

# Inspiring Ways to Design and Clean

by Susan Wyche

Coming up with innovative ideas is difficult, but not because inspiration is lacking. On the contrary, inspiration for new products abounds; ideas come from anywhere, while daydreaming, eavesdropping, or asking seemingly obvious questions about mundane activities. My research examining the effects of aging on housework demonstrates how new product concepts are inspired by the places where we least expect them. Rather than being scarce, opportunities for innovation are everywhere. The key to uncovering them is actively reflecting on the themes embedded in how we think about technology and how our experiences differ from the larger user population.

The cultural and historical themes that shaped older people's lives affect how designers conceive of products. For instance, although housework is becoming an increasingly shared activity, cleaning products are overwhelmingly targeted towards women; and during their design, the user is almost always configured as female. Another recurring theme is "labor savings." Often new technologies have unwittingly increased time spent doing housework rather than decreased it. By avoiding these themes, I was able to focus on cleaning products' broader

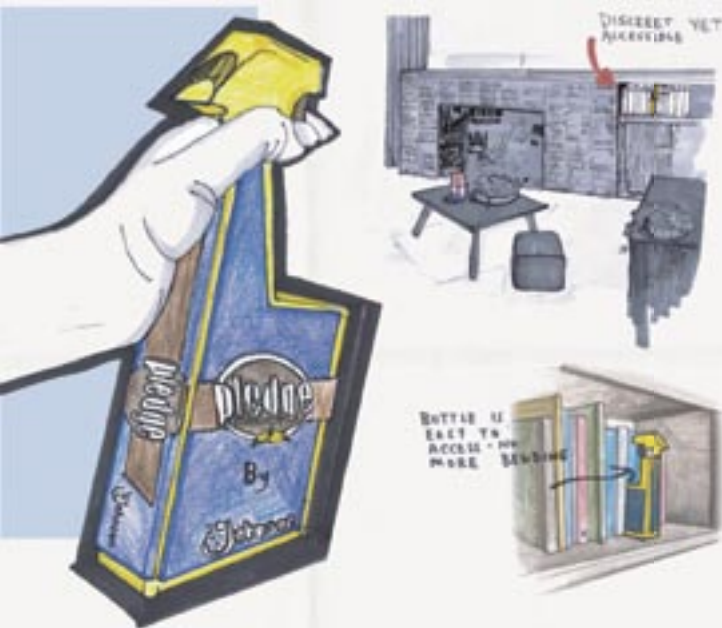
role in older people's lives and conceive of products grounded in their everyday experiences.

Immersing myself in the day-to-day lives of users, some more than twice my age, provided insights and inspiration for design. Not only are older people a good target demographic, they are also a resource for design

advice. Many of those I interviewed and observed cleaning had witnessed electricity's introduction into their homes; many remember their first washing machine; and all fondly recalled a time when they only had one brand of window cleaner to choose from at the grocery store. Their reflections on what gained and lost with technology's increasing presence were useful for generating new ideas.

During this process of unlearning and then relearning everything I knew about housework I constantly jotted down ideas and doodled concepts in my Moleskin notebook—once you recognize that an innovative idea can come anywhere at any time it's crucial to record it before it escapes your memory. On the following page is a sampling of the conceptual designs that emerged during my study. 🖐️



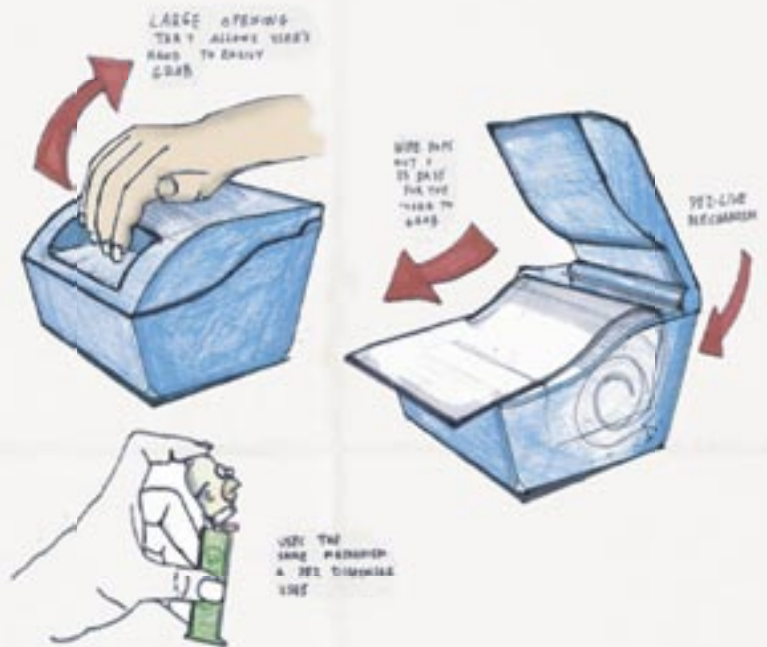


## Book Bottles

Bending, stretching, and reaching are effortless for me, but for users twice my age these activities are challenging. Cleaning products are usually stored in overhead cabinets or underneath sinks, making it difficult for older people to easily access them. This observation inspired “Book Bottles.” Rather than hiding trigger-spray bottles in hard to reach places, why not make them a seamless part of the domestic environment? Instead of designing a traditional-style spray bottle I envisioned it looking like a book, so to make it a somewhat discrete but accessible part of the domestic environment.

## “Pez” Packaging

Cleaning wipes are a new and popular way to clean surfaces. But packaged in a canister or sealed plastic pouch, they’re difficult to use for older adults with arthritic hands. When asked to imagine a simpler package, a participant described the opening mechanism on a Pez candy dispenser. I thus adapted the Pez mechanism to dispense cleaning wipes. The plastic “box” features a large opening and ejection mechanism, which facilitates a wide range of hand motions. Observing older adults struggle with an existing product created an opportunity for an innovative packaging idea grounded in their past experiences.



## Hands and Knees Floor Polish

“I was a hands-and-knees washer and still want to be, but I can’t get up and down like I used to. You have to be down on your hands and knees to really do the job.” Nearly every older adult interviewed said this. They missed the thoroughness that comes with being on the floor cleaning. “Hands and Knees” floor polish responds to this in a playful and whimsical way, being a floor polish made with hand and knee-shaped action scrubbers. The fictitious product cleans as powerfully, thoroughly and effectively as a person down on his hands and knees.

