

Significant Objects in the Domestic Space



By Molly B. Paris, Brandeis University for Community Housing of Maine

December 2015

CHOM Residents' Personal Narratives

A summer 2015 research project conducted to gather data on individuals living in properties owned by Community Housing of Maine (CHOM), a non-profit supportive, and affordable housing developer. The primary focus zeroed-in on investigations of CHOM housing's significance to its residents, as a creative and secure space to display personal belongings, and as an indicator of individual development beyond basic survival.

Significant Objects in the Domestic Space

CHOM RESIDENTS' PERSONAL NARRATIVES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A summer 2015 research project was conducted to gather data on individuals living in properties owned by Community Housing of Maine (CHOM), a non-profit supportive, and affordable housing developer. Information was collected from vulnerable populations throughout Maine living in both CHOM's supportive housing units, and low income tax credit developments.

This project is rooted in narrative and visual data obtained through interviews and photographs. The interviews were conducted at the locations of CHOM residents' homes. In this project, individuals were asked four questions regarding their personal background, former living arrangements, objects and images of meaningful/sentimental significance, and how residents personalized their living spaces. Interviewees were also asked to compare these meaningful objects to those in their previous living situations.

Results from the project suggested that nearly all individuals identified a personal image or object and, could explain their reason for choosing it; often this was related to a background story specifically tied to a previous living situation. Most individuals did not heavily decorate their living spaces; many identified as minimalists. The majority of individuals interviewed for this project were content with their CHOM living arrangement. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of participants described self-improvements in their living spaces – in physical, mental, and emotional terms – compared to their previous living environments.

An overwhelming majority of participants described self-improvements in their living spaces – in physical, mental, and emotional terms – compared to their previous living environments.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the project was multifaceted. That said, the primary focus zeroed-in on investigations of CHOM housing's significance to its residents, as a creative and secure space to display personal belongings, and as an indicator of individual development beyond basic survival. The project sought to understand the way personal objects might help to explain such individual narratives. The project explored whether or not an individual's former living situation(s) would impact an individual's interaction with and response to their CHOM home as demonstrated through (1) the display of personal objects, (2) the decoration of one's space, and (3) the creativity needed to develop and pursue higher goals for oneself. The project looked at those objects of importance to individuals living in CHOM housing, and what residents chose to do with their living space. Interview questions were formulated to help current CHOM residents consider how they came to live in CHOM housing, and to

reflect on item(s) they valued most. The project's additional goal was to understand, from residents' perspective, how CHOM's overarching motto, "creating homes and inclusive communities" applied amongst individuals living in their respective communities.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected by firsthand interviews of CHOM residents, using pen and paper. Some individuals were selected blindly to participate in the interview process; other individuals were notified in advance and agreed to participate before the interview took place. Interviewees were asked to sign a release form before the interview process. Likewise all individuals were given the option to accept or decline interviews. Individuals were provided with a release form to participate in an interview, which included background information on the project's purpose and interview questions. Thirty-one individuals were interviewed over a two month period, spanning from June to July, 2015. Of the 31 individuals interviewed, data were finalized from 29 of the participants; two participants later declined to have their information used in the project. Participants were also asked for a photo to be taken to document an object or image of significance to them. Of the 29 individuals, 19 agreed to have at least one photo taken of themselves in their home, their living space, or their most significant personal item.

Interview data were collected from various locations throughout the state of Maine including Bangor, Waterville, Saco, Rockland, and Portland. Of these five locations, interviews were conducted at 11 of CHOM's properties (out of the 70 properties in 23 communities it serves in Maine). Of those interviewed 93.5% allowed their data to be collected for this project; 14 participants were male, and 15 were female. Nineteen out of the 29 had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, whether chronic or a short episode. The majority of interviewees were white, reflecting the predominantly white population in Maine affected by poverty.¹

Specific interview questions include the following:

- 1) Can you tell me a little about yourself and what kind of things you have in your home?
- 2) How did you come to acquire the objects in your home and, is there a favorite thing you own or an important possession you've had for a while?
- 3) What did you take into consideration when decorating or furnishing your home? If you haven't decorated much, do you think you will in the future?
- 4) How has living in CHOM housing affected your well-being, and how does your current living situation compare to your previous living situation?

All data collected from interviewees were broken down by the number corresponding to the interview question. For example, all responses to interview Question 1 are compiled in a discussion under Results, Part 1.

¹ Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy Maine 2010: Opportunities for All

RESULTS

PART 1 – PERSONAL BACKGROUND: CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT KIND OF THINGS YOU HAVE IN YOUR HOME?

