

Portable, But Not Mobile: A Study of Wireless Laptops in the Home

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Abstract. We report a qualitative study of the use of physical space and wireless laptops by ten United States households. Although wireless laptops purportedly offer the opportunity and affordances to go “anywhere in the home,” laptops were generally used in a small set of particular places rather than moving fluidly through the home: wireless laptops were portable, but not mobile *per se*. We present factors that influence laptop movement in the home. We also present a model of people’s use of space in the home, identifying a small set of favored places of long-term use and a larger set of kinetic places used for specific tasks. We discuss how the factors we have identified generally promote use of laptops in favored places and generally discourage use of laptops in kinetic places. We discuss how our findings are relevant to the design of technologies for the home.

1 Introduction

A number of significant studies have examined the use of personal computers in the home [9,10,14,17,28,29]. Two increasingly popular technologies have the potential to dramatically change patterns that have been reported previously, particularly when taken in combination: wireless home networks and laptops. Forrester estimates that 3.8 million United States homes had both home networks and laptops as of December 2004, forecasting 30 million such homes by 2010 [25], and Strategy Analytics estimates that 19 million United States and European homes have wireless networks as of 2006 [19].

The wireless laptop offers continuous connectivity in a portable device, and while it certainly falls short of the original ubicomp vision [30], it is an important step towards it. The wireless laptop is touted as having great potential to change the nature of computing in the home. Rhetoric suggesting that people can compute “on a whim at any time and in any room” is extremely common [25]. Nonetheless, little is known about specific day-to-day practices with wireless laptops.

The much vaunted opportunities for the wireless laptop (and more broadly for mobile, ubiquitous, and pervasive computing) are strongly tied to its potential to be used in a variety of physical contexts. Physical space plays a large role in people's day-to-day lives, influencing for example sensory, ergonomic, cognitive, and social experience. We are therefore interested in examining the physical contexts in which people choose to spend time and use technology in the home. We believe that by studying current practices around choice of physical context, we can gain insights (1) for the design of future technologies and (2) for the design of physical environments (from furniture to architecture) amenable to emergent behaviors and technology use.

More specifically, we are interested in questions such as: Where specifically do people spend time in the home, and why? What are the properties of different places in the home? In which of these places do people use computing technology, and why? Through this investigation, we hope to learn more about which characteristics of space and devices are or are not favorable to computing technology in the home.

Households with wireless laptops are an excellent population to inform such questions, as household members have the opportunity to compute "anywhere" in the home and have well-established practices that can be examined (in contrast with participants in short-term interventions or laboratory studies). In this paper, we report a qualitative study of the use of physical space and wireless laptops by ten United States households. To our knowledge, this is the first study of the day-to-day use of wireless laptops in the home. Specifically, we discuss factors that influence where wireless laptops are and are not used in the home. We characterize participants' use of space in the home and discuss the settings in which laptop use is and is not prevalent in the home. Wireless laptops are not generally used anytime, anywhere, but are instead used mainly in four kinds of favored places in the home. We present a taxonomy of these primary sites of laptop use in the home. We believe our findings can be used to reason about how future devices may be used in the home.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first review related work and then discuss our method. We then turn to findings, followed by discussion of the findings and design implications. Finally, we conclude and discuss future work.

2 Related Work

The home has long been considered a compelling domain for ubiquitous computing, and many exciting technologies have been proposed for this venue [13]. The home is however plainly a complex domain for which it is difficult to design, and the promise of many technologies is as yet unfulfilled. Even when domestic technologies succeed, the reasons for their success are not always well understood. While important initial work has been done in the domestic arena, researchers have lamented the paucity of research on the home environment as compared to the extensive body of literature on the work environment, and have called for more research to deepen our understanding of home life and the use of technology in the home, e.g., [4,6].

One of the main areas of inquiry has been the use of desktop computers and the Internet in the home [9,10,14,17,28,29]. These studies have tended to focus on the social context of computing [10]; Venkatesh and his colleagues explicitly model the home as two main components – the social space and the technological space [28,29].

However, some work has also considered physical space, typically at the level of rooms or general areas. Mateas *et al.* conducted a study of the use of desktop computers in the home, explicitly considering not only social context, but spatial and temporal context as well [17]. They identified general areas (although not specific places) that represented “behavioral clusters” in the home, such as “Work Space” and “Private Space.” Frohlich *et al.* also investigated the location of desktop computers in the home [9]. In all these studies, the desktop computer was statically positioned, frequently in the home office if the family had one. Frohlich and Kraut [10] observe that placement of the computer has complex social implications and can create social tension, and they raise the possibility of portable machines that can be carried between different rooms.

The suggestion of portable devices resonates with O’Brien *et al.*’s study of home life and the use of audio-visual technology and a prototype set-top box [21]. This work focuses primarily on the social context for the use of technology, although this naturally leads to discussion of issues such as coordination and ownership of space, particularly the way in which noise-emitting technologies such as the television can mark out space. They discuss the importance of the portability of devices such as small televisions and stereos to distributing functionality throughout the home.

