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Figure 1

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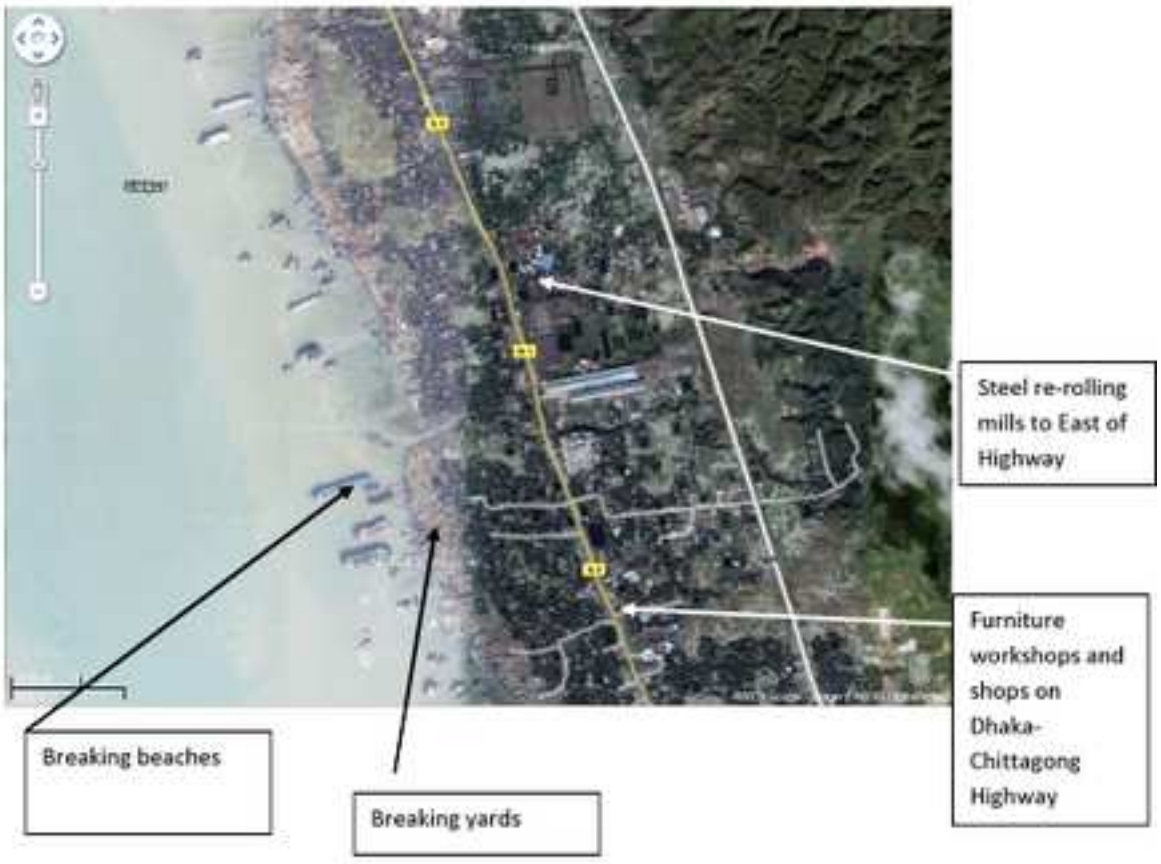

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Following things of rubbish value: end-of-life ships, 'chock-chocky' furniture and the Bangladeshi middle class consumer

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Abstract

There has been an upsurge of geographical work tracing globalised flows of commodities in the wake of Appadurai's (1986) call to 'follow the things'. This paper engages with calls to follow the thing but argues that work thus far has been concentrated, first, on global flows from developing world producers to developed world consumers, and, second, on things that remain stable as they circulate. This paper instead argues that 'follow the thing' research needs to also attend to flows 'down' the value chain, from developed to less developed worlds, and to things that are either coming apart or being disassembled. The case presented here is end-of-life ships, sent to be broken in less developed countries, as most are, in this case in Bangladesh. It looks at how the arts of transience re-work materials from rubbish value ships into new forms and objects in the household furnishing sector, which are then appropriated by Bangladeshi middle class consumers. Far from being a minor feature this is shown to be empirically a significant component of the Bangladeshi economy. Theoretically the paper challenges many habitual assumptions about global flows of commodities and urges 'follow the thing' research to rethink the thing. Paying attention to the back-end of the value chain shows that things are but temporary configurations of material. At best partially stable, things are argued to be endlessly being assembled, always becoming something else somewhere else.

Key words: 'follow the thing', waste, value chains, ships, furniture, consumption, Bangladesh

1: Introduction

At high tide at 3.30 pm on 16th December 2008 the *Al Nabila IV* - a 27000 dwt vegetable oil tanker - shudders and grinds to a halt, her keel stuck fast in the mud of the inter-tidal zone of the eastern edge of the Bay of Bengal. For the past two and a half hours she has journeyed towards this beach, travelling through a veritable 'haath' (bazaar) of merchant vessels at anchor, all of them waiting to enact the same journey. On the beach, towering over palm trees, approximately 20 - 25 other vessels, for the most part oil tankers and bulk carriers, lie in varying states of dismemberment. After decades of journeying between ports, the *Al Nabila IV* has arrived at her final resting place, Sitakunda beach near Chittagong, Bangladesh, one of the world's primary locations for ship breaking.[1] The skeleton crew - accompanied on this occasion by three Bangladeshi researchers - leaves the vessel, descending a steep ladder to a small motorised launch, which transports them to the shore. Smoke and the noise of oxyacetylene torches and hand-held hammers fill the air. Thousands of men, working for 37 ship breaking yards, are going about the task of breaking up these huge fossils, the remainder of the world's commercial shipping fleet. For the *Al Nabila IV* the immediate future will be this: first, workers will strip out all 'soft' items including furnishings, fixtures and furniture. Then other workers will climb the hull, cutting off block sections of metal to fall to the mud flats below, where they will be attached to cables by teams of workers and then winched back up the beach, to where yet more workers will cut and hammer them into smaller sections of plate metal. The plates and bars will then be loaded onto trucks by other workers, to be taken a couple of kilometres to nearby rerolling mills that provide 90% of all the steel consumed in Bangladesh. And so it will go on, for approximately five months until the *Al Nabila IV* is literally no more.

