

# Unearthing “The Blindspot”: An Emotion-centered Approach To Design

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Imagine you’re walking up the stairs to your office and seeing a green fuzzy cover wrapping around the banister – will you run your hands through it? How does it make you feel? Can the haptic interaction influence the way you work or think about the office?



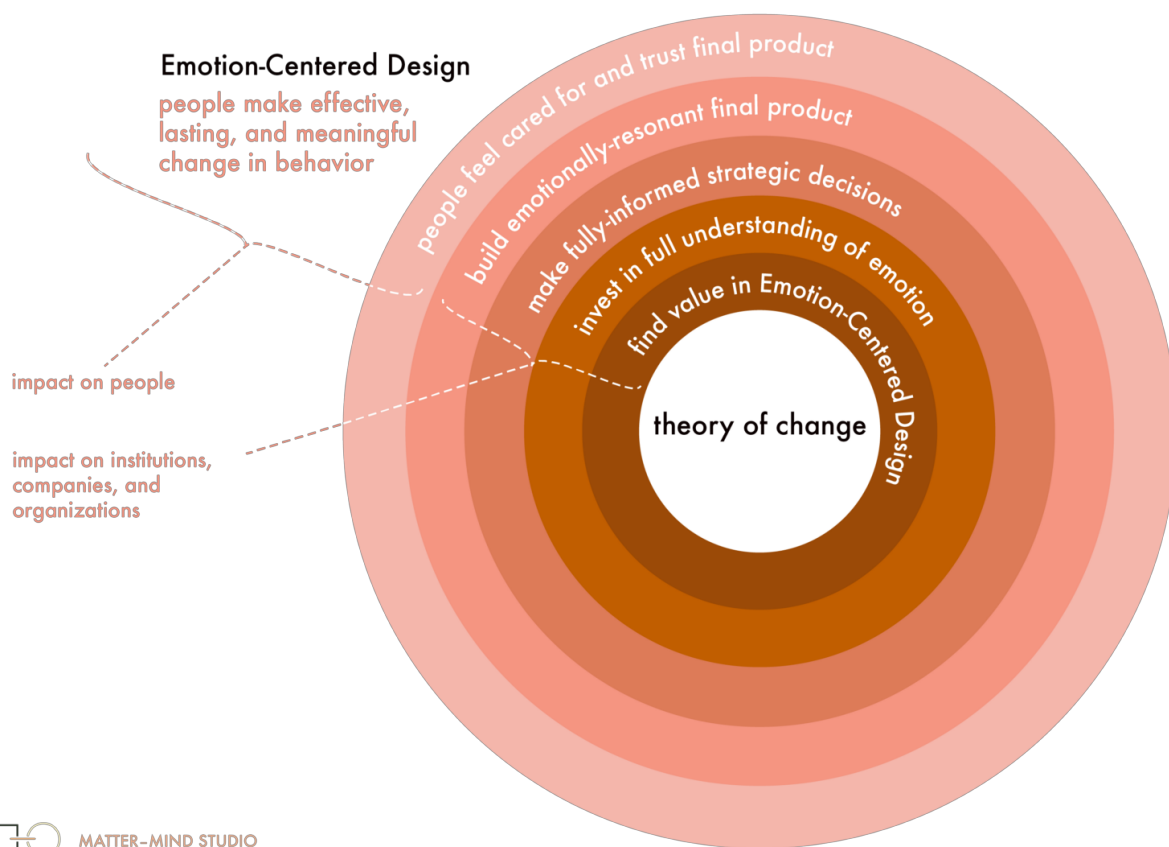
Research Instrument: *Being Present*. Courtesy Matter-Mind Studio

The green fuzzy handrail wrap, which serves as an anchor to the emotional transitions between the outside world and the inside space, the private life and the co-working environment, is one of [Matter-Mind Studio](#)'s experiments with [emotion-centered design](#).

We are surrounded by many objects in the spaces we occupy, yet oftentimes we don't scrutinize their impacts on our emotions. The emotional landscape in relation to the setup of space and placement of objects can convey valuable insights into our understanding of complex problems. Much of design language involves behavioral change, but how we think and act, according to Matter-Mind Studio, is deeply rooted in our emotions.

“People talk about waste issue and how plastic is bad for the environment, but it’s hard to change their actions. If we look at environmental issues through an emotional lens, we can see the emotional burden that comes with it. What kind of lifestyle requires you to be sustainable without feeling stressed out about it?,” said Lillian Tong, one of the co-founders of Matter-Mind Studio.