McClard and Somers present a rare study of the use of portable tablets [18], reporting a seven-week intervention in which they provided wireless networks and tablet computers to 13 families. Their work strongly emphasizes that the tablet can be used “anywhere.” (On a related note, Forrester reports survey data indicating that laptops are used to some degree in every room in the home, although most often in the office [25].) Although participants did not consider the tablet to have equivalent functionality to the PC, they liked the fact that it was portable and could be used in “comfortable” positions and locations such as a couch or bed. Despite the significance of issues such as fatigue and comfort in the home, and their impact on the use of technology, seating position and posture are rarely considered elsewhere in the literature. In one of the only other studies of wireless computing, Grinter *et al.* [11] explored the collaborative administration of home networks, some of which were wireless. Patel *et al.* [23] studied the use of a different wireless technology, cell phones, examining the proximity of the phone to its owner, both in and out of the home.

Issues such as communication, coordination, and organizing systems have also been explored in the home [5,7,27]. Crabtree *et al.* [5] present a study of domestic routines for managing communications such as physical and electronic mail coming in and out of the home. Their study shares our interest in a fine-grained analysis of locations in the home, but focuses on locations of communication media and the role they play in issues such as the coordination of action among household members. For example, Crabtree *et al.* introduce a notion of ecological habitats to describe where communication media dwell; we have a complementary focus on the locations in which people spend time in the home.

To evaluate the use of technology in the home, we need to understand not only where technology is used in the home, but more broadly how people use space in the home. The existing literature from the social sciences is surprisingly sparse regarding daily use of space, particularly regarding specific patterns of use of places and objects; generally researchers have focused on broader issues such as identity, territoriality, gender, and power, and discussions are often at the level of rooms rather than

specific places within the room (see e.g., [12,16]). In a notable exception, Oswald reports favored places for elders [22]. These favored places are motivated by a tendency towards environmental centralization, particularly when people suffer from a loss of mobility. Oswald however does not discuss in detail the characteristics of these places, and the population he is studying appears to use them somewhat differently than the more general population in our study.

Other relevant work explores the use of space and technology in the workplace environment. For example, Becker and Steele [1] discuss the concept of an *organizational ecology* that views space layout, technology infrastructure, and business processes as a unified whole. They use this concept to present arguments for non-territorial offices that support collaboration and dynamic allocation of space. Similarly, Brown and O'Hara [3] discuss how mobile workers dynamically make use of space. They explore how "place changes work" (e.g., availability of power or network connectivity dictating the tasks undertaken) and how "work changes place" (e.g., places like cafes or homes being turned into work places). While this work considers the use of portable technology in work-from-home settings, it does not explore technology and space use in the home in general. Luff and Heath [15] focus on the use of portable artifacts in workplace collaboration. In particular, they suggest that the *micro-mobility* of objects, such as the way in which multiple people orient to a paper medical record or circulate a paper work log, can be as important to the success of mobile technologies as the simple fact that they are *portable*. We return to this point later.

In this paper, we present what is to our knowledge the first study of the day-to-day use of wireless laptops in the home. Further, we present what is to our knowledge the first study to contextualize findings about technology use in a specific discussion of how participants' occupy space in the home.

3 Method

Data was collected as part of two related studies within a broader project on the use of space and technology (in particular wireless laptops) in the home. The lead author visited all homes in both studies and there was high overlap in interview content and procedure.

3.1 Participants

Participants consisted of the 28 occupants of ten households, as well as the six occupants of two pilot households. Two households were recruited from a local university community and the remaining eight were recruited via an online classified service. Participants were compensated. All households had wireless networks and at least one laptop computer. Households had a range of laptop and desktop computers (both PCs and Macs), with an average of slightly more than one computer per person.

Households were chosen to represent a diverse range of household composition and life stage. All households had multiple inhabitants; some households had children of various ages, while other households consisted entirely of adults, e.g., married couples who did not have children or "empty nesters" whose children had grown up and left home. Participants were from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and

had varying occupations, such as kindergarten teacher, health care analyst, tech support person, furniture salesperson, or student. Although technical knowledge varied, participants tended to be somewhat technically oriented, which is not surprising given that they were in households that were leading adopters of wireless home networks.

Eight of the households were located in the San Francisco metropolitan area, and two of the households were located in the Portland metropolitan area. The homes were in a range of neighborhoods, including for example an ethnic residential neighborhood and a quickly developing urban district. The homes in the study consisted of a range of housing types, from large “McMansions” to one-bedroom apartments. Our recruiting favored various types of open plan layouts because we were particularly interested in the use and coordination of more “flexible” and shared space, although some of the houses had traditional layouts.