[1] Recent statistics give a clear indication of the global patterns of ship breaking, as well as their connection to the global downturn. A total of 704 commercial ships were scrapped in 2008, the majority of these in Bangladesh and India. In 2009, Clarkson Research Group reports 1,014 ships were sold for scrapping – a clear indication of the effect of recession on the global shipping fleet. The major destination points for ships destined for scrapping are India (40%), Bangladesh (21%) and China (17%), with Pakistan and Turkey being lesser players in the market (Source: Browne, 2009).

12 kilometres away in Chittagong city, fuelled by a stream of overseas remittances and the growth of an export-led garment industry, lives an urbanised and increasingly globalised Bangladeshi middle class. Demand for new urban housing has exploded in this country of 150 million people, fuelling in turn a construction boom in low rise flats and apartments alongside more traditional urban housing. Allied with the boom in construction is a burgeoning consumer culture, characterised by global fashion and a taste for modern designs and home interiors. The new homes need filling and for the Bangladeshi middle classes, as well as a few items of teak furniture that are either handed from generation to generation or bought as wedding gifts, that means domestic furniture that is increasingly modern in its design, affordable and disposable.

This paper charts the connections between these at first sight unconnected activities and trends, to look at the entanglements of end-of-life ships and middle class homes in Bangladesh. It traces the connections between ship breaking and middle class domestic interiors, looking at how the one is translated into the other in both material and aesthetic registers. To do so it begins with the literature that has thus far addressed the links between consumer culture and production activities – studies which have followed Appadurai's (1986) call to follow the things. This literature has cast light on the process of commodification and (de-)fetishisation. However, we suggest it has been limited in its reach, still dominated by what Crewe (2000, page 281) characterised as 'food, flowers, fruit and fashion'. Moreover, it has been restricted in its conceptualisation of 'following' the things, confining this to movement up the value chain to the point of acquisition by western consumers. A focus on end-of-life ships brings into relief the commodity's descent towards rubbish value (Thompson, 1979) and disposal (Gregson et al, 2007) and the extended social and economic lives of things (Kopytoff, 1986; Gregson and Crewe, 2003). Ships are both commodities in themselves and the conduits for the global flow of goods in commodity chains. They enable the movement of things up and down the value chain, in and out of the commodity phase, and between geographically differentiated value regimes. Literally, then, to 'follow the thing' through commodity chains means that research should be following ships. And if commodities have biographies and lives, then so too do the ships that transport them. Eventually, however, ships are sent to their demise, when the scrap value of their

constituent materials outweighs the costs of maintaining them. Yet following end-of-life ships to the point of their demise flags-up that ships are not just singular objects but simultaneously multiple, heterogeneous things and materials. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Sitakunda, Bhatiary and Chittagong, Bangladesh, the paper shows how the demise of end-of-life ships is marked by their morphing through two inter-connected and geographically proximate sites of translation which epitomise what Hawkins (2006) calls the arts of transience, working with the mutability of things. The destructive labour of ship breaking on a beach at Sitakunda is shown to create a range of objects and differentiated streams of material which form the basis for secondary manufacturing, craft and retail activities in Bhatiary. The resultant products are subsequently distributed through Bangladesh's major cities, homes and workplaces. Taking the domestic as our focus in this paper, we show how furniture derived from ship breaking and revalorised through secondary manufacturing, craft and retail activities is appropriated in the homes of the Bangladeshi middle classes, with an empirical focus on Chittagong. The paper concludes by posing some key challenges for research that traces commodity flows, both from within the 'follow the thing' frame and from a vital materialist perspective, and by highlighting that the material potentialities of the arts of transience are not always positive. We close the paper therefore with a bitter twist, showing that reuse, recycling and re-manufacturing can have deleterious consequences.

2: Following things – a critique

The links drawn between spatially distinctive yet temporally coincident activities linking consumers with producers are ones forged typically through approaches that are characterised as 'following the things'. Originally this approach aimed to defetishise commodities through the political project of connecting (western) consumers with unknown, unseen and unheard producers in often far away lands. That origin is clear when Ian Cook reflects on Shelley Sacks exhibition *Exchange Values*, where a gallery of banana skins exported from the Caribbean to the West was surrounded by headphones playing the stories of the producers, explaining how demands for cheap produce, powerful supermarkets and intermediaries drive down their standard of living. The power of that testimony moved him to wonder:

> ‘Suppose you went to a supermarket before opening time. Switched on the food. And could hear whispering like this. Suppose you could pick things off the shelf, put them to your ear and listen to the people who had helped to get them there talking to you. What would they say and ask?’(Cook and et al., 2006, pages 655-6)

