Picturing a home: A new perspective on home-making through photo-elicitation

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Abstract

The photo-elicitation method can provide rich insights into homemaking – the process whereby residents use, modify and personalize domestic space. However, previous studies have prioritized the words of participants, gathered in follow-up interviews, over photographs themselves. This paper presents an alternative methodological approach. Specifically, we approach photographs as primary sources, with a focus on their composition. First, we demonstrate how formal elements of photographs can be identified, and their meanings analysed. We show that domestic photographs speak to people's relationships with their homes, and identify empirical insights into scale, light and absences. Second, we combine data from follow-up interviews with formal analysis of images to confirm these insights, and generate additional findings – e.g., regarding the negotiation of domestic architecture and the meanings of possessions. We conclude that photo-elicitation studies of homemaking benefit from both visual and narrative insights into participants' homes, and that both types of data merit serious analysis.

Keywords: home-making; photo-elicitation; photography; possessions; renters

Introduction

Home-making is the process whereby residents use, modify and personalize domestic space in order to meet their needs, express their identities, and forge a sense of belonging. At one level, it centres on the preferences, values and labour of individuals and households. This connects to the function of home as a 'haven' that affords privacy and "opportunities for self-expression through home consumption, maintenance and design" (Cheshire et al., 2021, p135). At another level, it is a social practice, embedded in "wider relations amongst people and between people and possessions" (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022, p7). These relations include ideals and dominant narratives around how home should be organized (Costa Santos & Bertolino, 2020), socio-legal rules and norms around property, possessions and tenure (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022), and material cultures of home that imbue spaces and objects with significance and meaning (Miller, 2010). Home-making also serves a communicative function, sending "socially coded messages to others about one's status in the world" (Cheshire et al., 2021, p136).

Photo-elicitation is often used to study home-making, as well as issues of housing quality and housing satisfaction more generally. It was first developed to categorize housing quality and examine how families adapted to new places of residence, and many subsequent applications have involved participants taking and sharing images of domestic spaces and scenes (Harper, 2002). It is a powerful tool for exploring the materialities of home-making (Soaita & McKee, 2021), contributing to a broader scholarly turn towards the complex and 'messy' material geographies of home

(Easthope, 2014; Gillon 2018). This area of inquiry seeks to “appreciate the detail of domestic features and practices” and encourages researchers to shine a light on “the mundane, the hidden and the ordinary” in order to understand how home is produced (Steele & Keys, 2015, p114).

In this study, our goals are twofold: first, to present and demonstrate a revised approach to photo-elicitation; and second, to show how this approach can provide enhanced insights into home-making. Drawing on art historical understandings of photography, we approach photographs as primary objects that are taken with purpose and intent, and are composed of formal elements that convey meaning. Working with images provided by a sample of Canadian renters, we first demonstrate how the formal elements of photographs can be identified, and their meanings analyzed. We then present key insights from follow-up interviews conducted with these participants, in order to understand the photographs from their perspective, and ultimately to connect their images with their words. In doing so, we show that formal analysis of photographs can provide insights into the materiality and practices of home-making, both on its own, and in combination with interview data.

Home-making

Home-making is a “profoundly material” process (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022, p3), involving both the domestic architecture of the home, and the organization of residents’ material belongings within it. As Costa Santos and Bertolino (2020) emphasize, home-making is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the spatiality of the home, which must be negotiated as residents seek to adapt, personalize and appropriate space, including through the organization and display of possessions. These objects are the

very ‘stuff’ of home (Miller, 2010): supporting daily routines, giving expression to identities, and anchoring feelings of attachment. Possessions are also imbued with personal and cultural meanings, and their organization is part of “the continuous efforts and labour of turning a house into a home” (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022, p6).

Some people and households are better placed than others to undertake the work of making a home (Miller, 2008). Many photo-elicitation studies focus on low-income tenants and/or people in precarious housing, whose ability to assemble and sustain a sense of home is circumscribed (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022; Miller, 2010). The institution of tenure is relevant here, as ownership almost invariably confers more control over home-making decisions than renting (Barratt & Green 2017; Easthope 2014; Soaita & McKee 2021). In the private rental sector, landlords’ financial interests are routinely prioritized over tenants’ interests in the use of domestic space and enjoyment of things (Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022; Rolfe et al., 2022), through mechanisms such as proscriptive leases (Rosen & Garboden, 2022).

Tenure and class differences have been documented in home-making research. Madsen (2018) found middle-class homeowners in Denmark were creating comfortable homes by managing energy use to ensure thermal comfort, and by assembling furniture and other possessions (books, candles, electronics) to create ‘cosy’ spaces for relaxation and socialization. In contrast, Soaita and McKee (2021) found low-income British renters living uncomfortable lives, deploying heaters, curtains and warming lights in single rooms to battle against cold and excessive energy bills. Some felt unable to make even minor improvements to their ‘so-called homes’, beyond changing the furniture layout or adding minor decoration. Their limited ability to home make was due

in part to tenure insecurity, which “drastically reduced agency in terms of amending, altering or crafting home’s materialities in practices of home-making” (p295). Indeed, renters may be vulnerable to home *un*making—the damage or destruction of the material and psycho-social components of home–due to factors such as rent increases and evictions (Cheshire et al., 2021; Dimitrakou & Hilbrandt, 2022).

Photo-elicitation

Participatory visual methods, such as photo-elicitation, are used in housing research to explore lived experiences, to prompt participant engagement and storytelling, and to reveal nuanced and affective understandings of place (including dwelling and neighbourhood) (Carpenter, 2022; Kuoppa et al., 2020; McCarthy, 2020). It is widely held that the inclusion of participant photography can stimulate deeper insights and “richer, thickened” accounts (Carpenter, 2022, p. 359) in follow-up interviews than ‘words-alone’ approaches (Due et al., 2022; Harper, 2002). These benefits flow, first, from the ability of photography to tap into participants’ tacit knowledge, and “reveal the ‘everyday’, ‘hidden, ‘uncharted territory’ of the domestic” (McCarthy, 2020, p. 1315). Second, photographs often act as ‘anchor points’ for interview discussions, helping to sharpen memories, encourage focus, and provide reference points for participant self-expression (Coleman, 2016; Richard & Lahman, 2015).

In Soaita and McKee’s (2021) study, participants were able to describe their homes in more detail after photo-taking than in initial interviews; basic descriptions gave way to longer, more emphatic narratives, and participants felt empowered to air grievances and discuss housing precarity. This ability of photography to promote critical dialogue, particularly with participants who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised,

informs the photovoice approach–a related method that has an explicit commitment to social action (Sutton-Brown, 2014). One of the ways in which that action can be pursued is through the curation and public display of participants' images (Carpenter, 2022).

