can be turned into dinner tonight. Rarely, weakly, and for just a few seconds I would drag my attention to the present. I would bring awareness to the surface, and that’s when I started to feel the lightness of removing my coat, and the pressure between the abdomen and the thigh while sitting and bending down, and the gap expand between my toes while taking off my shoes. I immerse myself in the daily ritual – the reception¹ – in the present in this place.

1. A Hypothesis

Experience from meditation restores. A more open and focused mind can find depth and unexpected aesthetic dimensions within the otherwise mundane everyday routines of daily life. How can we bring this careful attention to secular daily life and gain aesthetic experience during trivial daily activities (eating, sleeping, cleaning, etc.) in domestic environments?

We perform many daily activities and sub-activities in a day (24 hours). If we take each basic daily activity as a unit of time and define a specific time span and place for it, will this daily activity gain ritual or ceremonial qualities? An example of giving a specific moment structure and space for the ceremonial quality and ritual are meditation cells.

Figure 1. Meditation cell in Dhamma Suvanna, Khonkaen, Thailand

¹ Reception, one of the programmatic options from *Italy: the new domestic Landscape*, edited by Emilio Ambasz, 1972
2. RELATED TERMS

The everyday
I became aware of the concept of the everyday through Sarah Wigglesworth. She mentioned Henri Lefebvre, the philosopher of the everyday, in her article The Everyday and Architecture which “identifies the everyday as the residue left over when all the specialized activities have been removed”. Sarah Wigglesworth describing the relation between the everyday and architecture: “We did not really come to the everyday from the furthest shores of architecture. The everyday was always there and we, like everyone else, were always immersed in it. (The Everyday and Architecture)”

The particular philosophy of the word is difficult to declare, but there are many words and phrases related to it: everyday life, daily life and everyday moments – and reference in practice dimension to introduce the everyday in different practice.

Sarah Wigglesworth in the project The Straw Bale House will “consider the unpredictable nature of life with plan’s design stages” and “break the living space into a series of smaller departments”.

Yvonne Rainer’s postmodern choreography work Trio A is a constant repetition of daily trivial movements which nonetheless has stunning emotional power.

Daily activities
Domestic environments are full of these everyday activities. It starts from the moment we open our eyes in the morning and continues the whole day till we lay ourselves back on the bed to close our eyes again. The everyday practice is in the brief moment of picking up a piece of bread from the dining table, putting down the coffee cup on the coffee table, and opening the kitchen cabinet to take out the cutting board and place it on the kitchen counter. Each of them has a strong connection to environment and space that contains them.

The scale at which parts of body (hands, chest, and feet) relate to the domestic objects at home is different from the scale at which our entire body relates to a city block or a whole house. The activities engaged in these relationships therefore also have different scales. Thus the perception of these scales as they are absorbed by one’s body is different.

Ritual and Time
“The invention of the house as an architectural apparatus is motivated not only by the need for protection from a hostile territory but also by a desire to settle and to give ritual form to life. A ritual is a set of actions performed according to prescribed order. Its function is to provide an orientation and continuity on which patterns of behavior can be established and preserved. “

- Pier Vittorio Aureli, Maria Sheherazade Giudici, Familiar Horror: towards a critique of domestic space

“The human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit...... The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and
it is from this that you consider the neighboring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality.”
- William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity

During my previous experiment projects, I returned to two thoughts that, although not relevant in these first studies, still left me wanting to explore them further. The first was the experience of the ritual in trivial daily events, and the second was the awareness of time in everyday moments. If “the main idea of architecture is not design something perfect but create a living experience” (The Everyday and Architecture), how can design create structure/space for this kind of experience?

There are 24 hours in a day, and during these 24 hours we perform many trivial tasks. In most occasions, we pay no attention to these tasks while performing them; we are too busy thinking of the past or future to be aware of what’s going on now. Of the two scales of time, one is too large to sense and the other is too difficult to identify. If we take each daily activity as a unit of time and define a place for it, in which time span and in which place will this daily activity gain ritual or ceremonial qualities?

3. Experiments

Experiment 1: Repertoire of touch _ daily routine
The key words in this experiment are “hand”, “touch” and “momentary experience”.
I selected 5 scenes in a day from early morning to afternoon, used a camera to document each object my hand touched, and recorded down each momentary experience during these “events”.

These events happened in different environments, from domestic to public. I analyzed and sorted all touching actions in different pairs of words – pleasant touch and unpleasant touch, active touch and passive touch, touch for information and touch for action. By doing so, I tried to explore the relation between objects’ properties and momentary experience. Maybe because I performed these daily events in front a camera; the strong awareness of the present and ritual while doing these trivial daily events make it impossible to ignore, and this made me want to explore the relation between this experience and the space it occupies.

