CHAPTER 16

A PHOTOGRAPH IS EVIDENCE OF NOTHING BUT ITSELF

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INTRODUCTION

Design, and more specifically design research, in taking what we call the ethnographic turn, has adopted many research techniques from the allied disciplines of anthropology and sociology. In this chapter we present the case that this turn, while attractive to the discovery of the user and their experience, has occurred with little consideration for the fundamentally different enterprises that are ethnography and design. We look specifically at the use of photo-observation and note that its use is generally premised on the notion that the photograph is evidence. We argue that by viewing the photograph as ethnographic evidence we accept it on its own conditions and consequently it conditions us to see the world-as-is. However, design is concerned with what-might-become, and this conditioning is problematic for it results in the endless reproduction of the here-and-now. With specific reference to one of the author's research projects we will demonstrate that if we regard the photograph as a form of question we recondition it to be a frame through which we can re-engage in the project of what-might-become.

Without generalizing, design research has become preoccupied by the pursuit of methods to answer one of the two fundamental questions of any field (Groys 2012: 1)—how can I explain to myself what I am already doing? To add authority to any answer to

this question Donald Schon (1983) is now cited profusely and as a result so much 'reflecting' is now happening that any observer of the current of design research could be 'dazzled'. For it now resembles a mirrored room, or even worse the distorted reflections produced by the hall of mirrors in the sideshows of carnivals. Knowing what I am doing has completely overshadowed the other key question—what needs to be done? The ethnographic turn in design research appears to be attempting to answer a similar question—how do I reveal to myself what I can already see? But just as we don't seem to be able to let go of the celebration of reflection, we now cannot get over the spectacle of documenting the here-and-now. All this produces two questions—how can I imagine what-might-become and if I could represent what-might-become, how do I illustrate what needs to be done? This chapter looks closely at the distorting effect the photograph has had on these questions and design research.

The use of ethnographic research methods in design has taken off in the past two decades and is most prevalent in the area of user-based, participatory or co-design. There are nuanced differences between these areas yet they are all concerned with the observation and/or participation of key stakeholders in the development of the design outcome. More often than not this involves either real or imagined end users. Much of the research effort goes into observing and understanding the contexts of usage that a product, built environment, or service will play out in. This implies a need to engage with the experience users have of the designed world, the world-as-is. Observation has long been used in the field of anthropology, and to a lesser extent sociology, to gain insight into the experiences people have, and the meanings they make of the worlds they

create and inhabit. It is therefore not surprising design research has taken what we call the ethnographic turn**.** This turn is another in design's evolving journey of self-discovery, having already taken similar turns through art and science (Roxburgh & Bremner, 1999). Although we regard the ethnographic turn, and the program of observation derived from it, as an apparently logical shift required to discover the user and their experience, we contend that like these other turns it has occurred with little consideration given to the differences between the intents of ethnography and design. The history of design is typified by the importation of methods and theoretical frameworks from other disciplines (see Dilnot, 1998; Glanville, 1999; Downton, 2003: 35-53). Glanville argues that theory imported into a field without a test of its appropriateness is polemic and that the field becomes confined to what is already understood, making growth beyond these confines unlikely. Furthermore, he contends 'in fields such as design, where emphasis on creativity and the novel is central, such constraints are especially limiting and undesirable' (2005: 8). In this chapter we will argue the fundamental difference between ethnography and design is that the former is primarily descriptive whereas the latter is largely transformative, and the photograph does not describe the transformation. Given this we will then examine and critique the available literature on design's use of the ethnographic method of photo-observation and argue that it is circumscribed by an often-unarticulated descriptive logic that is at odds with design's transformative dimension. We will then proceed to outline a project using photo-observation in design research with specific reference to a project produced for the festival *Glasgow 1999: UK City of Architecture and Design*.

