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## Museum Experiments in Living Ethnography : ‘At Home in Japan’ in London?

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## Museum Experiments in Living Ethnography: ‘At Home in Japan’ in London?

Inge Daniels\*

生きている民族誌の博物館実験  
—ロンドンにおける「日本の家のくつろぎの空間」展

インゲ・ダニエルズ

Through an analysis of the exhibition ‘At Home in Japan—beyond the minimal house’, held at the Geffrye Museum in London from March until August 2011, this paper will re-evaluate the potential of the multi-sensory, spatial context of the museum to question deeply embedded cultural stereotypes. ‘At Home in Japan’, based on Daniels’ ethnography inside contemporary urban Japanese homes (Daniels 2010), juxtaposed the widespread, ahistorical myth of the Japanese house, characterised by empty spaces devoid of people and things, with the complexities of everyday life behind closed doors. The exhibition brought together domestic objects, photographs, written commentary and sounds to produce an immersive environment that encouraged visitors’ active participation. The objective of this exhibition was to test whether these kinds of multi-sensory, interactive experiences might stimulate a more balanced understanding of everyday life across cultures.

本稿は、文化理解に埋め込まれたステレオタイプを問いなおすために、ロンドンのジェフリー博物館において2011年3月から8月まで開催された展示「日本の家のくつろぎの空間—最小サイズの家のかなた」の分析を通して、博物館の多感覚的、空間的コンテキストがもつ可能性を、評価／再評価しようとするものである。「日本の家のくつろぎの空間」は、現代日本の都市家庭の内側に  
についてのダニエルズが著した民族誌にもとづいており (Daniels 2010)、人もモ

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\*Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford

**Key Words** : ethnographic exhibitions, Japanese homes, everyday life, performative knowledge, photographs

**キーワード** : 民族誌展示, 日本の家, 日常生活, 行為遂行的知識, 写真

ノもない空間として普及している非歴史的な日本の家についての神話と、ドアのむこうの実際の日常生活を、対比的に示した。この展示は、来館者が積極的に関わるように促す没入状況を作り出すために、日常品の使用と、写真、来館者の残したコメント、音を組み合わせて使用した。その目的は、博物館はこの種の多感覚的な相互行為的な経験をつくり出すことによって、日常生活について文化を超えて均整のとれた理解を導くことができるか、示すことだった。

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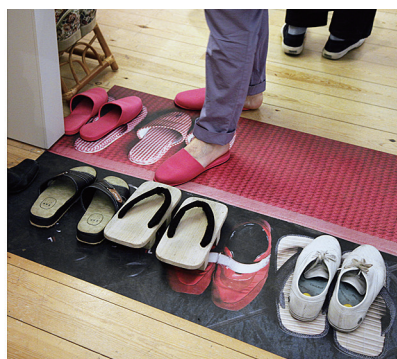
## 1 Introduction: Experiments in Living Ethnography

In this paper I discuss the exhibition ‘At Home in Japan—Beyond the Minimal House’, held at the Geffrye Museum in London from March until August 2011. The Geffrye is a museum of the home, set in 18<sup>th</sup> century almshouses in East London, in an area that used to be known for furniture making. Its permanent exhibition focuses on urban living rooms and gardens of the English middle-class over the past 400 years. Along a series of period rooms, that reflect changes in style, taste and fashion, as well as larger social and economic shifts, visitors are led on a walk through time from the seventeenth century to the 1980s. Moreover, in a more recently built extension, temporary exhibitions<sup>1)</sup> are held for a period of six months. Previous examples range from exhibitions about West Indian front rooms (2006), to gardens of elderly people (2007–2008), to eco homes (2009–2010). ‘At Home in Japan’ was the first temporary exhibition at the museum not to focus on the United Kingdom (UK); it formed part of a strategy to expand the remit of the museum to the study of the house and garden worldwide.

The exhibition is what I call an ‘experiment in living ethnography’, in reference to a book I am currently writing which aims to explore how anthropologists can communicate the performative, bodily knowledge we experience during fieldwork more effectively towards wider audiences. The production of ‘living ethnographies’ requires a thorough rethinking of current anthropological outputs. More specifically, it raises questions about the conventional ethnographic monograph—an example of meta-communication aimed at a professional audience of scholars and students—that continues to be the main medium for disseminating anthropologi-



**Figure 1a** A typical 'step-up', marking the divide between inside and outside space, in an entrance hall in a home in Osaka in 2006



**Figure 1b** The demarcation in the flat in the exhibition in 2011

cal knowledge. These anthropological texts are often clouded, in what Köpping has called, the 'fog of a meta-discourse', with authors emphasising 'product not process...smoothly forgetting the participation of the body' (Köpping 2002: 186). Thus, though 'the experience in the field authenticates us in the eyes of co-conspirators in anthropology, it has to be couched in scientific terms, denying the experiential component when it comes to teaching, writing or grant-grovelling' (ibid. 202–203). Moreover, the 'desire for esteem of peers and critics leads to a tendency to make things unduly complicated or scholarly or heroic' (Brody 2001, cited in Schneider and Wright 2006: 13), while writing clearly, or (dare one suggest) pleasantly, for a general public is met with suspicion<sup>2</sup>.

