All That Is Seen and Unseen: The Physical Environment as Informant

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INTRODUCTION

There is an old riddle, "What is everywhere, but invisible?", to which the answer is "air". But in ethnography applied within settings such as marketing and product innovation, the answer might as well be "the physical environment." While social scientists are trained to consider informants and environment as interrelated and crucial information sources in ethnography, it nonetheless appears that all too often the environment may be underutilized in ethnography in many industry settings. This is a troublesome omission as the physical environment can be tremendously valuable to any ethnographer on the hook to find strategically relevant insights about a given target.

This paper argues for a practice of industry-oriented ethnography in which the physical environment is viewed as an informant that helps us to find insights related to our end goal of understanding human behavior, such as what is highly motivating or what creates profound tensions for informants. We advance this argument in four sections. First, we make a case for what we believe to be the essential problem: that, notwithstanding extensive social science work on the significance of the relationship between people, places and material culture, the physical environment does not receive enough consideration in ethnography within a marketing context, with the result that we could potentially fail to bring our clients the full value of the method. Second, we discuss how an amalgam of two theoretical approaches, phenomenology and material culture studies, provides inspiration for how to think about extracting insight and value from an informant's physical world, which we define as the spaces, places and objects, and our relationships with them, that make up our physical and indeed social world. Third, we illustrate how this theory can translate into

practical methodological approaches, sharing a number of examples from our own work in which a focus on environment helped us to gain texture and deeper understanding, leading to richer insights and better strategic recommendations. Finally, we conclude with a call for a theoretically informed approach to maximizing engagement with physical space in ethnography applied in marketing contexts and note that, while we are writing from within the context of marketing and brand strategy and product innovation, we posit that the principles herein could enhance ethnography in other applied settings as well.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In recent decades the concepts of space and place have been explored in a number of academic disciplines, such as anthropology, design and cultural geography (see e.g. Tuan 1977, Tilley 1994, Feld & Basso 1996, Miller 1998, 2001, Seamon 2000, Low 2003).
[1] However, three observations indicate to us that the richness and applicability of this thinking have not yet been fully realized in industry-oriented ethnography, even though everyone seems to be "doing it", that is, collecting observational data that can include aspects of informant's physical environment.

First, we have noticed that many of our clients, either through their own orientation or as a result of being "trained" by other practitioners, tend to think of informants' physical environments in ways that, while helpful, are nonetheless often limited. For example, some may perceive the physical environment as a mere backdrop to the real purpose of the ethnographic endeavor, namely observation and interview. In this sense, the environment *may* be useful insofar as it provides fodder for those contradictions beloved by clients, where informants say one thing and their environment says something else (i.e. the mother who says she makes all her children's meals from scratch, but then is found to have a cupboard stuffed full of Kraft Dinners), but the environment is not necessarily a specific focus of inquiry in its own right. Other clients may have a greater orientation to the physical environment, but this may still be limited to the explicit marketing or product development concern at hand, such as how big the TV is and where it is placed, whether patients have access to healthcare marketing materials in a physician's office, or how people have adapted objects to suit their needs. Still other clients are more open to the environment as a source of data, but they expect or conclude rather face value interpretations of it, such as "family photographs on the wall indicated strong family values". Finally, some clients may express great interest in the environment, but here their concern is in being able to replicate details thereof to create verisimilitude in advertising and communications so that the target can feel the client "gets" their reality. Each of these scenarios, while legitimate and demonstrable benefits of ethnography, fails to explore deeper cultural meanings narrated by the physical

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[1] When we say design, we are including fields such as architecture, landscape architecture, interior and industrial design where questions of space and how humans construct meaning through it are both a natural fit and easily applied (although ethnography may not be a common research approach).

environment, and thus misses the opportunity to use the environment sufficiently as a gateway to insight into an informant's lived experience.

