Beyond Walking With Video: Co-Creating Representation

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This paper discusses a method I used to conduct a study of hygge*, a Danish concept that is usually translated as "cosiness." I wanted to learn more about* hygge *and how it related to technology in the home. The method I used builds on my experience with spatial ethnography, on Bruno Latour's theory of representation, and on the work of visual anthropologist Sarah Pink. I asked participants to use a video or still camera to help me document their home. With participant and researcher both behind the lens of a camera, I saw a significant remapping of the power relationship between researcher and participant; we were able to focus together on the material home as the object of the research. In addition to reducing the time needed to build rapport, this method offers a way to analyze cultural practices such as* hygge *that are not entirely visible in the material world.*

> By the way: *hygge* is so intangible that it disappears under close analysis.
> *from "Egocentrisk Hygge"* by Jørgen Hartmann-Petersen; in *Om Hygge* (About *Hygge*), translated by author.

INTRODUCING *hygge*

In summer of 2008, I worked as an intern for Intel Corporation's Domestic Designs and Technologies Research group. I conducted an ethnographic study that explored the relationship between technology, spirituality, and the home in Denmark. I was particularly interested in the intersection between technology and *hygge*.

Hygge is a Danish world and concept. As a noun, it is usually translated into English as "coziness." But it means much more than that: elements of ritual, spirituality, domesticity, contentment, pleasure, indulgence, and restorative nostalgia all merge in *hygge*. Together with its adjectival form, *hyggelig*, the word is one of the most frequently used in conversational Danish. For example: the Danish version of Starbucks, a chain called Baresso, markets itself by selling coffee and *hygge*. One of the highest compliments you can pay a host after a dinner party is to say it was *hyggelig*. And, in a fairly new linguistic development, you can now bid your friends farewell with a warm *"hygge!"*

FIGURE 1 *Hygge* defined in a Danish dictionary. The definitions have to do with comfort; notice the circular reference in the third definition, which explains one use of *hygge* using its adjectival form, *hyggeligt.*

Hygge is difficult for non-native Danish speakers, including the author of this paper, to correctly pronounce. A good approximation is to say HUE-guh, while imagining that you have a gentle American Southern accent: over-accent the "U" in the first accented syllable, and swallow the "h" of guh. As an alternative, the word approximately rhymes with beluga.

Though it is a deep part of Danish culture, Danes have questioned its role. After World War II, the widespread adoption of functionalist modern architecture, known in Scandinavia as *funkis,* lead to a cultural debate over whether the concept of *hygge* could survive in the modern material world of hard edges and white walls. This debate extended through the 1960s, when *Politiken,* Denmark's leading newspaper, published an entire series of newspaper articles written by cultural authorities who each attempted to define the real meaning of *hygge.* Given the prevalence of the concept and its prior collision with the innovation of modern architecture, I was curious to see whether and how the use of technology and technological artifacts, such as cell phones and laptop computers, intersected with the idea of *hygge.*

My own experience of *hygge* will be resonant with those who have experienced Danish weather. I spent the better part of July in Denmark, and while the Danish winter is dim and wet, the summer is usually pleasant, with long, sunny days.

On my research trip, it rained every day, nearly all day. About two weeks in, I had gotten the hang of it; I had obtained the most enormous umbrella I could find and a good pair of galoshes, and had committed to get outside whether it was raining or not. One evening after I had spent a long day in the field, the rain stopped, so I went for a walk. I passed an ice cream shop and ordered a medium cone with chocolate sprinkles. The rain

started again, so I sat under my blue umbrella on a wet bench, overlooking one of Copenhagen's lakes. The sky was overcast, but bright. It was just before nine. There I sat, wet and cold, a white swan swimming before me in black water, the ice cream rich and delicious. Suddenly, despite the foreboding weather and the ice cream chill—perhaps even because of it—I felt warm, content, and placid. This was *hygge*, I realized. And as soon as I had the thought, the feeling went away.