In order to remain relevant in the twenty-first century, anthropologists might have to re-assess their outcomes and think more radical thoughts. Some have been making more effective use of the Internet and other new technologies<sup>3</sup>, but, in my view, we will also benefit from revisiting older formats such as the museum space. Indeed, a second aim of my project is to re-evaluate the possibilities of the multi-sensory, spatial context of the museum to question deep-rooted cultural stereotypes. Of course, since the start of the discipline, anthropologists have understood the importance of the museum and exhibitions as educational tools. However, most ethnographic exhibitions tend to emphasize representational knowledge, whereby objects are treated as symbolic devices through which visitors can access information about the Other, albeit by gazing at them from a safe distance. Moreover, the stress tends to be on authentic, iconic items that eventually become part of a super-category of objects held, stored, and preserved in museum collections.

'*At Home in Japan*', by contrast, focused on the mundane material culture of everyday life. The exhibition elucidated the particular historical, cultural, and economic context in which contemporary Japanese domestic spaces are embedded. It was also an experiment that explicitly explored whether, by encouraging visitors

to actively engage with the material culture of the Other through familiar, bodily practices, one may stimulate a more balanced understanding of social life across cultures. Building on the anthropological literature about perception that argues that vision cannot be disconnected from the haptic experiences of the moving body in space (Ingold 2000), the exhibition created a three-dimensional environment that visitors were invited to explore with all their senses; with their bodies and their brains. We thus aimed to shift the focus from ‘knowledge transmission and learning’ to ‘enactment and experience’, thereby transforming the museum ‘from a space of representation to a space of encounter’ (Basu and Macdonald 2007: 13–14).

The exhibition combined the use of photographs and written commentary with objects, sound, and smell, in order to create a multi-sensory experience of what it feels like to be at home in contemporary Japan. The everyday performance of taking off one’s shoes before stepping up into the house embodies this ‘feel’ of home. Shoe removal exemplifies the tension between representational and performative knowledge that was at the base of the exhibition, and Figure 1a, which depicts the typical demarcation between inside and outside space that is found in the entrance hall of all Japanese homes (see Daniels 2008), is particularly relevant in this context<sup>4</sup>. As Hetherington, in his insightful discussion about the difference between distal, representational and proximal, embodied knowledge has rightly argued, ‘the feeling of home is not represented by slippers but performed by them’ (Hetherington 2003). This same photograph is also intrinsically linked with what I initially considered to be one of the failings of the exhibition, in that, because of health and safety issues, we were not allowed to instruct visitors to take off their shoes. That said, the absence of the customary ‘do not touch’ signs also resulted in some unforeseen visitors’ actions. Figure 1b shows how we employed a life-size copy of the photo, combined with real shoes and slippers, to create the standard domestic demarcation in the entrance hall of the exhibition. Upon seeing this display, some people spontaneously changed their shoes for slippers, and this enactment generally set the tone for people’s subsequent level of interaction.

## 2 Underpinning Research: The Myth of the Japanese House

The exhibition draws on several ethnographic projects I have conducted in Japan since 1996. However, the specific objects as well as visual and sound data used to produce the displays stem from one year of fieldwork conducted in 2003, in thirty urban homes in the Kansai area (Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe), and a visual project carried out with the professional photographer Susan Andrews in the same region in 2006. The research was published in a richly illustrated academic monograph—‘*The Japanese House: Material Culture in the Modern Home*’ (Daniels 2010)—that served as the concept as well as the catalogue for the exhibition<sup>5</sup>. Like the exhibition, the book is experimental in its use of photographs; it firstly questions the con-

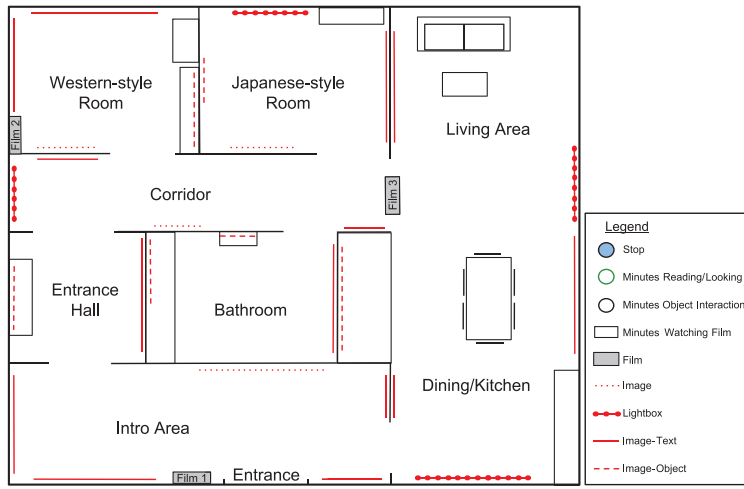
ventional relationship between image and text in the anthropological monograph, and secondly tests the potential of photographs to capture the synaesthetic qualities of the material world more adequately (Tilley 2002)<sup>6</sup>.

