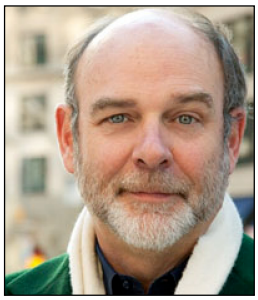
# Paco Underhill: Immersive Consumer Behavior



**Charlie Morrow interviews Paco Underhill**

**Inspired by the methodology of urbanist William H. Whyte and having lived in a multitude of cities around the world as the son of a diplomat, retail space doctor, consumer behavior consultant and best-selling author of *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, founded the first iteration office of his consultancy Envirosell in 1986. He became the chairman of the New Wilderness Foundation, an ethnopoetics and performing arts group, co-founded by poet Jerome Rothenberg and Morrow in 1974.**

**Paco Underhill:** ... that blue, she made three paces through the room. She saw the water lily bloom. She saw the helmet and the plume. Charlie, do you recognize that. That's the BBC warmup from the 1930s. It contains all of the sounds of the English language.

**Charlie Morrow:** I remember it was in a manual, a small manual that included the most important instruction, which was to not allow the person in the sound booth to have a ballpoint pen because the clicking sound would be doing this – CLICKCLICK – but that quote was there and then that warning.

**Paco Underhill:** So, Charlie, what is your book about?

**Charlie Morrow:** The book is called *Immerse!* and it concerns immersive experience and the design of immersive experience. The reason I was interested in interviewing you is because I thought that you've observed people in situations and the relationship between situations in which folks want to capture their attention or their money, or somehow interact with them. It is something you spend a lot of time looking at in detail. So, I'm very interested in how you see immersivity; how it is created.

**Paco Underhill:** One of the things that we are looking for in the broader world of physical design and I might point out cyber design is a better matching of art and science and that is the degree to which we can understand how people process and how people move is a very important part of making environments that are either painless or enjoyable for whatever process that you're trying to design for.

And part of why this is interesting, Charlie, is that while there are a series of biological concepts that govern how we process and how we move, one of the interesting issues is that the act of watching how people interact with spaces is one of the ways that we see the evolution of our species. Because what made a great space in 2000 and what makes a great space in 2019 – while there are some factors that have stayed the same, there are a number of factors that continue to evolve. So do you want me to start with the factors that stayed the same?

**Charlie Morrow:** That sounds like a great place to begin.

**Paco Underhill:** In general here, 90% of the world is right-handed. And that means that almost every space tends to work better with a counter-clockwise circulation path. What that means is

it puts the dominant right hand closest to whatever it is that you are asking people to interact with.

And whether you're talking about a gallery or you're talking about a museum, or you're talking about a whatever, that counterclockwise flow is really critical. The second thing is a biological constant; is understanding the difference between how someone sees at 20, how someone sees at 40, and how someone sees at 60 or later, because as we age the lenses in our eyes yellow, and the way we respond to changes in the context of our physical environment tend to be different based on that age.

The problem is that whether we look at museum design, we look at packaging design, we look at retail design or we look at airport design; often the person sitting at the CAD/CAM screen, doing the actual design work with the details on that design work, which are critical, tends to be under age 30. And if you're Abercrombie and Fitch or whatever, you know who your target market is, but if you're an airport or a museum or whatever, you don't know what your target market is so that there are three factors that need to be looked at.

One is how do I respond to downshifting? Meaning that if I am being asked to go from inside to outside, I'm being asked to go through a gate, or I'm being asked to go through any form of doorway or portal, be it inside or outside, there is generally some gear change that happens.

The second function is the degree to which someone responds to their peripheral vision, either expanding or contracting. So that the focus of our vision and the degree to which we are processing the edges, as opposed to focusing on what we're looking at.

And the third issue is responding to changing light. And we can do that again in an exhibit design, we can do it at an airport. We can look at it at an airport. We can look at it at a store. We can look at it in a variety of different ways. The issue is for people who are aging, those three things often take a step two or three longer than it might if you were younger.

There are also cues to help us be able to negotiate that change of space. And those come from physical barriers, they come from changes in texture underneath our feet that give us the signal that there is a change happening and that our bodies need to respond to it.

So that's the visual piece of the puzzle. Historically, some of the major differences in design were based on men and women. And there's some gross generalities here. One is men were programmed to be hunters or fishermen and that they were rewarded for their success. And they were often rewarded for the speed at which that success was achieved.

