Mapping for Mindsets of Possibility
During Home Downsizing

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Abstract

How can design orient people to an expanded sense of future possibility? Design researchers are beginning to recognize design's potential role not solely in producing products, services and strategies but, instead, in shifting mindsets and behaviors. This shift requires a different view of the design practice, from engaging users to gather insights to be implemented, to that process as the actual material of the design. Borrowing from the framework of practice-oriented design, a first step in these processes is expanding participants' understanding of future possibilities. In opening future possibilities, one recognizes an expanded range of futures and, ideally, engages in dialog with other people and their range of possibilities. This paper introduces mapping activities that are intended to reframe participants' perception of possible futures. This study conducted pilot workshops with participants who were downsizing their home and struggling with decisions about their things and spaces. This paper argues that working with people already engaged in life transitions such as downsizing presents a rich opportunity for these futuring methods, as they are already beginning to grapple with designing for possible futures. These methods provide a stake in the ground for future exploration of potential methods to engender mindsets of possibility and engage in trialing methods like living labs.

collaborative design, practice-orientated design, mapping, design process, futures

If the work of design is to build futures, then the work for designers is not only to build these futures independently but to engage the public in constructing these futures. This role of designer-as-facilitator creates new tasks for the designer and requires a new understanding of the role of design research. The designer must not simply use participation of the public to gather insights to implement a final product, service or strategy, but must expand people's concept of future possibilities. Much of the time, decision-making involves uncontemplated assumptions about the present state and expectation that current trajectories will persist. In opening future possibilities, one recognizes an expanded range of futures and, ideally, engages in dialog with other people and their range of possibilities.

This ability to open discussion and potential in participants has long been a latent component of exploratory design research methodology. Recently, with methods like living labs and practice-oriented workshops, designers have begun to acknowledge that the artifacts of design can be a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. This reconceptualization of design recognizes the dynamic nature of people's practices and routines and the role of design artifacts in enacting change in them. In "Living the (Co-Design) Lab," (Binder et al., 2011, p. 3) the researchers find that "design games thus became the nexus that made the design laboratory cross over from user research to design exploration. The games had a similarity to affinity diagrams and other diagramming methods usually associated with the analysis of field material." Here the subjects become the researchers working to understand and shape their own lives. In this framing, the designer's new role is to create environments for transitioning to new practices. Workshops that once were intended to gather information are now reframed as spaces to create shifts in

understanding and practice.

Designers taking up social practice theory or exploring living labs typically attempt to encourage transition from one practice to another. However, people already engaging in life transitions, such as downsizing their home, present a rich opportunity for designers to support this type of futuring. Downsizers are already beginning to contemplate futures, though this may be limited in scope. Having recently left (or considering leaving) the workforce and with homes newly empty of children while looking out to future health changes, downsizers are considering how they can match their surroundings to their changing selves. With more than 25% of the over-50 population making at least one housing transition and those below the age of 75 moving the most (Painter & Lee, 2009), this is a particularly rich moment to explore as a case study.

A key part of this new reframing is opening up participants to have a more expansive view of future possibilities. Mapping exercises are often used by designers to gather and understand their participants' values. But such exercises also have the potential to do this work of expanding futures. Using the case of several mapping workshops with people who were downsizing their home, I will demonstrate the potential for design methods to open up participants to an expanded range of future possibilities.

Literature Review

Approach

The conventional design process still maintains a division between the end user, research participant and the designer (Kjærsgaard & Otto, 2012). In participatory design, though the methods "utilize the skill-based but often tacit knowledge of users about their own (work) practices directly in the design process in order to create more appropriate and democratic technological solutions for the user," the designer will still synthesize these findings independently (Kjærsgaard & Otto, 2012, p. 79). Under these frameworks, participants are engaged in the research process, but only in that they will provide information and insights for the designer to incorporate into a final design, service or strategy. However, designers have begun to acknowledge that design can play a role in creating shifts in perception and routine which itself can be the outcome of a design process.

