

Chapter 5

Calibrating Your Cultural Compass

When you want to know how and why people do the things they do, the best people to learn from are the doers themselves, and the best place to learn is where the doing gets done. This is the simple premise of design research. It's a state of mind as much as it is a practice, and it holds whether you're by yourself for an hour or have a team of five people working with you for a month. The more experience you have, the more likely it is that you can find something that shapes the way you and others think and ultimately changes your and their courses of action.

In an increasingly connected world there's a temptation to think that a nuanced understanding of people and places can be found online, through social media accounts, self-documentation, street views, and a number of services that put a stream of data out there—where consumers are, what they are listening to, what brands they like, and so on. But these are only the crumbs on the surface of the rich, deep, multilayered casserole of human experience, and the only way to slice straight through it is to travel and be *in it*. “Going native” is hardly the exclusive domain of anthropologists. Although they have the luxury of spending weeks, months, or even years getting acclimated to a new culture, even the briefest dip in the contextual-awareness pool can yield insights and inspiration.

In previous chapters I've highlighted new ways of understanding behavior through the lenses of several broad social constructs and the technologies that facilitate or impede them. Now I'd like to shift focus to the context in which these forces are at play—not just *how* to look, but *where* to look. Over the course of this chapter I'll outline a handful of techniques for conducting what I call “rapid cultural calibration”—not only putting yourself in the local mind-set but also putting local phenomena into global perspective, implicitly and sometimes explicitly. I frequently use these techniques to give team members a sound basis for understanding the more stringent data they collect via formal research.

Rapid cultural calibration can take the form of a stroll at dawn or a rush-hour subway ride; a visit to a barbershop, a train station, or the local outpost of a global chain restaurant; or even a slight pause for contemplation at the sight of signage. Used in conjunction with more structured techniques such as in-depth interviews, surveys, and home visits—and when applied in multiple neighborhoods, cities, or countries—rapid cultural calibration can help deepen your understanding of a new culture and compare it with your own and others you've visited. Each calibration session can take as little as thirty minutes, or stretch as long as half a day (though if you were so inclined, you could do them *ad infinitum*, but in that case they wouldn't be particularly rapid).

Waking Up with the City

Across the globe, the best time to observe a city is around the crack of dawn and the hours that follow. It's not that the afternoon or night doesn't reveal things that can't be found at other times, but that the start of the day tends to be more consistent and more regimented than the day's end. For those of us trying to soak up local nuances, it's easier to observe more people in a shorter space of time as the city finds its rhythm to the tune of the morning commute.

Every city and season is slightly different, but the “waking up with the city” exercise typically starts around 4 a.m.* on a weekday. The ideal neighborhood is walkable, includes a mix of both residential and retail spaces, and broadly reflects the types of demographic target of the study in question. These trips work best when local team members can pair up with the visiting team to discuss observations from a cross-cultural vantage point. Sometimes it takes a bleary-eyed rickshaw, taxi, tuk-tuk, boda-boda, or bicycle ride to transport the team to the right part of town.

Over the course of the morning, the neighborhoods slowly reveal themselves. This often starts with the infrastructural support: shop deliveries, road sweepers, repair, waste disposal, and any other services that need to be taken care of before the influx of pedestrian and vehicular traffic makes these tasks more

difficult. A simple operation like waste collection can reveal patterns of behavior that occur inside the home. In cities like Tokyo and Seoul there are discrete days for recycling materials such as tins, cardboard, plastics, and organic materials, and there is significant social pressure to conform to the rules of what items are put where and when. This presorted recycling provides a window into what products people are consuming in a given area and a ringside view of electronics recycling, since these require a special permit and are placed to one side. In parts of London and San Francisco, it's generally fine for larger furniture such as chairs, cupboards, or beds to be placed by the curb, on the assumption that someone on the street will come along and claim it. Compare this with Old Delhi, where a rudimentary bed frame on the street might be used where it lies, still occupied by its sleeper(s) in the early hours.

