



# THE USER EXPERIENCE

## Exploring Context

By Aaron Schmidt

IT WAS A HOT, DUSTY DAY IN Moab, UT. I drove into town from my beautiful campsite overlooking the La Sal Mountains, where I'd been cycling and exploring the beautiful country. I was taking a few days off from work, and even though I was relaxing, I had a phone call I didn't want to reschedule. So back to town I went, straight to—naturally—the public library. I had fond memories of the library from a previous visit a few years back: a beautiful building with reliable Wi-Fi. Aside from not being allowed to bring coffee inside, it would be a great place to check email and take a call on the bench outside.

As I entered the library, I decided that transitioning from adventure mode to work mode required, at least, washing some of Moab's ample sand and dust off of my hands. I washed my hands and what happened next I did automatically, without consideration or contemplation: I cupped my hands and splashed some water on my face. Refreshing! I then wet a paper towel to wipe the sunscreen off of the back of my neck.

It was at about this point that I realized just what was going on; I was the guy bathing in the library restroom! Half shocked, half amused by my actions, I quickly made sure I didn't drip anywhere and sully the otherwise very clean and pleasant basin.

### Contextually appropriate

I can't say I'm proud of my mindless act, but it did get me thinking about the very sensitive issue of appropriate behavior in libraries.

I'm not going on a campaign encouraging libraries to offer showers to their patrons, but not because I think the idea is ridiculous. I actually think it is a legitimate potential service offering. That such a service would likely be useful for only a very small segment of library users is one reason why it isn't worth pursuing.

But as a theoretical concept, I find nothing inherently wrong or illogical with the idea of a library offering showers. It is simply an idea that hasn't found many appropriate contexts.

Even so, with the smallest amount of imagination I can think of contexts in which this could work. What about a multiuse facility that houses a restaurant, a gym, a coworking space, and a library? Seems like an amazing place.

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And don't forget that the new central library in Helsinki, Finland—to be completed in 2017—will feature sauna facilities. These will be contextually and culturally appropriate.

### Challenging assumptions

This is about more than showers and saunas. It is about our long-held assumptions and how we react to new ideas. When we're closed off to concepts without examining them fully, or without exploring the frameworks in which they exist, we're unlikely truly to innovate or create any radically meaningful experiences. When

evaluating new initiatives, we should consider the library less and our communities more. Without this sort of thinking, we'd have never realized libraries with popular materials, web access, and instructional classes, let alone cafés, gaming nights, and public health nurses.

Learning about our contexts—our communities—takes more than facilitating surveys and leading focus groups.

After all, those techniques put less emphasis on people and more on their opinions. Even though extra work is required, the techniques aren't mysterious. There are well-established methods we can use to learn about the individuals in our areas and then design contextually appropriate programs and services. See the sidebar for some resources to help you get started, including the Learning Space Toolkit, a free online product developed by North Carolina State University Libraries in collaboration with consultants brightspot strategy and AECOM.

To the Grand County Public Library in Moab, my apologies for the slight transgression. I did leave the restroom in the same shape as I found it. To everyone else, if you're in Moab, visit the library. It won LJ's Best Small Library Award in 2007. But if you need a place to clean up in that city, try the aquatic center. It has nice pools and clean showers.

#### DESIGN TOOLBOX

**Learning Space Toolkit**  
[learningspacetoolkit.org](http://learningspacetoolkit.org)

**A Project Guide to UX Design**  
[projectuxd.com](http://projectuxd.com)

**Service Design Tools**  
[www.servicedesigntools.org](http://www.servicedesigntools.org)

**When To Use Which User Experience Research Methods**  
[www.nngroup.com/articles/which-ux-research-methods](http://www.nngroup.com/articles/which-ux-research-methods)

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