

EXPLOITING?



REACTING?



RESPONDING?



PHOTOGRAPHY FROM "THOUGHTLESS ACTS" USED WITH PERMISSION

As a leader of the innovative design studio IDEO, Jane Fulton Suri sees the world differently. She shares 10 techniques that will help you pay attention, take note and devise the best creative solution for any project.

BY ROBERTA CRUGER



→ **Jane Fulton Suri sees the ordinary in an extraordinary way.** One of her innovative methods for inspiring ideas—observation—is illustrated in her power-packed little book “Thoughtless Acts? Observations on Intuitive Design.” Compiled with her colleagues at the award-winning design firm IDEO, the book is, on the surface, simply pages of photographs showing unremarkable people in their everyday lives. Look closer, though, and you’ll discover a fascinating collection of snapshots that speaks volumes about the ways we accidentally and intuitively design solutions to problems we encounter daily.

As IDEO’s chief creative director, Suri brings a background in psychology and architecture to the firm’s innovative practice. Perhaps more important, she brings her eyes. In this interview, Suri addresses the cues revealed in “Thoughtless Acts?” and unlocks key insights into the creative process.

The seed for your book was planted as you watched kids at the Red Road public housing development in Glasgow, Scotland, improvise a playground by swinging on doors. Did this inspiration come from your training in architecture or psychology?

Who knows about the genesis of an idea? This was an iconic bringing together of both of those perspectives. It's about the way people behave and what motivates their behavior in the real world.

The idea for the book started with a clunky Polaroid camera I was happy to discover I still had. At the time, I was involved in a process similar to the one we carry out now in our design work at IDEO. I was trying to understand the relationship between children and families in different kinds of home environments. That photograph brought it all together.

Your photos capture everyday situations, like using a window reflection as a mirror, placing an index finger as a bookmark and hooking sunglasses onto a shirt collar. It got me noticing actions I take for granted—using knickknacks for paperweights, an ear as a pencil holder, doorknobs to hang bags. Why did you title your book “Thoughtless Acts?”

It came about for a couple of reasons. It's a play on the word *thoughtless*—without deep conscious thought—not *careless*. These are actions, prompted by our relationship with the world, that seem automatic or intuitive. The idea is about stopping to really look at these things. We like the term because part of the paradox of this whole issue is that they're very mundane. In using that phrase as a title, it makes you ask, “Why

would someone make a book of thoughtless acts?” It makes you look twice.

Why the question mark?

I'm a big one about question marks! It asks, “How thoughtless are they, anyway?” Some have been thought through. People develop little systems, like tucking letters in the door to be mailed. That didn't happen by accident; it's become a habit. It's a different kind of thoughtless than the example of momentarily turning a piece of paper into a funnel.

You say that everyone is a designer. We devise clever responses, using our bodies and objects in ad hoc ways of making-do to answer our needs. Your photos actually make us think twice.

Exactly. The question mark is also about asking people to speculate and to not be right. To be curious—as opposed to being definitive. We're not used to looking at images and not knowing why. Pictures are supposed to have captions or explanations.



10 TECHNIQUES FOR OBSERVATION

The book “Thoughtless Acts? Observations on Intuitive Design” illuminates the value of carefully, consciously looking at the endless ways we interact with our surroundings. Through images, text and notes, the little volume prompts more questions than it answers. Author Jane Fulton Suri offers these approaches to develop a practice of observation that can contribute to your design process:

1 Seek inspiration from everyday interactions. Look for ad hoc ways we behave in real life. Examples: warming hands on a mug of coffee, using a dish towel to protect the keyboard.

2 Disrupt the normal flow. Develop a discipline of witnessing ordinary things by going out in the world. Examples: using the mouth to hold things, hooking an umbrella on an arm.

3 Document behavior and focus on action. Use a camera and notebook to observe a variety of related situations in natural settings.

4 Seek out extreme situations. Pursue experiences beyond what you know or live in every day in order to see anew.

5 Invite curiosity. Ask “naive” questions that reach beyond automatic assumptions. Examples: How “thoughtless” is this behavior? What motivates this?

6 Reveal what is intuitive. Be conscious of subconscious, spontaneous reactions. Examples: pulling a door to open it instead of pushing it, walking in step with others.

Of course, there are some comments in the back, but the intent of the book is that the world is like this—it doesn't have captions. The world is full of these little instances. If you stop to look, there's something to think about.

Could you speak to why observation is a valuable resource for design?

