

# TIME FOR DESIGN ANTHROPOLOGY

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

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### ABSTRACT

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The essay draws on two recent meetings of scholars and practitioners at the meeting point of anthropology and design to sketch out the emerging field of design anthropology. It suggests that this new field offers a practical philosophy through which to engage with the multiple crises of global society. The text connects the rise of design anthropological work with the growing socio-economic significance of design, but also with the concept of the Anthropocene and the question of how human design shapes planet Earth. If the interchange between designers and anthropologists currently underway is forceful, it is in the conceptual features of design as a human activity that its appeal seems to lie, whether one is seeking to understand social change today or seeking to renew scholarship.

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A prominent debate that anthropologists have participated in recently concerns the extent to which planet Earth is at least partly the outcome of human designs. The question is not of only academic interest. As the future has become a more and more fraught political arena, related questions are being asked with urgency in corridors of power as well as among grassroots change makers. Design has become a catchphrase of our times. A parallel trend has been the gradual emergence of a new subfield: design anthropology. Anthropologists have found inspiration and empirically interesting things to study and learn from in the worlds of professional design, a livelihood whose history is intimately tied into that of industrial capitalism, but also in informal or protest-driven types of design. Interest in ethnographic research methods and in cultural variation among users of design products has a long pedigree in professional product design and architecture, but arguably a new, more forceful interchange between designers and anthropologists is currently underway.

This short essay offers some glimpses of what design anthropology looks like. It suggests that design anthropology at present is fast reproducing alternative variants of itself and seeking institutional homes. I also hope to show that design anthropology's potential to engage fruitfully with frightening but shared, sometimes planetary, prospects is beyond question. This is particularly apparent in relation to what are conventionally thought of as environmental problems: confrontations between the expansionism of hegemonic capitalism and the more multifarious demands of social reproduction.

I became persuaded of this after attending two symposia on design anthropology recently. The Entremeios symposium in Rio de Janeiro took place in August 2014 supported by the Design and Anthropology Laboratory (LaDA) and Carioca Center of Design, a platform for showcasing design operating under the auspices of the mayor's office. An innovative format involving local students, scholars and designers as well as municipal officers, it was organized by Zoy Anastassakis and Barbara Szaniecki of the State University of Rio de Janeiro. It involved a range of events, talks and practical interventions in Rio's fast moving urban landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The second event was the Research Network for Design Anthropology's 'final' meeting in Copenhagen in August 2015. The network has brought together a notable concentration of different types of expertise in design and technology, mostly from across Danish universities but also a lively international group of people who work on evidently design-anthropological issues.<sup>2</sup> This event too was unconventional in format, at least from the vantage point of someone more used to academic conferences of an anthropological hue, including as it did a mix of lectures, posters and interactive sessions.

The empirical contents of these meetings is thus impossible to summarise, ranging as they did from the design of beautiful bodies and profitable architecture to the ontological status of algorithms or the potential of applying Aristotelian phronesis to policy making. Yet it seems that a recognizable methodological framework or underpinning for the practice of design anthropology is already in place. Descriptive, analytical and interventionist all at the same time, design anthropology provokes, and for someone like me, operating on the edges of academia and nowhere near professional design, it offers the promise of a practical philosophy through which to engage with the multiple and systemic crises facing global society, one knitted together in the recognition that above all we are inhabiting an ecological crisis but one that has little to do with nature.

Design anthropology appears at present as a collective imagining that draws together professional roles, personal biographies and embodied experiences. It addresses and intervenes in the unsustainability, but also undesirability, of certain contemporary human arrangements using an eclectic and self-consciously inventive suite of research tools. One might say that design anthropology presents itself less as a tool for problem solving and more as a way of problem making (Lindström & Ståhl 2015). Rather than supporting the capitalist technocracies that continue to tighten their grip on life with endless calls for solving problems of their own creation (so that they can persist in their habitual ways), design anthropology thus points towards a countervailing tendency: generating and sustaining critical debate. I should already add at this point that many understand their work as practical as well as scholarly or intellectual.

### *Renewing anthropology*

Some years ago the concreteness of design inspired some to mine it for inspirations leading to an updated anthropology (Rabinow et al. 2008; Kelty et al. 2010). For anthropologists and other social scientists, invoking design and design theory can be an intuitive way to deal with the fallout of centuries of the institutionalized division of intellectual labour,

which has divorced the work of heads (disembodied rational minds at the top of the social hierarchy) from the work of bodies (fleshy mortals whose physicality has put them at the bottom of the social hierarchy). Design as an idea offers a real-life bridge across many troublesome pairs of terms. It means working simultaneously with the conceptual and the material; it builds on the past even as it builds into or for the future (Latour 2011); and to borrow from Tim Ingold, design is capable, at its best, of respecting the way ‘the forces of ambition rub up against the rough edges of the world’ (2013: 72). Such characteristics make design an attractive conceptual toolbox for scholars of society or culture who are interested in change and what produces it.

