

Make Mine Home: Spatial Modification With Physical and Social Implications in Older Adulthood

Tam E. Perry

School of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

Objective. The process of moving in older adulthood, intertwined with loss and anticipation, is grounded in material commodities that include one's residence and its contents. This article emphasizes the role of material culture in housing transitions.

Methods. Based on an ethnographic study (January 2009–May 2012) of older Americans ($n = 81$) relocating, this study utilized interviews, participant observation, and review of documents.

Results. Personalization is both a reflection of a previous self as a homeowner and a projection of a future self as extensions of temporality intertwine with commodification processes. Through creative appropriations of their housing, residences are personalized to promote physical or social functionality or because of preference.

Discussion. Given the findings, the transitions involved in relocation must be supported by greater understanding and facilitation of key issues of personalization and its importance to older adults' decisions to relocate.

Key Words: Environment—Housing transitions—Material culture—Personalization—Qualitative methods—Relocation

AS older adults plan and execute moves, anticipating a long duration in a new residence may counterbalance feelings of loss resulting from leaving one's home and/or community. The literature shows that the preference to remain in one's living space is often a less costly option and preferred option (Geboy, Diaz Moore, & Smith, 2012). Indeed, numerous communities have established programs to help older adults age in place or remain in their homes (Oswald, Jopp, Rott, & Wahl, 2010; Vasunilashorn, Steinman, Liebig, & Pynoos, 2012). Moreover, there are state and federal incentives to support older adults in their communities. However, relocation is an option often explored and undertaken by older adults. A key reason for moving has been found to be difficulties faced in one's current physical environment (Oswald, Schilling, Wahl, & Gäng, 2002). This study shows how older adults attempt to make certain that their next residence will meet their projected needs.

Gerontological scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding housing transition processes (Perry, 2013; Scheidt & Norris-Baker, 2003; Shippee, 2009). It has been suggested that researchers "describe if and how permanent moves are distinguished from temporary ones" (Sergeant, Ekerdt, & Chapin, 2008, p. S96). I argue that one way to distinguish between these two types of moves is to consider the extent of older movers' emotional and material engagement in projecting a future after a move. Arguing for an intersection between material culture and gerontology, I examine how the process of imagining a future self—in a future space—has meaningful and functional implications

for older adults who are relocating. The deliberate work of personalizing a unit in a senior housing community can make the idea of moving seem more attractive and achievable.

Imagining a Future Self

When older adults plan moves, they engage in a process of imagining a future self. This imagination includes the activities they may be engaged in, the friends and family members they want to interact with, and what kind of residence will accommodate this future self (Perry, 2012). The latter is the focus of this paper, as the linking of the self with a living space is part of the process of relocation. This process occurs in any move taking place at any point across the lifespan, but scholars have noted the importance of moves and reconciling one's possessions in older adulthood (Luborsky, Lysack, & Van Nuil, 2011; Marcoux, 2001; Rowles & Watkins, 2003; Stum, 2000). Rowles and Watkins suggest that the complex ways that a home creates a sense of "being in place" (p.78) involves cumulative transformations of space into place over a lifetime. In this way, domestic space is a critical site where memories are anchored and identity is maintained (Rowles & Watkins, 2003). Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingle, and Bowen (2004) argue that relocation has two unique features for older adults. First, the accumulation of their possessions over a lifetime must be contemplated in household disbandment in later life. Second, relocations at this life stage are generally into smaller quarters.

For older adults in the United States, the process of relocation may begin by surveying the available housing

options offered by senior communities and Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs). The residential units within these communities may be considered commodities in that they are designed to be produced and sold with attention to economies of scale. Often, they are perceived as identical in form to an undiscerning spectator. However, such a perspective overlooks the complex nature of senior housing units and the ways they may lose their identical and impersonal features. This paper provides examples of the “singularization” of senior housing units and its potential impact on older adults’ well-being.