The participatory dimension of these methods–in terms of participants' relative freedom to take photographs as they choose, to select and emphasize certain images, and to ascribe meaning to those images–may reduce the power imbalance between researchers and participants (Carpenter, 2022; Due et al., 2022; Kuoppa et al., 2020). McCarthy characterizes visual methods as "potentially de-centring of power relations in the research process", and as "enabling of participants to define their lives as they see them" (2020, p 1316). These methods ensure that participants can express themselves through visual artifacts as well as words (Richard & Lahman, 2015). In addition, photography may correspond with the emphasis that many people place on visual self-expression, including in the home (Pink, 2004).

A primary goal of photo-elicitation is to learn from participants through discussing photographs in an interview setting (or, less commonly, in focus groups) (Carpenter, 2022; Richard & Lahman, 2015). Typically, these photographs are taken in advance by participants (a technique known as 'participant-led photography' or 'auto-photography'), although variations exist where the researcher takes and provides the images (Richard & Lahman, 2015). Participant-led photography is guided by prompts from the researcher, which provide parameters for the activity and connect the photographs to the topic under consideration. In research on home-making, participants are often prompted to photograph positive and negative features of their home. For example,

Kuoppa et al. asked participants to take photos of “pleasing or functional” and “dysfunctional or otherwise unpleasant” aspects of their home (2020, p. 1667), while Barratt and Green asked participants “to take pictures of where they lived” and “suggested that this might include things that they particularly liked or didn’t like or things or places which meant something to them” (2017, s. 2.4). More specific guidance is generally eschewed, to ensure participants retain agency to capture images of what is important to them (Soaita & McKee, 2021; McCarthy, 2020).

Once images have been taken and shared with researchers, they are used in follow-up interviews. Discussion is structured around the images–usually considered one-by-one. It follows that lines of questioning and conversation may vary significantly between interviews, “transgressing the limitations of *a priori* designed interview outlines” (Soaita & McKee, 2021, p. 282). A relatively open-ended, flexible approach to questioning also allows for the emergence of analytical categories that were not anticipated by researchers (Boland et al., 2023; Soatia & McKee, 2019). This said, two general lines of questioning are particularly common in the studies reviewed here: ‘what is in this photograph?’ and ‘why does this photograph matter?’ The questions correspond to interests in describing the *content* of the image (e.g., the object(s), space(s) or view(s) it portrays) and identifying its *context* - which can encompass the participant’s biography, the organization of their home, and/or the overarching purpose of the research (see Binch et al., 2022; Coleman, 2016). An alternative approach is the ‘SHOWeD’ technique developed by Wang and Burris (1997), which consists of five standardized questions for each photograph (see Binch et al., 2022). These questions

also call for insights into content and context (e.g., ‘What do you see here?’, ‘How does this relate to our lives?’).

After interviews are completed, analysis typically centres on transcripts. This focus is consistent with the idea that the role of photographs is *to elicit* richer (narrative) information from participants. As Carpenter explains, this approach “does not foreground the aesthetic dimension of the photographs, rather the photos are seen as a medium through which the participants can communicate their narrative and express their [views]” (2022, p. 355). It follows that, when results are presented, participants’ verbal descriptions and explanations of photographs, and the feelings these scenes evoke, are to the fore. For example, photos of insect traps and water-damaged ceilings can serve as entry points into detailed accounts of the negligence of landlords and the disinterest of public authorities (Binch et al., 2022); an image of a pile of clothes on a bed can provide context for a participant’s explanation of a lack of storage space (Barratt & Green, 2017). In such applications of photo-elicitation it is *words*—not photographs—that are privileged in data analysis and the presentation of results (Soaita & McKee, 2021); images are included primarily as illustrations of (or context for) themes identified in the textual data (Due et al., 2022).

While narrative is prioritized in applications of photo-elicitation, several studies have pointed to the potential of analyzing photographs in their own right. Soaita and McKee note that photographs are valuable ‘points of entry’ into participants’ homes, and should be examined both for what they show and what they hide, but add that it is participants’ words that “bring to life the things you see in the photograph, they now have history, meaning, context, affect” (2021, p. 279). However, serious consideration

of participants' photographs may be precluded when these are only provided hours or minutes before an interview (Soaita & McKee, 2021). Kuoppa et al. (2020) supplement the meanings that their participants attributed to photographs with a content analysis of the objects and spaces depicted in the images, and also reflect on what was not included. Barratt and Green (2017) reviewed images for 'similarities and differences' before conducting interviews, identifying a thematic focus on functional objects, which they interpreted as reflecting participants' focus on the use value of things. Carpenter acknowledges that attentiveness to visual signifiers in photographs "can help facilitate understanding and knowledge production" (2022, p. 360). Moreover, Carpenter argues for further research into "the aesthetic dimension of photography" and suggests that "closer collaboration between social sciences and humanities scholars" would help to achieve this goal (2022, p. 360). With this call in mind, we now turn to art historical perspectives and the method of formal analysis.

Art Historical Perspectives and Formal Analysis

Art historical understandings of visual images hold that they can be analyzed as primary sources—without reference to additional verbal or textual explanations. Photographs, for example, can be understood as containing a "wealth of content" and "a lavish amount of information" that can be analyzed directly, critically and rigorously (Achterberg, 2007, pp. 46, 115). This information stems not only from their content–a traditional preoccupation of photo-elicitation studies–but also from their *composition* (Barratt & Green, 2017). Composition encompasses factors such lighting, angle, framing, and colour—known as the formal elements of photography—which can be chosen by photographers, and interpreted by researchers (Achterberg, 2007). From an

art historical perspective, it is axiomatic that “the image itself has its own effects,” and that these effects can be unpacked through analyzing composition (Rose, 2001, p. 33).

One approach to such unpacking is formal analysis. In *The Methodologies of Art*, Adams describes formal analysis as

> consider[ing] primarily the aesthetic effects created by the component parts of design. These parts, called *formal elements*, constitute the basis of the artist’s visual language. … The final arrangement made by the artist is the *composition* of the work of art. A formal analysis of the artistic composition considers how each element contributes to the overall impression made by the work (2018, pp. 22-23; original emphasis).