There was a three-fold objective tied to the first interview question; (1) to learn more about individual CHOM residents, (2) to understand more about the history of their past living situations, and (3) to take note of items within the home. Background history and specific details of individual stories varied greatly. The majority of those interviewed ranged from ages 30 to 60 years old. Many individuals living in CHOM housing have histories with addiction and substance abuse and some were not originally from Maine. Some of those interviewed who were originally from Maine had either downsized from larger homes, or sought more affordable housing. Some of these individuals had been evicted from previous living situations, while others left former living situations aiming for government-subsidized Section 8 Housing vouchers.

Despite wide-ranging personal histories there was one constant: a high number of participants came from a background of very unstable living conditions. Approximately 65.5% or 19 out of 29 individuals interviewed experienced homelessness at some point in their lives prior to CHOM. Of the 19 individuals with prior experiences of homelessness, 14 were classified as “Long Term Stayers,” which is defined by the Maine Statewide Homeless Council as “people who stay more than 180 cumulative days in shelters (or outdoors) within a 365-day period (not necessarily consecutive).”² Though 65.5% seems high, it does not reflect the overwhelming majority of individuals in CHOM homes who were formerly homeless. In actuality, the number of formerly homeless individuals currently in CHOM housing is significantly higher than 65.5%. Likewise this percentage does not account for the various community partnerships CHOM has with social service and care providers. In the aggregate, working with other service partners allows 69 out of the 70 properties owned by CHOM to contain some aspect of supportive housing.

*Despite wide-ranging personal histories there was one constant:
A high number of participants came from a background of very
unstable living conditions.*

Many not accounted for in the project’s 65.5%, came from an unstable situation. When we take into account those who did not spend time in shelters but “couch surfed,” the number of individuals who were formerly homeless and now housed by CHOM, would be even higher. Research indicates that formerly homeless CHOM residents are individuals who are either retired, mentally ill, physically disabled (many of whom were formerly in nursing homes) and have low incomes, or those who sought to live in affordable housing, especially in the Portland area which serves as a locus of social services. Individuals who reported no history of homelessness or reliance on the generosity of friends and family to open their doors for temporary and extended periods of time, tended to have less traumatic personal histories because they could depend on their safety net for support.

2

Function Overrides Form

Most items individuals had in their CHOM homes served a functional purpose. Individuals often had these items out of necessity. Common among these items are couches, recliners, rugs, coffee pots, and televisions. Most formerly homeless individuals tended to have fewer “extras” in their dwellings but nearly all individuals interviewed owned these five common items. Compared to those who were formerly homeless and had fewer items, those who were formerly homeless and had more belongings often reported keeping their possessions in storage or with family or friends until they found housing. Greater financial means allowed these individuals the potential to have more items in their home.

PART II – IDENTIFICATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PERSONAL ITEMS: HOW ABOUT DID YOU COME TO ACQUIRE THE OBJECTS IN YOUR HOME AND, IS THERE A FAVORITE THING YOU OWN OR AN IMPORTANT POSSESSION YOU’VE HAD FOR A WHILE?

The objective of the second interview question was twofold; the first goal was to understand how individuals acquired objects in their home, considering that many were either formerly homeless or in unstable living conditions, and all had low incomes. The second objective was to identify why the image or object, selected by the individual, was personally significant. The majority of formerly homeless individuals acquired the objects in their home through donations, friends, and organizations such as the Salvation Army or Goodwill. Many who spent time in shelters and had to leave the facility each morning were previously limited in the number of objects they could own at any one point. Some individuals reported that at the shelter they were given a small tote, in which they could store personal items, and use as storage when they left the shelter for the day. Many formerly homeless individuals moved into their CHOM home with just a few items, while others had only a small suitcase containing some blankets and clothes. Some of these individuals were able to keep belongings in storage or with friends or family during periods of homelessness.

Individuals who were formerly homeless but had been living in CHOM housing for a longer period of time tended to have more objects in their home. Often case managers or social workers would assist individuals in acquiring items for their new home. Individuals living in CHOM housing who were not formerly homeless were often faced with the challenge of downsizing and in this process having to eliminate, sell, or donate most of the items they acquired over the years. Other

TENANT QUOTES

•••

“The most important characteristic of living in CHOM housing, aside from a comfortable place to sleep, is privacy.”

“I wouldn’t have anything without the program. Before CHOM, I had no housing options.”