The second observation that leads us to conclude that the environment is underutilized in industry-oriented ethnography is that there is a comparative dearth of writing, theorizing and methodologizing about the physical environment within the fledgling discipline itself, particularly in comparison to the attention given to methods and analytic tools for interviewing and observation. For example, the recent book *Ethnography for Marketers* (Mariampolski 2006) virtually ignores the topic, focusing instead on observing and interpreting behavior and events. Arnould & Wallendorf's (1994) otherwise rich and oft-cited article "Market-Oriented Ethnography" tantalizes with a few descriptions of physical settings, and indeed hints at how material culture can shed insight into class, but focuses primarily on interpreting observation and verbal reports. And finally, Sunderland and Denny's recent (2007) *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* contributes much to the field, but not an explicit theorization or methodologization of physical environments. Thus we see that although these works make generous contributions to the development of the field of marketing oriented ethnography, the physical environment as either a source of data or fodder for cultural analysis is only peripherally addressed.

We have seen a similar lack of theoretical and methodological attention in the proceedings of the last three Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conferences (EPIC), in which, of the many articles and workshops to date, one can count only a handful of pieces that deal with the physical environment explicitly. Even these tend to offer glimpses of potential rather than explicit frameworks for how to think about the environment and material culture. To take several examples, at EPIC 2005, Radka and Shieh organized a workshop entitled "Defining the impact of physical spaces on social interactions" that sought to work with participants to develop "clear, rigorous, and reusable tools for analyzing physical spaces"; this shows an interest and commitment to the topic, but as it was a workshop, there was no published outcome with which the larger community could engage. Jones & Ortlieb (2006) refer very briefly to several anthropological theories on place-making, but their goal is to create a conceptual anchoring for their study on designing online places, not to maximize the value of physical environments in real-world settings. More helpful to this project is Zafiroglu & Asokan's (2006) "At Home in the Field: From Objects to Lifecycles", in which the authors adopt a research framework "informed by anthropological models of exchange, consumption and material culture" (Zafiroglu & Asokan's 2006: 139). Their focus on material culture, specifically how televisions are used to mark and celebrate social relations, is an inspiration; however, at least in this excerpt of their research, their inquiry did not extend past the material culture of the television to include a wider look at the environment and other material objects, their impact on social relations and what the totality said about their informants' values and motivations. Deasy & Lucken (2007) explicitly examine built environments, but only from the point of view of *designing* for optimal communication, and they neither reference nor seek to advance anthropological conceptions of place or material culture.

Having outlined the overall situation, it is certainly worth noting two notable exceptions to this general rule. Grant McCracken (1988, 2005) and John Sherry (1998), both anthropologists and analysts of, and consultants to, the marketing world, have consistently brought physical environment to the fore of their inquiries. For example, in his essay on "homeyness" (2005), McCracken addresses the relationship between place, the objects within it and the construction of identities. Sherry's *Servicescapes* (1998) explores how experiences are created through the use of signs and symbols in the retail environments, and how these spaces become imbued with meaning through the retailers' theatrical approach to the environment and the embeddedness of enduring cultural values within them. However, while the work of both of these authors is also an inspiration, arguably it represents a springboard for further discussion of how to think about and extract insight from the physical environment, rather a suite of definitive approaches to the same.

Finally, in casual conversation with colleagues in venues such as EPIC, it appears that while many of us have the training and orientation to engage more deeply with informants' physical environments, we don't always have adequate structural support to do so in the environments in which we work. For example, colleagues or clients may question research guides that permit time for exploration of objects or the environment that do not appear to have immediate relevance for the project, or they may express discomfort with incorporating apparently tangential data into analysis. This is, in part, why we wish to make the case for methodolgizing it here. In the next section we will show how certain theoretical orientations can provide us with solid ideas and frameworks for thinking about the physical environment in marketing oriented ethnographies, and latterly, how this can add value.

