

Some Lessons from Memory Artifacts of Everyday Life: toward the design of memorable products

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Abstract: A watch, a toy, a ring, a pen... Many things bring back good memories and are inextricably intertwined with pleasurable experiences and emotional values. Therefore, if we are to design pleasurable products, we have to understand what makes an artifact memorable. This paper consists in four sections illustrated by statements taken from interviews with people from different backgrounds: the first section briefly presents the emerging field of Memory Studies and key questions about the relationship between social memory and the material world raised in Maurice Halbwachs' posthumous book "The Collective Memory". The following two sections bring together observations on memory artifacts from the point of view of its visual appearance and its functionality. The last section presents meaningful human actions associated with memory artifacts and highlights the social purposes and the "non material" aspects of human-product interaction.

Key words: *Emotional Design, affective memory, sociability, memorability*

1. Introduction

People, places, things and memory are so intertwined they hardly can be disentangled [1, 5, 9]. António Damásio [6] reinforces this idea when he observes "it is very hard to imagine objects that are emotionally neutral". According to the neuroscientist, things around us start losing their "emotional innocence" while times go by and we start reaching mature age. In other words, the older we get, the more experiences we go through, and the more material things around us gain special meaning and "emotional competence". Much more than form and function, objects constitute the setting in which our life and our memories take place. In this sense, understanding why and how some products become "memorable" and bring good memories should be a permanent goal for every designer.

Understanding why and how some products become "memorable" was the starting point of the doctoral dissertation "*Memory Artifacts of Everyday Life: an interdisciplinary view on things that bring back good memories*" about things that trigger "positive memories" and with which people have emotional ties. Its results were interpreted within the theoretical framework of Memory Studies and based on more than 300 stories about memorable things collected over two years through qualitative research techniques, such as participant observation, group and individual discussions and semi-structured interviews with around 150 informants from different backgrounds. This investigation was, also, influenced by the study conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton [5] into domestic objects and the process through which people

construct meaning in family environments.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the social purposes of “memory artifacts” and contribute to the development of memorable products.

2. Comments on the Collective Memory

Andreas Huyssen [11] points out the emergence of memory as one of the most astonishing phenomenon in recent years. He observes that modernist movements had been energized by “present futures”, but since the 1980’s the focus has shifted to “present pasts”. Memory Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary research field that includes all those disciplines and approaches concerning the complex relationship between memory, culture and society and the influence of the past on the present and the future.

In this scenario, Maurice Halbwachs is considered the pioneer of modern memory theory, arguing in the 1920s that all memory was fundamentally collective and socially rooted. The French sociologist deeply believed in the inseparability of the individual and society at all levels of existence and treated memory as a social fact in a time when memory was primarily understood as an individual phenomenon.

Halbwachs was the first scholar to study of the multiplicity of memories and the social rules by which they are formed. He is the father of the concept of “collective memory” and demonstrated that we live and remember in society. He demonstrated, also, that we live and remember based on material things.

Halbwachs’ ideas on collective memory and space raise interesting questions about the material world [9]. In his posthumous book “La Mémoire Collective”, the author presents us with the curious idea formulated by Auguste Comte, according to whom our mental stability arises in large part from the fact that our everyday objects change little and give us a permanent and stable image. Halbwachs compares these objects to a silent and motionless society, indifferent to our agitation and change of mood and, as such, responsible for the transmission of the senses of order and quietude.

The author recognizes the existence of a strong relationship between people and those things that are familiar to them, pointing out that connection between social groups and the physical surroundings is a vital aspect of any group self-definition. This is shown in his comments on how we feel when we find ourselves in an unfamiliar material environment: “before adapting to it, we go through a period of uncertainty, as if we had left behind our entire personality” [9].

The situation presented by Halbwachs brings us to the memories of one of our interviewees, just as she arrived to live in the United States:

I took things to make my home feel like a Brazilian home... But everything around me looked so different I started getting a little depressed (...) There was a smoke detector so I could no longer take hot showers with the door open or fry a steak. There were no drains in the floor (...) So, when I went into the supermarket and I saw a shopping cart it was an enormous relief! It was familiar to me! I definitely knew how that worked! I walked around with the shopping cart as if it were an old friend, I swear! (Paula).

