

# What's "Anthropological" about Design Anthropology? A Personal Reflection

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## Preface

*This paper approaches the discussion of "Ethnographies of the Possible" from a round-about way, taking the "peculiar space betwixt and between the present(s) and the future(s)" referenced in the description as the liminal spaces between the broader community of practitioner/scholars who engage in anthropology, design and ethnography in organizational and commercial arenas. This begins by conceptualizing design anthropology as a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1999) that includes localized communities that come together at various conferences, seminars, through books and journal publications and in virtual forums. However, these localized communities retain distinct characteristics. From this perspective the paper provides a particular "exploration of new frontiers for the field of design anthropology" by surveying the near past and present to suggest a vision for what the future might be like.*

*This is also a personal introduction via a reflection on 'becoming' and identity. I am joining a conversation that is well underway in this venue. The paper is a sorting out of 'this' and 'that' and an initial exploration of shared understanding and differences in the ways the field of design anthropology has evolved in unique contexts, especially in the U.S. and Europe.*

## Chaos, Purity and Danger

In a world where the ground seems to be shifting under our feet, it is easy to accept the idea of "challenging boundaries" and specifically, of challenging disciplinary boundaries. Within some fields the silos of disciplinary practice have given way to permeable boundaries where specialty areas emerge and grow, for example, biochemical engineering or business and design anthropology. The dissolution of once clearly defined boundaries has resulted in the need to explain these seemingly unlikely hybrids. It is the new exotic: strange, unorthodox and even somehow wonderful.

Hybrid fields present a challenge to how we identify and introduce ourselves, and to how we work with others who are not from the same disciplinary tradition. Within professional

settings this is situationally and contextually specific. If I'm with anthropologists I'm likely to identify myself as a design anthropologist. If I'm with a group of designers I introduce myself as an anthropologist. And if I'm with business professionals I will also introduce myself as an anthropologist. If I decide to introduce myself as a design anthropologist to designers or business people things become confusing very quickly. The designers might be more willing to accept this identity but be very suspicious as to whether I'm *really* a designer. The business people would probably be at a complete loss since they would wonder what an *anthropologist* was doing there in the first place. But a design anthropologist? Nope. Too weird, at least in the U.S. where design anthropology as such is not widely recognizable within the business and commercial world.

I'm not advocating for a return to the comfort of strict disciplinary boundaries or launching a call to action to 'circle the wagons'<sup>1</sup> to fend off potential border crossers that (mis)appropriate concepts, theories and methods. I am simply interested in understanding why practitioners/scholars of design anthropology self-identify as such. What does it mean to be a design anthropologist? How do they explain to other practitioners and scholars, to themselves, and to the general public why this identity is meaningful and necessary? Furthermore, how do they communicate and demonstrate the unique value of their contribution to teammates and clients?

Mary Douglas wrote extensively about the ambiguous consequences of mixing ontologies and challenging boundaries. She reminded us that disorder creates chaos, destroying patterns that are well-established, recognized and comfortable. But disorder also has "potentiality". The power of disorder is destructive "but its potential for patterning is indefinite." This is why, Douglas argues, "...though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power." (1966/1980)

"Know Thyself"

The title of this paper has its genesis some years ago when, as a doctoral student, my dissertation chair, Allen Batteau, would ask during a class "What makes this an anthropological problem?" Most often there was a short but deafening silence as we scrambled to come up with an

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<sup>1</sup> Apologies for the idiom: the phrase 'circle the wagons' refers to the practice on the North American frontier when wagon trains were under attack. The Conestoga or 'covered' wagons were drawn into a circle to provide shelter from an attack. Here the phrase suggests a response to a perceived incursion or attack on the purity of a disciplinary field.

intelligent response. This is not as simple a question as it might seem. The question is further complicated by the emergence of specialty or hybrid fields such as design anthropology.

How do design anthropologists maintain what is fundamental to being anthropological? How are the problems that they tackle anthropological problems? What events create the conditions that shift anthropology from (thick) description to critique to advocacy to intervention? What causes anthropologists to gravitate toward - and embrace - design? These questions are likely to sound elementary to anthropologists from Denmark and Europe where the field is more clearly articulated and recognized as a “distinct way of knowing” (Otto & Smith, 2013). Perhaps these are meaningful questions for me because I’ve been on the design and business side of things, teaching those students how they might apply and value social science theory and methodologies in their work. This is a feat of translation. Anyone who works in these ‘betwixt and between’ spaces knows this and has experienced, at least to some degree, the task of translating not only the words, but also making the content meaningful for someone to whom this is foreign in the extreme.