The book uses ethnography to question widespread 'western' stereotypes that depict Japan as the quintessential exotic 'Other'. It focuses on the trope of the 'minimal Japanese house', and contrasts it with the contradictions and complexities inside real, lived-in Japanese homes. To my knowledge, this is the first academic study, based on living for a prolonged period of time with Japanese families inside their homes, that shows the importance of backstage activities such as storage, cleaning, and bathing in the reproduction of social life. The book examines the impact of post-war changes to the exterior, the layout and the use of dwellings. It pays particular attention to domestic tensions as inhabitants try to: (1) balance the relationship between the individual and the family, between freedom and obligation, (2) negotiate multiple connections between the home, the community and the State, and (3) create beneficial alignments with spirits, ancestors, and the material world. More generally, the book offers a model for studying the house worldwide, that accounts for both local specificity and common, cross-cultural human experiences.

### 3 The Experiment: The Museum as a Space of Encounter?

The exhibition recreates a standard so-called '2LDK'<sup>7</sup> apartment consisting of a communal living-dining-kitchen (LDK) area with two extra rooms (one western-style room with wooden flooring and one tatami room), as well as an entrance hall, a central corridor, a toilet (represented by a photograph), and a bathroom (see Map 1)<sup>8</sup>. The average size of this type of flat is between 60 and 80 m<sup>2</sup>, but for health and safety reasons we had to double the size of the corridor, door-openings, and the LDK centrally, so the total exhibition space (including the introductory area) therefore measured 134 m<sup>2</sup>. The space was filled with goods used every day, while recorded sounds and life-size photographs taken inside the homes studied, as well as commentary produced by Japanese inhabitants and by me, were also employed. We opted for this multi-modal approach for the reason that it does not reduce culture and experience to text, but creates an immersive space that visitors can freely discover. Thus, people could put on slippers, look inside closets, open drawers, try on a kimono, sit on chairs and sofas, lie on the futon, and generally pick up and handle any of the objects used in the exhibition.

My approach has been particularly inspired by a temporary exhibition held at The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka in 2002 entitled '*Seoul Style*'<sup>9</sup>. This show, curated by the anthropologist/architect Sato Koji, was unique in that a complete urban apartment, with all the fixtures, furniture, and possessions of one Korean family<sup>10</sup>, the Lees, was moved from Seoul to Osaka where it was re-assembled. Visitors were invited, in this case only after they had removed their



**Map 1** Layout of the 2LDK flat re-created in the Geffrye Museum

shoes, to move through the domestic spaces without restrictions, handle all the objects inside, and use the furniture (Asakura and Sato 2002; Sato and Yamashita 2002). ‘*Seoul Style*’ drew my attention to the potential of both interactive, multi-sensory displays and the medium of the house, to convey the familiarity and similarity of everyday lived experiences across cultures in ethnographic exhibitions.

Unfortunately, we did not have access to the whole contents of one family’s home, and the spaces inside our exhibition flat were filled with approximately four hundred objects used every day. They had been sourced in the following four ways:

- (1) Japanese families who participated in my ethnography donated surplus domestic items; particularly tableware (see Figures 2a and 2b), cutlery, and cooking utensils, but also kimonos, towels, lucky objects, and dolls.
- (2) During two shopping trips with participants in Japan in 2009 and 2010, I bought other functional goods such as futons, tatami mats, curtains, garden tools, light fixtures, and slippers.
- (3) We purchased large pieces of furniture including a sofa, a kitchen table set, a carpet, a coffee table, and two chests of drawers at IKEA London<sup>11)</sup>.
- (4) We used seasonal and religious objects, tableware, and kimono from a collection I had put together over 15 years.

It was the fact that the majority of these objects were mass-produced goods, not destined to become part of a museum collection, that enabled us to break with conventional museum practices of preservation and limited visitors’ access. None of the objects was individually labelled, but we created assemblages of objects mirroring the often messy, material fabric of most people’s everyday lives. Thus, we chal-





**Figure 2a** Tableware closet in a home in Osaka in 2006



**Figure 2b** Tableware closets in the exhibition (photo by the author)

lenged the widespread treatment of objects in museums as iconic, singular pieces, in turn, construed as repositories of memory, history, and heritage. Moreover, giving visitors free access to all the objects meant that throughout the day<sup>12)</sup> the displays changed as things were picked up, handled, and misplaced, much as happens inside real, lived-in, homes. The exhibition thus also raised larger questions about our understanding of museums as spaces where valuable collections are stored and preserved. This issue is particularly relevant (and delicate) in light of the current economic crisis that has resulted in the slashing of museum budgets in the UK (and the rest of Europe). ‘At Home in Japan’ suggests that instead of seeing museums *only* as spaces where objects are indefinitely kept, leading to an ever-increasing need for storage space, (at least some) museums could be reconfigured as sites that facilitate the temporary coming together of objects, sounds, people, and ideas.

