A design anthropology of contemporary architecture: proposing mainstream, contemporary, process-focussed inquiry for future user-centred design

Alison McDougall-Weil
Engineering Design Centre, University of Cambridge

Contemporary anthropology has critical and evolutionary potential for contemporary architecture. Tim Ingold emphasises the commonality of design and anthropology as 'inherently speculative disciplines, whose propositions nevertheless only carry force to the extent that they are grounded in a profound understanding of human lived worlds.' (Ingold, 2015, p. 1) However, the way in which architecture provides the settings for everyday life in many places is non-optional. Architectural propositions 'carry force' even if they are not grounded in a 'profound understanding of human lived worlds': they are difficult to avoid. Choosing to not work or live in a given building is difficult: so is changing one's streetscape or city. It would be potentially better for inhabitants and users if the built environment were more human-centred. Historically, the design of the built environment is centred on the building as the product, rather than on experiences and interactions as the product. Design in architectural practice is not yet centred on the human. This is where a design anthropology of architecture has unique potential to intervene, through its joint ability to describe current practices and to provoke change. Starting from Marie Stender's advocacy (2015) of coupling anthropology and architecture I propose ways to address this area of design practice. What form of attention to architecture can design anthropology productively take? The proposal is based on the perspective of past professional work in architecture, and on my current research, a multi-year, multi-site ethnography of the architectural design process and design intentions for social interaction in bioscience labs *and* the interaction practices in those sites when inhabited.

The current setting in design anthropology, where possibilities opened up by new theoretical repertoires and current work in anthropology, the willingness to do multi-sited and 'at-home' anthropological inquiry, and the burgeoning approaches to and allies of an anthropology of design suggest that this is a time suited to studying architecture.

Firstly, design anthropologists interested in the topic of architecture can, as Stender proposes, consider the 'mainstream (not just minorities and subalterns)' (2015, p. 19). To this focus on the mainstream, I propose a focus on *contemporary* architecture. The urgency comes from frequent discontent with contemporary buildings and their frequent export to new contexts: materials, styles and configurations traditionally associated with Western office

buildings are now seen in residential design at home. Western-style buildings now also appear in drastically different locations and settings.

To focus on contemporary mainstream architecture, my research starts with the consideration of process. This is defined as both the architectural process *and* the larger context in which that design process is happening. My research approaches the design process as an element of a larger setting, one created by a client, rather than defined by the architect. In a particular context, at a particular time, the built environment becomes the subject of specific desires. At this early stage of the process, desired outcomes are decided to be amenable to design. In some cases, this becomes the start of a design process, driven by a coterie of stakeholders allied with architectural designers. After a formal design project is commissioned, the design process happens, ending with legal approvals and construction. Finally, the contract ends and design process participants disassemble. After the official design process ends, a less contractual and legally regulated world of users, audience and participants comes into action and inhabitation. With the setting characterised in this way, looking at the life of a process, project and place seems possible. It is this larger context that design anthropology is positioned to inquire into and which exceeds the typical repertoire of other approaches.

From the perspective of design anthropology, architectural processes neglect the user involvement seen commonly in other design processes. The historical development of design anthropology and its basis in business anthropology and corporate ethnography, outlined in (Gunn, Otto, & Smith, 2013, p. Chapter 1), is rooted firmly in human-computer interaction and workplace studies. The engagement with users seen in technology development and in the Scandinavian tradition of participatory design in the workplace is not a standard feature of contemporary architectural practice or education. That practical history equips anthropologists interested in design with particular strengths, in an opportunity space where architectural education and practice have not yet widely adopted anthropological inquiry and insight.

Given that architectural education and practice are not engaged with extensive user involvement or user studies, there is an opportunity to be strategic. Is the introduction of consultation or direct user involvement the key solution for making more human-centred architecture? Or, as Akama, Pink and Ferguson (2015) argue, is design anthropology able to propose less transactional involvements? This could start with critical coverage of the specifics of the mainstream, contemporary architectural design process.

The literature suggests that architectural practice and education have special features compared to other forms of design. Analysing those special features can help researchers propose design studies that could interest practicing architects and support the design of

human-centred architecture. The influence of history and precedent are documented in Dana Cuff's (1991) seminal work on architectural practice. Sociologist Robert Gutman's work, distilled to its major contributions in (Gutman, 2010), illustrates the problems with the questions architects ask about users (§3) and the essentials of architectural education in the US and the UK (§4). Albena Yaneva's (2009) ethnography of design practice describes the role of physical models in an architectural practice, and shows one possibility for using theory (in that case Actor-Network Theory) to order a view of practice. Major design research publications like (McDonnell & Lloyd, 2009) analyse design meetings, comparing engineering and architectural design and illustrating the unusually substantial role clients play in building design. Each of these special features shapes the available space for users in architectural design, and considering them can speed persuasive research.

Stender (2015, p. 1) suggests that 'architects are afraid of involving users'. In my current study of the nature and the forms that user involvement takes during past design projects in a number of architectural processes in the US and the UK, other possible explanations for the lack of user involvement emerge.