In residential areas, you'll find locals engaged in their prework activities of choice. In a city like Tokyo, this often includes joggers in running regalia and large-dog walkers (smaller dogs are far more visible in the city at other parts of the day, and tend to be exercised in closer proximity to homes). In New Delhi, the local equivalent is power walkers and joggers who congregate in small patches of park dressed in what most nonlocals would assume is office attire (at least for men—slacks and a shirt, with sneakers being the tip of the hat to Western notions of appropriate exercise gear), and where the only dogs will be strays on the street. A second-tier Chinese city such as Hangzhou takes a very different tack, with local exercise very much geared around bringing the local elderly community out into public squares and other spaces for group exercise activities, ranging from tai chi to ballroom dancing—all to sounds emanating from car-battery-powered mobile speakers. By 6 a.m. in Bangkok you will have already missed the hardcore athletes who use the coolest hours of the night for training.

In the hours before retail businesses open, you might notice how people and businesses in the community protect themselves overnight with, for instance, shutters and locks—conventions that might give you some sense of how this particular neighborhood deals with threats of vandalism or theft. And, of course, the absence of such conventions can be just as enlightening.

Some businesses open with a bang, while others, particularly those whose owners and employees have more local connections to the community, come to life more slowly. Even while the lights warm up and the “closed” signs remain unflipped, a local baker's shop in London might keep the door wedged open for ventilation and serve a loyal customer who pops his head around the door, a practice that speaks to established relationships and situations in which rules (opening and closing times) are broken and by whom. That may be contrasted elsewhere by the all-or-nothing rattle of a chain store grill being pulled up to announce that they are officially open. These simple rituals offer a sense of the strength of social and commercial relationships.

As the morning unfolds, the street starts to bustle with more energy and more people. You get to watch the first wave of commuters leave their homes and start the trek across the city to their jobs. You see how kids get to school, whether they wear uniforms, and whether they travel alone, in groups, or with a parent. All of these details say a lot about levels of trust in a neighborhood or city. You also get a glimpse of breakfasting behaviors: what foods people line up for, what kinds of people eat on the street, and whether they eat in a fixed place or on the go. Morning markets are far more vibrant than ones later in the day.

By 8 or 9 a.m., you should have a much better sense of how the city starts its day than you'll ever be able to gather in your hotel's lobby (although there's much to be said for people-watching there, too). At this juncture, I like to bring the whole team together for a recap over breakfast of ginger tea, congee, bacon rolls, or whatever the locale serves up, before heading back to our accommodation to rest up a bit before heading out for the rest of the day's research.

Ride Local

You can never understand the stresses and pains a city's inhabitants feel until you've felt the worst of its commute. The demands of punctuality pack more pressure into morning commutes than evening ones, thus magnifying the impact of any obstacles that crop up along the way. London favors the expensive-slow-and-unreliable commute. Cairo does it packed-noisy-and-hot. Tokyo's efficiency is on par with its density, and if you're lucky enough to join the Keio Line into Shinjuku Station during rush hour in the

rainy season you can appreciate the spatial dynamics, texture, and scent of a sardine can. In Tokyo, if a commuter train is delayed by more than a few minutes, late notes are handed out to commuters to present to their office, evidence of both the infrequency of this event and the traditionally hierarchical nature of authority in companies. And Bangkok, despite the very effective MRT (Metropolitan Rapid Transit) cruising over the city, still does a mean gridlock.

In Los Angeles, car commuters time their slog to work against the telltale red lines on their in-car navigation systems. In Beijing, this story has evolved: everyone knows that the entire city will be covered in red lines for a certain duration, and they simply plan their drive to include work activities such as scheduling important calls. It turns out being able to plan ahead for a predictable commuter experience is a big part of quality of life, even if it means planning ahead for sitting in traffic.