Anticipating many conversations about the loss of leaving one’s home, I was surprised during the course of this study by the number of conversations I had about countertop and cabinet colors, as well as other discussions of adding patios and sunrooms. I observed that many study participants became preoccupied with modifications in their new residences. For some older adults, the iterative aspect of choosing to move, choosing a retirement community, choosing a specific residence within a community and examining potential modifications within a residence cannot be overstated. As I tried to understand the emphasis on modifications, which for some movers overshadowed the overwhelming feelings of how much work was involved in moving from their original homes, I realized that the personalization aspect was part of a larger question: do I see this space as my next home? Attention to the personalization of space through modifications contributed to the work of imagining a future in the new residence. This process can be better understood by drawing on literature on commodities and material culture.

Recent Scholarship on Commodities

Commodities and their circulation have been explored by scholars to understand the relationships between buyers and sellers in processes of exchange. Recent scholarship focuses on the ways commodities are appropriated in creative ways. For example, Foster (2005) argues that Karl Marx’s study of commodities, which says the “exchange value” of a commodity is reducible to price set through market relations, did not consider other ways value is enhanced as consumers work to change meanings of commodities. For example, through marketing practices, products are positioned to appeal to the individual tastes and lifestyles of consumers. Using “lovemarks” as a term for personalization, Foster suggests, “Creating lovemarks therefore entails inserting products into stories that shape people’s relationships” (2005, p. 11). In addition to tailoring products to fit the narratives that people tell about themselves, Fehérváry (2009) also suggests looking for examples of appropriation before consumption. For example, through marketing to target audiences some products seem “made for me” (p. 447). On the other hand, she suggests that some commodities are not subject to appropriation because they are strongly tagged

as prestige brands. A Louis Vuitton purse owner can only “borrow” the brand’s symbolic meaning, but can never fully see it as hers (Fehérváry, 2009, FN 15, also FN 14). In contrast, in this study, marketing directors of senior housing at times encouraged appropriation—often termed “personalization”—as they hoped that potential residents would see that the housing was suited to their stage of life and feel that a particular retirement community unit could be “made for me.”

In his discussion of gift-giving practices, Carrier (1993) describes ways that impersonal, mass manufactured commodities can be personalized. He provides the example of how gift-wrapping a store-bought item is an important material modification that invests a commodity with personal meaning. By contrast, if an item is homemade, like jam, wrapping is not considered necessary. I suggest, in the case of senior housing, that material modifications can similarly be seen as a way to personalize spaces that are otherwise identical.

Such methods of personalization may also be an example of the social life of objects, in which objects ebb and flow in commoditized milieus (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). Building on Simmel’s (1978) argument that value creation need not be linked with production of objects, Appadurai (1986) argues for a more dynamic understanding of commodities. In his view, Marx’s account of commodity exchange should be perceived as potentially only one phase in the social biography of an object. Kopytoff (1986) also emphasizes the commodity as a phase in discussing the tension in an object’s history between becoming a commodity (something “common” and thus exchangeable) and becoming its opposite—singular. Singularity does not have to be equated with preciousness, as objects can be singularly “priceless” or “worthless.” The personalization processes described in the ethnographic data that follow show that, in the course of moving in older adulthood, there is a premove stage during which singularity is possible and that, in the history of a housing unit, much can be altered. Such a perspective requires an understanding of contexts that will, in Appadurai’s words, “help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career” (1986, p. 15). I suggest that the premove stage is a context in which the potential for senior housing units to become “singular” (rather than remain impersonal commodities) occurs.

Effecting this transformation is uncertain as it depends on the policies of senior living providers as well as certain skills and knowledge of older adults. Among potential residents of senior living, there is an asymmetry of information and options for other older adults also working to customize spaces. Foster (2005) calls this a “politics of knowledge” (2005).

While personalization is another a way to singularize a commodity as a projection of a future self in a future material space, the ability to imagine and execute such modifications depends on one’s expertise, nurtured through experiences

which may depend on one's class and professional background, personality characteristics and age. As discussed below, characteristics such as familiarity with construction practices or dispositions such as politeness may be products of historical moments of education, upbringing, and career orientation that continue to be exhibited in older adulthood.