This analytical approach is linked to *formalism*, an art historical theory that prioritizes the viewer’s direct engagement–or “physical confrontation” (D’Alleva, 2010, p.21)–with the image. From this perspective, what matters is not the artist’s biography, or the conditions under which the image was produced, but rather the formal elements that the artist selected to constitute the composition, and the viewer’s response to those elements (Adams, 2018; Berger, 1972). Formalism stands in opposition to contextual approaches, including Marxist and feminist analyses, which interpret the image through the lens of the social, economic and political factors that prevailed when and where it was made (Adams, 2018; D’Alleva, 2010).

Formal analysis has been mobilized to describe and understand images “for ‘what they are’, rather than for, say, what they do or how they were or are used” (Rose, 2001, p. 34). The primary analytic advantage of this approach is that it ensures the power and significance of images is recognized, and not ‘subordinated’ to theoretical or empirical concerns (Rose, 2001). Formal analysis also corresponds with how viewers first encounter and understand images (Adams, 2018)–capturing the ‘visual experience’,

rather than critiquing what lies beneath the surface (Rose, 2016). In sum, it is an approach that seeks to ensure the image is given its due–that its qualities (and the choices of its creator) are directly acknowledged.

A final art historical concept that is pertinent to our analysis is *genre*—the category within which the image sits. Two genres are particularly relevant to photo-elicitation in housing research. The first is documentary photography, with its concern to capture images of 'the everyday'—particularly in marginalized neighbourhoods and homes, often as part of a commitment to social reform (Rose, 2001). The second is family photography, in which images are centred on domestic scenes, often taken fairly quickly, in a 'snap-shot' manner. The informality and spontaneity of this genre should not distract from the photographers' purposive intent–for example, in imparting messages about family life (Rose, 2016).

Methods

We sought participants who were renting and willing to undertake home-based photography, share digital images with the researchers, and discuss them in a follow-up interview. Recruitment took place using email list-serves for students and alumni at our home institution (reaching several hundred recipients), and due to constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place over the phone. An honorarium of $20 was offered to encourage participation and recognize the value of participants' time.

Through this approach, we recruited six participants. Table 1 provides an overview of these participants and their housing situations, and their assigned

pseudonyms. While we had initially sought a larger sample, the large number of photographs that our participants shared provided ample opportunity to conduct formal analysis, and to demonstrate how this analysis can be connected to interviews. In total, 119 photographs were provided (minimum: 9; maximum: 28). In this respect, we had a relatively large data set to work with. Moreover, we do not intend for the results of our analysis to be generalizable, but rather to provide 'proof of concept' for how photo-elicitation can be supplemented and extended by formal analysis of photographs in home-making research.

Name	Age	Gender	Time in current home	Time spent as a renter	Layout of home (apartment)
Daryl	51	Male	6 years	Whole life, except 1 year	1 bedroom with balcony
Brandi	23	Female	1 month	2 years	Studio with half-walled bedroom
Will	30	Male	3 years	9 years	Studio with balcony
Olive	26	Female	1 year	7 years	1 bedroom with balcony
Camille	22	Female	6 months	5 years	2 bedroom with balcony
James	32	Male	7 years	11 years	Studio

Table 1: Overview of participants

At the outset, participants were provided with a short description of home-making ("making changes to your living space in order to become attached to it"), illustrated with the examples of decorating, rearranging furniture, cleaning, and structural changes. We then offered prompts to guide their photography: we asked that they capture areas in their homes in which they felt they could and could not home-make; spaces or objects

that captured how they home-make; and any changes that they had made. We requested a minimum of five photographs, but did not suggest an upper limit. Photographs were uploaded via a secure online portal. Participants gave written consent to participate and for their photographs to be used in our research. Approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta (Pro00104288).

After we had received photographs from all participants, we took one month to conduct the formal analysis of all 119 images. We approached each image with a concern to identify component elements that were particularly apparent or striking on first viewing, and to record what insights these evoked. This analysis led us to identify four compositional categories (Decor, Space, Hybrid, and Close-Up), and a fifth category that used various compositional choices to emphasize light. Decor photographs (n=44) showed a decorated surface within the home, on a flat two-dimensional plane. A particularly common example was a wall with either displays of artwork (paintings, posters, etc.) or shelves with books and other items. These photographs highlighted the resident's decorative choices, but gave little or no sense of the broader context in which the surface was located. Space photographs (n=11), by contrast, showed a three dimensional space, with a sense of depth so that foreground, middleground and background were clear. The composition was most often used to present an overall view of a room and how it was used—particularly through the organization of furniture and other possessions. Hybrid photographs (n=21) used elements of both the decor and space images, often by showing a corner of two walls, and sometimes including the connecting floor and/or ceiling as additional surfaces.

These images were taken at varying distances, and tended to be more eclectic and difficult to interpret. Close-up photographs (n=35) highlighted a specific object or objects, which filled the visual frame, suggesting little distance between the photographer and the item(s) of interest. Common examples included plants, decorative objects, and a variety of hooks, pins and strips used to affix artwork to walls. Light photographs (n=8) showcased how a surface or space was lit (naturally or artificially)—light and dark being formal elements of visual language (Adams, 2018)—or were close-ups of illuminated light fixtures or exposed bulbs.

Participants were interviewed by the first author over the phone in February 2021. Interviews were structured around the photographs, which were considered one-by-one. For participants who had submitted large numbers of photographs (more than 20 each), it was not possible to review all images within a reasonable time frame of approximately one hour, and in these cases we prioritized, first, discussing photographs that were formally different, and second, images that the participants considered important. For each photograph, we began with two standard questions, corresponding to content and context: ‘what is in this photograph?’, and ‘how does it relate to your experiences of home-making?’ We then asked bespoke questions informed by the formal analysis: for example, inquiring about the act of photography (‘did you choose to take this photo when the room had a lot of natural light?’) and compositional choices (‘why did you decide to take a close-up picture of this object?’). Interview transcripts were generated, and participants’ comments and explanations were linked to the specific photographs under consideration. This enabled us to combine the formal analysis of photographs, and the words of participants, in the results section below.

In presenting findings, we draw on Miller (2008, 2010), who provided ‘portraits’ of individual participants, each receiving a dedicated sub-section. We present each of the participants and two of their photographs in turn. This approach enables us to provide a reasonably detailed formal analysis of each image, and to incorporate participants’ explanations and interpretations. In so doing, we treat each participant as important and unique, while contributing ‘building blocks’ to a broader account of photography and home-making. Our selection of images followed the same guidelines that structured our interviews: a concern to include different images, and images that participants were most keen to discuss. However, in principle, any of the photographs that were both formally analyzed and discussed in the interviews could have been included.

