

House of Memories

by

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**В былые времена, когда человек попадал в какой нибудь в незнакомый город, он чувствовал
себя одиноким и потерянным.**

Вокруг все было чужое: иные дома, иные улицы, иная жизнь.

Зато теперь совсем другое дело.

Человек попадает в любой в незнакомый город, но чувствует себя в нем, как дома...

...Красиво, не правда ли?

Одинаковые лестничные клетки окрашены в типовой приятный цвет.

**Типовые квартиры обставлены стандартной мебелью, а в безликие двери врезаны типовые
замки.**

[Back in the day, when someone appeared in a foreign city he felt alone and lost. Everything around was

alien: alien houses, alien streets, alien lives.

But now it's completely different.

Now, a person can appear in any foreign city, but there, he feels at home...

...It's beautiful, isn't it?

Identical stairwells, dyed in a standard nice color.

Standard apartments furnished with standard furniture. And standard locks embedded into faceless doors.]

Eldar Ryzanov, *The Irony of Fate*, 1975

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In my life, I use numerous household objects and furniture pieces that are “older” than I am and came to me through generations. When using all of these things daily and living surrounded by this memorabilia, it is impossible to not think about how much these objects have “seen” in their life. How many people used them in their lifetime, how many precious memories are connected to random inanimate objects.

At the same time comes the realization that people all around the post-soviet territory possess objects identical to the ones that seem priceless to me. The Soviet possessions, meant to shape the Soviet identity through their uniformity, are now used by many descendants of the Soviet era and people who were born long after its collapse.

With these rising thoughts, the idea to create this project was born - An interactive art installation that would gather stories about these inanimate objects and put them in one place. This way, the viewer can experience people’s stories and feel themselves as a part of the uniformed Soviet life.

Keywords: Soviet Armenia; material culture; nostalgia; memory.

Introduction

Living in a post-soviet country, one cannot ignore the heritage the Soviet Union left behind. Neighborhoods, buildings, interior designs, furniture, and home objects; all carry memories of Soviet Armenia. Interestingly enough, the Soviet Union managed to create a collective identity in people from drastically different backgrounds. It attempted to erase their national identity and replaced it with a new Soviet one. To do so, it successfully used material culture, personal and shared spaces.

When it came to planning its citizens' lives, the Soviet Union thought of every minor detail. From spoon shapes to buildings and their locations, all enforced an emotional connection to the *rodina* (motherland). First, it was the connection to the "project of creating a new world, then to Lenin and Stalin as personifications of the Soviet project" (Kelly, Bassin 2012, p. 23). It later transformed into a culture that connected civilians with spaces and one another. This propagated connection birthed generations of people ready to die and kill for their *rodina* and the grand idea behind it.

What was interesting about this bond is that it was achieved through the uniformity of the routine. The average household of every Soviet citizen was identical. The furniture, the items, the expensive Czech crystal; all of it was the same in every average house from Ukraine to Kazakhstan. Despite the apparent lack of individuality in the Soviet Union, one of the advantages of this uniform, predictable life was the stability. As a Soviet citizen, you knew that no matter where you found yourself, the country would provide a living space and a job for you. Very often, generations who got to experience this stability reminisce about the good old Soviet days. The longing for this connected, stable, simple lifestyle is the primary source of

nostalgia for generations born and raised in the Soviet Union and the post-soviet generations as well. The Soviet Union failed economically, yes, but the enforced ideology ended up being strong enough to impact future generations.

Let's take *me* as an example. I was born way into post-soviet, independent Armenia, but, nonetheless, in my daily routine, I often find myself experiencing first-hand the remnants of the Soviet Union. Be it the phrases I use in my everyday life or the bed I sleep in; these are all in some way or another influenced by the long-gone Soviet state. The most curious part of this influence is the connection to material objects. Like in every post-soviet household, mine also has objects way older than I am, that have been used by a number of generations.

I see these objects as a part of my life, I create memories and have stories connected with them. But at the same time, these objects are an essential part of my parents' and grandparents' lives as well. They have their own memories, their own stories. Objects carry these stories and become a part of an intergenerational conversation.

