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## Cultural probes

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# Cultural probes

How can qualitative and emotional aspects from users be mapped at the same time as they get something meaningful in return? This case study has developed the use of cultural probes [1] with a selection of ten families with small children in the Öresund region.

The idea was to evoke thoughts about recreation and living for the probe users while providing information and inspiration to the scientist. This has been achieved through the use of collage. The mixed compositions of images and quotations in the collages are thought to give a quick and effective overview over both what thoughts the probe users have about their home life and how they live. The collages have then been handled over to the probe users as a platform for further discussions. The probes ability to work as something enriching and beneficial to the probe users have been further developed in a new way.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The overwhelming central issue – utopian living

The idea of the recreational home – perfect living – is surrounded by strong notions of demand. An overwhelming number of the products we own and have taken to our hearts are a part of our homes. The home becomes a decisive signpost of lifestyle.

Who we are, or better yet, who we want to be will be understood and interpreted through our home interiors. This is also a fundamental reason why our homes play such an important role in our daily lives. We manifest ourselves through our homes.

We are constantly fed by the idea of “**perfect living**” in the singular (see Figure 1). How well we manage to fulfil our dreams effects our self-esteem and how we feel. It therefore makes sense to do research in this field.

Instead of leaving “perfect living” in the hands of professional interior designers and TV-programs like “Extreme make over” the probes encourage their users to reflect over their home environment by themselves in a more realistic and pragmatic way.

In this context, recreational living is, to a great extent, seen as an intellectual and cognitive phenomenon where well-being is based more upon how we experience the environment than on how it may be perceived from an “objective” perspective.

The question has been how research persons experience their homes when asked to speculate from collages with different suggested utopian interiors. Decoration and furnishing programs, magazines and products continuously mediate ideals and utopian projects that conflict and oppose each other. No one can live up to both the idea of perfect country living and that of central living in exclusive districts in the heart of the city.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CULTURAL PROBES

There are many ways to collect material about how different individuals experience their living environment. The first question is naturally how the material is going to be used. Is it going to be used for further generalisations? Is it easy to quantify? Or is it going to describe unique qualities and cases that can inspire? The perspective at hand suggests the later.

Probes have been shown to allow the use of collected material in studies similar to this one [2]. The focus is put on context rather than on specific variables, and in the end on insight and interpretation rather than trying to prove certain facts. The approach even values uncertainty.



**Figure 1: An interior magazine front page**

There is an interaction that allows subjective discoveries and interpretations [3]. Probes have, however, proven themselves to be well equipped to meet methodological obstacles that arise in different home environment settings [1]. The interpretations presented in this case study, as in all studies, are not free but focused and carefully selected. How can a probe be designed and developed to maximize the benefits and use for both probe user and researcher? In this case study the researcher wants material for inspiration and information from members of a pre-selected group: ten parents with small children. The probe users' compensation is hopefully stimulating intellectual tasks, new perspectives on their living, or even increased well-being.

#### **OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper has been written chronologically as a journey showing practical probe method work in progress as the pages goes along. But here follows some arguments and research questions and some contributions made by this study. The main part of this paper is then a report of how findings have been made. But before starting it must be pointed out that this study to a certain extent has two approaches. One that wants to further develop the cultural probe method it self, and one that focuses on how to influence and invite probe users to develop their recreational living.

Strong focus has been turned to the question: What is in it for the user?

Concerning the users the cultural probes of this study has got yet other four partly unique objectives:

1. To work as a cognitive aid for the probe user in order to take renewed control over home interior development.

2. To work as a remedy to home blindness and give the probe user awareness to draw up a home recreational diagnose.
3. To give inspiration and create new reflections that provokes new views to arise.
4. To provoke the probe user to form a well-reasoned story about home life.

If these objectives are achieved the probe users will hopefully experience higher well-being in their home environment through the new awareness about the issue recreational living and home life.

