

1. Projects



Leaving/returning: how people remotely manage their homes

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The “leaving and returning” project, combining the two themes of mobility and “dwelling”, focuses on the temporary physical absence of people from their homes. What links do they maintain with their homes when they are on the move? What consequences do these mobilities have on the social and spatial organization of their homes? Being able to peacefully leave home and experience a pleasurable mobility depends on the individuals’ profile, their expectations with regard to their travels and a learning-curve that is almost a skill in its own right, in a world where travelling has often become the norm.

Research participants

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The project

Goals

Managing one’s absence from home seems to have become a major issue in today’s so-called “hypermobile” society where individuals very often find themselves away from their home environment. Despite more and more people working from home and the development of long distance communication, some claim we’ve become a “society of ritualized absence” (Viard, 2014). This society, enabled by a greater mobility in terms of leisure and work, leads to more time spent away from home. In this context, being absent from one’s own home appears to be an emerging feature in contemporary ways of dwelling, based on specific social practices. Managing this absence influences the material organization of the home and more generally one’s relationships to the habitat - understood as the living environment that includes all local and social ties.

This research project, in collaboration with Leroy Merlin Source, focused on the temporary physical absence of people from their homes while they are being mobile, in order to study how people manage this absence and explore their attachment/detachment behaviors with regard to their home in the context of their mobility-related needs and habits.

It was hypothesized that the absence situation gives rise to specific social, spatial and temporal behaviors related to the organization, management and preservation of the home – whether the home in question has other occupants or not. Indeed, these behaviors are worth studying even if the house is still occupied when away from it, by another member of the household for instance or a sub-tenant. As such, these behaviors would contribute to a symbolic and material ownership of the home.

Several reasons may explain why people implement methods and devices for managing and even counteracting their absence from home:

- The issue of home security against intrusions or accidents explains why people resort to insurance, surveillance systems (cameras, sensors, automation, etc.), neighborhood information sharing, storing valuables or setting up certain services (such as a neighborhood watch or a security company).
- The need for maintaining plants (watering), animals (food) or parts of the house (cleaning) can lead people to hire specific services (concierges, caretakers, etc.), buy programmable or remote controlled devices (automatic watering systems, animal food dispensers, etc.) or rely on the solidarity of neighbors and relatives (to check the mail, feed the cat, water the plants and let some air into the house, etc.).
- In order to make money or simply keep the home occupied for any of the previous reasons, people also lease or sublease their homes to other individuals (through AirBnB, for instance) or sometimes lend them to people they know (house-swaps, rent-free loans, etc.).
- Meanwhile, anticipating the effects of one's absence from home upon return may explain why people use programmable thermostats, buy stocks of food in advance, postpone renovations, etc.

These practices are not exclusive and work in conjunction, producing what we can call forms of "remote dwelling." People resort to two kinds of methods to manage their homes when they are away:

- technical resources, digital networks and objects (smartphone, home automation, keys, alarms, etc.)
- and social resources, human networks and people (friends, family, tenant, superintendent, neighbors, etc.).

The goal was to analyze what their use and significance is in people's relationship to housing and mobility. It is important to note that what is being observed here is one's absence from a home that may or may not be otherwise occupied by other people. Indeed, it could be sub-rented or occupied by another member of the household. The idea remains to see how the absence of one of the occupants can produce specific dwelling behaviors. The project favored a multidisciplinary approach and created a dialogue between photography and sociology. Starting from the premise that people create an imaginary of their home when they are away from it through a situation of mobility, the goal here was to capture a trace of this through photography, to produce pictures to show the places and devices through which people remotely manage their homes, whether physically, socially or symbolically. Photography in this context also provided an opportunity to capture certain behaviors performed by the inhabitants that reveal how they manage their absence from home. The photography work was put into perspective with an analysis of how people behave and represent their homes when they are away, as reported in the sociological survey. The goal here was therefore to understand people's representations of their homes when away from them and how their relationships to them drive the implementation (or not) of home management practices, to describe, categorize and contextualize them in connection to the kinds of movements that produce the absence.

Research hypotheses:

The different modalities of absence and their associated representations lead to different ways of managing this absence and, ultimately, to different modes of remote dwelling. Hypothesis 1: The devices employed to manage one's absence from home and their specific uses vary depending on the kind of trip made and especially how reversible it is. The frequency (in terms of routine), duration (in terms of time spent away) and distance (in relation to the home) of trips have an impact on the nature and use of these devices. Hypothesis 2: The devices employed to manage one's absence from home and their specific uses vary depending on the type of dwelling: what kind of accommodation (house or apartment, size, configuration, etc.), surroundings (rural, suburban, urban, density, collective building, subdivision, etc.) and ownership status (is the person a tenant or co/owner, how long has he/she lived there, etc.). Hypothesis 3: The devices employed to manage one's absence from home and their specific uses vary depending on localized social capital, i.e. people's social networks in the spatial environment of their homes. Weak ties (neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.) and strong ties (family, friends, etc.) are resources that facilitate departures and absences from home.