This research and the creative piece born out of it follow and delve deep into these stories and memories. It explores collective memory in the context of household objects and items.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this section, gets into the historical context of how the Soviet government used living spaces to shape people's mindsets and affect their cultural development. It looks deeper into the phenomenon of shared Soviet consciousness and culture, and nostalgia. It also explores how gathered narratives can be turned into tangible experiences.

The apartment planning-mindset connection

The Soviet government thought out every last detail when it came to influencing its citizens. In the early 20s-30s, the main goal of the government was to create a relationship between the citizens and their apartments. At the time, communal apartments were very popular. Mansions, multiple story buildings were taken from the former bourgeois, divided and turned into many, tiny apartments. The idea was to have a minimal amount of private space, like the bedroom, and share the rest of the apartment with the co-habitants. This was meant to create a sense of joined community, and "belonging to the postrevolutionary common space" (Boym, 1994, p. 131).

But the building of the Soviet Men didn't stop here. The physical environment was also transformed and modernized. It was meant to be turned into an assemblage of things that one would need to interact with continually. An avant-garde constructivist art group INKhUK came to be in the early 1920s and focused on creating practical and innovative furniture. Furniture like bed-couches, table-chairs, and many more acted as co-workers for the citizens (Vujosevic, 2017). These objects ensured that the owner "works" with them all the time, transforming and rearranging them from one thing to another.

This kind of innovative furniture could be found all around the Soviet Union. People living on both ends of the Soviet Union had identically furnished, identically designed

apartments. Individuality, national identity had no place in the iconic *Khrushchevkas*. (Varga-Harris, 2015). In the 1950s-60s, in an attempt to denounce Stalin's personality cult and the terror that came with it, Nikita Khrushchev (First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964) planned to bring more individualism into the lives of the Soviet Men. *Khrushchevkas* aimed to eliminate grand communal spaces from the 1920s-30s. Instead of sharing a kitchen and a lounge area, the residents had identically planned small apartments. Now, material objects have become more "major elements of everyday life" (Varga-Harris, 2015, p. 83).

This individualism was still framed by the standard objects that were available all around the Soviet Union. Factories provided a slightly wider choice, but more or less, all Union residents owned similar items. Be it in Kazakhstan, Armenia, or Ukraine; people only possessed objects that contributed to the "creation of the Soviet Man" (Vujosevic, 2017, p. 177) and the "strengthening of the soviet identity" (Kelly, Bassin 2012, p. 165).

In a 1975 Russian comedy, "The Irony of Fate," this uniformity is ridiculed. The main character from Moscow arrives in Leningrad (currently Saint-Petersburg) and does not realize he is in a completely different city, in a stranger's house, until the owner finds him there. It turns out their apartments have the same address, the same planning, the same furniture, and even the same New Year decorations. Throughout the movie, the viewer sees how they share not only material possessions, but also some vital social traits common for the Soviet Man (Ryazanov, 1975).

Once again, we witness how the Soviet government attempted to erase national individuality and created "the New Soviet Man" in its place, by making environments uniform.

The attachment to everyday objects

Along with the identical apartment buildings and houses, Soviet citizens had similar everyday items. These items, although limited, had significant sentimental value in the Soviet Union.

All kinds of items were hard to find due to the shortages and the general lack of production. Logically, when certain things were bought, they were preserved and viewed as "social organisms" (Gurova, 2009). What Gurova calls "social organisms" can be considered to be evidence of one's life experience. They carry memories and stories in them, and we are often able to study the life-span of objects similar to humans (Gurova, 2009).

Unlike the western consumerist culture, the soviet socialist citizens were tightly attached to their everyday objects. One of the main reasons was, of course, the shortage of said objects. For example, ordinary clothing was hard to find, so every item was cherished and used until the very end. When a shirt had a hole in it, you would patch it repeatedly until it was impossible to add patches on it anymore. And even then, you would not throw it away; you would turn it into a cloth and use it for another two years.

This "immortalization" of everyday things created a special connection with every item one possesses. Similar to the idea of furniture that you have to work with, "Soviet things functioned in a state of constant uninterrupted consumption" (Gurova, 2009, p. 58). These items were also often passed on from one generation to another. They were not always things of significant material value, but they did indeed possess substantial emotional value to the person.

