



## Designing for the user: Leveraging best practices from digital UX in how we design spaces - by Kate Wieczorek

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As new technology emerges, more of our lives exist within the digital realm. However, the impact of our physical environment cannot be ignored. We can view our digital movements as an augmentation of how we interact within the context of the built environment, such as Uber and Airbnb. With all of these new ways of interacting across multiple dimensions, it is paramount we design the right user experience.

User experience, also known as UX, has been a topic of interest for both the tech and architectural design industry. User experience is an individual's emotions and attitudes about using a particular product, system, or service. It is how that individual perceives and reacts to their environment, which then goes on to inform their future experiences. UX Design is the process of effectively designing and implementing a product, service, or environment, to create the intended user experience. The

digital UX design process is pretty robust, but commonalities exist with the architectural design process. As practitioners of the built environment, how can we leverage this how we design spaces?

#### User research should be the basis for design

In designing digital products, the ability to understand the user and their unique needs will determine a success or a failure. An app that is buggy, missing key features, or confusing to navigate will not be adopted by users. In the same way, a physical structure, such as a workplace, that does not effectively support its employees, lacks essential tools, or does not have the right spaces for collaborating, will hamper the success of that organization. The first step to avoid these situations is to understand the user through comprehensive user research.

In tech, UX research is done through a variety of both quantitative and qualitative efforts. Researchers will conduct activities such as user interviews, competitive analysis, content audits, usability testing, or other forms of data gathering. These tools can be utilized in designing for the built environment. Ethnographic studies, where a researcher immerses themselves in the lives, culture, or situation that they are studying; can be replicated when designing a workplace environment through observing employees in their daily work patterns. How does a user interact with others? How do they use technology? What habits do they demonstrate? What is impeding them in their workflow? What are their motivations and goals? Being able to answer these questions will result in a design that effectively addresses user needs. Qualitative forms of research allows designers to dig deeper to further understand design requirements, ones that the user themselves may not be able to articulate.

#### Frame the problem first, not the solution

For apps or other digital products, UX designers may be inclined to build a very advanced solution with many extravagant features. However, it is more important to frame the problem first, and not go straight to the solution. The problem statement identifies the gap between the current state and the future state, and is an important step when designing a product or a space. It is tempting to ideate on what the future solution can be, but without understanding the problem fully, ideating may lead to a design solution that simply does not work. For workplaces, this involves conducting a current state assessment of the true pain points employees, departments, and leaders experience. The problem of “not enough meeting rooms” could in reality be “our room reservation system is ineffective and it’s difficult to train individuals on how to use it.” Both are problems involving meetings, but the solutions to solve for these problems are vastly different.

#### Adopt a systems-thinking approach

Although one could argue a systems-thinking view is the opposite of an individual user view, when designing for the user one must think on both the small and large scale. Systems thinking is the process of understanding individual components, along with the interdependence of those components. From the UX digital design perspective, how the components fit together ties directly into the information architecture and development of the product. Adopting a systems-thinking approach for designing spaces involves understanding how the different space elements will curate a unique navigation and experience. Branding a space is more than a logo on a wall, it is the thoughtful immersion into an organization’s culture, philosophy, and values. How well different

spatial components tie together determines the effectiveness of the environment.

There is much overlap between the digital and physical UX design process, and many more elements can be leveraged. Both digital and physical experiences have merged, and a user's experience in one sphere connects with the experience in the other. Leading with designing for the user experience will not only be positive for the individual, but also impact how an organization operates within its own ecosystem.

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