CLUTTER AND PLACE

A place for everything and everything in its place. In its received English usage, the word 'place' connotes order and organisation. To be in or out of place is to be more or less orderly or organised. To know one's place is to conform to the codes of the social order; while, in culinary French, *mis en place* translates as the putting into place of ingredients, tools and equipment prior to preparing a meal. The geographical framing of place – as distinct from space – adds home into the equation (Creswell, 2014). If Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), in his foundational work on space and place, imagined planet Earth as *home* for its inhabitants, many thinkers, have seen home as the exemplary place, even if, as Creswell notes, feminist geographers have questioned the gender politics of such thinking (Rose, 1993). As Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* tells us, plaintively: '*There's no place like home'*. More, the production of homeliness, through practices of home-making, introduces material culture into considerations of place (Miller, 2001). Places are *made* via the material organisation of space (Woodward, 2007). Places matter (Hicks and Beaudry, 2010). Place thus comes more or less fully furnished: activated and enlivened with stuff (Miller, 2013a), made comfortable and intimate or, at least, materially significant (Attfield, 2007).

With these three senses of place in mind – as orderly, homely and material – the material element stands as a contradictory and stubborn presence. On the one hand, things are necessary to the production of place: for turning, as Dionne Warwick sings, *a house into a home*. On the other, the very same things pose a challenge to the order intrinsic of place: Mary Douglas' notion of '*matter out of*

place' (2003: 44) distils the problem of dirt as distinctly spatial and organisational, while Judy Attfield considers the domestic interior to be quintessentially 'wild' (2000). Certainly, in recent years, the production of homely spaces has vied with a quest for order and control of the interior. The stuff so necessary to the creation of home is seen to be attacking its inhabitants, producing a situation of 'stuffocation' (Wallman, 2014), where 'stuff-a-lanches' (Brooker, 2012) threaten to engulf us and life itself is seen to exist somewhere *underneath* the things we own (Becker, 2016). So, *the stuff of place can be seen to attack the order of place destroying the home of place*.

The stuff that overwhelms place is commonly referred to as clutter. Clutter, as Attfield observes, can be seen to consist of 'wild things' (2000: 150): objects and items that disturb domestic order by straying beyond their bounds. The task of maintaining the place called home thus becomes one of taming its material culture, of disciplining the interior, above all, by returning things back to their assigned drawers and cupboards. While this work of tidying things away has long been a feature of housekeeping (Beeton, 1861) and has a history longer than that of the domestic interior (Hicks and Beaudry, 2010), in recent years clutter has become a matter for professionals. Since the turn of this century, the world of professional organisation has become a growth industry complete with its own executive bodies and national associations. Accredited organisers, life coaches and storage gurus publish books, set up websites and blogs, offering consultancy and life coaching services dedicated to conquering the clutter that is deemed to blight contemporary existence. From space planning and organization to time-management, the systems and skills advanced by professionals promise

to help to cut through the demands of modern living, so that we might gain better control of everything from handbags to personal paperwork to kitchen cupboards.

The print publishing world alone is home to a thriving list devoted to the clutter 'crisis': in 2006 Amazon listed 139 separate titles, whereas now there are over 2,000. Lifestyle television, likewise, has seen an intensification of programming dealing with clutter, complete with TV tie-in publications, such as *The Life Laundry* (2002) and *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019). Each year, it seems, witnesses the reinvention of ways to control clutter: from the toothbrush principle (Chandra, 2010) to the KonMari method (Kondo, 2015 & 2016) to Japanese ikigai (Garcia and Miralles, 2017) to Swedish death cleaning (Magnusson, 2018), to the extent that journalists have begun quipping that decluttering books are themselves adding to the 'stuffocation' problem (Wiseman, 2015).