The connection between the past and the present

The tradition of preserving everyday objects and passing them on to future generations establishes a relationship between the past and the present. This relationship creates an unavoidable nostalgia in both the Soviet and the post-Soviet generations. Since material culture

plays a significant role in the fabric of nostalgia, these passed-on objects are often at the center of it. Anthropologists Ange and Berliner (2015) call them "nostalgia-objects" and state that they can be somewhat dangerous for history. Hung up on nostalgia, people often glorify the past, thus distorting the history that may have been not as pleasant (Shaw & Chase, 1989).

In the recent rise of *retromania*, post-Soviet generations feel this nostalgia for times they have never experienced. People now often feel a longing for others' culture, mostly because they only got to experience the remnants of it.

This nostalgia and the strong connection to the past often lies in the stories connected to these preserved objects. Unfortunately, many researchers lack personal stories and examples on this topic; thus, this topic seems too vague and intangible.

The creation of art installations

Being a relatively modern medium of art, installations are not widely researched. But the main idea of an art installation is to create an environment that the viewer can interact with. Unlike static works of art, like paintings and sculptures, installations are deconstructed after some time. That is one of the main advantages of this medium; it's temporary, and the viewer knows it.

Art installations allow artists to play not only with their objects but also with space. Here artists have a chance to experiment with all five human senses and incorporate each of them into their artwork. Installations bring art to a sophisticated level because of all the work and thought put into them. Simultaneously, installations are always based on personal narratives, making the medium more "human" than any other art (Kabakov, 2016).

Creating the art installation for my project makes the Soviet experience "convertible" (Boym, 2001). It brings the stories to a different level and makes them exist together with the viewer. This interactiveness creates a sense of intimacy and attempts to combine the two

opposite feelings. On one hand, it familiarizes the viewer with deeply personal stories and, in a way, brings the viewer into the narrative. On the other hand, it defamiliarizes the objects, puts them out of their context, and into a new one.

Research question

My capstone explores stories everyday household objects carry and how they become valuable memorabilia. Through an oral history approach I collect stories of three generations and explore the connection between an individual and material possessions. The project focuses mainly on stories about Soviet Union memorabilia. The project shows how personal stories travel throughout the years and how they differ in each generation. It explores the notion of nostalgia and its role in the shaping of the post-soviet society.

Methodology

The idea behind this project is based on personal experiences and stories. It explores the intergenerational connection with material objects and puts them on display with each other.

In-depth interviews are my main method of research. Seven in-depth interviews have been conducted with carefully selected interviewees. To present reliable context and provide the project with relevant information and show the aforementioned connection, I have chosen seven people, representing three generations; the *Soviet* generation, the *perestroyka* generation and, what I call, the generation *after*.

The *Soviet* generation

The first group, consisting of two individuals, represents the early Soviet era. Donald Raleigh describes this generation as the Soviet Baby Boomers; people who witnessed the transformation of the Union from a totalitarian Stalinist regime to a lighter Khrushchev Thaw. Unlike their parents and grandparents they did not witness the revolution and the World Wars, but instead they spent their formative days, youth and adulthood in the "normalized" Soviet Union (Straw, 2013). At the time of their formative years, the Soviet Union was clearly defined and functioning at its normal pace. The Soviet ideology was set in stone, although now, in contrast with the Stalinist regime, it was freer. They grew up with Soviet ideology embedded in them, and they are, perhaps, the ones who formed the deepest connection with the Union and the everyday details of it.

Oftentimes people from the so-called *Soviet* generation remember the Soviet times fondly. They miss the stable, more simple time of the Soviet era. Svetlana Boym describes this longing as "restorative" nostalgia. It aims towards the "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 2012, p. xviii) and is common between the Soviet Union's descendants.

E. A was born in 1952 in Yerevan. She grew up in a family of teachers and was exposed to a lot of art and literature from an early age. She proceeded to work as a teacher and later on as a professor of literature and dramaturgy. After living in Georgia, Belarus and Russia for a while she moved to Yerevan and currently resides there.

A.S. was born in 1947 in Yerevan. She grew up in a family of six, and spent her summers in Gyumri with her grandparents. She later studied at the Yerevan State Medical University and worked as a doctor. Even during the Soviet times, she had a chance to travel around the world with her husband, who was a film director. She currently lives in Yerevan but travels to Los Angeles to be with her son every year.

