MIRROR, MIRROR; The Anthropologist Of Dressing Rooms

By Penelope Green
Published: Sunday, May 2, 1999

IN a dressing room deep in the men's department of Macy's in Paramus, N.J., a lone linty french fry nuzzled a balled-up Kleenex. A few cardboard strips, discarded from shirt collars, beckoned from across the maroon carpet. Straight pins glinted shyly under a bench.

Paco Underhill, retail anthropologist and passionate shoppers' advocate, gave me a withering look. Macy's, the look said, wasn't doing its job, and he was mad about it. "Righteous anger," Mr. Underhill had explained earlier, "is very much a part of my personal universe."

He stomped out of the dressing room -- at 6-foot-4, Mr. Underhill is good at making a point with his body.

Nobody feels a shopper's pain more acutely than Mr. Underhill, the 47-year-old founder of Envirosell, a market research company that studies shopping habits, and a disciple of the late urban anthropologist William H. Whyte. As Whyte did, Mr. Underhill applies the field-study methods of a behavioral scientist.

Envirosell researchers, known as trackers, follow shoppers around stores, recording their every twist and sidle, their every pat and fondle of the merchandise. Their notes are supplemented by miles of what Mr. Underhill calls "the most boring" videotape, to understand how people navigate stores, and what attracts or repels them.

In a new book, "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping" (Simon & Schuster), Mr. Underhill reveals that Americans walk the way they drive -- on the right -- and so they habitually veer to the right aisles of a store. (Australians and the British, by contrast, veer to the left.)

Mr. Underhill knows that most people, especially women, don't like to be jostled or nudged on their bottoms when they are shopping, and they will walk away even if they might have been interested in buying. (When Mr. Underhill first observed this "butt-brush factor" at Bloomingdale's and described it to the store's president, a tie rack was moved out of a narrow traffic lane, and, in the following weeks, Mr. Underhill said, sales of ties soared.)

Mr. Underhill knows that 65 percent of men who take jeans into a dressing room to try them on will buy them, and that only 25 percent of women will. And he knows that a woman shopping with a man will spend less time in a store than if shopping alone, or with a friend, or even a child.

What all this means if you are an American retailer is that it makes sense to offer your best merchandise on the right side of the store, in aisles wide enough for two-way traffic, and to give men a place to sit and something to do in stores that sell mostly to women.

It is difficult to name a major American retailer that Mr. Underhill has not admonished -- I mean advised. Executives of the Disney Store were exhorted to crawl through their aisles

accordingly. Mr. Underhill charges from $30,000 to the high six figures for a store study, and much of his advice borders on the obvious. Still, clients like Starbucks, the Gap, AT&T, Estee Lauder, Walgreen's, Apple and Citibank have all hired Envirosell.

John Lombardi, the executive vice president for creative services at Revlon, an Envirosell client, is a believer. "Here's an obvious thing, and that is that as the population ages, as our customer ages, the bottom 13 inches of a shelf of products gets harder and harder for her to reach," Mr. Lombardi said. "And so, you zone your products so they can be reached. You extend that information into type size and package design. You sort of know these things, but you don't realize it or do anything about it until somebody says it. I love Paco's work. His -- what do you call it? -- retail intelligence is just invaluable information. You can't make this stuff up."

Macy's was but one of a dozen stores Mr. Underhill and I visited on a recent Saturday at the Garden State Plaza in Paramus. ("As researchers of shopping, we routinely sacrifice our weekends," Mr. Underhill said sternly.)

He took me on a tour of dressing rooms to prove a point, namely that it is here that most retailers fall on their faces. "A dressing room is the closing place," he said. "It's where you make the commitment -- where the sale happens -- and very few stores seem to understand that."

First stop, the Disney Store. Zero dressing rooms! Even though Disney's retail chain has begun selling clothes, not just T-shirts. Mr. Underhill was furious, and it hardly mattered that Disney is a client; he is as wonderfully abusive to clients as to nonclients. "I get mad when they're dumb," he said.

Sondra Haley, the vice president for publicity and promotions for the chain, declined to comment, citing company policy "not to comment on the work of our consultants."

