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#stayathome

by Sarah Pink

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Being in an uncertain place.

COVID-19 has created a moment of deep uncertainty about what will happen next, a step-change in how we see the world and an awareness that our futures might not be what we expected. When things are 'normal' uncertainty is easy to dismiss. We evade it by immersing ourselves in the quotidian routines and banal joys of everyday life. We trust that we know what awaits us in the days, weeks, and months that lie ahead. These familiar everyday actions and feelings happen at home, and at the same time are the very things that make us feel at home. But now, during this pandemic, home and its material, digital and social components are being reconstituted.

The mandate that we should #stayathome—a slogan that can be found posted everywhere, whether on twitter or in a cafe window—has a simple message: only go out for essential items and activity, as defined by your government. But nothing is as obvious as it sounds, not least the question of what home is. In vernacular English, home refers to a house, an apartment, a room, or some other built form. But this direct association of a house with home, the assumption we know what home means, is more complex—more contextually and culturally specific—than we give it credit.

For over 20 years I have collaborated with researchers across the world to understand how people live, sense, feel and use technologies in their homes: in [England](#), [Spain](#), [Australia](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Brazil](#). The single most important insight for the coronavirus crisis, drawn from this diversity of cases, is that home is best described as a feeling of familiarity and certainty. Home cannot be simply reduced to, or automatically tied to, the four walls of a house. The home is a sensory and emotional place, something we feel and sense in ways we cannot even describe in words.

10 My research about homes often starts with a simple question: “What do you need to do to make your home feel right?” People have told me this can be when they fill a room with music and dance alone, when the sunlight streams in through the window, or when they smell the same laundry detergent their mum used. Home can be found when we wake the house up in the morning, with music, radio, the smell of coffee brewing, letting the cat in, checking social media, and reading the news. Such mundane moments invoke feelings of familiarity, of a place that is stable and comfortable. Home is created through our everyday actions and relationships, through the meanings we invest in a place, through the sentiments that are tied to the home, and through the digital technologies that now mediate how we make homes.

Framing home as a feeling, rather than a house, helps us to understand why new houses rarely ‘feel like home’ until we’ve settled in, and it complicates, without eliminating, the existence of the home in a house characterised by inequality, violence, isolation, depression or worse. Home can be fleeting, shifting, and momentary—carved out and saved from the chaos that might surround it. The dissonance between house and home also provides us with some key messages for understanding the implications of #stayathome.

COVID-19 intensifies both the consistencies and the ironies of attempts to conflate house and home. The necessity to self-isolate has shifted how home feels and where it can be experienced. The pieces of this Constellation offer different ways to engage with the home and what it means now. #stayathome endorses the false belief that home is found in a circumscribed physical site; it has forced us to retreat into the built environment, while creating parallel uncertainties that we cannot quell through everyday routines—which, as [Melisa](#) tells us, even disrupt the grammars that previously structured our writing. For some, it has brought the conflicting socialities of family, work, and school into contact with each other, as [Shanti’s](#) experience suggests. For others, it has meant social isolation that technology cannot compensate for, or on the opposite end, a necessity to keep working in ‘essential services’ even at the risk of community health. [Kari](#) draws our attention to a labour force working on the frontlines of the energy industry: coal miners. #stayathome provides a prism through which to view old power

11 relations and technological inequalities in new ways as [Yolande](#) argues by investigating the smart wives we share our homes with, and as Larissa demonstrates by considering what crises like this one mean for the systems that energise our homes.

ETLab is running a number of [projects](#) that investigate the future of homes. In the forthcoming months and years, we will be reflecting on the lessons of COVID-19 in our work, engaging these insights to make recommendations for future scenarios.