

The speculative and the mundane in practices of future-making - Exploring relations between design anthropology and critical design

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In the autumn of 2014 the authors of this paper organized an interdisciplinary master course called *Future Spaces* for design students at The University of Southern Denmark (SDU) and The Danish School of design Kolding (DSDK). The course was an experiment in bringing together different approaches to the understanding, exploring and making of futures – drawing on design anthropology, critical design and design fiction. Our overall attempt over the 8-week period of the course was to explore how design anthropological studies of future-making and speculative design approaches might be combined to understand and critically engage with current and potential future-making practices. This was a rather abstract and ambitious agenda for a design course that lasted only 8 weeks and included more than 20 students with different disciplinary backgrounds. Besides the required theoretical treatment of the respective fields, the course included practical design engagements in 'the field'. At the time of writing we are still struggling to make sense of the various outcomes of these engagements. This paper is one attempt at outlining some of the issues, challenges and potentials they raise for design anthropology, critical design and the possible relations between them. Based on our experiment we see potentials for developing a more speculative and critical form of design anthropology in parallel with a more engaged and situated approach to critical design – an approach based on *situated critical material engagements that brings together speculative and mundane practices of future-making in the field as well as in the design studio.*

From ethnography to design anthropology

For the past 3 decades various combinations of design, ethnography and anthropology have been explored and employed in design and research projects within the fields of user centred and participatory design. ‘Ethnographically informed design’ approaches have played an important role in shaping methods and methodologies within user centred design (Kjærsgaard 2011). Drawing on ethnomethodology and classic ideals of ethnographic fieldwork the ethnographer here assumes the role of fieldworker in service of design, providing designers with information about ‘users’ in real life settings prior to and separate from the design process (Button 2000; Heath & Luff 1992). This ethnographically informed approach to design is based on a clear division of labour where the ethnographer describes current social practices (the real and the mundane), while designers deal with future-oriented material interventions (the imaginary and the speculative). Here design and ethnography are seen as separate endeavours taking place at separate times in separate locations.

With participatory design, this division of labour between research and design gets challenged as ‘users’ and other stakeholders are invited into the design process. In this context the ethnographer changes from being the provider of information about users, practices and contexts ‘out there’, to being a mediator and facilitator of collaborations and co-creation between different stakeholder, interest, practices and ‘worlds’ within the design process (Kjærsgaard 2011, Halse *et al* 2010, Halse 2008, Clark 2007, Blomberg *et al.* 2003; Suchman *et al.* 2002). Here tools, techniques and materials for collaboration become a central part of the ethnographers contribution to the design process (Buur *et al.* 2000).

Despite their differences ethnographically informed design and participatory design share an interest in minimizing distances between contexts of use and design. As argued by Kjærsgaard and Smith (Kjærsgaard & Smith 2014) this interest in ethnography as the provider of *tools, techniques or material* for creating *familiarity* with ‘the other’ (whether in the form of user, informant or design partner), often comes at the expense of a more anthropological *critical distance* to the field and the larger socio-material and political contexts within which design projects unfold (Kjærsgaard & Smith 2014, Kjærsgaard & Otto 2012). This preoccupation with ethnography as a *technique* for rendering real life contexts accessible to design has been criticised for its rather narrow view of ethnography which tends to neglect its anthropological roots (Kjærsgaard & Smith 2014; Otto & Smith 2013; Dourish 2007,