Results

Daryl

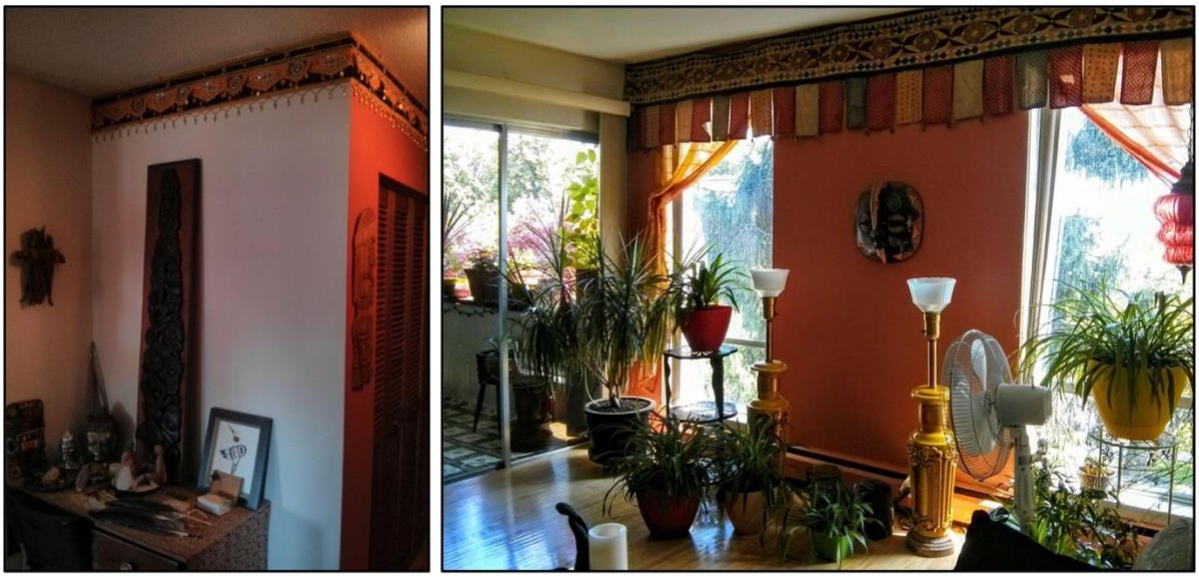

Figure 1: Daryl’s home

Figure 1(L) is a ‘hybrid’ image that shows the corner of a room: in the left foreground there is a brown desk with a collection of objects on top. One of these is a tall, dark board that stretches up and becomes part of the middle ground, along with a large section of white wall. To the right, an orange hallway recedes away from the viewer. It appears to be lit by a ceiling light that is out of frame. The viewer is placed far enough away to get a sense of how large each wall is and how the objects hanging on them connect to each other. The photograph provides an overview of the corner space and a suggestion of its connection to other parts of the house.

In Figure 1(R), the foreground consists of a hardwood floor receding away from the viewer. On the floor, there are potted plants and various pieces of furniture. The floor meets an orange wall, which dominates the centre of the frame. There are multiple floor-to-ceiling windows, which are slightly overexposed. Outside one window, more potted plants are visible on a balcony. The photograph is a ‘space’ image, providing a survey of the room to a viewer positioned away from the scene.

Figure 1(L) captures what Daryl describes as his “altar”. It features incense, eagle feathers, sage, candles, a bundle of sticks tied in the shape of a cross, and a Buddha head. The board leaning against the wall is a carving bought at a garage sale. This is the entrance to Daryl’s home, his front door being down the orange hallway.

Daryl’s apartment was richly decorated with what he referred to as ‘Moroccan-style’ hanging fabrics and masks, various statues of Buddha, and carvings and small prints. When asked about his choice of decor, he replied “I love Moroccan stuff; I just like the colours that they use and the pattern. It's a very intricate kind of work. It's always vibrant colours and I find it cozy, rather than, you know, I mean some people like

white walls, which I do not. It's a small piece of something that makes a big statement.” Consistent with this concern for aesthetics, Daryl discussed how he took photographs at different times, to showcase how his apartment looked in different lights.

Above all else, Daryl valued thriftiness. When describing the content of the photographs, he discussed at length how he acquired his possessions and how much he paid for them. Almost everything was obtained for free or at a very low cost. The many spider plants pictured in Figure 1(R) were propagated from five original plants that Daryl had bought, and he regularly sells them for pocket money. He had upward of 20 in his home at the time of the interview.

Brandi

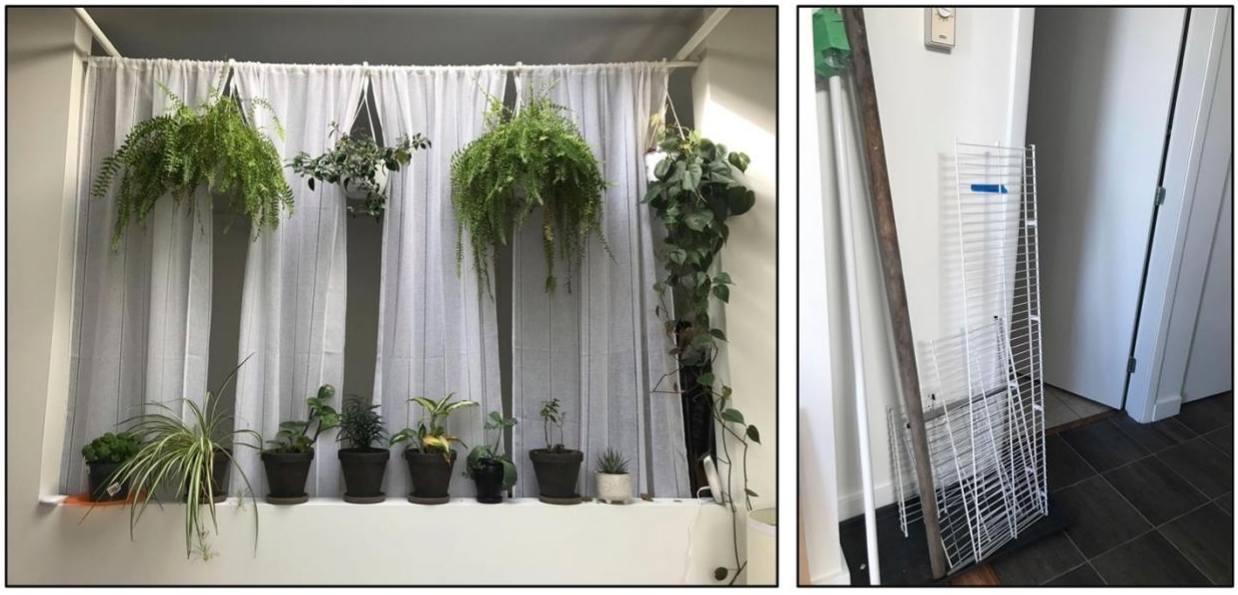

Figure 2: Brandi’s home

In Figure 2(L), the viewer is facing swaths of white fabric, divided into four sections and separated by hanging plants that are positioned above eye-level. There are an additional eight potted plants resting on a low white wall below eye-height. There appears to be empty space behind the fabric. Due to how the viewer is positioned, there is little sense of how this space relates to the rest of the home. It is a ‘decor’ shot, with many decorative and structural aspects on display.

