

A View Inside the Visual Habitat of Erin Smith

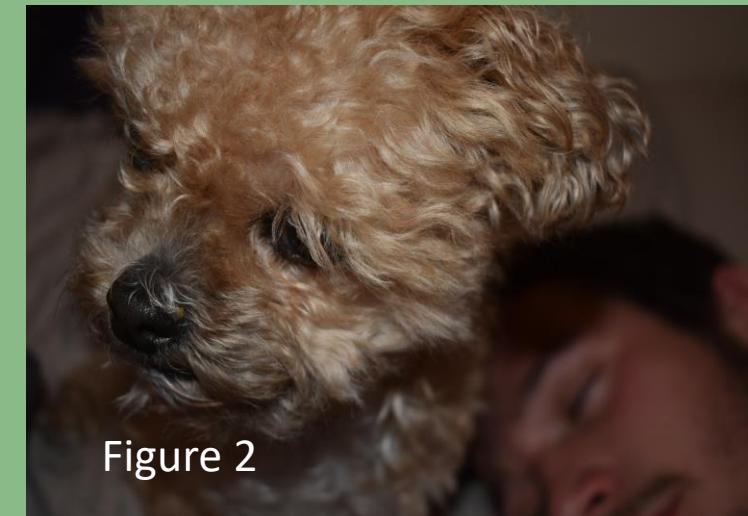
Introduction

Erin Smith is a fourth-year graduating UT student. She is a double major in Public Health and Biology, but also is receiving a minor in Psychology and certificates in the Business Foundations Program and Pre-Health Professions Program. Outside of her direct school work, Erin works as a TA at UT through the Freshman Research Initiative and as a Payroll Manager at a family-owned construction company. Erin also pursues many hobbies like yoga, photography, and playing with her extremely cute dog, Honey Bear. (Figure 2). Erin lives in a 3x3 apartment located in West Campus on 22nd Street. She lives with 3 other friends. She has her own personal bedroom, closet, bathroom, and balcony, but with a shared living room, kitchen, and second larger balcony. I chose to study Erin's environment based on several reasons: the amount of perceived productivity she is able to accomplish, the extremely interesting ways she chooses to display her identity through artifacts/actions, and because we are romantically involved😊. I became extremely interested in the ways Erin has continually developed her work ethic and wanted to learn more about how she uses her personal environment to supplement that work ethic.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Overview of the Environment

As stated before, Erin's living environment consists of a personal bedroom, bathroom, closet , and balcony. The shared spaces of this typical West Campus apartment include a living room, kitchen, and second balcony. My focus will be on the artifacts and displays within her personal bedroom which help facilitate the flow of efficient information in order to increase productivity. The important areas includes the desk, storage space, balcony, displays on the walls, and the spaces on the floor where she keeps various items. The main use of Erin's personal environment is not out of the norm. She mainly uses this space for sleep, studying, relaxation, and general daily activities. Pictured in figure 3 is the general layout of her personal environment with labels on the main spaces.



