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The goal of this thesis was to create a unique design process, specifically intended for the production of nostalgic domestic interior products. Nostalgia has been studied for hundreds of years and was once believed to be a disease or illness of the mind (Routledge 2015), however more recent studies show nostalgia to be a positive reaction to sentimental longing for the past (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018). Though the final interior products alone may not invoke a pure nostalgic response from its' viewers, the ultimate goal of this thesis was to create a process in which physical elements of nostalgia could be filtered through and condensed into an equation that outputs fresh product design.

This design process has been informed by the publics' understanding of personal nostalgia within their own homes. This information was gathered through surveying, which consisted of 100 participants. These participants supplied image references of nostalgic items within their home, which I have used to assemble a list of physical properties that characterize nostalgia. Out of all the physical properties mentioned on the survey – texture, function, pattern, color, and material – function was the most popular selection when asked what characteristic gave their referenced object nostalgic value. Among analyzing each referenced object, wood was the most reoccurring material at 34% of entries. Metal was the next most common material at 21%, with plastic and glass both occurring in 10% of entries. With this information, I concluded the best material to work with for product composition was wood.

Participants were also asked where their referenced object was located in the home. The living room was the most common at 37% of entries, the kitchen was runner-up at 21%, and the bedroom was the third most surveyed at 17% (see Appendix B). In totality, two objects were designed and created to demonstrate evidence of the working design process: a bar cabinet and a nightstand

DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE FROM THE PAST: A MODERN DEMONSTRATION OF  
NOSTALGIA THROUGH DOMESTIC INTERIOR PRODUCT DESIGN

by

Ashley R. Skinner

A Thesis

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the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

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Approved by

---

Matthew Jones  
Committee Chair



APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The interior design field constantly evolves and adapts to new ideas, much like the cultural interpretation of nostalgia, a psychological experience. By combining design and nostalgia to develop a new product, the user will have not only aesthetic value in the object, but also sentimental value. The main goal of this thesis is to create an innovative design process using nostalgia as an element of design and produce interior products using this design process. Before this concept takes form, several components need to be defined, starting with the history of nostalgia.

## CHAPTER II: NOSTALGIA

The existence of nostalgia as a positive psychological experience is relatively new. Nostalgia has been studied for hundreds of years and was once believed to be a disease or illness of the mind. This introduced negative connotations to the idea that nostalgia was a depressive response to longing for the past (Routledge 2015). More recent studies reveal the power and influence this psychological response has on consumers. Sentimental value can exist within anything that involves a past interaction. Sentimentality and nostalgia are often used interchangeably and may define each other when referencing emotions and feelings. This emotional response is one that people typically appreciate and encourages users to own products that evoke reminiscence of the past (Routledge 2015). A product that contains nostalgic information can yield a positive reaction and generate a personal connection. For this reason, my focus has been placed on the design process of modern domestic interior products with the goal of developing nostalgia as an element of design.

Nostalgia, as previously mentioned, was believed by Johanness Hofer, a Swiss medical student, to have been an illness or disease that caused physical and psychological distress (Routledge 2015). In 1688, Hofer coined the term nostalgia related to the pain experienced by Swiss soldiers who developed symptoms of longing for a return to their home. As described by Routledge, these symptoms included insomnia, anxiety, eating disorders, weakness, and fever. Though nostalgia was viewed as an illness, physicians could not locate a genuine bodily disease, which meant no actual physical suffering was taking place. Charles Darwin then announced his view of nostalgia as a feeling that people enjoy (Routledge 2015). The only time nostalgia could be considered a negative emotion is when one experiences excess pity or trauma from the past. However, this experience could be more relative to the term memory, a subjective occurrence. Aside from the history of nostalgia, the current definition of the word relates to a psychological experience of mostly positive remembrance – the action of

recollection (Boym 2007) – and sentimental longing for the past (Sedikides & Wildschut 2018). Independent variables of nostalgia include age, region, and culture. The average emotional response to physical objects changes as these elements change.