Shove (2007), a founder of practice-oriented design, describes how, in the shift from product-oriented design to human-centered design, the understanding of values is reconceived. She writes, "rather than a design(er) led process in which products are imbued with values for consumers to discover and respond to, proponents of this more radical form of user-centred design argue that traffic flows both ways" (Shove, 2007, p. 133). In practice-oriented design this is taken a step further. User needs are not innate and discoverable through design research but instead are formed as one engages in a routine or practice (Scott, 2011). In this reframing, engaging in a design workshop shapes one's needs as much as it reveals one's needs.

The desired outcome for the process moves from a product, service, or strategy to a shift in practice. For example, designers who have begun to explore the implications of practice-oriented design with an eye toward sustainability often have reduced water consumption as their desired outcome (Scott et al., 2011; Kuijer, 2014). Because the outcome is not a product, service, or strategy, but rather a change of practice or routine, workshops that would have been exclusively

intended for research gathering become sites of exploration. These researchers have employed methods like living labs where participants, rather than designers, are able to reexamine their existing habits and trial new ones. These workshops and experiments "apply the social methods of disruption to everyday routines in order to render visible the objects and settings of everyday life" to the participants rather than the researchers (Marres, 2012, p. 79). In other words, through these experiments, participants trial alternative lifestyles.

While practice-oriented methods provide the mechanism for exploring and enacting shifts in routine, they assume a participant who already has a mindset toward an open framing of the space. These researchers reconsider the role of the participant, but they assume the participant is already in tune with the intentions of the workshop. But this is not necessarily the case. Participants may not yet be open to different ways of living. In other words, before trialing a particular shift, how do people adopt the worldview that the future is open to shifting?

In Scott et al.'s (2011) model for practice-oriented design, futures are first opened up and then closed, as the participant selects and trials an alternative practice. They refer to this as a "continuous alternation between discursive and practical modes" (Scott et al., 2011, p. 7). In this research, I am most interested in the opening up and discursive mode. The living lab provides a model for the practical mode but there are fewer precedents for the discursive mode — perhaps because as designers we are most interested in diving into the *doing*. Nevertheless, without first opening up possibilities through the discursive mode, the exploration will not stray from the present reality.

In "Ethnographies of the Possible," (Halse, 2013) Halse argues that anthropologists should reorient themselves from concerns of the *now* toward *activating futures*. In arguing for this shift, he describes the design methodology — participatory prototyping workshops — he has used. He argues that, while these methods sound tenuous in the abstract, they become potent when used in concrete scenarios where futures are contested and disputed both internally and between stakeholders. They can provide a means of negotiating these conflicting possible futures. Designers can take ownership of these methods.

Why Downsizing

In order to understand the problem space, I conducted exploratory research that involved interviews and a cultural probe — a set of seven pamphlets to be completed over seven days tracking how participants associated practices, things and the process of ridding (Figure 1). Eight people who were or had recently downsized their home were interviewed and three completed the probe. I conducted two phases of interviews with eight participants. Three of the participants were men and five were women. Seven were above the age of 50. Five were retired and three were still working. All participants were engaged in a voluntary downsizing.
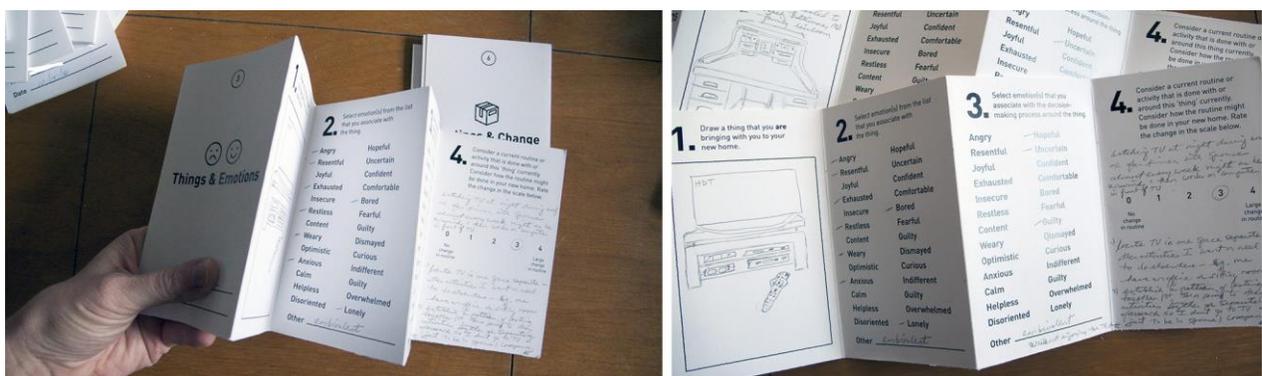
Figure 1: Cultural probes sent to participants beginning the process of downsizing their homes.