SEEING THE EVIDENCE

The histories of photography and ethnography are inextricably linked and have conditioned one another in very particular ways. Unless this is understood it becomes difficult to see that a programme of design research based upon ethnographic photo-observation is not unproblematic. The discipline of anthropology and the medium of photography both emerged during the mid 19th century and were either the product of, or influenced by scientific thought. Early anthropological fieldwork, using the ethnographic method of direct observation, was heavily informed by theories of biological evolution and the categorisation of species prevalent at the time (Edwards, 1992: 5-6; Harper, 1998: 25). This played out in anthropology in the guise of theories of social evolution that involved the hierarchical categorisation of the human race from civilized to primitive. The first significant pieces of ethnographic field work undertaken—Spencer and Gillen in 1894, Albert Cort Hadden in 1898 and Malinowski in 1922—established the world as an object of study that could be held at a distance, and observed and analysed in an objective manner. Photography was understood and used at the outset then as something that could record objective facts about the world (Kelsey and Stimson, 2008: xii). Because the camera is mechanical, and because of the direct indexical link between the photograph it produces and the scene it photographs, photography was regarded as an objective way of recording the seen world. More than this, Flusser argues, that because the photograph 'is an image produced by apparatuses' (cameras) that are 'the products of applied scientific texts' they are inscribed by the programmatic agenda of conceptual thought (Flusser 2007[1983]: 14). In other words it is not just that photographs appear to present the seen world as is, that we regard them as objective; the very apparatus that produces the photograph conditions us to see them,

and the world through photographs, in a very particular way. That is, the photograph and the reality it purports to depict are conflated as one and the same.

Rather than seeing the photograph as a purely objective device to document aspects of the world-as-is, in 1942 Bateson and Mead believed that photo-observation was integral to the generation of new knowledge (Harper, 1998: 25-26). Their work signalled an epistemological move within anthropology, from an objective view of the world to a subjective view of it. Photography used as a subjective, interpretive tool of observation came in to its own during the 1960s and owes as much to the emergence of critical sociology as it does early 20th century American social documentary photography (Harper, 1998: 28). It was understood that the photo-observer's subjectivity framed any such observation and that the photograph was an intervention into the world to be interpreted. Understanding is arrived at through subjective interpretation.

Geertz (1988) deals with the interpretive dimension of ethnographic social inquiry in detail in articulating what he calls the author function. In an interpretive view of the world we participate actively in constituting reality rather than passively receiving it. This point is significant in relation to design for design actively constitutes aspects of the reality of the world by transforming its material dimensions. It is little wonder then that ethnographic methods appear to be a natural fit for design. However this fit has occurred with little interrogation of the differences that exist between social inquiry, from which the ethnographic method comes, and design. The utility of ethnography in

design has been overwhelmingly premised on the perceived similarities between the two with scant attention paid to those differences.

We will come to the goodness of fit between ethnography and design shortly for it has a bearing upon how we might use photo-observation within design in a way that leverages those similarities yet recognizes and manipulates those differences. The key point that needs to be made here is that despite the shift in social inquiry from an objective science to a form of inquiry that was subjective, both anthropology and sociology have interrogated the relationship between the photograph, reality, the world and knowledge. By contrast design has not—it has simply talked about the utility of the ethnographic method in the design process.

A more radical approach to ethnographic photo-observation is the work of Grimshaw and Ravetz (2005) that draws upon artistic visual practices and 'involves quite different assumptions about the making and presenting of knowledge' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005: 15). Grimshaw is less interested in the discursive production of knowledge through language (the interpretation of meaning of what is observed) and more interested in an exploration of the haptic knowledge generated through the 're-embodiment of the self as the foundation for renewed engagement with everyday life' (Grimshaw 2005: 23). In doing so she recognizes that her ethnographic approach is not concerned with the documentation and interpretation of reality but is involved in the transformation of knowledge and subsequently reality, and is centrally concerned with

understanding what she calls social realities (Grimshaw 2005: 21). However she does not regard her observations of these social realities as a kind of 'simple minded realism, a reflection of life' rather it is a transformational 'an interrogation of it' (Grimshaw 2005: 24). This suggests a conceptual equivalence to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the transformational nature of artistic practice as a form of embodied perception that transforms our understanding of the world and hence our conception of its reality (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 165).