Anderson 1994). Dourish and Anderson, for instance, argue that the value of ethnography is not found in its techniques but in its anthropological perspective, and its ability to challenge (rather than inform) design thinking. They both see ethnography as a kind of design critique - a particular perspective that can be used to challenge assumptions within design, and may serve as a way of opening up the design space through opening up for different ways of thinking about the use context and its relation to design (Anderson 1994, Dourish 2006, Dourish 2007). Buur and Sitorus (Buur and Sitorus 2007) take this one step further by suggesting that the value of ethnography is in its ability to provoke designers. They are interested in the friction created in the meeting between perspectives of designers and ethnographers; and see ethnography not as an external discipline to be *linked to* design, but as an embedded and constructively provocative *perspective within* the design process (Buur & Sitorus 2007:149). Buur and Sitorus' call for a more critical and materially engaged ethnography, based on a more reciprocal relationship with design, is very much in line with recent developments within design anthropology. In design anthropology the emphasis on anthropology (as opposed to ethnography) tend to imply an interest in the critical and the imaginary potentials of anthropology, and in how they might be combined with material explorations in design. Within the field of design anthropology research and design are increasingly understood as interwoven practices, and the making of things seen a critical material form of enquiry into, conceptualization of and engagement with current practices, emerging worlds and possible alternatives (Gunn & Donovan 2012, Gunn, Otto & Smith 2013, Smith 2013, Smith 2013, Kjærsgaard 2011, Hunt 2011, Halse et al. 2010). It is with such forms of design anthropology that we sense a resonance and a potential synergy with certain perspectives and agendas of speculative and critical design.

Speculative and critical Design in the gallery and beyond

Critical design emerged as a popular discourse in design research and contemporary design exhibitions in the mid-1990s (Dunne and Raby, 2014) as a reaction to commercial and rational approaches to design that understood design as a form of problem solving (Koskinnen et al, 2011). It was introduced as a design attitude that was dedicated to transgressing qualities seen as inherent to capitalist ideologies, such

as ‘social conformity’ and ‘consumer passivity’. This attitude is characterized by skepticism towards dominant societal values and dissatisfaction with ‘narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life’ (Dunne and Raby 2014: 34). Critical designers intend to ‘ask questions’ about broader socio-technical and cultural configurations, to find problems in ‘the way technologies enter our lives and the limitations they place on people through their narrow definition of what it means to be human’ (Dunne and Raby. 2014: 34). The ‘language’ and ‘structure’ of design is used to inscribe alternative design values as a form of commentary to these dominant preconceptions. This intends to emphasize that designers inherently subscribe to a certain ideology, which consequently foregrounds their ethical position (Bardzell, 2012). As a form of artistic expression focused on social experiences, societal configurations and human needs, critical design may be read similarly to literature or film. And critical design therefore tends to see itself as a democratically participatory approach to design (Bardzell, 2013).

Critical design may be seen as a form of knowledge production through design, if not necessarily for design (DiSalvo 2014). However, over the past 2 decades research efforts in the Human Computer Interaction community have developed in both directions.

On the one hand, critical design has inspired design researchers to instrumentally utilize its ways of thinking in larger design or development projects. For example, *reflective design* (Sengers et al, 2005) mobilized critical approaches to uncover designs’ unconsciously embedded cultural assumptions and to combine this with the design of socially responsible systems. A set of principles and design strategies were formulated to guide designers and users in rethinking their own practices, some of which some were strongly related to critical design, such as ‘designers should use reflection to re-understand their own role in the technology design process’ (Sengers et al, 2005:55). The *critical artefact methodology* used conceptual critical design proposals in a participatory design context, in order to inform design activity that progress human-centered design activities (Bowen, 2008). And in a technologically dominated industrial practices, provocative prototypes were introduced by a design team to deliberately challenge stakeholders’ conceptions about use-context, in order to reach a more nuanced socio-technical

understanding of end-user relations to products and contexts, as well as to inspire further prototyping activities (Mogensen, 1996; Boer, 2012).

On the other hand, critical design evolved into a field of related approaches with their own nuances. For example, *speculative design* shares with critical design that it operates outside normative design contexts and that it moves away from familiar notions and established lineages. However, speculative design emphasizes the ‘philosophical inquiry into technological application’ (Auger 2014:21) in order to re-imagine how things and worlds can be inspired by different ideologies or motivations, not necessarily to express a critique on the dominant ones (Auger, 2012). *Adversarial design* builds on the agonistic quality of critical design to use the means and forms of design to question conventional approaches to political issues (DiSalvo, 2012). And *design fiction* builds on the basic rules of fiction or what-if scenarios, and uses the language of design and diegetic prototypes to ‘suspend disbelief’. Similar to critical design, these projections of the future move away from existing values and assumptions to make people re-imagine social possibilities (Markussen & Knutz, 2013).