Shortly after submitting this position paper I began reading *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion, & Rees, 2008) which was immensely helpful in addressing many of the questions that I had asked. *Designs* represents a pivotal point in the form of a ‘conversation across generations’. It illuminates the movements within anthropology that prefigured the emergence of design anthropology and other subfields that espouse a collaborative, problem-solving, solution-based orientation to ethnographic engagement. Through its seven ‘dialogues’ we follow Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion and Rees as they explore what is distinctive about anthropology and why anthropology still matters.

Raising the question - What’s anthropological about design anthropology? – is a centering exercise. It brings us back to the issues of identity, meaning, community and practice.

### Design Anthropology as a Community of Practice

We can apply Etienne Wenger’s (1999) concept of *communities of practice* as a lens and starting point for conceptualizing design anthropology as a disciplinary hybrid, a specialty area of practice and scholarship that exists in an “in between” space where a distinct way of knowing, doing and *learning* is occurring in the context of transdisciplinary engagement.

Wenger described the social theory of learning by starting with assumption that “engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are. The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor social institution but rather the informal ‘communities of practice’ that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time.” (Wenger, 1999) He identifies four components that characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing: meaning, practice, community and identity. Wenger defines meaning as “a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.” Practice “is a way of talking about shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.” Wenger’s describes community “as a way of talking about social configurations” so that the enterprises we engage in are considered valuable and that our engagement is recognized as a competency. Finally, identity is “a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.” (1999: 5)

It’s about *learning* and *a way of talking*, of communicating, of having a conversation amongst ourselves about the things that matter deeply within our communities. However, Wenger is clear that a community of practice is not only about a conversation amongst like minds. It’s also about knowing our practice well enough to have conversations *outside* our community about who we are, our competencies, and about the value we can bring.

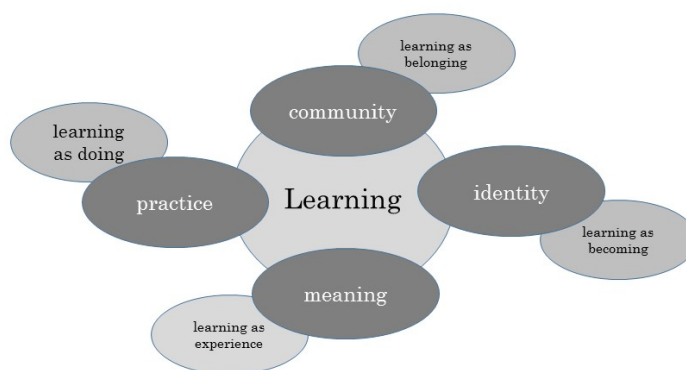


Figure 1 Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory (Wenger, 1999: 5)

Where and how do designers fit into this community of practice? They are not design anthropologists; they are designers. What is this relationship between designers and anthropologists? How it came to be is a parallel story about the shifts within design that moved

the field from the focus on form and aesthetics to a focus on ‘the user’ (Miller, 2014; Wasson, 2000).

When we identify as ‘design anthropologists’ we place ourselves at some point along a trajectory of ‘belonging’, either as a core member, a novice or somewhere in between. Wenger reminds us that this identity is both collective and individual, about *how learning changes who we are*, and about how identity creates our personal histories of becoming.

The Evolution of Design Anthropology: a personal history on becoming

Attending my first annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association was a rite of passage. It was an overwhelming experience to be immersed in this international gathering of several thousand anthropologists who were reporting on field studies from around the world and close to home. Like many first time attendees, typically graduate students, I poured through the listing of panel and poster presentations, films, division meetings and lectures. Everything was interesting; I had to sample it all. On a deeper level, I wanted to understand and internalize the common threads that were holding this diverse discipline together. This was my process of becoming an anthropologist and of finding my place in the overall disciplinary field. I quickly came to understand that anthropology was about *people*, not individuals, but social groups. How did they organize? How did social groups distinguish themselves from each other? How did they produce culture, both materially and symbolically? How did they produce knowledge?

My introduction to the field was much like everyone else and the events that follow are common knowledge to anyone in the discipline. However, at the risk of being redundant, certain of these events need to be mentioned in order to trace a personal trajectory into the community of practice called design anthropology that is described as “an emerging transdisciplinary field”. Growing attention to the field is attributed to the confluence of several factors. Technology is not expressly mentioned, but is implied: “In an interconnected world where the boundaries between physical, social and digital environments become increasingly challenged, the conventional distinctions between social science and design research no longer hold.” Challenging boundaries, cross-disciplinary and aspirations of transdisciplinary collaboration contributed to the emergence of new forms of applied anthropology, including design and business anthropology.