3.2 Procedure and Analysis

Data was collected during 2005 and 2006. Each household was studied in some depth through multiple home visits, which included home tours, semi-structured interviews, and a variety of mapping activities (e.g., annotating floor plans, using felt maps to do “walk-throughs” of recent days [17], and interpreting visualizations of location data collected by sensors installed in some homes). While we covered a wide range of topics, our interactions with the participants particularly emphasized their use of space and technology. In all but one home, all household members were present at all interviews. The primary interviews (usually two interviews per family, for a total of approximately three to four hours per family) were typically video-taped and transcribed. We had a number of additional informal interactions with several of the families, and we typically took notes on these. Additionally, in some households, textual and photo diaries were kept by participants, while in other households ultra-wideband sensors were used to track the locations of the participants and laptops and application use was logged on laptop and desktop PCs. In this paper we focus on qualitative findings, although we have begun to explore quantitative findings as well [1]. Time-lapse photography was also collected in some of the public areas in some of the homes. Households typically participated for approximately one to three weeks, although one household participated for approximately four months, and we conducted brief follow-ups with some households after several months had elapsed.

We reviewed the transcripts, notes, videotapes, and visual artifacts (annotated floor plans, photos, visualizations, etc.), triangulating across the different sources. Through this process, we identified themes [24] that we judged as representative of the participating households. In the next section, we report the results of our analysis.

4 Findings

In this section, we present the findings that emerged most strongly from our analysis. Specifically, in Section 4.1, we present factors that shape habits regarding location of laptop use. In Section 4.2, we discuss the places people spend time in the home, introducing the notion of favored and kinetic places. We discuss how the places in which people spend time interact with the factors described in Section 4.1, resulting in

particular patterns of laptop use in the home. Favored places were of particular interest because they were the primary site of laptop use. Accordingly, in Section 4.3, we describe favored places in more depth and present a taxonomy of them.

4.1 Factors Influencing Location of Laptop Use

In our analysis, we identified several factors that seemed to most powerfully affect location of laptop use in the homes we studied. The factors represent attracting or repelling forces that impacted laptop movement and use. Naturally there was individual variation, so while these were the major themes,¹ not all of these issues pertained to all participants in all homes.

The laptop functions as part of an assemblage. Laptops are drawn to established locations with appropriate infrastructure.

Laptops typically required infrastructure and space to enable general and sustained use. One manifestation of this was a general aversion to having the laptop unplugged, e.g., because of poor battery life or because participants wanted to make sure the battery would be charged “when needed.” Needs varied somewhat by person and circumstance, but laptop assemblages frequently included some subset of the following items: a mouse; a horizontal surface on which to spread papers or books, use a mouse, and place the laptop itself; a power adapter; peripheral devices such as printers, monitors, keyboards, or speakers, and wires and other attachments to these devices; pens and pencils; and/or a phone. Jack describes actually entwining himself in such an assemblage. He says he sometimes sits on the couch with the laptop on his lap, a power cord running to his left, and wires to speakers running to his right; this means he can not get up from the couch without moving the laptop and disconnecting wires or trying to lift them over his head. In practice, a laptop is not simply a device, but is indeed a configuration of devices or infrastructure to support laptop use.

Jack²: So we have a laptop and wireless but we’re definitely wired too.

The laptop is more likely to be used when it is at hand. The laptop is not always conveniently situated or booted.

A number of situations arise in the home in which the laptop would be useful for quick tasks. For example, one may wish to “google” for the answer to a question that arises in conversation or “fill time” by briefly checking email. However, the laptop may not be at hand in those situations, and the costs of retrieving and/or booting it often dominate the benefits it would provide. Therefore, opportunities for lightweight or even longer-term computing tasks may go unfulfilled.

¹ Note that while we had considered that varying signal strength of the wireless network might play a role in where laptops were used on a day-to-day basis, this did not emerge as a significant theme, largely because laptops were routinely used in a relatively small number of places due to other factors. In the rare cases where signal strength was mentioned as an issue, participants reported that it was possible to modify their home networks (e.g., by adding a wireless repeater) to accommodate specific places if necessary.

² Participants’ names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Laptops are in some senses surprisingly inconvenient to move from room to room or even from place to place within a room. A difference of just a few feet can make the difference in whether the laptop is used or not, and weight and wires are both inertial forces. Laptops often need to be detached from power or peripherals or closed before being moved – and closing them may automatically put them in standby mode or shut them down, which can lead to further delays. Further, laptops are moderately heavy and difficult to carry in one hand, and they are even more difficult to carry when one wants to bring along dangling infrastructure such as the mouse, mouse pad, or the power adapter. Additionally, if one is sitting (or lying) down and is tired, getting up to go get a laptop can be an unappealing notion indeed. Even when laptops are conveniently located, an additional obstacle is that they may not be booted and the boot cycles are not short. Participants told stories about walking to other rooms to use a computer that was already booted elsewhere in the home, rather than using the un-booted laptop right next to them.

The laptop is “fragile.” People tend to avoid putting laptops in “dangerous” locations like the kitchen or the bathroom.