According to Halbwachs [9], “usual images of the external world are inseparable from us”. In other words, the physical environment and the artifacts that participate in our everyday lives end up becoming part of our identity. Further more, this explains our interviewees’ feelings towards some of their memory artifacts:

I still have my first electric razor. I mean, how many times was it in my hands as I was shaving and thinking of a job interview or a party where everything is supposed to turn out perfect? (Claudio)

I keep a little cushion from the time I was a little girl (...) I only sleep if I have my cushion. As time went by, my cushion accompanied me because I never let go of it. In the end I grew up and today I have my daughters and my dear cushion! (Andrea)

Halbwachs asks and answers himself:

Why do we become attached to objects? Why do we wish that they remain unchanged, and continue to be in our company? We disregard comfort and aesthetics. Our material surroundings carry our own marks and those of others at the same time. Our home, our furniture (...) reminds us of our family and our friends that we were used to seeing within that frame.

The passage above is well illustrated by our interviewees:

We have an electric fan at home. It doesn't work anymore... It's not beautiful either. But we love it... It's there because it reminds us of my grandma. We don't use it anymore. It is there as a memento, you know? (Aline).

"About two years ago I found a piece of tile just like the ones that were in the bathroom of the house I grew up in. It is my most precious belonging (Claudia).

Halbwachs [9] strengthens the idea that material things bring a sense of balance and stability when he examines a situation in which a small group suffers a shock: "Life around us continues as if nothing had happened (...) while we, our family, our friends feel as if a catastrophic wind were blowing".

The author concludes that peoples' indifference, as well as everything that is inert, can hurt but can also calm us down and give us balance.

Halbwachs asserts that every collective memory unfolds within a "spatial framework" and that "space is a reality that endures". He explains that:

(...) since our impressions rush by one after another, and leave nothing behind in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space - the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination - that we must turn our attention.

In a rather curious passage, Halbwachs suggests that in order to see only the physical and formal qualities of things, we would have to adopt the attitude of physicists and artists. He claims that only under the "influence of painter's society" we would see things "not as they are, but rather as they are perceived by those who dedicate themselves exclusively to reproducing images".

At the end of the book, the reader is invited to do the following memory exercise:

Now concentrate, close your eyes and go back in time as far as possible, as much as your thought can fixate on scenes or people that are preserved in your memory.

* * * *

We may agree with Halbwachs that we will always find ourselves in places we know, in places we can locate and which are part of our material environment. And we may also agree that people, the designed world and memory are so intertwined they hardly can be disentangled. In this sense, designers can not "see only the physical and formal qualities of things", but things as they are: expressions of our experiences and our memories.

3. Seeing Things as They Are: Comments on Memory Artifacts

3.1 Comments on the visual appearance of memory artifacts

In an article on the role of beautiful objects in the lives of people, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [4] discusses the

notion that the purpose of art is to bring order to human experience. He shows that according to Gyorgy Kepes (1944-1995), the 20th century man lives in a chaotic environment and carries this chaos within him. In the face of such instability and confusion, it is up to the artist to organize the external environment and also thoughts and feelings. The psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), in turn, believed that art helped to reconcile the conflict between our primitive biological instincts and the artificial rules of society.

Csikszentmihalyi relates how dissatisfied he was with the vague and metaphorical accounts of how art affects the consciousness of the viewers. In this regard, he conducted a study in which he interviewed a representative cross-section of families in the Chicago area “to find out how ‘normal’ people responded to art objects and design qualities in their environment” [4]. He asked which kind of “art” objects people had in their houses and how often they contemplated them. As he reports, the interviewees repeated impersonal phrases, suggesting that art plays an unimportant role in their lives. According to the author, although most homes contain paintings and sculptures, these works did not appear important to the owners’ psychological or spiritual sense. In contrast to the emotional indifference to the works of art, the interviewees seemed to have a strong attachment to domestic objects without any aesthetic value. From this observation, Csikszentmihalyi changed his research approach and began to ask which things were special to people and why.