This research project was conducted in partnership with Leroy Merlin Source. It was launched in June 2018.

Key results

1/ Leaving with your mind at ease

Strategies for managing one's absence from home are meant to ensure peace of mind when leaving and returning home.

To leave home with your mind at ease means being able, along the way, to divert your attention from home. It means not worrying too much about those who stay there, the activities that take place there, or the objects that remain. It means coping well with the distance from the domestic environment, in order to engage in one's activities elsewhere (whether they are professional or personal), near or far, and to live them serenely and without disturbance. It means being able to come back home to one's individual or shared habits and reclaim a familiar space. In other words, the overall goal is to make one's absence an almost mundane act in the organization of domestic, family, professional, daily and social life. This serenity is not easy to achieve, but it comes from an organization that relies on everyone's resources. Thus, the home tends to be designed to live there but also to manage one's absence from it.

To leave with your mind at ease, therefore, requires having the means to deploy as many social, spatial, technical and symbolic devices as needed to ensure a double continuity that allows you to cope well with being absent:

- the continuity of the house: the preservation of its physical integrity and the regular course of life for those who remain there, with the assurance of finding your home as you left it upon return.
- the continuity of the activity performed remotely - whether leisure or work - which, in order to be properly executed, requires being fully devoted to it.

Ensuring these two continuities means doing everything you can to not have to go home once you're gone.

2/ Lifestyles and absence from home

The recurrent need to manage one's absence from home is the flipside of the hypermobility of contemporary lifestyles.

Remote work, professional assignments, leaving for holidays or weekends, or even dual-residency: the reversibility of our travels (the possibility to leave and return quickly and often to one's home) leads us to move more and more often, which leads to increasingly frequent departures from our homes.

Three major figures in how absence from home is managed, three absent modes: the life course of the inhabitant is decisive in the management of absence

Putting the house in absent mode means setting up rituals, spatial arrangements, to activate technical equipment and contact people. It aims to put the house in a stable state that ensures its integrity and preservation despite the absence.

Three absent modes, linked to three inhabitant profiles, emerge:

- The permanent absent mode: highly mobile professionals, with no children at home, who are always going away at irregular intervals and sometimes unexpectedly. Their home is constantly in absent mode: faced with a very fluid pace of life, the house needs to be in a state of stability to remain a central reference point. The house facilitates departures and returns by enabling a continuity and an economy of gestures before leaving, by requiring minimum care (no plants, no animals) and by readying itself for a scheduled delegation of presence (temporary rentals). The house is supervised by a network of contact people (conciierge, neighbors, roommates) who can intervene at any time but who are rarely mobilized unless something unexpected happens.
- The two-level absent mode: working couples with children or single-parent families, with regular and anticipated absences. Their home has a low absent mode during the day and a fully absent mode during the holidays with the entire household being absent. These two modes are cyclical and regularly programmed on a daily or yearly basis. When in low absent mode, the house facilitates daily domestic life, and relies on the regular intervention of contact people for the care of children (mainly family, housekeeping staff), who are always the same and with a well-established schedule. The fully absent mode reassures the inhabitants who leave it together. Actions are then focused on preserving the integrity of the empty home, between safety and maintenance.
- The “as needed” absent mode: retired or soon-to-be retired couples, home-owners, with independent children, and who control their own time. Their low mode depends first of all on the technical systems for managing absence during the day (securing doors and windows and activating alarms), when they go out for a few hours. The fully absent mode depends above all on the activation of contact people, especially the neighbors (keeping an eye on the empty house, looking after the garden). How effective the departure rituals are will depend on how well the house was organized to facilitate the absence (equipment, layouts, location, and stability of the network of contact people, for planned and routine interventions).

3/ The modalities of managing absence from home

The modalities of managing absence from home differ depending on:

- how many of the residents are absent: whether the home is completely empty (all members of the household are absent), or only in part (a spouse, roommate or child is present)
- the location: if there are trustworthy people living close by (parents, friends, neighbors, etc.), whether there is a need to rely on various contact people (gardeners, house maintenance staff, childcare workers, tenants or temporary subtenants)
- the duration of travel: a long-term absence requires more arrangements/devices than any short-term absence. The longer the absence, the more the inhabitant contemplates possible unfortunate events happening at home (theft, accidents, degradation, etc.).
- the frequency of travel: the more the absences are frequent, the more the arrangements/devices are integrated as routines in the preparation of departures and improved through repeated experiences to achieve a high degree of efficiency.