Women were gatherers, and were programmed to get more pleasure from the act of looking and that the act of looking became a very important part of their ability to process an immersive experience.

Now in 2019, some of those gender differences have shifted. And it isn't that men aren't hunters anymore or women aren't gatherers any more. But given the broader impact of birth control education, whatever, that some of those differences aren't so much between gender as they are between generations.

So, if we think of it as a baby boomer, generation Z, gen X, whatever, all of them have had different characteristics of how they respond to immersive experiences.

The other biological constants is that most of us like our spouses and we adore or care for our children and that, therefore, the clusters that people move in have responded to what that process is.

What is interesting is in the context of a global world, that within the context of Western culture you had a series of normative states. You had somebody moving alone or somebody moving with a friend, which was generally somebody of the same gender. You had someone moving as  a couple, which was a man and woman, or even a same-sex couple, but clearly there's a romantic attachment there.

And then the movement of a nuclear family. That has been challenged in part by both the Hispanic world and by the Middle Eastern world where the clustering of people ends up being eminently more complex. So, for example, in a Hispanic-themed mall, the number of people coming in are in a three-generational group, where there is a grandmother, a grandfather, a father, and the mother and the children is much more common than it might be if you were in Duluth, Minnesota. If you're in Dubai or in Bangkok, the number of people who are moving are in an extended-family cluster – so, for example, my buddy who lives in Dubai, when he goes on vacation, the vacation party that he travels with is 19 people. And that includes his wife, but it also includes his son, their wives, their children, servants, and sometimes some other domestic attachment. It's been interesting in that broader world of immersive experiences, for example, that the Middle Eastern family tends to want to go to places where somebody can rent them a block of Interconnected rooms as opposed to one room or one room with another room connected to it the way we would in the context of our culture.

So, those are biological constants that are globally affected by a series of different propositions. One is density so that if I'm in New York City or I'm in Delhi or I'm in Tokyo, there's a density and a proximity to people that governs people's interrelationship to each other. And the more dense you are, the more manners there are about dealing with that density. As opposed to going to Dallas, Texas or Johannesburg where the density is nowhere near the same concentration. That's a very important factor.

The second factor governing that is temperature issues. So, if you think of the difference between Helsinki where you have extreme cold, but you may have extreme heat. There's a way in which people move and react to changes in temperature as opposed to someone who lives in a tropical climate or lives in a temperate zone or yes, we may have air conditioning, but the actual temperature variation is much narrower than it is in other places. And that also governs that process.

And then the third one, which is a very interesting one, Charlie, is the difference between the economic status of people. I can take a city like Helsinki or a city like Tokyo, where are the economic variation between the very rich and the very poor is relatively narrow.

Whereas, if I go to a city like Sao Paolo, or I go to a city like Delhi, or I go to a city even like Shanghai now, that the extremes between the very rich and the very poor create a class structure that often governs our level of comfort about sharing spaces. Is this where you want it to go?

**Charlie Morrow:** This is totally where I want it to go.

**Paco Underhill:** All right. Backing up. If you ask me what are the change factors? I have five of them that are really critical and come up in every job that I do.

First is the recognition that our visual language is evolving faster than our spoken or written word, thanks to the internet, thanks to whatever – the way we see and the connection between our eyes and our brains. People could ask: but what about language and our hearing, but in a shrinking world we are using eyes to be able to translate as opposed to listening and translating, simply because the language barriers are eminently more formidable than the barriers between vision.

Some of that relates to the use of icons, the use of symbols. The acceptance of symbols and the degree to which we are able to process an electronic message, thanks to our phones and television and movies and everything else.

Second, is the changing status of women. The greatest impact on our species since we tamed fire is birth control and that has fundamentally shifted the relationship between sex and procreation. It has also fundamentally changed the application of gender to occupation. So I can look at, 1950, we can look at the movies of Harvard Law School and they had less than 2% of the class was women. If we look at the broader world of law school or medical school or dental school or pharmacy school, the degree to which women often dominate... In fact, if we look at institutions of higher learning, 60% of those attendees tend to be female. Females generally have less issues with learning disabilities. They have less issues with drug and alcohol use and our society is responding to the fact that the number of professions that are muscle- and coordination-related are declining. That doesn't mean that muscle isn't there, but that muscle and coordination function is something that is shrinking.

