

Design Ethnography: Qualitative Research Method and Its use in Interior Kitchen Space Design

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Abstract

Design as a field is multidisciplinary and it pulls in knowledge from all domains. It requires a strong research at the beginning to provide solutions that are suitable and yet unique. Many a time research at preliminary stages of design requires to collect data like user's requirements, their behavioral pattern, how they react in or to the designed product or space and also data regarding their preferences, established practices, socio cultural context and their aspirations.

A designer especially taking into consideration the space designer commonly known as interior designer starts a design process by understanding the User's requirements. To understand user's need and for doing subjective inquiry in user's environment about the needs qualitative research methods like ethnography can be used. Ethnography as a research method has similarities with steps involved in design process and designers can use these methods more effectively to understand the user behavior and socio cultural setup and user's need and aspirations. This paper examines use of some of the ethnographic research methods for design process. It aims to find similarities and differences between ethnographic research methods and design process. The methodology used is literature survey and interview technique with designers about the process that they follow. The data is then presented in descriptive narrative pattern and conclusions are noted. It is concluded that ethnographic research methods can be useful to designers while creating new designs for the users to satisfy their needs and aspirations.

Keywords: Design Ethnography, Qualitative Research Methods, Ethnography in Design, Space Design and Ethnographic Tools.

Introduction

Design as a field is multidisciplinary and it pulls in knowledge from all domains. It requires a strong research at the beginning of need identification to provide solutions that are suitable and yet unique and new for user's requirements. Many a time research at preliminary stages of design requires to collect data like user's requirements, their behavioral pattern, how they react in or to the designed product or space and also data regarding their preferences, established practices, socio cultural context and their aspirations.

A designer especially taking into consideration the space designer commonly known as interior designer starts a design process by understanding the User's requirements. The design brief is created after understanding the user's need, required design, available resources and considering the time and cost involved in execution of process. The initial stage in design process requires a pre study or data collection. This is basically a data regarding User's requirements, socio cultural practices of user, trends in design, choices and aspirations of users. This is a subjective inquiry and needs an engagement with user. To provide better or more user friendly space as a design solution to user, it requires one to be observing and understanding if possible experiencing what user's natural pattern of living is. At this stage designer tries to connect with user and through informal discussions, and other data collection techniques like photographic documentation, persona tries to understand user's need and choices. Then the designer tries to analyze the data to formulate the design brief. At later stage, the designer tries to incorporate the findings to create a design solution especially suitable for a particular user. Sometimes in interior design process even if there are multiple number of users, one can collect data which has common patterns and need identification can be common.

Aim

To understand and to find the effectiveness of ethnographic research methods with the steps of design process followed by interior designer.

Objectives

1. To understand the different types of qualitative research methods with the focus of understanding ethnography as a research method used in various disciplines for the study of user's need.
2. To compare the steps followed by a designer prior to designing like understanding user's need for designing interior space with furniture with some of the ethnographic methods which are established as qualitative methods for data collection.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study is literature survey. 35 articles are referred from different sources like google scholar using keywords like design ethnography, ethnographic methods, qualitative research methods in design etc. Ten designers were interviewed to understand their design process from space design domain. The data is then analyzed and represented through description and narration on ethnographic methods in design.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is defined as a type of scientific research method that collects evidences, produces findings and thereby seeks answer to a problem or question. It is widely used in collecting and understanding specific information about the behavior, opinion, values and other social aspects of a particular community, culture or population. Qualitative research helps in providing an in depth knowledge regarding human behavior and tries to find out reasons behind decision making tendencies of humans. It helps to understand human nature, market research purposes, current trends, changing tastes and preferences of people. As Design as a field is subjective and requires to study human behavior, many a times these research methods are used. There are certain approaches of qualitative research. Design ethnography has been widely used in to understand people's everyday behaviors, in order to build technologies capable of meeting users' needs. In interior design or space design one need to understand user's behavior in order to meet the requirements in terms of spatial planning. Use of ethnography as a research method provides the understanding of people's behavior and expectations from spatial planning and it also helps to understand the evolution of new trends in design domain.