When working with the last probes the idea of a new sort of "move in probe" was awoken. It can be seen as a product without feedback to any sender. "The move in probe" has been tested but not yet developed and evaluated like the other probes in this study. The design of "the move in probe" is still more or less the same as the other probes but serves a slightly different purpose as it is given to a probe user just when moving into a new home. The objective with this form of probe is then to work as a structuring intellectual helper while moving in. Carefully prepared it may help the user to end up with better reasoned and thought-out interior solutions. In present form it may help the user to broaden and diversify decision-making concerning for example furniture layout and human contact spaces.

The last and overall objective with this practically orientated paper has been to provide other researchers with some practical guidelines and advise for future probe work and development.

#### **RESEARCH METHOD**

A traditional probe objective has been to gain information from the probe users. The knowledge obtained has then often been used for target group analyses. As mentioned before getting inspiration has also been an important objective. This study has developed a way to present information from probe users in an inspiring way through the use of collages. The mixed compositions of images and quotations in the collages are thought to give a quick and effective overview over both what thoughts the probe users have about their home life and how they live. When shown to the probe users these get engaged through new reflections.

#### **THE PROBE USERS AND THE CULTURAL PROBE METHOD**

This paper will continue with an elaboration of the cultural probe method as used in this study. Then follows an account for a pilot study, and then the study itself.

All the probe users in this study are parents with small children. They all live in the Skåne region in the south of Sweden. About half of them have university degrees, some live in cities, others in the country, some in houses others in apartments and about half are men. The selection has not been strict in a statistical sense, and it does not have to be, as the probes do not claim any statistical reproducibility. They speak, from a purely statistical point of view, of nothing but the population selected. They describe specific conditions in handpicked cases.

The reason for choosing parents with small children has been the triggering provocation that arises when they are let to compare the collage made from their home environment with the two collages made from magazines. The magazine collages have also been in the probe mixed with triggering questions about recreational living. All this in order to provoke and encourage the probe user to get emotionally involved.

There is a delicate balancing concerning the introduction of the probe to the probe users. On one hand, the opinion is that as little information as possible should be hidden from the probe user. On the other, one might profit from being slightly restrictive when describing all the details about the future analysis directions of the material. This would be done in order to avoid presentation complexity as well as influencing the probe user too much in a certain direction. Doing so is not desirable even though the amount of hints given to the probe users has increased during the development of the probe. One motivation behind this has been to steer clear of a documentary orientated probe use. But there is a clear difference for the probe user between working with a probe from a well-presented, selected theme and to try to adjust it in detail so that it fits into future analysis and theoretical approach of a study.

## PILOT STUDY

The pilot probe was considered as a sort of antenna for testing the potential of the probe material; how it was to be perceived and above all how it was going to work as a whole. This opportunity to test and check the probe was important. The probe had to be easy to handle even from a cognitive point of view and thereby also easy to properly understand (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: The exterior of the probe

The thought was initially to design the probe package in an elegant and stylish way. A black tube like the ones often used by architects for drawings and blueprints was considered. The expression was to be as objective and neutral as possible. Just a little label would appear on the outside. The idea of the black tube was later discarded in favour of a transparent soft plastic bag that looked more like a travel bag for toiletries.

It was important that the probe should be played down. It would not express the properties of an object put on a pedestal. It would better express playfulness and exhort an informal friendly use rather than express order and perfection. The expectation and hope was that the probe would be perceived as something friendly and quite fun that the user himself actively fills with meaning rather than a static collecting instrument. Initially it was desired that the transparent probe should have a playful pattern in all sorts of colours integrated in the plastic like some plastic bags for children. But the idea was abandoned because the appearance was considered to be too childish for the probe.

### Probe interior content

The probe was intentionally designed to provoke, reveal and capture some motives behind forming home life. Probes can be considered as provocative kits meant to call forth an inspiring

response from people in different habitats. Probes can be used to give insight into how people live their everyday lives [1].