One approach to encouraging a mindset of open possibility is to work with people who are in moments of transition. When people are downsizing their home or having their first child, not only is their entire network of things changing, but their routines and practices are as well. Though often recognized by marketers as rich moments for intervention (Hill, 2012), life transitions are often neglected by designers who see their participants as static. Designers working under the framework of social practice theory have begun to counter this, but typically use design methods to create moments of transition rather than working within existing transitions (Scott et al., 2011; Kuijer, 2014).

Life transitions are a rich time in which to work because typically static routines and practices shift. Change in enough practices opens the entire fabric of networked practices to shift (Shove, 2012). During the process of inventorying and sorting, downsizers are very directly considering their things as well as their practices. This creates a window of opportunity to enable downsizers to reflect on how they are shifting their practices. Once they have completed their downsize, the window of opportunity will have closed and downsizers will re-establish a new network of things and practice patterns. These practices will no longer be so susceptible to change.

In these moments of transition, people are already wrestling with visions for their future. To think that the idea of 'futuring' would be something that is entirely brought by the design facilitator is, of course, naive. The downsizers I worked with were in a state in-between significant changes in their lives. Many had recently left the workforce (or were considering doing so) and had children who had recently moved away. Though they were all in good health, they were beginning to plan for future health deterioration. Through the downsizing process they hoped to match their surroundings to their changing selves. One downsizer I worked with relayed that the best advice he received during the process was to "envision the life he wanted to live." Downsizers are going about understanding their futures in different ways.

More evidence of futuring can be found in the different ways downsizers plan for change. While some downsizers making this change during the retirement years see this as a 'final' (or what one of Shove's own participants described as a "future proof") change, others consider platformed aspects of the change (Shove, 2012, p. 30). For one interviewee, the first downsize is an opportunity to purge her and her husband's life of possessions and move to a more central location in the city. Then they would search for a 'home base' from which they could travel throughout the majority of the year. Downsizing is a moment in time when people are actively reflecting on how to construct their lives to fit both their present and future selves.

Downsizers do this work of futuring in relation to things. While discussing ridding themselves of things and moving, Gregson (2012) writes that "...destruction relates to the perceived impossibility (rather than possibility) of gifting… It requires the divestor to project these things into another social context (either known or imagined) and - project themselves into this context" (p. 102). As downsizers consider things that they will not bring with them, where that thing will end up is often determined by if they can envision it with another person. Things they can envision their friends and family using are given higher priority. These will be given away. Lower priority are items they can envision someone else (but not someone they know) using.

These will be sold. Items which they can envision someone using but not in any specific way will be donated. And finally, objects without envisionable practices will be trashed. In doing this sorting work, downsizers must imagine how things impact and fit into a person's life. Or as Gregson indicates in the quote, sorting and ridding asks the downsizer to envision themselves living this alternative lifestyle. This act of envisioning, perhaps, can be nurtured and supported.

