

3.3 The art of noticing: creativity is in the context

Objective

This creative exercise aims to promote an understanding of the power of the context for design. Objects exist and are used in a context, and their meaning and use change across different situations. When we use an object in a specific context, we ignore all the details that do not matter. For instance, if an armchair is being used to reach something on a high shelf, (in place of a ladder, in other words), in that situation the position of the armrests is irrelevant; what matters instead is how much weight the chair can carry and how stable it is.

The use of an object in a specific context can then help us to ignore irrelevant features and focus on characteristics of the design that are particularly salient for that application or that are noteworthy but might otherwise go unnoticed.

Instructions

The exercise requires you to observe people when they use an everyday object for a purpose for which that object has *not* been designed. We tend to do this when we need to repurpose the object to execute a task for which we do not have an existing, affordable or immediately available appropriate tool. For instance, when we use a chair to reach out to something that is too high, because we do not have a ladder to hand. The analysis of alternative uses of an object can then: a) help us to focus on some of its interesting features; b) inspire us to come up with a brilliant solution to a problem (for instance, the [IKEAS step stool](#) for children or an adjustable [potty training seat to train toddlers to use the toilet](#)).

1. Identify an everyday object (e.g. a book)
2. Make a list of potential secondary uses of the object (e.g. what can you use a book for other than for reading?)
3. Observe what people do when they use the object unconventionally or ask them to try if direct observation is not possible or feasible. Record the observation by some means (e.g. make a video, take a picture or make a sketch, take notes, etc.)
4. Fill the following table for at least three different uses (see example)
5. Finally, identify one potential product idea that you discovered through the exercise

Object: Book

Typical uses of the object: reading

Alternative use	Property or feature of the design supporting the alternative use	How the object is used
Decor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Big format, illustration on the cover• Hardcover	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Displayed on a coffee table• Displayed in a bookshelf or other support (e.g.

		fireplace mantle) forward facing
Online 'professional' meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many books in a bookshelf behind the speaker.
Paperweight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weight and size 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laying on a pile of documents to compress the pile or keep it in place
...		

Note

This exercise can be seen as a variation of an apocryphal story; the barometer problem, in which a student is asked by her physics teacher to measure the height of a skyscraper using a barometer. The smart student identifies several ways to do this without resorting to the most obvious way, i.e. measuring the difference in pressure between the top and the bottom of the building (see this links if you are curious, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-barometer-problem/>).