

Title

Lockdown, Design Project, and the Politics of Home

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Bio Note

Geethika is a fourth year Bachelor of Design Student, specialising in Exhibition design. She is from a middle class, upper-caste, liberal household. At the time of lockdown, she was living with her nuclear family in a semi-urban region in Kerala, initially with no access to internet and with regular power supply failures owing to the area being flood prone.

Tanishka is a faculty member, teaching in Exhibition design for the last fourteen years. She was brought up in an upper middle class, upper-caste, liberal household in Delhi. At the time of lockdown, she was with her husband and daughter in the IIMA campus in Ahmedabad, where they have been living together as a nuclear family.

Abstract

In this paper the authors will reflect on time management and the blurring of spatial and temporal lines between work and home. We will draw on ideas of gender performance to make sense of the power dynamics within the physical boundaries of 'home' that we experienced while engaged in a teaching-learning relationship during the recent lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic. The authors will try to describe their individual and collective experiences recorded in meeting notes, emails, and WhatsApp messages in the context of their dependence on technology and digital media for transitioning from a previously studio based, hands-on method of learning. We will talk about how this process leads each of us to re-evaluate the boundaries between 'professional' and 'personal' as the physicality of these boundaries dissipate. During this time, the authors were engaged in discussions on a narrative design project that one of the authors (Geethika) chose to work on under the mentorship of the second author (Tanishka). The Project was to redesign an existing utensil museum in Ahmedabad through a feminist paradigm with an

objective to spark dialogue and instigate social reform on the concept of gendered labour. The student aimed to design narratives that urge society to steer past dogmatic binaries to accommodate the desires and agency of individuals. The project became a pivot for deeper reflections on the experiences that the authors were going through being at 'home'. Finally, we will discuss our personal and shared reflections on the politics that play out in a shared and emotionally charged space such as 'home' where preordained schedules are presently more or less dissolved. In this paper the authors will reflect on time management and the blurring of spatial and temporal lines between work and home. We will draw on ideas of gender performance to make sense of the power dynamics within the physical boundaries of 'home' that we experienced while engaged in a teaching-learning relationship during the recent lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

feminist design, gender performance, politics of home

Introduction

In our move from teaching-learning in the shared space of the physical environment of the exhibition design studio to the distant spaces of homes many things changed for both the authors. In this paper, we consider two aspects of this change. Firstly, we look at our ability to communicate and carry on the teaching-learning process through mobile communication devices and internet connectivity, which lead us to the question, how do we negotiate the boundaries between 'professional' space and 'personal' space as the physicality of these boundaries dissipate? Secondly, being in this situation, we look at the impact of our gender performance in the home, on our conversations about the narrative design project.

As women, learning and teaching in the relatively progressive environment of the NID campus, we perform our 'gender' in ways that are acceptable to us. In this paper, we draw on Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity, which suggests that we are embodied individuals, propagating particular ways of doing gender, often unthinkingly. This idea of gender resides in repeated words and actions, that both shape and are shaped by the bodies of real, flesh-and-blood human beings.¹ As we move from the professional space of the studio to the fluid space of our homes, we see our privilege in our words and actions, and begin to reconsider our shared conception of 'gendered labour' in the narrative design project.

The Design Studio environment and the Narrative design project

¹ Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.

During this time, the authors were engaged in discussions on a narrative design project as part of the third-year exhibition design curriculum. When the project commenced in late February 2020, COVID-19 was only a news-item about a rapidly spreading viral disease in Wuhan, China. The authors, along with the third year Exhibition design batch of 12 students went about visiting museums and working in their studio spaces as primary and secondary research ensued. The first author (Geethika) worked under the mentorship of the second author (Tanishka). By the third week of the course, Geethika chose to work on redesigning the narrative of the VECHAAR Museum² through a feminist paradigm with an objective to spark dialogue and instigate social reform on the concept of gendered labour. Her aim at that point was to design narratives that urge society to steer past dogmatic binaries to accommodate the desires and agency of individuals.

