

Designs and Anthropologies

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Designs and Anthropologies

FRICTIONS AND AFFINITIES

Edited by Keith M. Murphy and Eitan Y. Wilf

Afterword by Arturo Escobar

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Founded in 1889, the University of New Mexico sits on the traditional homelands of the Pueblo of Sandia. The original peoples of New Mexico—Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache—since time immemorial have deep connections to the land and have made significant contributions to the broader community statewide. We honor the land itself and those who remain stewards of this land throughout the generations and also acknowledge our committed relationship to Indigenous peoples. We gratefully recognize our history.

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Of Three Configurations	1
Keith M. Murphy and Eitan Y. Wilf	
CHAPTER ONE. Border Thinking about Anthropologies/Designs	17
Lucy Suchman	
CHAPTER TWO. The Wrong Means to Misguided Ends: Corporate- Based Design, Streamlined Insights, and Anthropologists' "Desire for Relevance"	35
Eitan Y. Wilf	
CHAPTER THREE. Feeling, Action, and Speculative Value through Human-Centered Design	51
Lilly Irani	
CHAPTER FOUR. <i>Autonomia Ethnographica</i> : Liberal Designs, Designs for Liberation, and the Liberation of Design	75
Alberto Corsín Jiménez	
CHAPTER FIVE. The Kinship between Ethnography and Scenography: Design Proposals and Methods Working within Ethnographic Projects	93
George E. Marcus	
CHAPTER SIX. Form-Giving as Moral Mediation	115
Keith M. Murphy	
CHAPTER SEVEN. Money Troubles: Designing a Bridge to the Ephemera of Expectations	141
Douglas R. Holmes	
Afterword: Anthropology, Designing, and World-Making	169
Arturo Escobar	
REFERENCES	191
CONTRIBUTORS	215
INDEX	217

Of Three Configurations

KEITH M. MURPHY AND EITAN Y. WILF

The recent coalescence of design anthropology as a distinct subfield of interdisciplinary research, appearing most prominently in the form of several edited volumes (Clarke 2017b; Gunn and Donovan 2012; Gunn, Otto, and Smith 2013; Akama et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2016), is a strong indicator that the decades-long alignment of design and anthropology is evolving. From at least the 1990s onward, “design ethnography” (Salvador et al. 1999; see also Graffam 2010)—typically figured as the use of ethnographic research methods in corporate settings—was the dominant form of the alignment of anthropology and design. Since about 2010, however, a number of new arrangements between these two fields have emerged, including more anthropologists heeding Lucy Suchman’s (2011, 3) call to develop “a critical anthropology of design,” as well as a turn to design pedagogy and practice as resources for transforming the fundamentals of ethnographic fieldwork more generally (Rabinow et al. 2008). Anthropological research in these veins has highlighted, for instance, the ways in which ethnographic methods have been both productively incorporated into and problematically reified within a number of different design arenas, while other endeavors have attempted to clarify the potential benefits of design methods and pedagogy for a transformed and updated anthropological toolkit.

This volume is both a continuation of and a deviation from this emergent line of inquiry, probing the possibilities and pitfalls underlying interactions between anthropology and design. The anthropologists we originally assembled for this project all vary in how they relate to design. Some have trained and worked as designers, some ethnographically studied designers or people in design-adjacent fields, and still others have somehow been influenced by design in their work without ever having dealt with it directly. The basic attitudes toward design we all held vary, too, ranging from celebratory to skeptical, with a tremendous amount of complexity in between. The clarion call organizing us was constrained, but also relatively free: participants were asked to

explore the design-and-anthropology relationship in whatever way they saw fit, so long as it loosely fell under Keith Murphy's (2016b) articulation of three different configurations—anthropology *for* design, in which anthropological methods and concepts are mobilized in the design process; anthropology *of* design, in which design is positioned as an object of ethnographic inquiry and critique; and design *for* anthropology, in which anthropologists borrow concepts and practices from design to enhance traditional ethnographic forms.¹ The results of these explorations, including a week of intense deliberation at the School for Advanced Research (SAR) in Santa Fe and many writerly revisions in the months that followed, are what we present in this book.²