Like Grimshaw, Ravetz explores the relationship between art methods and ethnography and recognizes and conceives social research as being concerned with the 'process of making social objects' that are 'shaped in the creative tension between social experience (participation) and reflexive communication (observation)' (Ravetz 2005: 70). However she is aware that anthropology elevates the social world, the here-and-now, while art privileges the visual imagination and the unreal, or in design terms what-might-be.

The significant point here is that Grimshaw and Ravetz's model of observation is not concerned with the realist photo-documentation of the seen-world readily substituted by the photograph. It is premised on the transformational dimension of observational interrogation, and the gap that this creates between what is observed and how it is observed. This is the gap of imagination that plays between what is seen, what is experienced and what is communicated about that seeing and experience. In anthropology that gap is most often described in words. For design that gap is the space in which we can imagine what-might-become, but only if we recognize it and not

simply substitute the photograph for reality. The Glasgow project, which we will turn to shortly, demonstrates the importance of recognising and manipulating this space.

In suggesting equivalence between arts practice and a radical approach to anthropology the work of Grimshaw and Ravetz offers some conceptually rich pickings for design researchers. While there are apparent similarities there are also subtle and significant differences and these are the differences between the making of meaning (the ethnographic interest in understanding experience and its relationship to knowing) and the meaning of making (the design interest in the experience of making). And while current anthropological understanding generally accepts the premise that in transforming knowledge it transforms our sense of reality, that may or may not have material consequences beyond the transformation of social realities, design is fundamentally concerned with transforming our material reality that may or may not have social consequences.

DESIGNING THE SEEING

Plowman (2003: 36-37) notes that it is generally believed that the pioneering work of Xerox PARC in the 1980s was the first instance of ethnographic methods used in the design process, but before that the HfG Ulm School had 'courses in sociology, and in other humanities and social science subjects' (Margolin 1991). The interest the Ulm school showed in the social sciences was paralleled by Henry Dreyfuss in the USA who published Designing for People (2003 [1955]) in which he advocated that 'experience,

observation and research' are crucial attributes for industrial designers to succeed in what he calls 'the science of appearance' (Dreyfuss 2003[1955]: 65). Dreyfuss provides no theoretical framework for the research outlined, although market research logic prevails, but it is clear that participant observation drawn from the social sciences is regarded as crucial for successful design outcomes. Where photography is discussed it is used as a research method to accurately and realistically depict existing, competing models of products to enable visual analysis (Dreyfuss 2003[1955]: 280). Dreyfuss' approach to both observation, and photography, sees them as providing visual evidence that can be readily and unproblematically substituted for the actual object or experience observed. The photograph and reality are one and the same.

The first attempt to systematically describe a program of design research, Design Methods, also recognized the importance of observation for design. John Chris Jones, a leading figure in Design Methods, argued that once 'efforts are made to observe what is going on, vast quantities of design-relevant information are quickly generated' (Jones 1992[1970]: 236). Jones outlines a number of his design methods that use observation in one form or another. These methods are ethnographic in the sense that they involve direct observation in the field but are often used without concern for the ethnographic focus upon the meaning people give things. Photo-observation itself first gets mentioned as a tool for documenting objects to enable the analysis of the images to search for 'visual inconsistencies' in the object in order for design improvements to be envisaged (Jones 1992[1970]: 209). In this method the photograph is once again taking on the attributes of evidence. Jones also talks about using filmic observation 'to make visible, patterns of behaviour upon which critical design decisions depend'

(1992[1970]: 259). In all of this work the emphasis is on realistic photographic and filmic documentation. The images generated are a form of evidence that are analysed to identify and codify patterns of behaviour that are subsequently transformed into tabulated and more scientific data (Jones 1992 [1970]: 266-267). And we demonstrate later in this chapter how the Glasgow project used photographs to illuminate very different tabulations of experiences.

