

Think like a Designer - Act like an Anthropologist: Exchange between two Disciplines

Topp, Sebastian

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Topp, S. (2019). Think like a Designer - Act like an Anthropologist: Exchange between two Disciplines. *Hamburger Journal für Kulturanthropologie*, 9, 27-36. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-8-13932>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-SA Lizenz (Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-SA Licence (Attribution-ShareAlike). For more Information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

THINK LIKE A DESIGNER – ACT LIKE AN ANTHROPOLOGIST. EXCHANGE BETWEEN TWO DISCIPLINES

Sebastian Topp

This edition of the journal aims to give insights into the productive effects of combining two rather different disciplines – design and anthropology – with each other to investigate urban areas and urban challenges. This is the background, in front of which the current academic discussions of design and anthropology are going to be viewed in the following article. The purpose is to introduce the various contact points of the two disciplines, to discuss the interface between them and the associated potential of combining them. The carved out overlaps raise questions about similarities, interconnections and relations of the two.

Design Perspectives in Anthropological Research

Over the last years, especially in the US-American and Scandinavian academia, the interface between design and anthropology was subjected to intense discussions. For instance, research projects were established to develop new forms of ethnographic research to prepare for the challenges ethnographic research faces presently. Although the anthropologists Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte Smith say, that »the anthropological study of design as a modern phenomenon is still in its infancy«,¹ design and anthropology have historical roots and contact points.

This serves as the motivation to take a closer look at the dimensions and complex relationship between the two disciplines. They show themselves in a variety of circumstances and call for a choice of perspectives to carry out the investigation.

The first perspective designates design as a process to rethink anthropological practices. The second focusses on the design sector as a research field for social and cultural change. Ethnography is the method of choice to provide knowledge about these processes. The third perspective understands designanthropology as a holistic concept emerging »as a distinct style of doing anthropology, with specific research and training practices«.²

Even though the emerging field of designanthropology gives an orientation and a plausible theoretical orientation, it is significant to concentrate on the

1 Ton Otto/Rachel Charlotte Smith: Design Anthropology: A Distinct Style of Knowing. In: Wendy Gunn/Ton Otto/Rachel Charlotte Smith (eds.): Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice. London/New York 2014, p. 2.

2 Ibid., p. 10.

edges and the preliminary work of the so-called ›new subdiscipline‹ to develop the necessary understanding between the two disciplines. Therefore, I will give an overview over the perspectives, dimensions and developments of the interrelations between design and anthropology by introducing the three elements as laid out below.

Designing as Ethnography

The first perspective defines design and its processes as an incentive to re-think anthropological research as an »inspiration for anthropology to develop its research practices in order to be better equipped for the study of the contemporary world«. Some researchers assume that anthropological research is forced to adapt by the changing lifeworlds. They see it as a necessary evolution, because »a discipline should change and [...] design practices and thinking can give direction to this change«.³ George Marcus and Paul Rabinow developed, as among the first to do so, new impulses for anthropological research and introduce their research work. They draw on experiences in design studios as fruitful inspirations for innovative anthropological inquiries. They elaborate on work experiences from architectural design studios, on their interest in working collaboratively and on the added value this can have for working ethnographically. For Marcus and Rabinow doing research is comparable to an ordinary design process. Marcus says, »the design studio is a way to develop alternative ideas about method in a more comprehensive way than traditional attitudes have permitted«. For him, »critique in design studios can be practiced to the point of vacuity and obnoxiousness, but, at its best, group critique of projects work through materials and operative concepts at different stages as thought experiments and scenarios with various consultants in the room«. In addition, Paul Rabinow defines the design studio as »a shared space, a cooperative and collaborative intellectual space«.⁴

Complementary to this, George Marcus and Keith Murphy also encourage turning towards the practice and perspectives of design and designers in respect to the development of anthropology. They state that design can offer inspirations and orientation for new ideas: »Design seems [to them] a key domain for ethnography to explore critically, and perhaps absorb into its own process of inquiry.«⁵ They argue that research contexts and objects develop at increased speed with regard to the discipline – »it would seem that where and with whom we work has changed at much faster rate than how we work«. They criticize anthropology for the lack of innovative ideas

3 Ibid.

4 Paul Rabinow/George Marcus/James Faubion/Tobias Rees: *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary*. Durham 2008, p. 83-85.