“I am still adjusting to having my own place, having a key, and being able to freely walk in the door.”

“Moving here was the best thing I ever did. I have learned more about speaking out for what I need, have done a lot of change in therapy, and have just received my section 8 voucher.”

“Since living in CHOM housing, I have been more productive and working with my recovery; I’m taking care of myself more.”

individuals suffering from mental illnesses and/or physical disabilities, who lived in nursing homes or under the care of a family member prior to living in CHOM housing, had acquired the objects in their homes over the years. These individuals would typically transfer their personal items from previous housing to their CHOM home. In other words, they possessed more freedom to hold onto and sentimentalize objects.

The most significant personal object owned by CHOM residents often reflected a connection to past circumstances or family members. For individuals who experienced chronic homelessness and had recently moved into CHOM housing, the most important item they owned was typically their bed or a recliner chair, a comfortable place to sleep after being a long-term stayer. Other chronically homeless people claimed their couch was one of their most important possessions for similar reasons.



For one specific individual who had lived in multiple shelters, the most important item he owned was a small, blue suitcase. This personal item had been used to transport belongings between living situations, hold treasured objects while in transitional phases of living such as in the shelter, and served as a pillow for more comfortable sleeping. Despite now living in a CHOM home, a place of comfort and stability, the individual's most prized possession still reflected past instability and periods of his life marked by transition.

Both for formerly homeless CHOM residents and those who had not suffered homelessness, many people identified their most significant possession as a family photo, or an object associated with family. Sixteen out of the 29 individuals interviewed identified a direct family connection to the image or object they selected. Formerly homeless individuals tended to select images, either photographs or painted portraits, of family members as their most important possession. Many within this group chose images of their children, as well as their grandchildren, at a young age. According to one individual displaying images of her children and grandchild, these are her most important possessions "because you can't replace those." Before living in CHOM housing the photographs of her daughters and her parents were stored in boxes, and thus could not be displayed.



Some people who did not display a photograph or painting of a family member identified the most important item they owned as a gift associated with a family member or friend. One woman explained the most important object she once owned (though no longer in her possession) as a lime green pillow. She received the pillow from a friend while staying in the hospital after a traumatic biking accident resulting in a traumatic brain injury. Another individual explained a similar situation in which his most prized possession was not currently with him. When leaving a shelter in a hurry the individual had left behind an old family photo album. Though the individual has since been in contact with the shelter regarding the item he left behind, he does not know when he will be able to retrieve the item. The exception to formerly homeless individuals selecting objects or images relating to family members was one individual who did not want to associate with his adoptive parents. This individual identified a Disney figurine as one of the most important objects in his possession; it represented his new self-identity and was part of the inspiration for his legal change.



For individuals who did not have a history of homelessness, the object of connection to a family member appeared to be less literal than a family photograph. Those within this population group tended to identify objects associated with their family. For these individuals their past living history allowed them to hold onto objects that could be larger than a photo. Such items included a poster given to an individual from a spouse, a maple wood stained cabinet which used to hold family photos, or a table made from bird's eye maple that the individual had owned since her children were young. Those who had not experienced homelessness appeared to have more flexibility in the object they selected as their most significant personal item; their past living situation often allowed them to have more objects and from this they had a greater number of potential choices.

For those who had recently moved into their new home, often there was no option to select a larger object associated with family. The past living situations of formerly homeless individuals dictated that they have very little; unless individuals found storage or family to hold onto their possessions, they would have to give up or hold onto very few items. In most of the shelters, one could bring in what they can hold on their person. In some shelters, individuals would be provided with small totes to store their belongings during the day. For those individuals who were forced to move in and out of shelters on a daily basis, a family photo was a sentimental, feasible, and often irreplaceable, object to hold on.

Other formerly homeless individuals living in CHOM housing selected objects which brought them enjoyment. Though not connected or associated with family, these objects still linked back to personal narratives, such as how the individual acquired the object. Some of these objects had been purchased by the individual including item such as fishing rods, books, or an interesting lamp. Other personally significant items of CHOM residents, such as music or paintings, were created by the individual. Some formerly homeless individuals valued intangible items rather than physical images or objects. One man described that by being homeless, “you get used to not needing a lot.” Consequently most of the things valued by the individual were intangible items, such as God, the U.S. as a nation, and the messages and values spread by past leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy. Other formerly homeless individuals felt similarly regarding an intangible connection to something that was significant to them. One individual shared that as a consequence of “growing up poor, material objects had never had much significance and money was only a tool.” He described his most significant possession as the ability to create art; the man noted his skill “as something God gave me.”