These two interviews were conducted offline, at each of the residents' houses. Being able to do it there was a big advantage for the project. Oftentimes, when telling a story or remembering a detail, my interviewees would go find the item they talked about and explain more.

The *perestroyka* generation

The second group, consisting of three individuals, represents the *perestroyka* generation. Born from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the *perestroyka* generation managed to study in still Soviet universities and start their careers already during its collapse. By that time the Soviet Union was changing drastically and quickly; it was the post-Thaw period, the economy was crashing, the shortage of *everything* came to be. But along with the weakening Soviet ideology, the beginning of freedom started. And once this generation was at its peak, the *perestroyka* started. The term *perestroika* refers to the time in the Soviet Union during the 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev lightened the regimes formerly common in the Union.

Still widely affected by the influence of their parents and their already disappearing ideology, this generation got caught in a whirlpool of new ideas, ideologies and open worlds. It experienced the rise of new music, art, new establishing relationships with the West.

This generation got the chance to grasp and put together aspects from the merging worlds and as Dmitry Travin (2013) mentions without even realizing it, this generation became responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union (Travin, Gelman, 2013). Being open to the freedom of the Western world, this generation realized the possibilities the world held for them.

Along with often being glorified and presented happier and better than it was, this era was truly the golden age of the Soviet Union. The descendants of this era often feel what American literary critic Fredric Jameson calls this "nostalgia mode," i.e., "the consumable past

that does not involve memory per se" (Jameson, 1991, p. 6) but is instead focused on the fragments of the said past.

My two interviewees, born in this exact period, shared their worldviews and how they were shaped by these shifting times.

A.M was born in 1972 in Yerevan. She traveled a lot around the Soviet Union and lived in India as a kid, due to her mother's occupation as a teacher. She got married and moved to Moscow for a while but then moved back and resided in Yerevan.

G.H was born in 1969 in Tbilisi, Georgia. He lived in a big house, a former mansion, right in the center of the city. At the age of 26 he moved to Yerevan and worked hard to support his parents. He currently resides in Yerevan with his family.

These two individuals were interviewed together offline. The main idea of conducting a group interview was to give the interviewees a chance to not only share their stories, but also reflect on each other's narratives and stimulate a better, lighter conversation.

The generation *after*

The final group, consisting of three individuals, represents the generation that came not long after the collapse of the Union. Born into already independent countries this generation didn't experience life in the Soviet Union but they did get influenced by its movies, artwork and music. They also carry the *generational memory* of the Soviet times, passed down to them from their parents and grandparents, oftentimes through stories and memorabilia.

They were born in the late 1990s and very early 2000s, during very harsh times for all countries in the former USSR. Unlike their parents, who lived in between two worlds, this generation saw the Soviet Union only as a remnant from the past. Interestingly, people born in this period grew up seeing and using objects they inherited from the Soviet past and living in

apartments explicitly designed for the New Soviet Man. This juxtaposition of their worlds creates an interesting narrative and connection with a time they never personally experienced.

What this generation often experiences is "reflective" nostalgia (Boym, 2001), which consists of an ironic longing for the time never experienced.

My interviewees, despite growing up in different capitals (Moscow and Yerevan) experienced this strong connection between an individual and material possessions.

A.K. was born in 1998 in Malta. After moving from one house to another throughout her childhood, along with her family, they settled in Moscow. Being of Armenian descent, she lives in between two capitals, Moscow and Yerevan, finding and creating a home in both of them.

R.G. was born in 1993, in Yerevan. His parents moved to Moscow when he was very young, but after living there for two years, they moved back to Yerevan. He grew up, got married and started a family in Yerevan and recently moved to Los Angeles. He and his wife are now working on making a foreign, not at all soviet country his new home.

Y.A. was born in 2001 in Yerevan. He is currently serving in the Armenian Army in Sisian.

All the interviews were conducted online, because all three interviewees currently reside in different cities; Moscow, Los Angeles and Sisian respectively.

For the sake of providing reliable information it is important to note that all eight interviewees cannot be considered *proletariat* citizens. They were a part of the Soviet intelligentsia; they traveled around the Union, in rare cases outside of it as well. This was a luxury not every Soviet citizen could afford and it is important to take this factor into consideration when looking at their stories.