Critical design typically disseminates its work in academic conferences, in museums or in contemporary design galleries. These environments provide a safe and intellectual space for expression and imagination. However, such dissemination space might influence discussions around a critical design, as a curated exhibition is typically themed towards a particular topic. But more importantly, critical designs might not reach their intended audience - the people who are closer to a commercial context (Koskinnen et al, 2011)

Defamiliarization (Bell, 2005) and a ‘*slight strangeness*’ (Dunne and Raby, 2001) have been advocated as techniques to ‘successfully’ engage audiences in critical design provocations. Achieving a balance between the strange and the familiar is important here, as an object that is perceived as to be too weird might easily be dismissed as art (an hence nothing to do with ‘reality’), while an object that is perceived as not strange enough might be simply be absorbed into everyday reality as it is (Dunne & Raby, 2001). As Bardzell has pointed out, it can be quite a challenge to actually design for this ‘slight strangeness’, because this relies on the social and cultural framing of the

critique (Bardzell, 2012). And hence, we might add, on an intimate understanding of the social-cultural context of the people with which critical design seeks a debate.

Design and anthropology as critique

Critique is not only central to critical design, but also plays a role in design anthropology. Even if this critique is more pronounced and explicit in the critical design tradition than in design anthropology, they share an interest in challenging assumptions, sparking reflections and imagining alternatives.

Defamiliarization serves as a technique in the critical design endeavour. However, critique through defamiliarization is also an integral part of more traditional anthropological practices. In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fisher 1986), Marcus and Fisher describe two ways in which defamiliarization may serve as a technique for cultural critique within anthropology:

1. *Defamiliarization by epistemological critique* – where in order to come to grips with the exotic ‘other’ we have to revise the way we normally think about things (Marcus and Fisher 1986:138)
2. *Defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition* – where comparing our own practices with less familiar ones might lead us to question the taken for granted nature of these practices. (Marcus and Fisher 1986:138)

It seems that critical design and anthropology share a preoccupation with distant, unfamiliar and alternative worlds – whether these worlds are fictional or non-fictional, speculative or real, and whether they are distant in time or in space. Both critical design and anthropology seem to work from a liminal position between different kinds of realities, and may use this position between the strange and the familiar to question what we take for granted and to speculate about alternatives (Dunne and Raaby 2014, Marcus and Fisher 1986).

As Bardzell et al. (Bardzell et al. 2014) point out, there are many ways in which design can be critical “A design can propose a future that is different enough from what we would have extrapolated that it surprises us—and we desire it. It can reveal the horrifying implications of a contemporary practice. It can defamiliarize the present to render contingent that which we always thought was just natural, and open

up hitherto unthought design possibilities. It can make us more empathic towards the lives and experiences of others. It can produce a design image that is gently troubling, neither utopian nor dystopian, but which nags at us to take it seriously” (Bardzell et al 2014:1959).

The idea of critique and ‘meaning’ as something that is captured within the design object itself seems to be a common denominator in various approaches to critical design. Critical design objects are often treated as if they were self-contained objects with intrinsic meanings that can be read as texts separate from the contexts in which they are produced and exhibited (Bardzell et al. 2014). Koskinen et al. (Koskinens et al. 2011:101) are rather sceptical of this approach to critical design as decontextualized ‘text’ for intellectual debates in journals or showrooms, instead they suggest that “if researchers want to show how design can make the world a better place, they have to go where people are. This does not happen through intellectual debates in galleries” (Koskinens et al. 2011:101). Similar critiques could be made with respect to the cultural critique of traditional anthropology, which too is often somewhat enclosed in academic texts and intellectual debates separate from the ‘cultures’ and practices they describe and/or ‘critique.