CHOM residents who had neither experienced homelessness nor identified a personal item associated with family, selected personal items which documented self-accomplishment. These personal objects included high school diplomas, college diplomas, or other service awards. For one CHOM resident, a high school diploma represented hard work and determination; the individual noted it took him years to earn the diploma because he had to put his education on hold while moving into a different living arrangement. Other objects of personal significance selected by individuals in this category included those which reflected hobbies such as painting, mixed martial arts, and following sports teams.

For one CHOM resident, a high school diploma represented hard work and determination; the individual noted it took him years to earn the diploma because he had to put his education on hold while moving into a different living arrangement.

PART III – INTERIOR LIVING SPACE AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS: WHAT DID YOU TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION WHEN DECORATING OR FURNISHING YOUR HOME? IF YOU HAVEN'T DECORATED MUCH, DO YOU THINK YOU WILL IN THE FUTURE?

The objective of the third interview question was twofold; it sought to examine whether formerly homeless individuals would decorate their interior space when provided with a home, and to compare these results to the other vulnerable populations CHOM serves. Decorating can be defined as altering the original generic space of the home. This was achieved in CHOM homes through several means including the display of objects and images, color choices, and interior furnishings. The results from this interview question were mixed; some formerly homeless individuals sought to decorate their new living spaces, while others expressed no interest in decorating. For those who were formerly homeless and did decorate their interior spaces, the reasons for doing so also varied. For one individual, “cleanliness and comfort were important factors,” regarding items he brought in the home to furnish it. Others furnished their homes with items they had in their former living arrangements before they became homeless. When items were retrieved from storage, individuals reused old furniture.

For formerly homeless individuals who did decorate, often minimalism was utilized in their CHOM home. One woman who had decorated her space still called herself a minimalist, noting she “didn’t want to take on too much stuff.” For one formerly homeless individual, furniture and other objects in the home were acquired from the previous CHOM tenant. In this case, decoration and furnishing of the interior living space was already in place. The use of thematic color schemes sometimes would unite a living space. One woman noted, “even though my favorite color is a fire engine red, I use a forest green in my home because I find it calming.” Out of the formerly homeless individuals who decorated their homes, most did so modestly in part because the number of objects they owned was limited. An exception to this was one woman who decorated her entire living room space with many figurines,

Significant Objects in the Domestic Space

pictures, and colorful objects. For nearly all, keeping costs in check was a priority when decorating and furnishing. Often, “price was the largest part.”



For other formerly homeless individuals, decoration was not an incredibly important factor in their CHOM home. One individual noted he was not interested in decorating his home and instead, “just went for utility.” Another individual stated she had no system of decorating her home, but was trying to create one. Many individuals declared being minimalists, with regards to the number of objects in their home and amount of decorating they pursued. One minimalist, a formerly homeless man, felt his home was cluttered even though he

did not have a lot of items occupying the space. This individual did not want to put any items on the wall. For example, airplane figures were hung from the ceiling with fishing line rather than mounted directly to the wall. While some formerly homeless individuals simply had no interest in decorating, others feared they would become too attached to their living space if they chose to decorate.

Overall, individuals living in CHOM housing who were not formerly homeless tended to acknowledge more of an interest in decorating their space. An interest in decorating was subconscious for some and a conscious effort for others. For one woman, whose living space appeared well thought out and coherently themed, the space had “just come together.” Her CHOM home included images of powerful animals such as eagles, dream catchers with leather strings and beads, a patterned rug, draperies, and an earthy toned wall color and a maroon couch. In contrast, other individuals noted specific efforts made to decorate their space. One woman chose to decorate her CHOM home in a similar manner to her previous home with paintings on the wall, and wooden furniture pieces. The woman noted her daughter, who was certified in interior design, had helped set up her CHOM home. With regards to interior decorating and furnishing, one individual mentioned he “incorporated things from his previous home.” Another individual who downsized from a home described her decoration style as, “funky” and “the brighter the better.”



Those who had more traumatic pasts were often forced to decorate their CHOM home with fewer items from previous living situations. For one woman who fled domestic problems, decoration grew from, “buying a lot of things from Craigslist.” She noted it was difficult at age 65 to start furnishing a space again. Some individuals who were not formerly homeless also claimed to be minimalists or expressed no interest in decorating their home.