Figure 2. Momentary experiences to different material properties
Experiment 2: Repertoire of movement _ lunch table

Two words: “table” and “hand movement” were the starting point in experiment 1 – repertoire of movement _ lunch table – which used video and photography to collect and document a process. Inspired by Sarah Wingleworth’s drawing *Increasing Disorder Dining Table*, I set a camera to take a top view video during a daily lunch in the studio to explore hand movements around a dining table.

In the article *Observation on Active Touch*, Gibson said, “what happens at the hand/fingers depends on – the movements that he makes and the object that he touches”. The results of my photographic analyses shows that hand movements depend on one’s intention and the properties of the object it is focused on.

Figure 4. Frame from the Video frame. Table provides a surface for hand activities
Figure 5. Hand movements during lunch and after lunch

Experiment 3: Table surfaces and everyday activities
In this experiment, I tried to explore the connection between body movement and furniture. I selected 6 types of table-furniture (which most daily activities are oriented around) in my apartment, and observed and documented my daily activities around these.

They are common furniture items to domestic environments and their sizes are within the standard range. The selected 6 table surfaces furniture were:
- Bench in the hallway (LWH1800*190*410, surface thickness 45)
- Dinging table in the kitchen (LWH1900*650*690, surface thickness 30)
- Kitchen counter (LWH 3020*615*910, surface thickness 30)
- Coffee table in living space (LWH 410*410*485, surface thickness 45)
- Study table in study room (LWH 2040*420*760, surface thickness 30)
- Bedside table (LWH 375*375*380, surface thickness 20)
Each of them relates to a different daily event: reception, eating, cooking, tea-time, working, sleeping.

Figure 6. Daily activities around six selected table attributes surface furniture.
4. Daily Activities

In Bernard Leupen’s book *Housing Design, A manual*, he divided basic activities of dwelling into 6 categories: gathering, sleeping, cooking, eating, washing and working. Functional approaches to spaces differ in the western and eastern world.

Figure 7. Functional approach to spaces, from *Housing Design, A manual*

I took an informal survey with friends: What activities do you perform on any given day in your home? Generally, we can define activities which occupy a special place or room (kitchen, living room, bedroom, reading corner) and have a clear time span (8 hours sleeping, 1 hour lunch), while the other ones are difficult to define or notice. These are not limited to one place or one time span (like cleaning, watering the plants, killing silverfish, or day dreaming).

Figure 8. Answers to the Survey: what activities do you perform on any given day in your home?

Through this inventory of daily activities, I came up with 7 specific activities: reception, gathering, sleeping, cooking, eating, washing and practicing.
5. Two References

Go Hasegawa’s House in Sakuradai
- Combine

The design of the whole house started from a big table. Go Hasegawa put a courtyard sized table in the middle of the house and organized different rooms and activities around it. The table is a combination of different functional surfaces in a home and not unique to one level. This table surface also serves as the floor (lifted) of the glass roof courtyard, making it an ambiguous object. It creates a joint space for all family members to perform different daily activities.

Figure 9. Ground floor plan and courtyard photo, *House in Sakuradai*

Sarah Wigglesworth’s The Straw Bale House
- Break down

In Sarah Wigglesworth’s project in 9/10 stock orchard street, London, the architects “consider the unpredictable nature of life with plan’s design stages” and “break the living space into a series of smaller compartments”. Each compartment contains some small size table surfaces of various forms and at various levels based on different target activities and different scales of the body.

Figure 10. The Living room plan, and interior photo, *The straw Bale House*. 
6. Short Film

Through a series of experiments and studies, I got to the point of making a film about daily activities. Inspired by Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielmann, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* which was directed in 1975, I made a short film (1 hour 9 minutes), *Daily Ritual, Åsögatan 100*, of my daily activities in my apartment. Taken in an ordinary weekend day, it started from the morning when I got up till when I turned off the bed light at night. There were some accidental activities, like cutting my finger when sharpening the knife or catching the escaped cat on the balcony; but mostly it reveals the mundane activities we perform every day. The short film serves two purposes – one is as an additional and detailed study material of daily activities, especially my daily activities; secondly, it is a good method to communicate with the audience of the exhibition what daily activities and rituals are and their connection to my project.