Since the objects displayed did not become part of a collection, we decided to give most of the items<sup>13)</sup> away in a free public raffle, held after the closure of the exhibition. This event, attended by more than two hundred people, tied in with one of the main themes of the exhibition; the movement of objects in and out of the house through gifting. The raffle also offered us the opportunity to examine whether by engaging in the consumption and recirculation of goods (instead of only their preservation), museums might be able to play an important role in enabling an ongoing dialogue about cultural stereotypes among people from various cultural backgrounds inside their own homes. Together with the photographer, Susan Andrews, I am currently conducting a follow-up study that tracks some of the objects that people won in the raffle into their new homes in the UK. This project investigates whether, and how, the exhibition objects became integrated into their new owners’



everyday lives, and if their presence had any impact on their previously held ideas about Japan.

#### 4 Photography and Museum Design

‘*At Home in Japan*’ was experimental in its sourcing, use, and recycling of objects, but in the remainder of this paper, I would like to focus on our treatment of photographs. Indeed, one of the main objectives of the exhibition was to consider how we might use photographs more creatively and effectively in museum displays. In most ethnographic exhibitions, photographs are considered supplementary; they either illustrate knowledge provided in texts, or contextualise specific objects in use. There are exceptions, of course, and in recent years growing numbers of anthropologists have, for example, been experimenting with the combined use of photographs and texts, in order to incorporate multiple perspectives in museum displays. A much-cited example is ‘*Okiek Portraits*’, an exhibition curated by the anthropologist/photographer Corinne Kratz. It was first shown in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1989, and then toured to several cities in the US. Kratz juxtaposed her own colour photographs of Okiek people with comments made by locals about these images, in order to question cultural stereotypes about Africa (Kratz 2002). Although this kind of experimentation is praiseworthy, the presentation of the photographs was rather unadventurous; they were singular, framed objects produced in a small, manageable size, and as such, in my view, not that different from artworks in photographic exhibitions<sup>14)</sup>. In our exhibition, we also aimed to compare and contrast images and texts, but it was our intention to give photographs more prominence. Our efforts resulted in a series of image-text ‘wallpapers’ (Figure 3) that covered at least one wall in each room.

Each of the wallpapers consisted of the following elements:

##### A. Top band

1. text in bold, large, print that relates information about the specific room
2. images: a. small group of photos and historical images embedded in the wallpaper illustrate the text  
b. Andrews’ photos mounted on medium-density fibreboard (MDF) tell their own story

##### B. Middle band

1. texts that elucidate cultural and historical contexts
2. captions for images embedded in the wallpaper—Andrews’ photographs were uncaptioned



**Figure 3** The image-text wallpaper in the dining-kitchen area in the exhibition

C. Bottom band: plasticised, A4-size documents that visitors could take off the wall to browse.

1. pamphlets, collected from the homes studied, advertising new homes, photo-studios, festive foods, etcetera
2. textual commentary about Andrews' photographs offered by Japanese participants.

Through the use of these pamphlets, which had been collected in Japanese homes in 2003, as well as comments made about Andrews' photos by some participants, we set out to integrate local perspectives into the exhibition. Figure 3 shows two such pamphlets hung in the bottom band (C1), one advertising festive food for the New Year's period (*osechi*), another giving away a cut-out of a devil mask to be worn for the Setsubun Festival held on February 2. The second document hung in the bottom band (C2), is an example of the commentary I collected through photo-elicitation; in this example people expressed their opinions about the photographs of tableware, closets, and drawers in the top band (A2a). A third visual element we introduced to offer visitors' a Japanese perspective was a slide show about the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of a home in Kyoto in 2003. Shown on a monitor in the introductory area, it consisted of three hundred photographs selected from more than one thousand photographs taken by the Yanos, the owners of the house, to document the event.

Like conventional museum panels, the wallpapers provided an array of textual



**Figure 4a** A collage of public spaces in the Kansai region



**Figure 4b** Visitors inspecting the collage close-up

information, but our approach differed because we also employed a relatively large number of visuals that we treated as equally important. Further, we laid out these images so that visitors could make visual links between them, thereby contextualising the domestic spaces concerned, whether or not they read any of the texts. In Figure 3, for example, Andrews' photograph of the family Takahashi sitting at their dining table in 2006, is visually connected to a series of historical images that traced the changes in tables and their associated eating practices. We further employed a visual device that involves placing photographs in dynamic relation to each other, and forces a multi-perspectival viewpoint, by producing photographic pairs, sequences, and collages of Andrews' photographs. Outside the exhibition space, close to the entrance, for example, we displayed a collage of multiple photographs printed in various sizes on four banners suspended from the ceiling (Figures 4a and 4b). These photographs, depicting a range of public spaces such as restaurants, streets, temples, and stations, contextualised the exhibition within the specific region where the research was carried out. Another example of our use of visual comparisons was a sequence of three large photos of urban gardens that morphed into a real garden at the entrance to the flat.