Together with the anthropologist Rochberg-Halton, he interviewed 315 people and 82 families, from different areas of the metropolitan region of Chicago, always including the parents and, at least, one child and one of the grandparents. Describing certain situations observed throughout the study, Csikszentmihalyi [4] explains the feeling of pride evoked in an interviewee by a plastic replica of the Venus de Milo, a gift from the company where she worked in recognition of her work as a salesman. According to the author, whenever the interviewee looked at the Venus replica, “she did not see the cheap goddess, but an image of herself as a capable, successful businessperson”.

The results of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s study showed that each house had a “symbolic ecology”, or “a network of objects that referred to meanings that gave sense to the lives of those who dwelt there [4]. They revealed, furthermore, that these meanings were rarely transmitted by works of art. According to the researchers, out of 1,694 objects identified as special, only 136 were graphic works, and 106 were sculptures, including the replica of the Venus de Milo. Of these, a large proportion had been made by children, relatives and friends, which mean that their value derived from the ties that bound the interviewees to the “authors” of the works. The sculptures and paintings mentioned were also valued for recalling a place, a person or a special event. Csikszentmihalyi [4] stresses that it wasn’t the “aesthetic quality” of the objects that made them special, but “what the person did with it, and what the interaction meant to the person”.

Visual appearance is a remarkable aspect of memory artifacts, as our informants observed:

I remember my first wallet! It was black, black leather, very much like that of my father... (Marcelo).

My notebook was covered in that checked black and red plastic. (...) I kept it because it reminded me of a teacher I loved (Shirley).

On my 14th birthday, my father threw a surprise party for me. (...) And the most memorable thing was when I got home from school and saw that enormous banner in the street, a really big banner written “HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR SON! (Tiago).

It is through their physical peculiarities that things become part of our lives and are recognized. Physical peculiarities help us to recognize our memory artifacts, but are not the focus of these memories. In other words,

Marcelo's wallet became memorable because it was his first wallet and very much like his father's wallet, and not because it was black and leather. Shirley's school notebook became memorable because it reminded her of a much-loved teacher and not because it was covered in checked plastic. Tiago's banner became memorable because it reminded him of the surprise party that his father threw and not because it was big.

Whilst the visual appearance helps us to identify a memory artifact, its aesthetic quality does not appear to play a significant role in our memories. In accordance with the findings of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton [5], memory artifacts demonstrate that we remember what appears important to us and not what is presented to us as a sophisticated visual model. They prove, furthermore, that at least in our culture, objects acquire value when they are associated with significant events in our lives, as our informant's description of a picture shows:

It was my children who made it and gave it to me few days after I told them that I was going to marry Ruy. This picture is a proof of love and a proof that my children had got over the death of their father... This picture is an event! It's worth more than any work of art! (Shirley).

In view of the above, we can say that it is not the quality of visual appearance that makes an artifact memorable.

3.2 Comments on the functionality of memory artifacts

A decade ago, Alexander Manu noted that because designers create physical objects, they tend to think in terms of tangible forms and about meeting only the "solid, mechanical needs of users"¹.

Stressing the need to reformulate the principles that govern the activity, Max Bruinsma [3] argued that design needed a new mentality rather than new forms. Presenting what he called the "invisible side of design", Bruinsma warned that "giving form is not just clothing the object with a nice form, it is: giving form to the meanings that the object can assume, beyond its direct function". According to him, this conceptual approach to design can go into many directions, but they all address one central issue: "the certainty that function is not enough to justify a product". Klaus Krippendorff [14], in turn, adds that designers realized that "we do not respond to the physical qualities of things, but to what they mean to us". As one of our informants' observation clearly illustrates: *I have a friend who has kept one of those old video cameras which doesn't work any more, just because it recorded the first years of his children's lives. It does make sense, doesn't it? (Irineu)*

Yes, it makes a lot of sense. Among the memory artifacts gathered throughout this study, many were kept, even though they didn't perform their original functions any more. And many become memorable, even though they had not been effectively used or established a direct using relationship with our interviewees. These memory artifacts indicate that "things do not have a one-on-one relation with a function or a user, (...) together they give form to complex relations between people and their world" [3], as the following statements illustrate:

I even keep things that don't work any more, such as the transistor radio from the time when my football team was the best in Brazil (...) my father and I used to bring this transistor radio to the games to hear the game we were watching live. (Fernando).