METHODOLOGY

Study Site

The data for this study were gathered from older adults residing in and around a small college town in the Midwestern United States. A few older adults moved from a greater distance (across the same state or across multiple states) to the area. Other older adults relocated across state lines to live near kin. Participants in this study moved primarily to independent living villages of Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRC) or other senior housing facilities. Where possible, I visited participants in both their original and their new residences. Some persons in the study had lived in multiple homes previously, and others still maintain multiple residences.

Study Participants

This ethnographic study focused on older adults ($n = 81$), their kin ($n = 49$) and involved professionals ($n = 46$) as the older adults planned and executed their moves. The ages of the older adults ranged from 57 to 91. Most were Caucasian, (95.1%) with the remaining being African-American (3.7%) and Asian (1.2%). This sample composition is reflective of the users of senior living in the United States currently. Fifty-nine females and 22 males participated in the study.

The primary participants were older adults, either single ($n = 43$) or married ($n = 38$) when both agreed to participate. The participants were recruited within 50 miles (of either premove or postmove location) of a university town with a little over 100,000 residents. Participants were recruited through flyers, presentations to senior groups, and informal communication about the study. Snowball sampling was also utilized as older adults referred peers to the researcher.

Data Collection

I used three data collection methods: semistructured interviews, participant observation and document review. Over a long period of time, these qualitative methods enabled me to uncover the meaning of moving for older adults, using "thick description" as a guiding principle (Geertz, 1973; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I interviewed some participants both before and after they moved. While some of the older adults were interviewed in these distinct phases (premove phase $n = 25$; postmost phase $n = 17$), most older adults, their kin and involved professionals (e.g., real estate agents,

handymen, or women) participated in the project through three stages of moving (premove, moving day, postmove). As the transition from one residence to another transcended county and in some cases, state lines, I aimed to visit each older adult in both their old and new residences, embracing a call to follow "objects and subjects as they move and circulate" in multisited anthropological projects (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, p. 1103).

Where possible, I participated in the moving process with activities such as packing boxes, donating items, posting a home on Craigslist, working on moving day, assembling tables, and moving furniture. I also visited many participants in their new locations to help unpack boxes and observe the arrangement of their possessions. To record my observations and my reactions, I documented my experiences in field notes. For document review, I collected lists of possessions, and lists of tasks to complete in the moving process, along with sketches of furniture layouts. I also took photos throughout the project to capture fieldwork experiences.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data with the goal of identifying key themes in the process of moving for older adults (Patton, 2002). Through analysis of interviews that were selectively transcribed, document review, and re-reading of field notes, themes inductively emerged. I was careful to triangulate interview data with observations to avoid privileging interview data (Carr, 2011). Several times I checked with study participants to confirm accuracy of my observations and analysis (Padgett, 2008). To preserve confidentiality, all names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

Tensions Between Providers and Consumers

In relocation, a tension exists in the senior living industry between older adults who are moving and senior housing facilities. Older adults are interested in personalizing their spaces as they imagine themselves in a new home. Senior living marketers may encourage potential residents to explore certain kinds of personalization by offering, for example, paint choices and countertop choices as a way to promote interest in a community. In my fieldwork, modifications to senior residences took many forms and had different purposes and consequences. "Modifications" included choosing paint color, changing fixtures, and adding upgrades such as stainless steel appliances, while other modifications were termed "special requests," which might be seen as ways to customize space by changing the footprint of a residence, like having an entrance to a storage closet through a bedroom closet rather than the standard way of having the entrance attached to the garage.

As I attempted to understand the difference between an upgrade and a “special request,” I soon learned the subtle distinction. “Modifications” were seen as adding value to the property and would be left in place for future residents of that unit, while a “special request” might or might not need to be reverted back to the standard design in efforts to refurbish the place for a new tenant. Thus, the upgrades and special requests invoked an implicit understanding of what was considered standard and what was not.