All the kitchen utensils were “gender artefacts” in my opinion. I was reading some feminist research writing from the KMC (Knowledge Management Center) on campus. I was also able to dig up the original ‘Vechaar’ publication from there as well, owing to the museum owner/designer’s connection with NID. I attempted to approach the topic pedagogically, indulging in semi-autobiographical conversations about gender and domestic labour with peer group and faculty members. The authors in their review sessions often discussed house-work and patriarchal mindsets based on personal accounts too, apart from academic discourse on the fleshing out of a cohesive narrative and tools for doing the same.

The students had worked in small groups to build a shared understanding of the museum as a space experienced by them, museum processes defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and a critical understanding of the museum as a colonial institution of ‘knowledge control’.³ This was achieved by engaging in both secondary research, reading texts, and field visits to the museums in Ahmedabad. Presentations and discussions on views that were emerging were conducted in the physical studio space. While there is a continuous use of technology to share and present in the work, within the space of the design studio there are also tangible presentations that occupy the studio space at various stages and continue to remain visible throughout.

While I worked in isolation at home with no access to the internet (which was recently solved by a fibre net connection), I missed listening to my classmates’ mid-week presentations. Not only were they insightful, observing how others worked on their personal yet similar briefs also served as starting points for tangential thinking. As ‘social distancing’ became the new buzzword, people became more active on social media than before and far more enthusiastic about sharing their work digitally. But I hardly get to witness the processes anymore. I miss

² This Museum in Ahmedabad was set up by the entrepreneur and collector Surendra P. Jain to display his collection of utensils from Gujarat and other parts of India, and was curated by the well-known anthropologist and a former director of the [National Crafts Museum](#), Jyotindra Jain.

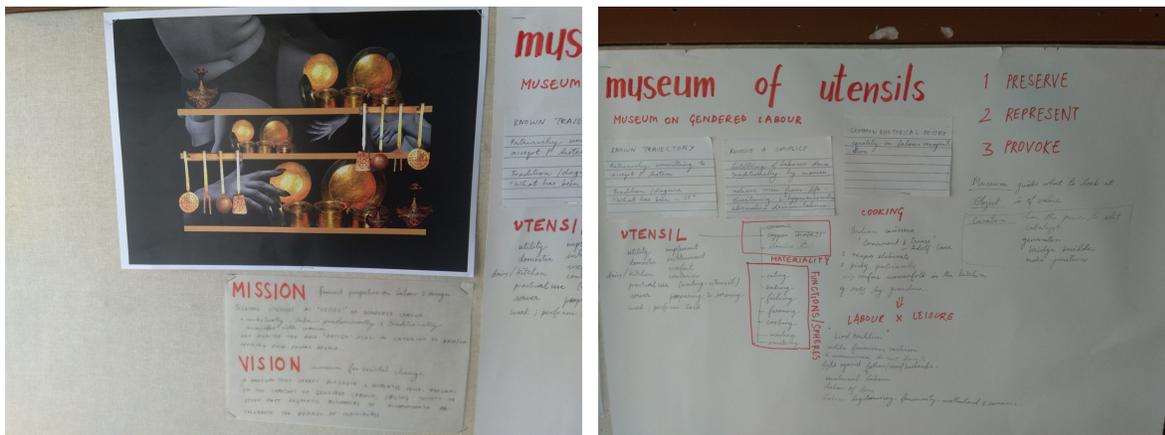
³ Mathur, Saloni and Singh, Kavita (2017) No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia. New Delhi, Routledge.

being in a space devoid of a 14 year old's memorabilia (my younger sister and I share a common study area at home). There was something about the studio space and its inhabitants and their activities that made it a conducive environment for learning and doing. Productivity slumped as the environment changed.

Moving Home

It was at this stage precisely in mid-March, when the nation-wide lockdown was imminent, students were asked to vacate the on-campus hostel. Faculty and staff continued to work, making sure all the students were able to make their way home safely until the nation-wide lockdown was finally declared from 24th March. At this time the institute also declared an indefinite closure and the campus was made inaccessible to all but its faculty and staff residents. The author (Tanishka) not being a campus resident was also unable to access her office space for the next 8 weeks.