Mr. Underhill has a checklist of features for what makes a dressing room successful: adjustable, flattering lighting; ample room to turn around in and to park a stroller; a "chair plant," a place for a companion to sit, and something for that companion to do (toys for children or magazines for men). Not least, it should be clean.

A former stutterer, Mr. Underhill speaks carefully and in complete paragraphs. You sense that his professional interests may have sprung from years of small indignities suffered -- beds that were too short for his lanky frame, suits that didn't quite fit. "Tall people are desperate for choice," he said, flinging off his denim jacket to reveal that the sleeves of a pale blue dress shirt were two inches short.

Following him around a mall is exhausting. You have to jog to keep up. He seems to have become Everyshopper, an amalgam of the 50,000 or so shoppers he's observed over the years, all short of time and fuse. In the couture department at Nordstrom's, a saleswoman opened a dressing room at his request and then, after being grilled about whether the lighting was adjustable (no), and Champagne was available (no, but there was bottled water), she asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm Paco Underhill," he said, and she fell back, clearly confused.

At Mimi Maternity, there were tiny dressing rooms with saloon-style doors, but these opened onto a semiprivate common area, with one chair plant, a box full of toys and some well-thumbed Sports Illustrateds. (Is the American male really such a cartoon?) In any case, Mr. Underhill beamed. The sales clerk looked happy, too.

At BCBG, there was a sitting area -- chair plants! -- outside the dressing rooms, but no men's magazines or mirrors in the dressing rooms. And the common mirror was in full sight of the front door.

The dressing rooms in the Polo Jeans store were predictably exquisite, paneled in the

an aluminum chair and rock-and-roll-y photographs on display -- an Annie Leibovitz portrait of the Red Hot Chili Peppers naked in one room, the work of Ellen von Unwerth in another. Mr. Underhill loved it all. But when a toddler barreled past, roaring, he said: "There is nothing for that child to do. Somebody should have thought of that."

Do companies think about their dressing rooms? Lynn Tesoro, a spokeswoman for Polo Ralph Lauren, said that dressing-room design at Polo Jeans stores is meant to be an extension of the store's design.

As for Macy's, whose Paramus men's dressing room had been found harboring a french fry and other debris, a corporate spokesman issued a statement explaining that stores follow a checklist to maintain comfort and cleanliness. "With that in mind, we were dismayed to learn that your findings in our Garden State Plaza store showed a breakdown in this system," the statement read. "Know that this has not, is not, nor will it ever be our standard, and that we will make every attempt to correct the situation."

Somewhere, Paco Underhill is smiling.

Photo: Paco Underhill, gathering retail intelligence at a Banana Republic store. (Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)

A version of this article appeared in print on Sunday, May 2, 1999, on section 9 page 4 of the New York edition.

More Articles in Style >

MOST POPULAR - STYLE

E-MAILED | BLOGGED

1. For Some Parents, Shouting Is the New Spanking
2. Guardians of Their Smiles
3. The Minimalist: Autumn Sonata: Sprouts, Bacon and Figs
4. Brussels Sprouts With Bacon and Figs
5. Video Library Player: On the Street | A Story With Legs
6. Ivanka Trump Weds Jared Kushner
7. Bo?te: Washington From on High
8. Generation B: Jobless, 50-ish, and Without Many Prospects
9. Road Test: It's Nothing to Sniff At
10. Modern Love: When Madness Is in the Wings

Go to Complete List »

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

MAGAZINE »

The Audacity of 'Precious'

OPINION »

Op-Eds: Postcards From America

FASHION & STYLE »

Weddings & Celebrations

N.Y. / REGION »

Flunking Out at the Food Co-op

OPINION »

Errol Morris: Case of the Inappropriate Alarm Clock

The final installment of a seven-part series on depression-era photography and photo-fakery.

THEATER »

Distinctive Growl, Eclectic Tastes, Full Plate

Home | World | U.S. | N.Y. / Region | Business | Technology | Science | Health | Sports | Opinion | Arts | Style | Travel | Jobs | Real Estate | Autos | Back to Top