

Exploring Anthropological Imagination

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Last year, as a design researcher at a human-centered design consulting company, I thought of anthropology in terms of its ethnographic tools, which we appropriated liberally in service of design, inspiring ideas about new digital services, business strategies, patient processes, etc. This model forms a linear progression from understanding a community to making a sensible intervention based on their needs, which I still think is quite useful in many contexts. Since then, however, I have been studying what it would mean to design rituals and interventions in social systems, and I am beginning to see the design/anthropology relationship as a collaborative effort at every stage of the process, transcending the tension between research and creation. Instead, it builds on a more acute awareness of the cultural impact of designed objects, ideas and experiences to produce cultural elements consciously to suit the needs and desires of any particular community. Rather than a progression from one endeavor to another, this begins to look more like a parallel iterative process, with both anthropology and design working to understand culture and create it.

Coming from design research, it is easy to reduce the fields of anthropology and design to separate parts of the design process: anthropologists research and designers create things. Anthropology, after all, provided design with ethnographic tools for observational, in-context research. However, this both unfairly burdens design with the task of creating a better future and simultaneously prevents anthropology from sharing its own unique vision (Anusas & Harkness 2014). In addition, when the fields are divided this way, their combination could imply a more research-heavy process: more workshops, more co-creation, more involvement of community members in order to build a greater understanding of the anthropological context. There is no denying that this research is important – especially as we design more consciously for cultural

impact and behavior change, the values and motivations for projects must come from within the community that they will affect. However, this may lead us into the trap that my fellow students and I often encounter: “a cessation at the stage of discovery [and] a proliferation of workshops and design probes” at the expense of outside vision (Hunt 2014). In pursuit of aligning with community interests, we often fail to contribute the new vision of the future that we have been tasked with. This is problematic because undergoing research and contributing expertise to a design team’s anthropological understanding often takes a great deal of time and effort from community members. Since designers are trained to imagine alternative futures, we have a responsibility to use that capacity in the service of the communities who take the time to respond to our initial exploration.

Instead of this false division of labor by fields, we should explore what kinds of interventions the “anthropological imagination” discussed by Anusas and Harkness (2014) can envision that design could not. If anthropology is about understanding human cultures and societies, what if design anthropology was about creating new cultural elements? For example, design anthropologists could be tasked with developing renewed social protocols, gestures, ceremonies, rituals, folklore, and other cultural fragments that create meaning for a community.

Ton Otto (2014) gives three great examples of projects that approach this definition of anthropological imagination, but avoids calling the cultural products “design” in their own right. He justifies the paper’s relevance via design by listing the project outcomes in common communication media terms: “a cultural festival, a video installation, and an exhibition”. Upon further inspection, we find that the real products involve culturally significant performances and ceremonies, changed and re-invented by community members. Exploring the challenges met in this work, Otto discusses the popular perceptions of these cultural traditions as static representations of the past that cannot be changed. He argues that in order to imagine a different future, we must also be able to manipulate the concepts and practices that define our cultures. Instead of cultural objects as preservation of the past, maybe we can think of them as dynamic things, constantly shifting each time they are repeated by a community member.

Although this conception of dynamic traditions makes it possible to imagine designing new ones, it also complicates our understanding of how that would happen. If each community member is constantly reinventing cultural products, then at what moment are they “designed”, how, and by whom? In the three projects that Otto shares, two are led by community members and one is initiated by an anthropologist. In this last example, the anthropologist has noticed a global trend: a new generation of “digital natives”. Working with young people who use digital media every day, she led them in creating a new conscious group identity that did not exist before. Developing an anthropological imagination would mean becoming more comfortable with this type of intervention. Witnessing some cultural inconsistency, confusion or lack of consciousness that has yet to be addressed, perhaps anthropologists and designers could team up with community members to better understand the situation, and then propose new cultural products to fill the gap.

In the traditional model of designing for a client, research leads to design, which is potentially implemented and then left alone. When anthropology takes on a more involved collaborative role, the process becomes cyclical, using a deep understanding of culture and the implications of cultural objects to imagine new ones, and then putting those into the world, provoking new insights that may incite an endless continuation of iterations. This gathers anthropological design into one unified process, reframing it as an ongoing, collaborative practice rather than two separate parts of a project. After all, we are never finished with imagining the culture that guides us.

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