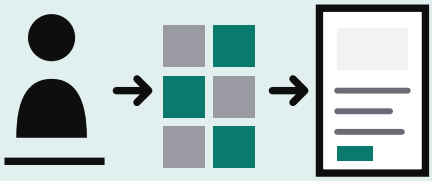
Process

Contextual Design

A design process that starts by observing people in context, organizes what was learned into shared models and diagrams, and turns it into visions, product structure and prototypes.



Origin

Beyer and Holtzblatt (1998)

What it's for

It helps a whole team design from real data about how people work and live, not from opinions or assumptions.

Phases

Data from context

Everything starts with contextual inquiry, where the activity happens.

Interpret as a team

Observations are discussed together and organized into an affinity diagram and models.

From data to vision

The team walks through the data before imagining solutions and telling them with storyboards.

Test with paper

The product structure is checked early with paper prototypes and with people.

How it's done

1 

Observe and ask people while they work, through contextual inquiry.

2 

The team interprets and models what was learned in joint sessions, an affinity diagram and work models.

3 

Envision, structure and test the product with visions, storyboards and paper prototypes.

Applications in design

When to use it

When a complex product or system needs redesigning and the team needs to deeply understand people's work or lives.

Avoid

Stopping at contextual inquiry and jumping to solutions without interpreting or modeling what you observed.

Don't fall for it

It's a long process: choose the models you really need instead of doing them all.

Connections

Used by

- Design research

Related to

- Affinity diagram
- User-centered design
- Contextual inquiry
- Prototyping
- Storyboard

Authors and works

1998	**Hugh Beyer and Karen Holtzblatt**	Brought together in a single process contextual inquiry, team interpretation, work models and the design of the product structure.
2016	**Karen Holtzblatt and Hugh Beyer**	In the second edition they extended it to consumer and mobile products, with experience models such as the day-in-the-life, identity and relationship models.

Sources

Original sources

- Beyer, H., & Holtzblatt, K. (1998). Contextual design: Defining customer-centered systems. Morgan Kaufmann.
- Holtzblatt, K., & Beyer, H. (2016). Contextual design: Design for life (2nd ed.). Morgan Kaufmann. View source (https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/-/9780128011362/)

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.