In recent years, this approach has been applied and developed in relation to a range of commodities, including papaya, hot pepper sauce, denim jeans, fashion clothing, cut flowers, chewing gum, rubber, chicken, sugar, wine and tourist souvenirs (Cook et al, 2004; Cook and Harrison, 2007; Cook et al., 2007; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Kleine, 2008; Long and Villareal, 1999; Ramsay, 2009). Although focusing on very different products, these studies of the ‘geographical lives of commodities’ (Castree, 2001) all track back through the assembling of a pre-figured point of sale commodity and/or commodities. ‘Following’ therefore is conducted either literally along the supply chains, to the point of realisation of the commodity in its final form through acquisition at the point of sale, or is distributed over a web of supply chains connecting networks of producers, buyers, technicians, product designers, retailers and consumers. The ethnographic vignette with which we began this paper, however, does not fit this frame. Rubbish ships, like the *Al Nabila IV*, are not being passed along a series of sites intact or even attracting symbolic layering and meanings on their way to becoming a final commodity. Rather, they are being unmade; stripped of symbolic associations (their names, their histories), they are not coming together but are being scattered into smaller parts. The work is destructive. It is about the labour of breaking things up, not putting them together (Gregson et al 2010).

To date, research on ‘following the things’ has not addressed the back-end of the value chain, or indeed any activity beyond the initial consumer. In this respect, it has close affinities with material culture’s neglect of the social and physical death of things (Colloredo-Mansfield , 2003; Dant, 2005). This is a surprising omission, given the inclusion of a key chapter by Igor Kopytoff in Appadurai’s influential collection, and the insistence therein that goods move in and out of the commodity phase, and that they have extended social and economic lives. Where extended lives have been addressed within geography, this has largely been in terms of constituting the home – especially ‘the material cultures of objects and their use, display and meanings within the home’ (Blunt, 2005, page 506; Leslie

and Reimer, 2003) – where the linkage of products and practices is seen as what consumption actually involves (Shove and Southerton, 2000; Warde, 2005; Watson and Shove, 2008). The thing is occasionally followed into the domestic world, but rarely beyond it, in spite of the emerging work on second-hand exchange, consumption and disposal (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Clarke, 2000; Gregson et al, 2007a, 2007b; Reno, 2009). Taking its inspiration from both Kopytoff and Thompson, this latter work rests on a reading of consumption that emphasises not the realisation of value in the initial point of sale but combines the senses of consumption as practice or making use with the material etymological sense of consumption as depletion, exhaustion and using-up, and as intrinsically linked to ridding, disposal and wasting (Hetherington, 2004; Gregson, 2007; O'Brien, 2008). 'Following' for this approach does not end with the western consumer. Rather, the western consumer, and for that matter the western home, is but one moment in the circulation of goods. Discarded consumer goods become captured within other networks which work to move them eventually either to sites of secondary processing, treatment and revaluation, often in Africa, India or China, or to sites of 'disposal' such as the landfills and incinerators of western Europe or the dumps of Africa and China (BAN, 2002, 2005). Thus, discarded clothing, consumer durables, electronic goods, paper and plastic, move to West Africa (European Environment Agency, 2009; Tranberg Hansen, 2000), Southern China (Iles, 2004; Lepawsky and McNabb, forthcoming; Tong and Wang, 2004) and South and North India, there to be 'recycled' into yet further commodities (Norris, 2004a, 2004b), many of which will return in another guise to be purchased by western consumers.

Along with its neglect of the back-end of the value chain, to date 'following the things' research has concentrated on a relatively narrow range of commodities – mostly food and fashion – primarily sold in western consumer markets. As noted above, this approach originated in efforts to counter commodity fetishism and has clear connections with the politics of ethical trade and consumption. Work in this vein has moved from an initial impetus to make the production chain transparent, and a tendency to have the clear-sighted analyst guide us from guilty consumption to exploited producer, to more creatively critical fetishisms (Foster, 2006, page 286) that, in Taussig's phrase, 'get with the fetish' to rework it (Cook 2006, page 658). Nonetheless, it is characterised by at least four problems.

The first problem has been a tendency to position those in the global south solely as producers supporting corporately driven flows, rather than as multiply entangled – as consumers and instigators – in flows that have more diverse paths and connections (Raghuram, 2004, pp 121 – 4; Wilk, 2006). A second problem is the emphasis placed on western consumption and western consumers. This neglects the burgeoning consumer cultures of India, China, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan, to take just some of the most obvious examples (Brewer and Trentmann, 2006; Chua, 2000; Clammer, 1997, 2003). But a further implication is that a highly particular pattern of consumption and type of (western) consumer comes to stand for a universal consumer and consumption. A third problem, following the thing tends to focus attention upon objects that become successfully stabilised. A fourth, and consequent, problem is that a vast range of intermediary things that are consumed in production and circulation -- from packaging to off-cuts to energy to, indeed, ships -- become subsumed within, maybe obscured by, final commodities.

Ships are both the glue and grease of the global economy and of globalisation, whilst the shipping industry is often represented as an exemplar case of a global industry and transnational workforce (ILO, 2004; Sampson and Bloor, 2007). The contemporary merchant vessel, combined with the technology of the big box container, is the means by which most commodities move around the world – although its central role and those of maritime spaces is all too often overlooked (Sekula, 1995: Levinson, 2006). But ships too are also commodities and, like all commodities, they move in and out of the commodity phase, as well as shift through value regimes. In the case of ships a commercial life, which is likely to be 25 – 32 years, will include periodic refits and probably progressive downgrading in terms of capacities, profitability and value. The *Al Nabila IV* with which we began this paper, however, is a ship of rubbish value. Rubbish value ships are offered for sale in the shipping industry's demolition market. In this case the vessel will have been purchased by 'Bangladeshi interests' – not for its use and exchange value as a ship but for materials, primarily thousands of tons of steel scrap. In the demolition market, the *Al Nabila IV* is valued not as an object but in terms of its "light weight tonnage", that is as weight in materials. Indeed, price will have depended on estimated valuations of materials and how easy they are to extract through breaking and then open to revaluation.