One of the few ethnographic exhibitions that, to my knowledge, has attempted to break with the standard use of photographs is *'Paradise'*, held at the former Museum of Mankind in London in 1994. This exhibition about Papua New Guinean Highlanders, curated by Mike O'Hanlon, used a number of life-size, colour photographs of people and environments that were not secondary to either museum objects or texts (see O'Hanlon 1993). In his review of the exhibition, James Clifford praises these photographs because they 'are in bright, living color. Enlarged and frequent, they work against the established tendency for museum objects, even new ones, to appear as collected treasures from another time' (Clifford 1995: 99). Moreover, he rightly argues that these photographs, which make people, things and environments present, also make us question the absolute focus on objects in museums that draws on a 'distinction between object and context, figure and ground' (ibid 99).



**Figure 5a** A lit paper window set in the tatami room



**Figure 5b** Looking out into the back garden from the LDK area

In our exhibition, we did not respect this supposed distinction, but allowed Andrews' photographs to take centre stage. Aware of the unique possibilities offered by the three-dimensional museum environment, we used life-size colour photographs of domestic spaces and interior features in the following three ways<sup>15</sup>. Firstly, drawing on their ability to provide unusual close-ups, we employed large-scale photographs to create walls in some of the rooms in the flat. Examples included a photograph of bookshelves filled with books, documents and trinkets placed in the western-style room, or a photo of a sink in use, and a cabinet, filled with soaps, make-up, toothbrushes, and miscellaneous containers filled with creams and ointments, hung at the appropriate level in the bathroom. Secondly, life-size photographs of windows were lit from behind to evoke the outside world coming in. Figure 5a shows how, by placing a light source behind the image of a closed paper window set inside a tatami room, we simulated the atmosphere inside this kind of space. Moreover, by switching the ceiling light on and off, visitors could augment the display's dramatic effect. Figure 5b demonstrates the same technique, but in this case, we illuminated a photo of a large window that enabled visitors to look over the shoulder of a small girl, and out into a large back garden.

The third photographic display technique we employed was, in my view, both the most imaginative and the most successful. These were 'image/objects' consisting of life-size colour photographs of specific domestic features that were paired with assemblages of objects. In this case, photographs and objects were treated as equally important; they referenced each other, blurring the distinction between representation and embodiment. Examples include lucky objects on top of a shoe closet in the entrance hall, a kimono closet in the western-style room, and a Buddhist altar in the tatami room (Figure 6a). I would like to pay special attention to Figure 6b, which depicts a life-size photograph of a kitchen counter to which we literally attached an arrangement of objects. This example demonstrates the huge potential of a more extreme application of this technique; something that I would certainly like to develop further, were the exhibition to travel to another location.





**Figure 6a** The Buddhist altar ‘image/object’ in the tatami room



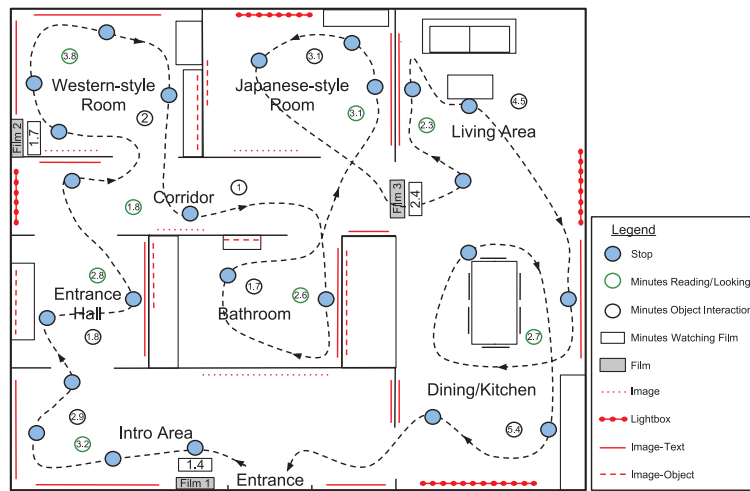
**Figure 6b** The kitchen counter ‘image/object’ in the dining-kitchen area

## 5 An Ethnography of Visitors

Between June and August 2011, assisted by two MA students, I conducted an observational study of sixty visitors to investigate whether the aims of the exhibition were achieved. Unlike large-scale scientific surveys, this study used ethnographic methods to challenge the premise that museum-goers are rational actors who can be classified according to their diligence for learning. Some participants in our study were in search of knowledge (40%), but more were driven by the pleasure of the unexpected (50%), while a minority sought inspiration for their own homes (10%). However, a focus on goals is misleading, as during each visit various motivations may intertwine, and I would like to end this article by looking in more detail at how people actually engaged with the displays.