DEFINING THE OPPORTUNITY: MARRYING PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND MATERIAL CULTURAL APPROACHES FOR RICHER APPLIED-ETHNOGRAPHIES

The efflorescence of social science theorizing about peoples' relationships with places, spaces and objects has created a wealth of material upon which to draw to fuel a marketing-oriented ethnography that regards the physical environment as central to its practice, and indeed, as an informant of a kind. In our project here, we have been strongly influenced by two not unrelated approaches: phenomenology and material culture studies. Although they have different intellectual inheritances, they share in common an orientation to thinking about people in relationship to the spaces they inhabit, and they understand people, places and things to be, at least to some degree, mutually constitutive. Of interest are not just people, places and things, but the relationship between them, and how these are suggestive of social processes, thus providing insight into what's motivating and appealing, and indeed, what's really happening to people in their daily lives. In this section, we will outline some of the key concepts and directives we have drawn from them so that in the following section, we can illustrate how we have methodologized them in a way that they can add clear value within a project context.

Navigating People and Praxis

Our starting point for this discussion is with ethnography itself: what are its unique strengths? What is at the heart of the ethnographic project, whether academic or market-driven? These questions generate two important answers, which themselves, in our view, create an argument for engaging with the environment through phenomenological and material culture approaches. First, in ethnography, far more than other research methods, the focus is on *lived experience*. We define lived experience as what people do, how, where and why they do it, the structural, social and emotional facilitators or barriers that accompany what they do, and of course, their own perceptions and interpretations of all of the above. Second, in ethnography, *the researcher him or herself is the research instrument*; in other words, we rely less on questionnaire or camera (although these can be helpful supplements), and more on nuanced observation, relationship, human empathy and intuition. To be effective, we must employ all our senses and faculties.

These two central premises of ethnography, lived experience and the centrality of the role of the researcher in *being there*, are in natural sympathy with a phenomenological approach to ethnography. For example, Seamon summarizes a phenomenological approach thus:

> In simplest terms, phenomenology is the interpretative study of human experience. The aim is to examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings and experiences "as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life" [von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3]. The goal is "a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency and ambiguity" [Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5] (Seamon 2000: 2).

We see that this description could just as easily be about ethnography as ethnographers too try to understand and describe human experience through a synthesis of an informant's interpretations and our own situated and reflective analysis of the same. However, this very similarity begs the question as to what an ethnographer has to gain by adopting a self-consciously phenomenological approach? After all, if the two perspectives are already so aligned, what more can this add?

We would argue that adopting a phenomenological approach, especially one enriched with ideas from material culture studies, creates certain imperatives in practice. The "rigorous description of human life" that phenomenology requires is characterized by certain features, such as, for example, an attention to sensory data, an inquiry into how space is invested with meaning, including how cultural norms and social relationships are inscribed on to place, and a recognition that environments are dynamic, not static. These features, perhaps easily overlooked unless one explicitly challenges oneself to pay attention to them, help to sensitize the ethnographer to particular avenues of pursuit, and also the potential means by which to pursue them.

Physical Environment as Informant

As a starting place, a phenomenological approach asks us to engage all our senses actively as we assess the environment; in other words, we must, if you will, interrogate our own being-in-the-world when in our informants' environments. Practically, this means *listening*, both to what the informant says, but also to the soundscape the informant may be intentionally creating – or perhaps subjected to by others; *smelling*, for example, do we sense cleaning, mustiness, pets, etc; *seeing*, for example, how is space ordered? What goods are present? Where resources are emphasized?; and finally, *being sensitive to atmosphere,* for example, is there a feeling of comfort and security, or is it oppressive? These sensory dimensions give us greater insight into the lived experience of informants, and they may also speak volumes about peoples' aspirations or constraints. Further, sensory elements powerfully tie into the social, and even professional, relationships we are often trying to understand. In some cases, this may be familiar ground, such as a mother self-consciously trying to create "good cooking smells" to give her family a sense of home. However, in some cases, the interplay between the senses and social relations may be far subtler, but equally as important, such as, for example, a physician's use of touch in his office, which may simultaneously be a way of guiding and comforting patients through a treatment process, and a means of marking his social supremacy in that environment, since he is the only one permitted to initiate touch with others.