Many participants expressed concern that their laptop could be damaged by hazards such as cooking spatters, young children, or hard knocks. In practice, this meant they were concerned about putting their laptops in dangerous locations such as the kitchen, the bathroom, or other locations where they might be bumped, dropped, or spilled upon. Tom expressed some of these concerns, and discussed his perception that a consumer electronics device is more appropriate than a laptop for “unsafe” venues:

Tom: The thing that bugs me sometimes is either [my teenage son] took it [the laptop] or [my teenage daughter] took it. They’re in the kitchen with it, they got it open, it’s sitting on there, and they’re listening to their iTune collection... and I’m going, ‘Don’t you guys have iPods? Didn’t I get you iPods with your own music on it?’ You know. I don’t really want this laptop sitting here because I said, cracked screen, knocking it, stuff like that... giving them \$150 thing to walk around I... feel a lot more comfortable than letting them run around with a \$1,000 thing.

In some cases, participants overcame their reservations and used their laptops in these more unsafe locations or situations. The important thing to note is that there is a cost-benefit tradeoff between the risk to the laptop and the value of using it in a given situation. Anne, the only participant who reported using the laptop in the bathroom, recognized that it was not always “safe” to use it in there, but she appeared to derive benefit from it and was careful to position the laptop “dead center in the middle of the counter.” Different household members sometimes had different perceptions of the risk to a laptop, or at least different cost-benefit analyses. Anne’s boyfriend Mark revealed that he borrowed her laptop for a friend to use while they were outside playing basketball.

Mark: I was going to say, I didn’t tell you that John came over and we were playing basketball. We had the garage open and I brought the laptop in the garage just because he wanted to check something. So I was like, “No problem.”

Molly: Of course you would leave that out, so she wouldn’t kill you.

Anne: We’ll discuss matters later.

Mark: So there's a little counter in the garage and I just put it on there for my friend to use the Internet.

Molly: He shares that now, so she won't kill him. Last thing we need is the basketball to hit the laptop.

Mark: We were just outside playing basketball and he was like, "I've got to check something for my school." And I was like, "Okay." Then I just brought the laptop outside so we didn't have to go back in. I wanted to keep playing and he wanted to check it really fast. So it does come in handy to have the wireless laptop... I left it there until we were done. The basketball wasn't anywhere near it so it wasn't going to break it.

This is exactly the kind of opportunistic use of the laptop that seems ideal, but such events appear to be the exception rather than the rule, even when one considers that sometimes they may not be discussed with interviewers because this might reveal them to other members of the household. The fact that sharing this particular event was so problematic reveals the importance of the issue to the participants, as well as the fact that such opportunistic use is not routine.

People sometimes want a "break" from the laptop. People sometimes put mental or physical distance between themselves and their laptop.

Participants had a range of strategies for dealing with work/home boundaries [20] and online/offline boundaries. Participants often said that it was "sad," "sick," or "pathetic" how much they worked or how much time they spent online. Some participants had few boundaries and would, for example, keep a BlackBerry on the night stand and check it in the middle of the night. Other participants would establish rules about times or spaces in which laptops or laptop use were permitted. Some areas were treated as technology-free sanctuaries, peaceful shelters in the home.

Katherine [on her husband Sam's use of email late at night]: I just can't understand why anyone would be emailing or responding to email at 11:00... it's hard to imagine that someone's expectations are you're going to be online, reading an email that late.

Anne: [F]or some reason I don't feel comfortable using [the laptop in my bedroom]. I need to be usually down here [in the living room] or somewhere else but not really in my room, because you know I kind of spend a lot of time there, my personal time, it's like my personal haven, so the last thing I want to do is work in there. So phone calls and things like that it's usually down here or outside on location... I usually like to keep my work separate from my personal life.

Another strategy for respite from online stimulation was to have the laptop in a clearly inactive state or put away. The act of closing the laptop or shutting it down was significant. Similarly, a laptop might remain in a bag when someone returned home, to allow them time to "unwind" before facing more email.

The laptop is drawn to activity. Laptops are sometimes positioned (or repositioned) so they can be interleaved with and integrated in ongoing activity in the home.

While many factors tend to limit the movement of laptops, they are in fact sometimes moved (or are strategically kept) near activity or other people in the home. Brad and Jacqueline talk about Brad using his laptop in bed at night so he can be near her:

Brad: It's pretty easy work, so I do it in bed. At night. It's like, oh, I wanna do a bit more...

Jacqueline: Yeah, as I've gone to sleep... I can't sleep by myself, so Brad has to go to bed and use his laptop in bed.

Participants reported interleaving computing with a wide range of other activities from relaxing to socializing, e.g., surfing the Internet while supervising a napping child. Participants also made it clear that computing can be fully integrated in some activities. For example, computing can play an important role in socializing – people can look at photos or choose music together, online news can prompt conversation, or people can chat online about a TV show as they watch it.

4.2 Where People and Laptops Spend Time in the Home

In the previous subsection we described factors influencing laptop use. Next, we discuss the locations in which people spent time in the home. We also discuss patterns of laptop use in these locations, and how the factors help explain the patterns we saw.