Additionally, the downsizers I spoke with were not exclusively concerned with their own future circumstances and practices. A nearly universal experience that my participants spoke of was previously supporting a family member through the downsizing process. Nearly every downsizer I talked to had a story about the painful experience of helping someone part with their things. Often, according to downsizers, there were far too many things and the older downsizers were too attached. Their move was not voluntary (as is that of all of my participants), but required, as they were often moving from their homes to a retirement community. After reflecting on this experience, many downsizers told me that they did not want to inflict this experience on their own children. They wanted to reduce their possessions now in order to spare their children that same experience of having to sort through things that were not their own and they had not accumulated themselves. Downsizers demonstrated that they were downsizing not just to create a more comfortable or convenient life but also to improve the life of the next generation. This seems to be an opportunity, or at least an indication, that while the downsizers did not talk about their downsizing in terms of increased environmental sustainability, they might be open to the concept if framed in this way.

Yet while downsizers are futuring, they do not have the tools to adequately envision and explore the changes that they are embarking on. Regarding the process, one participant said, "It's kind of 'chicken and the egg.' I don't know how much to get rid of before I know where we're going to move." Rather than shutting down areas of possibility with tools that help downsizers know what to get rid of, this is an example of a moment where design can open up the range of possibilities that people can envision. This mindset of open possibility is a first step toward a person reconceiving their environment and practices. As Halse (2013) points out, "they will rarely rest assured that 'the world could be different,' at least not with the addendum 'in principle'" (p. 191). Instead, this work of creating mindsets of open possibility will allow people to explore different futures, whether independently or through designer-facilitated living labs or other workshops.

Research Methods

The initial workshops were conducted with four downsizers from the initial exploratory research. This included two women and a married couple. All workshops were conducted independently in the homes of the participants in the suburbs of Washington, DC and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The workshops intended to work with existing contested changes that the participants were considering undergoing during their downsizing process. These ranged from the placement of a garage to storage space.

The workshop sessions lasted roughly an hour, consisting of three activities centered about these contested, potential changes. The first activity involved framing the problem. To frame the

problem, participants were asked to describe their current situation, and then describe a preferred situation and what the situation would look like to achieve this. Then participants used this proposed solution to create a *wicked solution map* (Figure 2). Wicked *problem* maps (sometimes described as system maps of wicked problems) recognize that problems are embedded in a network of related problems and attempt to map that network (Irwin & Kossoff, 2017). The wicked *solution* map instead intends to map the network of repercussions for any given solution.
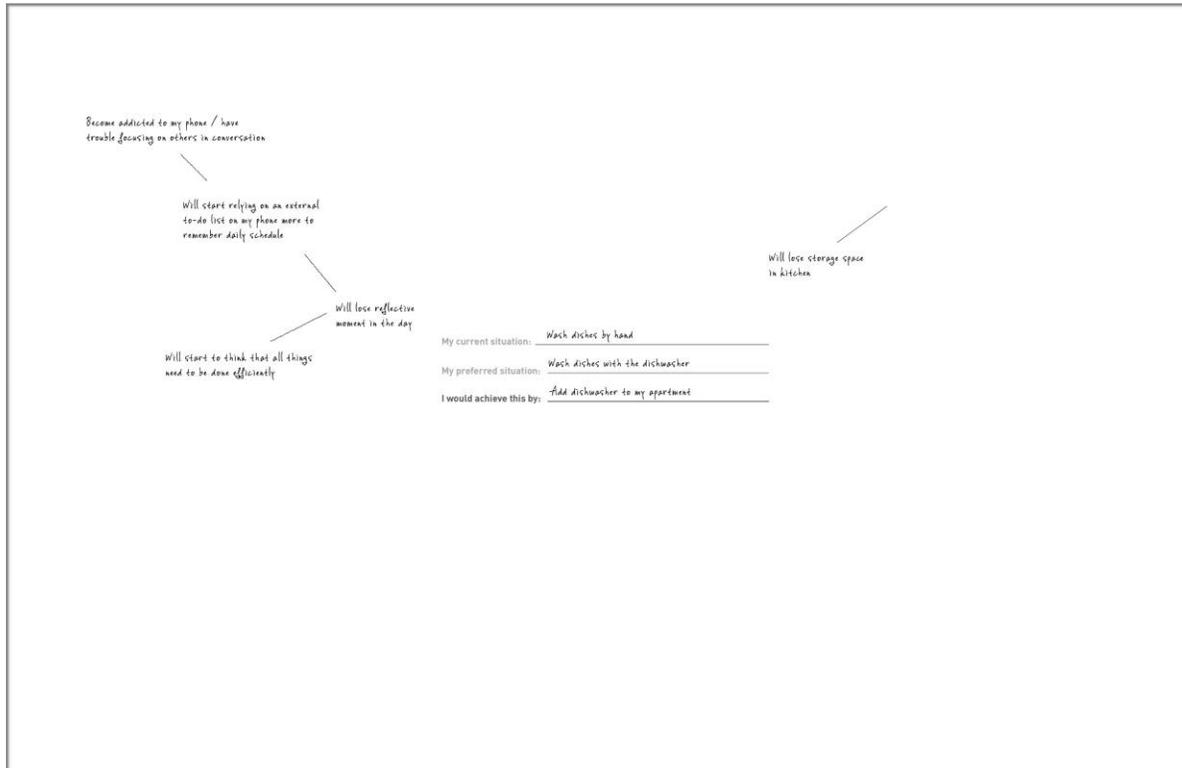