My research suggests that scope and content of professional architectural work are not arranged to freely admit users or to do user research. In the design of a substantial bioscience building in the USA geared to house 700-800 people by a respected international practice, a reconstruction (using interviews and archives) of the design process shows that user-figures are depicted and mobilised in the design processes frequently. From how they work with representative users (the real persons clients select to represent the larger body of users) to how they depict imagined future users in drawings and renderings, this case reveals that architects aren't afraid of involving users as much as limited in the liberty to do so.

The basic legal contract of services on which the building was based is a standard American Institute of Architects document, C142-1997, in use until its withdrawal in 2009. The contract states that early stage 'observation' consists of visits to the site of the future building for the purposes of documenting architectural site conditions, such as location of services. Visits during construction are to review the progress and quality of construction work. These visits are not intended to provide the architects with an understanding of the site's users or future users. Contractually, architects encounter nominated user representatives (who may or may not be representative of the user constituencies seen during inhabitation), and are not positioned to access other users. Clients do not expect it. Despite clients' design intentions, which ask architects to design to change social worlds of action, architects are not typically interacting with users as a core part of the job of doing architecture. In that design process, the

architectural firm used the four user representatives (who were senior bench scientists) to gain access to current labs. Over a three day period, one architect visited and photographed each user representative's lab. These photographs were the basis of an annotated report that circulated in the design firm and was presented to the client to build a shared picture of current lab conditions to inform the design. That activity was not an official aspect of the process, but an exceptional effort made by that architectural firm.

Considering that even basic access is outside the normal scope of work, we do not currently know what kind of topic users could be in architectural design. It seems wise to begin a research programme to remedy that with a 'critical anthropology *of* design' (Suchman, 2011, p. 3), alongside approaches geared specifically to intervening in design practice. If we want to make progress with introducing contemporary anthropology, and the methods, theories and techniques of design anthropology, into the processes seen in the practice of architectural design, it is productive to begin understanding how and in what context such work is done.

Anthropologists can gain access to design processes in architecture using the same skills gained in accessing and studying the design and use of technologies. They are well placed to persevere with understanding, representing, and working with and through those understandings. Design anthropologists are already sensitised to issues of design, and can build on work in contemporary anthropology such as studies of material culture (Miller, 2010);(Buchli, 2014) and literatures on work practice temporality (Cefkin, 2015), collaborating with designers (Squires & Byrne, 2002), and relate also to historical interest in spatiality in anthropology in many forms (Rapoport, 1969); (Hall, 1959); (Bourdieu, 1979); (Whyte, 1980).

Encouraging this research direction has the potential to build a community of researchers who could have long-term engagement with the built environment just as anthropological practices already now shape technology or healthcare development and business practice.

A design anthropology focussed on contemporary mainstream architecture can use a relational process view to structure the study of the human lived worlds of both designers and everyday users. It could make clear the aspects of those worlds which do not overlap, and how that matters to designing and inhabiting the built environment. Making these processes and practices visible and audible can benefit those on the design side and those on the inhabitation side of the built environment, as well as building a new corpus of anthropological research.

Position paper for the conference "Design Anthropological Futures", August 13-14th, 2015, Copenhagen, DK, The Research Network for Design Anthropology.

4

Bibliography

Akama, Y., Pink, S., & Fergusson, A. (2015). *Design + Ethnography + Futures: Surrendering in Uncertainty*. Paper presented at the 33rd Annual ACM Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Seoul, Republic of Korea.

Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Algeria 1960: The disenchantment of the world, The Sense of Honour [and] The Kabyle house or the World Reversed: Essays*. Cambridge/Paris: Cambridge University Press/Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Buchli, V. (2014). *An anthropology of architecture*. London: Bloomsbury.

Cefkin, M. (2015). *Temporalities of Intervention in Designing Work*. Paper presented at the Research Network for Design Anthropology Seminar 2: Interventionist Speculation, School of Design, Copenhagen. https://kadk.dk/en/center-codesign-research/research-network-design-anthropology

Cuff, D. (1991). *Architecture: The Story of Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gunn, W., Otto, T., & Smith, R. C. (2013). *Design anthropology : theory and practice*. London/New York: Bloomsbury.

Gutman, R. (2010). *Architecture from the Outside In: Selected Essays*. Enfield, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.

Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language* (1st ed.). Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ingold, T. (2015). *Design Anthropology Is Not, and Cannot Be, Ethnography*. Paper presented at the Research Network for Design Anthropology Seminar 2: Interventionist Speculation, School of Design, Copenhagen. https://kadk.dk/en/center-codesign-research/research-network-design-anthropology

McDonnell, J., & Lloyd, P. (2009). *About designing: Analysing design meetings*. London: CRC Press.

Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rapoport, A. (1969). *House form and culture* (18th printing. ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Squires, S., & Byrne, B. (2002). *Creating breakthrough ideas: the collaboration of anthropologists and designers in the product development industry*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Stender, M. (2015). *Architectural Anthropology - And why architects are afraid of users*. Paper presented at the Research Network for Design Anthropology Seminar 3: Collaborative Formation of Issues Moesgaard Museum, Aarhus University. https://kadk.dk/sites/default/files/06_pecha_kucha_marie_stender.pdf

Suchman, L. (2011). Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 40*(1), 1-18. doi: 10.1146/annurev.anthro.041608.105640

Whyte, W. H. (1980). *The social life of small urban spaces*. Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation.

Yaneva, A. (2009). *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture : an ethnography of design*. Rotterdam: 010.