From the rhetoric associated with wireless and laptops, one might assume that the primary benefit of wireless laptops is that they let people compute anywhere in the home.³ In practice, laptops appear to be in common use in a relatively small number of places in the home; specifically they are commonly used in the four types of favored places we describe below. Their use in other parts of the home is much rarer, although provocative and informative when it does occur. Laptops appear to be *portable* (physically able to move around), but not *mobile* (able to transition quickly and smoothly between a variety of contexts). As suggested by the factors influencing laptop use described above, the *micro-mobility* [15] of laptops is limited. In particular, laptops go far fewer places than paper-based information artifacts in the home [5,7], similar to findings about the mobility of paper versus electronic artifacts in the workplace [15].

4.2.1 Framework of Spatial Occupation of the Home

In the households we studied, each household member typically had two or three *favored places* where they spent the majority of their time during waking hours (this offers an interesting comparison to the more numerous and diverse places for communication media reported in [5,7]). Examples ranged from a particular spot on the sofa to a seat at the desk in a home office. Note that these places are quite specific – they are not simply general areas or parts of rooms. One might imagine that people living in larger houses would have a significantly larger number of favored places, but our findings suggest that the number of favored places per person remains relatively constant. While larger houses may afford more choice of location for favored places, apparently people still establish a relatively low number, due to factors such as habit

³ One question that arises is the distinction between laptops with and without wireless capabilities. For example, how many of these behaviors are enabled simply by having a laptop, as opposed to a laptop on a wireless network? While it is difficult to say without making a direct comparison, we do observe that many of the participants' tasks required Internet access (e.g., web surfing and searching, email, IM, online bulletin boards), and Internet-related tasks were often interleaved with stand-alone tasks such as word-processing. Accordingly, we believe wireless is indeed a key enabler of laptop movement in the home.

and the work required to develop and maintain them. Participants spent extended periods of time in their favored places, conducting activities such as television watching, computing, socializing, or reading. Favored places naturally develop over time into habitats – places with resources conveniently arranged at hand. Objects such as drinks, books, remotes, and power adapters for laptops tend to accumulate in favored places. Placement of items can be ritualized and the environment can evolve over time to support convenient use – the spot for coffee, the cushion broken in, or the laptop adapter wedged in the sofa cushion.

In addition to favored places, participants naturally used other places in the home during waking hours. These places were generally associated with shorter duration, focused activities that involved physical manipulations, e.g., a mirror in the corner of the bedroom for doing one's hair, a door that a participant tucked her feet under to do sit-ups, or a kitchen counter that a married couple used to make sandwiches for lunch or to prepare the evening meal. Because these places were typically characterized by motion and physical manipulation, we refer to them as *kinetic places*.

4.2.2 Laptop Use in Kinetic Places

There were a number of resourceful uses of laptops in kinetic places in the home. We discussed above how Mark took the laptop outside for his friend to check email when they were playing basketball. Laptops were on occasion used for recipes in the kitchen or to check email in the bathroom. A particularly creative use was by Mareesa and Carlo – if their baby daughter had fallen asleep in the car on the way home, Carlo sometimes brought the laptop out to Mareesa so she could sit in the car in the driveway and use the Internet while supervising the child's nap. Mareesa sometimes also brought the laptop to the child's bedroom so she could be with her while she napped.

While we could emphasize the sensational and resourceful nature of these events, on the whole we felt they were much rarer than we would have expected, and that fewer participants took advantages of these opportunities than we would have expected. Further, location logging, application logging and detailed discussion revealed these events to be even more uncommon than initial discussions with participants might lead one to believe. We believe that these events are marked and tend to be disproportionately emphasized by participants because they are creative and memorable. For example, one family that talked enthusiastically about using the laptop for recipes in the kitchen turned out to use it for that purpose only once during the multiple-week study period, while another family that reported such use did not use it for that purpose at all during the study period.

These events are informative not only because participants are highly interested in them but also because stories about them tend to be accompanied by revealing descriptions of why using the laptop in a given location is troublesome. In fact, most of the factors described in Section 4.1 seem to discourage the use of laptop in kinetic places in the home. Although laptops may require less infrastructure for short-term tasks than for long-term tasks, lack of items in the assemblage was still often an issue. Participants were often reluctant to use laptops without power or a mouse. Further, lack of an adequate place to put a laptop was a barrier – laptops are plainly difficult to use while standing up and are even more difficult to operate while walking or doing other physical activities. Kinetic places in the home are many and varied, so laptops were often not at hand, and it was rarely worth the trouble to detach from power and

peripherals and move the laptop. Concerns about breakage also made it less likely that the laptop would be brought to more active areas in the home. Desire for a “break” from the laptop also sometimes limited its movement in the home.