So, that we look at a third of the predator pilots flying drones over Afghanistan are nerdy women who have the manual skills. They've grown up with video games, have focus and the ability to do it. There's nothing about muscle in being able to deliver a thousand-pound rocket within 10 feet of whatever your intended target is.

We also know that in the world of consumption that historically we sold women clothes, food, and cosmetics. In 2019, women are also the single most important buyers of technology on the planet because, unlike men, they're not fascinated with what's inside. They're interested in the appliance nature of it.

How is this going to affect the way I live or do my life and make challenges that I face easier. Men tend to buy for themselves. Women buy for themselves, but they also buy for their children and they tend to be the purchasing agents for their parents.

So, the third issue here is the role of time. In the world in which we function and our ability to multitask is one of the earmarks of our success. And is, I might point out, one of the differences between generations. So, I can look at a 12-year-old who is sitting in the kitchen, they've got earphones on, they are eating something and they're doing their homework at the same time. And the television is going on in the background. It would drive you and I crazy, but they can do it.

But we move through our lives with a clock ticking inside our heads and one of the goals often of a person in our environment is to get you to either forget that clock or to recalibrate that clock. That said, one of the issues in the world of immersive design is recognizing that there are

many more people who are more interested in a dip than a swim. So, if I look at the average time someone spends at Macy's or I look at the average time someone spends at the Metropolitan Museum, that amount of time over the past 25 years continues to shrink. And that it isn't that someone isn't interested, but, for example, a member at the Modern will go to the modern museum and be eminently happy, having a great half an hour, whether it's in between lunch appointments or doing something, or as a break from the office or doing whatever, those are where the process sinks in. Therefore, in the design of an immersive experience, understanding the time constraints that somebody brings to the process and the degree to which someone is able to both sip and gulp as the case may be.

The fourth issue is what is global and what is local. And that is the recognition that there are things that are utterly fascinating in Dallas, Texas, that nobody gives a darn about in New York City. There are dresses that fly off the rack in Atlanta that nobody takes to the dressing room in Philadelphia. There are paintings and galleries that have a great deal of interest in Berlin, but no one cares a busted fuck about it in Munich. I mean, those are part of that idea of understanding who are your constituents. But if I'm the Museum of Modern Art, maybe I'm serving the world, but I'm also serving New York and I have to be able to have that balance. So that's issue number four.

Issue number five is a really interesting one, Charlie; it has to do with our access to sophistication and our access to money. We as a species passed over a magic moment in the mid-1990s. Up until the mid-1990s, the overwhelming majority of global wealth was in the hands of an aristocracy, people who knew what they were looking at and knew what they were seeking to experience. And that dealt with both what they came to a museum with or what they came to an exhibit with or knowing the difference between a tee-shirt that sold at Walmart for three bucks and a tee shirt that sold at Selfridges or IKEA for 24 bucks. And knowing that it wasn't just a price difference; it was a quality difference. In 2019, if I look at the 20 wealthiest people on earth, 17 out of those 20 earned the money in the course of their own lifetimes. And whether it's Carlos Slim in Mexico, whether it's Warren Buffet in Omaha, Nebraska, whether its Jack Ma [of Alibaba], these are people who acquired things in their own lifetimes and part of this has meant is that as we try to design experiences, often we have to provide people with some form of education and that form of education is something someone is often very willing to absorb. But it often is the difference between whether somebody gets it or somebody doesn't. So, I just took my niece and nephew to Washington, DC, and we went to the Renwick Gallery and the National Gallery and we went to the Museum of the American Indian, and we went to the zoological exhibit.

The museum that they liked the best was the commercial spy museum. And the commercial spy museum; it had no relics of the past, but it had a program. It sat the kids down and told them what they were going to see, how they were going to see it and what they were expected to process from what they were going to see and gave them moments all along the way to reinforce what that message was.

I went along with the ride. The tickets were 20 bucks, whereas the Renwick Gallery, which I had a fabulous time in, was absolutely free and the kids were completely puzzled by.

**Charlie Morrow:** Marvelous. I'm curious in terms of electronic devices for communication and entertainment, which have certain kinds of immersivity. I wonder what you can say about those.

Paco Underhill: Well, it's interesting, Charlie, because I was writing a column today based on my exposure to the San Manuel Casino [renamed Yaamava' Resort & Casino] in Southern California, where I spent the weekend, 10 days ago.

