

Winner of the 'ITRA - BTHA Prize for outstanding toy research'
Student Research Prize

Hyun-Jung Oh. The phenomenon of dolls' houses: Putting together memories and fantasies. MA thesis, Anthropology, material & visual culture, at University College London.

Dolls' houses and miniatures have emerged as a popular hobby among Western adults in the past three decades. Originating in the sixteenth century mercantile region of Southern Germany, dolls' houses flourished in the Netherlands, England and America in line with the development of modern capitalism over four centuries. Throughout their long history, dolls' houses served as a symbol of wealth and taste in the aristocracy and middle classes. In addition, their educational function for girls should not be ruled out. The revival of dolls' houses as a grown-up's hobby tends to reflect the socially imbued longing for nostalgia. Particularly, adult women are likely to miniaturize an ideal residence as an objectification of childhood memory or fantasized history.

Dolls' house activities, such as collecting and crafting, allow adult women to employ their knowledge of social history, creativity and lifetime's skills in putting together memories and fantasies. Moreover, as children play with small objects such as toy cars and toy tea sets according to their body size, some elderly people who are physically challenged tend to satisfy their love of homebuilding in a miniaturised artefactual world.

In the modern day, dolls' houses are enjoyed by many people regardless of age and gender, though older women dominate the miniature hobby scene. Different from their predecessors, women in their later life are likely to objectify the memory or imagination of childhood or ancestry. Thus, Tudor, Victorian or 1940s styles are favoured.

Today's hobbyists show diverse patterns in engaging with dolls' houses as collectors, makers or players. While some wealthy people collect expensive miniature pieces, others make them by employing their lifetimes' craft skills. However, the underlying premise of hobbyists of different categories is the activity of putting together an idyllic residential scene comprising a number of objects. In old-fashioned objects older women feel the warmth of the past, contrary to the coldness of contemporary things. Given most elderly people live apart from their children, the warmth of home is well presented in the presence of dolls and objects conjuring up the sense of interactivity.

Handling small objects tends to require great attention to objects and consequently bodily movement and senses. This might detach one from the surrounding world and its troubles. People in hardship would find something to lose themselves in, and they gain the sense of control over the world of objects which is manipulable and protected from the outside world.