5 Keith Murphy/George Marcus: Epilogue. *Ethnography and Design*, *Ethnography in Design ... Ethnography by Design*. In: Wendy Gunn/Ton Otto/Rachel Charlotte Smith (eds.): *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*. London/New York 2014, p. 257.

and inspirations. »There is a deep-seated [but lively and largely self-admitted] conservatism in anthropology's emblematic professional culture of methods, which has the effect of slowing innovation down to a glacial pace.«⁶ The change of the current lifeworlds and research topics in anthropological research also affects the characterization of the ›field‹. Empirical research takes place in areas, which

»are not configured as they were when anthropology first emerged as a discipline. Even the traditional [and, to be sure, idealized] destinations of anthropologist, small-scale societies, are today deeply intertwined with global flows and transnational forces that originate far beyond village and regional borders«.⁷

Consequently, they want to show, that anthropology can benefit from the design. »Design, it seems, does in fact have a lot to offer for anthropology.«⁸ For instance, the added value to react adequately and efficiently to social and cultural change. Therefore, they propose

»to dismantle ethnography's aging frame, tear it down to its most basic elements, and then reconstruct something new using party and assembly techniques shamelessly scavenged from design, with the goal of rebuilding the core engine of anthropology – and in so doing clear a space for further transformations of the anthropological apparatus.«⁹

What becomes clear from this perspective is, that design is a positive influence in supporting anthropology with competences and inspirations. Design and its processes as well as its techniques could furnish the discipline adequately to function in an accelerated world and the social and cultural realities come with it. The use of ethnographical approaches in both disciplines serves as one of the bases of reflections on the intersection points of the disciplines.¹⁰ Murphy and Marcus illustrate, that

»design is inherently stitched to the social world, so embedded in a nexus of objects – that is a nexus of things of various materialities made to exist in and support the social world – and because it, like ethnography, is a point of contact, a space of transduction, it seems to us that placing the two alongside one another and tracing their parallels and divergences is a good a place as any to begin exploring how design can help reshape anthropology«.¹¹

According to them, there is an established basis for a working relationship between design and anthropology, due to the fact that ethnography and

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 256.

8 Ibid., p. 255.

9 Ibid., p. 253.

10 Ibid., p. 261.

11 Ibid., p. 254.

design have a couple of overlaps in their mode of practices. This supports the argument for a stronger recognition of the productive ties and need for exchange between the disciplines.¹² There are also some dissimilarities as Murphy and Marcus are pointing out. This might support the argument that especially »ethnography could benefit from the ways designers handle their material and the creativity they bring to their works«¹³ and that

»by carefully integrating elements of design into ethnography, we hope to inject ethnography with a newfound creativity, new ways of thinking, new kinds of collaboration, new pedagogical techniques, new raw materials, and new kinds of outputs«.¹⁴

During a conference on designanthropology in Copenhagen, Denmark 2015,¹⁵ George Marcus posed a controversial question and, thereby, advanced the academic dialog between both disciplines: »Does Design Anthropology absolve or relieve the anthropologist from long term field work, if not what does the design anthropologist collaboration look like embedded in the long history of fieldwork?« He talked about the relationship between the disciplines, which, he supposed, is still undefined. On the one hand, it could be asked, if anthropological knowledge is favourable for design techniques, and, on the other hand, if ethnographic fieldwork matches with design actions. His own experiences show that doing fieldwork has changed a lot in anthropology. Design practices deliver methods for anthropology, even if they aren't aimed at deep reflection. They can and might be successfully implemented in the future. Marcus supposes that in ethnographical research we have to extend our research and include the people we focus on in our ethnographic fieldworks.

In a recent work, Marcus, Wilillerslev Rane and Lotte Meinert have introduced the idea of obstructions as tools and methods of intervention. The aim is to rethink the way of doing anthropological fieldwork creatively and support the idea of collaborative practices for empirical gain as well as taking a fresh look at reflecting the accumulated data. »[W]hile there is nothing wrong with the more conventional methodological approaches in anthropology«, they declare themselves in favor of developing innovative ethnographic methods. According to them, »there is a danger that their hegemony will seal off other ways of experimenting with method«. Intervening in someone's work by applying an obstruction constitutes a collaborative approach of doing research. It is not to be understood unproductively »as a method [...] to block or destroy the work of one's peers«. Instead it raises the potential of

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 257.