In an apparent departure from a scientific approach to design, Henry Sanoff is interested in understanding the subjective meanings and experiences users have of their designed environment arguing that designers 'have overlooked the application of social science techniques for acquiring visual information' for design (1991: ix). He presents a series of design case studies that use a range of different visual methods of inquiry, drawn from the social science field of environment-behaviour (E-B) research. These case studies have a strong user-based or participatory design focus and Sanoff argues that the methods facilitate both a deeper understanding of people's perception of their environment and provide an opportunity for a dialogue with the people who use it (1991: xi-xii). Despite Sanoff's interest in extending the E-B agenda to encompass meaning and experience there is a strong quantitative slant to how many of the techniques are implemented and analysed, (Sanoff 1991: 1). Not surprisingly his use of photo-based research methods is premised on the photograph as evidence.

Sanoff's techniques include, for example: multiple sorting - where users sort images

based upon their own criteria (Sanoff 1991: 5-7); categorising visual cues - where users sort photos based upon pre-determined descriptive attributes (Sanoff: 15-20); photo-elicited interviews - in which users are interviewed about their perceptions of environments, using photographs of them as prompts (Sanoff 1991: 34-36); visual questionnaires - which require users to describe supplied photographs and answer questions related to them (Sanoff 1991: 53-56); and visual appraisal - which involves users numerically ranking photographs of buildings to pre-set statements or questions (Sanoff 1991: 56-61). These are by no means all the techniques outlined but are indicative of Sanoff's concern for removing researcher bias from the research process. They also point to the analytical framework that Sanoff privileges in constructing his research and this has some parallels with the work of Jones. Although Jones' and Sanoff's aims may be different, ergonomics versus experience, both use the photograph as evidence from which non-visual data can be extracted and analysed. Sanoff himself believes that 'the information locked in visual content must then be transformed by the observer into a useful, analysable form' (1991: 75).

Zeisel (2005[1984]), like Sanoff, is also concerned with environment behaviour research for design of the built environment. In outlining his conception of design, Zeisel is well aware that the problem/solution paradigm is an oversimplification of the design process. Like Sanoff, Zeisel presents a compelling rationale, supported by substantial case study work, for the E-B design agenda and there is much of value for design practice and theory contained within it. Zeisel argues researchers need to carefully devise research programs 'to increase their control over the consequences of their actions' and that when such an approach is applied to design it is to improve the

quality of design (Zeisel 2005[1984]: 119). He then proceeds to outline a series of criteria to establish and maintain research quality. This approach suggests that the researcher can simply separate themselves from, or minimize their presence within, the systems they are observing and designing in, and is typical of a kind of positivist logic prevalent in early anthropological research. This in turn has implications for the manner in which photo-based research methods are used and suggests once again a view of the photograph as objective evidence.

Photo-based methods are a common tool used in Zeisel's research. In his framework photography is used to document phenomena and behaviour so that there is a high degree of congruence between what is observed and what the photograph looks like. The resultant photographs are evidence of what is observed and are used for analytical purposes. The photograph's powerful claims to evidence of an observed reality are essential requisites when used in such a way. Zeisel's approach is largely about finding proof of emerging hypotheses, yet there is recognition that they can also be generative of insights through recording relationships or patterns of behaviour. However, the significance of any such insight is only established through subsequent objective analysis of the evidence.

The work of Zeisel and Sanoff suggest a largely unproblematic reading of the photographic depiction of the real as evidence and many of their techniques are developed to eliminate misunderstanding and variations of interpretation across

different viewers of the image to sure up the reliability of that evidence. However, Glanville argues that we 'must take responsibility for our observing, our knowing, our acting, our being: for we cannot pass on our observing: it is ours, integrally ours' (Glanville *in* Anderson 2004: 91).