For this thesis, nostalgia needs to be soundly defined. The word nostalgia is often understood as being an experience of *memory*, defined by psychologists as being retained information from specific experiences of the past (Squire 2009). Designing for a broad range of viewers using memory as a design element would be impossible since there is no way to define everyone's personal experiences from the past as a general recollection. According to The New Oxford American Dictionary, remembrance pertains to the psychological act of recalling the past, not specific moments and experiences. *Remembrance* is a far more approachable term for this thesis when defining a nostalgic experience. For this reason and the intent of this thesis, my definition of nostalgia is the sentimental remembrance of the past.

### **Defining Design Process**

The design process for most products starts with identifying an existing problem within the scope, whether it be large or small. Concepts for solutions are then formed from this research and fleshed out through prototyping (Morris 2016). The specific design process involved in any product design will always vary depending on the problem and variables. With furniture design, the variables can range from ergonomics to function and style with furniture design, though some variables are constantly interchanging between different products. Considering this, the independent variable in the design process is the consumer-related or common issue, and the dependent variable will always be the product developed. Understanding existing issues surrounding a product's design will ultimately guide the new design process towards a more refined product outcome

In this case, the problem was converting the psychological experience of nostalgia into a physical element to be used in a new design process. This level of innovation is required to help

the home furnishings industry survive amongst the consumer's constantly changing styles and preferences. Furniture design can often feel like reinventing the wheel. In my experience, many manufacturers look at past seasons for new design inspiration. This causes new designs to have repeated elements from the previous season, and these designs often lack innovation and uniqueness. Adopting a different design process could assist in the creation of new and fresh ideas.

## CHAPTER III: THE WHY

Before reviewing my thesis timeline, a few critical questions have to be answered. One of the most relevant questions that could arise from this topic is “Why nostalgia?”. Why is this the topic of conversation for creating an innovative design process? Simply put, I chose the topic of nostalgia because it means something to me. This topic carries personal value at a high level, allowing me to remain focused on it for the remainder of my educational career and beyond. I find it hard to let go of items from my childhood, I reminisce on my past, and I can be pretty sentimental. Even while receiving my Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree, I found myself latching onto the topic of sentimental value any chance that appeared. Some would call me emotional, but I would say I value the passing of time more than most people do. Because living in the past is irrational, I decided to turn my values into something that would benefit my career, my life, and ultimately my future in the furniture design industry.

This forms a secondary question; why combine furniture design and nostalgia? The furniture industry is constantly changing. It is a moving target for designers since consumers’ styles and preferences update often. Furniture manufacturers need to develop new furniture collections every season to stay relevant and remain successful. Using nostalgia as an element of design in a furniture design process would open doors for more innovation within the field. Adding sentimental value to new designs creates a personal value for the end-user. With an added personal significance, the new product will likely outlast its non-sentimental counterparts, even if it requires more maintenance for the product's longevity. It is probable that someone will retain an object with sentimental value over mass-produced, kit furniture with no personal ties.

Finally, what outcomes are intended to originate from this thesis? After graduation, I will be working for Universal Furniture, a large home furnishings company that works with high profile individuals. Some of their most recent collaborations feature Miranda Kerr, Nina Magon, and Erinn Valencich. Being able to discover new and innovative design is necessary for a



furniture company to remain relevant and successful. Part of my role within Universal Furniture is to make sure this happens by producing novel designs and ideas. This newly developed skill of transforming an emotional response into an element of design gives me the research and development experience to continue this process within my career. Some of this experience includes research through public surveys, visual analysis, and product engineering. I feel as though I have an advantage within my field because I have learned to think outside of the box and create new designs using non-tangible elements as a design concept foundation. My background in art also reinforces this newly developed skill. I received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture and Ceramics. This education exposed me to materials and experiences I had never explored on my own, including turning concepts into dimensional objects. I originally came into the program with some drawing and painting familiarity, but started working with other materials that led to welding, metal-casting, clay modeling, and woodworking. These skills and experiences aided in culminating my overall understanding of design.