My great-grandmother came to Brazil around 1910 and was never able to get used to the weather here. (...) She was constantly fanning herself and saying that Brazil was hell. I remember her every time I see a fan. She fanned herself till she was 90! (Paulo).

¹ Form Follows Spirit: speech made by Alexander Manu. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil, 1994.
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~maxb/unp-idem.htm>

At this point, we can conclude that the capacity of a product to trigger good or bad memories do not derived from their “mechanical” performance. What makes artifacts memorable is – above all – the quality of social interactions, feelings and experiences they are associated with and their likely effects on individuals and society.

4. Organizing the Memory Artifacts: Memory Artifacts & Human Actions

This study has identified a total of more than 300 “memorable” artifacts and organized into categories based on the reasons our informants considered them memorable. Due to the limited length of this paper, only one from these categories will be presented: Memory Artifacts & Human Actions.

In the light of Halbwachs’ thoughts, we understand human action as meaningful and purposeful actions mediated by artifacts and most of the time oriented towards other persons.

4.1 Awarding Actions:

Include trophies, medals, banners, flowers, crowns, plaques, among other material ways of publicly acknowledging and awarding outstanding attitudes, efforts, abilities, performances and achievements. The “awarding artifacts” are tangible and public expressions of admiration and recognition of exemplary actions in a broad sense. They are closely linked to the feelings of pride and accomplishment.

I'm so proud of my medals. I love to show them to my grandchildren. (...) Is there any single material thing more important than something that makes you feel proud of yourself?

4.2 Caring Actions:

Include medical supplies, handkerchiefs, umbrellas, tissues, coats and material things that mediate actions perceived as demonstrations of concern and interest for our health, safety, welfare or comfort. The “caring artifacts” are closely linked with the feelings of protection, support and being loved.

I was abandoned when I was a baby and I was raised in an orphanage (...) When I was eight, Miss Julia came to work at the orphanage as part of a student-nursing program and changed my life. (...) She used to brush my hair every morning and that was a very happy time for me. (...) Since then, I love all kind of hairbrushes. They still bring me the warm feeling that someone cares about me (Maria).

4.3 Celebrating Actions:

Include flags, caps and gowns, champagne and wine corks, cake candles, banners, party supplies and decoration, balloons, confetti, among other material things associated with sportive, familiar, national and religious commemorative events such as Football cups, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Bar Mitzvah, graduation, birthdays, anniversaries, marriages. The “celebrating artifacts” are the material components of rituals, parties, commemorations among other festivities that help determine unique cultural attributes and preserve traditions and customs. They are closely linked to the feelings of belonging, sharing and social participation.

"Five times champion!! And Ronaldo scores 8 goals! We were there... we were all wearing yellow shirts and shouting “Brazil is penta!”. That shirt makes me feel so proud to be Brazilian (...) I was dominated by this incredible sense of belonging! (Paulo).

I had a, lets say, a “celebration shoes”. They were bought to be worn on the day of my graduation, and from then on, ended up being used on special occasions. I got married in these shoes and I used them at the

graduation and marriage of my three daughters. Later I gave them away (...) because they had already fulfilled their purpose (Carlos).

4.4 Learning Actions:

Include uniforms, exercise books, pens, pencils, erasers, mimeograph copies, newsletters, notebooks, lockers, backpacks among other material things related to acquiring competences, improving knowledge, developing skills and raising awareness. The “learning artifacts” are often associated with teachers and parents. They are, also, closely linked to the feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence.