Frictions and Affinities

But a basic question remains: Why ought anthropologists care about design in the first place? There are plenty of answers to this question, of course, several of which are demonstrated in the chapters that follow, but perhaps the most obvious answer is that design is ubiquitous in human life, and in the many guises it adopts it has powerful effects. Yet, until recently, anthropologists have mostly ceded the responsibility for exploring design to scholars from other disciplines. Take, for instance, the Design Research Society. This is the largest international body supporting interdisciplinary research in design, founded in the United Kingdom in 1966 in the context of a general turn in the postwar era toward developing a coherent “design methodology” for large-scale problem-solving efforts. During World War II such efforts had been typically handled by scientists and engineers (N. Cross 2007). Indeed, before this period, neither industry nor academy had paid much special attention to design, outside of architecture (Dilnot 1984). Then starting in the late 1960s, a new generation of thinkers, inspired by both the dawn of the space age and the emergence of new computational technologies, began touting design as a new and flexible framework to complement existing problem-solving models inherited from engineering. But within this growing field of design research there were few to any anthropological voices advocating a critical excavation of design and design practice (this also being the start of the practice theory era). Instead, design research came to be dominated by two distinct agendas, one from engineering (and eventually computer science) that promoted design as a *technical* discipline, and the other from art history that focused more on design as a generator of *aesthetic* products and that was

largely steered by the great man theory. When social science did eventually enter the fray, it was in the guise of cognitive psychology—with some notable exceptions, such as the early work of Lucy Suchman and her colleagues—and largely in the service of improving or developing different design practices, rather than critically analyzing them from a broader social or political point of view, or using ethnography as a central methodology.

Beginning in the early to mid-2010s, a range of projects and practical collaborations began addressing the paucity of anthropological attention to design, clustering under a set of almost interchangeable terms such as design anthropology, design ethnography, and ethnographic design, predominantly in Europe (especially Scandinavia), North America, and Australia. In some respects this move reflected anthropology's essential instinct to explore any and all worldly domains touched by human hands, and at the time design and "design thinking" were very much in the air, bolstered by the publication of several influential books, most notably *Change by Design* by Tim Brown of the design firm IDEO (Brown 2009). But rather than merely filling a gap in anthropological knowledge, many of these projects also seemed to succumb to a kind of inchoate allure swaying between design and anthropology, in which practitioners from both fields were seduced by the methodological and concept-building capacities that their counterparts possessed. In a word, anthropology and design were caught in the throes of a mutual attraction.

Squirreled away in a number of Max Weber's writings is the concept of "elective affinities," a partially developed theoretical construct he borrowed from eighteenth-century chemistry—by way of Goethe (see Goethe 1978)—to explain why different sorts of things in the social world seem to "naturally" bind together, even though there may be no real material contiguity between them. The most well-known example of this in Weber's work is the elective affinities that bind Calvinism with capitalism (Weber 2002), but more broadly, elective affinities can hold between all sorts of social and cultural formations. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this concept is that it productively relies on what one scholar described as "an obvious absurdity" (Howe 1978, 310–71): the seeming contradiction between the free choice of "election" and the naturalness implied by "affinities" both combined into a single idea. However, what Weber was trying to get at is how people find plausible links between different things in the world and then argue that those links are "real" or "natural." Sometimes these bonds are strong and do not require much argumentation at all because they plainly seem to belong together. Other times they are weak,

which means more effort is required for making the case that the things brought together properly “fit.”

“Design” and “anthropology” are two terms that refer to phenomena out in the world with elective affinities holding between them, features that both anthropologists and designers are choosing to bring together because their links seem to provide benefit to both fields. The earlier iteration of “design ethnography” was a mostly unrequited relationship in which anthropological methods were seen as providing textured insight into what might otherwise be considered shallow research and development processes. As Tony Salvador, Genevieve Bell, and Ken Anderson argued (1999, 36), “A basic assumption of design ethnography is that people here, there, or anywhere are not just consumers. They are social beings, people with desires, wishes, needs, wants—some articulated, some unrecognized.” In this early version, anthropology had a lot to give design in terms of concepts, methods, and styles of argument, but anything that design gave back to anthropology was strictly incidental.

Design anthropology in its contemporary form is not as narrowly focused as the earlier incarnation of design ethnography, and as such it predicates a much richer relationship between anthropology and design. Given that elective affinities tend not to align in only one direction, but *mutually correspond*, design anthropology assumes within its scope that if ethnography can be useful for design, then perhaps design can be useful for ethnography. With that in mind, some anthropologists have tried to introduce specific studio practices derived from design pedagogy into how they teach, talk about, and think about ethnography as well as anthropology more broadly (see, e.g., Murphy and Marcus 2013). One premise underlying this move is that ethnographic norms and traditions are stale and often ill-suited for the kinds of twenty-first-century social worlds that anthropologists tend to find themselves studying; design practice is generally really good at stimulating imagination and encouraging problem-oriented thinking. Perhaps using design to “reimagine” ethnography—just as ethnography has been used to reimagine design—can help transform the very possibilities of what ethnographic practice can be.