Second, because phenomenological and material culture approaches assume that space is not neutral but rather invested with meaning, it also requires us to be attentive to the meanings both we and our informants can interpret, and indeed which they may be consciously trying to create. While "meaning" itself is a broad term, we add specificity by focusing on particular (and sometimes overlapping) kinds of meaning: how informants' environments, and the objects therein, represent their engagement with social norms, how they convey their inhabitants intentions, and how they are suggestive of social or group power relations. Regarding the former, we have been guided by various theorists who have argued that the spaces and things that constitute our physical environment may represent, or be negotiations of, social norms. For example, as Bourdieu has famously argued (1977), physical environments can be homologies of social values and norms (e.g. single-family versus communal dwellings; segregated male and female spaces, etc.). More recent arguments, notably advanced by Miller et al (2001), take Bourdieu's idea much further, arguing that peoples' relationship with spaces and objects are not a one-way affair, but rather are dynamic and reciprocal. Thus, rather than environments and objects facilitating aspirations and behavior solely in line with accepted social norms (e.g. Victorian silverware and rigid class distinction), we see that people use space and material culture to interpret, personalize and even negotiate social norms. For example, of her chapter on the aesthetics of social aspiration in the UK, Clarke writes that she:

> does not simplistically suggest that the external abstract forces such as 'class' and 'the State' are countered through the appropriation of domestic environments. Rather, it considers 'home' as a process, as opposed to an act of individual expressivity, in which past and future trajectories (inseparable from external

abstractions as 'class') are negotiated through fantasy and action, projection and interiorization" (Clarke 2001: 25).

This focus thus compels us to pay close attention to how we see social norms accepted, contested, negotiated, or even manifest in the form of unresolved tensions. Further, we also watch for how we see objects or spaces being used to convey agency or intentionality. Gell (1998) and Miller (2001) have described how places and things may convey their creators, owners or distributors' intentions. We've seen this illustrated, for example, at the family breakfast table, in which both the table and the breakfast cereals that the children consume became agents of mothers seeking to bind children to the home with invisible threads, so that they are centered and feel cared for no matter where their day takes them. And finally, we are also attentive to how power maps on to the places in which we're immersed. Tilley writes:

> The relationship of individuals and groups to locales…also has important perspectival effects. The experience of these places is unlikely to be equally shared and experienced by all, and the understanding and use of them can be controlled and exploited in systems of domination…. Features of the settings of social interaction may constitute 'disciplinary' spaces through which knowledge is controlled in a highly structured manner. The ability to control access to and manipulate settings for action is a fundamental feature of the operation of power and domination (Tilley 1994: 26-27).

Although Tilley's frame of reference here is Neolithic landscapes, as we shall illustrate in a later example, his comments are just as apt for physicians' offices, and even the expression of power within the home.

Third, a phenomenological approach also asks that we are attentive to movement and change: being-in-the-world is dynamic and temporal, not static. In ethnography, this means being attentive to deliberate versus unconscious movement, that is, what is performative, and perhaps meant to draw our attention towards something, and what is more natural, or habituated and routine? It also asks us to look at the flow or movement over time and through a given space – obviously relevant if we're looking at shopping patterns, for example, but also revelatory of how patients are processed through treatment centers, and even within the home, such as, for example, in the form of homecoming routines. And what do our informants' movements and gestures tell us about their emotional connections to places and things, about their comfort with a given topic, about their sense of power and authority to speak, about their evolution in relation to a given topic, and so on? Each of these aspects of movement and change help us discern the social processes, behaviors or needs that our ethnographies are asking us to understand.