Ethnography

Ethnography as a tool can be used by designers as it provides a window onto the ways users interact with interior furniture or products in their everyday lives.

The paper provides an overview of extension of ethnographic tools like narrative study, photographic documentation and persona analysis to a domain of spatial design. It traces how ethnography can help the designers in providing solutions for user's need.

Design process always starts with understanding user's need, context, cultural background and available resources and aspirations of users.

Design is never creating out of nothing and it always has specific cultural points of reference. Design requires and generates knowledge, because designers always need to engage with specific life worlds. Ethnography in the context of design differs from ethnography in the social sciences as it is quicker and embedded in the iterative processes that designing

involves. Ethnography research is not only comprehensive today but also it may be known as user centered design process. This is because Ethnography research highly focuses to developing and understanding of the design process. Therefore, this type of research deals with cultural studies at the starting of a project in order to support future design decision. Every observation of an everyday situation, no matter how trivial, that is made in the course of a design project is already a simple form of ethnography. In the design process generally designers interact with users, test new technologies, develop mock-ups and construct future scenarios and take user's feedback to apply that in reality. Design ethnography established itself in the 1990s in this rather technology- and market driven environment to the user centered design through methods such as on-site observation, informal interviews, and photographic documentation and video recording.

This paper intends to examine the similarities between steps involved in interior design process as research stage with some of the methods of ethnography.

Ethnography as a qualitative research methods

Ethnography deals with the discovery and description of culture of a group or individual. Ethnography is the art and science used to describe a group or culture. Ethnographers search for predictable patterns in the lived human experiences by carefully observing and participating in the lives of those under study. Ethnography may also involve a full immersion of the researcher in the day-to-day lives or culture of those under study. Ethnography is conducted on-site or in a naturalistic setting in which real people live. It is personalized since you as the researcher are both observer and participant in the lives of those people. Ethnography also collects data in multiple ways for triangulation over an extended period of time and conclusions and interpretations formed through it can be given comments or feedback from those who are under study. This type of research method basically intends to study culture through close observation and active participation. The ethnographer/ researcher collects information regarding the socio cultural phenomena. The analysis of data leads to development of theories for the socio cultural phenomena under study, only on basis of the views and perspectives of its respondents. Following are three methodological principles that are used to provide the rationale for the specific features of the ethnographic method.

Methodological principles of the ethnographic method

1. Naturalism: This is the view that the aim of social research is to capture the character of naturally occurring human behavior, and that this can only be achieved by first-hand contact with it. This is the reason that ethnographers carry out their research in "natural" settings.

2. Understanding: It is the argument that human actions differ from the behavior of physical objects, and even from that of other animals, they do not consist simply of fixed responses or even of learned responses to stimuli, but involve interpretation of stimuli and the construction of responses. From this point of view, if we are to be able to explain human actions effectively we must gain an understanding of the cultural perspectives on which they are based. Ethnographers argue that it is necessary to learn the culture of the group one is studying before one can produce valid explanations for the behavior of its members. This is the reason for the centrality of participant observation and unstructured interviewing to ethnographic method.

3. Discovery- Another feature of ethnographic thinking is a conception of the research process as inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses. The focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened, and perhaps even changed substantially, as it proceeds.

The approach to data collection is "unstructured in the sense that it does not involve following through a detailed plan set up at the beginning; nor are the categories used for interpreting what people say and do pre-given or fixed. This does not mean that the research is unsystematic; simply that initially the data are collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible. The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

Modes of data collection in ethnography

There are three modes of data collection in ethnography: observation, interviewing and archival research (Angrosino, 2007)

1. Observation: According to Angrosino (2007), observation is the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting.