However, many potential residents would not contemplate such major modifications, or even request them. In many ways, personalization came with a cost. For example, ceiling fans and specialized door swings had set prices and sometimes the difference between an upgrade and a special request would come into play. According to a senior manager of the retirement community, upgrades cost money but they were seen to add value to the space, while special requests, might have to be taken out to be replaced for future residents. In some cases, residents were charged a fee to install a product as well as an estimated fee of the cost to remove such personalization for the next resident of their units. Therefore, the cost of removing and replacing such requests (like specialized door swings or specialized doors) was added into the pricing. Another marketing director explained that people expected more amenities now that they were living longer. Some new residents found their new homes to be equipped with appliances more modern than they had ever had before. For example, one couple in the study had not had central heating in their previous residence. Others had lived without garbage disposals, microwaves, and icemakers in their previous residences.

However, facilities were additionally concerned with the ease of having another resident move into a previously occupied unit in order to maintain high occupancy rates. This can be also examined as a recommodifying process. There is also a limit to the possibilities of modification. One marketing director recounted to me, “If you say customization to people, it gives them free reign, okay, I want to move that wall ... it’s much more than what I call personalization, superficial things like crown molding, change in blinds, different kinds of tile ... it’s interior space, nothing structural, that gives them the opportunity to express themselves.” In an interview after having viewed a senior community, a local architect cautioned that one could also see the limitations of personalizing space. She explained that those moving into a retirement community or condominium should be aware that they could not make major changes to an exterior space. For example, additions, or even an additional window were not possible. Thus, these structural limitations ensured the possibility of recommodifying a residence.

However, during one of my tours of ~~the~~ a senior living residence to which Mrs. Ash moved, the marketing director, Mrs. Carey, assured me that modifications could be made, even to the point of making cutouts in existing walls. It seems in this case that the retirement community was

also in competition with newly built ones with a more open layout concept and the “wall cutouts” could create such a feeling. She also showed me choices of units in which the dividing wall between two units have had been taken down, creating a more spacious unit and also providing possibilities for individualized redesign of the space. Senior living marketers have a need to appeal to a changing market, and suggesting ways that units could be redesigned is part of that process.

Modifications to Compensate for Present or Future Physical Challenges

A key reason that participants were interested in modifications was to compensate for physical challenges. In the following two examples, inability to obtain the proposed modifications made relocation unimaginable. In one case, Mrs. Roger moved from out of state to a retirement community. When I visited her kitchen in her original house, I noticed it was small. She had a stool placed to one side as well as stools placed strategically around the home to provide support when she was not using her walker to get around her home. In her original residence, Mrs. Roger had critically considered her navigation of space. Foremost on her and her daughter’s mind was her macular degeneration diagnosis. For her new residence, she needed to anticipate further eyesight decline and the navigation of space. She needed a countertop choice that allowed her to see items placed on top of it. She insisted that granite was too busy. She examined the visibility of different countertops by placing pills on the different countertop options.

She reported that if she had a granite countertop, she would need to cover the countertop with contact paper to see the objects placed on it, so she selected Corian, as the color of the countertop contrasts of her prescriptions allowed her to see the pills and, by extrapolation, would allow her to see other daily use items she would place on her kitchen countertops.

A second example of modifications in the new residence helped with Mrs. Baskin’s ability to care for her beloved pet. At her original home, she lived with two dogs. Using a walker and having diminishing eyesight, she found walking the dogs around the neighborhood to be increasingly troublesome as time went on. When I arrived at her original home, I saw several piles of dog feces on the front walk up to her house as she was letting them outside the front door to a small area near the driveway.

Mrs. Baskin had already decided during the moving process that she would give one of the dogs to her grandchild. She was ready to move, but requested that the retirement community allow her to install an invisible fence to keep her dog within her lawn space. This fence allowed her to take care of her remaining pet while not disrupting the architecture of the retirement community. In these two cases, the requests for modification would hamper the move if the

requests were not granted. From my observations, retirement communities recognized the importance of the requests in order to improve the older adult's ability to navigate spaces.