I collected stuff from the studio, photographed the physical mind-map as there was not much physical content relating to the project to be carried home except for a notebook, sketchbook, laptop, and paraphernalia.



Making space for work and the politics of home

As we were geographically separated and no longer able to occupy the physical spaces of our usual teaching-learning environment, we no longer had access to the same infrastructure and resources. Firstly, our communication became dependent on mobile and internet-based devices and secondly, we had to make space for work in two very different home environments. During this time, the author (Tanishka) was residing on the campus of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad. As a campus resident she had the advantage of a robust infrastructure that provided electricity and access to hi-speed Wi-Fi based internet continuously. The author (Geethika) moved to her family home in Kozhikode in Kerala. Being in a semi-urban, domestic setting meant little to no access to the internet with bad network connectivity and frequent power outages.

At this stage, the project required me to invest some more time in the research, and as I started off parallelly with conceptualisation, a stable internet connection was necessary for both research as well as communication. My transition from an urban, resource-rich, academic setting to a rural/semi-urban, domestic space with erratic phone and data connectivity was less than smooth. The inability to access information and communicate online gradually led to a feeling of incapacitation and sluggishness. Efforts were made to alleviate the situation upto no immediate relief. Increased involuntary leisure time meant increased expectations from family members who live away from me to make daily calls.

I share my sister's bedroom who was the sole permanent resident of the space until I moved in. Both of us feel a lack of privacy. Her study area has been encroached by me. Somehow my 5 books and journal and box of paints take up the prime position on the table while her piles of books are strewn on the floor underneath the table. In our home we have an obvious lack of space and storage. And in a situation like this, who gets the "prime" spots is created by and in turn results in power politics. Whose learning is more important?

Housework and the anxiety of making sure our family had all the supplies required for the extended periods of lockdown took up most of my time and mental space in the first two weeks. Being confined at home, with no outside help to cook, clean and wash required some negotiation between the three of us to settle into a routine. The burden of the chores being shared by the two adults meant that I had very little time in a day to spend on 'work'. By the third week, I also realised that despite living in a spacious three-bedroom house with enough private space for each of us, I did need to set up a defined space for work. I took a large unused table and placed it next to my bedroom window as my new workspace. I am sitting at this table as I write this.

Doing our share of household duties

Being home during the lockdown has changed a lot of things for someone who lived blissfully detached and rarely homesick in a college hostel. Having been conveniently aloof from domestic chores for years, this blurring of lines between 'college' and 'home' gave me an opportunity to indulge in domestic duties first-hand. It felt serendipitous to an extent since the project I was working on was enriched by a keen observation of my working mother maneuvering her domestic duties as well.

Both my parents go to work most days during the lockdown and economically sustain the family through "shared responsibilities", yet household chores are my mother's by default and whatever the rest of us do is "allotted" and oftentimes considered a favour. Leisure time is when I normally take up household chores such as tackling the ever-growing pile of washed clothes, cooking dinner etc. On those days when achan⁴ is home, amma⁵ is complaining about having to

⁴ 'Father' in Malayalam

⁵ 'Mother' in Malayalam

spend extra efforts in the kitchen. He demands that the biryani be perfectly cooked and the mutton be marinated the way “his mother” does (cue patronisation of an overworked, under-appreciated mother who is typically a home-maker and holding one’s wife against this ideal of an uncomplaining milking cow). Extra time for women at home meant more time spent in the kitchen cooking up a feast. Amma is always complaining how her body aches more on holidays than on the days she is in her clinic...

From my mother’s perspective “working” is better than working at home. Now that we do not have any pre-ordained routines, how do we redesign our schedules to alleviate gender roles within the boundaries of our homes? How do we unlearn these roles?