Figure 4

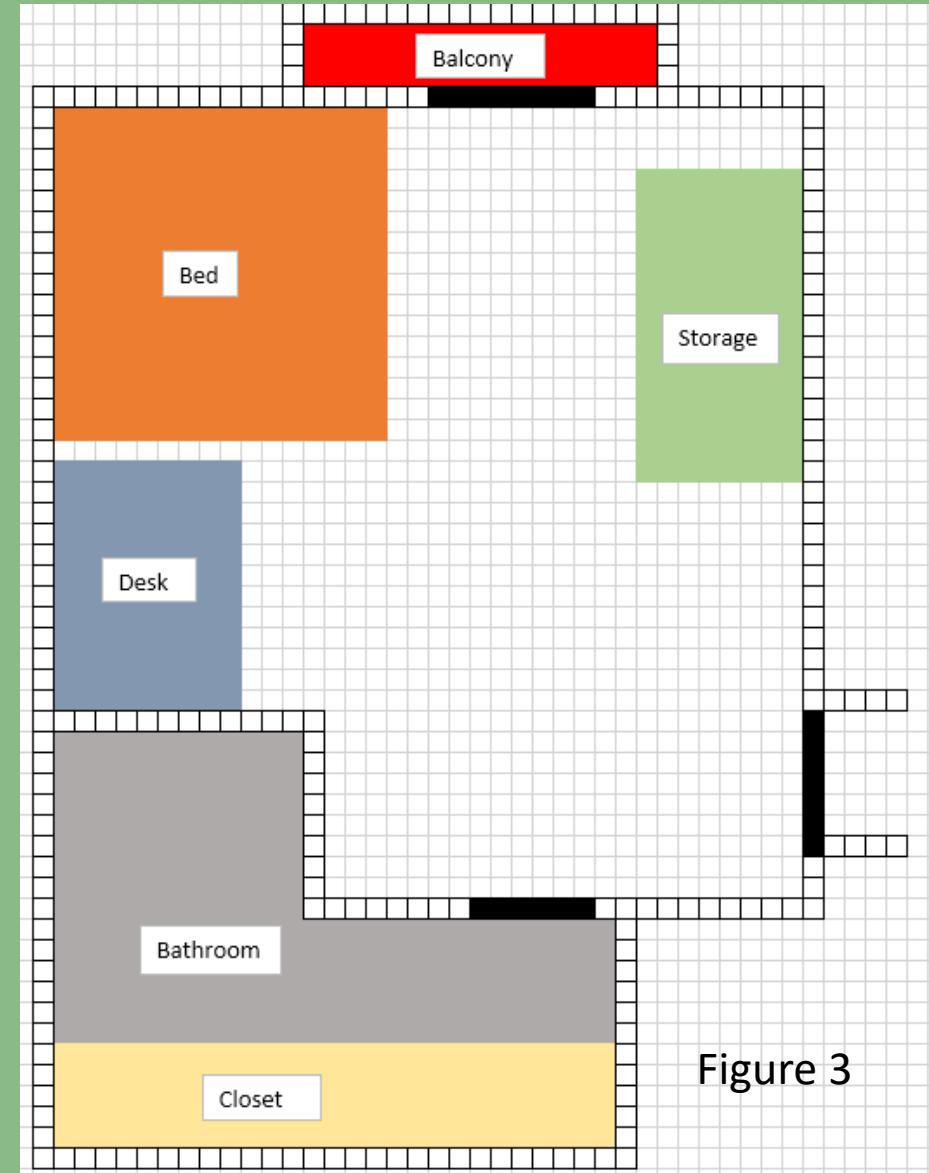


Figure 3

Preview of Analysis

In the following analysis, I will examine how Erin organizes and uses her visual environment to facilitate work flow, communication with herself and others, and representation of identity. I will focus on three key topics:

1. Information Design
2. Identity Claims
3. Feeling Regulators

Key Concepts

- Information Design: How a person organizes their environment with information that they need to have easy access to.
- Messaging Centers: Places where people leave messages and reminders for others and self (Gosling 2008).
- Organizational Systems: Objects that influence efficient personal organization.
- Identity Claims: Items or objects that a person uses to shape their own environment in order to show others and self about their personal identity (Gosling 2008).
- Feeling Regulators: Items of objects that convey or enact certain emotions.
- Behavior Residue: The physical traces left in the environment by our everyday actions and movements (Gosling 2008).

Analysis: Information Design

I have always been amazed with Erin's ability to handle so many tasks in her life. As described in the introduction, Erin has been able to receive multiple majors, certificates, and a minor within four short years at UT. She has also been heavily involved in various organizations, community service projects, and jobs. Thus, I was mesmerized by the way Erin uses her environment to help facilitate efficient flow of information and develop work ethic. The way she does this was the most interesting aspect of her room. Though many of the items and actions she uses to accomplish tasks are normal, her specific usages of these items and actions have led her to accomplish many achievements in her school, personal, and professional environments.

Analysis: Information Design cont.