The Method

I interviewed a total of eleven households over the course of approximately three weeks. I spent between three and seven hours with each participant. I found participants by asking professional and academic contacts in Denmark to forward a call for participants. Participants were compensated for their participation in the research.

At the beginning of my first visit, I asked for help documenting the interior of the participant's home. I offered the participant a choice of recording device: digital SLR, digital point-and-shoot, or digital camcorder. On the first visit, we went around the home together, documenting the home as an artifact to be interpreted, while the cameras (and a digital audio recorder, functioning as backup) worked to record our journey and capture our conversation over what we should capture on video or film. This is a more interactive version of what visual anthropologist Sarah Pink has since labeled "walking with video." On the follow-up visit, I operated the video camera and still camera, capturing the participants moment by moment as they drew a cognitive map of home and reflected upon the focus of the research (Hasbrouck 2007; Lynch 1988).

I found the mere act of asking for assistance with data collection to subtly shift the power dynamic between researcher and participant. Upon reflection, I found that the researcher and participant became allied in their task of documentation, and the object of study became the material artifacts on the other side of the lens. This method follows work by Latour (1999) on the creation of scientific knowledge through the manipulation of artifacts and by visual anthropologists who aim to understand how people use artifacts to create knowledge. This method offers a way to create a discussion around the normally invisible act of assigning cultural meaning to objects; building on Alex Taylor, Laurel Swan, and Dave Randall's idea (2007) of listening with indifference, asking the participant to help create video and photographic data is a way of seeing with indifference.

This collaborative method builds on theoretical frames from my own interdisciplinary background studying social factors in architecture, my experience as a freelance ethnographic researcher, and ideas from the fields of visual anthropology and Science and Technology Studies. It goes beyond the method outlined by Sarah Pink in her 2007 article "Walking With Video" to propose a new way that researchers and participants can work together to understand concepts that slide between the material and immaterial world. Rather than simply using a video camera to capture the richness of the ethnographic fieldwork, my

method puts researcher and participant on the same side of the lens. The artifact of the home—the *setting* for the study—replace the human participant as the object being scrutinized.

The Method

The Theoretical Background

I studied architecture because I am interested in how people create meaning in space. The academic branch of architecture interested in this question is called either environment/behavior [E/B], or, more ponderously, but appeasing to those leery of the causality implicit in E/B, Social Factors in Architecture. Founding figures are anthropologist William Whyte, who used film and stop motion photography to make recommendations for better plazas in New York City; anthropologist Edward Hall, who introduced the idea of proxemics; and, the somewhat more controversial figure of filmmaker Oscar Newman, whose film and book *Defensible Space* continue to inform urban design. Out of its allegedly deterministic roots, the field of Social Factors in Architecture has evolved to recognize that space and human behavior are mutually constituted. Ethnographic research has found a home in a few architecture firms, such as HOK, although it is much more firmly entrenched at consultancies such as IDEO. Berkeley professor Galen Cranz has developed a method for applying ethnography in the context of architectural design. Her method, based in semantic ethnography, was developed and continually tested as part of a course she has taught for the past 25 years. It laid the groundwork for my research method.

My area of interest is the home, as it is the space over which individuals tend to have the most control, and, therefore, where expression is the most revealing of the unpredictable relationship between attitude and behavior, and where identity is formed and reflected (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Marcus 2006). *Hygge* is closely linked to the home, but the challenge of studying it as a concept, I realized, is that *hygge* is not all about space, but is rather a *product* of interaction in space. In many ways, *hygge* is invisible.

At the time, I was reading the literature of Science and Technology Studies. Reflecting upon the ethnomethodological principle of building theory out of conversation, I thought if there was some way to have a conversation about practices in the home, a discussion about *hygge* might naturally arise. I also had concerns about building rapport. *Hygge*, I had learned from a 1976 study by anthropologist Judith Freedman Hansen, was closely linked to Danish identity; how would participants react to an outsider studying something so closely linked with their culture? From prior experience doing in-home ethnography, I was also concerned with how I might help participants get over the fear of their home, their image, and their voice being recorded.