4.2.3 Laptop Use in Favored Places

In general, participants had a small number of favored places where they spent extended periods of time during waking hours in the home, and laptops were used in most of these places. In fact, we can see that most of the factors described in Section 4.1 presage the use of laptops in these favored places. We discuss the relevance of these factors in turn. First, laptops are part of an *assemblage* and they require a place for that assemblage. Favored places include habitats that have horizontal surfaces for books, projects, or food and often other desirable infrastructure such as power outlets to facilitate the use of other objects such as lamps. It is natural to extend these locations to incorporate items such as speakers, mice, or power adapters, and in fact the assemblage is often visible even when the laptop is not currently there.

Second, laptops are more likely to be used when they are *at hand*. The laptop is more likely to be at hand in favored places, simply because people spend a large amount of time in a small number of favored places and the laptop tends to be in one of those places (which is of course a self-reinforcing phenomenon). Further, visits to favored places tend to be longer than visits to kinetic places, and costs associated with settling in with a laptop, such as connecting the power supply and organizing supporting materials, are more acceptable in longer-stay than in shorter-stay spots. Additionally, laptops may be kept at hand but not used continuously, particularly in the comfortable places described below. For example, a laptop may be set aside and then picked up during commercials or when conversation prompts use. This type of intermittent use matches well with the use of other objects in favored places – many objects in favored places are kept at hand but not used continuously. Laptops fit well with the scale and treatment of these other objects: laptops can be stacked and tidied with magazines or papers, remotes can be put on top of them, or laptops can be removed entirely if the room is cleared of clutter in anticipation of visitors.

Third, laptops are perceived as “*fragile*.” Favored places tend to be in “safe” locations in the home – locations where objects like books, furniture, and the human body itself are less likely to be damaged. Laptops fit comfortably into these environments. In fact, the laptop has some relationship to the human body in terms of nurturance needs. The laptop needs some of the same things as the human body on a somewhat similar time scale: it needs fuel on a multi-hour time cycle; it does not perform well in direct sunlight (the laptop screen is not very usable in bright light, and people have an aversion to sitting in direct sunlight, for example moving out of their favored places or adjusting the blinds if direct sunlight hits); and the body and the laptop both seem attracted to soft seating – given concerns about bumping the laptop, it is in some senses easier to place it rather carelessly on a soft surface than to place it carefully on a hard surface so that it does not bump, and we saw many laptops “sitting” on a couch or an ottoman rather than a coffee table. Therefore, it is somewhat natural that the laptop would be compatible with existing places for sitting.

Fourth, recall that people sometimes wanted a “*break*” from their laptops. In some senses, putting laptops in favored places seems to work against this, since for example they enable people to frequently check email from the couch. Laptops do however

have some nice affordances for boundaries, e.g., it is highly significant that laptops can be closed, turned off, or put in their bag by the front door.

Fifth, recall that laptops are *drawn to activity*. As we discussed above, some of the situations in which laptops can be useful do not occur in favored places – but many do. Additionally, the habitat in favored places often includes a television, books, and other resources compatible with laptop activity.

4.2.4 Change on a Multi-week and Multi-month Time Scale

Although the number of places in which participants routinely used laptops was fairly limited, we would like to emphasize that the participants' ability to choose these places was significant. This choice was exercised with some frequency. There was naturally some variation from day to day. But even more importantly, we learned that the use of space and laptops within space was highly contingent on routines that change on a multiple-week or even multi-month time scale. Use of favored places and laptops was highly sensitive to current routines and projects. Seemingly small changes such as a difference in a child's nap schedule, a change in the weather, or a new project assignment at work could greatly perturb the system, meaning for example that laptop use ceased entirely in one location and began in another.

4.3 Types of Favored Places

In the previous subsections, we presented factors that influenced location of laptop use, and we discussed how these factors interacted with where people spent time and used laptops in the home. In this subsection, we focus in more detail on the primary sites of laptop use in our participants' homes: favored places. (While space constraints prevent a more detailed discussion of kinetic places, we note that the kinetic places were significantly more variable and idiosyncratic than the favored places.) Specifically, we discuss the characteristics and affordances of favored places. While stereotypical notions such as "dad's favorite chair" do appear to have some basis in reality, we learned that there are not simply favored places, but importantly, there are different types of favored places. We did a clustering exercise of the favored places of our participants that revealed four major clusters. These four clusters can be usefully organized into a two-by-two matrix (see Figure 1), whose axes emerged as themes in our analysis. The first axis is comfortable versus ergonomic, and the second axis is open versus closed (in United States homes, this axis is strongly correlated with public and private spaces in the home). We discuss each axis in turn.

Comfortable places are (not surprisingly) most strongly characterized by comfortable seating – usually a sofa, but sometimes a soft chair or even a bed. Comfortable places generally support a wide range of seating positions and minor variations in location. Laptops are useful in these places, since (unlike desktops) laptops can easily be used in multiple positions. Posture can be chosen based on fatigue and task, and variation in physical position can be refreshing. Comfortable places typically have a low or small table nearby which contains resources such as a drink, a book, or a laptop computer. Comfortable places are often associated with unstructured time and support a wide range of (often interleaved) activities such as television watching, talking on the phone, socializing, reading, or computing. Computing in these locations is likely to involve more "relaxed" tasks such as web surfing, IM, or email (note that a

recent Pew Internet Report discusses a dramatic increase in the number of people using the internet “for fun,” going online “for no particular reason” [8]).⁴ Most comfortable places were associated with use of a laptop, although a small number were associated with only a television.