Constructing stories

The main goal of my capstone project was not only gathering these intergenerational stories, but also presenting them in an interactive way. The idea was to create a walk-in art installation in a Soviet apartment in Yerevan, Armenia where visitors can see and experience these gathered stories. The installation is interactive and allows the viewers to touch, use, move - in a word, experience - the objects while listening to stories these objects have to tell.

Some of the objects are borrowed from the interviewees themselves, and are as authentic as possible. The installation also features some photographs, video clips retrieved from family archives of the interviewees with their consent. In order to provide the audience with a more intimate experience with the installation, I use music, songs and clips all around the installation. This way I create an appropriate atmosphere that fills the installation space.

The apartment chosen for this installation is my grandparents' house at 20/1 Saryan Street in Yerevan, Armenia. This house was "given" to my grandparents in 1983, and after the collapse became officially owned by them. This apartment was the first choice for the installation location, since, for the most part, it kept its former Soviet beauty; the hardwood floors, the curtains, the big shelves and the wallpapers.

Artist Statement

One evening, my mother was telling me how the chairs we use in our house were the first thing she and my father bought when they got married. She was telling me a story about how a few chairs got lost during transportation, some broke down and how later they were going around buying identical chairs from strangers to fill the set. That's how I started thinking: it's interesting, so many people all around the Soviet Union had identical furniture, identical household objects and seemingly identical lives.

This conversation gave birth to an idea to research and find out how people from the former USSR countries connect with their objects, how they pass it from one generation to the other and what stories do these objects tell. As a result my research turned into a creative project.

I wanted to present my findings in a tangible, visible way. After some thought, the creative project took the form of an installation. With a walk-in art installation, the viewers are able to interact with the exhibition and feel themselves as parts of this project. Since the project focuses on personal stories and memories, I want to create the atmosphere to really draw people in and keep them captivated with the stories.

My grandparents' old apartment on Saryan street, Yerevan, is the sight for the art installation. I spent most of my childhood there and always return to it with fond memories. Most of it has not been renovated since the day my grandparents moved in, in 1983. It has the classic Soviet "ёлочка" [*yolochka* - spruce] parquet, heavy kitchen cupboards, giant wardrobes that can't be moved and, of course, the crystal glass sets.

I chose my interviewees very carefully. Each represented a generation differently affected by the Soviet Union. They gladly told me stories from their youth, reminisced about their old houses, and lent some precious items for the installation. These objects, displayed during the installation are followed by snippets of our conversations, making the installation interactive and much more personal.

I invite you to walk freely in the apartment, interact with everything you see, sit on couches, open cupboards, eat and drink from the fridge. I want you to feel at home, in a home full of memories.



Reflection on the process

The process of making this presentation was a perfect mixture of stress and joy. Too many times during the process, I got disappointed that the project is not coming out the way I imagine it. But in the end, it turned out to be even better.

Even though they were hard to plan and execute because of the tight schedule, the conversations were interesting and engaging. All of them quickly turned into friendly conversations after starting out as more or less formal interviews. All my interviewees were especially nice and eager to tell their stories.



Creating an art installation was the right thing to do for this project. It served its purpose and

allowed for the material to become more personal and close to heart.

Seeing the guests walking around the installation, reading, and relating to the stories was such a blessing. There were many people from different backgrounds gathered at the exhibition, and I tried to have a conversation with each of them. A friend of mine, from middle America, who was visiting Armenia for the first time, came up to me and with sparks in his eyes told me that his grandma, all the way in the United States, had the exact same radio once hung in that apartment. Hearing stories of these objects going back and forth made me realize the importance and the beauty of this project.



But the actual process of making the creative piece was absolutely the best part of this capstone project. I had all the help I could possibly need from my parents all throughout the process, but the actual construction of the art installation I took completely to myself. It was important for me to stay in solitude

with all my objects in the apartment. As I was sitting alone in the sun-filled apartment, among stacks of papers, with peoples stories, and objects from different parts of the world, different eras all gathered together, the photograph of my grandparents hanging from the wall was looking right at me. This was the ultimate moment of reflection. This was the moment I fully realized what my project is - a thread that started way before my birth and that will go on long after my death. From the second I started to cut out the snippets necessary for the installation, I realized that this is no longer my project. It has turned into a collective reflection on memories, a door into other people's minds, a "temple of memories" (A.K., an interviewee for the project).

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