Figure 2(R) shows a hallway that recedes to the middle-right of the image. In the foreground, wire racks lean against the white wall in the centre of the image, along with what appear to be poles. Further down the hallway, a door is ajar. The viewer is positioned looking slightly downwards at the wire racks, indicating that these are the main point of interest. This said, the composition of this ‘hybrid’ photo–with other parts of the home in view–suggests that the importance of these objects is related to the rest of the space.

When Brandi was interviewed, she and her partner had just moved into their apartment. She expressed the most concern of any participant about the state of her home, as she was still in the process of organizing it to feel functional and appealing. In Figure 2(L), Brandi had hung the plants and the curtain fabric in the overpass to separate the bedroom from the living room. Brandi’s apartment is essentially a studio, with the half wall being the only sort of barrier. Brandi decided to further demarcate the bedroom and living room by putting these objects here.

Figure 2(R) shows the physical clutter that comes with setting up a new home. The wire racks had been in the shoe closet, but Brandi had moved them to install her preferred shoe storage system. The large brown pole had been used by Brandi to hang

plants in her previous home. Notably, this is the only photograph of clutter that any participant took. Brandi explained: “I definitely hope that won't be their home. We’re still kind of in renovation mode. With the shelves in that picture, we'll just ask the landlord if they want to use them for a different unit. Or we'll just kind of throw them in the closet.”

Will

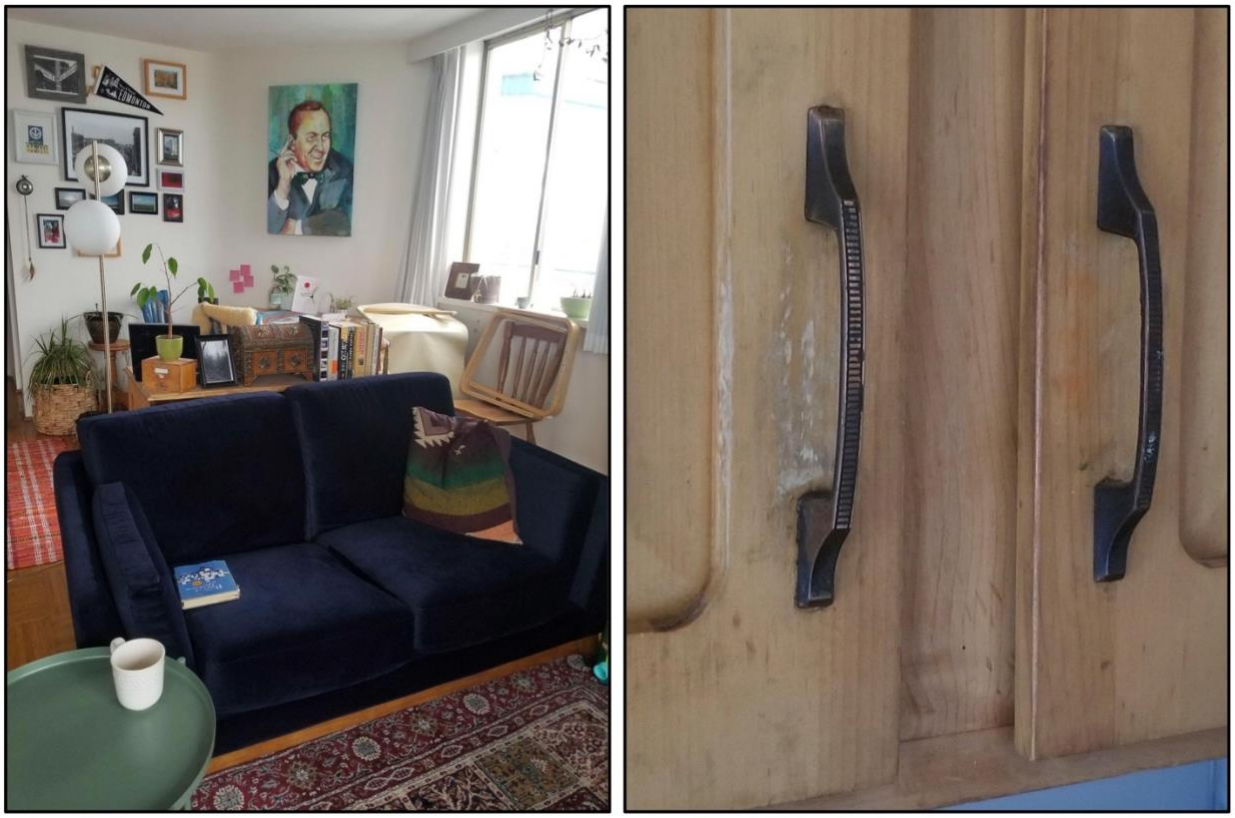

Figure 3: Will’s home

In the foreground of Figure 3(L) is a blue couch that faces the viewer, with a rounded turquoise side table to the left, and a patterned rug on the floor in front. Behind the couch, there are various objects, but because of foreshortening and their distance from the viewer, it is difficult to distinguish their position relative to one another. Finally, in the

background of the image, white walls meet to form a rounded corner of the room. There is a window on the right-hand wall, and decorations on other walls. This ‘space’ image provides an overview of how the different components of this room work or fit together.

Figure 3(R) is cropped and angled so that the viewer is close to cabinet door handles. They are a dark brass colour and mounted on blonde wood, which is fairly beaten up, with scratches and marks. This photograph is a ‘close-up’; it hides the rest of the room in order to highlight the handles.