Change in recent decades has accelerated to the point of making many places about which anthropology claims expertise—environments—unrecognizable. It would seem, as redesigning the planet progresses at all scales, that the roughness of the edges of the world Ingold refers to is not equally apparent to everyone everywhere. Gargantuan extractivist projects, new infrastructures of unprecedented scale and unforeseen rates of urbanization also draw our attention to professional design projects that are both technology- and capital-intensive. Anthropology then becomes interested in history, in linear and irreversible as opposed to cyclical temporal dynamics. If industrial technology and capital have histories of several hundred years, we could say professional design has a history of a little over 100 years. Perhaps design anthropology might even allow us to take seriously the politically explosive possibility that the modern-industrialist era really is anomalous (Vadén et al. 2013).

The last two decades or so are certainly discernible as presenting a historical shift to what is increasingly dubbed an age of design. Design and its products are overtly and increasingly valued and promoted across economic, political and cultural domains. Today good design is recognised not just as a source of economic value, but also as a route to public good (Julier & Leerberg 2014) (though frequently also a sticking-plaster-type substitute for the adequately resourced public infrastructure of now mostly bygone social welfare systems).

At the Rio meeting in 2014 there were talks about street signs, buildings, markets, beaches, but also about the city, national transport infrastructure and global trends in urban and regional planning. The fusion of design practice—making an intervention—and social science questioning appeared in these discussions both as problem solving and problem making, with an ethical attentiveness to what it is right to do in situations where so many people have been abandoned to find their own solutions. Rio de Janeiro’s striking beauty and the context of massive urban transformation in the city obviously created a fertile, not to say provocative, space for intervening in collective futures. The changes taking place, their gentrifying and entertainment-oriented rationale so squarely embedded in the spectacular and globalized capture of resources for capital rather than people, immediately gave a set of co-ordinates and comparisons. Copenhagen also exhibits the influence of spectacular late capitalism. Its marks are clearly visible particularly in waterfront locations—the favoured hotspots of the neoliberal remaking of city life. At the same time—especially in the warm August 2015 sunshine—Copenhagen presented itself as a site of conviviality and the intersecting infrastructures that comprise the figure of the city in the modern imagination. Indeed, the very idea of the city, at least the big city, carries within it design both at a grandly utopian scale and the micro-designs of the

thousands (or millions) whose self-organizing can be understood by analogy not to the blueprint plan but to the self-directing organism. In the unmeasurable complexity of the city, design as practice, object and environment appear as a kind of meshwork for design anthropology to investigate and engage.

At another level, design anthropology's timeliness connects to the condition captured in the neologism 'Anthropocene'.<sup>3</sup> This conveys the notion that the planet itself is being designed, that humanity is now going beyond designing for its own needs and actively intervening in forming the global environment. The idea goes back at least to the counter-cultural publication, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, published in California in 1968, which began with the words 'We are as gods and might as well get good at it.' The publication offered readers a variety of resources by which they could cultivate their own power to educate themselves and shape the environment. Interestingly, the author of those lines, Stewart Brand, found the words in the anthropologist Edmund Leach's Reith Lectures broadcast on the BBC in 1967!<sup>4</sup> Whether or not it is admissible or constructive to designate an actual new geological epoch such as the Anthropocene to convey the impact of industrial capitalism-cum-'humanity' on the planet, (see Malm & Hornborg 2014), to argue that we have designed the world we now inhabit is in any case to argue that we can and indeed must redesign it.

Another phenomenon underpinning design anthropology is that so many in government, business and civil society, have latched onto 'design thinking' as a panacea for the multiple crises facing political leadership today. Panacea it is not (Kimbell 2011), but design might be offering a kind of epistemology that appreciates boundaries and distinctions but at the same time follows problems and concerns across institutional and intellectual barriers.

Similar thinking reinforces the idea that design could be a model for a postcolonial anthropology, an experimental, engaged and collaborative discipline that constitutes a distinct style of knowing (Otto & Smith 2013). While many anthropologists no doubt see their discipline as inherently critical and imaginative, Keith M. Murphy and George Marcus (2013), drawing on ideas of design pedagogy, compare anthropology unfavourably with design education. It is the latter that they see as the real location of critical thinking and discourse today.