The pictures in the probe collages were taken from a selection of European magazines from 2004, mostly from their front pages. The pictures are all persuasive proposals of stylistic and recreational living home environments. These intriguing interior proposals were then mixed with questions and declarative statements regarding the issue. The collages covered two A3 colour pages.

The probe also contained a 27 shot disposable camera, a pencil and 27 numbered pieces of paper (one per picture). The use of disposal cameras and note taking materials are well tested. All



Figure 3: The original probe content

the items were then packed into the probe bag (12X17X21cm); a chocolate bar and a lottery ticket were also included (see Figure 3).

The outside label on the probe was also a brief presentation where the entire project, *Rapunzel – recreational living*, is described with several catchwords.

### The user of the pilot study

A suitable home with a father and children was found after some searching. The father seemed creative and filled with ideas concerning living and furnishing. He received instructions over the telephone. The probe was delivered to his house and he was asked to keep it for three weeks. This proved to be a wise decision as he could not show the camera to any of the children without them also wanting to take photos. Because of this, it was decided that future probes would stay in the homes for about a month. This longer period has proven to work well in other studies as well [3]. When the material was eventually returned, the pictures were digitized, appropriate comments were matched to them and more general notes were listed separately.

### Pilot probe evaluation

It was highly important to optimize positive experiences and to evaluate the probe with the objective of making the findings mutually interesting for probe user and researcher.

British researchers have also pointed out the advantages of letting probe users actively take part in methodological probe development [1]. This insight has led the probe development ahead to a meta level. More about this later.

The first feedback to the probe user was to let him take part in the material when it had been put together. The first synthesis of the textual and visual material was the following A3 collage (see Figure 4).





Figure 4: The pilot study collage

## The interview

A week later the probe user was called and asked some more all-embracing “*meta questions*” concerning the probe. The idea was for us to evaluate the probe work together.

What follows are some of the questions we discussed:

- What was it like to work with the probe?
- Did it give you anything?
- What did the probe appearance express?
- Did you get any new thoughts concerning your living?
- Did the probe feel strict or more like a funny gadget?
- Did the probe work help you to see your home from a slightly new perspective?
- What was most difficult or dysfunctional with the probe work?

The following factors affected future modifications of the probe:

- The probe user wanted more guidance.
- The probe user felt bad about experienced inefficiency during probe work.
- The probe user found it difficult and time consuming to determine what to exclude from the probe.
- The disposable camera felt too definitive and static because it was impossible to edit the photos. “*A picture taken is a taken picture!*”

## Modifications of the pilot study

It felt hazardous to modify the probe after a first pilot test without restrictions. But to include the impact of newly gained experiences on the probe design felt reasonable. Some triggering questions were added, others were slightly reformulated. The altered probe focused more on encouraging continual note taking during the probe work.

After scrupulous considerations, the original disposable camera was kept in the probe. The fact that the probe users are unable to edit or look at the pictures after taking them is something of a drawback. There are yet no digitally editable low price or disposable cameras on the market and this study did not have any other ordinary digital cameras to borrow. However, in some teenage groups with a high number of mobile phones with digital cameras, probes might work very effectively through continuous SMS and sending of pictures. Possible probe designs are a broad field, though, directed by the purpose, resources and time frames present. Some studies, for example, have developed probes so complex and bulky that they could hardly fit into a large moving box. They have contained a variety of material such as digital scanners. Because of their extensive designs they have required considerable commitment from their probe users [4].

## Ethics

The totally voluntary basis of the probe work in this study has been emphasized for the probe users; it is a hopeful belief on the part of the researcher that no one has felt obliged to participate. Those taking part have been well informed about how the material gathered might be used in the future. They have also had a chance see and influence the collages. Communication with the probe users have been continual.

The collages, unfortunately, do not permit total anonymity – “But that’s Bengt’s living room!” Consequently, the users were also asked and gave their approval to use the collages in this study.

