The Collective Intelligence and Phenomenology in Research Methodology

This essay is going to describe two different speeches: Slow Home Project by John Brown and Home Artefacts Project by Kate Pahl, and compare their methodologies that were used in their research, followed by personal critiques.
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1. Introduction

There are plenty valuable educational resources from the At Home theory forum. This essay is going to outline the research methodologies from Slow Home Project and Home Artefacts Project, and compare and critique with them.

John Brown is a professor of architecture at the University of Calgary, and he also is one of the founders of Homebrand and Slow Home Studio (SHS). The speech John gave about At Home was that he identified the current residential housing situation in North America, the fast house, as the development of fast food, for their particular simulations. After highlighting the characters and problems of fast home, John ran a Slow Home Project that aimed to providing the relevant and understandable design advices and information to address those housing problems. In addition, the website platform he used in SHS was also an educational resource for people who are not only the clients, but also the design enthusiasts and design professionals, which is a remarkable idea by using the collective intelligence.

Kate Pahl is a senior lecturer at the University of Sheffield. The research topic she gave was named The case of disappearing object: a study of home artefacts in Rotherham (Home Artefacts). In the speech, Kate believed every object in the home tells a story, and she tried to find out the relationship between artifactitious objects of Pakistan heritage in the home and the narratives of migration of Pakistan in Rotherham. Starting with an interesting conversation about a special suitcase, Kate kept using the conversation format to promote her research process, which made it humanistic and match the theme. Apart from that, she also intended to explore how the object stories can be used to enhance family learning opportunities by exhibiting in Rotherham Art Gallery. Moreover, the conversation and exhibition played the major role in input and output ways to the research information.

2. Cases in Details

2.1 Principle and Attitude

2.1.1 Making the right choices
Good design is not about the style, size or price. It is about making sensible choices that are good for you and the planet.

----John Brown

John strongly insisted that architecture is for people. The management mode of their architecture firm, the Homebrand, can just prove that. They considered the customers would prefer a estate agency rather than an architect when dealing with the housing purchasing, and they turned their architectural office into a store in which everybody would be comfortable.

To offer the smarter strategies was the SHS’s starting point as well. Their purpose was to address the basic problems, where and how you live, for their clients. John was trying to extend his “Fast Houses Slow Homes” concept among the North America housing industry through this practical serving way.

2.1.2 Humanity

The philosophical attitude to Kate’s research was more inclined to humanity. As Heinrich stated in his architecture empathetic theory, people should understand the situation through our self-experience.(1886, cited in Su, 2010) For their six-month ethnographic interview, Kate advocated to honour and respect the immigrants’ cultures. She thought the families can not only help contribute the objects, but also distinguish the valuable objects they need.

To enlarge the effect of their idea, a participatory website called every object tells a story was created to share their research achievements, and an exhibition was hold in Rotherham to provided the vision of the artefacts’ identities.

2.1.3 Comparison and Critique

It is obvious that John was more focus on spatial production and Kate’s idea was in a pure mental way. To be more specific, the “slow home” concept was largely intended to meet the users’ need, while the Home Artefacts aimed to arouse sympathy from other people.

The Slow Home Project seems to avoid the environment issues, even its principle did mention about the world. SHS have sufficient resources to help people make the right choice to their home, but not to the environment, which makes it look more like a profiting institution with a sustainable principle. However, it is still honourable
that John hoped to inject the new blood for the standardized housing market, in the name of improving living level for human-being and environment.

As for the Home Artefacts, its attitude perfectly matched the humanism, but it is difficult to not doubt the reality and accuracy of the feed-back phenomena with over personal emotion. One of the principle of the phenomenological reduction method, from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (2010), requires the researchers to sense the essence from their own objectivity without any pre-assumptions. Kate’s “every object tells a story” target seems to be a strong expectation that can lead the whole research direction.

2.2 Contents of two speeches

2.2.1 Fast Houses Slow Homes

John started his speech with the current housing problems he identified in North America, and he pointed out “we are in a road to nowhere”. “All the houses look the same” was the essential problem, and this was the result from “fast”, because nobody was going to spend 10 years or more to do the research for an appropriate house. Another notable fact, less than 5% architects being involved, was a significant reason why he tried to develop his own architectural theories and conduct them through his architectural company.

The Homebrand architecture firm was founded by John and his partners, and it implemented the “architecture is for people” concept. Its management patterns included estate agency, construction, interior design, product retailing and advocacy, which made it a well-designed company. After 12 years successful operation, John attempted to explore the profound problems of the North American housing industry.

A matching comparison between the fast food and house was presented to describe the profound problem. The fast food and fast house had a lot in common with their characters. Initially, they both were fundamental in some periods. They also were the production of human’s ambition for the future. Ridiculously, they lead the people from active producers to passive consumers, which means people had already compromised the repetitive, standardized, anonymously produced and unhealthy food and houses.

To deal with the “fast” problems, John proposed his “slow home” idea. He believed the slow home was simple to live in and light on the environment, and it helped the architect design with depth and practical sustainability. To test the conceptual idea,
John ran a survey on January 18, 2010, named The Slow Home Project. Hundreds of users took part, and the SHS invited people all over the world to analyse the residential design quality in North America through a website platform they built. At last, they achieved great repercussions and collected considerable data. According to the quantity analyses, John’s concept became more convincing and really provide a new solution to the housing industry.

2.2.2 Home Artefacts

Beginning with a conversation about a special suitcase, Kate presented her research in the form of telling story. Specifically, the historical suitcase’s origin was the most attractable element to the audiences. Kate’s job was to reappear the mystery and honour to the Pakistan heritage. Moreover, there was a history of immigration by studying the suitcase.