Finally, even as we consider all of these qualities of the physical environment, we also try to understand them from the point of view of the informant; that is, we involve them in the interpretation of what we're seeing and experiencing, rather than simply assuming

meaning based on our own interpretation of spaces, material culture and so on. While of course consistent with the value that anthropology has traditionally placed on both emic and etic (insider and outsider) perspectives, this focus on the informant's account and interpretation of his or her lived experience also makes theoretical room for their own agency. In other words, it disrupts any tendency to look at spaces and material culture as merely representative of internalized social norms, and instead redirects us to focus on how people, places and things are acting on each other to create meaning, value and behavior. This orientation clearly overlaps with writings by McCracken (1988, 2005) and Miller (2001, 2005), in which consumption can be seen as agency, not acquiescence, and in which we are in dynamic relationships with the material culture in our lives, rather than merely destined to use it to replicate and live out social norms.
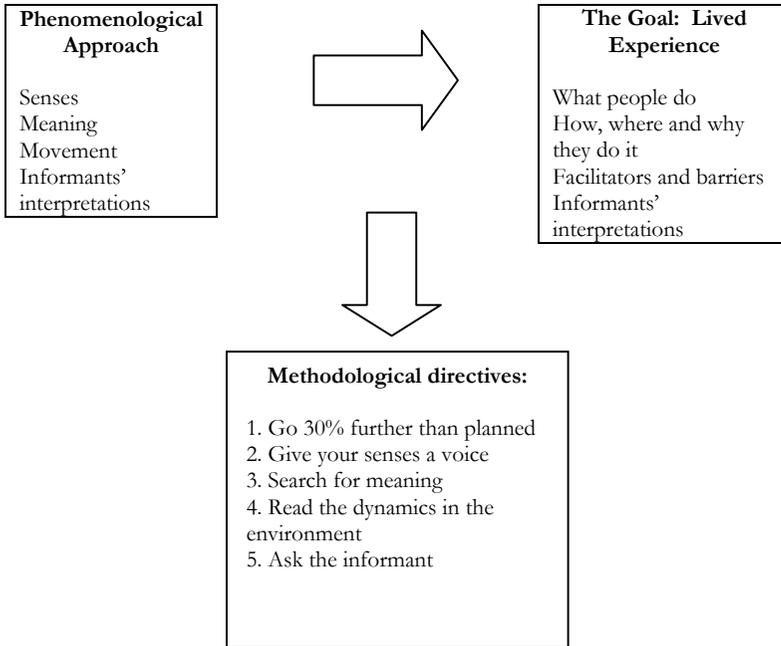
FROM THEORY TO METHOD TO VALUE

Having outlined the way in which we see phenomenological and material culture approaches possessing the ability to inform how we think about the physical environment in applied ethnography, in doing so enriching our insights, we'd now like to detail specifically how we've incorporated these ideas into a very simple framework so that we always have a robust engagement with our informants' environments when we're in field. We will also share insights that arose as a result of this approach, which at a minimum augmented our results, and on occasion provided the breakthrough insight that helped us chart the best solutions for our client's business problem. Naturally, some of the principles will feel deeply familiar to ethnographers, and many of us may already be incorporating them in various aspects of our work. However, for us, the value of the framework lies in its implicit reminder to interrogate the environment thoroughly every time, rather than leaving it to chance, or dismissing apparently tangential insights without asking ourselves about the larger picture to which they might be adding up.

At the outset of this section, however, it's worth revisiting what we're actually looking for in our ethnographies: what are the *kinds* of insights we seek as underpinnings to identifying brand opportunities in marketing strategies, communications and innovation? Essentially, we're looking for insights into lived experience, which we defined above as understanding what people do, and how, where and why they do it, the structural, social and emotional facilitators or barriers to doing it, and of course, informants' interpretations of the same. From these, we then extract what drives people, such as aspirations, values and tensions (which we define broadly as discrepancies between how people feel things ought to be and how they really are).