The promises of decluttering extend far beyond organised cupboards and homes, though. The clue is often in the title: *Clutter Busting Your Life: Clearing Physical and Emotional Clutter to Reconnect with Yourself and Others* (Palmer, 2012), and many others like it, pledge to enhance energy flow, cure illness, improve productivity and relationships, relieve stress, increase annual turnover, add value to property and reduce environmental impact. Storage solutions are offered, then, as vehicles to good living as well as containers for our possessions; decluttering is held to enhance, psychological, ecological and spiritual wellbeing (Potts, 2007). As we are spurred on to organize our things, a minimalist refrain

can be heard to resound through the hints, tips, hacks and guidelines: *living with less gives you more*.

As much as clutter appears to be the undoing of place, it, nevertheless, has a good deal to say to the notion of place; that is, *if listened to*, the things that constitute any given muddle and mess can be heard to *speak back* to place. Tuning into what clutter might have to say to place, though, requires admitting objects and other non-humans to be active agents, dynamic participants in human social life. Such an idea of object agency (Latour, 2005), figured in a range of approaches to the material world from ‘thing theory’ (Brown, 2001) to ‘new materialisms’ (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012) to ‘object-oriented ontologies’ (Bogost, 2012) to feminist materialisms (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008) thus helps to complicate the rather simple picture of stuff just messing up place by decentring humans in the drama of place making. The things corralled in the name of clutter, regularly found to be misbehaving in the place of home due to human fault or negligence, turn out, in new materialist thinking, to have ideas of their own. Granting agency to the things that comprise clutter, thus, means thinking of place otherwise. A more accommodating vision can be found in Doreen Massey’s figuration: of place as a ‘source of conflict’ (2005:140), which offers ample room – for *all* of the actors, human and more-than-human, that congregate in any particular place. Before disturbing some of the claims made by professional declutterers, however, and introducing a more thingly consideration of place, it would be helpful to take them at their word, so as appreciate more fully what is at stake in the battle between clutter and place.

HOW TO BANISH CLUTTER FOR LIFE IN FIVE EASY STEPS

Taking a lead from waste management strategy (i.e. *reduce, reuse, recycle*), a popular approach to clutter-control is one of radical space reduction. Phenomena such as the Tiny House Movement and what has been termed the New Minimalism are premised on the idea of minimising the accommodation offered to things. *Reducing space,* thus*, controls place* as a smaller architectural footprint can, so it seems, house less stuff. Rather than simply doing without, however, New Minimalists promise a life less burdensome, one free of twentieth century values, where material goods operate as a measure of the good life. Graham Hill, founder of Treehugger.com offers a typical story in his op-ed piece 'Living With Less. A Lot Less' (2013). From enjoying career success, a dot.com windfall, followed by frenzied status consumption (to the point of employing a personal shopper to spend his money), Hill finds himself anxious and overwhelmed with the complications of his supersized life. A period of drastic space reduction delivers a new design for living, together with a new metric of success, where less is considerably more: 'I have less — and enjoy more. My space is small. My life is big' (ibid). Hill's narrative arc – affluence, conspicuous consumption, epiphany, radical downsizing – forms something of a hook in the New Minimalism. *Goodbye Things* (Sasaki, 2017), for instance, offers a variant on the same theme: its author's conversion from unhappy, messy maximalist to happy, tidy minimalist is one riven with similar paradoxes: smaller space, bigger life; emptier apartment, fuller soul; salary poor, time rich.

Aside from reducing the square footage of the house, the accommodation within the interior is further rationalised so as to banish all forms of *loitering*. Dawna

Walter (2002) is, for instance, uncompromising in her advice to remove furniture, such as hallway or coffee tables, or indeed any surface where things might rest or hang about before being put away. Principles such as the 'one touch rule' dictate that keys, the mail, a reusable cup, must be marched directly to their assigned places. Marla Cilley, aka Flylady (Cilley, 2018), has a fantasy of designing 'hot' surfaces so that they repel anything that has the nerve to take rest, where imaginary sloping counters and coffee tables put a stop to unauthorised gatherings of things. Storage methods can also be operationalized to discourage items dawdling, nipping their potential to become clutter in the bud. Marie Kondo's folding principles in *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying* (2015) are designed along these lines to enable *vertical storage*. Stacking, piling, and other horizontal methods are seen to squash the life out of things, creating an unconscious hierarchy (things at the bottom of the pile become neglected and overlooked), and making things recede from sight and thus hard to retrieve.

