

The first glimmer of the premise for this book came to me in Scotland way back in the seventies as I walked through bleak urban landscaping, just north of Glasgow city center. I'd been interviewing families about their lives in the notoriously ill-conceived high-rise apartment scheme known as the Red Road flats.

As I was leaving, I snapped this black-and-white Polaroid picture of a young boy. He and his friends were taking turns riding on top of the building's boiler room door while the others were pushing it open and closed with varying degrees of vigor. They were most likely damaging the door hinges and technically committing an act of vandalism. But I felt I'd glimpsed something more interesting than that, something subtle but powerfully relevant to the practice of design.

Looking at that picture, I wondered about how designers might be influenced by images like it: visual evidence of the realities of everyday behavior, of design in use. Might *référence* to such images help designers to be more sensitive to people's experience and needs? The boys here had gathered



to play with the only dynamic and noisemaking element in the landscape. Who had thought about the needs of ten-year-old boys in designing this housing complex? And who, having witnessed the behavior of ten-year-old boys in almost any culture in the world, could fail to notice how they are attracted by opportunities to move and challenge physical limits?

Things used in unintended ways, in this case the boiler room door, usually indicate something about people's needs. And needs often translate into design opportunities. Here was a clear demonstration of both need and opportunity to provide these residents with means for safe but boisterous play.

And not only was this a starkly dramatic expression of *need*, it was also a revelation about the boys' *experience*. While they played with the door, they felt directly the effect of levers, pivots, and the resilience of metal and wood. Through bodily interactions they were learning intimate lessons about the behavior of materials and mechanisms that would guide their interpretations of things they would encounter in the future.

In daily life we make interpretations about the stuff around us all the time—how it might work and what we can do with it. We develop an exquisite awareness of the possibilities and sensory qualities of different materials, forms, and textures. This awareness is evident from our actions, even when we are not conscious of them—these are our “thoughtless acts.” Understanding these intuitive interpretations might be a significant source of insight for designers.

inviting curiosity

That Polaroid was the start of an idea about observing and documenting everyday interactions as a contribution to design. Many years of collaborative work with creative and thoughtful colleagues has evolved that idea, so that now it has become standard practice within IDEO's human-centered design process. The starting point for most of our projects—whether related to products, spaces, or services—is observation of behavior in its natural setting. Teams do this together, along with clients, as a way of learning firsthand about the context, habits, rituals, priorities, processes, and values of the people we are designing for.

We have assembled this collection of humble images as a way of sharing this approach in an experiential way. It is an invitation to look, in a newly focused way, at ourselves and our everyday environments. The idea is to reveal how unexceptional incidents, looked at from an inquisitive stance, can inspire thoughts about design opportunities and consequences. We have presented the images in the hope of making the experience of looking at them akin to encountering incidents in the real world: life without captions. (At least until page 182, by which point there should have been ample opportunity to just look.)

There are no definitive explanations. Each image is meant to provoke curiosity and encourage the observer's own interpretation and speculation about the situation. What qualities have been recognized and exploited here? How “thoughtless” is the behavior actually? What are the implied human motivations and needs, and how might design respond to these?

For example, the picture on page 138, of open umbrellas resting on parked scooters in the street, might suggest myriad functional opportunities and scenarios: for street furniture with shades, for vehicle seats finished with less heat-absorptive material, or for garments with insulated seats. It might also indicate opportunities for additional ways to support self-expression, identity, and status among vehicle owners and riders.

We hope that observers will take this same lens to the real world to enrich their own perceptions. There are great rewards in giving in to curiosity about behavior—about even really mundane things such as how we choose where to place a hand to pick up a paper cup full of coffee, or pause to take in the scene as we enter an unfamiliar building. The key is looking carefully at what people actually do in various situations and asking ourselves questions such as these to explain what we see: Why has someone placed this object here? What are those people doing and why are they grouped like that? Why is it that people apparently avoid being here? Curiosity will reveal meaning behind these nonspectacular interactions that take place around us all the time.

inspiring and informing design

Examining these everyday interactions, we discover a lot about how we engage, adapt, and make sense of our surroundings. We see directly how design plays into our lives, how we actively shape our environment, and how we in turn are shaped by it. Observing such interactions can inspire new design opportunities and guide better solutions in several valuable ways:



going into the world

Seeking inspiration from real life is a surprisingly obvious idea, but it is easily overlooked when we become preoccupied by our professional roles, with their traditional domains and established processes. There is a lot of inertia involved in breaking away from habitual ways of working, even to do something as simple as leaving our offices for a while to go out into the world and observe directly what's happening there. It won't immediately come to mind as something to do and at first perhaps won't even feel quite like legitimate work.

But for people who regard themselves as tasked with problem solving or innovation, it is imperative to encourage and elevate the practice of observing everyday events. Directly witnessing and experiencing aspects of behavior in the real world is a proven way of inspiring and informing contextually relevant ideas.

A cornerstone activity of IDEO's innovation and creativity workshops is precisely this kind of observation activity. We start by going together in teams into the field with cameras and notebooks to watch people doing specific but very ordinary things and then return to tell our stories and interpret what we've seen. The insights that emerge from careful observation of people's behavior, around something as apparently mundane as sorting laundry or buying coffee, uncover all kinds of opportunities that were not previously evident.

Recently we took designers and executives from an electronic gaming company to watch children playing different kinds of competitive games. I went with a team to watch an interschool

wrestling match where we noticed, among many other things, how fathers were yelling advice to the boys and excitedly demonstrating holds and moves from the benches. Sharing personal stories about what each of us had noticed, we developed new perspectives about competitive games. My team had realized viscerally that spectators make connections with players and can contribute actively to the ambience and excitement of a competition. With hindsight, that is not a dramatic realization, but one that had eluded the team until real-world observation focused attention on it and inspired thoughts about many new possibilities for interactive gaming around this active rather than passive role of spectatorship.

Once we've decided it's okay to observe, it's really not difficult. But it does take discipline to do it systematically and with attention. We are so used to moving efficiently through the world that we operate on autopilot a lot of the time. In fact, the phrase "thoughtless acts" highlights the predicament—we do most of the everyday things we do without consciously thinking about them. So, unless we make a special effort to focus, we just won't notice things such as the way we position ourselves in a line, know where to deposit mail, or use information from reflections in a window. Usually we notice these things only when our normal flow is disrupted and we are forced to think about our actions and assumptions: as when we are abroad somewhere and confuse a mailbox with a litter bin, or when a new colleague asks us to explain how the coffeemaker works. Then we become more aware and analytical about the signals we look for in our day-to-day interactions. So, the discipline of routinely looking and noticing involves deliberately attending to things that we normally take for granted. It means asking questions from the

naive and curious perspective that we might have visiting a place in which we are unfamiliar with the people, their habits, customs, and objects. Why are they doing that? Why there? What is that? How would I know that?

We hope that the instances depicted in this collection will raise the profile of ordinary events and frame them in ways that encourage greater attention and respect for them. The world out there is full of examples of people acting intuitively with things in delightful and surprising ways.

Please let us know what you see. You can contact us via thoughtlessacts@ideo.com

— Jane Fulton Suri

thoughtless acts?
observations on intuitive design

by Jane Fulton Suri + IDEO

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