With, then, understanding lived experience as the central goal, we have created this very simple framework as our guide to ensure that we contemplate the role of the physical environment in our inquiry and analysis in a rich and detailed way:

Phenomenological Approach		**The Goal: Lived Experience**
Senses Meaning Movement Informants' interpretations	→	What people do How, where and why they do it Facilitators and barriers Informants' interpretations

Methodological directives:

1. Go 30% further than planned
2. Give your senses a voice
3. Search for meaning
4. Read the dynamics in the environment
5. Ask the informant

1. Go 30% further than planned

In practice, interrogating our informants' environments means we need to *access* them, and that we need to be open to thinking about their import beyond the immediate research question at hand. In our immersions, we demand this of ourselves by applying the "50-50 rule". Simply, this rule allows us to spend up to half of our total interview time at the couch, kitchen table or desk, but requires that the other fifty percent is spent getting the informant literally to walk us through his or her life and context. When this is executed successfully, the whole interview is dynamic, flowing easily from seated conversation and reflection, to movement and investigation, back to seated conversation, albeit perhaps in a new space. Where this isn't possible (such as with health or ability impaired patients; people very sensitive to privacy), we think about how we can honor the spirit of this principle, such as, for example, using different pieces of the environment as prompts to engage in our conversation ("In which part of the house do you feel most at peace? Why? What stuff do you have in the room?").[2] In the context of marketing oriented ethnography, the 50-50 rule is a great imperative for interrogating the environment and going beyond a brand oriented house tour.

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[2] See Miller's (2005) comment on the tension between privacy and research inquiry.

Physical Environment as Informant

However, this precept is not always as simple to follow as it sounds: both we and our informants find that it is comfortable to permit a static format, and naturally, both we and our informants have social reserve that inhibits us from demanding or easily offering access into private domestic or professional spaces. If sensitively practiced, however, we find the rewards are worth the effort, and from our experience, we have learnt that much of the stimuli to get moving comes through the interview itself, that is, the informant will say something that creates a logical opening for us to investigate further (e.g. "I keep my exercise equipment in the basement; it works well because I can watch TV while I sit on the stationary bike." "Great, can you show me how it's all set up?"). However, sometimes informants don't give obvious openings like this. For these instances, we have developed a number of techniques that facilitate movement and exploration. For example, we may ask informants to walk us through their environment from the perspective of someone other than themselves (e.g. their mother with Alzheimer's or their teenage daughter), we may ask them to take us to the place (or thing) in their house that best symbolizes their relationship with the topic of the inquiry, or any other topic of interest that emerges (e.g. their relationship with their health, with money, etc.), or we may ask them to take us on a house tour and tell us, from their perspective, what each room "says" about them, and/or their roles, relationships. We might also prompt them with the old phrase, "If the walls could talk, what would they say about X? How might this be different room to room?".

2. Give your senses a voice

Given that in ethnography we are humans plunged into other humans' environments, it is natural that our senses are alert and ready to help us interpret the surroundings in which we find ourselves. However, all too often, we make little or no provision for interpreting sensory data beyond the most obvious, that is, what we've seen and heard. The other, less privileged senses, such as smell, touch, and, if you will, a reading of atmosphere, are typically relegated to immediate post-interview chat with our colleagues and clients. Our directive, however, demands that we assess what we've felt as well as what we've seen and heard, not only to see if it tallies with what the informant has presented to us, but also to see what else we can glean from it.

For example, in a recent study on patients' experiences with chronic pain, we found that a number of informants actively sought to portray to us their resistance to incapacitation, and indeed, their narratives of survival and endurance were remarkable and important. However, by using all our senses when in-home, we were able to go beyond the appearance of things to see where they actively struggled on a daily basis. So, to take just one example from what became an overall pattern, in an informant's bathroom in one home, we saw equipment she had had installed in order to enable her to get on and off the toilet and in and out of the shower: clearly highly relevant to the topic at hand. However, we also noticed the dankness of the bathroom, in which towels were damp, the floor was clammy and it smelled rather fusty. This sensory perception was as important as the more obvious physical adaptations she had made, for it told a story about the difficulty of performing normally routine tasks like cleaning, about the pride that may have forestalled her for asking for help in such an intimate area of her life, and of the daily impact she had to live with as a result of

her pain. This was important complementary data to what she told us, to how she interpreted her changed relationship with the space and objects of her home, and to what we observed in her behavior during the immersion.