During the course we were interested in cultivating a different kind of design critique from that exhibited in showrooms or written about in academic texts. We were less interested in the inscribed ‘meanings’ of design objects and more preoccupied with exploring ways in which speculative and critical objects might engage with particular people, places, and practices ‘in the field’. These design objects were not meant to be commentaries from afar, but situated objects that could latch on to and interact with concrete practices and images of futures ‘out there’, sparking reflections, changing conversations, shifting perspectives or influencing practices. Here critique was not seen as something intrinsic to or embedded with the design object itself, but rather as something which was played out in situated encounters within particular contexts. In the following, we describe how we themed and organized the course in order to better understand this ambition of situated designed critiques.

Future spaces

The general theme of the course was futures and future-making. In the first part of the course, called *Imagining Futures*, students were introduced to design fiction as a critical and creative design methodology. Through the creation of stories about and objects for fictional futures they were to distance themselves from the current, the ordinary, the mundane and the 'real', in order to be able to question the taken for granted and see possible alternatives.

The second phase called *Locating Futures* was more anthropologically inspired and concerned with understandings of future(s) and future-making. Inspired by among others Watts, Ingold, Bell and Dourish (Watts 2008, Ingold 2007, Bell & Dourish 2007), we wanted to sensitize our students to notions of futures as multiple, situated, mutating, messy and embedded in the everyday practices of people. The idea was to study the future, not as a given thing awaiting us out there in the horizon in need of forecasting, but as (story-telling) practices that have presence, meaning and agency in people's lives here and now. Through brief field studies and interviews in homes, companies and organizations the students looked at the way futures were understood, constructed and manifested in plans, dreams, fears, aspirations, objects, stories and practices of people in homes and at work.

In the third phase called *designing futures* we attempted to combine aspects of phase 1 and 2 by taking the design of speculative and critical objects out into the world, exploring how they might latch on to or interact with situated future-making practices of everyday life in the sites explored. And hence, how future-making practices of everyday life might inspire and interface with the future-making practices of design. This was about designing objects that would challenge perspectives, change conversations or influence practices *in context*. The designs were not meant to be self-contained objects to be admired and discussed in showrooms or publications, instead the making of object were to spark reflection and initiate dialogues 'in the field' (about current and alternative understandings of futures) and among the students themselves (about situated future-making practices and the role of design within it).

In the remaining part of this paper we will focus on the activities and results of phase 2 and 3, and the work of two of the student groups on issues concerning the making of futures in city planning in Kolding, Denmark.

Our two groups both visited a private company that is heavily involved in city planning in Kolding. The company has invested in land in a particular area of the city with the intention of transforming this area into a vibrant part of the city where collaboration and innovation through design is in focus. They call the area Design City Kolding and their plan is to be able to attract and build for companies and organizations that could benefit from being located in this ‘city’ within the city. Based on interviews with a project developer the students tried to make sense of how futures were understood, planned and constructed within this company. Through collaborative analysis of objects, quotes, stories and video material from ‘the field’ they identified themes and issues for their subsequent design work.

People and buildings - the politics and business of city planning

The students learned that the company was very concerned with *strategies* for shaping and managing city developments in accordance with their business model. The company initially started out thinking that making their vision come true was simply a matter of building. Though as the buildings remained empty they had to change their strategy and think about ‘people before buildings’, as the project developer explained. Before they could get round to selling buildings and building sites, they had to build relations, trust and a name for themselves within the city. To do that they engaged in various design events and projects around the city, and used that as stepping-stones towards realizing the future and the business plan they had envisioned. As a consequence of this approach ‘people’ and ‘citizens’ have come to play an increasingly important role in the rhetoric surrounding the company’s activities within the city, to the extent that many citizens of Kolding assume that ‘Design City Kolding’ is a development strategy initiated by the municipality, and not a business plan for a private company. Despite the company’s emphasis on ‘people before buildings’ the students found that offices within the company were filled with images and models of planned buildings, but that ‘people’ and their interests did not seem have a presence and a voice in the offices and plans of the company.