Paying attention to things like the *Al Nabila IV* highlights the material potentiality in things in ways that many current accounts of 'following the things' obscure. For all its capacity to attend to the distributed qualities of assembling things, 'following the things' research stabilises and condenses things, freezing them in the still life that is the object of the point of sale commodity, or – more rarely – in the lives of these objects with consumers. While work on food products has attended to their specific material affordances (e.g. Stassart and Whatmore, 2003), the product is rarely materially unravelled or recombined. Looking at the back-end of the value chain and at commodities of rubbish value does not merely extend the following of things over more of their social and economic lives. It is more profound than this. For what it does is to destabilise the thing itself. It shows that the thing is multiple, mutable and material; and that the thing and the commodity are but moments in the circulation and assembling of material. We come back to this point in our conclusion. Before this, we highlight the complexities and entanglements of mutable things deemed of rubbish value. Having arrived at Sitakunda beach, Bangladesh, the *Al Nabila IV* has entered a complex, integrated site of object demolition, materials separation and segregation, re-use and secondary manufacturing, centred on the district of Bhatiary (Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

In the following section we trace some of the material transformations and translations involved in this site. The constituents of the ships move through this complex in many directions. Thus, steel plate from the ships provides 90% of the steel used in Bangladesh and is turned into reinforcing rods for the concrete making the new houses and apartments springing up in Bangladeshi cities; ship chandlery is resold to equip the coastal fishing fleet; and electric motors and components are reconditioned and sold to land-based industries with, for instance, ships' boilers and compressors being used in dyeing fabric and generators to power the factories producing garments for the clothes export sector. Indeed the proud boast of the industry is that 99% of an end-of-life ship is 'recycled'. Given their connections to the home, to domestic consumption and to consumers, it is what was once the desiderata of the trade – the furnishings and how they have come to permeate Bangladeshi consumer culture – that are the most pertinent things to follow in this instance and for the

development of debates on following the thing. Our empirical focus in the paper therefore is on the furniture shops of Bhatiary, the transformations they effect, and the appropriation of ship breaking furniture by the Bangladeshi middle classes.

3: Sites of translation, transformation and re-valuation

3.1: The furniture businesses of Bhatiary: a tale of rubbish turned to value

Bhatiary could be dubbed 'recycling city'. Since the mid 1980s, hundreds of shops have sprung up till they now stretch from Chittagong City Gate some 9 km to Sitakunda and Sitalpur. The shops line the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, the main trunk road in Bangladesh. They sell almost everything, from lifeboats to kitchen sinks and cooking equipment, from western toilets to gym equipment and generators. More recently, a further spin-off has evolved in Chittagong city, specialising in electronics and consumer durables. The supply chain of all these business depends upon the ship breaking industry on the beach.

Originally these shops were a means of simply disposing of the sundry, unvalued soft goods of the ships. Pioneer sellers tell stories from the early 1980s of 'poor people collecting leftover materials from the yards and selling them by the roadside'; of 'local people scavenging and making fences out of ship breaking board or of using it as firewood'; and of ship breakers chucking board on the beach as they broke up their ships. Scavenging and wasting are central to the narratives of the early pioneers in the business. The pioneers portray themselves as doing a favour to the ship breaking businesses, through taking unwanted materials off their hands. [2] In such narratives, ship breakers are depicted as seeing no value in furniture, fixtures and fittings, whilst the self-positioning of the furniture pioneers is as the heroic agents of salvage. 'Please release me from this burden' is a phrase commonly attributed by pioneer furniture makers to the ship breakers, along with 'at that time this stuff was nothing but trouble for them, they just wanted to get rid of it'. In their self-narrative, the furniture makers identify themselves as having seen the scope for

[2] A field survey conducted for the this project visited every second-hand outlet in Bhatiary in the course of 2008, documenting location, products, reprocessing, ownerships, alliances and employment and interviewing many owners.

entrepreneurial activities without having the capital to enter the breaking business itself. Indeed, some early innovators moved from supplying workers to break up ships to owning workshops processing their fittings. Nowadays, the major furniture businesses send agents aboard the ships and the ship breakers organise auctions for the contents.

Whilst initially retailers would sell goods 'as-is', that is in the condition in which they came from the ships, the furniture sector has grown though moving into repair, renovation, reconditioning and re-fabrication work. There are currently 72 furniture units in Bhatiary (2008 survey data), owned by 22 partnerships or individuals. Almost all of these shops have a refurbishment facility attached. This may vary from such simple actions as providing backs for cupboards no longer bolted to ship bulkheads, through to recovering soft furnishings but increasingly it means taking only the carcass of furnishings or boards as raw materials to produce almost entirely new products. The larger enterprises employ between 30-40 people each, all of them male, working in the full range of carpentry and furniture making skills – cutting board, constructing frames, doing joinery, gluing, upholstering, a-fixing surface materials (notably Formica - see Figure 2)), patterning and polishing, as well as selling.

Figure 2 about here

The workers in these refurbishing workshops are all either skilled craftsmen or akin to apprentices learning their trades. Most are migrant workers from Chandpur and Noakhali districts, and are typically recruited through kinship networks. Their jobs, indeed the livelihoods of all those working in the furniture sector in Bhatiary (estimated at 10,000, 2008 survey data), are dependent upon a steady supply of board and wood from the ship breaking yards, and therefore a constant flow of ships being broken. Neither can be assumed. The ship breaking industry in Bangladesh is increasingly subject to overt challenges, both for the environmental degradation the industry causes and for its labour conditions (Cairns, 2007; Greenpeace, 2005; Hossain and Islam, 2006; YPSA, 2005). Furthermore, the industry is entirely dependent upon a supply of ships for demolition which is a mirror image of the peaks and troughs of global trade.