Will lived alone in a studio apartment, and had re-worked this small, open space to meet his needs. He described setting up separate areas by positioning his furniture to form a living room, a workspace, and dining area. This was undertaken in part because of working at home during the pandemic; having a specific area for work made it easier to be productive, and to feel as though work was complete at the end of the day. Figure 3(L) shows how Will creates discrete ‘rooms’: the living area is in the foreground, in front of the couch; the workspace is in the middleground, based around a chair and desk, and the dining area is in the background, where a table is positioned under the painting. Will said of this photograph: “this is what I can control, what I can manipulate. In a studio apartment, since you have one room, you can kind of dictate creating rooms. I didn't take any photos of the kitchen because I have no control over that. So it's kind of a waste of time taking photos of it.” Will did in fact take a photograph of his kitchen—Figure 3(R)—but only a very small portion of it, in order to illustrate his frustration: “Everything is super worn down … you just can’t make it look nice”; this was a space Will felt that he could not change or control.

Olive

Figure 4: Olive's home

Figure 4(L) shows a closed white door, with a plastic skeleton at eye level that is wearing a white tanktop and hanging from a black hook. To the upper left of the large skeleton is a smaller, golden skeleton. The photograph is cropped along the outline of the door, with the viewer's line of sight narrowed to focus on the skeletons. As such, this photograph functions as a 'decor' shot, albeit with a narrow frame.

Figure 4(R) positions the viewer in front of a white wall covered with an array of posters of various sizes and designs. The photo is dimly lit, with a light source out of view on the left-hand side. The viewer's gaze is directed to these posters, because nothing else is in view. Consequently, this photograph is a 'decor' shot, presenting an overview of the objects on the wall.

Olive had many knick-knacks in her home, often things she had salvaged that were being thrown out by other tenants. Figure 4(L) showcases two such objects: the large skeleton named ‘Mr. Bones’ and the small skeleton named ‘Bones Jr.’ Mr. Bones was “found in the alley and [I] just brought him home. They've just hung on my doors in various apartments for the past few years.” Presently, the skeletons hang on the outside of the bathroom door, as a unique form of decoration.

Olive also had an extensive collection of album and concert posters, some of which were featured on the wall in her living room (Figure 4(R)). Olive discussed how they are attached to the wall with sticky-tack, and consequently fall down a lot. According to her lease, she is allowed to use nails and push-pins, but as the walls are concrete, options are limited for displaying artwork.

One characteristic of both these photographs and the discussion with Olive was how object-centric they were, with very little context provided. Olive’s perspective on home-making appeared to centre on the display of possessions and artefacts (see Barratt and Green, 2017). We gained little sense of the wider context of Olive’s dwelling, barring an expression of frustration with her kitchen, which she chose not to photograph: “It's kind of a big mess. There’s crumbs everywhere and I haven't had the chance to deep clean everything.”

Camille

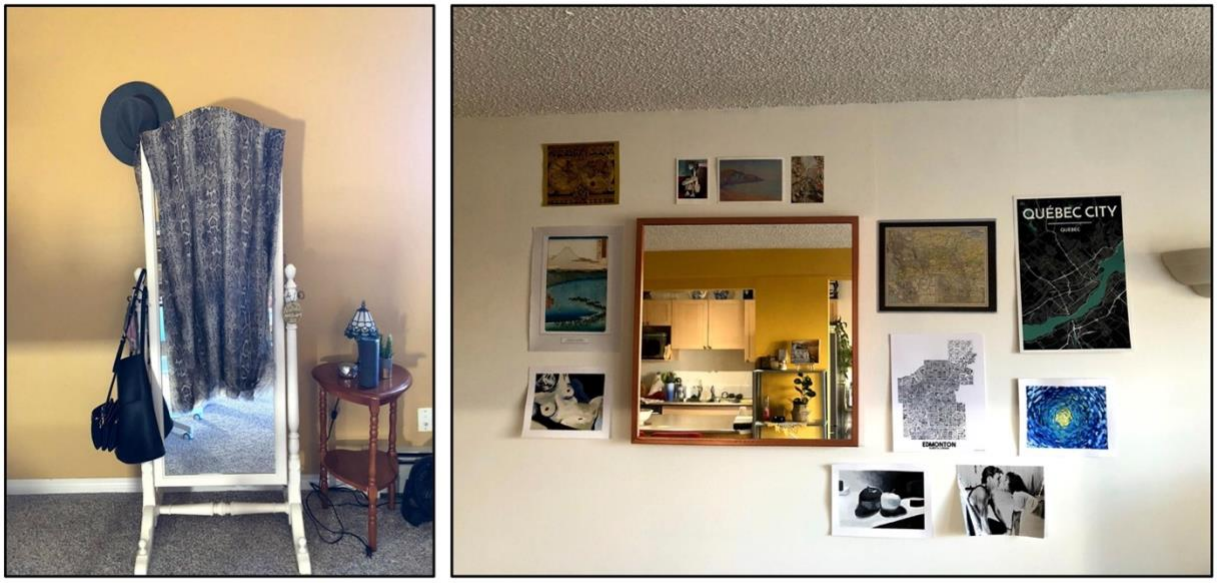

Figure 5: Camille’s home

Figure 5(L) is centred on a white standing mirror, which is largely covered by grey patterned fabric, blocking reflection of everything except a carpeted floor. To the right of the mirror is a small side table with a collection of objects on it, while to the left purses are draped off the frame, and a hat hangs on the wall. This ‘decor’ photograph is composed so that no other space is in view, indicating that these objects are important.

In Figure 5(R), the viewer is positioned looking slightly upward. There is a collection of photographs and prints affixed to a cream wall. There is also a mirror, positioned slightly to the left of the viewer's line of sight, which reflects a kitchen. There is likely a window just out of frame to the right, given the natural light cast across the wall. While centred on the wall, and thus classified as a ‘decor’ image, the composition

of this photograph also positions the viewer to understand other spaces in the home, specifically the kitchen.

Camille was the youngest participant at 22, and the only participant to live with someone who was not her partner. When discussing home-making and possessions, she almost always used a collective pronoun: she did not buy a piece of furniture, but rather *we*–herself and her roommate–bought a piece of furniture. Home-making for Camille was therefore a collaborative act. Collaboration came up when we discussed Figure 5(L). Camille described how, during the pandemic, she and her roommate had begun to feel ill at ease with their bodies. Consequently, they decided to cover-up their mirrors with scarves in order to avoid looking at themselves: “[I’m] tired of seeing myself in sweatpants, and no makeup on. We took some scarves, and we covered up some of the mirrors in the apartment so that we don't have to stare at ourselves. I kind of like it like this. I've noticed my mood has increased and I feel happier and I don't hate the clothes that I wear.” Here, we also see a connection between embodiment and home-making, and the feelings, senses and physical actions this connection evokes (Clapham, 2011).