On average, visitors spent 28 minutes inside the space, and Map 2 shows the standard route taken. Most participants were positive about the interactive/immersive aspect of the exhibition, but the level of tactile interaction was influenced by people’s naturalisation into the ‘do not touch philosophy’ adopted by most museums. We, for example, regularly overheard parents scolding their children for touching the displays, and thereby demonstrating just how deeply ingrained this attitude is.

‘*At Home in Japan*’ did not assume one mode of ‘passive’ learning. On the contrary, we stressed complexity and ambiguity in order to challenge any totalizing view and hopefully foster a more intuitive understanding. Especially interesting in this respect is what I call the ‘zone of uncertainty’; a space in front of the tatami room, where visitors were confronted with the message ‘In Japan people never wear



Map 2 The average route taken by visitors

shoes on tatami mats’ printed on the floor (Figure 7a), without further instructions about what to do next<sup>16</sup>. Upon seeing this text, all the participants in our study paused, even if only for a very brief moment. Ten per cent decided to remove their shoes, while fourteen per cent did not go inside. The other seventy-six per cent walked onto the mats with their shoes on, but most seemed eager to postpone this transgression. The two most common delay strategies were, first to watch one of the films we produced from stills (which lasted three minutes) while standing at the entrance to the tatami room, and second, to enter the bathroom opposite instead. Map 3 shows how a group of visitors passed through the ‘zone of uncertainty’ three times before finally entering the tatami room wearing their shoes.



Figure 7a The ‘zone of uncertainty’ in front of the tatami room

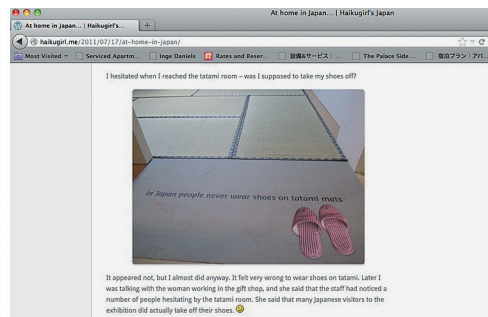
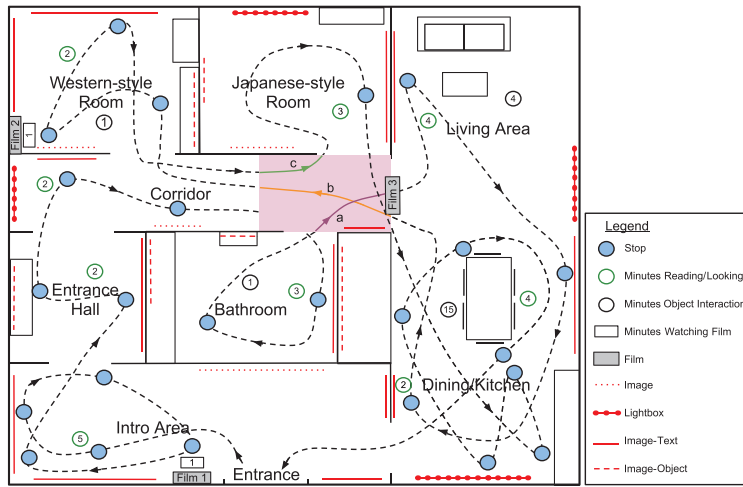


Figure 7b Haikugirl discusses the ambiguity surrounding shoe removal. on her blog ([www.Haikugirl.com](http://www.Haikugirl.com) consulted on 10.01.2012)





**Map 3** The trajectory of a ‘cultural broker’; a British man in his 50’s, who lived in Japan for one year, and who acted as guide to his two male friends. The ‘zone of uncertainty’ is highlighted in front of the Japanese-style room

The moment of hesitation and the ensuing corporeal awkwardness that most visitors experienced in front of the tatami room mimics the bodily uncertainty encountered by most people visiting Japan for the first time, as they learn how to exchange name cards, how to pour a drink, when and how to remove their shoes, which slippers to wear when, and so forth. Of course, similar instances of bodily discomfort are prevalent when we are confronted with other unfamiliar cultural contexts. Thus, only over time does a Belgian in the UK, for example, learn where to stand on the escalator, how to queue in the post-office, or how to pay a black cab driver. Moreover, this kind of bodily learning<sup>17)</sup> also occurs, although probably less blatantly, within our everyday, familiar lives. Thus, we may readjust our bodies awkwardly when a passenger takes the seat next to us on public transport, or we may look for bodily clues as to whether or not to shake hands, kiss, or hug when meeting someone new. In ‘the zone of uncertainty’ visitors experienced with their bodies the ambiguity characteristic of all cultural encounters, and, as in ‘real’ life, people reacted and/or adapted in different ways.