3. Search for meaning

This directive speaks to capturing the meaning generated within and assigned to specific environments and objects, which can include, but is not limited to, the examples we gave above, such as agents' intentionality and how social norms and power relations may be inscribed or contested in environments and objects. There are, in turn, a number of shorthand mechanisms for helping us to do this. For example, we find it very helpful to pay attention to where we see concentrations of resources, or, conversely, surprising absences (e.g. no televisions). Resources (or lack thereof) in a given area speak to people's values and motivations. For example, in a project in which we were comparing different ethnicities' approaches to well-being, we interviewed a Hispanic mother in Los Angeles who told us that she didn't have enough money to continue to attend a health group at her local community center. However, when she was sharing her environment we us, we found televisions and Nintendo games in her children's room. This suggested to us that her children (and very possibly her children's successful assimilation as Americans) were more important to her than her own health management – an important consideration when positioning well-being products to mothers with limited resources.[3]

We also train our ethnographers to be alert to what the space tells them about the power dynamics in a given context, and in turn, to analyze what that tells them about the social relations and needs of the office or household. To do this, we've drawn on Tilley's analysis above to create a series of basic questions - such as how knowledge is acquired or controlled, whether there are "disciplinary" spaces, who sets and enforces access to resources in the environment – that can be individualized for given projects into questions such as: how is parental authority expressed in a home? Are children's computers in public spaces, under the watchful eyes of their parents? What can this tell us about the means parents use to control their children's behavior and the tensions between them? Or how is power and authority exercised in physician's offices? To what end? And what impact might this have on patient-physician interactions? It's also essential to ask ourselves what *experience* this creates for our informants: we need to investigate how they accept, contest and negotiate these power dynamics. For example, what tactics might patients employ to assert agency in their encounter with their physicians? Do some spaces, such as examination rooms, inhibit this agency, and others, such as consulting rooms, facilitate it? This is no esoteric question for a client who, for example, is seeking to drive prescriptions through direct to consumer marketing, and needs to know the best route for empowering patients to

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[3] Given this observation, we were struck by Miller's (2001) comments that in Clarke's chapter "The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration", she advances that "the home itself carried the burden of the discrepancies between its actual state at a given time and a wide range of aspirational 'ideal homes' that are generated out of much wider ideals that a household might have for itself [including] immigrants' aspirations towards assimilation" (Miller 2001: 7).

bring up a given medication with their physician, or indeed, even suggest an alternative to a physician's recommendation.

4.   Read the dynamism in the environment

Methodologizing a sensitivity to dynamism and movement has proven less neat, but has proved consistently worth tackling, even if it requires a degree of improvisation from immersion to immersion. One tactic that has proven successful is to ask informants to walk us through routines so that we can see how space is used and where perhaps subconscious foci may lie. Another approach that's proven successful is asking people about the evolution of their environment, and asking them to accompany this narration with illustrations from the space around them: this inevitably gives us clues into the evolution of the person him or herself. For example, we had a client who wanted insight into how patients with weight-related illnesses such as Type 2 diabetes complied with diet and exercise regimens. They intended to use this information to design more effective support programs. The client was sensitive to environment insofar as they had asked us to look in informants' refrigerators to see what they "really" ate, and also asked us to make note of overt material examples of health management, such as exercise equipment. We did so, and it was helpful, but frankly, we didn't see anything fresh or unexpected. What did catch our attention, however, was how the environment reflected informants' relationship with time. To take two of the most striking examples, one seemed frozen in an ideal pre-diabetic past, and the other seemed focused on an ideal future, in which the structural constraints that inhibited her from complying with her physician's recommendations would be miraculously removed. We drew our initial evidence for both these interpretations from the informants' décor and their engagement with their homes. For example, the former felt static, like a time capsule: all the photographs on display were from the 1980s or earlier, the appliances were old and the general style and atmosphere felt dated despite relative affluence. The latter felt like a stage-set under construction: the informant's home was lovely but virtually empty after a year of habitation, because, as she put it, she wanted everything to be perfect and was willing to wait for it to be so. Our other informants conformed to this pattern, if not quite so dramatically. The first couple of immersions cued us to pay attention to this issue in the remainder of the ethnographies, and ultimately to approach the transcripts sensitive to how informants placed themselves in relation to time. It was thus that we found the crucial insight: our clients' target was habitually disengaged from the present, living instead, without necessarily being conscious of it, in a more comfortable past or an ideal future, both of which undermined the need for active self-management in the here and now. This insight proved pivotal in helping the client create patient support programs that actually spoke to patients' sensibilities and needs.