The relationship between the photographic image as evidence and the contrived nature of its codes of representation is something that Strickland explores, albeit in the context of observational cinema (2003: 118-128). Strickland argues that the realist framing of the realist documentary image is an ideological construct and that entertainment cinema, which is total artifice in that it does not document 'real' phenomena, is constructed upon models of realist fictions (Strickland 2003: 124-125). In effect she is arguing that although documentary and entertainment cinema purports to have different intentions, one exploring reality the other creating fictions, they share common realist codes. The point Strickland is making it that the distinction between factual and fictional filmic representations and its bearing on our sense of reality is not as great as one might imagine for 'postmodern theory overturned the old idea of a world whose existence is independent of our representations of it' (Strickland 2003: 125). It is evident that Strickland recognizes, within her own observational practice, that the artificial nature and the aesthetic dimensions of her media, and its modes of representation, are central to how knowledge is developed and design concepts generated. Further underlining this more synthetic or interpretive approach to her research is her belief that observational cinema is 'essentially a manner of revealing rather than a language of telling' (Strickland 2003: 126). Strickland's work in design demonstrates an interest in

exploring the space and slippage between the analytic aspects of looking at evidence and the synthetic aspects of making interpretations through asking questions; in ethnographic terms the making of knowledge of things and in design terms the making of things of knowledge.

QUESTIONING THE IMAGE

What we have been discussing above is that the ethnographic turn to observational research illustrates that gathering information about the everyday is very easy to do because it is everywhere around us. However, once observed and captured (mostly by photographs in design research), the process of transforming that information into a form that can be communicated or put into effect to make 'design' projections presents numerous problems. As we have explained, in the critical discussion above, the observational image of the everyday is not a record of the everyday but a record of the observation.

But perhaps a more immediate problem for observational research has become the overwhelming banality of what is found. In its raw form this information tends to merely depict that which we know. Once classified as 'known' it is therefore considered ordinary and humdrum, less attractive than the seductive flows of information sweeping around us, and unless something is done with this imagery it is easy to classify it as not very interesting. And the everyday is diminishing in interest because it competes against massive, global flows of information that is the ideal context for selling things,

but not necessarily for creating them. Observational imagery then runs into the problem of transforming what is observed into forms that could be considered useful for design, partly because of an unacknowledged – and unchallenged - conflation of the photograph with reality and partly because of this competition. The imagery itself is often difficult to classify using any technique other than polar groupings of similarity versus difference. Without reference points even the differences can begin to look the same. These reference points, we would argue, are best located by regarding the photograph as a record of someone's observation and not the observation itself; considering the photograph as a form of question rather than a statement of apparent fact; and acknowledging the space between what is seen, what is experienced, and what is communicated about that seeing and experience, is the gap of imagination that design must explore. This exploration is impossible when we conflate that space by regarding the photograph as evidence of the reality we observe.

HAVING DISPENSED WITH THE EVIDENCE WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

The project described here took place in Glasgow as part of the Glasgow 1999 festival year and set out to test whether images and descriptions of people's experience of the world-as-found could be communicated to designers, and if so, how designers could work with a depiction/description of this imaginary mental space.

The initial stage of the project was an attempt to picture the everyday experience of people living in Glasgow by asking them to document their observations of this

experience. The resulting survey presented the broadest possible picture of what it means and how it feels to live in Glasgow. The systematic documentation of the context of house and home in Glasgow was intended to allow us to not only look in and see, through an active process of observation, but also to then transform the state-of-affairs we found.

After respondents photographed what they felt made their house into a home and wrote what they had photographed and why they made their choice, they were asked to photograph (if possible) what would make this experience better, and again to write what they had photographed and why. The two-part structure of the research method was designed to produce an identifiable differential between what produces the best experience, and what changes would produce a better experience. This differential about how it feels to live with the world-as-found produced comparative indices for the description of what is called the experience, or mental space, or public imaginary. The tabulated results of what they wrote can be assembled to read as per Table 16.1.