Technological developments help to lighten the load still further by shrinking or even evaporating our belongings. The evolution of smart objects, scaling from phones and watches to clothing and homes, promises to revolutionise everyday life and to tidy up the stuff-a-lanche into the bargain. One of the unique selling points of smart technology is its pledge, crudely, to reduce *volume* and *mass*. The history of computer storage offers a stark illustration as the bulk of punch cards, magnetic tape and hard drives the size of refrigerators have come to be replaced by flash drives, SD cards and amorphous cloud computing. New minimalist designs for living are, then, decisively underwritten by the digital revolution. In the words of the author of *Stuffocation*: 'we' [will turn away from things largely]

‘because we can. After all, what’s the point in owning physical books and CDs when you can access them from the cloud?’ (Wallman, 2014: 13). The excess baggage of all forms of hardware, from cameras to housekeys, is offloaded – or uploaded – as users are tempted toward lighter, smaller items and, ideally, away from material possessions entirely. Techno-fixes also help the move toward an experience economy: we are expedited by digital technology to *live more with less*, to opt for forms of consumption that, say, privilege travel adventures (complete with digital photo albums or Instagram accounts, which are crucially imagined to be immaterial) over the accumulation of what, revealingly, are sometimes referred to as the *trappings* of wealth.

Even in the most minimalist, technologically up-graded environment, there remain stubborn leftovers that demand attention, however. Software upgrades, for instance, leave in their wake bits of digital clutter: redundant object code, installation files, string statements, what the tech industry refers to as ‘cruft’. Likewise, our physical tabletops can turn on us in the blink of an eye. Clutter can, then, manifest under our very noses: a MacBook Air™, a clutch of index cards, a fountain pen, some notebooks, an iPad mini, two cups of cold coffee, a glasses case, journal articles, books, a book rest, a pack of tissues, two propelling pencils and a mobile phone sitting, *mis en place,* on a dining room table can *become* clutter at the point that a meal is about to be served. For the professional organiser, then, keeping such clutter under control is a matter of encouraging the right habits and making solemn commitment to ‘the on-going programme’ (Walter, 2002: 106) of letting go and keeping constant control: ‘require[ing] you to have discipline and never los[ing] focus of what is going on around you’ (ibid:

103). Rigorous maintenance regimes are, thus, the key to success and to remaining clutter-free for life.

The temporal flow of any place that aims to be clutter-free is thus oriented toward the present. The 'one in, one out' rule is revealing especially of the law establishing the movement of objects as being from front to back door. The wave of decluttering motion that propels material objects through the house relies on a regular action of *purging* the interior of its blockages. Book purchases, for instance, must be accompanied, like for like, by book disposal. Shelf space remains constant and stocks are culled to fit available space, resulting in a storage solution where books are pushed through space of the house as new titles are introduced. In order to keep things moving forward, decluttering practices range from annual events (the 'blitz' or what was once called spring cleaning) to monthly, weekly and daily routines to even '60 second sort-its' The logic is clear at all scales. Decluttering is, then, a process of *throwing things away*, making even sanctioned items not safe from the periodic 'edits' that now feature as a permanent part of the practice of living: photographs need regularly to be reviewed and rehung; personal letters and cards need to be disposed of several weeks after their arrival, sentimental objects routinely inspected to ensure that they continue to *spark joy* (Kondo, 2016).

