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BY DAVID WHITEMYER
An old science makes
a new impact on
interior design.

ANTHROPOLOGY IN

CREATIVITY



Eric Laurier knows that putting a sofa in a coffee shop may invite longer stays and younger crowds. He recognizes that window tables are the preferred seats of parents with children. He understands how people line up at a snack bar counter, how they order breakfast and how they find their way back to the door. He's not a trendy restaurant interior designer, but a scientist who for the past half decade has used ethnography to study human behavior in European cafés. Laurier, Ph.D., is part of a human geography research group at Edinburgh University in Scotland, which, in addition to cafés, has documented human behavior at pubs, libraries and bus stops.

Laurier's research has amassed volumes of stories detailing how people sit, sip, walk and talk in small neighborhood eateries. He knows how people behave in cafés, and a good interior designer could use what Laurier knows to make cafés better – more user-friendly.

Ethnography is the best route to understanding how people relate to their environments, and from that understanding, designers can custom-fit spaces. Ethnography can improve interior design.

THE SCIENCE OF OBSERVATION

Sometimes referred to as “going native,” ethnography submerges a researcher into a setting to watch the relation between activities and environment, and to discover behavioral patterns. Laurier thinks of the ethnographer

as a “professional stranger,” someone who becomes “part of the group being studied – walking in their shoes for a while.”

Literally, ethnography means writing (from Greek, *graphien*) about cultures (*ethnos*). It is believed to have developed as a science in Europe some time after the Dark Ages, with its roots in anthropology, sociology, psychology and linguistics. Only recently has ethnography been used to inform design.

Interior designers and architects already employ methods for researching built environments. Post occupancy evaluations (POE) and evidence-based design (EBD) systematically evaluate measurable aspects in buildings, such as energy efficiency and life-cycle costs. Surveys and focus groups are used to find out what people think about a space, focusing heavily on health, safety, security and functionality. While these methods improve future projects, they don't provide the full story.

For example, a POE questionnaire might ask an office worker how many times a day he gets up and walks to the photocopier, informing a designer on carpet durability, desk placement or proper lighting. But an ethnographer will watch people walk to the photocopier, consider how they navigate through the office and observe how they interact with their coworkers. It's the difference between asking people to explain what they do versus watching them do it. Ethnography can't replace traditional research methods, but it can enhance them. “Ethnographic findings, at their best, provide inspirational materials for designers, supplying unexpected details and pertinent reminders of how places are organized,” Laurier says. “Designers then use their skills and imagination to produce buildings that may variously support, enhance, augment or radically alter those places”

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—Eric Laurier, Ph.D., Ethnographer, University of Edinburgh, Scotland



AKING IT TO THE STREETS

Ethnography got a big boost as a tool for spatial design in the 1960s and 1970s, when William Whyte used it for his Street Life Project. Whyte filmed hundreds of hours of pedestrian behavior in New York City. He watched where people gathered on sidewalks, how they maneuvered through plazas, and what they did when interacting with other people. Among other things, Whyte observed that sunken plazas were not used as frequently as street-level plazas and that people like to gather on outdoor stairs. With this first-hand knowledge, he wrote about urban planning and design, and served as a planning consultant for a number of U.S. cities.

Like an ethnographer, Whyte understood that watching people provided more honest information than simply asking people questions. He knew that a good observer began without any biases and should “look hard with a clean, clear mind, and then look again – and believe what you see.” Only after clearly understanding what's

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—Stephen Wilcox, Ph.D., Founder, Design Science, Philadelphia

been observed can the researcher adapt information to inform a design direction.

Callison Architecture, a Seattle-based design firm, took this concept to heart in the early 1990s when it was hired to design the new corporate headquarters for Eddie Bauer, an international clothing and catalog company. “We always are trying to get into the heads of our users,” says Andrea Vanecko, IIDA, Callison’s Principal-in-Charge of Corporate Office Interiors.