PART IV – INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIONS ON CHOM HOUSING: HOW HAS LIVING IN CHOM HOUSING AFFECTED YOUR WELL-BEING, AND HOW DOES YOUR CURRENT LIVING SITUATION COMPARE TO YOUR PREVIOUS LIVING SITUATION?

The goal of the fourth interview question was twofold; to see what individuals were working towards achieving on a personal level to improve their well-being, and to identify how CHOM housing specifically compared to their previous living situations. The results from the fourth interview question varied, though the majority of CHOM residents expressed feelings of accomplishment and positivity while living in CHOM housing. The degree to which individuals perceived improvements depended on past personal histories, previous living circumstances, and their individual goals.

For several formerly homeless individuals, the most important aspect of their CHOM home was their newfound personal space. Many formerly homeless individuals were still getting used to having their own space and having a place to call their own. Even after one year of living in CHOM housing one man noted, "I am still adjusting to having my own place, having a key, and being able to freely walk in the door." For one individual, "the most important characteristic of living in CHOM housing, aside from a comfortable place to sleep, is privacy." This implied not having to sleep in close proximity to strangers in the shelter. Many formerly homeless individuals faced the challenge of learning how to relax, following periods of stress inducing their prior living arrangements. For one individual, the biggest transition he experienced, between being homeless to living in CHOM housing, was getting used to sleeping and relaxing; this contrasts with broken sleep and instability felt from those who experienced chronic homelessness. Though this individual enjoyed the privacy of his new home, being around fewer people each day was one aspect he was still getting used to. When asked what it was like to now have a home, a newly leased up tenant described it was, "like being in the dark and not knowing what to do." Learning how to embark on new goals was the priority for several formerly homeless individuals who sought more structure and purpose in their lives.



For nearly all formerly homeless individuals, moving into CHOM housing provided stability compared to previous living arrangements. Many were grateful for their CHOM home. A formerly homeless veteran described living in CHOM housing as, "it's a good base camp." Compared to former unstable living situations, many enjoyed not having to move in and out of the shelter space with their personal belongings. One formerly homeless individual described feeling "lucky it [the shelter system] exists, but it was not a fun experience." Another individual who was chronically homeless in various states had avoided shelters because, "they were worse than prisons." One woman noted, "I like CHOM housing because moving was hard and overwhelming." She enjoyed the stability of living in one place. Another formerly homeless individual described living in CHOM housing as "nice,

Significant Objects in the Domestic Space

comfortable, and less stressful than moving in and out of the shelter every day.” Although this individual had lived in CHOM housing for two years he noted he was “still fearful of feeling too at home or getting too comfortable.” Even after living in the stability of CHOM housing, some formerly homeless individuals struggled to accept that they can relax.

A connection with the community often made individuals feel more comfortable in their living arrangements. Likewise it provided a support system through which individuals could relate to one another and encourage each other to achieve their goals.

Though many formerly homeless individuals found it difficult to compare their previous living situation to their CHOM home, many reflected on a greater connection to the community and new opportunities. A connection with the community often made individuals feel more comfortable in their living arrangements. Likewise it provided a support system through which individuals could relate to one another and encourage each other to achieve their goals. One formerly homeless Veteran described CHOM housing as a little community, noting, “Veterans have the ability to instantly bond with other Veterans because they understand each other.” This individual, who is working on recovering from PTSD and other mental health issues, feels that her supportive community has helped with this process. Others felt similarly. “I wouldn’t have anything without the program.” For this individual, CHOM allowed his family to build stability, which they had lacked before, within the community. This individual continued that, “Before CHOM, I had no housing options.” He went on to describe help through general assistance (G.A.) but noted compared to CHOM, G.A. housing was substandard and insecure; if one forgot to pay their rent on the exact day it was due, they would be promptly evicted. Since living in CHOM housing, many individuals have also been able to obtain a section 8 housing voucher through CHOM’s project based housing.

CHOM was instrumental in providing a safe place where individuals could recover and expand on personal goals, such as employment or further education. A formerly homeless individual who previously suffered from alcoholism noted, choosing to move here [in CHOM housing] was “the best thing I ever did.” Since living in CHOM housing the individual stated, “I have learned more about speaking out for what I need, have done a lot of change in therapy, and have just received my section 8 voucher.” Many formerly homeless individuals had similar responses. “Since living in CHOM housing, I have been more productive and working with my recovery; I’m taking care of myself more.” For those who were not formerly homeless, the greatest value in CHOM housing was the stability and sense of community it fostered.