DECLUTTERING AND TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

The strategic plan of the clutter-free interior – reduced, rationalised, technologically upgraded, disciplined and edited – can, in spite of its claims, be

critically re-described: in terms of what Michel Foucault (1988) models as 'technologies of the self'. In Foucault's words:

> [technologies of the self] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (1988: 18)

The skills and attitudes involved in decluttering and other forms of extreme tidying are advanced as guarantees: to deliver happiness, mindfulness and generalised wellbeing. The technical operations of organisation and place management, entailing the perpetual policing of persons and things, are thus designed to alter, permanently, the basis of the *relationships* between persons, materials and things, humans and non-humans. New rationalities and ways of being, i.e. forms of self-monitoring and behavioural modification, often draped in Buddhist robes (as Zen habits, for instance), are offered in exchange for a lifetime's peace and tranquillity.

The first clue that points toward decluttering as a complex technology of the self can be discerned in the level of policing of the interior. Just as beggars, vagrants, and loiterers find themselves banished from urban space in the eighteenth century (Foucault, 2009), itinerant and wayfaring things become subject to forms of population control. So, items that cannot earn their keep or that have no homes to go to in the reduced accommodation of the minimalist apartment, are

corralled into categories of expulsion: donate, recycle, discard. Likewise, the smart habits that accompany the smart gadgetry of the new minimalism rely upon permanent practices and techniques of monitoring and self-monitoring, via one-touch methods, daily tidying regimes to ensure the smooth flow of things through the space of the house.

More, elements of the task of policing become delegated to the things themselves in decluttering strategy. The belief that clutter can be eliminated by design: through spatial restriction or the removal of transitional furniture, such as hall tables, or the installation of sloping surfaces or the imposition of strict folding regulations, entrusts things, objects, or artefacts with the burden of maintaining order. Robert Rosenberger's word for things that are inhospitable by design is 'callous objects' (2017) and his project highlights the way that devices such as bus stops and park benches are modelled to drive homeless people out of the city. The 'noninnocence' (Haraway, cited in Rosenburger, ibid: xii) of such technologies and of the object world more broadly is pertinent, I would argue, to the question of clutter. Bringing the notion of the 'callous object' indoors, it becomes evident that domestic anti-loitering laws are in operation in the professional organiser's strategic plan. Flylady's dream of clutter-free fixtures and fittings operate very much like bus shelter benches constructed at an angle to deter rough sleepers. Equally, the frog-marching of objects to their assigned homes coupled with the removal of transitional resting places for things to foil potential loafers, bears ready comparison the logic of the city identified in Rosenberger's study of homelessness. Like a certain brand of refrigerator that attempts to control user taste by repelling fridge magnets, the blueprint of the

clutter-free house is informed by principles found in hostile architecture. Designed to hinder and frustrate use, 'callous' features of the interior silently round up what become, in the process, delinquent things.

It is at this point that differentiating between things and objects becomes a helpful move. Without wishing to oversimplify what are complex discussions – usually involving protracted detours through Heidegger's tool analysis (Harman, 2002; Bogost, 2012) – Tim Ingold offers a more-than good enough distinction for thinking about clutter: *objects* present 'a fait accompli', they are 'already made' (2012: 435) and thus, are functional, purposeful, determined and closed; in Latour's phrasing, '*matters of fact*' (cited in Ingold: 436). Whereas *things*, following Merleau-Ponty, are more 'stitched into the fabric of the world' (437), they constitute, following Heidegger, 'gathering[s] of materials in movement' (436) and, hence, *carry on being* in unforeseeable ways. While objects work in full-time occupations, and are either in use, serving human needs, or else on stand-by, mis-en-placed or stored away in dedicated units, containers, drawers, cupboards and Hikidashi boxes, things exceed human intention and design.