The supply chain to the furniture shops is itself controlled by the one-third of the furniture sector able to muster both the finances and the skills to bid on an increasingly differentiated set of lots sold by the ship breakers. Effectively, as the furniture sector has grown and become more successful, so too has its complexity, its commercial sophistication and its division of labour. Indeed, the major sellers all have bidding specialists and financial partners alongside the more traditional furniture and refurbishment specialists, and all sell a variety of board, wood and leftover wood scrap within the construction and building trade as well as to other furniture businesses in Bhatiary.

To transform the board and fittings from rubbish into a once more valuable commodity required more than carpentry skills. It required a market of consumers. Initially local understandings of ship breaking furniture, based on its opportunistic use as fencing or its abandonment by the roadside, dumped on the beach or in drains, emphasised its seeming poor quality and lack of durability. Added to this were local myths about the water-proof nature of ship furniture, leading to misuse, and also design anomalies that came from items being originally incorporated into the structure and fabric of the ship itself. Transferred to land, such furniture lacks many of the design features (such as backs) that are taken-for-granted in domestic furniture. Add to that their used condition, compounded by a lack of care devoted to the furniture's removal, and such items were never going to be easy to sell to the Bangladeshi middle classes for use in their homes. Indeed, even to sell them at all required that the incipient furniture businesses develop repair and refurbishment facilities.

For the approximately 45% of the Bangladeshi population in absolute poverty, furniture of the type discussed in this paper is an irrelevance. For the remaining 55% however, comprising the middle classes and elite, it came to offer new possibilities. Prior to the advent of the ship breaking furniture sector, furniture in Bangladesh equated to teak. Expensive, extremely durable, handed down through the generations and also purchased for wedding gifts, teak furniture conveyed, and continues to convey, social status and standing in Bangladesh. Increasing scarcity and extremely high prices, however, provided an opening in the market for a different type of furniture. It is this gap that the incipient furniture businesses spotted and exploited. Selling their initial goods through a 'try it and see how you get on with it' narrative, they found that consumers began to value their 'new'

furniture precisely because of how it stood in opposition to teak. Thus, as we show in the next section, ship breaking furniture came to be valued because it was cheap (compared to teak), and because – whilst it was durable – it could also (and unlike teak) be discarded, precisely because it was cheap and of less value. Ship breaking furniture therefore could be given away to relatives, left behind if one moved, and thrown away if it broke. Its value, then, was in its transience as well as its price, and in the way it fitted in with the lives of an increasingly mobile Bangladeshi middle class.

From the late 1990s, the market has moved into a new phase related to the rise of international-style branded furniture appealing to a more modern, more self-consciously designed aesthetic. Most prominently, the Otobi brand in particular appealed to younger tastes, refracted through a spatial imaginary of 'international' style whose putative globality both reflected and restated widening Bangladeshi middle class horizons. Furnishings here are infused with a complex mix of national and global signifiers, or better, nationally understood signifiers of globality (Reimer and Leslie, 2008). Larger firms, such as Sun Furniture House,[3] provide an exemplar case of how the ship breaking furniture sector has been able to domesticate this aesthetic, utilising Formica and glue to create a desirable 'Mock Otobi' for a large number of lower middle class consumers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 about here

Sun Furniture House's entry into the ship breaking furniture business in the mid 1990s was initially shaky. The owner of the business Mr Abdul Alim, tells the story of how his company's use of Formica was originally decried by the other businesses which relied more on traditional carpentry and polishing skills, as well as on upholstering skills, to revalorise boards and frames. Formica, however, enabled Sun Furniture to cover over the blemishes and marks of wear on ship breaking furniture, to present it as shiny and new -- in local parlance 'chock-chocky' (see figure 4). With Formica's surfaces capable of being produced in either matt or glossy finishes, and with myriad patterns, Sun Furniture now generates

[3] All names are pseudonyms.

bespoke orders from Chittagong's lower middle class who desire, yet cannot afford, Otobi. While Sun Furniture's 'Mock Otobi' 'chock chocky' may have started as an affordable alternative it has now grown into a new ship breaking furniture brand with its own cachet, and its products are widely distributed throughout Bangladesh via wholesalers, retailing in Feni, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Noakhali.

Figure 4 about here

The furniture shops and allied refurbishment workshops of Bhatiary show clearly how leftover, discarded goods declared to be of rubbish value by ship breakers were captured, transformed and revalorised. They show too how this revalorisation is dependent upon creating markets for new products. That the furniture businesses of Bhatiary have been so successful in this regard is in no small part down to having fabricated and re-commodified goods whose value lies in their difference from other goods, particularly teak. Yet other businesses within the sector have shown themselves equally able to adjust to the competition posed by new brands in the market, by reproducing the copy more cheaply.