The most notable use of information design is exhibited through Erin's usage of a large white board located on the wall by her desk (Figure 5). This gives her the ability to make notes of current and upcoming tasks and events. This type of messaging center changes constantly over time. You can see how she uses color of the texts to differentiate different tasks and ideas.“I have a weird, scattered process of remembering tasks in my head that has worked pretty well throughout my years in school. I feel like I have to translate thoughts to a different language when putting them onto lined paper or into a word document. So, instead I have things like a large whiteboard where I can write "prompts" down for to do items or just things I need to remember” (Erin Smith). This quote gave me great insight to how Erin's personal efficiency in work and her internal thought processes for organization take place.

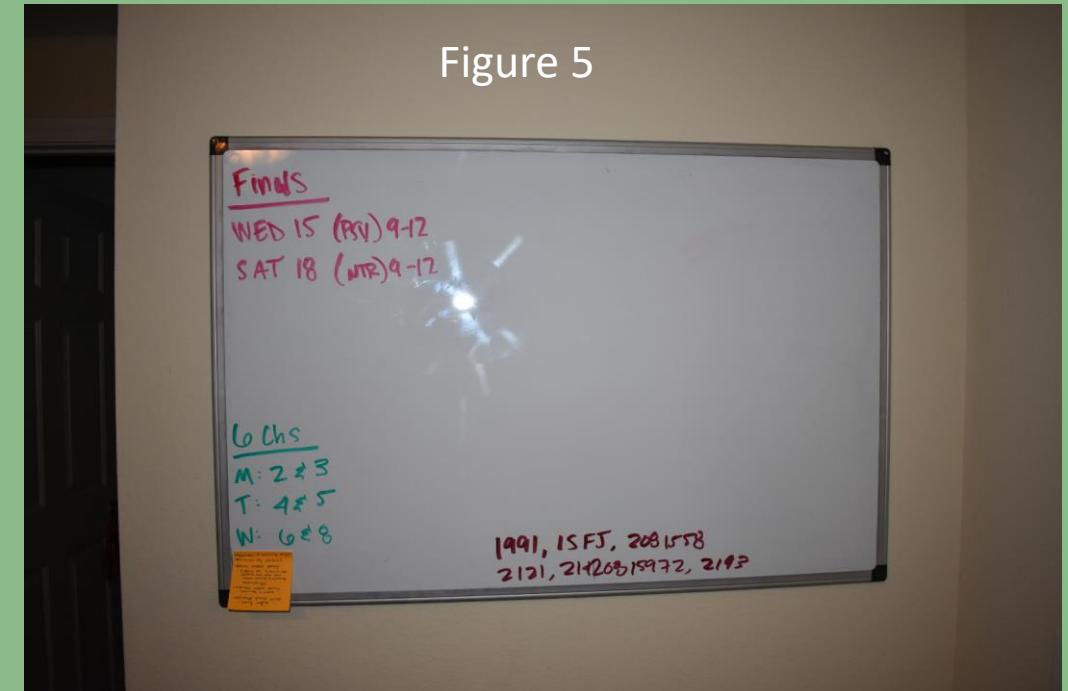


Figure 5

Analysis: Information Design cont.

Pictured is a screenshot of Erin's personal desktop. As you can see, the main screen contains many separate digital sticky notes with information to remind her of tasks and events to be completed. This is yet another way that Erin uses her visual environment to help facilitate the flow of information around her and throughout time. She also organizes files to further enhance this efficiency. In asking her about what she uses to communicate with others and self, she describes these notes for "things I absolutely cannot forget and will catch the corner of my eye to keep them on my mind" (Erin Smith). I realized, when thinking about this digital visual space, how comparable her bedroom is to her desktop screen. They are both clean, simplified, and organized. It is made apparent by her explanation that she "can only have a clear working mind if my space is clean and organized" (Erin Smith).



Figure 6

Analysis: Information Design cont.

Pictured is a small wood platform piece attached to the wall by her door to the rest of the apartment. Erin uses this object as a organization system to place important items for her to remember to use. One would think that this space would be best used for items like keys, phones, or wallets. However, Erin uses this space for help on reminding her of items that are of frequent use, but sometimes forgotten. Everyone has that one task that they frequently forget to do on a daily basis but need to do, nevertheless. Erin uses this space to offset that problem. As mentioned by Norman, “a design solution has to be consistent with the entire problem solved” (Norman 1988). This specific design solution is in fact consistent with an entire problem solved.