Working at the intersection of design and psychology, Lillian Tong, Myriam Doremy Diatta, and Colleen Doyle use the emotion-centered approach to address “the blindspot” in design—the commonly neglected relationship between made objects, spaces, experiences and our emotional lives. Informed by [transdisciplinary design](#), Elaine Scarry’s “[The Interior Structure of the Artifact](#),” and daily observations, the studio is developing emotion-centered design tools such as sentimental objects, spaces, key insights from family rituals, and communication techniques. This creative intervention to the traditional design thinking and practices requires not only a lot of research and exercise, but also imagination.



Theory of Change. Courtesy Matter-Mind Studio

According to [Shana Agid](#), artist, writer, activist, and Assistant Professor of Arts, Media, and Communication at Parsons, the biggest gap in [design thinking](#) lies in its “[packaging](#),” as the nuance of why people do what they do and what it means to design in relation to that ends up getting lost. Matter-Mind’s approach can contribute to filling the gaps as it embraces nuances and the “mess” design deals with, which involves humans and complex systems. Their willingness to reimagine what’s important in the making process—a series of elements lining up to build the capacity to do other things, an ecosystem, instead of just an immediate product—is worth investigating.

Having worked with service design in visual and political cultures for many years, Agid recognized that “There was an impulse in design to always come to a conclusion, to tell the perfect story.” Thus, there isn’t enough questioning on how different experiences, such as with race, class, gender, or different ways humans occupy body and move through space, might deeply impact a person’s interaction with design. What’s interesting to him about the studio’s approach is the proposal of emotions as design materials—“They are taking what we learn from human-centered and participatory design to create an emotional lens, through which designers can dissect the multi-layered system behind the gloss of a ‘perfect story’ and make better products and services.”

In her namesake [article](#) published in 2002, Lucy Suchman talked about the idea of “located accountability” in design and technology production. Perhaps, what Matter-Mind is tapping into opens a more substantial question on accountability and positionality.

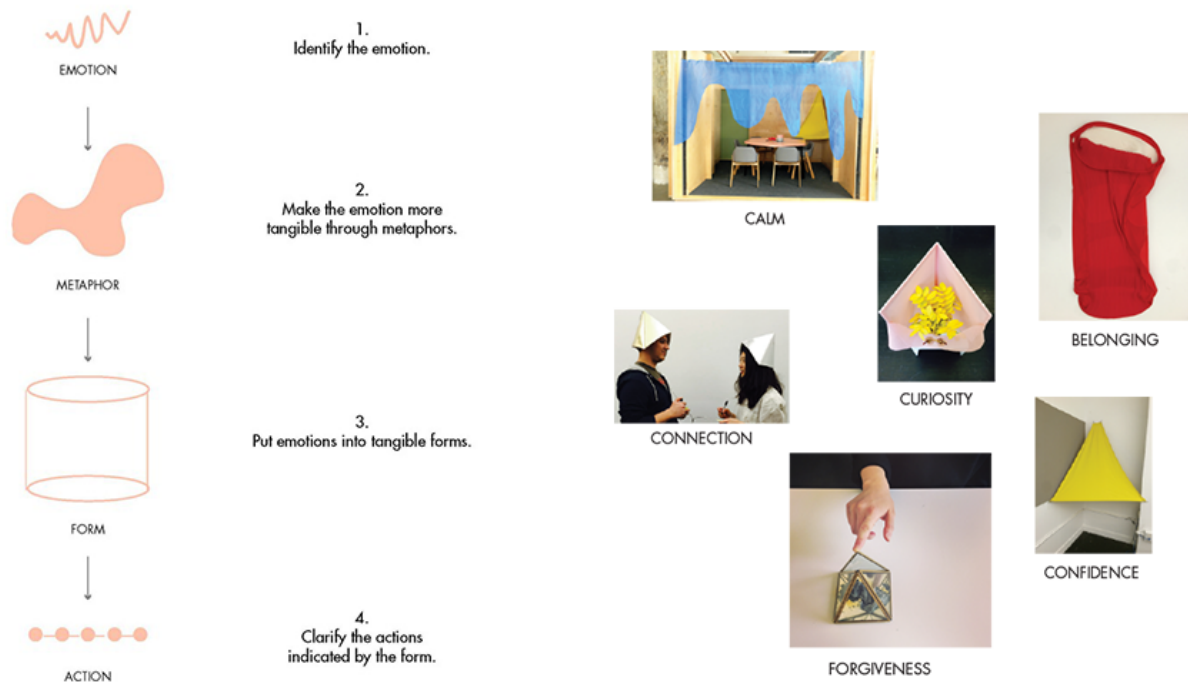
“In design literature, there’s a fallacy that designers are not imposing anything on the situations, which is 100% not true, but the question is how do we talk about that in a way that allows us to still design in a compelling way, while acknowledging that we do frame things through certain lenses?,” said Shana Agid. It seems to her that Matter-Mind is calling out the idea of what people bring to the designing process, what gets designed, and the environment they’re designing around—there’s no way anybody is walking free without seeing themselves having some impact on the situation.