The method I developed is similar to that visual anthropologist Sarah Pink outlines in her article "Walking With Video." The key difference is that whereas Pink holds the video

camera while conducting research, my method puts a camera in the hands of *both* the researcher and participant. Many, if not all, of the benefits Pink identifies in her work also apply to my method. For example, in "Walking With Video," Pink relays how video can help relay a sense of place through capturing sensorial experience. She claims that video can help explain how people relate to their environments in two ways:

> First, video provides us with a tool that can enable embodied communication about empathetic understandings of and representations of other people's perceptions of their environments. Second… anthropological film/video that represents people 'walking with' the camera person/anthropologist also stands as film about place as it is made, in the sense that the film/videomaking context serves as a process through which people, things and sensory experiences are drawn together.

Looking back upon my research, I can identify other benefits of my method for applied ethnography:

Speed with reflexivity. This method quickly generates a rich set of data that the participant and researcher can reflect upon while the data is being collected. This is the same aim as working with cultural probes such as photo journals, but it takes away the time needed for a participant to complete the assignment—as well as eliminating the risk that the assignment will be forgotten or left undone. Interestingly, putting the camera into the hands of the participant, perhaps because it serves as a tangible reminder that they are creating a representation, leads to some of the same types of conversations a researcher might have with a photo journal. Thus, this method can reduce time spent by both researcher and participant, while still providing opportunities to reflect on the data.

The method also worked to quickly build rapport with informants. The power dynamic shifted the instant the participant picked up the camera. Behavioral psychologists explain this as the well-known mimicry effect; with our posture and movement aligned, participant and researcher were having a similar physiological and emotional experience (Lakin 2003). This also might have to do with the level of trust implied in allowing a relative stranger to handle expensive video equipment—or in the simple and humbling act of asking for help.

Understanding Place as Representations of Human Action. This method remaps the traditional division between subject and object. The material objects become the object, or what is interviewed; the researcher and the participant are doing the interviewing.

Before using this method, I saw my time in the field as data collection. My goal was to extract as much data as possible so that I could sit down at my desk with quiet and time to think and make sense of it all. While in the field, I always had the nagging feeling I was missing something important: what key object would I neglect to photograph? What simple question would I forget to ask?

But this method, with the clear focus on documentation, created an opportunity to conduct analysis with the participant early in the research process. When I carried a camera alongside the research participant, it became clear that we were both creating representations and doing research. Barthes' discussion of photography (1981) is useful here. The participant would explain not only the *studium,* or the ostensible subject of the photograph just snapped, but also the *punctum*, the "element that rises out of the scene" to "pierce" the viewer.

This is a significant point because, as Bruno Latour points out, we researchers are engaged in the transformation of representations themselves into research. In "Circulating References: Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Rainforest," Latour analyzes how an interdisciplinary team of researchers create a theory by taking physical samples of the soil in the rainforest, transforming them with the aid of scientific tools into data points that can support or negate a scientific hypothesis. The dirt gets pulled out of the ground and put in a suitcase that is taken out of the Amazon, much as the information the soil samples represent gets figuratively pulled out of the suitcase and turned into a report published in a scientific journal.

Latour sees these elements—the dirt, the soil samples, the scientific paper—as representations that exist in an unending chain. Going one way, Latour sees representations as being amplified. They gain compatibility, standardization, and relative universality. Going the other way on the chain, and representations are reduced. They gain particularity, materiality, and become local. Changing from one phase to another means making a trade-off between what is gained through amplification and what is lost through reduction.