CONCLUSION:

Through this project I was able to gain a deeper understanding and connection to the vulnerable populations that CHOM serves. The interview questions provided insight into the examination of how residents living in CHOM housing turned their apartments into homes, through the personalization of their living spaces. By understanding an individual's story, the history of their living situations, and how they came to be a part of the CHOM and surrounding community, the documentation of stories, which arise from items of personal significance, provided linkage throughout the project. The interview questions also helped guide the narrative story of individuals, while photos of personal objects and images within the home, provided a visual narrative. Despite personal differences amongst individuals, and the stories shared by those interviewed, nearly all individuals who participated in the project identified a significant object or image in their CHOM home which carried sentimental significance. Through the interview process it was revealed that objects and images played a critical role in assisting CHOM residents to recall past living environments and the stories intertwined with those experiences.



This project revealed that the significance of objects and images often arises through direct or indirect associations with family members or friends. Prior to the onset of the project and interview process, I predicted that the personal items of those interviewed would vary depending on their past living experiences; that is, items most significant to formerly homeless individuals would differ from those who had never experienced homelessness. The results disproved this hypothesis, as the majority of all individuals interviewed chose a significant image or object connecting or associated with family. However, the reasons why individuals selected their chosen image or object differed; all tended to relate back to their personal narrative. The majority of those interviewed had never considered what objects or items in their home carried the most significance. This had not been considered perhaps because formerly homeless individuals had never been asked, or because unstable living situations dissuaded individuals from becoming too attached to any one object or item.

Before the project began I also hypothesized that a majority of individuals would choose to decorate their CHOM home, seeing as that many now residing in CHOM homes never had previous opportunities to create their own space. This was based off of the understanding that prior to CHOM, many individuals were homeless or did not have a stable, secure living environment. The results from the project revealed that most individuals, across the vulnerable populations CHOM serves, did not extensively decorate their homes. Many formerly homeless individuals either claimed to be 'minimalists,' did not decorate because they did not want to become too comfortable in their home, or had not invested direct energy in individualizing their space. Individuals who were formerly homeless and did choose to decorate, by altering the original generic space of their home, had often done so subconsciously. Other population groups who had not experienced homelessness did not tend to decorate more, though they were more aware of the aesthetic interior choices they had made within their CHOM home. CHOM residents who were not identified as formerly homeless individuals and

Significant Objects in the Domestic Space

chose a 'minimalist' approach to decorating, often adopted this approach as a result of downsizing from a larger home or living arrangement.

An overwhelming number of participants reported positive changes in their lives as a result of living in CHOM housing. Stable and secure housing proved to be an important prerequisite for individuals to achieve progress in their lives, measured through increased confidence, pursuit of further education, interest in new hobbies, self-growth and recovery, as well as an improved physical and mental well-being. The majority of those interviewed found CHOM housing preferable to their previous living situation, though there were some complaints regarding the neighbors of tenants. CHOM housing was considered preferable to previous living arrangements for both formerly homeless individuals, and those who had not experienced homelessness. This was the case for several reasons including increased stability, and security, more privacy and comfort, improved noise control and affordability, as well as growing positive relationships within the community.

An overwhelming number of participants reported positive changes in their lives as a result of living in CHOM housing.

This project intended to extend on research done in the field of neuroaesthetics, the study of how the brain experiences and responds to art and objects of beauty.³ The research project looked at how CHOM residents responded to their objects or images, in the context of a home, and sought to document changes among CHOM residents. In this case, we sought to examine how both significant objects and the space in which they are found, the home, affect the individual residing in that space. Research in the field of neuroaesthetics has demonstrated that beautiful visual images and architectural spaces are linked to areas in the brain such as the ventral striatum, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and the orbitofrontal cortex, which are involved in the coding of human pleasure.⁴

As a result of the project I found that individuals are more likely to enjoy and reflect on items they consider personally significant when they have a safe and secure environment to do so. Many individuals, primarily those who were formerly homeless, chose to have their most significant images or objects displayed, if not visibly placed within their CHOM home. In previous living arrangements these individuals kept their most prized possession either in storage, or tucked away at the bottom of their other belongings, places where their objects and images could not be regularly or visibly enjoyed by the individual. Many individuals, even those who claimed to be 'minimalists,' chose to display objects and images of personal significance when they had a home. Those who did not have their items displayed, seemed uncertain of how to display or why they should, given that many were previously homeless



³ The Aesthetic Brain, The Scientific American

⁴ Neuroaesthetics, The Scientist Magazine

with no opportunity to do so. Based off of concepts explored in neuroaesthetics, a beautiful interior space can also influence how individuals feel about themselves. The impact of how individuals can feel about themselves, and view their personal autonomy is positively correlated with the space in which they live. Many individuals, across the vulnerable populations interviewed for this project, were making positive changes to their lives, demonstrating the importance of how a stable, secure, and comfortable living space can promote positive self-esteem, productivity, and creativity.

