

Design Anthropology and the material interplay of possibility and inquiry.

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Material Principles

As an emerging field, design anthropology is uniquely placed to help us understand and deal with the 'world in the making' by exposing our material engagements with the emerging possible. This position paper draws exclusively on the texts provided as the outcomes of the Research Network for Design Anthropology (2013-2015) to expand on this and outline what I consider some of the main attributes of design anthropology through what can be termed a form of 'making possibilities through inquiry'. By way of background my interest in design anthropology stems partly from endeavors within design research and partly from having taught a short course in design anthropology to students of pedagogical anthropology in spring 2015.

Design anthropology provides a framework for devising methodologies that can capture and build upon an emergent response to being in the world. On a fundamental level this relies upon ways to arrest our perceptions and understand the textual features that surround us. Foremost this points to the place of things and spaces and their appearance as "shapers of the world and ourselves" as pointed out by Cila et. al. This focus upon materiality and material culture is clearly seen through for example the 'reflections of the teenagers' digital worlds' shown by Smith & Otto, or through the reliance upon visual ethnography and images seen in Karen Waltpor's "The Invention of Futures @ the edge of society". These become instances of understanding "everyday life as material participation" (Damsholt & Petersen) through multiple approaches to ways of collaborating as seen in the presentation by Thiel & Jensen. What is salient in these studies is the extent to which design anthropology uses textural responses to perceptions of the world. This is typified by the view of 'Staging atmosphere in design anthropology' provided by Stine Maria Louring Nielsen.

Methodological Diversity and Invention

Design anthropology relies centrally upon new ways of documenting and mapping our existence in the world. Through these we achieve new views and panoramas of otherwise hidden issues and experiences. These revelations of the ordinary can be seen in the “defamiliarization” adopted by Kjærsgaard & Boer, and in the accounts of spaces through which Anastassakis seeks to understand the experienced environment of Rio de Janeiro. The diversity of documentation becomes a visual cue for projects within design anthropology as does also its constant invention. These are exemplified through the example of “Exploring through the ‘impossible’” and reflecting upon the opportunities of the Internet of Things (IoT) carried out by Giaccardi, Speed & Rubens.

As a new and transdisciplinary field, design anthropology offers the benefits of a shifting and inventing methodology incorporating the interplay of social and material elements. This is seen in the idea of new spaces for “alliance and interaction” by Sarah E. Jackson as part of an archaeological project, or in the morphology of the ethnographer as “para-ethnographer” (Vangkilde & Rod) or even in the use of “speculative ethnography” by Jamer Hunt. Similarly “spectrum analysis” appears as a form of ethnography by Laura Forlano and ethnography itself becomes a means of challenging design thinking and design critic as described by Kjærsgaard & Boer. The “transdisciplinary design program” outlined by Jamer Hunt shows ethnography as a tool in the design process able to present an otherness of possible futures, and through “speculative interventions” by Carl DiSalvo, it takes on a form that is at once an inquiry and articulation of “contemporary conditions”.

Design anthropology provides an alternative to the many purely analytical approaches within the social science through the continued development of new research tools. Notable examples here are the “developed digital archaeological recording system” shown by Sarah E. Jackson or the creation of "object personas" by Cila et. al., as well as in the use of the multiple media and methods typified by Aditya Pawar.

Dealing with Ambiguity

In these engagements of making there is a mixing of approaches combining the use of analysis and synthesis able to generate a unique range of tools. As a means to an end, this evolving practice allows a way understanding changing interactions that are intrinsically uncertain and capricious. It is here we can see the importance of adopting playful material engagements with analytical ones such as in "When design games and ethnography meet" by Eva Brandt or in the use of "speculative prototypes" by Lenskjold. These approaches find ways of bridging personal engagements with collaborative meaning making. They focus upon understanding material opportunities that effectively traces lines of previous making and possible making that can be understood through "thinking through making" as described by Raijmakers, & Arets.

As a distinctive field of understanding, design anthropology provides ways of approaching the ambiguous. This can be seen in the use of concepts of "complexity" by Vangkilde & Rod and in the approach of 'orchestration' described by Raijmakers & Arets. It is also seen when dealing with "social and socio-technical systems" shown by Jarmer Hunt and when attempting to consider the future, and what this means for design as discussed by "Forms and Politics of Design Futures" by Mazé. Finally and perhaps most critically for the field, ambiguity also applies to questions raised of knowledge (Smith & Otto) and what is described by Tim Ingold as the "split between living in the world and knowing about it".

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