3.2: Ship breaking furniture in the homes of the Bangladeshi middle class

Having discussed how the Bhatiary furniture businesses revalorise the wastes of the ship breaking businesses, we turn in this section to consider how these items are appropriated by Bangladeshi middle class consumers. We draw here on 39 interviews with householders, conducted in Bengali, spread across the middle classes, and present three households as exemplar cases. All of the households live in Chittagong City and they were recruited through social networks and snowballing methods.[4]

[4] Methodological note: The fieldwork here involved 2 local female field assistants without whom access to Bangladeshi homes would have been impossible. Initial plans to 'follow the things' from shops, even those with whom we had good relations, foundered both due to the difficulties of contacting buyers in the shops or explaining our purposes in subsequent phone calls. The process of recruitment was not easy, hampered at many stages from the reticence of many shopkeepers to divulge details of their consumers, and then, where we did have details on customers, the rapid turnover of residence and contact phone details made contact difficult. If contact was made the suspicions of many consumers (that the research was to do with NGOs trying to shut down ship breaking, that it was a subterfuge to contact women, or to gain entry to the home for nefarious purposes, that it was to do with taxation or the then military regime) meant gaining consent for an interview was often difficult and then finally, even if the respondent was willing to participate, finding the residences, given the lack of any definitive street map of the rapidly growing Chittagong, was something of a

Mrs S is a widow in her mid fifties living with one of her elder daughters and her family in a one-storey small rented house in the Noia Bazar area on the outskirts of Chittagong City. The house comprises two rooms alongside a kitchen and bathroom. The front room acts as a living/bedroom with the other being the main bedroom. Space is at a premium in this home, yet it is crammed full of furniture – to the extent that it is almost impossible to move. In the bedroom, aside from a teak bed which was her daughter's wedding gift, there is an upholstered sofa, a steel clothes rack and a wooden chair. In the main room is a second matching upholstered sofa, a bed-cum-sitting area, a small table and a cupboard/chest, on which stands a TV. All this furniture, with the exception of the teak bed, is ship breaking furniture purchased in Bhatiary. Much of this furniture was purchased relatively recently. Mrs S bought the second bed two years ago, in part on the advice of her neighbour who stressed the competitive prices to be found in Bhatiary, and has bought all the rest subsequently. Mrs S talks about this furniture in ways which emphasise the multiple ways she values these items: in terms of affordability, as a worthy substitute for the unobtainable (teak), as fashionable, as varied in design and as well made. She says:

> 'It is very good and cherished by us [...] (it) is within the range of our ability and affordability. We can't buy teak furniture so it is very beautiful and attractive to us. People like us are basically the lower income group and the only option is ship breaking furniture both for design and by necessity'.

She thus makes a 'choice of the necessary' in Bourdieu's felicitous phrase (1984, page 372). Nevertheless, she emphasises

> 'there is a big difference between today's products and previously. Ship breaking furniture used to look second hand but the way it is made nowadays in Bhatiary with Formica and other materials is far better. Last year when I went to Bhatiary to

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challenge. Thus the most successful interview recruitment technique was to work by snowballing, building from contacts in identifiable fractions of the middle class. Within Bangladesh, the expansion of service sector employment, increasing remittances, and a trend towards entrepreneurship and self- employment have created a new middle-income strata. A distinction between upper and lower middle class is widely recognised in popular parlance, and reflects the wide range of incomes from 7000 to 50000 taka monthly (around £65 to £500). As we show in this section, more fine-grained differentiations are embodied, expressed and recursively produced through consumer cultures.

> purchase this sofa set I was really impressed to see all the different designs and that many of these items are chock-chocky'.

Mrs K is mid thirties and a school teacher. She has one child and her husband works for a private company. They live in a two bedroom flat in Agrabad, a middle class residential neighbourhood close to the financial and business quarter in Chittagong City. The flat has a living room, a dining room, a master bedroom, children's bedroom and two toilets. Mrs K is from Dhaka originally and the couple moved to Chittagong shortly after their marriage, nine years ago. They started their married lives in a small one-bedroom flat, similar to the previous case study. Initially they had no furniture for the flat. A friend told them about Bhatiary, where the furniture was both ready-made, ready to take away and also reasonably priced. Mrs K explains:

> 'When we went there for the first time we were so surprised to see that the whole of Bhatiary area is full of ship breaking furniture and the price was so reasonable. It was really helpful for us to start a new life as a newly married couple with only my husband earning. First, we bought one bed and one wardrobe which were essential items and desperately needed by us. Afterwards we also bought a dining table and sofa set – I really liked the furniture'.

Today Mrs K's home has a mix of ship breaking furniture and new international style furniture and furnishings, including some items from Otobi and some teak. The main living room includes a large sofa in blue, gold and pink cloth, an ornamental table and an emergency bed for guest use. The master bedroom includes a teak bed, a chest of drawers from Bhatiary, and two pieces of Otobi furniture – a wardrobe and a dressing table/mirror. The dining room however still contains the same oval, formal dining table and set of chairs, purchased 'as is' in Bhatiary when they were first married.

It is instructive to compare how Mrs K talks about ship breaking furniture now compared to earlier on in her life. Acknowledging the impossibility of purchasing any other type of furniture as 'newly-weds', she now sees this furniture as 'cost effective but not fashionable'. Indeed, whereas for Mrs S, 'chock-chocky' connotes a stylish aesthetic, for Mrs K it is not. For her, using Formica has lowered the quality of the product, impacting negatively on its

appearance. She says: 'The glossiness of the Formica or the covering fabric of the sofas is very bright which I feel is less sophisticated'.

The changing consumption of ship breaking furniture within Mrs K's home over the years illuminates the ambiguities of ship breaking furniture within the taste registers of the Bangladeshi middle classes. For Mrs K, furniture is understood to convey social status and standing. Ship breaking furniture is problematically, even negatively, positioned in relation to social status. Thus, 'chock-chocky' is too brash, or too 'loud' (to use an English translation). It is a marker of a lack of sophistication. In another sense, ship breaking furniture is understood here as 'second-hand', in its negative sense. As a consequence, in Mrs K's current home certain items of ship breaking furniture have been relegated to the private areas of the house where taste matters less – notably a child's bedroom – and replaced with objects that accord with different, assumed to be more modern, taste aesthetics. Paradoxically confirming this class aesthetic, however, another item of ship breaking furniture – the 'as is' dining room table and chairs – is proudly displayed in another public room. It is 'unadulterated' and high quality original furniture. The confines of Mrs K's flat therefore contain a conjuncture and collision of taste registers in which ship breaking furniture is multiply positioned.