Distance itself doesn't seem to be the main factor in differentiating how absence is managed and what arrangements/devices are chosen. Even when geographically close, the point is to not have to return home so as to not interrupt the current activity. Inhabitants have integrated that speed allows them to make reversible trips, and so distance doesn't significantly impact the choice of arrangements.

Three strategies for managing one's relationship to home

The research identified three strategies for managing one's relationship to the home form which one is absent, depending on the need and desire for contact with the home. And digital tools are now central to this.

- The "ubiquitarians", who are never completely absent. They are here and there, connected to and not really absent from home. For them, it's important to keep control and/or contact with those who have remained (spouse, children, roommates,...). Through autonomous vacuum cleaners, connected kitchen robots, remotely controlled thermostats or alarms, they can always keep a hand on their home.
- The "detached," who cut themselves completely from their empty home. They don't want to think about it at all when they're away and prefer to keep it at a distance, come what may.
- The "elastics" and the "delegates," who have an intermediate relationship. They keep an eye on their home when away, they stay in touch with their relatives who remained at home to feel reassured, and they leave it to others to take care of the house, hoping that those in charge will be reliable enough for the duration of the absence. Managing one's absence from home then potentially requires mobilizing an entire social network (existing, strengthened, new, degraded).

4/ Between living and moving, making the absence livable

Leveraging the "transition chamber" of departure

There are two kinds of "transition chambers" that are needed for a successful departure, in order to travel with peace of mind:

- A spatial or physical "transition chamber," with a "departure (preparation) zone" within the home. It can be a vestibule, relatively isolated within the house. It facilitates frequent departures, by making them more routine and isolating them from the personal sphere, or leisure trips that are less frequent but that require objects that need to be stored, prepared (clothing, toiletries,...) and also now digital tools (chargers, adapters,...).
- A temporal "transition chamber" also exists by way of the travel route taken, both when leaving, in order to cut as quickly and cleanly as possible with home (especially when it is the center of an intense everyday life and you're going on vacation), and when returning, to decompress, organize and reconnect with contacts.

These organizational routines, both physical and temporal, enable the inhabitants to leave their home more easily and frequently.

The necessary alignment between physical and psychological distance

One's physical distance from home implies a displacement that is unambiguous. But one's psychological distance from home fluctuates depending on the degree of attention paid to the home left behind. Inhabitants can communicate with their home through the right technologies and stay concerned about what may happen in their absence, but they can also ensure that there is a real separation, by taking the necessary steps to focus entirely on what they're doing at their destination.

- Before leaving: this requires making the departure irreversible, through routines to prepare the house (cutting the water, packing, checking that doors and windows are closed,...)
- During the trip: the departure trip is sometimes experienced as a special moment to relax, to isolate oneself in a bubble (watching the landscape, reading a book) or instead to exchange with relatives or colleagues (for example: having an one-to-one conversation with a parent while being accompanied to the airport, and then cutting one's phone during the flight, putting on comfortable clothes and watching a movie)
- During the period of absence: this period can give rise to a desire to disconnect from home and the intensity of daily, family and/or professional life (for example, by cutting one's phone or other electronic devices). Alternately, the link can also be maintained with home and those who have

remained there: for example, phone calls and other communication rituals with children, made possible by digital and instant communications. This link is preserved through practical objects (the telephone), but also symbolic ones that recall the home and allow the absent person to recreate a familiar environment (perfume, lucky charms, favorite garment,...). The psychological link to home is also maintained by the fear of its degradation (careless roommates, burglaries, fire,...). While communication technologies make the absence easier, they can also complicate it because of the routines and devices put in place precisely to enable a detachment (the untimely triggering of an alarm, for instance). They force the absentee to pay attention to the home.

- Upon return: while getting physically closer to home, the inhabitant must prepare to readjust to the domestic environment. The devices put in place when leaving were intended to preserve the house and its occupants, but they are also intended to ensure a serene return and help the inhabitants resume the ordinary course of domestic life. The inhabitants do everything to maintain a stable state of cleanliness, order and operation which, prepared for prior to their departure with the absent mode or the intervention of contact people, must be found as is upon return. As soon as the home starts to depart from this image of stability, the return home becomes a source of anxiety. Arriving home allows people to reclaim their dwelling: putting the heating back on, preparing the first meal, unpacking their suitcase and taking care of dirty laundry, in order to resettle but also to prepare to leave again.

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Partir – revenir

Gestion de l'absence, stratégies
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Portfolio n°2

Typologie des objets de l'absence

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Housing
- Leisure & tourism
- Rhythms of everyday life
- Work

Theories

- Art & Science
 - Methods
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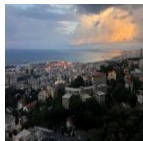
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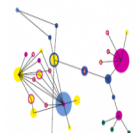
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