Figure 7

Analysis: Information Design cont.

Her main area for conducting work is the typical desk. The objects and items on the desk are within the norm of what a typical student needs to accomplish school work like various forms of parchment, writing utensils, technology, etc. Though not much interesting analysis of this space is very apparent, I think it is important. Her desk is designed for utility and simplicity, where only the necessities for efficient work are needed. I think this gives good insight to the take-aways I gained for how to be more efficient when designing my work spaces. A simplified desk space encourages a focused work-centered mind. It is also important to note the candle and essential oil diffuser. Erin described these as a helpful tool in relaxing from the stresses of work and a way to further increases focus. She describes this combination of work and rest by saying: “I need a combined space where I can focus and work, but also a space where I can feel at peace and rest. It is difficult to create a balance between those two energies in a room. I think I have finally accomplished it by integrating work materials in a way that is aesthetically pleasing and can provide a separate thinking space within my little sanctuary” (Erin Smith).

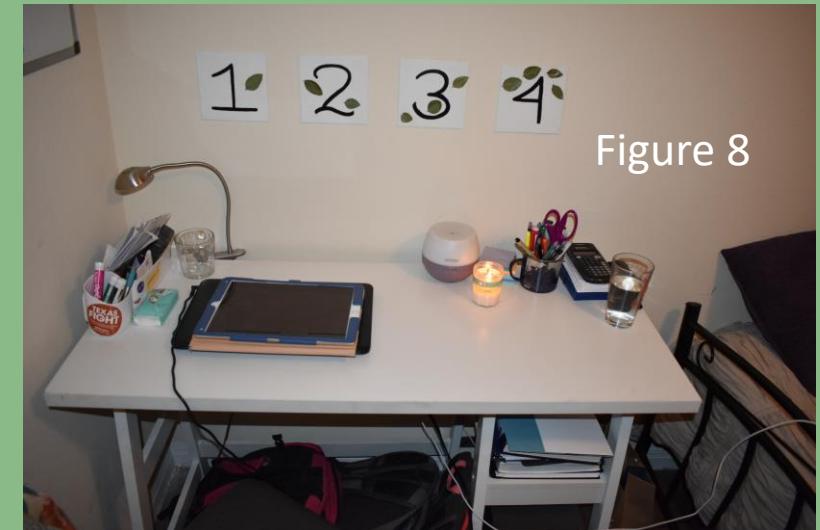


Figure 8

Special Space Analysis: Main Storage/Bookcase

One of my favorite ways that Erin uses her space is her storage/bookcase. The space combines the usages of an organizational system while also being used as identity claim and feeling regulation system. While the organizational system is made clear in the photo, the identity claim and feeling regulation parts are not. In the following slides I will follow up on how this bookcase storage is used to communicate those unclear parts. Erin describes this space as such: "This kind of feels like what the storage files of my brain might look like" (Erin Smith).