Mr J is an engineer in a mobile phone company who lives in Sarsen Road -- a well known affluent neighbourhood in Chittagong City. He is in his forties and lives in a gated complex of luxurious rented apartments with his wife and two children, and is one of a large number of Bangladeshi return migrants. In his case he spent some years working in Canada. Prior to this, and before he married, Mr J's furniture came exclusively from Bhatiary. This furniture was left in situ when the family went to Canada but, on their return, and move to Sarsen Road, the family sent the vast majority to relatives in the 'village home'. They then filled their new home with entirely new furniture, the majority of it teak. Ironically they thus sent the 'modern' furniture to be valued in the 'traditional' village, while as modern urbanites they bought 'traditional' forms.[5] Whilst his wife regards Bengali teak furniture as highly

[5] It is important to flag that the valorisation of the traditional aesthetic, even its reproduction as commodified types, has echoes across Bengal and often carries a gendered charge about who are the protectors of tradition (Nag, 1991). Such wider patterns are beyond the scope of this paper, as are interesting comparisons with homes, objects and memories in the South Asian diaspora (Tolia-Kelly, 2004a, 2004b).

desirable and authentic, Mr J continues to value ship breaking furniture for its durability and lasting qualities. He maintains that home aesthetics are unconnected with brands or prices but that what matters instead is the order and maintenance of interiors. For him the home is less about exactly what is put in it and the status such items allegedly confer, and rather more about the arrangement and conjunctures of things. He says: 'Home is a natural nest. It has to be well organised and well arranged'. Unusually for a man in his position, he is positively disposed towards ship breaking furniture, saying: 'I do not feel shy about showing people that I have ship breaking furniture; [...] I even encourage people to use ship breaking furniture'. Nonetheless, the flat contains just one item of ship breaking furniture, a reading table in his daughter's bedroom, in which all the other items are teak. Elsewhere, the furniture in all the public rooms is teak, whilst his son's room is furnished exclusively with Otobi originals, a response to the taste demands of the son's generation.

The almost total absence of ship breaking furniture and the conspicuous presence of teak and Otobi in Mr J's home are indicative of the entanglement of value, brand and material culture in the homes of the Bangladeshi middle classes. Here, in the upper echelons of this social class, where authenticity is affordable, it is materialised, through the historically traditional form of teak or in the modern designs of Otobi. Ship breaking furniture, whilst valued rhetorically and remembered nostalgically, has no place in this aesthetic register, either as the copy or in its refurbished form. Physically and aesthetically it is of rubbish value in the milieu of Sarsen Road, albeit that its potential for revaluation in other settings is still acknowledged – bundled onto a truck or motorised rickshaw it passes into another value regime centred on the rural economy and rural livelihoods.[6]

At one level the households discussed above provide yet further testimony to the cross-cultural purchase of Bourdieu's (1984) arguments about the interplay of distinction and taste. In the homes of the Bangladeshi middle classes distinction is inflected through the logics of affordability and necessity, convenience and availability, as well as aesthetic

[6] Alternative conduits for the disposal of unwanted ship breaking furniture are typical of the hand-me-down/around social economy and include giving things to waged domestic workers (commonly employed by the Bangladeshi middle class) and to second-hand shops, as well as abandoning things in public space, where they may be salvaged.

registers. Registers and logics conjoin to generate distinctive tastes and immediately recognisable types of domestic interior. For the lower middle classes, domestic space is produced through a taste of necessity. Here just having and possessing furniture works to mark a critical distinction, the separation from poverty. When allied with the affordability of ship breaking furniture, possession works to valorise an interior stuffed to capacity with ship breaking furniture (Figure 5). Having furniture morphs to having domestic space crammed full of furniture. At the same time, it is the bright, shiny, glossy surface qualities of 'chock-chocky' that are valued here. In contrast, it is precisely those qualities ('chock-chocky') which are regarded with disdain by other fractions of the Bangladeshi middle class, for whom 'chock-chocky' ship breaking furniture is seen to be poorly made, inauthentic and the hallmark of bad taste. In their homes what matters is authenticity, understood in terms of either materials (teak) or design (modern, international brands). Thus, whilst teak continues to be highly sought after, to predominate in the homes of the upper middle class and the elite, and to be the prevailing wedding gift of choice, modern design aesthetics are being increasingly adopted by younger people. Valuing 'brand' over indigenous materiality, this distinction is a generational one which points to the rise of global consumer cultures amongst the younger Bangladeshi middle class.

Figure 5 about here

The broad contours of how distinction and taste work themselves out in the context of the Bangladeshi middle class will be familiar enough to those conversant with consumption debates. Of greater interest, however, is that ship breaking furniture continues to be valued by the upper echelons of the middle class, as a generic type if not as an actual physical presence. In part this value is predicated upon absence, nostalgia and memory. Thus, whilst for some of the middle class ship breaking furniture is an ambivalent accommodation, for others it works as both a marker of social progress and social mobility and as fondly remembered, but no longer present, pieces of material culture that marked the start of married life and the first family home. Running alongside this is a value grounded in disposability. That ship breaking furniture can be discarded, and that it is disposed of through intra-familial gifting and the hand-me-down/hand-around social economy is a

measure of its social worth. To be able to gift furniture in a country where 40% of the population are without furniture, and to be able to place this furniture with poor relations living in rural areas, is both open to notions of care and responsibility towards family (or known others) and simultaneously a means of registering in a highly material way the social mobility of family members.