Figure 11. Frames from the short film *Daily Ritual, Åsögatan 100*
7. A Spatial Design

Figure 12. Perspective views
Space for specific activities

Based on Bernard Leupen’s 6 basic activities and the analysis of my informal survey, I came up with 7 specific activities: reception, gathering, sleeping, cooking, eating, washing and practicing. Each specific activity has been given a customized moveable activity module to provide a place for that activity. Each activity module can easily change location inside the spatial framework based on which activity is taking place. The negative space created between activity modules within the project's spatial framework is the generic space where unintentional activities occur.

Figure 13. Seven specific activities and its spatial framework

Basic Setting

As the context for the project, I have selected the city Stockholm, my own apartment and myself. I removed all walls and reduced the apartment size down to a single person home using my own body as scale module. Of the 7 specific activities, I assigned cooking and washing fixed compartments because of plumbing and ventilation issues.

Figure 14. Basic Setting for site and context
**Body module**
I did some mock-ups on the wall to test the scale and marked down important numbers: 400 is for sitting level; 1400 is level with my shoulders; 1600 is level with my body height; 1800 is a comfortable height to enter a space through.

Figure 15. Mock-up to test scale

**Five activity modules**
From here I worked out the basic form for the 5 activity modules. The basic form of each activity module is a response to my body memory (of spatial boundaries and the sequence of movements used while performing this activity) and images from emotional memory. For example, the arched roof of the reception module echoes the ritual of passing from one space to another (outside to inside, public corridor to domestic space, etc.) and the steep pitched roof of the practice meditation module visualizes the force of the imagined vertical line along ones spine which creates a static and stable pose for meditation.

Figure 16. Basic form of five movable activity modules
**Image and materiality**

Using myself as reference through my physical dimensions and my specific emotional memories, I have identified and assigned several images and materialities to the different activity modules. For example, my strongest emotional memory and image for the sleeping module is that of my grandparents’ bed – a traditional Chinese wooden 4 post bed holding a linen mosquito net. As a result, I chose wood – which is also a common generic material in Sweden – and fabric as the main materials for the activity modules.

![Figure 17. Traditional Chinese wooden bed](image1)

![Figure 18. Interior image of Zumthor House](image2)

**Detail study**

I studied different details for the joints of different modules.

![Figure 19. Detail for module 5. One type of wood slat and one detail for the whole structure.](image3)
Figure 20. Detail for module 2. For more enclosed structure, using a general method of building timber stud walls in Sweden, while removing unnecessary layers (like sound insulation and sheetrock).

Figure 21. Each of these activities modules were given a specific image and materiality
**Generic and specific space**

In Bernard Leupen’s article *The Frame and The Generic Space, A New way of Looking to Flexibility*, he defines the two words *frame* and *generic space*:

“The permanent, or durable component of the house, constitute the frame within which change can take place. The frame defines the space for change. The frame itself is specific and has qualities that determine the architecture for a long period and time. The space inside the frame is general, its use unspecified; this space I have called generic space.”

In the abstracted basic setting of my site, the partition walls between my apartment and the neighboring apartment are the frame, containing the generic space of my apartment.

I’ve defined 7 specific activities, each with a time span and relatively fixed place. This lead to two fixed components (washing and cooking) and 5 moveable activity modules (reception, eating, sleeping, gathering and practicing) which I have called specific space.

Moving one step beyond Leupen’s definitions, I’ve inserted the specific space into the generic space. The two together constitute a novel approach to the domestic environment.

Figure 22. Frame, generic space, and inserted specific space

Figure 23. Seven specific activities are assembled in one space
8. Spring Exhibition

During the two-week spring exhibition, I exhibited a 1:1 prototype model of the activity module 5 practicing, renderings and diagrams of the spatial design on the wall, and a short film *Daily Rituals, Åsögatan 100* on a 24 inch TV screen.

I wanted the top row to be immediately visible from far away as the audiences approached the project, showing the final images of my design. The bottom row illustrates the process and the construction principles as well as diagrams to illustrating the specific activity modules in use. This along with my 1 to 1 prototype, are what attract the viewers to come and study my project more closely. For those who feel the desire to come closer, the diagrams and film are there to complete their picture of my project.

Figure 24. Exhibition photos
9. Conclusion

I see my project as having several levels relevant to the fields of interior architecture and spatial design.

At the spatial design level, I’ve brought my own experiences and awareness of ritual and the present in secular and spiritual life to the thinking of spatial design, via experiments exploring daily activities and the every day, through the shaping of an abstracted spatial design of domestic space, to capturing the very ordinary-ness of everyday life while still being aesthetically engaging.

At the individual activity module design layer, I’ve followed a complete set of design methods based on the control of the image and its underlying structural logic, where the direct convergence at the material level and the way of shaping the site and space characteristics are the main driving forces of the design.

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