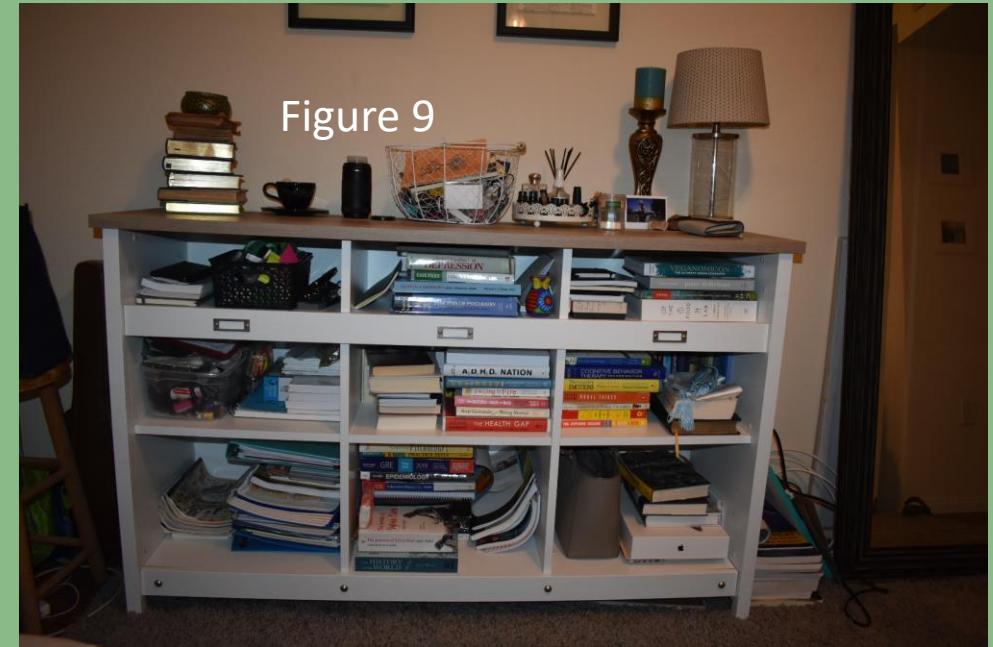


Figure 9

Analysis: Identity Claims

Figure 10 shows a stack of various books consisting of mostly psychosocial and health-related books which are located in a section of the previously mentioned bookcase. These act as claims to Erin's personal identity as they communicate her school and career passions. With her many health-related school degrees/certificates/minors previously mentioned, it is not surprising to see these on display. This is just one specific example of the ways Erin uses books to make claims to her identity and show other who she is/what she likes. If you look closely at figure 9 on Slide 12, you can see the other stacks of similar health-related books. These are ultimately displayed in a similar fashion. I think these also act as a reminder of self-directed identity for Erin. Since she probably sees these books often, it reminds her of the content and knowledge gained from the books and reinforces her thoughts on why she chose them.

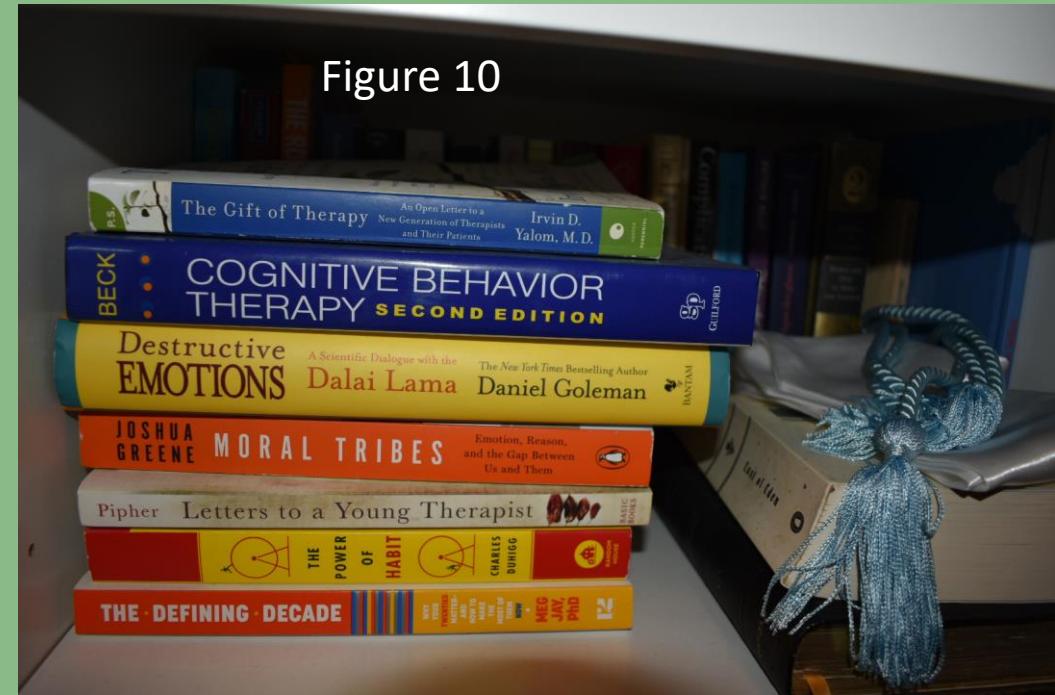


Figure 10

Analysis: Identity Claims cont.