Sociality was an important aspect of the visitors’ experience, and two thirds travelled in pairs or small groups. Many of these people engaged with the displays by using their cameras; it was common to pose for photos by play-acting living in the space while putting on slippers, wearing kimonos (see Figure 8a), pretending to wash one’s body in the bathroom, cook food and eat at the table, and so on<sup>18)</sup>. Some visitors also posted photographs with comments about the exhibition on the Internet; a good example is the blogger, haikugirl, who wrote an extensive review of the exhibition on her website in which she discusses aspects of Japanese culture

as well as Japanese-related events in London. Figure 7b, for example, shows how she recalled her experience inside the ‘zone of uncertainty’ by posting a photograph of the text printed on the floor in front of the tatami room, accompanied by the following words: ‘I hesitated when I reached the tatami room—was I supposed to take my shoes off?’ ([www.haikugirl.me](http://www.haikugirl.me), consulted on 10.01.2013).

More than half the visitors entering in groups were accompanied by a ‘cultural broker’; someone who had visited or lived in Japan, who acted as a guide, whether spontaneously providing explanations about the displays, the photography or the texts, or answering questions raised by family and friends. Moreover, these ‘cultural brokers’ were most eager to re-enact certain domestic practices, while encouraging others to copy them. Examples ranged from removing their shoes, trying on slippers, putting on kimonos (or using the others as mannequins), showing them how to squat, or how to use chopsticks. In Figure 8b, a cultural broker is enacting ‘*gas-sho*’; a gesture whereby the palms of both hands are brought together in front of the chest that may be used while saying ‘*itadakimasu*’ (translated literally this means to receive or accept) to express gratitude before eating a meal.

I would like to end this discussion by describing the visit of one such ‘cultural broker’, because I hope that this case study will give the reader a flavour of the unusually rich data we collected by using ethnographic methods. Bob is a British man in his 50’s, who lived in Japan for one year, and visited the exhibition with two male friends. The group spent fifty minutes inside the space, and Map 3 relays their trajectory. In the introductory area, they all read for five minutes, after which they interacted with some of the displays by, for example, opening the post box and ringing the *furin* bell, typically hung outside the home during the summer months. Next, they watched the slide show, and when one of his friends picked up a pamphlet advertising homes, Bob began a discussion about house prices in Japan. The entrance hall offered a number of opportunities for cultural brokers to demonstrate their knowledge of Japanese culture. Bob, for example, pointed at the photograph we had pasted on the floor to create the demarcation between the hallway and the inside of the home (see Figure 1b) and said: ‘You would expect there to be a raised bit here’<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, others familiar with Japan mentioned that they would have expected a ‘real step-up’ to mark the threshold, and in the interview they, like Bob, claimed that because there had not been a step-up they did not feel inclined to remove their shoes.

Bob’s group spent most of its time in the dining-kitchen area in front of the tableware closets, touching and talking about many of the items inside. They opened drawers and took out several items for inspection. Bob was clearly in his element in this space, explaining the use of utensils, pots, and pans. He, for example, demonstrated how the lid of a ceramic bowl could also be used as a dish for soya sauce or wasabi. At the kitchen counter, he picked up the cooking pan and exclaimed: ‘This is so light, it must be aluminium. You’d get Alzheimer using this’. While at the table



**Figure 8a** Experiencing the display through photography **Figure 8b** A ‘cultural broker’ encouraging his companions to copy his actions

he picked up one of the lacquer bowls and said: ‘They do quite well to make things look like the real thing—this is plastic made to look like lacquered wood—it’s less expensive’. Later, in the interview, he admitted that he had never been inside a real LDK area because in the homes he visited in Japan ‘socializing was kept out of the kitchen’, but he added that he was accustomed to the utensils and tableware on display from having eaten Japanese food.

To conclude, the findings of our visitors’ study suggest that the exhibition was successful in questioning common European preconceptions about Japan. Of the 1305 entries left in the visitors’ book, only twenty-three were negative; these were primarily complaints about the lack of real furnishings and fittings (some people had wanted to see a real, working toilet and bath), and the entrance fee<sup>20)</sup> (a first for the Geffrye Museum!). Overall, the comments left behind infer that the exhibition had the desired impact. Typical examples of feedback included: ‘Fascinating. Totally different from the stereotypical image. A real eye opener’, or ‘Excellent exhibition of contemporary Japanese people’s houses and lives. Very precise and detailed description of Japanese life. This contributes a lot to understanding Japan’. The majority of those participating in the visitors’ study were also complimentary. A British woman in her seventies admitted that because of the war she held anti-Japanese sentiments, but ‘the display of everyday normal living made me feel that Japanese people are very similar to us’, while two British women in their 20s expected that Japanese homes were ‘compartmentalized and ordered’ but they actually ‘looked messy and normal’. Finally, ten per cent of the participants in our study were Japanese, most of who were long-term residents in the UK. As an anthropologist I particularly valued their positive reactions, and I would therefore like to end with the following words expressed by a Japanese man in his 30s married to a British woman and living in London: ‘The exhibition shows Japanese lifestyle and not the stereotype. It is really what the Japanese are like and not just what Westerners think they are like’.