Figure 2: Example of a partially completed wicked solution map around the issue of 'having to wash dishes by hand'

The exercise is intended to encourage participants to think more broadly about unintended consequences as well as trade-offs in design choices and practice shifts.

The participants were then asked to take the current situation and reassess how they might address their dissatisfaction with it if they were presented with different values and constraints. These were represented by a 2x2 matrix (Figure 3). Along one axis ran good health vs. bad health and along the other 'value thrift' vs. 'value abundance.' This encouraged participants to reframe their problem with the support of the limited framework (to provide both a starting point and avoid overwhelming the participant with possibility).

Figure 3: Example of a partially completed 2x2 matrix addressing the issue of 'having to wash dishes by hand'

In the third activity, participants were given cards depicting ways in which people downsized (i.e. into a 'tiny house' or into an 'intergenerational community'). To create familiarity with these downsizing outcomes, participants were asked to arrange the cards according to how similar they were to the participants' vision for their downsize. Then participants were prompted with the idea that each of these ways of downsizing embodies a particular set of values. The participants were then asked to describe how someone with this particular set of values might resolve their dissatisfaction with the problem (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Participants sorting cards and adding descriptions of problem solutions for each value set.

Discussion

These mapping exercises provide a means to reveal and explore unconsidered futures. These methods and tools are not intended to be applied as-is to each decision that needs to be made during the downsizing process. Instead, they are intended to provide a reframing of the process of problem-solving and decision-making. They are a framework to explore 'how things could be otherwise.' By moving back and forth between the frame of one's own preferences, choices and values and alternative preferences, choices and values, participants are given new ways to consider and articulate futures.

For some, the activities led to concrete shifts in their understanding of the problem space. For one participant, the third activity led to an entire reframing of her problem. In the first activity she had proposed that the scenario that she was dissatisfied with was having to walk to her car in the cold winter. Her proposed resolution was to move into a home with an attached garage. During the card sorting activity she found that every solution she was proposing involved living without a car (even those she associated closely with her own desired downsizing outcome). While she recognized constraints keeping her from realizing this outcome, she had a new frame for the problem.