The project background was followed by. The Home Artefacts Project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council ‘Diasporas, Migration and Identities’ grant, which partly determined its humanistic character. Besides, the project was also a participatory project. There were some different ways to collect the information, such as the Women’s Art Project, the website and the Rotherham exhibition.

Kate used a large proportion to describe her research methodology. The main methods were ethnographic interview, mapping, reflexive voice, etc. She indicated the core research process was started by interviewing with families; and then they coded from the interviews by drawing out of themes, talking themes to families and reconfiguration of identities; finally, they created boxes and displayed panels to the families, showing the reflect on what they see. The whole research methodology system included the research question, themes and theoretical framework.

Kate then came to the cases study: the lost objects, which continued the story line. She introduced the special clothing culture with different embroidery in different times, a present for celebrating a newborn, putting the gold in the shoes to avoid being stolen, etc. In terms of timescale and memory, those stories can be concluded as the effect of heterochrony, where a long term process created an effect in a shorter time scale behaviour.

The At Home theories include: 1. home is as a fluxible place; 2. home cultures are created between objects and stories; 3. contemporary home illustrates accidental and deliberate practices; 4. lost objects; 5. time scales and objects.
As a complement and further research, Kate briefly told about her new follow-on project named Writing in Home and in the Street at the end of the speech, and gave out the chief ways of new methodologies.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Collective Intelligence

The Slow Home Project survey method was mostly based on the website. They spent 9 months to interacted with on-line people and mainly focused on 3 housing types: apartment/lofts, townhouses and single family house, in 9 North American cities. Firstly, they produced videos in which they analysed the real practical cases, and identified the existing problems. After that, they uploaded the videos and the plans to their online workshop. Interestingly, people who were interested in the design jobs, not necessarily the professionals, would divided their jobs automatically and submitted their production. Some would do the planning or graphic works, and some would provide the precedence, and some would leave their comments. As an interactive feedback, the SHS team would redrew and demonstrated in the next day according to the replies from their web pages. They would also like to talk about their projects both in gentle and critical ways with the e-public, to figure out if there was any possibilities can be done in the case. Apart from that, John and his partner published a book named *What’s Wrong With This House* and attached with a checklist based on the readers’ experience to test the “slow home” idea.

After 9 months, the SHS team got brilliant achievements: hundreds of clients taking part, 719 design project submissions from all over the world, 117 daily exercises and 5973 comments. (2010) From the results, they quantified the relations of the “size and price” and “score and size”, and ranked the housing design qualities among the 9 cities. At last, the expectation of this project was to keep promoting the development of people’s living concepts.

2.3.2 Phenomenological Research

The methodology of Home Artefacts Project was more inclined to phenomenological research methods, and the whole process was recursive. The initial step was the ethnographic interview. Kate’s team spent over 6 months to communicate with the immigration families, with the skill that they should absolutely honour and respect the cultural private. The next step was mapping the community by using cameras and art work. Kate emphasized all their works would go back into spaces and make
sense together. The stories and objects that were collected were displayed in the exhibition panel which was a participational way to present the reflection on what they observed. They then continued to discuss with the families with the process circulating.

The research questions that aimed to distinguish the valuable objects and indicate how they work were listed out clearly after the main methodology explanation, followed by the three themes: lost objects, timescales and objects, and meanings of objects. As a completed research guideline, Kate also built up the theoretical framework: 1. material cultural studies; 2. relationship between objects and cultural practice; 3. relationship between narrative and material objects; 4. timescales and objects.

2.3.3 Comparison and Critique

It might not be wrong to define John as a pragmatist and Kate as a phenomenalist. John’s research methodology was relied on the network communications and the collective intelligence, whereas Kate’s was classical and purposeful. That is why their outcomes went to two totally different directions. The former proved its correctness and redefined the design qualities by its standard, while the latter revealed the particular objects and stories from its anthropologic angle.

Although the rules for the Slow Home Project design quality judgements can fulfil some testable standards, the score data, the scientific “facts” by quantification, still had not enough evidences to prove its comparability. (Yang and Dai, 2007) From this survey, the social and human factors had no way to be excluded; therefore, the outcomes could be influenced by the clients’ intentions and the academic theories. Especially, the Slow Home Project was indeed a practical project and also mixed with the profitable and educational goals.

The methodology of the Home Artefacts Project belongs to the category of positivism. The reality and accuracy of the phenomenon reduction still remained doubtful, because the consequences were largely based on the subjective interviews and observation. It is possible that Kate was trying to express her viewpoints from an empiricist’s perspective. The details of her methodology was sufficient, but the corresponding results remained unclear. Last but not least, Kate’s conclusion was to continue the concept with a follow-on project, but not a practical way to improve the community.
3. Conclusion

John achieved great repercussions through his research methodology. The network platform for design conversation was an appropriate attempt for the Slow Home Project. John took good use of the collective intelligence, or so-called unpaid labour (Trebor, et al., 2009), to achieve his research purpose. However, the environment part mentioned in John’s original principle have not been carried out through the whole project, except praising the Rocky Mountains was one of the most beautiful natural landscape.

Kate’s research process framework was classical and successful. The recursive steps seems to be perfectly matched with her narrative theme, and the follow-on project still kept these processes. The limitation is that her theories and outcomes had little connection with the space, and there is no solution or improvement with the migration of Pakistan in Rotherham.

The flexible and effective research methods, such as the on-line workshop, and humanistic and thoughtful research attitude are both remarkable achievements from John’s and Kate’s speeches.

(2325 words)

Bibliography