## CHAPTER IV: THE PROCESS

Before beginning my design process, I need to verify its criteria. The process must include a research phase, a design phase, and the fabrication of a product, all while referencing public and personal nostalgia. These references include visual elements of the survey responses, like material and style and my clarification of nostalgia as previously defined. The functionality of the final product is the main contributor to the criteria and the material. It is likely that my personal nostalgia may be introduced through experience and material during the design phase. It was mentioned that nostalgia would be an element of design within the process, but how would this be measured? Because I intend to create an approach using the public's input on nostalgic elements, I have to detach myself from the visual analysis of the survey and focus more on what elements carry a visual relationship to nostalgia. There are no defined criteria for the visual elements of nostalgia, as this cannot be determined until the final product is produced and analyzed. The goal of this thesis remains to create this design process with nostalgia as a point of reference and design, though nostalgia as an emotional response is not a requirement of the final product.

Research is one of the first steps to a successful design process. Without research, the outcome is uninformed and may not benefit the consumer. Often, research will continue throughout the design process along with documentation (Jeffery Bardzell, Shaowen Bardzell, Dalsgaard, Gross & Halskov 2016). In Spring 2021, my topic was decided, and I began researching. I explored artists, furniture designers, joinery methods, and different styles. I analyzed my findings for methods by which I could start designing. I considered various materials, styles, quality and even researched the design processes of the artists and makers I had explored. Often, the artists I studied worked from personal references, surveying the public, or commission-based requests. This led to the next phase of my research – a single survey, only distributed to a small portion of the public. There was only one question, and it was to the

point; “What in your kitchen is nostalgic to you?” An image of this object was asked to be included in the response. From these responses, I started analyzing image submissions and forming design element conclusions. This was the beginning of what would be called “The Candleholder Project,” a series of explorations and experimentations through the design of light sources.

Here is where my research continued. I would research, sketch several pages of concepts, experiment with an idea, and repeat this process. I ultimately settled with two wall sconces; both using kerf cuts to create curvilinear forms with solid material – in this case, wood. I was unsure if the final design elements would result from this phase, as this was my opportunity to familiarize myself with product design. It was proven incredibly successful as this is where the kerf texture shown on the final designs was initially introduced. At the time, I did not expect this element to appear in future designs. I was more concerned about testing material strengths, weaknesses, and abilities. Wood and the tools and techniques to use with it were accessible, which is why I chose to test this material in the Spring 2021 design phases. I began by making cardboard models from the concepts I had sketched, with the intent of testing scale, proportion, and functionality. Once I had determined which models were most successful, I began testing the designs with wood. This is where the kerf cuts were introduced into the design process. Cutting grooves on both sides of the wood made it flexible and allowed me to shape the wood to replicate the curvilinear models. This design process proved successful as two LED sconces were produced from this method.

Over the summer of 2021, I completed an internship with Universal Furniture, which ultimately resulted in a job offer as a product development coordinator. This internship provided me with vital information to my design process and how I completed each phase. I witnessed Universal’s design process from start to finish as they were working on completing a new collection for the Fall market. This meant experiencing all of the setbacks that came with the process. Like most furniture manufacturers, Universal starts by drawing inspiration from an

existing product, similar to my first research phase in Spring 2021. From there, they begin designing furniture. This is where I drew the most inspiration as I continued developing my design process. Universal starts with dozens of furniture sketches, expecting that most of the pieces will be dropped before they begin sample production. However, their production phase is not similar to mine as they have resources that allow for samples to be made without much involvement in the building process. The only issues typically resolved in their production phase relate to finishes and textures. Those details must be decided upon before production launches in order to minimize the chance of market sample errors.

Following my internship, I kicked off my second research phase. This time a more extensive, more detailed survey was taken by 100 participants, which provided me with the evidence I needed to continue the design process. Images of nostalgic household objects were provided to be visually analyzed for conclusive design elements that could further validate my design choices. This is where I drew my design criteria. I knew the final product would carry out a function due to the high volume of responses related to characteristics of nostalgia (See Appendix B). 37% of participants claimed the function of their chosen object is what gave it nostalgic value. At this point, I also decided to use wood as the predominant material due to my experience and confirmation from the survey responses. Style-wise, I knew the final pieces would maintain a more modern aesthetic, primarily due to the goal of creating an innovative process. Innovativeness requires fresh ideas, which mostly fall into the canons of modernity. Following this research, I began my design phase.