As it stands, the mutual attractions between anthropology and design are, essentially, instrumentalist exploitations of their identified elective affinities—what can anthropology do for design, and what can design do for anthropology? Indeed, as Christina Wasson (2000) described it, when anthropology was first introduced to design, it originally took on a form much reduced from its traditional conceptualization, notably marked by shorter periods of ethnographic

fieldwork and very little theoretical scaffolding. In some domains this situation is changing, but in general only very specific features of ethnography have been selected as usefully correspondent to design, and to be sure, the same is true the other way around: only very specific features of design are treated as usefully correspondent to ethnography. What this means is that design and anthropology function as aspirational figures of salvation for each other, each seemingly offering some missing piece that the other lacks, or a jolt of ameliorative sense or structure. Anthropology, so the logic goes, can make design somehow more “context-sensitive,” and design can make anthropology somehow more “relevant.”

Contending with Frictions and Multiplicities

Thus far in the development of design anthropology the elective affinities that scholars and practitioners have exploited have by and large—although not exclusively—been methodological and practical, chiefly concerned with the mechanics of conceiving and carrying out the work of each of the broader contributing disciplines. There has also been a growing number of more or less traditional ethnographic studies of different design practices, with an eye toward critically evaluating the positions and conditions of design in particular cultural contexts. Some of the chapters in this volume continue along this path, highlighting in various ways the elective affinities between anthropology and design. Others, though, adopt a different stance, calling into question or even outright challenging the very grounds for elective affinities between design and anthropology in the first place. Indeed, what all of these essays demonstrate, in one way or another, is a critical probing of the “border,” to use Suchman’s term, between these two seemingly mutually attracted disciplines.

We titled the original SAR seminar “Designs and Anthropologies” as a subtle acknowledgment that while both “design” and “anthropology” are terms typically used in the singular, they both actually refer to a very wide range of things. This is quite obvious with design, which covers phenomena as distinct as creating software interfaces and planning entire cities, but also applies to anthropology, a category ecumenical enough to encompass almost any research centered on humans and their lifeworlds. Indeed, because both terms cover such variable ranges, it is tempting to proclaim that any single “design anthropology” is all but impossible to build. And perhaps it really is impossible to build, at least a design anthropology that incorporates the

critiques of each of its constituent parts but still has something useful to say. One of the outcomes of our collective discussions in Santa Fe is that if we commit to the reality that both design and anthropology are unstable signifiers with constantly shifting referents, rather than two coherent facts with consistent elective affinities (as design anthropology has heretofore operated), then we are very much left with the trouble of dealing head-on with the messiness of both design and anthropology.

But then again, perhaps that is the point. Perhaps laying out the troubles that come with aligning design and anthropology directly alongside the virtues reveals pertinent matters that might otherwise remain subdued or undiscussed. We originally chose to explore the three configurations of design and anthropology together, rather than focusing on just one (such as “anthropology of design”), because, despite different commitments and priorities, new and ongoing work in areas roughly covered by those configurations provides valuable perspectives on a shared set of concepts, questions, methods, and implications for both anthropology and design as human-centered disciplines. We posed a set of motivating questions that cut across the configurations—for instance, What is the position of design as a pervasive mode of intervention in human lives? How are the politics (and ethics) of this intervention handled? How do design and anthropology identify and construct “problems” in the social world—and how does each work toward “solving” them? In what ways is creativity conditioned, mediated, and given value by institutions (such as corporations, legal regimes, markets)? And how does design recursively redistribute those processes for users?

In the pieces that emerged from our efforts, some of these questions were addressed, others weren't, and still new ones were raised and worked through. Each of us, in our own ways, was committed to unpacking, critiquing, interpreting, and reassembling the emergent, and timely, alignments of design and anthropology. While the original three configurations remained throughout, the texture and tenor of those configurations shifted away from what we'd originally conceived to become something different. Our guiding agenda in exploring anthropology for design, of design, and design for anthropology was not to abolish the friction between the two modes of scholarship and practice—either by censoring one or the other mode of practice or by ensuring that they align with one another in every dimension—but rather to make sure that whatever friction their collaboration creates remains generative rather than constraining.