

# Doing things differently is always theory and practice

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## Introduction

Three main points meander through the following comments: 1) In such unsustainable times as ours, design anthropology had to be; 2) It is not the case that anthropology is reflection and design is action, both theory and practice are part of and crucial to both disciplines; 3) The mutual incompatibility of the temporal orientations of anthropology (to the past/present) and design (to the future) is probably illusory and can in any case be overcome. My thoughts on the topic emerge from understanding both design and anthropology as disciplines. Discipline is a mutable and fraught concept these days, so it may be useful to note explicitly that I use the word to refer to a certain competence if not virtuosity, a capacity in a specialist area that comes with application. I also think discipline's prerequisite is time to learn. If design anthropology is to emerge as a discipline understood in this way, this will take time and much effort.

## Future, temporality, sustainability

The work of the network has already illuminated a vast range of complex situations of social and individual significance, where the problem of change, and more specifically, the creation of new artefacts is central. Design interests anthropologists also because we live in the age of design. But we also live in the age of crisis where the futures on offer are scary and many people are looking out for ways to make them slightly less so.

Design's conceptual apparatus is a particularly resonant one in these circumstances, because it is a tool for thinking that attends necessarily and often rather precisely, to acting and thus to shaping futures. Design doesn't just create future stuff, and certainly whatever it does it does not do it *ex nihilo* but by building on existing infrastructures, problem definitions and techniques. Designerly practice develops in relation to one of the key challenges for institutions these days, the overlap between concept and materialization. In design not only is the relationship

between the possible and the actual constantly posed, it is often thoroughly thought-through. Practitioners of design also display considerable awareness of context and, to borrow from Tim Ingold, respect for the way ‘the forces of ambition rub up against the rough edges of the world’ (2013: 72).

To design then automatically draws our attention to temporality, a point neatly captured by Mike Anusas and Rachel Harkness (2014), whose paper for this network’s seminar from 2014 is titled simply, ‘Things Could be Different’. They argue that the popular concept of innovation and its supposed link to novelty and relinquishing of the past is implausible, because 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 future lives. Here dealing with stuff and dealing with each other are inextricably linked, and everything potentially comes up against obduracy, resistance to change. It is where matter in general rather than innovations as discrete objects, pushes itself into view and calls attention to its complex, often socially problematic (because matter so easily pollutes), temporality. The environmental then ‘crystallises the importance of [an] extended temporal approach’ (2014: 10). Anusas and Harkness do not use the term, but the beleaguered concept of sustainability does reflect these preoccupations with sustaining existing habits and understandings.

It seems the West/North is increasingly aware of its own unsustainability, as proliferating future studies indicate. In some areas of life, the future is coming faster than expected (for instance in ferocious climate events). Explorations of the resources that people have to create futures seem to be exploding across the disciplines, not least because, as author William Gibson has put it, ‘the future is already here – it’s just not very evenly distributed’ (quoted on Steven Shaviro’s blog, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1174>). As social groups seek to live wisely, it is important to understand where obduracy in fact lies (in concreteness, in thoughts, elsewhere entirely?), and good to know what is amenable to change and what is not. With a seemingly unassailable impetus towards a totalising intellectual life and an exceptional commitment to furthering corporate power, economic globalisation has narrowed down the space within which such questions can even be posed. Anthropology’s thought-through approach to understanding the practically

unthinkable variety of different ‘naturals’ and ‘normals’ makes it a good partner for design in such circumstances.

The two disciplines are not as alien to each other as is sometimes suggested, with one bent on making change the other bent on recording convention. To an extent these roles are there, but like all human endeavour, design and anthropology both attend routinely to the past as well as the future, and both involve theory as well as practice. Anthropology is practice as much as theory, design is theory as much as practice.

Design-anthropology is indeed well equipped to pursue proposals for better, less unsettled futures. The ‘human’ in its ‘human-centred’ is wider than *homo economicus* (let alone *homo neoliberalis*). Design-anthropological collaborations have already developed a lexicon for and a habit of taking temporality seriously (e.g. Clarke ed. 2011 and many of the network’s seminar papers), and working with multiple temporalities and partial perspectives. Ultimately, more than many other disciplines, design anthropology is inherently alert to the multiplicity not only of realities but also of politics and ethics (Maze 2014). No totalising here, instead, an understanding of the human that is diffuse and relational and still planetary. No growth-oriented utopianism either, but discerning commitments to real people’s real desires for real futures, and real environments’ real potentials. Exploring our multiple crises *with* people (cf. Ingold 2013) helps sustain realism as well as ambition and imagination.

