

systematic way of dealing with it. It looks as though they just hang around aimlessly. We would argue that they are observing clues that could lead to themes which will help them create a response to the problem situation. These clues are not explicitly expressed as themes, but are often packaged in episodic knowledge, as stories. For example, Hester van Eeghen, the internationally renowned bag designer based in Amsterdam, explained in an interview (Dorst 2002a) that she goes to the market on Saturdays just to observe people handling the wares they buy, and the various ways they hold their shopping bags as they grow heavier with every purchase. But her observations go far beyond these physical and functional aspects of carrying. She focuses on somebody, follows her around, and tries to figure out what kind of person she is (nervous? expansive?), imagining how she lives, filling in all kinds of details about her life. The value of design lies in the creation of a “something” for “somebody”: creating this connection means shaping high-quality relationships, and Hester van Eeghen’s spying on people is her way of getting a sense of what the basis for such a relationship could be. The bags she designs have a real cleverness and intimacy in the way they help shape this relationship, and as a result they are curiously satisfying to use. Some of her bags have an interesting trick that allows them to be worn in different ways, made with sensitivity to the user’s real needs in different circumstances: what is a seemingly petite, elegant hand-bag can be expanded to hold A4 paperwork. A subtle bulge in one of her bags helps you bring an apple to work along with your laptop. Many of her bags have secret pockets that satisfy our deep-felt need for privacy. Just the knowledge that the pocket is there makes the bag more of a personal object, and creates a deep attachment (van Eeghen and Gannij 2009).

Likewise, famed Japanese product designer Naoto Fukasawa (art director of the Muji department stores) makes short video recordings on the street to observe how people use public spaces in Tokyo. A great example is the clip showing people on the platform of the metro, pacing while texting messages, and using the profiled stripes on the pavement that are put there for the orientation of blind people to guide themselves around the pillars. This brilliant observation tells you something not just about the use of these stripes, but about the state of mind of these commuters and how they navigate through public spaces. The understanding of people in this intimate way feeds into Fukasawa’s very subtle designs (Fukasawa 2007).

Some designers go beyond observation and engage in deliberate interaction to unearth underlying themes in a situation. An example of such a strategy is