Where most designers might start with a program or concept – square feet, color scheme, spatial hierarchy – Callison took a different approach. “Before we did anything, we told the client that we wanted to come work in their office for three weeks,” Vanecko says. At the time, Eddie Bauer employees were scattered among what Vanecko describes as “three inefficient leased office spaces in several different buildings.”

To really understand the client and to design the best new facility, the Callison designers had to experience for themselves why Eddie Bauer employees were so successful as they worked in, interacted in and adapted to their current environment.

It makes sense that Callison would try this approach. The firm’s background is in retail design, and it is in retail and product design where ethnography is being utilized

right now. “Our retail group has influenced all of our other departments,” says Vanecko about their corporate, hospitality and healthcare projects. “Our whole history has been built around going beyond just understanding the psyche of the user.”

What Vanecko’s company does for interior design is rare. “I’m not aware of other firms doing research like us,” she says. “I don’t think there are many.”

She suggests that the high cost of ethnographic research is the main barrier to designers and their clients giving it a go. But if an improved office space can increase productivity or if an enhanced store design can strengthen sales, it may be worth the cost.

ETHNOGRAPHY FOR SALE
Compared to other research methods, ethnography is expensive. “An average research project will cost around \$200,000,” says Stephen Wilcox, Ph.D., founder of Design Science, one of a few dozen competing global consultancies that market their ethnographic research to huge corporations. However, Wilcox says that projects in the \$20,000 to \$50,000 range are not unusual.

Ethnography is the current industry buzzword, and it is being used by software developers, mobile-phone makers, store planners and home appliance manufacturers. Called “commercial ethnography,” its practitioners aim to create an understanding of a specific market, and then suggest actions or designs based on what they’ve observed and learned.

There is some debate around whether this truly is

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ethnography. Wilcox is quick to say that “there are probably 10 people claiming to do ethnographic research for each person who actually knows how to do it.”

He is one of the first people to apply ethnography to the world of design, and he is protective of it as a science, arguing that “a lot of ‘ethnography’ consultants don’t rely on hypothesis and error-testing, both of which are traditional parts of the scientific method.”

IDEO, a well-known international design, innovation and human-factors consultancy, uses observational research in its product and environment development. Jane Fulton Suri, a leader of human-centered design at IDEO, employs ethnographic techniques, but she’s hesitant to label it as such. “We use a range of direct observational techniques, such as video capturing and shadowing. We also ask users to participate by carrying a camera around or taking notes,” she says.

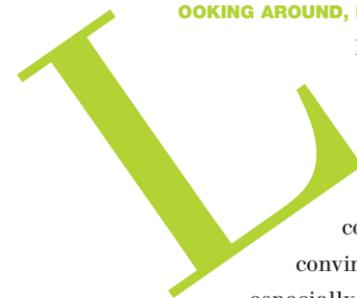
A few years ago, IDEO was hired by the DePaul Health Center in St. Louis, Mo. In addition to just watching people in the hospital, designers also played the role of patients. “Looking through the eyes of the user is a great way in,” Fulton Suri says. Among their many observations, they noticed how patients and families seek to personalize hospital rooms, often hanging pictures, leaving cards and flowers, and making it homey. “We made a recommendation to the hospital for each patient room to have a white board wall that could be decorated with messages and pictures.”

The observations of the designers led to a simple low-tech way to temporarily personalize a space. “People were doing this naturally, so we tried to come up with a way that made it easier for them,” Fulton Suri says.

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—Stephen Wilcox

LOOKING AROUND, LOOKING AHEAD



Ethnographic research for use in architecture and interior design is not yet commonplace. It is costly, and it’s difficult to convince a client of its worth, especially when it may benefit only one building. In product and retail

design, it’s cost-effective when multiple units are produced. Second, ethnography doesn’t produce any measurable information. Without hard data, encouraging old-school thinkers to try something new is a challenge. “I don’t think ethnography can solve all the problems of the design process,” Laurier says. “But it can help keep designers’ feet on the ground of everyday ways of dwelling in places.”

Interior design is not just about aesthetics. It’s about people and how they use space. Being that ethnography is about the examination of culture and people, it seems a proper fit in helping the world of interior design. ■

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