In order to spark reflections and dialogues about the role of ‘people’ in this investor driven form of city planning, one of the student groups developed a design concept called Build Your Neighbourhood - a portable interactive table with an image of the area of Design City Kolding.



Build Your Neighbourhood – By Line Øgendahl, Jakob Heichelmann, Asger Lautrop, Kasper Birner Wollesen

The table could be placed temporarily in different parts of city to engage the public in dialogues about the development of Design City Kolding. At the table one could shape the area as one would like by placing various element like trees, houses, shops, libraries, sports arenas etc. on the map. The table would record the inputs, and processed information in the form of statistics would subsequently appear as a dynamic projection in the company's meeting room.

Build Your Neighbourhood is not an explicitly critical or provocative object in itself. In fact it seems rather familiar and could easily be produced and placed in the city. It is only within the context of Design City Kolding that we might see it as a form of design critique. Latching on to company's rhetoric, Build Your Neighbourhood carves out a space for the people, voices and perspectives that are currently not represented in the plans and dreams for this area. By displaying the dreams of people in a controllable and manageable form (as processed statistics) the design concept plays with the company's idea of the future as manageable and controllable through plans and strategies, yet it comes with an implicit political critique of a potential future shaped solely by private capitalist interest. As such it is an ambiguous concept that seems to fulfil the company's need for 'user input', while slightly shifting perspectives and subtly raising democratic issues. When the concept was presented to the company their response was actually quite positive:

"I very much like the kind of statistics that it generates. It is a very simple way of showing a need or a wish for the area. We started out talking to the general public, but then we have sort of focused on possible future customers. So when you come

here with your project then, yeah, maybe we have ‘forgotten’ the general public for some time, and maybe it is time to sort of re-enter that segment. So it is a good reminder” (Project developer at Design City Kolding)

But even if the project developer saw possibilities for public involvement in temporary future projects, she was quite clear that when it came to permanent structures within the area revenue (not people) came first. However, since the company genuinely believed that the area they were creating would be an asset to the city and its economy there appeared to be no profound conflict of interest with ‘the people’.

Returning to the idea of ‘slight strangeness’ it seems that Build Your Neighbourhood was almost too familiar to successfully provoke reflection and debate about alternatives. The students could perhaps have gone further in showing alternative futures, through for instance providing less obvious and familiar element to choose from when building dream areas at the interactive table. One wonders what might have happened if instead of trees, houses and football pitches, the elements to choose from had also included refugee camps or homeless shelters, for example, in order to challenge implicit ideas of the kinds of people we design for. Would that have lead to immediate dismissal of the design object and perhaps even the students, or would it have provoked reflection and dialogues about the taken for granted?

The empty place – history and agency in city planning

The company was generally quite proud of its achievements within and plans for the area. During the students’ first visit the project developer showed a map of the area, and explained how “ 3 years ago it was like *nothing*, it was not a very nice area. There were some alcoholics living here and a mad dog, and people just didn’t come here”, while now the area had completely changed. However, talking to people from the area the students learned that this was not a perspective shared by everyone, and that what the project developer described as ‘*nothing*’ had indeed been ‘*something*’ to others. The area used to be a swamp with a rich fauna and therefore a popular place for school excursions. It was an area with lots of old boat, which had also attracted people who did not quite fit into ‘regular’ society. As one of the local citizens put it:

“...I think it is one of these places that a city needs to have. You need to have these kinds of places where you can live alternative kinds of life. You may not have a house or whatever, but you live on your boat, and you repair your boat and yes you drink beer”

The company seemed unaware that this area had not been a blank canvas; that their image a future for the area was realized on behalf of others, and that while including some people it excluded others. Hence when talking about ‘people before buildings’ it was a particular kind of people the company had in mind, namely the kind of people that would fit within their vision and would eventually inhabit the buildings.

The Dystopian Bench made by one of the students addresses these issues. The Bench is designed for a public path that runs through the ‘Design City’ area. It looks like an ordinary bench and can be used as such, but comes with built-in surprises such as heating, cooking facilities and shelter. It can be used in different ways by different people, revealing its possible usages with time in use.