5.   Ask the informant

This fifth directive may feel self-evident to ethnographers, in that we're obviously there to engage with the informant, and we're inevitably peppering him or her with questions throughout our time together. However, in this case, we specifically mean involving our informants into this process of engagement with, and interpretation of, the physical environment. This means that we make our interest and intentions explicit and we actively

invite our informants to tell stories about their spaces and things. And, as our immersions progress, we also share our emerging interpretations and hypotheses with them and invite them to challenge, correct or build on our ideas. Occasionally, this brings us to quite a new place. For example, in one study with Boomer parents, our ingoing hypotheses was that parents often disliked their children using electronics and online goods such as video games, the web and televisions because it removed their children from the social sphere, even while leaving them physically present. However, one of our informants illuminated a very different perspective with us as he gave us a detailed tour of the electronic pleasure palace he had built for his son: it was, effectively, a honey-trap he and his wife had built to keep their child home. Yet, as we asked him to describe the specific behaviors that accompanied each device, a new reality emerged: in fact, son and father were using the technologies to reach out to each other, by asking for help (father to son on the computer), by seeking to share favorite shows (son to father with the DVD player), or by gaming together. The clarity of this insight really was only able to emerge through both our informant and us delving into the material culture of the home, and its impact on social relations.

CONCLUSION

In the marketing and innovation context in which we work, we have found that our ethnographic practice is greatly enhanced, and thus brings greater value to our clients, by using the physical environment as an informant that helps to tell a much richer story about our informants' lived experiences. On the whole, we have found that the approaches outlined here have consistently yielded meaningful results that helped us deliver our clients insights and strategic recommendations that opened up new opportunities that we would have missed otherwise. Specifically, these approaches have allowed us to gain insights beyond immediate problems or brand contexts, which in turn has enabled us to discover unexpected and unanticipated sources of insight and inspiration, illuminated the different ways in which broader contexts introduced needs and tensions into the lives of informants, and enabled us to decode myriad drivers of what people do (and don't do) – in short, everything we seek to do in our applied ethnography.

While the approaches and framework outlined in this paper represent a very simple way of trying to incorporate decades of provocative and thoughtful work on phenomenology and material culture studies into a manageable but enriched practice in marketing-oriented ethnography, we would posit that the essence of what we've described here has application in other applied contexts too, from healthcare policy development to web design. This belief is based on, not just our own experience, but the continuing commitment in anthropology to engage with the spaces, places and objects that make up our informants' physical and social worlds, the rich perspectives from which suggests to us that to overlook informants' physical environments in any context is potentially to miss some of the core aspects of their lived experience, which surely must always be relevant to us. Of course, depending on the specific applied context, there may be different emphases or approaches

that are more or less relevant, but we would encourage other practitioners to explore where these possibilities and limits lie, and, ultimately, to share these perspectives in a wider disciplinary discussion of how to maximize our collective understanding of the value of considering the environment as an informant, and how actually to do so within our respective fields.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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