2. Interviewing: Interviewing is the process of directing a conversation to collect information (Angrosino, 2007).

3. Archival research: This is the analysis of existing materials stored for research, service or other purposes officially and unofficially (Angrosino, 2007)

Design Process and steps involved

"The user" is a central trope for designers, the focus of their design process, identifying and meeting "the user's" needs and wants is the central mission of designers. Of course, this is never a straightforward process. Consumers have complex, multiple needs, which they are not always able to articulate. Also, designers may create new product ideas

that satisfy needs consumers did not know they had. For this the designers follow some of the data collection methods which are tools for data collection in qualitative research methods of ethnography.

Few types of ethnographic studies done by designers are listed here.

1. Concurrent ethnography: A technical system or a “rapid prototype” is introduced into praxis at the same time as it is observed ethnographically, whereby iterative loops, such as field research—debriefing—design of a prototype—field research, are played through several times. The observations are focused on the human object or human-interface interactions.
2. Quick ethnography: This refers primarily to quick forays into the field. This process can provide an overview of an area that has been defined in advance.
3. Evaluative ethnography: This ethnography is performed after the implementation of a new technology or system. It is focused. Various forms of interview are utilized as the main method.
4. Re-examination of previous studies: This refers to analyses of earlier ethnographic studies. It is therefore purely desk research with no visit to the field.

Similarities in design process and ethnography:

Keith M. Murphy and George E. Marcus have mapped out similarities between design and ethnography in social research.

1. Design and ethnography exist as product and process
2. Design and ethnography are focused on research
3. Design and ethnography are people-centered.
4. Design and ethnography are at the service of more than the thing itself.
5. Design and ethnography are reflexive.

At the same time, there are differences in both. The design is defined as future oriented and collaborative. Field Research ethnography in which Methods are used so that situations are disrupted, data is interpreted more quickly, and the processes become iterative. In the context of design ethnography, iterative processes can produce hypotheses, out of which prototypes, workshops, mock-ups, future scenarios, etc., are developed.

Findings

Design ethnography is not about a fixing on methods, but more about immersion in social life worlds. Curiosity and a fundamentally open

attitude toward people and social life is needed whereby the methods for achieving this are only a means and not an end in themselves.

Sketching is often done so automatically by designers that it is not even perceived as a method of fieldwork. In fact, sketching is also called “graphic anthropology” (Tondeur 2016) is a highly useful approach in fieldwork, where photography and video recording is not possible.

Photography can facilitate the first contact in the field. Participatory Photography and Cultural Probes and video documentation and also handing out cameras and letting people in the field use them themselves can help collect data. In photo elicitation technique pictures are not simply analyzed by researchers but also function as the basis for interviews with the participants in the field. Participant produced images describes visual data created by the people in the field.

Conclusions

Thus, ethnography is always participatory, as the researcher participates to a greater or lesser extent in the field. Most design processes also have participative elements, given that designers do not just work in a lab but rather develop their solutions interactively with particular groups. Prototype building, user feedback, user testing, iterative modifications in design solution after feedback are often part of design process.

The practices and research methods of design ethnography are variable and diverse and should be well-founded and consciously considered. Design research has impact on other disciplines when used as a step in design process for user’s need and satisfaction through design outcome. More and more design research methods be developed by designers and to be consciously that can be applied, changed, expanded, transcended, and adapted. Due to the playful and iterative approaches in design practice, design ethnography has a high potential for methodological innovation that is also interesting and inspiring for cultural anthropology and sociology.

Therefore, when considering methods in the context of design ethnography, it is necessary to consider practice that designing must be viewed as a cognitive process that produces knowledge, and that these design techniques do not merely objectivize previously generated knowledge.

This states that designers switch quickly and in response to the situation between roles and perspectives. They alternate between active intervention and passive observation, giving form and conducting research. They make hypotheses and materializations, like prototypes, out of the findings.

As a non-self-contained method, design ethnography has the potential to quickly translate images into words and words into designs, whose implementation is then reflected on and articulated. For the benefit of society, it entails quick and situational shifts in thinking styles and perspectives of designers thus satisfying user's needs.

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