Many individuals, across the vulnerable populations interviewed for this project, were making positive changes to their lives, demonstrating the importance of how a stable, secure, and comfortable living space can promote positive self-esteem, productivity, and creativity.

By providing homes for vulnerable populations in Maine, CHOM allows individuals an opportunity to share their most significant objects and images, through the space and security of a home. CHOM residents engage in individualizing their home through the objects and images that personalize the industrialism of a uniform space. By living in a space which fosters comfort, relaxation, and stability compared to former living environments, the space itself can begin to reflect the individual residing within it through their personal objects and images, and their individualization of the space. This can further instill CHOM residents with a sense of identity. For many, the act of choosing what to put in their space and how to arrange it is still a concept they are learning to accept. To be given a choice, CHOM residents, especially those formerly homeless, are propelled into normalcy, where one must not only make decisions about their home, but also about their life and future self.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and what kind of things you have in your home?
2. How about did you come to acquire the objects in your home and, is there a favorite thing you own or an important possession you've had for a while?
3. What did you take into consideration when decorating or furnishing your home? If you haven't decorated much, do you think you will in the future?
4. How has living in CHOM housing affected your well-being, and how does your current living situation compare to your previous living situation?

APPENDIX B: SUMMARIZED INTERVIEWS

*Original names of interview participants have been changed

Anthony

Anthony is a formerly homeless individual, who prior to CHOM lived on the streets for 1.5 years. During this time he stayed in various shelters and suffered from homelessness. He has only been living in CHOM housing for a brief period thus far.

Jane

Before coming to CHOM housing, Jane had been evicted, from a previous living situation, and sought subsidized housing. Jane and her family want to move location so they can be closer to a college she hopes to attend. She plans to remain in CHOM housing for the year so they can obtain a section 8 housing voucher.

Reikyn

Reikyn is a single parent, who was homeless prior to CHOM. Reikyn was living in various shelters in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. He has struggled with substance abuse but is now employed and starting to establish a life for his family. Reikyn has lived in CHOM housing for less than a year.

Lynn

Lynn suffers from various mental illnesses as well as physical disabilities. Before CHOM, Lynn was living in various shelters as a chronically homeless individual. She has lived in CHOM housing for approximately 3 years.

Weston

Weston is a former veteran. Following service, Weston was employed as truck driver and could not financially afford paying monthly rent during his 37 years of employment with the company. After retirement he became homeless and lived in shelters. Moving into CHOM housing was the first time Weston had his own place

Tim

Tim is a former veteran, journeyman for new apprentices, and maintenance chief of a physical plant department. Tim relocated for work across various states including Maine, Maryland, Georgia, and South Carolina during his career. After falling ill, Tim lost his job and became homeless. Tim avoided shelters because they were “worse than prisons.” He has lived in CHOM housing for the past year.

Tammy

Tammy is a former veteran who suffers from various mental illnesses. Tammy was attending college studying physics and geoscience, until she suffered a mental breakdown from past experiences. After suffering a mental breakdown, Tammy lost cognitive ability. Before coming to CHOM, she was living in a shelter. In CHOM housing, Tammy is working on management of her illnesses in hopes of opening her old physics textbooks again.

Michelle

Michelle suffers from mental health issues and past issues with alcoholism. Michelle is a college graduate and former caseworker, who lost her ability to work after an OUI prevented her from transporting clients. Continued alcoholism and a lack of family support prevented her from holding a job. Michelle has lived in CHOM housing for 2 years and has recently obtained a section 8 voucher.

Mike

Mike became homeless after losing his apartment. He was on and off the streets for the following 8 years. Conflicting ideologies with family members prevented him from moving in with them. Mike

spent time in Georgia to receive treatment for alcoholism, and would later attend a treatment center in Maine. Mike lived in CHOM housing for a few years before deciding to live independently. After relapsing, Mike stayed in shelters before coming back to live in CHOM housing.

Ken

Ken started having problems with substance abuse in his early 20s. After being diagnosed with mental health issues, Ken relocated to Maine for better treatment. He is now sober and has lived in CHOM housing for the past three years.