At the same time, the frameworks helped participants develop possibilities that they would not have thought of previously. For example, brainstorming ideas for the quadrant of the 2x2 matrix that she did not associate herself with, the participant discussing ideas for her walk to her garage developed presently actionable solutions. She thought someone might start wearing shoe grips to walk to the garage in the snow. She realized she could actually start doing this now before she had downsized and exclaimed, "I don't know why I didn't think of this before!"

For others, these methods may not manifest as a direct reframing of a particular problem but as new ways to communicate (with oneself and others) about existing unresolved concerns. It creates a space to discuss previously unspoken concerns between affected parties. For the couple who performed the activity together, completing each activity was much more challenging than with the individual participants. Both had different responses to the activities and even different interpretations of the prompt. Each also had drastically different thoughts on how they were currently and ought to be solving the problem they decided to frame in the first activity. One participant thought that they ought to be adding more space to their home to accommodate their possessions while the other believed the solution involved better organization and discarding of current possessions. Through the initial framing and mapping activity they discussed and decided both activities would need to be involved in the process of downsizing. However, they were able to negotiate and determine that adding additional space would take precedence.

For those who do not reframe their decision-making, the activities are most valuable as prompts for discussion around contested futures. For example, Kjærsgaard and Otto (2012) as argue, when realizing that the children involved in their playground future study were not making innovative prototypes, "children and designers did not have to see the same things in these props. They were merely intended to serve as a common ground for negotiating design ideas from different perspectives" (Kjærsgaard & Otto, 2012, p.182). Just as Kjærsgaard and Otto (2012) understand that the participant and the designer do not have to see the same thing, neither do the participants themselves. In fact, the materials provide a space for negotiating these contested ideas, beliefs and understandings that might have otherwise gone unspoken. However, as became

evident, these activities are most useful when all parties involved in the contested space are present. While they are helpful for sorting out and expanding one's own conception of the possible, they gain their power when facilitating the conversation between many.

Conclusion

This initial workshop serves to put a stake in the ground to demonstrate the potential of how design mapping methods can be applied in the service of creating an expanded range of future possibilities in participants. The maps are not intended as research material for the designer but instead are intended to support participants in their process of transition that is modeled by practice-oriented design. The workshops demonstrate the potential of working with participants who are already in periods of transition rather than forcing transition.

While the sample size was small, the workshops demonstrate that the mapping exercises can both expose participants to previously unconsidered potentials and serve as a point of negotiation between parties. It would be worthwhile to consider the role that these exercises could have for a group of participants who are navigating similar issues such as downsizing. Scott et al. (2011) argue that working in collaborative groups this way could provide three benefits:

1. Provide 'legitimacy' to challenges to normative practices

2. Create mutual 'trust' around stepping outside of social boundaries

3. Motivate participants as they implement or explore these potentials (p. 286)

Just as with the married couple, utilizing these methods with collaborative groups may reveal additional benefits.

Applied in this manner, design research methods, once applied by designers to frame the problem space for themselves, have new purpose and an end in and of themselves. Just as Halse (2013) argues for a new role for anthropological ethnography, so too can design research methods be tasked to explore contested spaces to "materializing ideas, concerns, and speculations… crafting accounts that link the imagination to its material form… and creating artifacts that allow participants to revitalize their pasts, reflect upon the present and extrapolate into possible futures" (p.194). A mindset of open possibility will prepare people to engage with previously unexploited futures, especially relevant in contested spaces like issues of sustainability, both independently or through designer-facilitated living labs or other workshops.

This paper has proposed concrete methods for creating mindsets of possibility in the scenario of downsizing. A full repertoire of methods and tools that can be used to open up futures can be developed from this initial pilot. Though an open mindset of possibility and an opening of discussion around contested issues could be the intended outcome of these methods (as in this case study), these methods could also be integrated into a more traditional human-centered design process with a product, service or strategy outcome. Once design research methods have been reconceptualized in this way, the challenge remains to explore their potential.

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