There was a small library in the orphanage and Julia (a nursing student) used to read to us every night and this book called ‘Flicts’ impressed more on me than any of the others. (...) It was a book about a brown color like my own. One day I picked up the book and I realized I could read all by myself. I felt so proud! I felt I had learned something of real value (Maria).

4.5 Pastime Actions:

Include miscellaneous albums and collections, playing cards, jigsaw puzzles and other things related to relaxing and restful activities. The “pastime artifacts” are material ways to please and distract us and are related with the feelings of serenity, tranquility and quietude. They point to an emerging social phenomenon: the desire of doing nothing, switching off and slowing down. They call for a new approach to design research and practice - the “slow design”- oriented to slow down life's pace and counterbalance the ‘fastness’ of the current design paradigm [8]. Pastime artifacts are related, also, to the so-called “SPA industry”. According to the International SPA Association definition, “spas are entities devoted to enhancing overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit”. Spa-going has been described as a new cultural trend and seen as a necessary part of a healthy lifestyle.

The first thing I remember about summer and vacation is a hammock. The best way to be quiet and peaceful, doing nothing (...) there is nothing more pleasant than resting in a comfortable hammock. (...) Hammocks serve as bed, as swing, as baby’s cradle, but it mains function is to slow me down...

4.6 Loving Actions:

Include cuddly toys, jewelry, flowers, Father’s day, Mother’s Day and Valentine’s Day gifts and cards, among other material ways to demonstrate love and affection. The “loving artifacts” are closely linked to the feeling of happiness and being loved and open up broader questions and additional theoretical and methodological approaches to design research and practice [12, 15]: Is “Romantic Love” a Western social construction? How does the visual environment shape our understanding of love? How we express and receive love?

(...) one day he asked me to meet him in a very fancy restaurant. When I arrived, he came walking towards me with a huge bouquet of red roses and followed by a man playing violin! (...) He materialized his feelings towards me! Red roses and violin means nothing else than “I love you” in all languages! (Ana).

4.7 Recreation Actions:

Include sporting goods, toys, dolls and games in general, paddling pools, sand-castles, butterfly nets, among other material things used to play, “having fun” and leisure activities. The “recreation artifacts” are closely

linked to the feelings of pleasure, wonderment and amusement and point out to the role of design in socialization processes. In this sense, this category reinforces the relevance of “game design” field. It reinforces, also, the relevance of approaches such as the called “fun design”, masterly illustrated by Alessi’s products, which combine functional design and aesthetics in funny and humorous products.

I remember playing LEGO when I was a kid. I had a lot of sets and I shared them with my brothers and my cousins. My dad used to play too and he couldn’t hide his excitement...I remember how good it was to spend hours together (Joel).

My grandmother had this funny bell that she used to call all of us in to dinner. It had the shape of a fat woman, like my grandmother. My cousins, my sisters... we all loved to play with this bell.

4.8 Remembering Actions:

Include medals, post cards, miniature monuments, magnets, t-shirts, mugs and other things preserved with the intention of remembering people, places and events.

This category ponders the distinction made by Ene Köresaar [13], between “souvenirs” and “mementos”. “Souvenirs” refer to artifacts designed to mark some event and with the specific aim of “triggering memories”. Mementos, on the other hand, are artifacts designed to perform other functions and which, after some time of use, end up being kept as an object to trigger memories.

The “souvenirs artifacts” are closely linked to the feelings of comfort, hope, gratitude and happiness.

I collect snow globes from each country or city I visit. I have about 80 snow globes from every place I've been. I use them to decorate my Christmas tree each year. (...) and to remember, of course... (Irene).

4.9 Sacred and Magical Actions:

Include religious gifts and certificates, amulets, rosaries, Bibles, prayer booklets, pictures, statues, scapulars and other material things to exercise religious and spiritual practices, to translate philosophical and ethic beliefs and to ascend to a higher and transcendent dimension. The “sacred and magical artifacts” are closely linked to the feelings of comfort, hope, gratitude and happiness.

This medal helps me to thank God every day. My grandmother gave me this medal (...) the priest blessed it (...) It connects me with God in a very personal way, and I am filled with joy and hope for the future.