Fig. 1. The four types of favored places. These are the locations in which laptops were most commonly used in the home, arranged as to whether they are *Comfortable* or *Ergonomic* and are in the *Open* or *Closed* areas of the home. *Comfortable-Open*: Sam likes to watch TV and work on his laptop. His wife Katherine works on her laptop at the dining table nearby. *Comfortable-Closed*: Gaby finds a comfortable position to use the laptop on the bed. *Ergonomic-Open*: Jack and Margaret’s dining table doubles as a desk. While Margaret works at the desk, Jack works at the couch nearby. Sometimes they switch places. *Ergonomic-Closed*: Kumar likes to work in the home office for privacy while his young children play elsewhere.

By contrast with comfortable places, ergonomic places are characterized by upright chairs positioned in front of tables or desks. The positions of both people and laptops are more static in ergonomic places than in comfortable places. Ergonomic places are often associated with focused computing tasks and/or tasks that involve using a mouse or spreading out papers or books on a horizontal surface. Ergonomic places seemed to be associated with a higher level of mental activation or alertness for some participants. All the ergonomic places we observed were associated with the use of either a laptop or a desktop (and all the desktop computers we saw were in ergonomic places).

⁴ One might expect clear patterns would emerge overall regarding which tasks occur in which locations, for example, that task would dictate location. However, numerous confounding factors such as fatigue influenced the location at which a given task would occur, and participants often appeared to move fluidly among tasks while in a given location. As a result, the relationship between task and location appears to be less straightforward than one might imagine. We believe this complex interaction is a rich area for further investigation.

Table 1. The four types of favored places used during waking hours

<i>Type</i>	<i>Comfortable-Open</i>	<i>Comfortable-Closed</i>	<i>Ergonomic-Open</i>	<i>Ergonomic-Closed</i>
<i>Canonical example</i>	Family room couch	Bed with view of TV	Informal dining table	Desk in home office
<i>Occurrence</i>	Very common	Less common	Common	Common
<i>Seating</i>	Couch / soft chair	Bed / soft chair	Upright chair	Upright chair
<i>Seating positions</i>	Multiple	Multiple	Single	Single
<i>Horizontal surfaces</i>	Coffee / side table	Nightstand	Table at desk height	Desk
<i>Task</i>	Focused or not focused	Focused or not focused	Somewhat focused, primarily computing	Focused, primarily computing
<i>Location in home</i>	Central	Not central	Central	Not central
<i>Openness</i>	Open, spacious	Confined	Open, spacious	Confined
<i>Visual properties</i>	Good view and light	Lesser view or light	Good view and light	Lesser view or light
<i>Media</i>	View and control of entertainment center	Smaller TV	Often has view of entertainment center	Usually no TV
<i>Facing</i>	Outward facing	Outward facing	Outward facing	Facing wall
<i>Clutter</i>	Useful to tidy	Useful to tidy	Useful to tidy	May stay cluttered
<i>Computing Device</i>	Laptop	Laptop	Laptop	Laptop / desktop

Open places are centrally located in the public, central spaces in the home, such as the family room or the dining room in an open plan home, or even the occasional spot outside. They often take advantage of the best views and light the home has to offer. Open places offer proximity to social activity in the home, and seating in these areas generally faces the room and/or other people. These places typically have a good view of the entertainment center (including items such as the TV, gaming station, and stereo). Laptops are useful in these areas because, unlike desktops, laptops lend themselves naturally to positions facing outward – toward the room, companions, the view, or the TV. Further, these areas are usually in the “front-stage” of the home, so it is often desirable to tidy them. Laptops are particularly desirable in these areas relative to desktops, because laptops can be easily tidied or removed entirely. For example, laptops can be taken out of the living room and hidden away in another room during a party, or they can be cleared off the table for dinner.

By contrast with open places, closed places are in less central areas of the home – typically home offices or bedrooms. These areas are more confined and offer more privacy than the open areas. Here privacy often means audio isolation – one might go to one’s room to watch TV or talk on the phone without disturbing others, or conversely one might go to one’s room to read or compute without being disturbed by TV watching or social activity taking place in the open areas of the home. Additionally, because they were more confined, ergonomic-closed places offered the advantage that projects in them could be left spread out, while configurations of objects often needed to be tidied up in ergonomic-open places.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the four types of favored places. While the patterns are strong, naturally there is some variation so the table captures canonical types rather than exact rules. Figure 1 shows examples of each type of place.

Unlike Oswald, who observed that elders had a single favored place [22], we found that individuals have an ecology of favored places suited to different needs – each of our participants typically had a set of favored places of different types. For example, one common pattern was to have a comfortable-open place paired with an ergonomic-open place, while another was to have a comfortable-open place paired with an ergonomic-closed place. Some participants also mentioned moving to different places because they found it “refreshing” or because it helped keep them awake.