Figure 11 shows two prints of a brain and heart on pieces from newspaper articles. Erin references these in relation to the bookcase storage that lies below. “I think the whole shelf is summed up nicely with two prints I have hanging above it. They are anatomical representations of a brain and a heart and they are in perfect balance which is what I think I am searching for in my future career and life” (Erin Smith). These act more as self-directed claims to identity but are intriguing to others that visit Erin’s room (including me) because they require personal explanation for why they hang in such a prominent position. These prints help Erin remind herself of her search for a certain career and lifestyle.

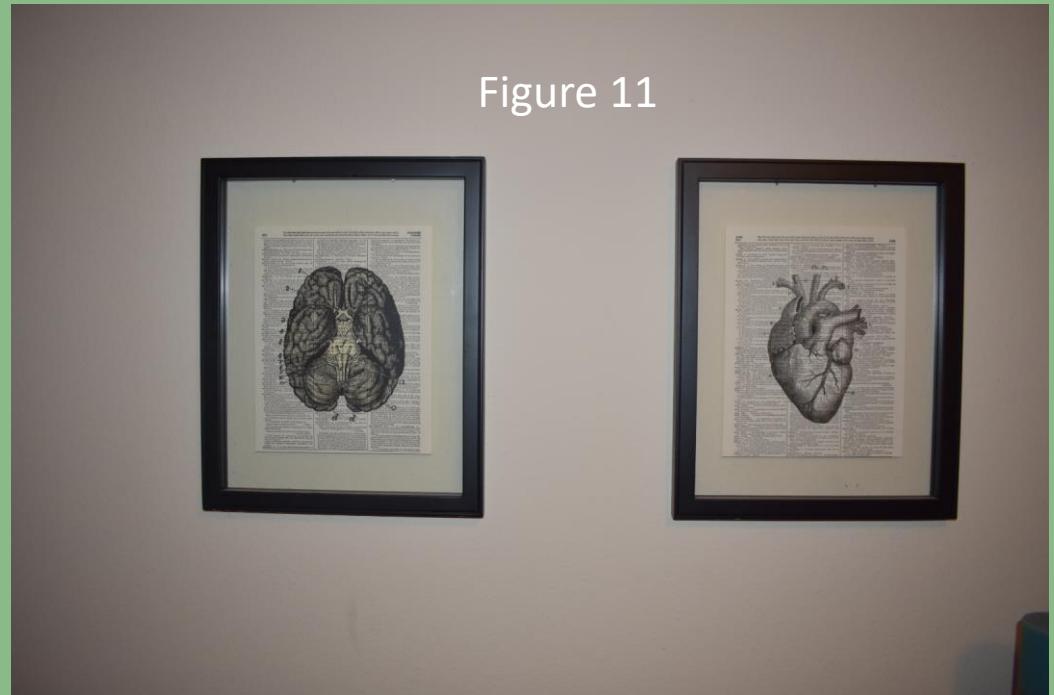


Figure 11

Analysis: Feeling Regulators

The pieces of plant art (“plart” as Erin refers to them) represented in figure 12 are her main exhibitions of feeling regulators and are located on the wall above her bed. “My newest installment and one that has brought the most peace to my space. I am really bad at keeping real plants alive, at least right now and in this space, but I still am so impacted by the natural calming they provide. There is an artist that does beautiful illustrations of different plants, and I think what I like most is that these provide the peace and beauty of nature but also the originality, individuality, and impact of a piece of art” (Erin Smith). These pieces of art, though new, were bought and installed for a specific reason. The reason is that they convey emotions that encapsulate peace and beauty. I think this is consistent with a common theme within her room discussed earlier which is how she combines the space to maximize focus and work efficiency, but also feel at peace and relax.



Figure 12

Analysis: Feeling Regulators cont.