Among the questions found in the survey, participants were asked to provide an image of a nostalgic object within their home and provide where the object was located within the home (See Appendix A). Of 100 participants, the most common location was the living room at 37%. The kitchen was the next most popular at 21%, and the bedroom was the third most surveyed at 17% of entries. I believe these common locations directly relate to the amount of time the average person spends within each of these rooms. In hindsight, it may have been

valuable to ask participants where they spend the most time in their home, aside from sleeping hours, as this time is spent unconsciously.

In the Fall of 2021, I further developed the design process by producing dozens of sketches of household products, similar to that of Universal's design process, but informed by the detailed survey. These objects included clocks, chests, side tables, and even coat racks. Though I would have loved to make each of these products come to life, I had to choose products that I could fabricate with quality while keeping the design in mind. Due to my limited knowledge and experience in furniture making, I was well aware of the time commitment needed for me to bring a product to completion and to do it well. This encouraged me to look further into the survey responses and make educated design decisions to narrow down which pieces would be most impactful.

These findings were partly why the bar cabinet and nightstand came to fruition. I chose these two pieces based on their polling locations and their potential impact. Because the kitchen and living room are often tied together within residential spaces, I chose to highlight the bedroom as a method to create visual distance within the small collection I would be producing. I additionally decided on these pieces due to their proportions. The bar cabinet allowed me to work at a more impressive scale, while the nightstand allowed me to focus further on details and corrections.

I have far more experience working with wood than any other common furniture material, which was the most significant motive for choosing wood. Among my findings, wood was the highest repeated material at 34% of entries. This finding further validated the use of wood as the predominant material for product composition. I included my sentimental value by sourcing wood from my step-grandfather, a phenomenal woodworker himself who has made incredible grandfather clocks from black walnut. He has since retired from woodworking but has thousands of board feet of oak, cedar, black walnut, and pine. The wood used in the final production of my pieces would be black walnut, air-dried for over 15 years. I chose this particular species for its

beautiful grain pattern, color, and to give continued life to the wood that was no longer yielding grandfather clocks.

These pieces were designed at 90% completeness before I chose to continue with them. Many of the decided design elements originated from the surveys; however, most decisions were made as the product was being developed. The cradle-like legs were designed to add a sense of weightlessness to the otherwise blocky cases. Initially, the legs were one-inch dowels; however, through some testing and experimentation, it was realized that more stability would be needed to support the pieces. The leg height was not as important of a requirement with the nightstand since the bottom shelf is open to the back. The shorter leg height provided enough lift and weightlessness to counter the single drawer. The bar cabinet needed taller legs due to the function of the piece, as well as to counter the visual weight of the case. The curvilinear face frame was an addition to breaking up the rectilinear momentum. To further enhance these curves and the wood grain, the kerf texture from Spring 2021 was reintroduced on the drawer and door faces. Though initially used to create flexibility with wood, the kerf pattern was now used to enhance the visual design. The pattern was also used to move the eye upwards due to the piece being slightly taller than the average eye level. I chose to add a linear kerf pattern to the drawer face of the nightstand to continue to highlight the natural wood grain and further relate the two pieces as part of the same collection.

The final two materials that were introduced were brass and glass. Initially, glass was looked at as a method to add more texture to the pieces. Crystalware was a common submission in the final survey, so I was drawn to the idea of using similar faceted surfaces within the final pieces. Ultimately, I was unable to source high detail glass cutting. Plexiglass was briefly looked at to receive the same amount of detail, but doing so with the CNC on campus. This seemed like a great alternative until I began analyzing the finishing stages. The CNC would leave a rough, frosted finish, which would be difficult to remove. The quality of cut acrylic would not have the same perceived quality of cut glass. Glass remains to be a higher

quality material, so design decisions continued forward to keep the quality of the final pieces up to the highest standard. I reviewed my previous analyzations of texture and found the crystal facets were of lower importance in my initial drawings. The kerf grooves in the wood outweighed the facets visually, and both textures appeared to not work well together on a single piece. This is where I compromised with the material and chose a flat glass top for the nightstand. This added an alternative material while including durability, longevity, and ease of cleaning to a surface that would be regularly used.