Tacoma

Tacoma is an orphan who was raised by alcoholic and abusive parents. After being told by doctors that he was close to death, Tacoma became committed to finding a rehabilitation center and becoming fully sober. Since living in CHOM housing and being sober for the first time in 48 years, the individual is now pursuing career opportunities and working on recovery.

Earl

Earl suffers from mental and physical disabilities. Before coming to CHOM, he had lived in various locations throughout the state of Maine. Earl has lived in CHOM housing for 2 years and is now attending the University of Maine, studying New Media.

Ruby

Ruby was adopted from South Korea and suffers from mental and physical disabilities. Before CHOM, Ruby lived under the care of her parents. However, as her parents aged it became more difficult for them to care for themselves and their daughter. Ruby has since lived in CHOM housing for 1.5 years.

John

John suffers from mental and physical disabilities. Before CHOM John was living in a nursing home, where there were limited opportunities to grow as a young individual. John now feels much more comfortable in his CHOM home.

Christine

Christine was adopted from foster care as a child. She moved from Maine to Canada, after her parent of Canadian descent was caught working in the U.S. without a green card. Christine returned to Maine and moved in with an older sister after high school. She was living with her sister for a short period before she was unexpectedly kicked out. Christine was homeless for a brief period before moving into CHOM housing.

Sydney

Sydney is a single parent of two children. Before coming to CHOM, the family of 3 lived with the mother of Sydney, when she was leaving a bad relationship. Sydney works as parent and a CNA and has lived in CHOM housing for nearly 3 years.

Anna

Anna is a mentally ill and physically disabled individual. She was neglected as a child and grew up in the Maine foster care system. Before coming to CHOM, Anna resided in various living situations including a group home, a tent, and a low income apartment. Anna has now lived in CHOM housing for the last 7 months.

William

William is a retired business and accounting administrator from the Portland area. He has lived in CHOM housing for the past 8 years, moving in after downsizing from a ten bedroom home which he could no longer afford.

Bess

Bess is a divorced mother of 3, who spent the majority of her career working with special needs children. Before coming to CHOM housing, she had been living with her daughter for several years. Bess has since lived in CHOM housing for the last 14 years.

Liz

Liz returned to Maine and found CHOM after fleeing domestic problems in Georgia. She has been employed as an artist, a massage therapist, a floral designer, jewelry designer but is now retired. Liz has enjoyed her time living in CHOM housing thus far, especially the supportive community environment.

Rachel

Rachel is a retired bookkeeper and activities director from a nursing home in the Portland area. She returned to Maine from Florida after a family incident. Rachel has lived in CHOM housing for the last 15 years.

Dianna

Dianna is a retired real estate agent from the Pennsylvania area. She moved to Maine following an illness in the family. Prior to living in CHOM housing, Dianna lived in an apartment in Portland for a brief period. She has found living in CHOM housing to be much more affordable.

Sarah

Sarah is originally from the Portland area but moved out west when she received a housing offer from her partner. Once she reached the West Coast the offer was rescinded and Sarah was homeless for months. When Sarah found housing, expensive upkeep and repairs forced her to leave. She returned back to Maine and was still struggling with homelessness. Sarah was able to obtain a section 8 voucher and has since lived in CHOM housing for the past few years.

Sabrina

Sabrina works as a market researcher in the Portland area. She came to CHOM housing in search of more affordable housing that was closer to her place of employment.

Phil

Phil is originally from Maine and worked for a phone company for many years. He was also involved in underwriting and entrepreneurship work. Prior to living in CHOM housing, Phil had downsized from a home and was living in an apartment in Portland. He decided to move because his apartment was too noisy. He has since lived in CHOM housing for the last year and a half.

Gavin

Gavin is a former veteran who is also physically disabled with mental health issues. After leaving an abusive living situation, Gavin was homeless for a year. He found an apartment but soon after began looking for a place with a greater sense of safety. Gavin has since lived in CHOM housing for the past two years.

Marina

Marina has struggled with alcohol and substance abuse as well as homelessness. She has lived in CHOM housing for the past four months, after following an intensive outpatient program and being engaged in community volunteer work. Marina is now working towards her GED.

Ron

Ron began suffering from mental health issues after a family death. A mental health institution helped connect Ron with a shelter. Ron learned about CHOM through a friend and has lived in CHOM housing for the last seven months.

Trevor

Before coming to CHOM, Trevor was living in shelters and suffering from substance abuse and alcohol related issues. He was connected to CHOM following completion of a mental health program. Trevor has lived in CHOM housing for the last few months.