With Ingold's explanation in mind, it becomes clear that a crucial trick in the clutter guru's repertoire is one not only of privileging *objects over things* but of turning objects *into* things in order to expedite their disposal. Marie Kondo's starting point, for instance, consists of dismantling the house by creating a vast heap of possessions. What were distinct objects, sitting on a bookshelf or in a wardrobe, are rendered as a pile of stuff, as things. What she sees as the poor treatment of possessions, is to all intents and purposes, *performative*, as even

tidied away objects (dresses hanging in a wardrobe, books sitting on a shelf) are wrenched from their respective homes and forced to reapply for their jobs, to earn their keep. Having created what is, to all intents and purposes, a hoard – 'it's very important to get an accurate grasp of the sheer volume for each category' (2016: 6) – a reverse trick is performed where each thing is pulled out of the pile and inspected to see if it 'sparks joy' before being consigned to its appropriate place. It is clear that what sparks joy for Kondo are objects: items with purpose, even if that purpose is simply to look decorative. Anything else is readied for disposal, sent on its way to the charity shop or the recycling plant.

If, as Bill Brown (2002) has it, things *get in the way* and, consequently, become conflated in the world of self-help with clutter, there is, nevertheless, no getting away from things. Ingold's framing of the *carrying on* of things as opposed to objects, is especially instructive here:

> From an object-centred perspective, this carrying on is commonly rendered as recycling… From a materials-centred perspective, however, it is part of life. (435)

The declutterer's alibi of recycling is, further, shown to be short-sighted with its object-centred imaginary. It might well be objects that find themselves on the pavement in curb-side recycling schemes but it is *materials* that enter the waste stream, many of which are burned or buried in landfill sites. Samantha MacBride (2011) goes so far as to argue that contemporary recycling practices, especially with their focus on individual consumers, aggravate the environmental waste

crisis by diverting attention away from grander scales of industrial waste production and by allowing us to freely dispose of objects by presuming that they stay somewhere in the consumption cycle and out of landfill.

Besides, things persist in other more subtle ways. Even if a given place is purged of things and its material culture is as disciplined as a surgeon's operating table, it is a short step from mis-en-place to mess, as Gregory Bateson demonstrates in his metalogue 'Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?' (2000). Staged as a playful conversation with his daughter, Bateson conducts a thought experiment around tidiness, which shows how even the most obedient, disciplined object contains the capacity to lapse into a state of disorderly thingness. Wagering that 'things will always go toward muddle and mixedness' (ibid: 8), i.e. clutter, Bateson contrasts, by making fractional adjustments to his daughter's possessions, the 'very, very few places' (ibid: 5) which are 'tidy' for any given object with the 'millions and millions and millions' of ways of constituting its untidy appearance (ibid: 7). If there are millions and millions and millions of ways for things to be out of place then there are, correspondingly, equal numbers of potential ways of generating rubbish, especially if we follow the logic of stuffing a bin bag with 27 random items at high speed in an effort to keep the house in order (Cilley, 2018). The advice here is clear: clutter cannot be organised, only busted, reduced or binned. Kondo's trademarked method begins tellingly, not with organisation but with disposal.

Technological objects are no less thingly nor are they resistant to muddles. The slow creep of software upgrades alone can render hardware obsolete and

thinglike while we sleep (Chun, 2016). A fully functioning piece of technology becomes a thing not due to the machine itself wearing out but often by incompatibilities at the level of code, through scripts running silently in the background. If technologies effectively break without being broken, it also turns out that what appear to be the dematerialised spaces of the digital are thick with things. One element that is entirely missing from the imaginary of minimalists, who *lighten up* by swapping analogue for digital objects, is the vast infrastructure that supports the digital. If what is 'salient' about technology is that it 'is not salient, for most people, most of the time' (Edwards, 2003: 185), reducing and minimising one's possessions via technological means, say, to cloud storage, is, then, more an act of outsourcing, where clutter is sent packing to the complex architecture of the Internet: to its glass fibres, data warehouses and remote servers (Blum, 2013). Likewise, exchanging material possessions for travel adventures and consumer experiences disavows the entire infrastructure of the experience economy and crucially, the elaborate scaffolding of leisure activity (Eide and Fuglsang, 2013), which is far from immaterial.

