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Is the future of living smart? BUT WHAT ABOUT FEELING AT HOME?

We increasingly live in small, mass-produced homes that hold no intrinsic meaning. Smart homes promise us efficiency—but offer even more detachment from the spaces we inhabit

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There is a comforting, predictable blandness to the promotional videos that accompany the launch of almost any technology product or service these days. All these videos for phones, earphones, apps, tablets, smartwatches, and fitness trackers feature the same upbeat pleasant music, soothing youthful voice-overs, and bright, happy people living straightforward, compartmentalized lifestyles.

You wake up, change into running clothes, step outside, smile, run, smile, stop running, smile, check your smartwatch, log the time, smile, the end. It is all very efficient and smooth and effortless. None of that rummaging for earphones, scrambling for running clothes, checking the weather, fiddling with your playlist, farting discreetly, and peering through stinging sweat-laden eyelids that accompany the runs we actually go on.

But active and passive “idealization” is the entire point of such commercials. They actively exhort you to buy things and experience a certain ideal product lifestyle, while passively suggesting what the broader contours of such a lifestyle could be. The latter is tricky business. You want your fitness tracker strapped to the shapely wrist of a model with an athletic build who lives in a shiny house next to a park. But you don’t want to overlap that hand and alienate all the fat people who live in dingy flats in Dahanu.

So what do the promotional videos for Artificial Intelligence-enabled Home Assistant devices from Google and Amazon tell us about the ideals of the smart home? To look at it from a broader perspective, what does all this talk of smart homes mean for the changing nature of our relationship with the spaces we live in? Let us speculate, albeit cautiously.

In a sense, the smart home represents both an inversion and a reversion of the relationship human beings have had with their homes since they first started building them.

Promo videos for both the Google Home and Amazon Echo devices present one’s life in a house in fairly similar, and “instrumental” terms. Protagonists primarily sleep, cook, eat and listen to a bit of music. Oh, and they switch lights on and off. But the AI assistant is just a small part of the rapidly developing notion of the smart home. As other writers in this issue point out (see page 9), the smart home will also have temperature controls, security

systems, energy management, connected appliances and so on. Overall, the idea seems to be to create a home that anticipates your passive needs—climate, lighting—and rapidly processes your active needs—music, entertainment, recipes, weather forecasts, activating appliances and so on.

Surely this radically changes the notion of what a home is? The culmination of all these ideas is to change the home into a tool or an aggregation of instruments. But what is the point of this “instrumentalization” of the home? The smart home revolution seems to point towards the same goal that permeates so much of modern technology and technology journalism: productivity and efficiency (this writer himself writes a column on productivity for *Mint*).

Thus, taken as a whole, the smart home is a place that aspires to make you sleep, cook, eat, and amuse yourself with the maximum possible efficiency. In other words, this is home-making’s equivalent of meal-replacement products like Soylent, which promises to give you everything you need for a balanced diet in the form of a glass of vaguely palatable milkshake.

There is a certain primal elegance to this idea. It represents, as mentioned before, a reversion of sorts. In the 1850s, a tremendous storm battered the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland. When the winds settled, locals noticed that the storm had exposed what looked like ancient stone structures. Later, these were revealed to be one of the most well-preserved and illuminating sites of neo-



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lithic culture anywhere in the world. The Stone Age community of Skara Brae is a collection of some seven or eight homes preserved in surprisingly good condition for around 5,000 years. On entering each home, around 500 sq. ft in area, visitors are first faced with what is known as the “dresser”. Made of stone, like everything else, the dresser was perhaps used for

(above) A Unesco World Heritage Site, Skara Brae is a neolithic village in Scotland; and the entrance to one of the homes.

storage and for the display of ritual and decorative objects. There are two beds on either side—perhaps one male and one female. And in the centre of the room is a hearth.

Thus 5,000 years ago human beings built homes in which they cooked, ate, slept and perhaps carried out a few rituals for divine or leisurely purposes. Bang in a toilet and an Amazon Echo and you have the idealized home for the 21st century.

The intervening centuries have seen a singular pattern in the history of the human household: As they made more and more money, humans built bigger and bigger homes containing more and more things. The home was not just a place to feed and sleep but a repository of objects, and the ideas and aspirations these objects represented. Homes didn’t do things for people as much as people did things to homes. While the super rich could afford to build massive homes crammed with art and culture and statuary and crafts, the middle classes lived in smaller homes, but with no less enthusiasm for the accumulation of objects. In London, Sir John Soane transformed his home into the densest collection of art you will see anywhere in the world. In India, princes and kings stuffed their homes with expensive imports—crystal chandeliers, Italian beds, French furniture, train coaches.

It is in this context—one in which we live in increasingly small, impersonal homes devoid of truly personal stuff—that smartness promises us even greater efficiency. Yet it also promises even greater detachment from the home. In the very near future we may move from one smart home to another like we move from one smartphone to another. Log out, delete files, log in, sync settings.

As recently as the 1990s, the “More is More” aesthetic was prevalent in the homes that populated our mass culture. In *Friends* and *Frasier*, the protagonists lived in very different homes that reflected their different lifestyles—protipsters versus media celebrity—yet both homes creaked with objects.

But by then it was the age of minimalism. The origins of the movement are beyond the scope of this piece, but in the decades following World War II, a “less is more” philosophy began to percolate not just into art but also design and architecture. Pick up an interior design magazine today and you are assailed by pictures of minimal interiors, empty spaces, sunlight cascading through homes that are... empty.

All this culminates in the best-selling 2011 Marie Kondo book, *The Life-Changing Magic Of Tidying Up*. The book can be summarized as follows: Take all your stuff and throw it out, live happily ever after. It is as if homes are no longer about what they contain but what they don’t. One screen plays all your entertainment. An Instant Pot cooks all your food. And in between, there is acres and acres of space punctuated by the stray piece of Scandinavian furniture that is impossible to use without serious, long-term spinal displacement.

Why are we suddenly throwing away all our stuff and flaunting how little we own?

Some of this minimalism surely has to do with the nature of modern housing. Most of us, except the very wealthy and the very poor, live in small, mass-produced homes that hold no intrinsic meaning. We choose homes for what they can do for us. Is it near a good school? Does it have a large enough bedroom? Is there parking? And then, because culture will flaunt what it most lacks, we will try to use as little of the space as possible, because god forbid things get cluttered.

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Thus we are back, in a sense, to Skara Brae. Our homes are once again 500 sq. ft in size. And we are back to doing little more at home than eating, sleeping and having a bit of a laugh. But the ancients felt at home. What about us?



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