My method made the shift from one phase of representation to another more visible. In so doing, it acknowledged to the participant their essential role in the research. Because we were both engaged in the act of recording, it was necessary for the participant to explain what the object behind the lens meant. Perhaps this is simply because putting a video camera in the hand of a research participant makes it clear that the participant is helping to create a representation that will have a "life of its own" separate from them. This method of collaborative and reflective representation gives the participant chance to help create—and therefore control—the representation with which their identity is inextricably linked.

Figure 2. Discussing the process. More than one participant took a picture of me, the researcher, which lead to a discussion about the research process.

At a basic level, putting a camera with an on/off switch in the hands of the participant offers a sense of direct control over the interview process, which is often taking place in their own home. In this way it might help overcome feelings of intrusion. There are obvious limits to this remapping of control—I left with the photographs and video; the participants signed a release; a third party controls the data; but these are the conditions typical of most academic and corporate research.

Cataloging with narrative. This method helps the research to be more wide ranging in subject. Home tours feel less invasive when the participant is pointing the camera, and I noticed a give and take between who is leading the tour of the home and who is following. Video is also a rich resource for generating a record which can be used to make accurate floor plans, diagrams, inventories, and so on, of the parts of the home that actually matter to the people who live there. This is a critical benefit of this method; with my background in architecture, I certainly could have created measured drawings of the home, but doing so would have been problematic, both for the time it would have taken, and for the message communicated by visibly measuring a person's home. But working from the video, I can generate a representation of the space that is arguably more accurate than the most carefully measured floor plan. My representations are shaded by the time I was able to spend engaging with the participant and understanding their relationship to the space, rather than an undifferentiated, if complete, inventory of every last object in their home.
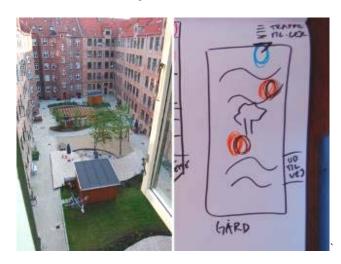
Figure 3. Multiple representations. The cognitive maps help to highlight objects of interest in the photographs and video.

It is also possible to ask the participants to create floor plans or cognitive maps *while* recording that process on video. I did this in the second interview when I asked participants to draw cognitive maps of their homes (see Lynch 1988 and Hasbrouck 2007). Comparing these maps to the video and the photographs generated in the house tours is revealing of the spaces, objects, and practices participants actually regard as important in their own homes, which come to mind first, and how these things relate to one another. Methods using probes, such as house tours, inventories, or evocative objects, do not get at personal importance as effectively. For example, one participant, Karin, explained that the significance of the photographs in her home office. Her home office is where Karin connects with her family using Skype and email on the computer, and it is where she hangs pictures of her relatives. Photographs and other things hung on the walls in other rooms are reflective of her identity and the relationship she has with her husband.   The value of the video is that the narrative that goes along with each object stays attached them to place where the object is displayed.

Findings: Understanding *Hygge*

Per: This *hyggelig* thing is very -- I've been thinking a lot about it, it's very, very difficult.

Author: Yeah.

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

Per: Yeah. Cause it is a - it's really difficult thing. It's more like - well *hyggelig* is more like - kind of like - it's a bit like music. Like you know if you play a note on the guitar, one note is just a note. If you play two notes, it could be just two notes… but when you put them together and when the sum of the two is more than just two, it's more like a symphony… it brings something more to it.

            That's kind of *hyggelig*.

            It's not one plus one adds up to two; it's more like four or five. *Hygge* builds up to something bigger. But it's just difficult to create a picture without explaining it.[1]

Hygge, really *is*, in all fairness to Per, a difficult thing to explain. As the epigraph of this paper explains, it is the kind of thing that goes away the moment one identifies it as existing. His explanation is the best I heard to explain the framework that needs to be in place for one to experience *hygge*: it is a certain kind of alchemy. Another pair of participants, Karen and Poul performed a more stereotypical version of *hygge*, but Karen went out of her way to reassure me that the *hygge* they posed for was "not a lie," but actually something they did together.