14 Ibid., p. 262.

15 *George Marcus: Jostling Ethnography Between Design and Participatory Art Practices ... and the Collaborative Relations that It Engenders*. Copenhagen 2015, see URL: <https://kadm.dk/en/research-network-design-anthropology/conference-design-anthropological-futures>.

developing fruitful ideas. It is used »to stimulate a kind of creative exotic thinking or unrecognized potential in such thinking«¹⁶. In comparison to the

»classical anthropological methods [...] the obstruction method [therefore] [...] breaks with the ›solo‹ tradition in anthropology. In the obstruction mode the researcher needs another researcher to break habits and challenge his or her automatic assumptions about anthropology«.¹⁷

So, »the methodology of being obstructed by another researcher turned out to be a remarkably powerful workshop vehicle for thinking and trying out new ideas«.¹⁸ The main result and insight of working creatively with obstruction are as follows, »a lesson learned from the experiment is that creativity depends on the presence of limitations, another that apparently cunning obstructions on other people's work can be productive in sparking their creativity«¹⁹. They diagnose the need to be open for these kinds of innovative field tools, due to the fact that, »contemporary anthropological research remains vital as a field science only by making amendments to, and indeed experimenting with, the methodological regulative ideals through which current practitioners conceive fieldwork projects«²⁰.

Anthropology of Design

With their publication »Description to Correspondence: Anthropology in Real Time« Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold introduce thoughts about the potential of a second perspective of the relation between design and anthropology: They define the design process as a field of investigation. This line of thinking relates strongly to the work of Lucy Suchman. They reflect her view and connex between design and anthropology, that she »urges us not to reinvent anthropology as [or for] design, but rather to adopt a critical anthropology of design as part of a wider anthropology of the contemporary«.²¹

Suchman's perspective is based on her academic work on design practices in professional technology companies, which has generated new perspectives on future making and innovation of office work. She has done research within collaborative teams, which have consisted of cognitive and computer scientists and system designers at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) in California in the 1980s and 1990s. Her research interests focus on the re-

16 Wiltherslev Rane/George Marcus/Lotte Meinert: Obstruction and Intervention as Creative Methods in Anthropological Research. In: *Ethos* 5 (2017), p. 809–819, p. 2.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 6.

19 Ibid., p. 7.

20 Ibid., p. 4 f.

21 Caroline Gatt/Tim Ingold: From Description to Correspondence: Anthropology in Real Time. In: Wendy Gunn/Ton Otto/Rachel Charlotte Smith (Eds.): *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*. London/New York 2014, pp. 139–158, p. 154.

lation between global and local and the shift of these determinants within long-term anthropological research. Of particular interest to her were »the situations that frame design, and the frames that condition professional practices«. A reference point and interest of her work is »research up« and the challenges arising from this. This discourse was picked up by the German speaking scientific community. Suchman's research in communities is highly innovative and illustrates a special dynamic of contradictions, temporality and generates a redefinition of the concept of location in anthropological fieldwork with new perspectives and collaborative forms for anthropological research.

»One contribution to the project of relocating future-making, then, is an anthropology of those places presently enacted as centers of innovation that illuminate the provincial contingencies and uncertainties of their own futures, as well as the situated practices required to sustain their reproduction as central.«²²

From her research perspective she elaborates on the findings, that both design and anthropology are independent from each other, but generate a productive dialogue by taking innovative design approaches to anthropological research.

She dissociates herself from other research on design and anthropology in the fact that she does not suggest that design and anthropology will merge and develop into a new form of anthropological research. Nevertheless, she defines this relationship between the two with inspirations for further and future anthropological research:

»I argue instead that design and innovation are best positioned as problematic objects for anthropology of the contemporary. I share an interest in ways of theorizing change, breaks, ruptures, and the new that do not rely on singular origins, definite moments of invention, or trajectories of progressive development. And I share as well a commitment to an anthropology that works across disciplinary boundaries within the academy and allies with relevant practitioners in other locations.«²³

What is striking here is that Suchman equates design and innovation as a process that creates something new with unexpected outcomes. From a methodological point of view and in contrast to the perspective above, she supports an interdisciplinary work and approximation with other disciplines, especially in respect to »researching up«.