At 7 AM on a Monday morning; the casino's 5,000 slot machines, 70% of them have somebody sitting in front of them; 70% of them at 7 AM on a Monday morning. Now, whether those people got up early and had breakfast and then came to the casino because they know that they'd find a seat there because the casino is really, really crowded. And on Saturday night there are people not waiting in line for a machine, but there is a certain distinct tension, people trying to find one. And you can look at it and go these people aren't gambling because they know they're not going to win. They are there to be entertained. Many of them are older.

The fact is that they can sit in front of a machine for three hours and have mesmerizing graphics in front of them and have some form of reactive contribution to it, which may or may not be successful. But then the measure of success at a modern gaming machine isn't whether you're winning, it's the proximity to winning that you're getting, meaning that if you get 9 out of the 10 things to win a $10,000 prize, that is almost as exciting as getting the 10 things and winning the $10,000 prize. That proximity of messaging and sound-light exposure is, on the one hand, I could look at it and go, it's an exercise in cacophonic, visual masturbation. On the other hand, it is a zen-like exercise for many and they are making their choice to go there as opposed to going to the movies or going to somewhere else.

And that, while some of them may not have the resources to lose what they're losing, the overwhelming majority of them are perfectly happy to come in there and plunking down a hundred bucks, 200 bucks, 10 times a year and have that five-hour, zoned-out experience where somebody is feeding them water, coffee and drinks and Coca-Colas. And they can sit there and absorb it.

It is a little astonishing to me. I can look out my window on the second floor of Broadway and 20th street and fully 30% to 40% of the people on the sidewalk are involved with their screens. And it isn't that they're bumping into each other. But that somehow they have the ability to focus and yet control the peripherals in their environment is part of that visual education that the modern generation gets.

It's also the recognition that that device is an access point to a broader world. What does that mean when the internet collapses, when you have a power outage the way we had in New York city not that long ago. And all of a sudden people are faced with having to deal with a bunch of different stuff where they don't have access to their phones and don't have the ability to do so. I don't know what the answer is to that, Charlie. But I do know that that screen addiction has translated into a kind of activity joining Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Just as I need nourishment, I need, you know, sex. I need shelter. I need connectivity too. And, in the context of my own family, I struggled to sit at a dinner table and ensure the fact that I tried to get everybody to stack their phones.

If we have a retreat with a bunch of my employees, one of the games we play as we stack our phones and the first one that reaches for the phone has to buy a round of drinks.

**Charlie Morrow:** That's marvelous. You've answered my questions and I'm very pleased to have your participation in the project. Kind of the last thought: I'm curious how your own timeline

has been. Either from where you are back to where you began or the other way around; how you became aware of immersivity and how you documented this.

**Paco Underhill:** You know, Charlie, I grew up as the son of a foreign service officer, where I had to travel and move constantly. I also had a terrible stutter and therefore it was often difficult for or embarrassing for me to ask questions. And therefore, I often relied on my eyes as a way of figuring out what the rules were.

And there's more than one person that has said that I took a coping mechanism to a handicap and turned it into a profession. My story, which I've written about, is I am trained as an urban geographer and I used to be part of the crew that would rewrite commercial zoning ordinances for different cities across the country.

And one of my jobs as the junior member of the research crew was to install the cameras on the roofs of buildings to record the traffic patterns of cars and people in buses on the street. Up on the roof of the Seafirst Bank building in Seattle, 60 stories up, there was a strong wind blowing. I'm quite tall, I'm six feet four, six five but I don't like heights and on the roof that building, I could feel the building rocking in the breeze. And I realized then that I had to come up with some other way of applying my skill set. ... And a week later I was standing in a bank in New York City, getting madder by the moment because I realized that the lines weren't working. And I realized then and this light bulb went off in my head that said the same tools I'd been using to look at how a city works I could take you inside a bank or a store or a hospital or an airport or a train station or a doctor's office or a home or a museum or an exhibit or a showroom or a trade show and be able to deconstruct those.

If you'd asked me back then – it's now almost 40 years later – whether I'd be seen as a global expert on fast food drive-thrus or on how you sell lipstick or, serve on the board of the Smithsonian and help small museums around the country be able to better understand traffic patterns, I would have asked you what insane asylum you escaped from.

You know, there are so many of us who came to New York City as intelligent misfits and we cast our fate to the wind and it blew us to where it took us and our responsibility was to, you know, take advantage of that process. Make sense?

**Charlie Morrow:** It makes sense. Totally. And I'm delighted to have those words captured. Thank you so much, Charlie.