



CONTEXT MAPPING

TWO RESEARCHERS DISCUSS CONTEXT MAPPING AND HOW IT IS BEING USED TO INFORM AND INSPIRE DESIGNERS WITH EXPERIENCE-BASED DATA.

Maps, both geographic and metaphorical, have been the tools of professionals in science, engineering, and design, for exploring terrain that is new, not fully understood, or just plain complex. More and more, the success of products depends on how well the products fit in the context of the everyday lives of their users. Hence, designers have a need to understand those contexts of product use. This involves understanding all the Aristotelian questions about experience: where, when, how, what, why, with whom, etc. surrounding the use of products. Not just on a functional level, but also on an emotional, empathic level. The design of a car, a mobile phone, or a music player should not just be technically sufficient, it must also fit its users' emotional and social needs.

For this multi-faceted understanding, designers need metaphorical maps to the terrain of user experiences. We refer to this as the contextmap. The process of gathering, organising, and communicating the information, shown in (Fig. 1), is referred to as contextmapping.

contextmapping

The results of the data gathering is a diverse collection of photographs, diagrams, annotations, stories, interview transcripts, etc. It is the task of the contextmapping research team to compile this into a form that the design team can use: the

contextmaps.

A contextmap is an explorer's map: incomplete, ambiguous, diverse. (Fig. 2) depicts aspects of the map metaphor, which also reflect the way designers need information. These are issues like the proverb 'the map is not the terrain', 'maps grow because the traveller adds to it', 'maps facilitate discussion and planning', 'maps are used with other tools'.

As compared to conventional ways of informing design teams about users, the contextmap does not replace the terrain (e.g., by demographic statistics, framed conclusions stated in abstract terms 'must be used in offices'), but helps the design team to organize glimpses of life in real offices, and the people behind the statistics.

The aim is not to replace user experiences by one-dimensional criteria, but to help the design team access and explore people's tacit rituals, their motives, goals when using a product. It allows designers to empathize with the user, to step into the user's shoes. an example

For example, consider the design of a new shaving experience for men. As with cars and digital electronics products, manufacturers of body care products find that the razors that the competition can make are as sharp, long-lasting, cheap, and strong as their own. Hence, they look for advantage along the dimensions of the user experience. This involves building a map of what factors are involved in shaving, and the user study generates diverse insights, both practical and emotion-

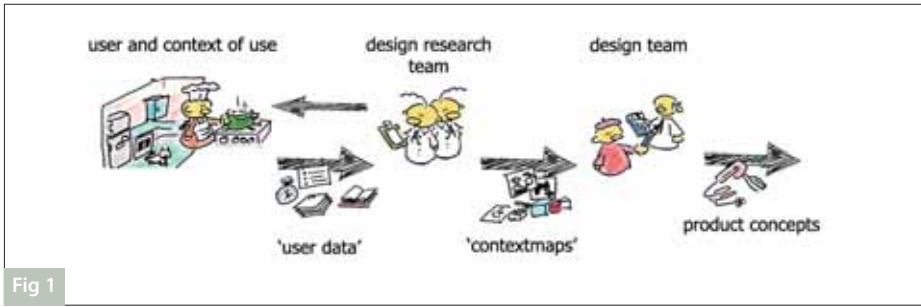


Fig 1



Fig 2

al, both superficial and profound: 'I hate cleaning the sink afterwards', 'shaving foam is like playing in the snow as a child', 'when shaving I see my face in the mirror, and am reminded that I am getting older'. These observations, together with images of where and when people shave, give many rich glimpses of the terrain of the shaving experience of other people. This helps female designers empathize with how men experience shaving; it also helps male designers empathize with how other men experience it differently from themselves.

Designers indicate they don't derive inspiration or 'the feeling for the situation' from a conventional research report. In our experience, they must not be passive receivers of information, but active participants, who annotate and extend the maps they use.

Therefore, the shape of contextmaps resembles that of the early explorers: the

maps are incomplete, possibly ambiguous, with pieces of raw data like the elephants drawn into the 'terra incognita' white spaces in the map, or the 3D landmark buildings on some tourist maps. Their shapes can be evocative, such as the infographic of the shaving experience shown in (Fig. 3). Designers appreciate such open-ended forms of presentations, such as the 'personal cardset' and the 'action posters' shown in (Fig. 4).

In both of these communication tools, a varied mix is given of photos, diagrams, short and long quotes, etc. These are organized tentatively, but it is left to the reader to participate in the communication; there is space intended for notes, annotations, sketches, labels, which are made by the reader. These annotating actions help the design team to appropriate the information and be inspired by it, and to use it in generating and discussing new ideas. Over the years, user

FIG. 1: Conext mapping process.

FIG. 2: The map metaphor

FIG. 3: Infographic

FIG. 4: Action poster

research departments of companies such as Microsoft and Philips, consultancies such as SonicRim and MakeTools, and research institutes such as the Royal College of Art and TU Delft have explored and developed these techniques of studying users and communicating these findings in new ways to designers.

Conclusion

In design, contextmapping methods (google for 'cultural probes' or 'generative tools'), originated because design teams found the information they got in the project briefs insufficient and restrictive. The classical design brief, often based on market research, is abstract, numerical, and serves well to demarcate borders of the terrain within which to look for solutions, but does not help to find one's way within those borders, and to deal with the many facets that the real world has that have been abstracted away.

At ID-StudioLab, part of our research is aimed to find how multifaceted explorer maps of user contexts can enhance a design team's understanding of contexts of product use. It is expected that, in turn, this understanding of how to help designers experience the information about people's experience, can help the field of information presentation in general, for instance by making receiver into an active participant.

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Lab Link: <http://www.studiolab.io.tudelft.nl/>
More information about the contextmapping research can be found on <http://www.contextmapping.com/>.



Fig 3

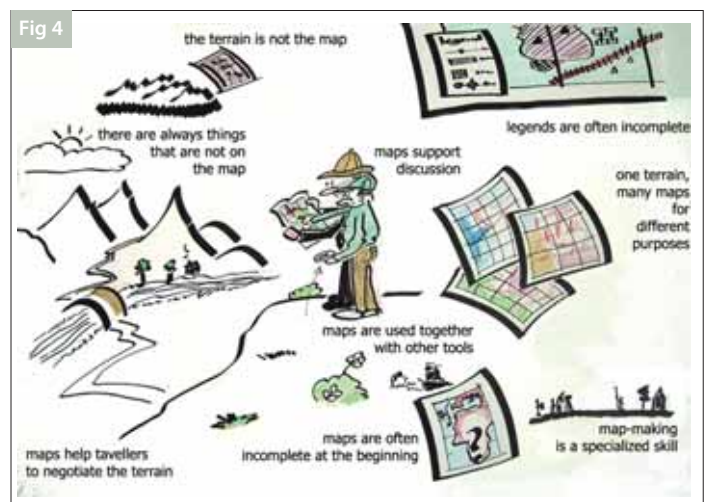


Fig 4