For the would-be critic looking for something revolutionary in design anthropology there is, though, the uncomfortable thought that the emergence of design anthropology may have had more to do with revolutionizing commerce in order to strengthen its social and political position than with overturning it. Arguably design's social visibility has much to do with the anthropological contribution to consumer culture: for one, it helped lead to the corporate discovery of local specificity. It is now commonplace to suggest that a novel product can achieve better commercial success with the help of anthropological tools, not least ethnographic studies of users (Clarke 2011: 10). This makes anthropology not just a handmaiden to professional and overwhelmingly corporate-led design, but to definitions of novelty, creativity and imagination that anthropologists should know to be as environmentally damaging as they are historically narrow. Design anthropology may thus be fostering intellectual activity that fulfils contemporary criteria of usefulness whilst making the possibility of environmentally and socially sane lives actually more difficult.

For some then, design is a model for anthropology's future, for others it is a problematic object for anthropology to investigate. Lucy Suchman, for instance, a pioneer of anthropological engagements with professional design, advocates a relationship between the two disciplines that is not hyphenated but rather a more conventional but also more critical 'anthropology of' (2011). I also felt something like the generative tussle between engagement as endorsement on the one hand (and thus ethically suspect) and as critique on the other (ethically more defensible) that Suchman spells out at these two meetings on design anthropology. It may be a sign that we are living through a *good* crisis, that there is a chance that the turbulence we are experiencing will lead, as the science of the Anthropocene at its most optimistic suggests, to better designs: of things, of subjects and of environments.

### *Reorganizing design*

It became clear at the meetings that designerly knowledge is produced at multiple sites, in many collaborations, but that what this knowledge was for and what it was good for was often a source of anxiety for researchers. The anxiety was heightened no doubt because design knowledge also generates things that non-designers may not want—like algorithms or gadgets that emphatically do not respond to real people's real needs. In fact, even the supposed beneficiaries of some design projects can be appalled by them.<sup>5</sup> In response, those engaged in the conversations in Rio and Copenhagen sometimes tried to re-establish a distinction between scholarly knowledge versus designerly making. Unsurprisingly, the distinction was just as easily collapsed. After all, these were people who see themselves as engaged in creating both knowledge and objects, and doing so in ways that question and resist the historically produced hierarchy of these practices.

At a minimum, design anthropology's contribution to design and design research is merely to offer ingredients for de-familiarizing and re-familiarizing aspects of being human through comparative ethnographic investigation. Beyond that, what a designer does and wants—whether they want to know or to make—will depend on overlapping but never identical biographical and professional commitments. In addition to being a question of personal morals, this is an epistemological question. It hinges on the collaborators involved and the things, issues and publics that they collectively generate and remain committed to. It almost—but not quite—goes without saying, that epistemology here is highly political. One of the position papers prepared for the Copenhagen event, by Ramia Maze (2015: 6), now Professor in New Frontiers of Design at Aalto University, put it like this:

[E]laborating and multiplying possible futures is an exercise of power, even if position or preference is not articulated or neutrality is claimed. Not acknowledging or recognizing underlying norms entails that assumptions and alternatives can remain unavailable to others, thus limiting their possibilities for (re)positioning or choosing otherwise.

Mainstream political institutions and even many self-consciously ethical or green activists (the two groups overlap substantially) seeking to redesign futures fail to recognize this. They offer little but moralizing and policing together with an insistence that the same

socio-economic structures that created our problems in the first place are irreplaceable. The result is that many people experience life as an uncomfortable paradox: well-meaning green credentials are evacuated by the materiality of resource-hungry urban lives, and notions like ‘environmental struggle’ and even ‘political radicalism’ begin to appear old-fashioned if not meaningless. This puts design in an awkward place, and unsurprisingly there was debate at both events about the way alternative design projects get co-opted or cynically exploited for the usual fun-oriented but profit-seeking activities of urban elites, infatuated as many now are, with the edgy but productive vibe of the activist grassroots. The formal tends to subsume and thus destroy the informal, the official can take credit for and neutralize opposition by co-opting it.

This mix of profit-driven and social sustainability, of top-down and bottom-up, was also the topic of my presentation at Rio’s Entremeios symposium, which concerned design activism in Helsinki.<sup>6</sup> Since the symposium was titled ‘Ways of life and creative practices in the city’, I felt that the efforts of volunteer-activists, many of whom have design and architecture backgrounds, offered an interesting window onto creative practice in the city. The activists I talked about—who have built greenhouses on derelict city-centre land in Helsinki and, in the process, ignited imaginations and promoted sustainable and human-paced ways of life—could be presented as radical opponents of business-as-usual, that is, as design activists, change makers or agents of alternatives (Fuad-Luke et al. 2015). However, they could (and perhaps should) also be seen as products and even promoters of neoliberalism themselves, even as politically naïve and socio-economically advantaged tinkerers, who hardly add up to a social movement. After all, they can easily leave the truly downtrodden and marginalised just as vulnerable as before, while they pursue their own middle-class green-tinged utopias.