In many ways, I found that *hygge* exists much as it did when anthropologist Friedman-Hansen studied it in 1974. Changes in material culture and technology, however, do suggest a few amendments to her analysis. Friedman-Hansen suspected that it was the small size of the average Danish home that lead people to be closer to one another, and the cultural demands of *hygge* that necessitated lightweight, easily movable furniture. Danes today, including those I studied, live in relatively spacious homes, yet the proxemic aspects of *hygge* remain. *Hygge* requires closeness, either physical or psychological.

Technology can be very much part of the experience of *hygge*, especially forms of technology that are portable or easily moved, such as laptop computers, handheld radios, cell phones, and the like. Technology that enables or enhances communication with those in one's inner circle—or one's self—is likely to be viewed favorably, as is technology that can enhance safety or security, such as a cell phone carried "just in case" and turned off, so as not to disturb the moment.

Television is especially problematic in the experience of *hygge*. The experience of consuming video media can be part of *hygge*, but the television and other material of video—DVD player, wires, humming fan, glowing lights—are not. Many participants preferred to consume video media on laptop computers or on moderate size flat screen displays or with DVD players that would be taken out for the purpose—then put away afterwards.

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[1] Transcript excerpt edited for clarity.

                                                                Beyond Walking with Video

Implications for Research

Because the method requires that researcher and participant work together to create a representation, it is particularly well suited for understanding concepts such as *hygge* that involve things that slide back and forth between the material and the social world. Examples of this slide in action include aesthetic taste, as explained by Cranz (2006); Latour's explanation of how soil samples become scientific theory in "Circulating References" (1999), and the many examples of the material effects of categorization schemes in Susan Leigh Starr and Geoffrey Bowker's book *Sorting Things Out* (1999).

The video-and-photo method captures the stories behind material objects. It preserves the sense of spatial and temporal order in the home. Like other methods involving video, it shows objects and practices in context (see Ruby 2005). And, most importantly, it lets people act out ideas or show concepts that do not fit easily into words.

Figure 4. "That's not a lie." Poul and Karin performing *hygge*.

The key difference to this research method is the shift in the power dynamic between researcher and participant. More so than material probes, this method addresses concerns about the effect on research of the power differential between corporate researcher and participant by providing a way to use the camera as a technological tool to turn the research focus on place and space. This method offers numerous practical benefits, too. It provides alternative ways to practice ethnography that work well when time is limited, or where it might be difficult to build rapport with a respondent. Also, using more than one camera at a time generates a rich set of representations, and an opportunity to reflect upon the creation of those representations in the usual way—in the analysis phase of the project, after the interview is completed—and also at the very time the representations are created.

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

Because the method offers both the researcher and the participant the opportunity to reflect upon the representations they are creating together, it method is an effective way to learn about concepts that float between the material and the immaterial, or the social and the "real." By situating the material environment as the subject of the study, I found that it is possible to create deeply meaningful—and visible—representations of things that are normally invisible, such as feelings, thoughts, and expectations. Blurring the lines between subject and object can be especially beneficial when the thing being studied is one of those intangible—or invisible—things "you just have to experience yourself" in order to fully comprehend — such as *hygge*. In this way, the method is well suited for studying the kinds of taken-for-granted cultural ideals Elizabeth Shove explores in her 2003 book *Comfort, Cleanliness, and Convenience.* Put another way, these are words or concepts that may seem hackneyed or clichéd, but which still have great cultural force.

The key to the method is an interdisciplinary approach that holds that space is a key way of understanding culture and that builds on a wide-ranging set of theoretical approaches. The method works because, to use the language of Actor-Network Theory, it creates a sense of symmetry in the analysis between the researcher, the participant, and the space, objects, and practices that make up the participant's home. So, while *hygge*—like so much else—may go away as soon as it is named, that does not mean that it can not be understood.

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