4.10 Self-Care Actions:

Include cosmetic supplies, electric shavers, perfumes, creams, bronzing products, toning gels, adornments, clothes, accessories amongst other material things associated with caring for and improving personal physical appearance. The “self-care artifacts” are related to the ever-expanding fashion and beauty industries and are closely related to the feelings of self-confidence and well-being.

I still have my very first electric shaver... I still have it because I used it a lot, I guess... Because it made me feel a big man, handsome, respectable (...) A well shaved man will always be respected. I remember this feeling of “WOW! Look at you” when I finished shaving. My shaver certainly became like a close friend! (Paulo).

I will never forget the first time I put on lipstick and perfume for a school dance. I felt so pretty and confident! (...) Since then, I never go out anywhere without a bit of lipstick on. Never! (Flavia).

4.11 Thank you Actions:

Include flowers, boxes of chocolate, cards, medals, certificates and any material thing given in return for a favor, a kindness or a helping hand. The “thank you artifacts” are tangible and private expressions of gratitude, appreciation and contentment to thoughtful hearted actions. They are closely linked to the feelings of joy and recognition.

I didn't expect to receive anything in return... But then she came and gave me this silk and velvet heart-shaped box (...) Actually, I was very happy with the recognition of my gesture, my friendship, very touched... indeed. This box means a lot to me (Danielle).

4.12 Working Actions:

Include professional tools, equipments, uniforms and any material things or results related to professional competence, performance, conduct and skills. Choosing a profession is a highly and **crucial** act in contemporary societies, influencing and shaping our identity and whole way of life. The “working artifacts” are closely linked to the feelings of “having made the right professional choice”, pride, accomplishment and solidarity.

Fifty years ago, I went to work as a teacher in a desperately poor area in Minas Gerais. There was only one class for all ages. It was so hard in the beginning ... a lot harder than I could have ever imagined. (...) But soon I felt privileged and blessed to be in such a special community. I had parents and their children in the same class, helping each other to learn... They have taught me so much about tenacity, about faith and the universe. They changed my life... They shape my identity (...) I have this powerful "I did it!" feeling every time I see a green blackboard with wooden frame (Maria).

Working with competence, dedication and integrity is the most basic, powerful and formidable expression of solidarity, my dear. (...) My first stethoscope was a Sprague and I still have it. It brings me a great sense of accomplishment and the feeling I made the right choice (Dr. Wilson).

5 Final Thoughts

Memory artifacts teach us that products function within social contexts and mediate most of our actions, linking people to their everyday life and to each other.

Memory artifacts are the tangible remains of our experiences and their associated feelings and suggest that designers create and give *physical form* to products, while users put them in action and give them *social form*, extending their functions and meanings far beyond those for which they were designed.

As Arjun Appadurai [1] has argued, material things have a social life and “their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories”. According to the anthropologist, “human actors encode things with significance” and it is not merely things but “things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context”. In this sense, we can say that products have a history of their own related to human actions they are involved with and have no meanings aside from those attributed to them by their users.

Indeed, the social life of a product is built together with its user and out of sight of designers...but not out of their imagination. In other words, the social life of a product is both in users' hands and designers' mind. After all, designers can imagine the actions their products will promote, since “design is the ability to imagine, *that-which-does-not-yet-exist*, to make it appear in concrete form as a new purposeful addition to the real world” [16]. Taking into account the above considerations, we propose designers expand their focus from product *usability* to

product *memorability*: a social shaping factor related to “the quality of being worth remembering”, to the actions products mediate and their effects on individuals and society [7].

In Norberto Bobbio’s [2] concise formulation, “we are what we remember.” Then, we better have good things to remember. Designing for a “showing respect action” or a “learning action”; for reinforcing self-esteem, optimism or resilience; for people to relax, to have fun or to meet each other; designing for surprising, for changing negative attitudes and behaviors, for living collectively and responsibly among other vital aspects of our humanness and sociableness (or disposition to be sociable), may rise new and original questions and also generate new and original solutions. Designing with *memorability* in mind may bring into existence more desirable days and a better present to be remembered at the future.

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