## The four next cultural probes

It became evident that the way the probes are delivered and presented is crucial. A goal has been to carry out a presentation, delivery and collecting procedure as uniform possible.

Already at first sight, the probe user perceive ideas about the probe work. In order to get direct feedback about how the probe was first perceived, all remaining probes have been handed over in person. This was also a way of connecting the probe to a face. Other scientists have had positive experiences in presenting cultural probes in person as well [2] and [5]. This gives the probe user a clearer understanding of how to execute the probe work before starting. No telephone call or letter can provide the tone and pitch of the probe better than a personal meeting. The disadvantage is that the number of probe packages it is possible to distribute is restricted due to the time consuming nature of personal appointments.

There has been an obstacle. The probe users have sometimes had difficulties taking the step from using the probe for material documentation to using it for documentation and establishment of immaterial thoughts and reflections. The probe was again scrutinized in order to manifest the importance of the personal engagement. Further encouraging probe users in this direction was a challenge before the last probes.

Three new questions were raised:

- Were the triggering questions hard to relate to?
- Was the presentation of the probe purpose unclear?
- Was it complicated to transform personal intellectual thoughts to words and pictures?
- Could the probe be made easier to work with?

To get answers to these questions was one of the topics during the compulsory telephone interviews that followed a week after the probes were collected.

The probe users had, however, no clear suggestions as how to improve the probes. But the idea to wait with sending the camera until half-time was debated and so was the idea of whether it would be a good idea to limit the number of pictures to about ten.

### **The issue**

The triggering questions are a technique to structure, exhort and invite probe users to think thoughts that they would not think otherwise, and to take pictures they would not normally take. The following is a list of the questions. In the probe they are mixed with the interior pictures mentioned before:

- What thoughts arise when you see these arranged pictures?
- How does your home appear in relation to these pictures?
- What makes you feel good? (*At home*)
- What is your sanctuary?
- Is there really such a thing as perfect living?
- What is a friendly home to you?
- Your home – a locality for service or a meeting place?
- What are you the most/least satisfied with in your home?
- Why does your home interior really look the way it does?
- How does it affect you?

The probes have gradually been updated and modified after the pilot probe; all this in order to reinforce the probes ability to problemize the issue and to provoke and evoke thoughts to arise for the probe user. The predominant objective is not to collect information, but create inspiration and dialogue – a form of mutual exchange between scientist and probe user rather than a more traditional one-way extraction of information. There are, however, different views about what purpose cultural probes ought to serve. Some argue that collecting inspiration is the most important [3]. Others emphasize that their most appropriate use is to collect information [6].

### **THE FOUR FIRST COLLAGES**

The researcher has originally put the all the collages together. The most striking sentences have then been mixed with the most interesting pictures from the probe cameras. Considered as interesting where pictures well described or commented by the probe users. Documenting pictures without any comments have been left behind. The collages have then been shown and discussed together with the probe users, in some cases the collages have then been modified.

Here follows the collages (see Figure 5,6,7,8).





Figure 5: Collage 1a





Figure 6: Collage 2a





Figure 7: Collage 3a





Figure 8: Collage 4a



### The four final cultural probes

The final modifications made were to encourage the last probe users to concentrate their picture taking to the end of their probe work and to keep the two probe collages when returning the probe. This was done to be able to refer to them as a basis for further discussions during future telephone interviews.

Finding “suitable” probe users is a delicate matter. The idea is that well-motivated probe users get more out of their probe work and also produce higher quality material than less motivated probe users do. In this study highly motivated probe users willing to truly engage themselves in probe work are wanted. What can one do then in order to accomplish this?

An inquiry was sent out in A5 format to a number of families with small children all acquainted with the first probe users. The first probe users also delivered the inquiry. Affirmative answers were then handed back to the first probe users and then, in turn, to the researcher. In some cases, the future probe users contacted the researcher by telephone. This was directed by the inquiry.

