Cultural Probes

Cultural Probes are a design-led approach to engaging with settings aimed at producing inspiration rather than information. They involve presenting people with open-ended, even absurd tasks in the hope that their responses will provide fragmentary insights into their lives, thoughts, hopes, and fears. Invented by Tony Dunne, Bill Gaver, and Elena Pacenti for a project spanning three European countries, they are often designed to rely on photographs and drawings, as well as short written responses, to minimise reliance on language and provide relatively direct glimpses into peoples’ situations.
Household attitudes towards the use of energy were captured as a set of rules, which were in one case fixed to a fridge door with Cultural Probe packs containing collections of new tasks for them to complete at
A selection of returned probes including conversations between appliances, sketches, an end-of-oil survival kit, and an energy confession.

home. Again, the tasks were playful and perhaps surprising. What are your rules about
What is the pressure of energy here?

sitting next to classic through window

confess a guilty energy usage secret

framing

energy? What would two appliances say to each other? As we waited for the probe returns,
My energy monitor: Chronicle of a failed attempt

Liliana Ovalle

Last month, I moved out of my rented flat. After living three years in the attic of a converted pub, I packed up all my belongings but one: an energy monitor. For the last two years, the device had been trapped inside the meter cabinet located on the ground floor of the building. It remains there, clamped to what I believe is the electricity meter of flat no. 7, my ex-flat.

Energy monitors are a key measure within current carbon-emission reduction policy. To better understand how these devices affect everyday life, we distributed a variety of monitors amongst the members of the ECDC team for a short trial. Covering a range of brands and styles, each monitor offered particular features, from a discrete minimal presence to a range of online services that could expand the device into a complex network of synchronised power switches and appliances, a gateway to the Internet of Things. With multiple graphs and quantifications accompanied by pictograms of smiley and sad houses, the monitors were presented as the ultimate tool to becoming an informed energy user. I received mine with excitement, eager to discover and quantify the flow of electricity going through my house, which until then had only been evidenced through quarterly bills.

As soon as I got home, I opened the box of my 'Alert Me Starter Kit'. The kit consisted of different electronic components: a battery-powered wireless transmitter that clips to the electricity meter, and a receiver unit that connects to the broadband router. After carefully reading the instructions, I began set-up. My first task was to access the electricity meter. I had seen a locked door on the ground floor with signs indicating that it contained the meters and other installations of the building. I had been dissuaded from carrying out further explorations by a red sign which read 'Danger: Electricity shock risk'. On my first attempt to break into that semi-restricted zone, I found my first obstacle: the door was locked and I had no key. I had never before needed to open this door since electricity readings had occurred anonymously by means of an unnoticed visit by a reader sent by the electricity company. After looking for the key amongst all the appliances we started first-person research, for instance installing energy monitors in our homes.
manuals, loose keys, and other bits that the landlord had left us, I finally found it.

I opened the door only to discover a second obstacle: all the cables coming from the row of electricity meters were protected with plastic wiring duct. There was no way to access beyond this protection, and after failed attempts to remove the lid with a screwdriver I decided to squeeze my hand through the duct and try to clamp the monitor. This was a somewhat blind and uncomfortable manoeuvre as I wasn’t sure which of the cables that I could feel corresponded to my flat – never mind that the electric shock warning kept flashing in my mind. It took me a few minutes of groping inside while I hoped that none of my neighbours would appear and find me with my hand trapped inside the guarded electricity installation. I finally clipped the clamps to what I believed was the correct cable.

Excited about achieving what turned out to be the trickiest step of installing the monitor, I went back to my flat to check if the hub was receiving any signal, only to be disappointed to find there was none. After long chats with the supplier’s online support, I was advised to remove the clamp to check if the signal of the transmitter was strong enough to reach my flat at the top of the building, which would require breaking into the electricity installation again. In the next two years, I never returned to it. The space behind the locked door remained a restricted area to me, and I preferred to avoid the discussion with the landlord to get proper authorisation to access the space.

As I was packing to move out last month I had the uncomfortable reminder of the monitor inside the meter cabinet when I found the box with the rest of the components. I decided to leave the device behind and move on. I still picture it transmitting undetected signals to the world, trapped in the dark duct where it will probably stay until another tenant attempts to break in.

At least, we tried: one of the things we learned is how recalcitrant physical infra-