Observation is the idea of not just listening to what people tell you about their experience, but looking at how they behave in relation to things. It's about looking at the action and noticing what people actually do, as opposed to asking them to reflect on it, which will be some sort of approximation. They iron out a lot of the interesting things in order to give a coherent description of their behavior. So there's an important piece in the power of just looking.

Could you describe how we can look deeply and see beyond our assumptions?

It's all about how you look, where you look and what

you do with what you've seen. Do it in a very deliberate way. Look in the right places to see the behavior you need to see. Look for conditions around the whole experience that might not be typical—in essence, look at more extreme situations that might provide insight into things that could be relevant for a general audience, to highlight certain kinds of activity, feelings and behavior.

What's an example of observing an extreme situation?

It's very project-dependent, so it's hard to talk about in the abstract. Say we're designing a washing machine; we might visit someone who works professionally washing others' clothes or someone who's responsible for laundering delicate items, a place where water is a precious resource or where you see people dealing with super dirtiness—situations that might be invisible otherwise. Specific instances allow us to see patterns and themes. We're looking for boundary conditions around the whole experience that might not be typical.



7 Uncover the emotional experience. Connect to feelings to determine responses we intend to elicit through design or communication. Examples: the ways people stand in lines or create personal space on park benches.

8 Tune into cultural patterns. Find meaning and themes in various situations. Examples: the ways people conform in an elevator, convey messages or dispose of litter.

9 Tap resources. Inform the experience with input from clients, experts and the experienced.

10 Seek flexible and enduring solutions. Not everything requires a makeover. Sometimes simple is best.

“Let's get really mindful about the process. Be aware of what's been hitherto fairly automatic. Let's become more conscious.”

JANE FULTON SURI



Why do you emphasize focusing on action and evidence?

In the book, there are images of people, while other images are evidence of things people have done. All these things are tied together—the objects and how they imply or provoke behaviors and emotional connotations. As designers, we can change the objects in that cycle. If we understand the emotional or behavioral responses, we're better informed about how to change them.

Which details should we look for and what kinds of questions should we ask to heighten our awareness?

Why are the elements in this space and place organized the way they are? How did this situation come to be like that? And what's the emotion involved?

We did a project with an airline about the experience of economy flying. One of things we did was take our clients to the Department of Motor Vehicles in the morning and to a spa in the afternoon. It was all about understanding the nature of experiences and what details and features create what kind of response. We took them out of the airline experience they're in every day. Look at the environment, how it impacts what people are doing and how they're feeling in the space.

You arranged the photos in "Thoughtless Acts?" by category, such as: Adapting? Reacting? Conforming? How can these behaviors be applied to design?

With a question mark above our heads. With the sense that there isn't a correct answer. The notes in "Thoughtless Acts?" are footnotes. They suggest, "This is a question you could ask." There's nothing definitively telling what's happening in the picture. It frustrates some people. It's about the need to recognize patterns among multiple examples and then interpret them as driving design principles.

Why is seeing the ordinary worthwhile?

The key is seeing the ordinary afresh. There are people trained to do that—for example, anthropologists. But



there are also ways of going into situations that you don't understand very well and watching carefully.

Self-documenting is another technique that we use. Keep a diary of every time you use a washing machine, for instance (since we were talking about laundry), and take photos of it. Let's get really mindful about the process. Be aware of what's been hitherto fairly automatic. Let's become more conscious.

You suggest making observation a discipline, like a practice. What methods do you recommend?

It's interesting to think of it as a practice, like doing yoga. Another idea is to look at analogous situations. Here's a dramatic example I often use to illustrate this: We were working on a project that involved hospital emergency rooms. Part of the project team went to a NASCAR race, where there are a number of things that are highly likely to go wrong, which is equivalent to an emergency room. There are insights to be gained from looking at team collaboration and organization and equipment in NASCAR pits that make you see emergency-room situations in a different way and even prompt direct ideas. That's another way of becoming aware of patterns in behavior without looking directly.

How do you interpret these patterns and apply the behaviors to design?