Brass was chosen as the hardware finish for its visual compatibility with black walnut. The warm tone of brass complemented the natural walnut while adding an element of modernity. The process of choosing hardware for both final pieces was reasonably challenging. I wanted the hardware to add to the final design and not be an element existing separately from the overall style. I had designed the hardware shape in the Fall of 2021, and I was determined to find something similar. Ultimately, I sourced aluminum drawer pulls with the correct shape, and was able to paint them with a brass finish to match the preliminary design. To finalize the material selection decisions, metal and glass were the second and third most repeated materials from visual analysis of the images received through the survey. This finding, much like the wood, further validated my choices for final material use.

## CHAPTER V: RESULTS

Nostalgia can be very personal, so expecting a nostalgic response from every viewer would be unreasonable. Not everyone has the same sentimental values, which is why the goal of this thesis wasn't to invoke that response. If the reaction occurs, this would undoubtedly add to the success of my design process. Nostalgia can be identified in the final product through its visual elements. Because the furniture design was informed by the public's personal nostalgic references, it appears as though some of the repeated styles among submissions have been presented through the final product. Blog post from Leon and George "La Residence" defines mid-century characteristics as neutral, geometric, minimalist, and valuing function over form. These same characteristics are evident in pre-design research gathered through surveys. The question that drew out those elements is, "what makes an object nostalgic?". With that being said, it appears as though mid-century style aligns best with nostalgic design elements.

### **Mid-Century Modern Involvement**

Mid-century Modern is a broad term used to describe the architecture, furniture, and design from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Fenton 2015). This movement began with the more extensive modernist movement post World War I. I can conclude that nostalgia may have indirect ties to a modernist movement. The Modernist movement originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century (Fenton 2015) and has carried through decades of changing styles and preferences while remaining relevant in today's market. Even now, in 2022, furniture designers and manufacturers still appeal to a large group of mid-century enthusiasts with their minimalist designs. Clean lines, rich wood tones, functionality, and simplicity rather than ornateness are all characteristics that can be pulled from my final product. These same visual elements are also common in the Mid-century Modern style (Lyon 2022). Due to these same stylistic elements reappearing over the decades and within my design process, it leads me to believe that a large group of people have sentimental value in objects from the modernist movement. All of this



information leads me to conclude that the mid-century style itself also carries nostalgic value. Since my pieces have modernist elements, this furthers the validity that my design process carries visual elements of nostalgia.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

What would I do differently after going through this process? Most importantly, I would ask more specific questions in the survey to further identify physical elements of nostalgic items. Though I gained results during my visual analysis, it would be interesting to see what the survey participants thought about the materials they chose to emphasize. I would also be interested in asking questions about their location within the United States, as most participants were likely from the Southern region of the US.

In conclusion, the goal of this thesis was to compose a design process using nostalgia as an element of design. Out of dozens of sketches and unresolved thoughts, a bar cabinet and nightstand came to fruition as a sign of success. These two pieces flaunt a balance of airiness and heaviness with the support of curvilinear and linear forms. The use of nostalgia in this design process has taken visual elements from the past and reconfigured them into a modern-day aesthetic. This aesthetic includes carved texture, natural wood tones, and gentle front-facing curves. With opposing experience, alternative survey data, and a different creator's nostalgia, the outcome would likely look very different than what I have created. Pulling physical elements from the research of a non-physical concept is a unique method to use in a design process. Over time, this process will evolve as the common values of nostalgia change. It makes me wonder what this process would have looked like before the modernist movement, and what it may look like another 50 years from now. This process will also change as my knowledge and experience with woodworking expands. In years to come, I expect to have more understanding of the furniture industry, greater proficiency in woodworking, and would possibly have a new approach to research and analysis. This leads me to believe that my own experience is a design process variable that evolves over time, therefore changing the outcome. With this conclusion, I am assured of my advantages within the furniture design field. The

confidence to offer design suggestions using innovative concepts allows me to put myself in scenarios to advance my career.

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APPENDIX A: PUBLIC SURVEY

Nostalgia in Residential Spaces: Survey

Nostalgia

\*Consent Form

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Project Title: Nostalgia in Residential Spaces

Principal Investigator: Ashley Skinner

Faculty Advisor: Matthew Jones

I am asking you to participate in this research study because I am gathering data to help inform my thesis research and intended goals. This research project will only take about five minutes and will involve you answering a total of six questions, four of which pertain to data collection. Your participation in this research project is voluntary.