Another study participant, Ms. Zachary, delayed moving in because of being severely allergic to aromas originating from the newly laid carpet in her new unit. She knew this particularly well because in the *first* senior community she moved to (this is now her second), she had the same problem. When I saw that she was delaying her move by several months, and placing philodendrons and fans in the rooms to clear the air (Figure 1), I asked her about the matter.

Ms. Zachary: It's the odor from new carpeting...the way carpeting is made. My body is highly allergic...to those chemicals. That odor which eventually gets out of there. I call it, it makes it [my insides] raw...

Researcher: You are waiting to move in? You don't think you can spend the night here?

Ms. Zachary: I know it.

Researcher: Did you think of anything like having tile throughout or hardwood?

Ms. Zachary: I guess I'm so much of a person who...what their plan is, I just accept...and so I didn't make any big deal about that.

She not only delayed her moving-in (and sleeping there) for over 2 months because of the carpet, she was spending over an hour about twice a week driving to check on the positioning of the plants and the fans and opening and closing windows and spreading and vacuuming baking soda to promote the dissipation of the fumes.

Ms. Zachary had moved to a different retirement community a few years earlier. From that experience in a retirement community with long hallways and individual apartments, she learned that her allergy to the carpet odors would affect her transition into the space. Getting rid of those emanations was challenging, but she had also discovered the difficulties she, as a single woman without children or grandchildren, found it trying to become friends with other residents who only wanted to talk about their relatives. After not connecting with her neighbors there, she felt compelled to look for another living situation. After attending a talk by the marketing director of one of the retirement communities in this study, it resonated with her that the director was not pushy about selling a product, but rather spoke to the audience about making the best decisions for themselves. She hoped that moving to a new retirement community might offer more opportunities for valuable social interaction. Ms. Zachary indicates in the passage above that while she may have benefited health-wise to have modified her space with tile or other noncarpet options, she is inclined to accept "what their plans is." This vignette shows the transition to senior living as a process fraught with individualized needs to be supported as well as individualized personality style in making plans. Ms. Zachary's politeness results in a delayed move, a cost

of having two places at the same time, and energy to air the place. Her story also indicates the process of an older adult imagining a more amenable housing trajectory, thus indicating that all senior housing "units" are not exchangeable, as commodities may at times be considered. The need for a different unit and the need for a unit that suits her health concerns are both part of this process of relocation.

Modifications to Promote Choice and Display Expertise

Some older adults pursued modification because of preference. There were two ways choice was promoted. There was the sense of control resulting from the possibility of making choices, as well as the cognitive capability to choose between options. One thing I noticed repeatedly was the interest potential residents had in personalizing their new homes by making modifications to their interiors. I had numerous discussions with future residents of one retirement community offering choices among three kitchen cabinet colors, colors of granite for the kitchen countertop, and colors of paint for the walls. These decorating choices, integrated with the possessions they moved from their old homes, enabled everyone to personalize their new residences.

However, discussions about modifications might also signal moving to a place that was unlike what people were both accustomed to and preferred. Some felt granite countertops were "too fancy" for them. One marketing director told me that they had to work with older adults to help them feel they deserved to have such a nice kitchen. During fieldwork, I also tried to discover if what mattered to study participants was simply having choices, or specifically choices that signaled a certain socioeconomic lifestyle. Even when talking about granite, a natural stone, and Corian, a "solid surface" product manufactured by Dupont, no one really wanted to talk about Formica, a composite countertop material, as a viable option.

The feeling that the new residences were too fancy also became part of the discourse. On the other hand, could this new residence be a step down? When I spoke with Mr. and Mrs. Keith after their move, they did not consider everything offered to be of the highest quality. This was important to explore because some of the older adults in this study hold held strong opinions about the meanings of quality. Yet, understanding the preferences and dislikes of movers with a variety of original homes and expertise seems important in design of living spaces. While I concluded that the cabinets in the retirement community were top-grade as per many conversations about the excitement of choosing cabinetry to match granite, Mr. Keith pointed out to me, "Well, it's not high end cabinetry ... I would not put this grade cabinet in [my home] ... on good cabinetry, it is dovetailed. This [the drawer] is stapled." Having been to the home from which they moved, I noticed the great emphasis they had placed on detail. For example, in each of their bathrooms, they had designed the shape of the bathroom mirror to mimic the shape of the sink. During a visit to their original residence,



Figure 1. Due to her carpet allergy which delays her move, Ms. Zachary purifies the air with fans, open windows and plants.