Figure 5(R) features an uncovered mirror, but in the dining area, alongside art and postcards that Camille had made and bought. Natural light is cast across the wall, and the kitchen, reflected in the mirror, seems sunny. Camille explained that she had taken the photograph in the morning when she felt the light was most favourable. Later in the interview she described actively considering lighting when taking photographs so as to capture as many details as possible.

James

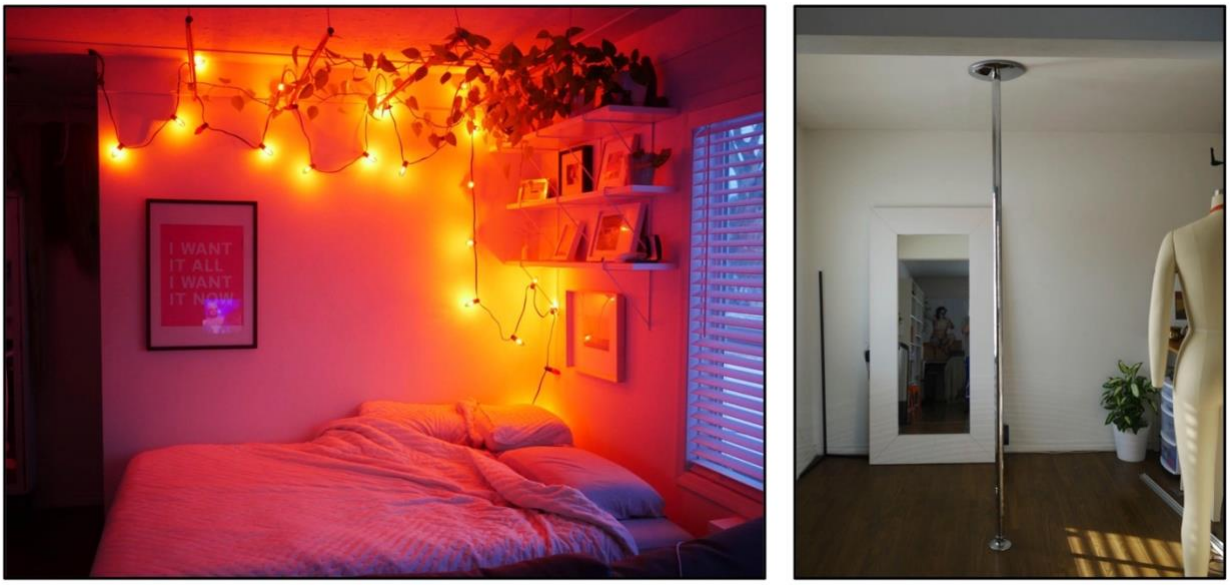

Figure 6: James' home

In Figure 6(L), a string of orange lights hangs from the ceiling and drops down to the right across the wall, ending up below eye-level. In the foreground is a bed, with white linen turned cool orange and pink by the lights. Along the wall with the lights is a framed image, and the adjacent wall has a shelving unit. The viewer can see from the base of the bed up to the ceiling, and gains a sense of how the space works. First and foremost, however, this is a 'light' image, dominated by the colourful illumination.

At the centre Figure 6(R) is a large metal pole extending from ceiling to floor. On a wall behind the pole to the left, a mirror reflects a painting of a squatting naked figure. To the left of the pole, and seemingly close to where the viewer is positioned, is a dress mannequin. Light flowing through a window out of frame to the left casts patterns on the floor. While the pole is centered, suggesting importance, the bounds of the photograph extend well beyond it. The inclusion of the mirror, mannequin, and much of the wall and

floor in this ‘space’ image suggests that the importance of the pole is related to the rest of the room and these objects.

James lived in a studio apartment and followed the practice of creating discrete ‘rooms’ within this architectural space. In Figure 6(L), a bedroom is formed by distinctive lighting above the bed—orange novelty lights hung across wooden bars that James had installed. James described how he seeks out colourful light bulbs and fixtures, and matches them with similarly vibrant possessions. In the case of the bedroom, the framed print to the far left of the image is neon pink, to complement the bright orange lights.

Figure 6(R) is centred on a pole that James installed for pole dancing—it is temporary and attached to the floor and ceiling via tension. James discussed how, during the pandemic, he transformed what had been his dining area into a dance room: “There used to be a small dining table here, like a dining area, and I just never used it. I started learning pole dance a couple of years ago, and with isolating and being at home … it felt like a good idea to have one. I thought it would make me like my home more, and it really has worked.” While James’ choice to turn his dining area into a dance room is unconventional, it fits within the broader trend towards home-making in studio apartments by creating semi-discrete spaces.

Discussion

We identify five key insights from our study: three anchored (in the first instance) in our formal analysis of the photographs, and two stemming from the more conventional combination of photographs and interview data.

First, we observed that participants generally used one of three contrasting compositions in their photographs. Most common were ‘decor’ shots that showed how they decorated a two-dimensional surface: these were often wide shots that showed most or all of a wall, although some were narrower and more focused on display of specific elements (e.g. the skeletons in Figure 4(L) and the standing mirror in Figure 5(L)). Second were ‘close-up’ shots centred on a singular object with little or nothing else in frame. This composition invited viewers to consider the importance of the object to the participant. Finally, ‘space’ images–and to a lesser extent ‘hybrid’ images–allowed participants to present an overview of an architectural space and how it was used—particularly through the organization of furniture and other possessions. Collectively, these compositions point to the various scales at which home-making takes place—that is, at the level of the object, the surface, and the room. While these scales have been identified and analyzed in previous home-making studies (albeit often separately), we establish that they can be evident in participant photography, and thus may reflect tacit understandings of home-making, which do not necessarily require interview questions to elicit.

Our second finding centres on the importance of lighting. Many images were naturally lit, with light flowing through windows either in frame or just out of frame illuminating objects and spaces. This points to an element of choice (at minimum, participants chose to take photographs during daylight hours) but also suggests that natural light is relevant to home-making, given the frequency with which it was visually privileged. Indeed, participants shared an array of photographs centred on plants and/or furniture in pleasing natural light. Moreover, in a small number of images (n=8),

including Figure 6(R), lighting was the focus of the photograph. In combination, these observations affirm the importance of light in home-making noted in several studies, where it has been linked to experiences of comfort (Madsen, 2018) and control (Due et al., 2022), and support Kuoppa et al.'s (2020) conceptualization of light as an 'affordance' that shapes the relationship between people and their homes.