What are the modes of transport people use to get from where they live to where they study or work? What are the environmental conditions—heat, humidity, and density? How smooth is the ride? How even is the road? What is the likelihood of being able to sit versus being forced to stand? What kinds of activities does that space afford at each stage of the journey? How much does it cost, and how do people pay? What activities are considered acceptable and unacceptable in each space?

These are the sorts of questions that come up when our teams venture into the melee of the daily commute, and the answers are incredibly important in understanding research participants' lives. In the span of most in-depth interviews, the discussion of commuting might last only a minute or two, but by experiencing a city's commute for yourself you gain a better sense of the mental and physical state in which people arrive for work or school in the morning and back home in the evening.

If you're trying to understand people's motivations, think about the different frames of mind they could be in if they'd just spent thirty minutes in gridlock on the 405 in Los Angeles compared with a packed but highly efficient subway ride in Tokyo or Singapore. These are fundamentally different experiences that affect everything from scheduling business meetings to making phone calls or sending messages. China is already the world's largest car market and is growing at a fair pace, and snail's-pace traffic is already the norm.

How would a Chinese in-car experience be designed differently when the driver has significantly more time to interact with the display? Or when the hassle of driving and parking reaches the point that it makes more sense to hire a dedicated driver with a very different level of education to the owner? Or when the local shy-distance between vehicles (the mentally comfortable space that we prefer to have when negotiating the road with other vehicles) is measured in single-digit inches? The opportunities flow out of the observations and firsthand experiences.

Long-Distance Travel, sans the Travel

Airports, train stations, and intercity bus stations are renowned among people-watchers (of both the professional and dilettante varieties) for the diverse crowds that pass through their halls. Beyond the broad range of fashion sensibilities and group dynamics you might find in these places, you'll also find a host of opportunities to calibrate to the local culture.

Stations for medium- to long-distance travel exist in every city and support a similar range of activities, which make them ripe for cross-cultural comparisons. Some particularly revealing behaviors (in terms of cultural variance) to look for include queuing behaviors, payment options at shops and kiosks, the sale and consumption of entertainment media for the trip, snack and beverage preferences, and the use of personal technologies in waiting areas.

Even the simplest piece of infrastructure, the waiting area, can speak volumes about the local culture. In India there will be one waiting room for men and women, and another for women and children only; in the United Kingdom you'll find one waiting room for all comers; in Japan it's mostly the same, but with the likelihood of a separate smoking room nearby; and in China, where one might expect egalitarianism to rule, you will likely see three separate waiting rooms—one that's open for all, another for military

personnel, and a third for VIPs who are willing to pay a small fee for access or whose credit card or bank provide the service as a value-added offering.

Travel hubs, as potential targets for high-profile terror attacks, also tend to reveal norms and expectations about security (or security theater) and the level of government suspicion toward its populace, from the presence of armed guards and sniffer dogs to the use of ID cards, restrictions on passenger movement, and whether bags are scanned on entry (as today they are at many long-distance Chinese train stations). As sensitive spaces, travel hubs are also good places for researchers (or voyeurs) to practice rapidly and discreetly capturing photos and video, and in some cases to practice negotiating with security authorities once detained. Places to leave things (for example, lockers, waste bins, and lost-and-found) are likely absent in a country learning to live with a sustained bombing campaign. As you might expect for a city in a country that has been at war since the turn of the century, it's no surprise that New York remains one of the more paranoid places on the planet, only trumped by the recently seceded Juba in South Sudan.* Even if locals the world over don't agree with the reasons behind the security, they very quickly become used to its norms, making it harder (for them) to spot opportunities or outliers.

Some airports are more interesting than others. The now-defunct Dubai Terminal 2 served a range of destinations including Kabul, Kish, Kandahar, Baghdad, and Mogadishu, with burly contractors, NGO staff, wealthy local businessmen, and con artists milling around check-in gates to lively destinations—the kind of place where you smile when a flight is delayed and you're handed an opportunity to watch and learn.