Mr. Keith took great pride in showing me the certificate that identified his father as a master carpenter.

In addition, after moving in, Mr. Keith took me through his new home, showing me places where the molding was not properly finished. Yet, when I asked Mrs. Keith about the cabinets, she said, “It [the cabinet] bothers me ... but can I live with it ... absolutely.” For her, and for Mr. Keith, the overall benefit of moving to a retirement community allowed them to accept the place, while still maintaining their voice and expertise in quality construction.

The amenity most often talked about was granite countertops. Some people felt that their new kitchen would be more spacious than their old one. A built-in dishwasher was an upgrade for the older woman who had a portable dishwasher and had to cart it to the sink every night to do her dishes. However, even though the residence featured new appliances, this same study participant told me she was giving up a convection oven that could cook a chicken in 20 min.

Others felt that if they could completely design the space, they would not choose the available options. On the issue of countertops, several people told me that, given the choice, they would not select granite. They preferred a solid surface like Corian, which many had in their own homes. Ms. Grant took great pride in explaining to me how she had designed and overseen the construction of her current house. In her original residence, also had holes for installation of a soap dispenser drilled into her Corian countertop, which she found out would not be possible with granite.

Residents were given a list of options and had much time to be preoccupied about the possibilities. A command of the

language of construction expertise signaled a relationship to homes in which value was placed on “the creation of places in our home and yard that provide settings for immersion in the reverie of simply being; places to facilitate heightened awareness and meditation on our place in the cosmos” (Rowles 2008, p. 133). For some who considered the move to retirement community as their last, there may have been perceived lacks in previous residences for which they wanted to compensate. Mrs. McGee said that she asked for a six-foot soaking tub because she had always wanted one. She told me that her son was quite impressed with the idea of such a long tub and intended to use it when he visited. However, in the end, Mrs. McGee did not move because she reconsidered her move and thus never got her six-foot soaking tub.

Others requested great modifications in their housing. By making the request using the terminology or way of speaking that reflected expertise, older adults asserted their wishes. For example, Ms. Grant had many ideas for her new space, including swinging doors that would be half the width of the door entryway, bi-fold doors and lighting tubes that would allow natural light to illuminate the living room where there were no windows. She spoke frequently with the owner of the construction company, even beyond her ideas that were termed “special requests.” She sent meeting notes to staff of the CCRC after their appointments in which she described each room of the new space and her modification requests with price estimates. Through this process of meeting notes, she employed the vocabulary and syntax of an expert in several ways. First, Ms. Grant’s creation of meeting notes served as a first indication of her professional approach to recording decisions made. Second, she also referred to other

documents as “base documents for discussion.” Scholars of texts and discourse term these processes as this “inter-textuality,” a process that offers ways for referring to past documents and past conversations (Irvine, 1996). She also indicated her own ability to price items, bolded by her, such as “On 5-31-10 I googled the (NAME OF COMPANY) Catalogue. Found (NAME OF MANUFACTURER) Doors. Followed Price Option. Learned the “probable” version costs \$1,500/unit. One with grills costs \$1,676/unit. Screen for either costs \$168. Send E-mail Re: this info.” In this statement, bolded for emphasis by her and to indicate this action as a follow-up to their meeting, she displayed her computer proficiency and indicated an ability to identify and locate items of desire, as well as to counter pricing suggested by the construction company, which would include labor costs.

In addition, she employed a “construction register,” or a way of speaking that demonstrated her ease in discussing issues around the building of her home. She used phrases such as “spec out” and “certificate of occupancy” and “structurally sensible way” to show her ease. She offered construction suggestions such as requesting a new switch in her kitchen. She likewise showed she was able to assimilate and make decisions about adapting the home for future wishes, such as the wiring of the ceiling fan. She similarly wrote using a “construction knowledge” register in her confidence to mark outlets and switches on the diagrams provided by the staff. She drew out the construction schedule and was able to talk about framing, and the timeline of when the certificate of occupancy would be available.