A small but largely important feeling regulator in Erin's visual habitat is a small tea cup and matching plate filled with various wine corks. This small object is located on top of the mentioned bookcase and reinforces the importance of this space as a way to display objects that act as feeling regulators. The tea cup and wine corks were collected during Erin's family trip to France last summer. Each cork was from a bottle that her and the family drank during their time there. Since Erin has a love for family and French wine, the object acts as a reminder of the memories gained from that trip. When noticed, the object enacts certain emotions associated with the trip like love and happiness. It is another instance of how Erin uses objects to enact emotions embedded within the display. As described by Gosling, feeling regulators "can help a person reminisce about bygone happy times" (Gosling 2008).



Figure 13

Discussion

Throughout the analysis of certain objects, spaces, and displays within Erin's visual environment there was not discussions on if Erin even enjoys her person space. Thus, after conducting preliminary analysis and realization of this missed asset, I ask her for a response to this prompt. In general, Erin loves her space! She discussed the fact that she could never find mental focus and comfort in public spaces like coffee shops because she was too "hyperaware of (her) surroundings" (Erin Smith). I realized Erin organizes her space to counteract that hyperawareness through a clean, simplified, and organized environment. But then why does she have all these artsy displays of identity and personal objects? Wouldn't a simplified space only have essentials to promote efficient work and focus? The answer to this is simple. Everyone needs displays of identity and feeling regulators to encourage a healthy and peaceful mindset. Without this mindset, work efficiencies would decline, and the space would be deemed boring. Therefore, I feel that Erin uses her space to maximize the important unique aspects of how she sees an efficient, healthy work environment. I say unique because it is her own interpretation of what a productive work environment needs to be. The insights, actions, and objects Erin uses in her environment may not be applicable to every person's environment.



Figure 14

Discussion cont.

An important insight that I consistently notice within Erin's visual environment is the lack of behavior residue. As described by Gosling, these are generally "physical traces left in the environment by our everyday actions and movements" (Gosling 2008). However, I feel that behavior residue and its definition can be relaxed to include non-everyday actions and movements and the lack of action and movement. Erin keeps her spaces, private and shared, to a high level of cleanliness. There are only rare cases where her environments are kept unorganized or unclean for more than a couple days. I feel like this is out of the norm of most college students. I attribute this cleanliness of space in a way that is consistent with her productivity and thus could be explained by her desire to live an organized life in all ways. The only instance of behavioral residue in Erin's analyzed environment is her outside balcony, pictured in figure 15. The picture shows a far-gone, sad looking plant that seems to have been sitting there for a long time. From personal knowledge, I know that Erin does not use here balcony very often and is not a space to be used to accomplish what she need. Since this her only unused space in her personal environment, I feel that it makes sense that this is the only place with a source of behavior residue. All her other used spaces have no concrete or consistent traces of such.



Figure 15

Conclusion



In summary, Erin uses various forms of information design, identity claims, and feeling regulators to promote a healthy, peaceful lifestyle which helps her accomplish a large amount of tasks in a productive way. This work/life balance encouraged me greatly to study her visual environment. Erin's usage of the white board, computer/room cleanliness, unique door storage space, and simplified desk area all encourage her abilities to achieve her goals in school, work, and personal life. The ways in which she stays calm and relaxed in face of these stress-inducing goals through the use of unique identity claims and feeling regulators explains how she keeps this balance and why she visualizes her environment in such a way.

From conducting this assignment, I have learned a great deal about how a person constructs their visual environment is unique, purposeful, and reason-based. Every object, display, and space in a person's environment is placed and used in a way that they see fit. Thus, I feel that if I were to apply the productivity insights gained from this analysis in my own life, it may not work the same. Also, I feel like I now go into people's visual environments with thoughts consistent with how I conducted this analysis. I ask myself how they communicate their own identity to self and others, why this object, what does this space do for you, etc. Finally, I have gained even further respect for Erin, her work ethic, and feel that I have become closer with her from the process.

References & Acknowledgements

Erin Smith

Gosling, S. (2008). *Snoop. What Your Stuff Says about You*. New York: Basic Books.

Norman, D. (1993). *Things that Make Us Smart*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Tufte, E. R. (1990). *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press.

Norman, D. (1988). *The Design of Everyday Things*. New York: Doubleday.