The Hairdresser, the Barbershop

Every community has some form of social hub where people come together, hang out, and catch up on gossip—effectively a stock market trading on social currency. In many communities, that hub is the hairdresser or barbershop. It would be difficult to design a space more conducive to engaging in social interaction: somewhere to sit and wait; neither too quiet nor too noisy; lots of mirrors for scanning the room and catching facial expressions; a task that can take twenty minutes to an hour to complete; and where the focus is on the interaction between the barber or hairdresser and the client, rather than the usual distractions of mobile phones or otherwise. For the price of a cut or shave, that seat is as much yours as any local's, and once you're in it you have as much right to steer the conversation as anyone in the room. Gender aside, almost anyone can walk through the doors and be served. I usually try to hit a different barber every day for a shave, and on a few occasions I've gone to two in the same day.*

Through these conversations, you can figure out the best places to go to and explore attitudes on pretty much any topic under the sun, from sports teams to the appropriate local moves for men and women to pick someone up, to the level of corruption in government. It's also a good way to find leads on people to interview who know the most about how the community has changed and can connect you to other social connectors. Think of it as hyperlocal search with directions and personal connections built in. Pay for a fresh blade, figure out where you want the conversation to go, and enjoy the ride.

Breaching Behaviors

There was a time when it was unacceptable for a gentleman to go out in public without wearing a hat. And there was a time when the idea of walking around town and blocking out the sounds of the city with headphones and music was considered outlandish. The notion of sharing the minutiae of everyday life with complete strangers would have been considered a sign of a demented mind. But perceptions, and social norms, change. It's not always directly evident what norms are in play, as they can vary between social classes, groups, times, and places and can even appear to be contradictory. Taking a drink in one context can be as antisocial as declining the offer of a drink in another.

A firsthand exploration of the line between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” can be both nerve-racking and intellectually rewarding. It's also a great tool for uncovering issues that might negatively affect adoption of a particular product or service, and to test the malleability of the social norms in question. The greater the affront caused by a small act of impoliteness, the harder and faster the unwritten rule.

The most famous breaching experiment was conducted in 1974 by Stanley Milgram and his Yale students, who tested the unwritten “first-come, first-served” seating rule on New York subways by approaching passengers and asking them for their seats. Surprisingly, 68 percent of passengers obliged. Ironically, the experiment seemed to cause more pain for the experimenters tasked with crossing the social boundary than for the people who gave up their seats. “I was afraid I was going to throw up,” said one of the students recalling the experience. Milgram, in an interview with *Psychology Today*, described the deep anxiety and discomfort he went through upon his first crack at the experiment: “The words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge.” After scolding himself and mustering the strength to ask for a seat, his anxiety turned to shame. “Taking the man’s seat, I was overwhelmed by the need to behave in a way that would justify my request,” he said. “My head sank between my knees, and I could feel my face blanching. I was not role-playing. I actually felt as if I were going to perish.”

Breaching doesn’t always have to be an act of emotional masochism, and in certain high-risk situations (especially where armed guards are involved) it may not be worthwhile to put your safety on the line. But there is much empathic understanding to be gained from breaching, and there are many ways to test the impact of crossing a line, from role-play within the team to staged situations out in the field to small impromptu interventions when you sense the possibility of an enlightening experience. Breaching activities can include: jumping a line; talking loudly on a mobile phone in close quarters with strangers, such as in an elevator or train; placing a pile of cash on a dining table during a meal; or wearing a nonworking prototype of a potential new product like video-player sunglasses and acting out the user experience in public (all of which I and/or my team members have done on recent research studies).

The International Language of “Lovin’ It”

It might seem contradictory to the sentiment of this book to travel halfway around the world to visit a McDonald’s, but the value of the experience has little to do with the flavor of the food and much to do with the tastes of the local clientele.