Another time when persons asserted their expertise was at the “walk-through,” when they checked their unit prior to taking possession. Sometimes this assertion was a result of past professional and “placemaking skills.” Rowles (2008) argues that repeated assembling of space through moves often leads to the development of these skills. The “walk-through” occurs after the county approves the certificate of occupancy and a place is deemed to have passed inspection and is ready for occupancy. This occurs after the builder turns the unit over to the retirement community. At one walk-through with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, throughout the discussion of how appliances and thermostats worked, Mr. Johnson said that he wanted to show the retirement community staff member his ideas. As a landscape architect, he used his technical knowledge to transform his space. At the end of the meeting, he told the staff member about an idea for the end of the garage. He provided both a floor plan and an elevation drawing of his proposed workbench area. Note that this space was available to him because his was the only unit in which one entered the storage area from the master bedroom, rather than through the garage. Making the change he suggested would make his workbench and storage areas easily accessible. It also improved the airflow to the space because garage building codes do not allow for a cold air return off garages. Thus, at the back of the garage, he had an entire wall available, where most have a doorway. A staff

member, Jill, advised him to consult a custom cabinetmaker that had worked on other projects for the retirement community. Both the drawings and related conversation portray professional engagement during which approval for a modification project was solicited and received.

At other points in the walk-through I witnessed, Mr. Johnson brought out his tape measure to measure drawer handles in two ways, both the exterior width (5-inch handles) and the interior (3-inch distance between screws). He displayed his technical skill by knowing to measure them both rather than rely on the exterior width to find others that would fit the drawers.

Modifications can achieve multiple purposes for older adults, such as the promotion of choice, compensation for present or future physical challenges or the promotion of function and safety. These modifications also worked socially to signal to retirement community staff and other residents that new neighbors had expertise in interior design and construction. For example, Mrs. Johnson worked for years as an interior designer and previously had a home in which she often held charity fundraisers. In her new residence, she personalized her kitchen with a triple-crown molding to augment her cabinet and countertop selections. She also requested a gas stove and hardwood floors throughout her residence. Consequently, her unit became a showpiece for prospective residents. For example, the triple-crown molding added by Mrs. Johnson enhanced the intersection of the walls and ceiling in her kitchen. Retirement community staff, working to encourage new residents, also viewed modifications as a way to promote choice and to create excitement about moving to their property. Residents also worked towards imagining a future in which modifications would be viewed as features to enjoy. Many imagined the living space as their last home, at least the last one for which they would control the design and decoration.

DISCUSSION

As older adults imagine a future living in a new environment, they spend time and effort considering how a new residence could be less demanding. In fact, the findings show the deliberate processes they undertook to personalize their new homes. They planned for their present and their future selves, anticipating physical decline in some cases. While older adults in this study may have had multiple reasons for moving, include living near kin and difficulty navigating their original residence, I argue that personalization was subsumed in this decision, which is why the process of selecting the materials was so crucial for some older adults in this study. They could only optimize their new environments by paying attention to these details. Without certain modifications, their new environments might not be an improvement over their old ones. In other cases, older adults personalized their spaces to create environments that facilitated their emotional well-being. Living in a space

with decorative touches brought joy and pride. Residents often showed each other their spaces and talked about the choices they had made. Lastly, these personalized touches brought feelings of control over their environment.