The obsolete technological object, whose hardware has outlived its software, like the laptop sitting on a table in a downsized apartment at lunchtime, is less matter out of place than *matter out of time*. In his work on waste, Will Viney calls into question the 'spatial bias of contemporary theories of waste' (2011, n.p.) in favour of an emphasis on time. If waste can be constituted as 'time's leftovers' (ibid), then clutter is, all the more, time-bound. Clutter, as distinct from waste, can be glossed as *matter yet to find a place* and, in the homes of minimalists, as especially time-sensitive, whose *time is running out*. Place, then, in the imaginary

of the declutterers, is not only squeezed spatially, it is on a clock. Equally, the temporality of the act of decluttering, with its 'one-touch' and 'one-in-one-out' rules is jittery, manic, not to say anxious, which is the very opposite of organisation. The time of place, in the dream of a clutter-free home, is now.

Doreen Massey (2005) offers an object lesson to the likes of Kondo in her altogether more messy configuration of place. Place is certainly less settled in Massey's view: 'you can't hold places still' (125), it involves ongoing dialogue and negotiation in dealing with the frictions and incompatibilities that surface in the effervescent space-time of place, what she refers to plainly as 'the here and the now' (139). Places are, thus, processual, heterogeneous, multiple, haphazard and, like clutter, marked by the 'throwntogetherness' (140) of people and things. This altogether more rowdy, *throwntogether* conception of place speaks back forcefully to the world of professional organisation and self-help. One thing is certain, the promise that resonates across the advice: of freeing oneself from clutter *permanently*, of banishing it for life, seriously underestimates the agency of the object world, whilst, simultaneously, overestimating the stability of place. The operations and techniques of decluttering rely upon a rather static notion of the items that are seen to constitute the mess and, equally, of the containers designed to organise and tidy them away. Indeed the very idea of a series of nesting containers housing, indeed disciplining things – scaling from drawers, to wardrobes, to rooms, to houses – proves incompatible with Massey's relational conception of place. Indeed, clutter is *more* rather than less likely to manifest in the reduced footprint of the tiny house or micro apartment, as tables and surfaces become multipurpose.

Conclusion

The ambition of controlling things as a means of controlling place radically underestimates the ontology of things. If the stuff of place is seen to attack the order of place threatening, in turn, the home of place, then, controlling the stuffly element is by no means a straightforward task. What is clear is that the professional and self-help framing of the relationship between clutter and place certainly does not reckon for the wildness of things in its strategic plan. The five steps to permanent tidiness – reduce space, banish loitering, embrace the digital, adopt smart habits, ensure flow – unsettle place by installing a manic regime of control, where objects are constantly on the move or at best given temporary contracts. The smart habits of the clutter-free, in conforming to Foucauldian notions of technologies of the self, attempt to impose new relationships between people and things, potentially destroying the bond between humans and the material world. Decluttering rewrites the interrelation between order, home and material thus*: the order of place serves to attack the stuff of place destroying and dematerialising the home of place*.

Clutter, if listened to, has much to say to notions of place. Both the distinction between objects and things and Massey's figuration of place as *throwntogether* and irrepressible is helpful in considering how things consistently get in a muddle. More, the object-centred imaginary at the heart of de-cluttering serves to exacerbate rather than resolve the question of over-consumption by expediting clutter as a new species of waste. Decluttering is a new means of

‘ridding’ (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe, 2007). The alibi of recycling and charity donation, which moves things along and out of the house (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe, 2007a), turns out to be false: by far the biggest broken promise of the decluttering industry is the idea of getting away from stuff. The minimalist front stage thus masks a cluttered infrastructural backstage or even offstage (Goffman, 1990) and when it comes to ‘stuff’, there certainly is no ‘away’ (Miller, 2013b). What we have, instead, is the far more awkward situation of facing our things, in all of their materiality and thinghood, as we try to work out how to live together. In Massey’s schema, places are under constant negotiation, and rather than being ‘locations of coherence’ are sites of ‘adventures and chance encounters’ (2005: 180), not to say conflict and disagreement. It is, then, in the messy confrontation between all of the agents of place – human and non-human – that the challenge of configuring a more equitable and, more, ecological relationship between order, home and stuff must begin.

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