Of all our activities, eating is probably the most deeply engrained in our psyche, culturally grounded in an incredibly diverse set of assumptions we learn from childhood: from what we consider “normal” food to how we’re supposed to prepare it, purchase it, eat it, and share it. Regardless of your opinion on the menus and business practices at multinational restaurant chains, the very nature of the industry and its commercial sustainability is predicated on figuring out how to appeal to the nuanced mass sensibilities in every market, across a huge spectrum of cultures.

International chains are therefore valuable reference points for calibration: heavily frequented by younger locals (and in many instances considered regional rather than international enterprises), with tailored offerings and branding elements interspersed among the global hallmarks. The fact that you can find a McDonald’s in more than thirty thousand locations in the world means you can compare everything in one country’s McDonald’s—the customers, the food, the menus, the decor, and the behaviors within and around it—with any other’s. By thinking through its design decisions, you can see how a multinational brand has tailored its offerings to a particular setting and culture.

While many chains, particularly fast food, may be considered down-market establishments in developed countries, they’re often considered aspirational in developing markets, with luxury amenities like guaranteed air-conditioning and consistently well-maintained restrooms.

Take a McDonald’s in Mumbai: the easiest difference to spot compared with one in, say, Paris is in the menu—half of which is vegetarian. The McAloo Tikki, a potato-, peas-, and bread-based patty between two buns, reigns supreme sales-wise, alongside local equivalents of signature items, such as the (big, but not Big) Maharaja-Mac, a double layer of chicken breast with gooey cheese, lettuce, and tomato sandwiched between its buns. Unsurprisingly, for a country with a high percentage of Hindus (for whom cows are sacred) and Muslims (who don’t eat pork), the packaging clearly indicates vegetarian food, with a green dot in a green square, and nonvegetarian food, with a brown dot in a brown square.* The restaurant also contains two completely separated kitchens, one for preparing meat and the other for vegetarian foods, with utensils and staff kept separate as well.

As a high-volume fast-food joint, McDonald's tends to invest early in infrastructure that can shave seconds off a transaction time, so you're likely to see what payment options the masses there have most recently adopted. Out in the restaurant, you can observe group dynamics and ranges of distribution, as well as imagery depicting the corporate interpretations of local youth aspirations; in one particular McDonald's in China, I noticed an image with smiling, socially engaged teens on laptops, accompanied by the word *modern* spelled out in English.

In a more developed market such as Japan, twenty-four-hour McDonald's restaurants are often the overnight accommodation of choice for homeless people and those waiting for the public transport to start. For the price of a cup of coffee, they can rest their heads on tabletops undisturbed.

Reading the Signs

Ubiquitous as it may be, signage is often ignored by passersby, with the exception of certain life-and-death situations. But for the avid observer wanting to get a read on the urban environment, signs, and the underlying motivations that brought them into being, can say a great deal about social behavior and value conflicts in public spaces.

Urban signs come in many flavors: directions, street signs, a handwritten note regarding a lost pet, another note announcing a found set of keys. But the ones that can be most revealing about current and changing societal assumptions are of the "do this" and "don't do that" variety.

Official do-don't signs put up by the local authorities often reflect a stress point between existing behaviors and the preferences of the greater community, or at least the decision-makers who mandate the signage. "Don't litter" signs are a clear response to the persistent issue of littering and can be found all over the world. The "no fireworks" signs in China are a response to the long-standing practice of igniting fireworks to celebrate a birth, death, business opening, or holiday, a tradition that has come under scrutiny because of the risk of fire, quite famously after the blaze that engulfed part of the China Central Television (CCTV) complex in Beijing during the 2009 Chinese New Year celebration. The crackdown also reflects a shift from low-rise housing, where the noise might affect only the residents of a dozen or so homes, to high-rise apartment blocks with acoustic properties that ensure the noise from a single celebration will be heard by hundreds of families.