As practitioners of their disciplines, anthropologists and designers engage with those they study as intellectual partners – of sorts at least – seeking answers as well as solace in practical and sociable encounters that are simultaneously learning experiences. Often, if not always, they are also geared to surviving our futures. All this supports my contention that a design-anthropology of some kind was inevitable. It also underlines the point, often made but worth making again maybe, that design anthropology is not a contradiction in terms (cf. Ingold 2014).

Designerly, empirical and historicist

So far so good, but is there not a danger that this idea of design-anthropology as doing what is being done anyway – designing for sustainabilities – but better, may turn out

to fuel wishful thinking or be fiddling while Rome is burning? Is it not the case that while the *constructing* disciplines flourish (buoyed on by a persistent obsession with innovation), too many thinkers – academics and others researching environmental change or social scientists and humanities scholars making society conscious of its historicity – find their work hampered, whether by habits of thought or corporate interference?

The answers to these questions are empirical and so more empirical research of a reflecting and of a historical nature is needed. The contemporary (or modern) tendency to ignore history is strong (Connerton 2009), but in order to be critical, design anthropology must respect the past. The work it produces can of course take many forms – narratives, questions, artefacts, services, in short, designs – but it will always be inherently multi-temporal.

Unfortunately, for now it will probably also be short-term. In the academy and in commercial consultancy, but also well beyond both, there has already been a massive growth in imaginative and un(der)paid project work, some of it undertaken by academics alongside artists, designers, and other creative producers, as forms of activism or at least social critique. For instance, in examples I know from London and Helsinki, academics, professionals and students have provoked thought and action on important issues in ways that might, with only some stretching of concepts, qualify as a type of proto-design-anthropology. A good example is the Helsinki-based project from the early 2000s in which designers, artists and others working on their own time established a physical space – a greenhouse and café – to host events, also created new space for simultaneously thinking and doing (Berglund, forthcoming).

The seven-year project illustrates two relevant points. Firstly, its own history is significant, not only in that it was a case of volunteers exploiting an exceptional time for the city's administration, namely Helsinki's year as one of ten European Cultural Capitals, which gave the initiative backing it might otherwise have lacked. Its intellectual climate also connected with a global waves of ecologically and globally oriented debate that was fuelled by the so-called Battle of Seattle of 1999. The second point is that its activities were precisely the inextricable interlinking of making and thinking that design as a discipline is so well placed to nurture. It was about thinking, about doing and about exploring, and as the interviewees I have talked to endlessly highlight, it was a collective endeavour not just to create but to enjoy

alternatives to an overpowering yet often problematic normal.



*The Oxygen Room* pop-up pavilion, Helsinki, 2005. Photo by Cindy Kohtala.

Great! But the pop-up format and project-based research are not enough for the sustained theoretical and practical work of rethinking the way futures are designed. We need nothing less than to flesh out robust critiques of hegemonic ideologies and the dominant practices they support, and to do it with the confidence to be self-critical, not univocal and certainly not moralising (a good example is Escobar 2012). Long-term, slow and risky research is imperative.

It's important perhaps to note that the work of thinking has never been confined to academia. However, the fast-disappearing privileges once granted to academics now appear as important but endangered elements of our capacity to engage in the knowledge practices necessary for coping with a changing planet. (If I were to include a fourth point for my 'position' here, it would be that we need to do all we can to save our universities from corporate takeover and fatal identity-loss (cf. Lave et al. 2010)). We need to describe, carefully and in many different registers for many different audiences, how newly configured forms of design (and other) expertise are making futures already, who is doing it, with what agendas and above all, with what wider implications.

We must ask questions that consultants are not likely to pose. For instance,

what might we make of the finding that creative workers of the ‘middle classes’ are vastly over-represented in activist design projects, often ‘moonlighting’ for the environment or for vulnerable others (Adam 1998)? And how might we understand the social elites who support design for *their* world rather than the *shared* world? And what about the epistemological implications of pasts? In exploring these questions, I suspect we would find that far from being empty, the future is cluttered, full of competing realities backed by highly unequal forces.

The inherently complex way that design anthropology is developing temporality as an analytical device will, I suspect, allow it to examine futures, past and current, with precision and nuance. If design anthropology develops the best of both anthropological practice and theory, and the best of design practice and theory, there is no reason why the impacts should not be revolutionary – though of course the results may not be so pleasing to so many. Future historians might have something to say about that.

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