However, to certain publics, the idea of using feelings to inform design is not so easy to fathom and embrace.

The three ladies of Matter-Mind are exploring how to situate themselves in the industry when a lot of companies are driven by clear and big data. What they focus on is [small and qualitative data](#) that can reveal more nuanced and novel insights. “People like to see numbers and we don’t quite proof numbers just for numbers’ sake. There are a lot of contexts to understand when we see data, but a lot of people like the straightforwardness and easy-to-grasp,” Tong shared. Recently, the human value of small and qualitative data versus the commodity of big data has been recognized by other design practitioners, such as [Giorgia Lupi with Data Humanism](#).

On a side note, [Elliot P. Montgomery](#), speculative design researcher/strategist at Parsons and co-founder of [The Extrapolation Factory](#), a design-futures studio based in Brooklyn, mentioned that we should differentiate between “emotion-centered design” and “emotion-design,” as the latter might point to something problematic.

“You can design the conditions for experiences but you can’t design experiences. To me, emotion might play by the same rules as experience. You can design the context or environment to tease out a whole range of emotions, but you can’t design an emotion itself without manipulating the body and brain chemistry,” Montgomery explained.



*Design Poetic for the Workplace.* Courtesy Matter-Mind Studio

In a larger cultural context, different groups of people might have various ways to confront and process emotions. Shana Agid wondered about an aspect of the U.S. working culture: “In some ways I don’t think we’ve gotten that far from the masculinized perspective that rational thought is more valid and able to be carried forward than emotional reason.” Lillian Tong resonated with this idea, as she witnessed how people dealt with emotions differently growing up in China, but she also thought that people found it hard to express more complex feelings and talk about emotions in any culture.

“It makes sense, because you need a safe space to be vulnerable and open; it requires a lot of reflection and articulation,” she uttered, “People usually convey feelings through stories, and that’s why Matter-Mind collects stories through our design tools to unpack how feelings can help companies and organizations [improve their products and services.](#)”

As revealed by Tong, most clients, partners and collaborators are very intrigued by emotion-centered design, yet it’s uncommon for them to absolutely get it because the idea is deeply entrenched in the process. There are the “Matter-Mind Champions” who understand where the studio’s coming from, and there are people from business background, for example, who might not be familiar with neither design thinking nor their more conceptual approach.

“Our challenge and also excitement is to invite these people in the kitchen and experience the process with us,” Tong smiled.

As someone who constantly works with new ideas and tools in design, Elliot P. Montgomery clarified that it could feel like a hurdle or obstacle when people first heard about emotion-

centered design because they needed time to rationalize this new concept. However, he said: “There are many signals that indicate to me that young people are really excited about tapping into emotion and experience, and stepping away from pragmatism [...] They would be very excited about the premise of emotion-centered design.”

One thing to keep in mind when applying this new design approach, as suggested by Montgomery, is the individuality factor—how by designing for one emotion you’re hindering another emotion, even within a group of link-minded individuals.

“Let’s say productivity has the smell of lavender. If you grow up in a lavender farm, the smell of lavender will remind you of the beautiful days of your youth, your parents, and all of the positive things that keep you motivated. But maybe for me, I equate lavender with a terrible past experience in which I ate a bunch of lavenders and it caused me to vomit [...] Emotions diverge and evoke different behaviors, because we’re complex human beings with various experiences that evolve overtime,” he shared.



Lillian Tong, Colleen Doyle and Myriam Doremy Diatta. Courtesy Matter-Mind Studio.

When asked about the hopes and dreams of Matter-Mind, Lillian Tong said that they wanted to work with more organizations with a good cause, such as MoMa Art Lab. Their hope is that more designers will be aware and use the emotion-centered approach to understand [the emotional needs that drive consumption](#).

“Right now, we want to mainstream emotion-centered design and enable people to understand the value of our approach [...] The process can be manifested through a course in a school. It would be interesting if we’re hired by Columbia Business School to do a course on emotion-centered design,” Tong said.

Lillian Tong wasn't sure if it was the perfect entry time for Matter-Mind, considering all the anxious realities in politics, culture, and environment. Yet amidst all uncertainties, the three co-founders are simply driven by their common passion to care for people through design.

"Sometimes we asked ourselves: 'Are we ready? Are we experienced enough?' But if we really want to do this work, we want to be the first to make it happen," Tong determined.