The mere existence of a sign reveals that whatever issue it pertains to is important enough for someone, presumably an authority on the matter, to invest time and energy to discuss the possibility of a formal or informal ban with other people in the know, commission production of the sign (or urge someone else to rubber-stamp it), and have it installed. That someone has either the legal or moral right to put up a sign in a given location reveals standards and assumptions about who is allowed to do so.

In most instances, these signs aren't put in place to issue firm directives and control behavior (much as authoritarian urban planners might fantasize); they're there because the person(s) who wants to control behavior lacks the power or presence to do so and believes an authoritative-seeming sign can serve as enforcer. Many formal do-don't signs come with a "by the authority of" tagline: "By the authority of the Surgeon General" or "By the authority of Mayor So-and-So." Such signs are often the one piece of urban infrastructure that retains the mayor's name after all his other prestige developments have fallen by the wayside. But most of the time we don't pay any attention to the do-don't signs; if we ever did, we've long since absorbed the information and developed the habit of ignoring them.

Some signs are displayed to limit legal liability. "Don't lean on the rail" comes with a set of assumptions that if you do end up falling off the building and breaking a leg, the building owner's legal liability will be limited, or at least that case will be made in court. The same goes for signs like "infants must be carried," found on escalators, and "keep your feet away from the edges."

In countries that are officially multilingual, such as Canada, the languages that need to appear on official signs are enshrined in the constitution. The order in which the languages appear on a sign can be associated with one given prominence over the other(s), and in some communities this becomes a highly politicized issue. In India, Hindi is the official state language, but English enjoys the status of subsidiary

official language, and there are fourteen other official languages: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The spread of signage supporting a particular language can reflect migratory flows, shifts in vacationing preferences, a willingness to accept foreigners in an erstwhile closed society, and an increasing importance of trade between nations. Chinese signs have become increasingly prevalent in Africa at the beginning of the twenty-first century. English has been widely adopted on the Beijing Metro. The layout of bilingual signs in Arabic equally support two sets of cultural assumptions: Arabic text running from right to left and Western scripts from left to right.

The language used on a sign can also reveal the aspirations of its authors. In Japan, some shops display signs that are only in English—not for the benefit of English-speaking customers, but in order to lend a cosmopolitan air to the establishment. A similar rationale is inherent in the design of T-shirts and other paraphernalia displaying Japanese text worn by Westerners with no knowledge of that language. The inappropriate use of Japanese kanji for tattoos has, and will continue to, provide mirth to those who actually understand their meaning. As the world starts to appreciate the nuances of Chinese culture, expect more of the products and services created by Chinese designers to be laden with their cultural hallmarks.

In cultures with high levels of illiteracy, it's far more acceptable for an illiterate person to rely on human directions rather than signs. For instance, an illiterate auto-rickshaw driver in New Delhi traveling a route well outside his comfort zone is either going to stop the vehicle and ask for directions or phone a friend. One of the most comprehensive examples of urban signage supporting illiterate use can be found in the iconography designed by Lance Wyman for the Mexico City Metro in 1968, at a time when Mexico still had a significant level of illiteracy—with each station having a simple icon such as a duck, cannon, or bell, corresponding to a nearby cultural or historical landmark.

Some signs document the evolution of technology. The phone depicted in “no mobile phones” sign has evolved over the years from Motorola's iconic brick to Nokia's Candybar to Apple's iPhone, with each generation in turn looking as outdated as the next, at least until the form factor settles or usage disappears. You can still see the old-school rotary dial phone in pictograms for telephonic services in Egypt.

Occasionally there's a subtle subversiveness to be found in formal signs, where the attention to detail in the “don't” element of the sign conflicts with a nuanced understanding of the demand being made. In Tokyo I came across a “no cycling” sign that took the classic posture of a fixed-gear enthusiast, whose silhouetted bike revealed keirin geometry, bullhorn bars, and no brakes—little details that a trained eye would notice, and which were clearly used intentionally by an in-the-know designer as a subversive wink and nod to fellow cyclists.