## Notes

- 1) Outsiders often curate these temporary exhibitions. I co-curated 'At Home in Japan' with Susan Andrews, a professional photographer and senior lecturer at the Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture, and Design, while we received assistance from a team of in-house curators and designers.
- 2) This attitude seems no longer tenable in the current financial climate. In the UK, for example, in the 2013 research assessment carried out by the government, academics were asked for the first time to demonstrate the 'impact' of their work beyond academia. Although this focus on impact can damage academic freedom by limiting the variety of research topics academics might be able to focus on, one possible positive consequence is that scholars might well feel inclined to think more carefully about their use of public money.
- 3) See for example the contributors to the Routledge Innovative Ethnographies Series at <http://www.innovativeethnographies.net>.
- 4) Unless indicated otherwise, all photographs used in this paper were taken by Susan Andrews, and they were reproduced with her kind permission.
- 5) This combined 2D/3D approach for communicating complex anthropological knowledge to multiple audiences is something I am developing further in my current project about amateur photographic practices in contemporary Japan.
- 6) The reviews of the book in anthropology journals were positive; see for example Winkel (2011) in *Etnofoor* or Ben-Ari (2002) in *Social Anthropology*.
- 7) Since the 1960s the communal dining-kitchen (DK), or living-dining-kitchen (LDK), space has become standard in all Japanese homes, whether flats or houses, in both urban and rural areas.
- 8) Laura Haapio-Kirk, who has graduated from the Msc. in Visual Anthropology at Oxford in 2011, assisted me in conducting a visitors' study of the exhibition, and produced all the maps.
- 9) Thanks to a generous grant from the Japan Foundation and the support of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, I was given the opportunity to study this particular exhibition at the museum in 2009.
- 10) The Lee family received money to replace the contents of their home, and one of the two books published in Japanese about the exhibition examines what the family decided to buy. The ethics of the project are not discussed in much detail, but the loss felt by individual family members was compounded in the unhappiness of the grandmother who eventually decided to leave her son's family and move back to her home in the countryside.
- 11) Since its (second) opening in Japan in 2006, IKEA has become a household name, and I selected products similar to those that people in my study had placed in their homes. Final choices were only made after consultation with Japanese participants, but it was a big challenge to match the colour of specific woods; a particular mahogany wood that is very popular in Japan, for example, proved unavailable in the UK.
- 12) At the end of each day all objects were returned to their original places.
- 13) I have excluded some rare objects from the raffle with an eye on a future travelling exhibition. A number of ethnographic museums have expressed an interest in the project, but I am currently having concrete talks about hosting the show with the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. For this new exhibition, I plan to collect new objects from Japanese families, many of who have already volunteered, and their new UK owners will give some of the raffled objects in loan.
- 14) 'How We See Each Other', an exhibition held at the National Art Gallery of Namibia in 1998, uses the same technique, but in this case the focus is more firmly on local perspectives because untrained and inexperienced Namibian photographers comment on their own amateur photographs depicting everyday life (Rhode 1998).
- 15) The Bauhaus movement famously experimented with the relationship between photography and space during the 1930s, but I will discuss their pioneering ideas in more detail in my forthcoming publication about the exhibition.
- 16) The 'zone of uncertainty' emerged as a direct, although rather unexpected, consequence of not instructing visitors to take their shoes off in the entrance hall. Of course, Japanese people do not wear shoes in their homes. Moreover, once inside, certain spaces necessitate special attention; thus, people will change into special slippers when going to the toilet, while upon entering a room covered

in tatami mats even house-slippers are removed. Walking on tatami mats with shoes is paramount to sacrilege, and the decision not to instruct visitors to remove their shoes was therefore very problematic. The alternative was not to allow visitors to go inside this room, but this would not only go against the interactive spirit of the exhibition, but also elevate the symbolic function of the mats, thereby inadvertently confirming widespread stereotypes about the minimal nature of the space. The text on the floor was a compromise that left the decision about what to do, to the visitor.

- 17) It was pointed out by Gergely Mohacsi, based at Osaka University, and the commentator of my paper at the symposium, that this kind of bodily learning is expressed in Japanese with the idiom '*mi ni tsukeru*', which refers both to 'wearing clothes or jewellery', but it is also 'to master something' or 'to gain a skill'.
- 18) In my monograph about the exhibition I will also analyze photographs taken by people visiting the exhibition.
- 19) We were unable to create this 'step-up' because we needed to provide wheelchair access.
- 20) Adults were charged £5 and concession tickets were sold for £3, while entrance was free for children under sixteen.

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