From the beginning my doctoral study was cross-disciplinary, rooted in anthropology, business and organizations. I chose to apply to the interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in

anthropology and business<sup>2</sup> rather than the existing doctoral program in business and industrial anthropology<sup>3</sup> because I believed it was important that my program was comprised of courses from two distinct disciplinary tracks. Over the next few years I began to gravitate to my ‘tribe’ within AAA annual meetings, attending panels and presentations that focused anthropological practice and theory in business, industry and organizations. In 2005 the world shifted: the first Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) was held in Redmond, Washington. The conference was attended by a diverse group of participants from a range of disciplines that were engaged in commercial arena. Rick Robinson (2005) opened his introduction to the theory discussion by calling for a *conversation*, noting that “Application of methodology to an arena doesn’t make a domain, or a discipline. Theory debate does.” Marietta Baba provided closing remarks calling for “the end of theory-practice ‘apartheid.’” (Baba, 2005) Tracing the beginning of a theory-practice ‘split’ from its origins in British colonialism, Marietta made the case that “a reintegration of theory and practice was underway in the global practice of ethnography by multiple disciplines and professions.” Within the next year I had my first opportunity to work on a project for a major corporation that wanted to understand sharing practices between family members and among close friends (Miller & Metcalf, 2009). This was my first introduction to design anthropology. In 2007 I was the first faculty hired<sup>4</sup> to teach in the graduate program in design management at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Fast forward to August 2010 and the 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial European Association of Social Anthropologists at the National University of Ireland Maynooth and the panel presentation that resulted in the 2013 publication of **Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice** (Gunn, Otto, & Smith). Design anthropology has undoubtedly come of age. It meets all the criteria to be recognized as a field in its own right, especially in Europe where practitioners and scholars seem to identify more readily as design anthropologists and where there is an explicit effort to articulate the field.

This is not where the story ends. Because I’m writing a book about design anthropology I’m sensitive that there are differences as well as commonalities between these two organizations— EPIC and the Research Network for Design Anthropology. How can I approach

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<sup>2</sup> I was one of the last doctoral students admitted to the interdisciplinary program at Wayne State University just before it was ended. I completed my dissertation and graduated in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Founded by Marietta Baba and other faculty in the department of anthropology at Wayne State University, this excellent program was the first of its kind in the U.S.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Fee was on the industrial design faculty when he created and wrote the curriculum for the design management program.

the topic of design anthropology without addressing the existence of two distinct albeit “friendly” communities of practice, both claiming to have transformative potential in business and organizational environments (Batteau & Morais, 2014; Binder & Halse, 2015)? It was not simply a matter of geographical convenience that two organizations emerged. Design anthropology is typically described as a subset of business anthropology. The workshop facilitated by Allen Batteau and Robert Morais (2014) at EPIC 2014 posits EPIC as the “Big Tent” concluding that “business anthropology and EPIC occupy a big tent, inclusive rather than exclusive.” Perhaps the tent is not big enough? The story does not end here either.

## Design + Anthropology

Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. (Pierce, 1877)

Co-authors Christian Madsbjerg and Mikkel Rasmussen included this quote by Charles Sanders Peirce in their book **The Moment of Clarity** (2014) published by Harvard Business Press Review. Writing about abductive reasoning<sup>5</sup>, a type of logic proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 1800s and very familiar to designers, the authors describe what they believed to be Peirce’s most significant contribution – “distinguishing between the act of asking a question and the act of making a judgement, which we experience as doubt and belief, respectively”.

I cite this quote because the sense of ‘doubt’ is endemic to the practice of design and anthropology, more so now as we seek to intervene in the current state of things. We must be willing to accept the state of doubt as part of the process of creating something new. When data is collected and analysis begins, we move closer and closer to the state of doubt: did we ask the right questions? Did we talk to the right people? Do we have the right kinds of data? Do we even have the right problem? *What are the consequences of intervention?* Transitioning to synthesis we take the “abductive leap” and begin to construct models of “what could be” (Dubberly, Robinson, & Everson, 2008). Often it is

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<sup>5</sup> Other authors have introduced abductive reasoning to the business community, notably Roger Martin (2009) in **The Design of Business**.

in this transition between analysis and synthesis that anthropologists sign off, leaving the designers to complete the bridge to intervene in the present with a proposed solution for a 'better future'. Yet design anthropology is being positioned as an explicitly *interventionist* approach: "future oriented processes of inquiry and exploration which not only develop alternative perspectives or opportunities, but function *as sites of cultural production and transformation*." (Smith & Otto, 2014) It is expressly linked to design and represents a unique form of knowledge generation that is created "in and through action rather than as a result of observation and reflection." In this shift – this dis-ordering of existing patterns – a new field is emerging.

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