“Don't” signs can also produce subcultural and countercultural gems. “Don't practice your golf swing” seen in a petite neighborhood park in Tokyo says as much about the sporting preferences of middle-aged Japanese men and women as it does about the dangers of that activity in that space. The presence of the sign suggests that there is actually some possibility of the prohibited activity taking place there. Why doesn't that park have a “don't practice your baseball swing” sign, given that baseball is the de facto national sport in Japan and could be as much of a hazard to park-goers? For starters, baseball activity tends to be confined to designated baseball facilities. Tokyo has many small neighborhood golf ranges, but they charge an entry fee, whereas the park is free. The sign itself provides none of this information, of course, but it goes to show that the presence of certain signs, and the absence of others, can tell you a great deal about how a public space is used and how its constituents think it ought to be used.

In countries with a dense population, where one person's discourteous act can impact many others in close proximity, the rules governing courtesy behaviors are often articulated in excruciating detail. The Tokyo subway's signs specify a range of activities that occur with sufficient frequency to require public censure: no smoking, no groping, no speaking on a mobile phone, no music, no applying makeup, no jumping on the train as the doors are closing, no sleeping on the floor, no food or drink, and so on.

A lack of signage can be just as revealing. On one field study in Iran, our team took a late-night stroll in northern Tehran and wandered around a park. There were only two signs in the whole park: “drink this water” and, at another source, “don’t drink this water.” A comparable park in the United States, arguably one of the more officious countries in the world, is likely to be filled with signs detailing rules and regulations, do’s and don’ts, and especially so in children’s play areas. Still, whether a park is in Iran, America, or any other part of the world, this form of signage can be an indicator of the regulatory environment in the city, state, or country.

Which is more sophisticated? A country that articulates its rules and regulations through the use of physical, in-your-face signs, or one where the assumptions about what you can and can’t do are more inherent in the social fabric of society? Does a lack of signage reveal a lack of process, thought, conclusion, rule of law? Or the opposite?

In many ways a sign can be a last resort, a footnote to a space whose purpose could and perhaps should have been planned better for intuitive use, sans written directions. Urban planners, architects, and designers have created a whole vocabulary of uncomfortable addendums—urban forms with cues to influence behaviors—such as rows of small spikes to stop people from sitting on ledges or low flat walls; metal bobbles welded to rails to keep skateboarders off; and starbursts of spikes on pigeon-prone surfaces.

As you train your eyes on a city’s signage, be sure to consider how it might evolve in a more digitized future. If we become increasingly able to create digital layers and overlay them on the world around us, then in theory anyone who could create a layer would be able to post signs or commentary, and anyone who knows how to find those layers would be able to view them. And if the people putting up signs, from government agencies to advertisers, are able to use more and more sophisticated cameras and sensors to take stock of passersby, how will they use that data to convey authority? “No smoking” signs might carry a much more authoritative ring if they were accompanied by the image and voice of your strict-disciplinarian high school math teacher.

Capturing the Platzgeist

Designers often talk of staying in step with the zeitgeist, a German term that translates literally as “time spirit” but is in itself far from a literal substance. The zeitgeist is much bigger than contemporary trends and styles: it’s a mood, an essence, and through cultural absorption a good designer can gain an intuition about whether designs are congruous or incongruous with the zeitgeist.

The same can be said about what I like to call the platzgeist, a gestalt sense of the spirit of an environment, whether a neighborhood, city, region, or country. All of the above techniques can help you gain that sense, both consciously and subconsciously, but by capturing it through sensory stimuli, you can create a veritable mood database. And after your sense of platzgeist has faded over time, this database will be your return ticket to that place and its spirit.

Macro tours, capturing imagery around an environment through a macro (extreme close-up) camera lens, allow you to think about the little things, literally: the textures, colors, geometry, and patina that make up an object or space, capturing and experiencing things up close. A macro lens allows you to isolate things from their context, but the images you capture can later be viewed in clusters to give a sense of cumulative effect.