The cases provided above illustrate that there is no environmental template for accessibility and functionality. There is a subjective nature to the functionality of one's environment due to the importance of examining not just the physical environment, but also the individual's interactions with it (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). Earlier work on relocation focused on triggering mechanisms to moving and the importance of deciding where to move (Wiseman, 1980), or on types of moves such as amenity, kin or institutionally-related (Litwak & Longino, 1987). In their ecological model for late-life residential decisions, Sergeant, Ekerdt and Chapin (2010) feature two key interdependent zones surrounding the relocation decision described by the authors in terms of "individual characteristics" and "physical environment" (2010, p. 1032). Wahl and Oswald (2010) argue that these interactions between the person and the environment affect developmental outcomes such as identity, well-being and autonomy for older adults. This paper features the transitions that older adults who plan to relocate face, showing how the older adults become interlinked with their physical space in imaging the future. This also offers a way to understand Geboy, Diaz Moore, and Smith's warning that "although place experience is individualistic, . . . places must be designed for groups of people" (2012, p. 57). Personalization may be a mechanism that links experience and design in creative ways.

However, it is important to remember that these modifications, despite being appropriate to the physical and emotional enrichment of residents, come at some costs. First of all, there were some costs involved in fulfilling these requests. Second, it was clear that the retirement community charges for labor in addition to materials, so prices found on the Internet or at local hardware stores differed from the actual costs to the residents. Third, the level of modifications varied greatly, with some residents, equipped with skills and knowledge of building processes and projects, making more detailed and extensive changes than those not as experienced in the process. When residents saw each other's units, they were sometimes amazed at the possibilities and wished they had known about these options. Thus, some gained great recognition for their clever requests, setting the tone for some residents to emerge as leaders in the community. However, the full extent of the impact is yet to be determined. In all cases, the older adults were imaging their future selves. They were creating a new home in a community they had chosen by modifying their spaces to meet their needs and desires. These actions made deciding to move palatable and even exciting.

By presenting these case studies, I demonstrate the importance of material culture in promoting functionality among older adults. The transferability of these results to other senior populations must be considered. The participants in this study had both financial resources to afford the

modifications, which perhaps preceded their requests and the resource of time. They had time to consider a variety of options, explore their feasibility and make formal requests to senior living providers. Those with differing economic backgrounds and shorter timeframes may go through other processes to make a senior living space their own.

In these cases, there are two possible ways to intervene in the moving process. Older persons can be encouraged to project a future self when choosing aging-in-place and relocation options; those considering moving can be encouraged to explore issues related to function and preference. Second, an awareness that older persons' interest and intent to personalize their new residence or not, may be based on personality, generational, professional and/or cultural backgrounds is warranted. Some older adults can be assisted to help them make appropriate choices that account for present or future physical decline.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines senior housing as a commodity and "singular" personalized space. The social biography of such a housing unit begins in the "premove" stage in which the older adult imagines a future self and the space that a future self may inhabit. There are serious implications to personalization, whether to promote functionality or to promote individuation through choice. This imagination is interlinked with a permanence in the creation of a new home.

By contrast, in Parrott's (2005) ethnographic work on psychiatric units, she finds that patients focused on creativity through dress, rather than on decorating their physical living spaces. In fact, their attitudes toward their living spaces were of a transitory nature as she writes, "fixing objects to the walls of these rooms metaphorically fixed them in the institution" (p. 250). In her work, residents hoped for impermanence as the absence of personalized spaces intersected with the hope of a future outside that space.

In this project, most residents moving to independent living communities made plans to personalize their new residences in varying ways. While these material modifications represent anticipation of the residents' future selves, personalization also presents potential dangers, both in terms of cost, which could deplete assets, and in terms of status differences as well, with some achieving reputations of expertise and others less able to do so. This difference might have unknown impacts on future peer relationships within retirement communities.

Bakhtin writes, "Every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope," emphasizing the meaning making that occurs through linking space and time (1981, p. X). For this project, meanings of moving underlay specific examples of personalization and modification. Older adults were coming to terms with changes occurring within themselves as well as changes in their networks. As older adults create homes in new spaces, the

selection of personalized options may impact well-being and functioning. This study highlights the importance of material culture for gerontology by showing the centrality of the creation and sustenance of home to the lives of older adults.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Correspondence should be addressed to Tam E. Perry, PhD, School of Social Work, Wayne State University, 4756 Cass Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202. E-mail: teperry@wayne.edu.

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