By developing her take on the relation and the interplay between design and anthropology further, she says,

22 Lucy Suchman: *Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design*. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011), pp. 1–80, p. 6.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

»at the same time, I believe that we need less a reinvented anthropology as or for design than a critical anthropology of design. The latter requires, among other things, ethnographic projects that articulate the cultural imaginaries and micropolitics that delineate design's promises and practices«.²⁴

Therefore, she elaborates on »the limits of design« to frame design as »figure and practice of change«, to define its position in processes of methodology, change and future making. She concentrates on the politics of design and defines design as the process and product, which is supported by a socially and culturally constructed need for progress, improvement and efficiency. Design and designers, she states, take on a role in fulfilling this ongoing and socially and culturally inherent progress. »Innovation, [...], is embedded within a broader cultural imaginary that posits a world that is always lagging, always in need of being brought up to date through the intercessions of those trained to shape it: a world, in sum, in need of design.«²⁵

Consequently, the importance of design

»moves from being one among the four primary elements of nature, culture, business, and design (albeit at the core) to being the enveloping, encompassing, and, by implication, directing force, leading to a reiteration of the nineteenth-century declaration of the conquest of nature and the rhetorical query regarding the future: ›Now that we can do anything what will we do?‹«.²⁶

In conclusion, Suchman sees an added value and perspective in focusing on design practices as forms of future making and innovation practices, especially due to »the rise of professional design as a dominant figure of transformative change« as an arena for politics and economic forces.²⁷

Designanthropology

Wendy Gunn and Jared Donovan define designanthropology as »an emergent field concerned with the design of technologies that build upon and enhance embodied skills of people, through attention to the dynamics of performance and the coupling of action and perception«.²⁸ These perspectives can be understood as the strongest exchange of theories, practices and methods of both disciplines. Wendy Gunn and Jared Donovan designate designanthropology as »an emerging field and consists of multiple practices«, which is implemented as an integral part of university education and collab-

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 3.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p.5.

28 Wendy Gunn/Jared Donovan: Design Anthropology: An Introduction. In: Wendy Gunn/Jared Donovan (eds.): Design and Anthropology. Anthropological Studies of Creativity and Perception. Farnham 2012, pp. 1–18, p. 10.

orative research teams for instance.²⁹ Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte Smith define designanthropology as a sub-discipline, which »is a fast-developing academic field that combines elements from design and anthropology«³⁰ and understands itself as a distinct style of knowing. »Design anthropology is coming of age as a separate (sub-)discipline with its own concepts, methods, research practices, and practitioners, in short its own distinct style and practice of knowledge production.«³¹

By introducing the third category, it is important to recognize according to Gunn and Donovan that, »design anthropology is an emergent field that is not owned by any one discipline or sub-group within a discipline«.³² Therefore, their understanding of designanthropology is that of an engagement of both disciplines in »a convergence of efforts of learning from each other«. It is a »shift from informing design to re-framing social, cultural und environmental relations in both design and anthropology«.³³

What becomes obvious here is that designanthropology is still emerging and building upon both perspectives, which are explained in the paragraph above. The understanding of designanthropology varies between the positions of understanding designanthropology as »fieldwork [...] in the service of design. Framing originates from problem-orientated design approaches rather than engagement with peoples. Anthropology is put in the service of design, for example ethnographic studies are used for established design requirements«.³⁴ As an historical example, Ton Otto and Rachel Charlotte Smith illustrate that designers in the 1990s, especially commercial and industrial designers, valued the data and methodologies of ethnographic work highly at that time and made the first strong relation between both disciplines visible. The growing demand for anthropologists in companies in the United States and Europe illustrates this nicely. It is also supported by the long tradition of anthropological studies of organizations and corporate cultures as research done by anthropologists in corporate and commercial settings.³⁵ Otto and Smith argue further and designate not only ethnographic knowledge as a benefit for design, they also present in detail a genuine affinity between ethnography and design »as a processes of inquiry and discovery that includes the interactive way process and product are interconnected and the reflexive involvement by researchers and designers«.³⁶ The research that was done during that time showed that they »argue for the relevance of ethnography in and for design as more than simply a methodology for the study of a read-

29 Ibid.

30 *Otto/Smith*, as in fn. 1, p. 1.

