The Unsung Beauty of Mundanity
The Role of Research in Design
by Felice Ling

What do you picture when someone says the word "research"? For many, the image of a sterile lab with stark, white walls comes to mind. Everything in the environment is controlled, every variable accounted for – which is exactly what you want when you are trying to test the efficacy of a drug or pinpoint specifically what causes what. But what if you are trying to design a new product that will soon be incorporated into someone's life?

"Research" doesn't often conjure up the image of conversations in the living room or a walk around the park. Hopping into the passenger seat of a truck to talk to a driver who's just passing through a rest stop seems more like an ambush than "research," and following someone around their kitchen and living room as they clean falls more under the realm of "stalking."

But that's exactly what design researchers do for a living – and it's for a good reason

Design research can be messy. Take one study, for example, where, in order to create a better sleep tracking device, THE MEME Design tracked ten participants and their sleeping habits over the course of three weeks. We didn't corral them into a sleep lab each night for observations; we let them stay in their own homes. That was the point. Rather than isolate them from potentially confounding variables, we needed to get to the roots of their real life experiences, warts and all.

Products are affected by their contexts, so we need to know as much as possible about the people who use them. Otherwise, how would we know if it will fit into their lives?

That meant we had to account for camping trips, nights on the couch, nights with house guests, and nights when a participant didn't come home at all. We learned more than we had sought out to know, exactly because we dared venture into the most private of spaces. The real power of this type of research is that it opens you up to potentials that you had not hypothesized, gives you glimpses through doors that you hadn't known existed, and offers you opportunities to walk through some of those doors.

That's why research isn't just "talking to people."

It's much deeper than that. And when research is discounted as a casual kind of conversation and subsequently skimped on, the resulting design recommendations just aren't as powerful. While a superficial conversation most definitely can lead to some helpful information, those findings pale in comparison to the kind of insights that emerges from thorough research – insights that can tweak a product or utterly transform it into something that is not merely useful but absolutely integral to a person's lifestyle. This kind of research we do is in no way easy; it requires a particular sort of researcher to do it.

Design researchers are designers and social scientists – psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists – who are regularly immersed in the uncertain, shaky ground of real human lives and challenged to make sense of them. Where many would be lost or overwhelmed, this kind of researcher thrives on ambiguity. But remember: we aren't just researchers. We are design researchers. We can't just mosey about, lost in the quagmire of research data forever. Our research is applied and that means that we have to take what we learn and siphon these resulting insights into clear recommendations for the design of whatever it is that we're working on. When we do that, when people are willing to invest time and effort into good design research, we create products that truly make people's lives better.