Our third finding centres on absences—that is, content which is *not* present. Elements of home that were consistently absent from photographs pointed to the limitations of home-making for renters. For example, with one exception, participants did not take photos of kitchen objects or spaces. When asked why, they explained that they felt disconnected from or disinterested in their kitchens because they could not change them, and that they tended to accumulate mess. Will specifically stated that he did not like his kitchen because he felt unable to renovate or change it; this frustration was captured in Figure 3(R). This affirms that tenants' sense of control, or lack thereof, strongly influences their sense of home and ability to home make (e.g., Due et al., 2022; Easthope, 2014; Nasreen & Ruming, 2021). The lack of photographs of kitchens in our study, and participants' disconnection from them, stands in contrast to Costa Santos and Bertolino's (2020) finding that the kitchen is the 'heart of the home' and a centre of domestic life. Indeed, our participants' home-making appeared to be most strained in kitchens, which cannot be readily personalized. More generally, participants mostly avoided taking photographs of areas of their home they felt they had little control over.

Our fourth finding was that, within rental units with open layouts, participants opted to create discrete spaces. Specifically, Brandi, Will and James had divided their studio apartments into 'rooms'. Through this practice, they replicated elements of

conventional floor plans, by delineating separate spaces for distinct activities. This negotiation of domestic architecture is an aspect of home-making that involves adapting and appropriating space so that it better meets individual needs and preferences. This finding recalls Costa Santos and Bertolino's (2020) identification of a 'reciprocal spatiality' between the architecture of the home and the values and expectations of residents. Indeed, our participants consistently emphasized this dynamic in follow-up interviews. By "altering … original layout[s] … [and] changing the prescribed use of the rooms" (Costa Santos and Bertolino, 2020, p. 503) through strategic placement of furniture and other possessions, participants were able to home make without undertaking structural changes. This points to one way in which renters can exert control over their homes. Will stated this directly, explaining "this is what I can control, what I can manipulate."

The fifth finding is that every participant mentioned having items in their house that were thrifted or salvaged in some manner, and several showcased such items in their 'decor' and 'close-up' photographs. Daryl and Olive, in particular, repeatedly discussed saving objects from the trash, and seeking out free or low-cost objects online. Daryl took pride in this thriftiness and saw it as a key element of his home-making. Prior to interviewing Olive, we had no way of knowing that Mr. Bones (Figure 4(R)) had a name or was a salvaged item, but because the skeleton dominates the frame, we knew it had importance to her. The practice of finding or thrifting objects, and then using these objects in creative ways, stemmed from a combination of economic necessity, participants' pride in their creative skills, and the value of these objects in decorating an apartment. As Soatia and McKee (2021) have observed, "creative improvisation [with]

cheap, recycled stuff" (p. 295) can be an accessible form of personalization for tenants with limited resources. Overall, we found participants engaged in "planning, responsibility, resourcefulness and frugality", not for the sake of appeasing landlords or maintaining a lease, but in order to make a home in private rental accommodation (cf. Rosen & Garboden, 2022, p. 476).

Conclusion

In this study, we examined how participants' photographs communicated their home-making. We drew on art historical knowledge and utilized formal analysis to complement and extend traditional approaches to using photo-elicitation in home-making research. We approached each image as a primary source, and sought to understand how its composition directed the viewer to understand certain things about the scene and its content. While this approach produced empirical insights, as set out in the previous section, our primary contribution is methodological. This study responds to an emergent interest the 'aesthetic dimension' of photographs in applications of photo-elicitation, presents an approach that counters the strong tendency to privilege words over images (see Soaita & McKee, 2021) and responds directly to Carpenter's (2022) call to integrate approaches and insights from the humanities.

Specifically, our method was informed by formalism in art history; it directs attention to formal elements of images and resulting composition, which is crucial to how a viewer understands what they are seeing. In our study, participants conveyed important aspects of home and home-making by how they positioned the viewer and how they framed their photographs. 'Close up' shots, for example, clearly prioritize the object they centre on, and based on this composition alone, the viewer can infer that the

object is of importance to the participant. This is, perhaps, a self-evident point; yet we suggest it is 'obvious' precisely because, as Rose (2001) explains, "the formal elements of a picture will dictate how an image is seen by its audiences" (p. 25). More generally, attentiveness to these formal elements in participants' photographs can illuminate aspects of home-making prior to interviews–and, indeed, can inform interviews. In our case, we were able to extend long-standing concerns for content and context by asking additional, specific questions about participants' compositional choices.

We find that formal analysis–a way of looking very carefully at how images are composed–can strengthen and enrich studies that employ photo-elicitation, specifically in home-making research, but also more generally. The process we have described in this article is replicable, although we acknowledge it necessarily entailed a degree of subjectivity (e.g., in identifying compositional categories, and assigning images to them). It is also important to note limitations to this approach. First, by definition, formal analysis does not seek to explicate the social or political context for images. This said, "detailed scrutiny of the image itself" (Rose, 2001, p. 37) can certainly be a productive starting point for more theoretically-informed analyses. Put another way, formal analysis may precede, and inform, other forms of artistic interpretation (see Adams, 2018). Second, formal analysis cannot account for how different views might see the same image differently; at least implicitly, it assumes that the "compositional modality of the image" will be "universally recognized" (Rose, 2001, p. 191). Finally, we note the potential for future research to connect formal analysis with the concept of 'atmospheres', which has been employed to understand how domestic spaces are

organized–and illuminated–to create specific multi-sensory experiences (Bille, 2015; Kuoppa et al., 2020).

In proposing and demonstrating formal analysis of participant photographs, we do not intend to imply that follow-up interviews, and the information these can elicit, are of less value than has traditionally been understood. Clearly, it would not have been possible to interpret the meaning and significance of a photo of a mirror draped with scarves without asking Camille, and we could not have known why Daryl decorated his apartment with Moroccan art without discussing this choice. Follow-up interviews remain a critical component of the photo-elicitation methodology. We have established that photographs can be analyzed as primary objects, and that this approach can yield insights into home-making, but such insights are greatly amplified by the explanations of participants. Here we concur with Achterberg (2007) that "images … help to contextualize words, just as words help to contextualize images" (p117). Taking the time to analyze the formal elements of a photograph is a form of methodological rigour, and enables housing researchers to draw upon other scholarly fields that specialize in using visual materials. In particular, this study benefited from (and operationalized) the insight that composition is never passive, and always conveys meaning to viewers (Rose, 2001). Ultimately, photo-elicitation studies of home-making benefit from gaining both visual and verbal insights into participants' homes, and both types of data merit serious analysis in their own right.

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