The author (Geethika) worked on her narrative with a definition of museums to be institutions that display power by facilitating visibility for women in their domestic spheres to tell their stories through the objects on display in the museum. In theory, it is the exertion of the designer's privilege of identity⁶, belonging to a segment of the society that has a strong sense of itself and represents experiences that may not fully and personally be theirs. A lot of the insights that informed the narrative for the museum were being informed by the personal experiences of people other than the designer herself through this self-propelled act of representation. These observations of the author’s own mother, neighbours and others who were interviewed qualitatively gave rise to a dilemma. She worked on a project with a narrative of dignifying domestic labour stressing on alleviating the responsibilities from the woman’s shoulder while on the other hand, she unflinchingly exercised her privilege in selectively sharing only those chores that she enjoyed and that too only when she felt that she had the time to spare. “I have classes” and “I’m working” were convincing scholastic excuses in a setting that validates the same. The reality was that one could fall back onto the service of another.

Long Hours and Family obligations

Working/learning remotely is time consuming. Things that could be resolved (when it came to discussions, doubts about software, etc.) in person within minutes from faculty or peer group members now took more time (googling, making appointments for calls, scheduling meetings etc.). Same applies for live online classes as well. Things that would be discussed within hours in the studio interspersed with chai breaks now became 6-7-hour long sessions. As most events are global by default these days, there is increased discourse with a ‘global’ panel in ungodly hours.

Home – an emotionally charged space and mental health

Being in a stressful work environment was always an excuse to NOT take calls and distress calls were made only in matters of utmost urgency. I depended on my mother for support only while going through a heartbreak or worse. The role of family and friends and whom I depend on and

⁶ Dubin, Steven C (1999) Displays of power: memory and amnesia in the American museum, *The Postmodern Exhibition: cut on the bias, or is Enola Gay a verb?*, New York

whom I call as part of a courtesy or to maintain the relationship has almost completely reversed for me. Now that I'm home having bridged the physical distance, I share more work related issues with my mother and "being stressed out" calls for a hug or some heart to heart conversation in place of dismissal of calls. Similarly, for my adolescent sister, having me around is both irritating as well as helpful. Being considerably tech literate in comparison and having not too much of a generation gap with her makes me a good enough "mentor". Now I experience what it must be like to be a day scholar.

Relationships undergo flux as spaces and physical proximity changes but at the same time, owing to our dependency on technology, reduced desire and stimulus to connect socially on top of not seeing people face to face has made evasion and procrastination easier.

Gender performance and roles

My gender performance is limited within the bounds of my home and the couple of times I have ventured outside either for a walk or to buy groceries. While in college, clothes I wore each day were decided based on that day's activity. Is it appropriate for sourcing materials from Teen Darwaza? Will I look respectable to the vendor? Will my outfit garner unwanted attention? Am I covering up enough to go to the Sunday Market while avoiding being groped in public? Is my clothing and shoes protective enough for the workshops? Although I share my space today with my family and its very own orchestra of gendered performances, I am relieved from a constant reminder of my bodily existence. While I miss interacting with people other than close family, I enjoy this body-less existence.

Patriarchal ego decides minute life decisions more these days than while living solo and the gravity of the lockdown and safety guidelines restricts any possibility of evasion. Investing in a fibre net connection was a tedious task owing to a strained relationship with achan who chose to perform his patriarchal agency precisely when it was uncalled for.

Conclusion

Many of our teaching-learning conversations highlighted to us ways in which our gender performance in the space of the home was different from the professional space of the studio. Having to reschedule times for our conversation as household work spilled and took over was one of the prominent aspects. These aspects of private life, rarely shared between the learner and teacher, became more than relevant in this situation. As we found ourselves sharing and discussing these aspects, it played a role in reshaping thoughts and approaches to the project.

Through this move from teaching-learning in the professional space of the institute to the emotionally charged space of home it became clearer to us how as privileged feminists we often fail to see how caste, sexual orientation and disability intersect with each other and the distinct

likelihood that some women are oppressing others. As privileged women we became more sensitive to interpreting and representing the 'gendered' labour of other less privileged women.

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