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Design, Ethnography, & Everyday Elderly Domesticity

How does ethnography change as it migrates from anthropology into design? Does it continue to generate contributions to research knowledge as well as design insights?

This paper explores these questions via an ethnographic case study of everyday elderly life and its domestic spaces. This study specifically focuses on the everyday domestic lives of senior citizens to understand the role of objects and ritual spaces in directly and indirectly maintaining social connections with separated loved ones. The study was designed to investigate the role of objects and ritual spaces play in social domestic practices, so as to inspire new ways of thinking about how design could improve the quality of senior citizens' lives at home.

The study is reflective of the way ethnography has become integrated into the design process via interest in Information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs have become densely woven into physical environments and intricate social frameworks of daily activity throughout the world. As emphasis on the design and use of ICTs within fields such as informatics and interaction design move from the workplace to contexts of everyday life, ethnographic methods are increasingly being used by designers and researchers to generate rich, deeply textured understandings of the dynamic –and often idiosyncratic –social, cultural, and material ecologies characterizing these domains.

The presentation will describe what the study suggests about the broader role ethnography can play within the design process as well as what the ethnographic insights relating to everyday elderly life arising from it suggest about what design ethnography has to contribute to cultural anthropology.

*A computer and project will be required for this presentation.