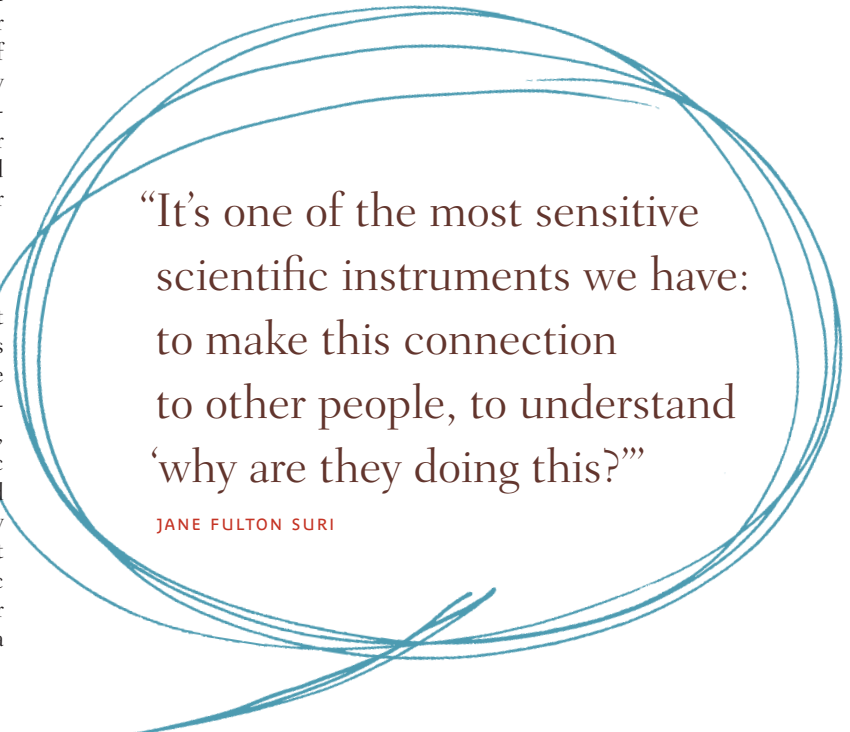
I think of work we've done with Bank of America, with the debit-card program called Keep the Change. Every time you use the card, it rounds up to the nearest dol-

lar and moves the difference into your savings account. Your debit card helps you save.

The pattern came from observations of people struggling between their desire to spend and their desire to save, and noticing a number of people in different circumstances rounding up on bill-paying or gift-giving. One particular story that's a small icon of this pattern involves a woman who rounded up utility bills—it gave her a way of feeling safe and comfortable. That became a powerful image for the idea for our financial product. The design principle involved aligning people's desire for a sense of control over their finances with the tools we provide for them.

Is this related to what you call “empathic” observation?

The critical component is to not just notice what people are doing, but to really try to understand what's driving it. You can see behavior, stand back and be quite objective about it, but because we're not just scientists with clipboards, we can also get a sense, a feel, for *why*. Often, we do it automatically. We're empathic individuals. We have a capability to understand and connect with other people—which science has largely told researchers to avoid because it's not objective. But I contend that it's one of the most sensitive scientific instruments we have: to make this connection to other people, to understand “why are they doing this?” at a deeper level.



“It’s one of the most sensitive scientific instruments we have: to make this connection to other people, to understand ‘why are they doing this?’”

JANE FULTON SURI

Can you address another ideation technique you recommend, rapid prototyping?

The earlier you can show a rough idea and express it in a tangible way—to expose your thinking—the earlier you can get feedback either from others or yourself. That will help you eradicate bad ideas, see the value in good ideas and evolve them more quickly. Have some faith that the prototype doesn't have to show every element of the design. Let yourself off the hook. It's not going to be right. In fact, it's not even helpful if it is. In the observation process, we're looking for patterns, themes or categorizations. And the earlier we do it, the easier it is to change, because we've invested less in it and we've got more time.

In the text section of the book you describe the numerous benefits of observing people's behavior, from inviting curiosity to finding meaning.

It's about, “Don't dismiss this as not worth doing. Value this.” At one level, it's to say to buyers of design, “This is something that designers will do and *should* do, so create space and opportunity for them to do it. Don't just give them a nice room in the office to do their design work. Enable this.”

A lot of the work we do at IDEO is highly collaborative with our clients, who are often top executives within their companies. We've found it incredibly valuable to expose them to this process, and to help them see their business with a new perspective.

IDEO's design teams integrate designers, engineers and social scientists. How is this collaboration helpful?

People think that design is about making things and that research is about taking things apart to understand and analyze them. I'm trying to say that design is about that, too. It's very important to me to emphasize the fact that IDEO is not a research organization. We do some things that look like research because we're designing. Research and design are not different disciplines. It's important that we understand that design involves tasks that look like research.

So, observation is a creative process for designers, writers, clients—for everyone?

I think that designers observe all the time and are possibly more engaged in it than other professionals. They're aware of sensory experience. But I don't know that it's consciously articulated. Think holistically about what design involves. Some of it involves being aware, bringing perspectives from experience to bear, and checking out your ideas against reality. That's all about design—the verb, *to design*. [HOW](#)

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