Dystopian Bench – by Kasper Hansen [Photo Eva Knutz]

The bench is designed to cater for the needs of people who used to live in the area, but might now - or in a dystopian future where ‘Design City’ has taken over city development altogether - be homeless. Like Build Your Neighbourhood the Bench insists on making room for the people who do not have a presence and a voice in the plans for design city Kolding, but in a slightly more provocative way. The Bench does not only raise a political critique of who has a say and a space in the future of the city, it is also a critique of a particular design approach that sees the designer as someone in control of dreaming up futures on blank canvases in empty spaces. Contrary to this

approach The Bench starts from what was there before. Its more opened-ended design does not prescribe a particular use but lets people appropriate it in their own way.

The Dystopian Bench sits more comfortably within ‘traditional’ approaches to critical design than does Build Your Neighbourhood. As a bench for homeless people it might pass as a critical and interesting object in itself, yet it is the product of situated engagements in a particular context, and the critique it poses seems more interesting, sophisticated and relevant within the specific history and context of Design City Kolding. So far the Bench has been exhibited at the Design School, but has not been brought into contact with the general public or the people at Design City Kolding. Whether it might have succeeded in challenging perspectives and provoking reflections and debates beyond the design student community itself we do not know.

A critique of critical design

In our course the making of critical objects in the end served primarily as a vehicle for students’ reflections upon their own immediate understandings of futures and future-making practices, and the role of design within it. Through the situated engagements, they did indeed learn about and grapple with notions of future(s), and the multiple, messy, situated, future-making practices embedded in the everyday lives of people. Creating objects that were to also challenge perspectives, latch on to and influence the practices of these city planners, however, was a different ball-game altogether, and one that we saw interesting but not entirely successful attempts at. As one of the groups concluded in their final presentation; to really provide a constructive criticism in terms of an interesting speculative design object that would show alternatives and make a difference, would require knowing much more about city planning on an everyday basis, as well as a willingness to seriously engage with this practice. In their current position they felt that they were simply foreigners looking in, and that they were in no position to criticize the practices and perspectives of the people who had been kind enough to invite them in.

Bringing their speculative and critical objects back to ‘the field’ thus made the students reflect upon their own role and perspective – Did they know enough to engage in these speculations and critiques? And how could they as outsiders contribute to a constructive debate? Their critique was raised in response to a very tight course schedule with little time allocated for analysis, theoretical reflection and

serious engagements in the field, but also points towards more general concerns about the foundation, position, relevance and commitment of speculative and critical design objects.

Critical design and design anthropology

Our experiment succeeded in making students critically reflect on possible understandings of futures, future-making and the role of design within it, which resulted in interesting and thought-provoking attempts at creating situated critical objects that might also challenge perspectives on and practices of future-making outside the design studio.

Even if the student projects cannot be taken as examples of design anthropology or critical design or even a mix of the two, we believe the projects point towards potentials and challenges in combining design and research approaches from these fields. Based on the experiment we see potentials for developing a more speculative, critical and materially engaged design anthropology inspired by critical design along with a more situated and anthropologically inspired form of critical design. An approach that:

- 1) Takes design anthropology beyond ethnography, ‘user studies’, participatory design and applied anthropology towards a more critical material engagement with potentials and alternatives.
- 2) Moves speculative design beyond the production of critical objects serving as conversations pieces for intellectual debates in showrooms towards a more situated engagement with mundane practices of future-making, where critique is not intrinsic to the design object, but unfolds through encounters within particular contexts.
- 3) Explores how speculative practices and products of design may latch on to and engage with situated mundane practices of everyday-life in order to provoke reflections, challenge assumptions, change conversations and influence (future-making) practices in ‘the field’ as well as in the ‘design studio’.

We not see this approach as replacing current practices of design anthropology and critical design, but rather as extension that combines and broadens the scope of these practices.

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