Living in Metamorphosis – Morphome Research Project

Morphome project report 2003:
Inspiration from homes – the probe study

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Background

As the project had focused on the home, it was natural to conduct a study on the home, especially focusing on its role as a social place and an environment of being together. The study was modeled after the Cultural Probes approach [1] both because it was an interesting one, and it was suitable for the project. The Smart Products group at the University of Art and Design has been applying the probes self documentation approach several times [2] and introduced the other partners to it.

Self documentation is a useful tool for the fuzzy front end of design and development. It is good for capturing subjective experiences and thoughts from participants in private or varying contexts and times. Given some time to work on the assignments, say a week or two in minimum, the participants begin to reflect on the theme and focus on their own experiences and relationships with the issue.

Using a selection of techniques ensures that the results are visually rich, and compelling in their authenticity and concreteness. Also, through photography assignments participants can show things that would not easily emerge during an inverview only. However it is important that the subjective descriptions are collected, which was done by visiting the home and having the participants describe their work and thoughts.

[1] Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti (1999) Cultural Probes – results from the EU project Presence

[2] see e.g. Mattelmäki, T. and Battarbee, K. (2002) Empathy Probes. In: Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference, 23-25.6 2002, Malmö Sweden. Several experiments have been conducted with design consultancies and their clients in the Tekes-funded Luotain project http://smart.uiah.fi/luotain

The self documentation kit was pilot tested in two homes, one in Helsinki, one in Tampere. After the pilot, some of the questions

were improved and made more specific, and the rest of the study was conducted in a few homes in the Tampere region and in Helsinki. Although the homes were not numerous, they were chosen to represent a wide variety of kinds of homes, from a single's bedsit flat to a family house and a community. This was done to get an idea of the differences between homes and the possible similarities that might be found.

Photos and stories

One of the role of the photo assignments was to root the stories and facts about the homes into a concrete environment. Photographs are always open to multiple interpretations and require instructions for viewing correctly [3]. Many things are easier to express through taking a picture and then describing the choice of subject, than to try to talk about them. The home and its objects become concrete in the photos, and participants enjoy talking about them.

[3] Koskinen, Kurvinen, Lehtonen (2001) Mobiili Kuva, or Mobile Image (2002) – the book discusses also the relationship between image and text

Left above: what descibes community: having toothbrushes all together.
Left below: games and play (displayed on top of disliked thing, an ornametal pillow cover)
Right above: what makes home: the kitchen
Right below: the living room, with cables (disliked) and plants (part of the home)