Read thus, ship breaking furniture begins to emerge as a type of furniture whose value lies in that it can be whatever the consumer wants it to be: a beautiful substitute for the unattainable (teak), as offering comfort and convenience, as fashionable, as a nostalgic memory, as disposable, as conferring of generosity and care. Such mutability in meaning is, we suggest, intimately linked to the conditions of the furniture's production and the infinite variety of its form. Ship breaking furniture is not often second-hand furniture. The vast bulk of this furniture is fabricated from materials leftover from the process of object destruction and steel scrap recovery that goes on on Sitakunda beach. Built on 'wastes' and materials rather than objects, Bhatiary's furniture businesses are an instance of secondary manufacturing and founded on imagining and fabricating these materials into objects and commodities that resonate with the aesthetic tastes of the Bangladeshi middle classes. As such, these businesses have the capacity to endlessly reinvent their products, to keep producing 'chock-chocky' and to produce the cheaper copy that looks just as new. These businesses matter to broader debates precisely because, in their appeal to a large, guaranteed market of lower middle class consumers across Bangladesh, they show that rubbish dumped on a beach can be reclaimed and re-valued; that the arts of transience can indeed turn 'waste' into value.

4: Conclusions

Our concern in this paper has been with things at the back-end of the value chain, things deemed to be of rubbish value. The paper shows clearly Thompson's point, that rubbish is no end point but rather a fulcrum point and that the arts of transience are critical to rekindling value. Nonetheless, where the paper departs from previous work, and from other research on second-hand exchange and consumption, as well as from cultural work on salvage (Soderan and Carter, 2008), is in its departure from a focus on a stable object of devaluation and revalorisation. The dismembered objects on Sitakunda beach testify to

rubbish value's connection to the material, its properties and capacities. Here, on this beach, the temporal and physical limits of particular object forms and configurations of material have been reached. As forms they no longer have any value. Rather, at this point, their value is not as a thing but a function of their materialities and their ability to multiply and mutate. The ships cease to be vessels but revert to being thousands of tons of scrap steel and more. To stop seeing objects and to see them as conjunctures of materials requires a gestalt shift. The social sciences customarily focus upon objects – be that in material culture studies, museum studies, consumption research, as well as for research that has followed the things. A focus on end-of-life objects, however, insists on seeing that things are assemblages, ontological conjunctures of stuff, materials, brought together and held together, but also coming apart and wrenched asunder.

The implications of this focus and these arguments for following the things research are considerable. Two points are particularly noteworthy. The first is that in confining attention to movement up the value chain, such work has both truncated the temporally and geographically extended lives of things and neglected that things travel down, as well as up, the value chain. Bangladesh is but one destination for rubbish value ships; India, China and Pakistan are others. Other end-of-life consumer goods display similar geographies. The work of NGOs in particular has been critical to exposing the environmental and labour consequences of such traffic in things, but the full implications of these flows remain to be taken up by geographers interested in commodity chains, whose attention remains primarily with the production of point of sale commodities consumed by western consumers. A second point follows on. This is that in paying attention to point of sale commodities, following the things research works to stabilise things in the still life of the object form. This stabilises the object by stilling material and placing it utterly at the command of capital. Flatter ontological perspectives such as vital materialism acknowledge that it takes much to hold things together and that material is both agentic and performative (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2001, 2004, 2007; Mackenzie, 2009). Seen thus, things are inherently unstable, materially as well as in their meanings – hence the importance of repair and maintenance activities (Graham and Thrift, 2007; Gregson et al, 2009). But repair and maintenance are unable to keep holding things together. The *Al Nabila IV* with which

we began this paper makes precisely that point. Objects, even objects as durable as this 30 year old ship, eventually start to come apart, economically and physically, symbolically and socially. As such, the object is but a temporary moment in an endless process of assembling materials, a partial stabilisation and a fragile accomplishment that is always inexorably becoming something else, somewhere else.

The instability in things points finally to the importance of the arts of transience. To work with the future potentialities in things, with what things might become, is not an art possessed equally by all places. Animating materials anew, rekindling them is curtailed not just by limits of the imagination, by knowledge or indeed by ways of seeing, it is framed too by the categories and classifications that surround stuff in particular parts of the world – particularly discarded objects declared to be 'end-of-life' – and by the markets that are available to goods fabricated from secondary materials. Correspondingly, the places in the world where the arts of transience are most vividly articulated are precisely those places where materials and 'wastes' are lightly regulated or unregulated and those where end-of-life goods inexorably find their way to as a result. Bhatiary – and Bangladesh more generally – is one such place, and that Bhatiary emerged in conjunction with a spatially proximate ship breaking business is indicative of the affinities between the activities of object destruction and revaluation. Bhatiary's arts of transience exemplify a flat ontological politics of materials being disassembled, reassembled and enrolled in new configurations – and reveal the dangers as well as productivities of such flattened ontologies. There a bitter twist to the celebrated virtue of recycling 99% of the ship materials returns to haunt the discussion. With no distinction between materials, the furniture businesses of Bhatiary and their agents strip out and rework their furniture from a range of boards -- some benign, some of toxic asbestos. The latter boards are also sold extensively within the construction industry and therefore have been distributed widely across Bangladesh, notably in new build flats and apartments. Correspondingly, we end the paper by sounding a note of caution regarding the arts of transience. Whilst all materials have the potential to keep being assembled, there are some materials which would surely be better off stabilised as wastes – even if thus sequestering them requires much by way of maintenance work. Asbestos is one such material. The challenge for an ontological politics of vital materialisms is not just to

recognise the distinctions in materials but to devise appropriate interventions that remain alive to the potential in the arts of transience whilst recognising their dangers.

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List of figures