A macro tour can be done as a walking tour around a neighborhood or confined within a more limited space, such as a convenience store, bus interior, or public park. The macro tour works best when conducted by multiple teams, so that in follow-up meetings the photos from different team members can be aggregated, arranged, pinned up, and shared. The detail and depth of field inherent in macro photography also make great material for presentations, experience boards, and movies later on.

Some variations on the macro tour include the fish-eye tour (using an extreme wide-angle lens instead of a close-up one) and the panorama tour, capturing as much of an environment as possible within single images. In contrast to the high-resolution, blinders-on detail of the macro tour, the fisheye and

panorama tours foster a big-picture hyperawareness of a setting, and this counterpoint of zoomed-in and zoomed-out provides an arrayed perspective ideal for absorbing the *platzgeist*.

Since the goal of these activities is to capture the sensory experience within a setting, it helps to go beyond visual stimuli. Of course, it can be tough to record and play back smells, tastes, and tactile experiences (though it will be possible someday), but an audio tour can add a wonderful layer of texture to the process.

“Silence” is rarely truly silent—it’s just that we’ve trained our ears to filter out the ambient noise. A high-end audio recorder allows you to reimagine an environment by picking up the sounds that otherwise drift by: a single pair of high-heeled shoes among a herd of commuting flat-soles, a crying child off in the distance, the pings and dings of machines’ audio interfaces. Back at the office, audio tour recordings can be played during synthesis sessions and workshops to re-create the environment where the data was collected and jog the team’s sensory memories, and can also be overlaid as audio tracks to add depth to concept movies.

When the World Is at Your Doorstep, Don’t Just Look out the Window

The cultural calibration techniques outlined in this chapter are designed to be as enjoyable as they are inspirational, but when it comes to corporate research there’s always that lingering question: are they practical? Even when they don’t cut into the formal research schedule, they still carry a cost in terms of time and energy, usually bore by the team in the form of long days if not sleep deprivation.*

Let’s take it in practical terms, then. Perhaps you’re trying to design, for instance, a microwave oven optimized for a particular demographic. How does a more nuanced understanding of locals’ commuting habits help you accomplish such a task? If those locals are your consumers, then by understanding their commute you might gain some distinct insight on the pressures that lead them to zap their food and eat it on the go; you might even get a glimpse of how they eat on public transit, openly or furtively depending on what the formal and informal rules of the environment allow.

In a broader sense, though, it can help you understand how your consumers live and how they aspire to live, the daily challenges they face, and how they find a balance between convenience, cost, and comfort. When you interview consumers directly and visit their homes, the commute and any of these other contextual activities will only serve to augment your understanding of the things they share with you, in a way that assumptions based on demographic characteristics simply can’t.

The trick to these cultural calibration techniques is striking the right balance, so they don’t feel like overstimulation. Proper implementation involves constantly taking the pulse of how much you and your team have absorbed and how much energy you’ve expended in the process. There’s no such thing as too much learning (although novice teams often overcollect data), but there is always a point of diminishing returns, and the smart (and often brave) choice is to step away and focus on methods that will yield richer results.

Often what separates good design research from great design research is finding the right balance between formal and informal data collection, and having the right mental and physical space to process it—in essence moving data (raw information) into insight (cogently applying the data to the task at hand). Most researchers learn the formal methods but struggle with their conscience (and their clients’) to justify activities that feel less like work and more like having fun. I call this “finding the optimal *surface area*” and it’s one of eight principles of design research I’ve listed in an appendix in the back of this book.

Our ability to imagine what-could-be stems from knowledge, amplified by experiences, and ultimately our ability to understand which of those experiences can be applied to the task at hand. Whether you’re starting a new business, designing something discrete, or trying to figure out your next career move, rapid calibration techniques and the ability to spot what’s hidden in plain sight will help you find your way there. Bringing that back into your life and work will help you challenge minds and move hearts. Figure this out and wallets will open themselves.