The secret life of the techno zoo

The aim of this playful mapping assignment was to reveal the emotional relationships that people have to their products, and relate these to the territories of the people in the home. On a sheet, a map was drawn of the layout of the home with important things marked in. A transparency was laid over it, where the territories of family members were drawn in. On the final overlay, stickers of wild animals were attached to describe the animal qualities of products in the home. This assignment was considered both fun and a lot of work. Especially in this assignment the explanation is more important than the choice of animal. It was clear that people had emotional relationships to many objects, although many of those relationships were placid and low key.
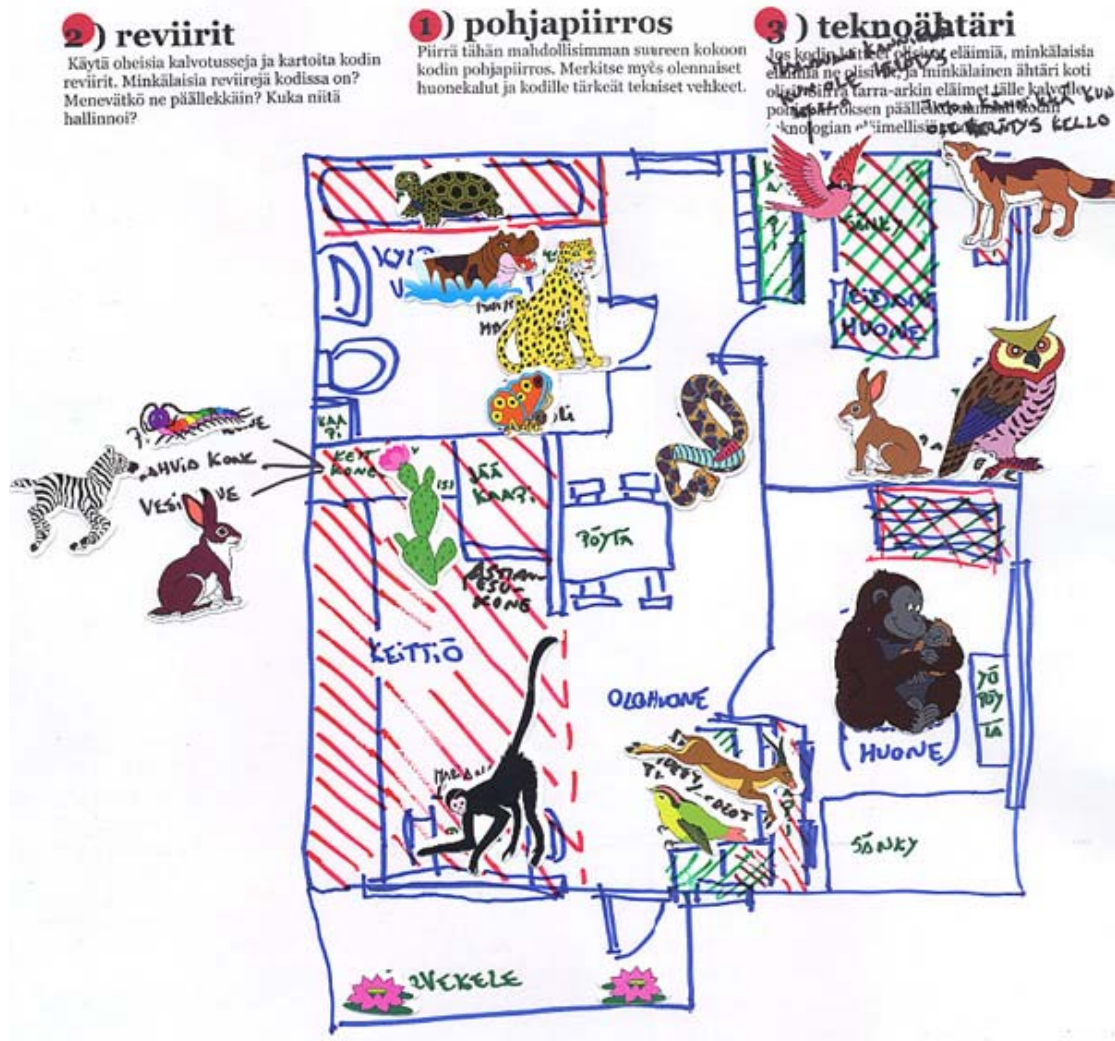
Arriving at conclusions

The study results were not surprising as such, but they did open some slightly different views and aspects, compared to interview studies conducted in homes about media and technologies just two years earlier [4]. These themes or keys were derived in an affinity diagramming process, conducted by the research group.

[4] Leppänen, S. (2001) Älykoti. In: Digitalisoituvan median monet kasvot.

- home aesthetics
The photos of the home delivered an image of the home as a collection of materials and objects. Although the visua style and atmosphere of the home was important, even more important was that it contained "significant things" [5], and that the home was a place where conflict between meaning and aesthetics was tolerated and even welcome. The home must not look like a design magazine.

[5] see also Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981) The Meaning of Things

- cables and wires
The strongest critique of products was focused on the cables and wires. They were disliked and hated, and most people were frustrated with the sense of disarray they created.

- beyond the walls
For many the area considered home was not limited to the inner walls of the apartment. Balconies, gardens, back yards and even the city block were considered part of home. The views from windows also were an important element to the home.

- the table, the sofa, the tv, the bedroom
Home was often symbolised by a thing or a place where everyone can get together. Often this was the kitchen table, or the sofa where everyone gets together to watch tv. People may use the home differently when they are alone than when others are home as well. Every home has a place where people like to be together when in private and places where guests are entertained. Special guests may have a special place in the home as well.