<Insert Table 16.1 Here>

Table 16.1 The experience of home

Next, designers were sent a random selection of the photographs with the tabulated responses. With all the documentation designers were asked to sift through the photographs using whatever organizational method suited them in order to transform the documentation into information that was either personally, commercially, industrially,

or socially useful; adapt the information to appropriate design frameworks; and evaluate the information to project possible future products, services, and living scenarios. In this way they were taking responsibility for their own observations of the images supplied rather than trying to develop an objective overview of them. Their resulting design projections were installed in ten apartments in the Homes for the Future development in Glasgow in 1999. From the ten designs we present four responses to research that is observational but whose ethnography was photographed and written by the observed.

Konstantin Grcic's idea was to assume the role of the observed by selecting ten typical items one would find in any young person's flat in a City like Glasgow, and then incorporate them into the structure of this person's single room (a bed-sit). The objects could be new or second-hand, they had to be affordable for someone with an average income, and in his own words 'no designer furniture, average looking, well considered, but not too cynical.' Given that 37% of people wanted their home to feel bigger his design showed how someone fitting the profile he outlined might really live; how the need for storage, display, and a sense of livable space could be designed to make a space feel bigger (Figure 16.1 left).

A more empirical approach came the architects McKeown Alexander who used the photo survey as a datum for their approach. They felt they were not qualified to attempt to make a physiological reading of the photo records, however they did mark similarities or repeated preoccupation's. For example—in their analysis at least 30% of

the images pictured lounges and living rooms with TVs; approximately 20% provided exterior images, either of houses, extensions to houses and gardens; very few dining areas were shown; and kitchens, bathrooms, bedrooms were shown in equal weight. Their basic summary of the above observations suggested that generally people were aware of their holistic domestic environments, but present a bias on a particular aspect or space within that environment, which makes the issue of emphasis subjective and dangerous for the designer to assess. They then said the conclusions from the returned surveys provided them with enough evidence that informed their proposal, i.e. the need to express individuality through objects and furniture; the need to project/recreate interior ambience; and the desire to create an illusory sense of light and space (Figure 16.1 right).

<Insert Figure 16.1 here>

Figure 16.1. 'Glasgow Flat', designed by Konstantin Grcic, 1999 **(left)**; 'Untitled installation', designed by McKeown Alexander, 1999 **(right)**.

The partnership One Foot Taller thought that even a cursory look at catalogues of living room furniture showed an abundance of very large lounge chairs and sofas, and the photographic survey of Glasgow homes showed the same. They were interested in the paradox of how the living room still dominates people's 'imagery' and 'imaginary' (mental image) of their home, how the furniture was still so large, and yet how everyone appeared to want more space. Respecting all these demands, they designed a chair that was more or less the same size as the typical chair depicted in the photos, but all the

non-essential structure was removed to leave the 'essence' of comfort (Figure 16.2 left). They hoped this would allow the apparent attachment to big armchairs to be more compatible with the pressure of small living spaces.

The British designer Tom Dixon appeared to be intrigued how people described their desire for a sense of spaciousness in the research (a light/space correlation), so he decided to take some products he had already manufactured (domestic lights) and use them to demonstrate how they could be arranged according to the need to balance space and light (Figure 16.2 right). And they were assembled in this way so they did not prescribe how they should be used, rather how they might be lived with.

<Insert Figure 16.2 here>

Figure 16.2 'Untitled installation', designed by One Foot Taller, 1999 **(left);** 'Untitled installation', designed by Tom Dixon, 1999 **(right)**.

ENLARGING THE QUESTION

Having asked what experiences make a house into a home we then sought to illustrate the public experience of a city. Using the same method of photograph and questionnaire we asked the people of Glasgow to describe what they liked and what would make that experience better in an expanding radius from house to street to neighbourhood, to suburb, to City centre. This time the results of what they wrote could be read as per

Table 16.2.