The printed inquiry becomes something of an assurance, an undefined affirmation about engagement in the future probe work. Leisure time is a precious resource that families with small children seldom have in surplus (see Figure 9).

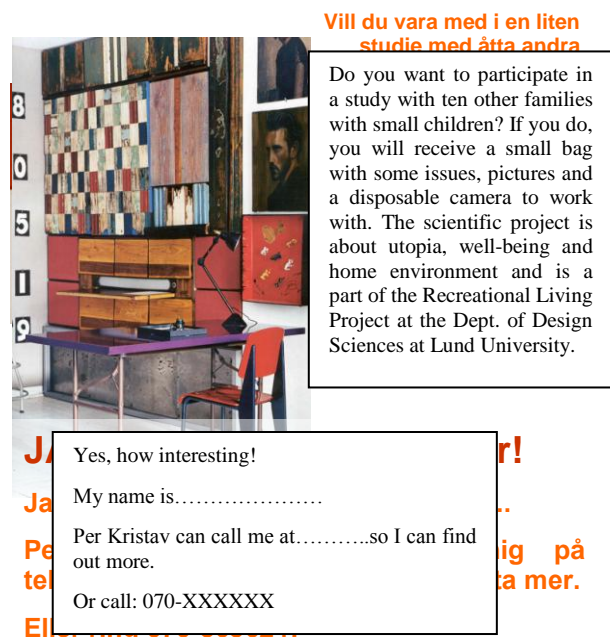


Figure 9: A5 inquiry

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The probe users have expressed that the probes have been an inspiring experience.

The probe content has shown able to work as an activator to revitalise reflections concerning recreation. The collages have been a source for both laughter and reflection

According to the probe users the probe work has helped them to form a story about their home environment. The meta purpose to bring the issue to life has been fulfilled. Some probe users have also described how they started to experience their home life in a slightly new way. One probe user described how he got renewed control over interior development in his home after being able to pinpoint some factors that before had been hidden to him. Other probe users describes how the probe work has worked as a cure against

home blindness. The probes seems to have helped the probe users to distance themselves to their home interiors.

Two quotations below:

”The hall again, does it look worse in the camera or do I see it with new eyes?”

”It seems like it */(the probe)* makes the familiar strange to me!”

Yet another probe user told that he now will stop the gradual development from aesthetics to functionalism in his home. He have decided that he needs a aesthetic spot in his home in order to relax from effectiveness and stress. This probe user has reached awareness enough to draw up a home recreational diagnose and cure.

When looking at the collages one gets a clear picture that it is the unique details in the home that is important when it comes to recreation. The custom-built features gives self-esteem and wellbeing. The feeling of being able to influence the home environment in a unique way. The probe users also talks about “smart solutions” as something important for well-being. This is interesting as the probe users more often describe well-being something like this woman below:

“I feel comfort here at home when I feel that the children feel good, that creativity got enough room, when the atmosphere at home feel fun and cosy. This can not be possible in a cold home locking like an exhibition where perfectionism and cleanliness is more important than anything else.”

The probes in this study have fulfilled the objective to work as a cognitive aid for probe users in order to take renewed control over home interior development. They have inspired the probe users to new creative thoughts and to reflect more actively upon their home interior environment.

Some probe users have written down short stories about how their home came to be and why it is like it is today. The inviting provocations of the two magazine collages have also made the probe users form about their home interiors. This have also helped them to draw up a home recreational diagnose.

The idea to further develop the “move in probe” is in progress. The objective of this form of probe is then to work as a structuring intellectual helper while moving in. Carefully prepared it may help the uses to end up with better reasoned and thought-out interior solutions in the future. In present form it may help the user to broaden and diversify decision-making concerning for example furniture layout and human contact spaces.

There might also be many new applications for cultural probes working with this new form of collages and a user centred approach. One idea is to let workers map perceived risks or moments of discomfort in their working environment while working.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

IKEA Stitching foundation

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