31 *Gunn/Donavan*, as in fn. 28, p. 1.

32 *Suchman*, as in fn. 22, p. 5.

33 *Gunn/Donavan*, as in fn. 28, p. 9.

34 Ibid., p. 8.

35 Ibid.

36 *Otto/Smith*, as in fn. 1, p. 6.

ily available world of users outside the design studio«. ³⁷ Another perspective is that »the theoretical contribution is for anthropology rather than design. Design follows the lead of anthropology in terms of adopting theoretical understandings or becoming the subject of anthropological study«. ³⁸ This is more oriented towards the perspective of Lucy Suchman. In addition, designanthropology changes the timeframe which is accessible by research. Or, as Gunn and Donovan are concluding:

»[...] bringing together D [design] and A [anthropology], anthropology brings an understanding of the past in the present [...] DA [designanthropology] is concerned with making partial connections between past, present and future – what you do in the present is to have a vision in the past in order to make a move towards the future.« ³⁹

It becomes clear that an idea of temporality and the possibility of researching futures play a part in the disciplinary questions of designanthropology. This seems a strong orientation toward radical change, but it can also raise the question, to what extent co-operations or mergings of the two disciplines can be fruitful. There is no doubt that both discipline have weaknesses: They focus on social and cultural contexts which are changing and developing permanently. This makes it necessary to balance, to forgo thinking in black and white. It makes it necessary to negotiate the grey zones, while at the same time having to show one's colours (alias to adopt a clear position). ⁴⁰ Therefore, both discipline have to reflect and adjust constantly. But there is need for sensitivity, as a radical orientation towards a designanthropological approach of doing research could present the danger of losing some qualities, especially, when designanthropology is reflected from a cultural anthropological perspective.

So the ideas presented above raise the question: What added value do the three perspectives generate for the work of a cultural anthropologist in practice? I will draw on my PhD research project, which concentrates on urban contexts in the cities of Hamburg, Helsinki and Graz, to illustrate. It shows the dynamics of design processes interweaving to develop the urban space. In respect to the discussion of designing a research process as an ethnographer my research underlines this perspective. The fact that my urban research focused on a group of design students that worked in the urban environment forced me to reflect on the techniques as well as perspectives the design students use to approach the field constantly. We have learnt from each other and developed an understanding for each other's research and the qualities each discipline presents. This collaborative process enriched the fieldwork on both sides and generated a faster access to the field and an increased exchange of the findings. A permanent dialogue and learning

³⁷ *Otto/Smith*, as in fn. 1, p. 9.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 2 f.

³⁹ *Gunn/Donovan*, as in fn. 28, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Jesko Fezer* in this issue.

process for both disciplines became apparent and the involvement with each other in particular has made the difference.

The second perspective, the anthropology of design, is also productive with a view to current urban anthropological research. The fact that numerous design processes and design events are established in cities draws attention to the attractiveness of formulating anthropological questions about the practices behind these processes. Within the frame of design activities in the city, this creates a laboratory (atmosphere) where social and cultural transformation can occur and something new is and will be established. Therefore, it delivers a productive environment for investigating urban anthropological research.

Finally, I have to dissociate myself from framing my design research as designanthropological. It is clear that this perspective is not fully developed yet and is more or less a concept for a debate about the perspectives of future research. So far, it has made little substantial contribution. Time will show, whether it is only a hype about a term/concept or the methods and if it is destined to make an impact in the future. Nevertheless, my research and the fact that I was educated as a cultural anthropologist let me develop on the criticism that designanthropological research tends to oversee the benefits of cultural anthropological research and the positive effects of investigating the past to understand the present.

In conclusion, I would like to state, however, that the productive relation between design and anthropology should always be considered during the set-up of a research process, following the principle: think like a designer (free-minded and flexible, in non-linear ways) – act like an anthropologist (entering into others worlds with empathy and analytical understanding).



Sebastian Topp, M.A.
University of Hamburg
Faculty of Humanities
Institute of European Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West Wing)
20146 Hamburg, Germany
sebastian.topp@uni-hamburg.de