<Insert Table 16.2 here>

Table 16.2. The experience of Glasgow

No design response to this information was pursued because the information was sufficiently descriptive of the 'mental space' of the City to be assembled into an exhibition. A detailed analysis was given to the City for its planning department to guide future design decisions, but in brief the findings showed people preferred increased social and community facilities to comfort and security combined (the law and order invasion of public space is clearly more about fear than livability); the City's architecture was three times more important than the architecture of their houses (a note to Council to care for the city); they perceived the most unattractive aspects of the City to always be closer to their home (pride has a radius); parks and gardens were seen as a dimension of the street (inside and outside overlap); they felt it was twice as important to promote the sense of belonging than to improve the city (more desire to blur the boundaries); and they felt twice as sentimental about their houses as they did about the city (change gets harder as you radiate from the centre). Despite a very dynamic set of possibilities for modifying the experience of the City, the sum of all changes (like compared to better) equated in a not surprising conclusion that they would change very little about their City.

The observational research detailed in these two related projects represents the attempt to find a method to illustrate experience rather than document the here-and-now. This research questioned the description of experiences (the search for meaning), and the photographic illustration of these experiences (the meaning of the image). Having captured evidence of experiences, the manner in which these experiences were described for the purpose of design needed to be indicative of how people felt, but not prescriptive of how matters might be changed to enhance those feelings. The research did not purport to design peoples' experiences for them, rather it illustrated experiences of the world-as-already-designed to add to the flows of information design uses in its relentless re-design of everything around us.

That the observer carried out the photo-observation of their own world illustrated not only what people saw, but the questionnaire gave us insights into why they saw it as significant in their experience of their home and City. What these projects present is the case that for design, the most viable observational goal is not patterns of use, but the 'mental space' of living. By asking people to use a camera to complete a questionnaire, the pictures they take describe the actuality of their experience of the designed-world. Asking them to do this again, to use a camera to complete a questionnaire to depict how this might become a better experience, renders design possibilities. What this tells us is that photo-observation is better used to abstract experience rather than visualize the construction of the world-as-found.

CONCLUSION

Where the art of design has led to the myth of creativity and the science of design has led to the myth of technical rationality, the sociology of design (of which the ethnographic turn is a part of) has led to what we now call the myth of proximity. In an effort to overcome the limitations of both the artistic and scientific framing of design, design has turned to ethnography to understand the users of design and the experiences they have of the designed world so that we might better give them what they want. In getting so close, through ethnography, to the reality that users inhabit we have lost perspective of the abstract and transformative dimensions of design, as well as the abstract and transformative dimensions of experience. The perspective we have lost is critical distance, which is not the same as an objective stance. In other words because the epistemology and methods of photo-inquiry used in design's ethnographic turn have an unchallenged realist framing we are more likely to replicate the seen world as it exists as yet more banality. That is, the project of photographing the conditions of the world-as-found in the name of research, turns the project of design into a conditional image. The myth of proximity is the promise that the closer we get to the user's reality the more likely we can give them the reality they want, when in fact what we produce are images of the world that increasingly look the same. In this chapter we have presented the case that the habitual way we 'see' photographically conditions the evidence. And the ethnographic turn in design research, dependent on the photograph as evidence, is undermined because the image is now nothing but evidence of itself.

In the Glasgow projects the photograph assisted in framing the questions—what is this

image and why is the object of this experience meaningful to you. The photograph in this way is a prompt to observation, not evidence itself. It is about framing, perspective, and distance—not about evidence. If regarded as evidence the photograph must be accepted on its own conditions. If regarded as evidence we are conditioned to accept as evidence of the as-found. If regarded as a way of asking questions it re-conditions observer and observed—the as-found becomes as-if.

Through careful use, observational research can be a very different study of relationships between people and the artificial world. This focus might link it with the study of social ecology, but in this relationship we are concerned with the role of design ideas in the production of this artificiality. Observing abstractions of experience creates pictures of the pathways and messages that convey individual experiences of past design decisions. Incorporating descriptions of this can enrich relationships in the future.

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