Anne: Yeah, I’ll use my laptop in here [at the kitchen table] sometimes if I want to be like sitting up or just kind of have a change of scenery. I’ll sit in here, kind of face out if it’s a nice day.

Favored places had clear owners, although use was of course coordinated and sometimes even shared. More common than sharing was complementary use of favored places, for example a husband’s place on the couch and a wife’s place at a table nearby, both used together in the evening.

5 Discussion

Participants had a set of favored places where they spent time at home – places that offered different physical, social, and sensory experiences, and the laptop was accommodated in all of these. Laptops moved with some regularity among favored places, and also occasionally to other locations in the home, or to external locations such as work. Because of this flexibility, the laptop (especially when wireless) brings computing into the home in a way the desktop does not. Laptops are positioned and re-positioned in key locations, from the most public to the most private, interleaved and integrated with ongoing activity – in a given day, a laptop may be used in the living room at the hub of social activity and then in bed before falling asleep.

In some senses one could argue that the wireless laptop is a triumph – successfully used in a variety of situations in the home. However, we believe this would be an overly simple characterization. There are significant frustrations and lost opportunities, both at favored places and at kinetic places in the home. Accordingly, we now turn to a discussion of design opportunities in these places, highlighting how the consideration of different classes of place in the home could inform the design of new objects more tightly integrated with different aspects of the domestic ecology.

While laptops were satisfactory in all four types of favored places, they were notably optimal for none of them. In its current form, the laptop is a compromise object. For example, it is not an ideal object for comfortable places, and frustrations often arose regarding body and laptop position. Keyboards can be awkward to use when lying on one’s side, the screen can be difficult to see from an oblique angle, and laptops emit heat and can be too hot to place in one’s lap.

Accordingly, we believe that it is an important challenge to develop technology and infrastructure that is customizable to each of the different types of favored places. We believe that our findings about the nature of favored places and the way in which

they are used can serve as useful constraints for evaluating different models that might be proposed for such customization (and that they have more general application in the ongoing debate between device convergence and appliance design). Some of the key observations are: (1) people typically had a set of two or three favored places; (2) favored places offer different experiences and have different characteristics; (3) comfortable places involve varied posture; (4) a given place may be used for a wide range of tasks from lightweight surfing to “serious” work; and (5) the location or use of favored places may vary due to changes in routine.

As an example of how the constraints can be used to reason about different classes of design solutions, our finding about changes in routine suggests that it is unrealistic to build-in technology or carefully instrument the home at a set of pre-designated places. Portable technologies seem more appropriate than built-in technology for favored places. Further, we would suggest that the most compelling designs involve objects that are not simply *portable* but are *reconfigurable* as well. For example, devices with keyboards and screens that expand from a smaller object would fit well with people’s existing patterns. Note that design of reconfigurable objects in the surrounding habitat is also important. Figure 2 shows two examples of participants who creatively and dynamically reconfigure their comfortable places to add ergonomic elements. Many effective design solutions may lie not only in the design of the technology itself, but also in the design of furniture to better support the technology.

Although the laptop is becoming part of the fabric of daily life in favored places, barriers frequently prevent the laptop from being used in compelling circumstances in kinetic places. Kinetic places have very different characteristics than favored places – they lend themselves well to robust devices that are free of attachments and possibly include hands-free or single-handed interfaces. For example, built-in displays, voice UIs, or smaller appliance devices may be appropriate in these locations.

As a final observation, our findings in some senses argue against the notion of fully ubiquitous access in the home. People sometimes wanted distance between themselves and technology, for example creating technology-free zones or lamenting the intrusion of technology into certain spaces. It is an interesting design challenge to try to resolve the apparent paradox between the notion of having computing “everywhere” and maintaining boundaries.



Fig. 2. Left: Part of Tony’s coffee table “pops up” to become a tray for the laptop. Right: Gaby works at nesting ottomans. She puts the laptop and mouse on top of one ottoman, pushes out a second with her feet, and props her legs on a third.

6 Conclusions and Future Work

We have presented the results of a study of people's use of space and wireless laptops in the home. We have examined the relationship between where people spend time and their use of computing devices. Participants each had a small set of favored places in the home. Wireless laptops were routinely used in almost all of those places, and we have identified factors that promote their use in these locations. Wireless laptops were used much less routinely in other areas of the home, and we have identified barriers to their use in these places. We have discussed the relevance of these findings to new technologies and form factors.

There are many excellent opportunities for future work, including issues such as the complex interaction between task and location, moment-by-moment analysis of what occasions relocation from one place to another, the impact of fatigue on the use of space and devices, collaborative versus individual use of devices, the use of ensembles of devices [26] with different form factors (e.g., cell phones, BlackBerries, iPods, laptops) in different locations in the home, and extending the findings to encompass multi-cultural issues.

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