### *Back to scholarship*

I will conclude by returning to the anxieties connected with what the product of design anthropology might be. Although George Marcus, in his keynote speech at Copenhagen’s August 2015 meeting, seemed to re-establish a division between anthropology as scholarship and design as practice, the conversations in Rio, Copenhagen and beyond do not support this view. The meaning of scholarship is inevitably and increasingly contested but, as people involved with design anthropology, participants seemed very aware of the need to respond simultaneously to many constituencies working at many speeds. There was also a sense that responding is a form of responsibility, a quality of intellectual life that allows a design anthropologist to articulate or narrate a certain kind of reflexivity, not to say recursive quality.

In a paper by Mike Anusas and Rachel Harkness (2014) written for the Research Network for Design Anthropology titled simply, ‘Things Could Be Different’, the authors push design anthropology to the next level by drawing on an ecological idiom. But instead of a closed understanding of ecology or temporality, they capture the reflexivity of knowledge production today by invoking time more generally, not just as the future, as is typical in design and design anthropological conversations. The designer may be focussed on producing something new, but she has to work with the past, building on

existing infrastructures, problem definitions and techniques and, as Anusas and Harkness so compellingly remind us, existing matter.

Design anthropology can hover uneasily between fine detail on the one hand and vagueness and lack of groundedness on the other, even as it keeps in view the social, cultural and political dimensions of design. In drawing attention to the temporal qualities of the materials and ideas that are shaped and reshaped in practices of design, one is alerted to the constant and always consequential interplay of the material and the conceptual. And vice versa. The material and conceptual impinge in time, wield consequences through time. Anusas and Harkness (2014) also note that the popular concept of innovation and its supposed link to novelty is implausible. To design is to imagine, and imaginings are necessarily complex articulations of unknown futures and selectively recalled histories. In the current conjuncture, as they argue, it is what we term 'the environmental' that best opens up understandings of the limits as well as the possibilities of designing feasible futures. In the complex demands of environmental concern, dealing with stuff and dealing with each other are inextricably linked, and everything potentially comes up against obduracy and resistance to change.

Instead of timelessness, a kind of elevated but impossible condition of immortality, or an endless capacity to go backwards in time—or to pretend we can (insuring ourselves against trouble or investing in the pursuit of eternal youth)—a design anthropology grounded in the environmental, with all its associations, attends not just to complexity but to consequentiality. Clearly not everything calling itself design anthropology is or needs to be about undertaking such a task. The centrality of design for contemporary society would make this unlikely anyway. Working with the anxiety or unease of endorsing or protesting business-as-usual is, however, creating an enthusiastic and timely conversation. To understand what it means for design to be part of society like this; to narrate its roles and impacts as local, vernacular and interactive as well as born of globalization and corporate profit making all at the same time; and to appreciate what ongoing alterations in expert practices and authority mean for policy and government as well as commerce, are all issues taken up by scholars in design anthropology.

As such, it is certainly a scholarly pursuit, if by scholarship one is referring to a disciplined collective endeavour of sustaining and developing human intellectual capacities. Where, exactly, this exercise gets carried out (in universities or elsewhere), is less important than the fact that it is being developed, taught and applied. Of course, as I've suggested, design anthropology can also leave everything as it is. In that respect too, it is rather like most other kinds of scholarship today.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/entremeios.lada/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://kadk.dk/en/research-network-design-anthropology>

<sup>3</sup> The use of the term Anthropocene has been growing since 2002. Writing in the journal *Nature*, the Nobel-prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen suggested it as a way to capture the idea that the scale and intensity of the changes caused by technology were producing irreversible and lasting damage to the global environment. The result is a new, human-dominated, geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where the global environment is thus the product of human endeavour. The *political* import of the term

is that design, a human practice by definition, can be applied to render this environment healthy again.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.wholeearth.com/issue/1010/article/195/we.are.as.gods>

<sup>5</sup> Ann Galloway shared an anecdote about how sheep farmers with whom her research team ('Counting Sheep' based at the School of Design, Victoria University of Wellington) engaged, could not understand how government money had been awarded to a project of such questionable usefulness.

<sup>6</sup> A developed version is available in Berglund 2015.

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