No, other than the time you spend on this project there are no know or foreseeable risks involved with this study.

You and/or society will or might have access to new design elements surrounding the development of interior product.

You will not be compensated. There will be a drawing for a chance to win one of three gift cards.

---

We will do everything possible to make sure that your information is kept confidential. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. We will dispose of any email provided for the gift card drawing once the winners have been contacted. Your email will not be used in the data collection or any other part of the research process.

For Internet Research, include this wording: Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing." Alternatively, add security statement from commercial survey tool used for the study.

You do not have to be part of this project. This project is voluntary and it is up to you to decide to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate at any time in this project, you may stop participating without penalty.

You can ask Ashley Skinner via email [arskinne@uncg.edu](mailto:arskinne@uncg.edu) or Matthew Jones via email [mbjones4@uncg.edu](mailto:mbjones4@uncg.edu) anything about the study. If you have concerns about how you have been treated in this study call the Office of Research Integrity Director at 1-855-251-2351.

- 
- Agree
  - Disagree
- 

\* What is your age? This question is anonymous and for statistical purposes only.

- 
- 18-24
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55-64
  - 65+
- 

What object in your home (kitchen, living, bedroom, office, etc.) is a symbol of nostalgia for you? Please upload a photo of that object or find an image of the object online and upload it. Examples of objects include furniture, functional products, or other interior products.

Please email image to [arskinne@uncg.edu](mailto:arskinne@uncg.edu) if image will not upload to be considered for the gift card prize.

---

Choose File

No file selected

---

\* What characteristics make this object nostalgic to you? Select all that apply.

- 
- Texture
  - Material
  - Color
  - Pattern
  - Function/Use
  - Heirloom
-

- Other (Please specify)
- 

\*What room in your home best describes where this object would be located?

---

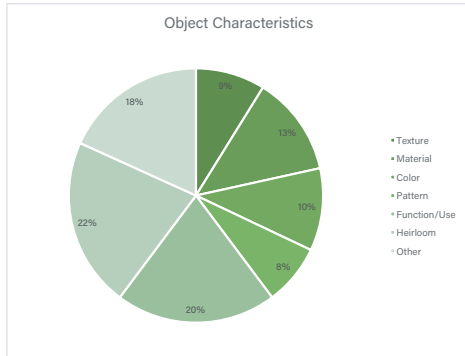
- Bedroom
  - Home Office
  - Bathroom
  - Dining Room
  - Living Room
  - Kitchen
  - Garage
  - Other (Please specify)
- 

If you would like to be entered to win one (1) of three (3) Amazon gift cards, please include your email below. Your email will only be used to contact you regarding the gift card drawing.

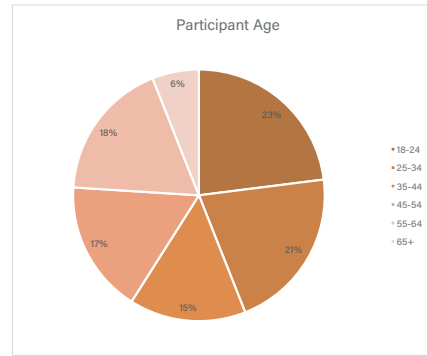
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Submit

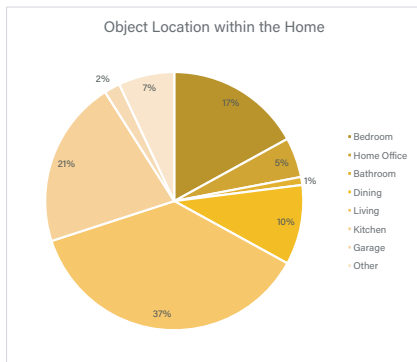
## APPENDIX B: SURVEY DATA



Characteristics	Count
Texture	16
Material	23
Color	19
Pattern	14
Function/Use	37
Heirloom	39
Other	33



Age	Count
18-24	23
25-34	21
35-44	15
45-54	17
55-64	18
65+	6



Location	Count
Bedroom	17
Home Office	5
Bathroom	1
Dining	10
Living	37
Kitchen	21
Garage	2
Other	7



APPENDIX C: DETAILED IMAGE LIBRARY

Process Images









































