

Design Anthropology – When opposites attract

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Werner Sperschneider

Center for New Ways of
Working
University of Aarhus
werners@daimi.au.dk

Mette Kjærsgaard

Mads Clausen Institute for
Product Innovation
User Centred Design Group
Danfoss A/S
mkjaersgaard@danfoss.com

Gregers Petersen

Mads Clausen Institute for
Product Innovation
University of Southern
gregers@mci.sdu.dk

Design anthropology is a bricolage of design and anthropology. While the term design anthropology can mean *the anthropology of design* our focus here is on *anthropology in design*. Design anthropology tries to combine *making sense of what is there* with *remaking what is there into something new*.

Observation and Interpretation

Within the field of user centred design ethnographic observation has become increasingly popular. The involvement with users is not a neutral action taking place in a space and time of its own. Therefore it is necessary to pay attention to what is observed, and how this intervention in everyday practice is interpreted and described. Ethnographic observation is a fundamental element of anthropology. But what is anthropological, and hereby ethnographic, observation and description?

Clifford Geertz (1973) has characterised ethnographic description as interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse. The ethnographic description is trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms, Geertz' uses the term *thick* description in this regard. Therefore to capture what is "said" on the many perishable levels of the flowing discourse one requires more than superficial *thin* observation.

When meeting users the understanding is created through a piecing-together of what is at hand, the established interpretation becomes a *bricolage* of the meeting with a specific situated practice. If this meeting is only positioned as *thin* observation, the multiple layers of the *thick* description derived from the situated practice of the users is lost and forgotten.

Situated practice

User centred design is interested in observing and understanding everyday practice. In anthropological terms this is situated practice. The concept of situated practice can be discussed respectively in terms of *situatedness* and *practice*. First; situatedness consists of the specific context of the situation including the various actors who are present - and the non-present actors who manifest themselves in the discourse of the given situation. The situation emerges through the individual presentations that take place. The combined expression taking form in the situation is the product of individual knowledge, plans and schemas. Secondly; practice is what you do, socially and individually. It is the everyday activities that often are of an unconscious character, taking place without conscious interpretation. The observed practice has to be recognised as the product of a dialectic relationship between cultural habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and individual biography.

Cultural habitus is, amongst other, represented via norms, social values, cultural constructions of gender positions and so forth. This implies that the observed individual practice often is different from (or not equal to) the expected cultural practice. For design anthropology it becomes important to incorporate individual biography, experiences and cultural habitus.

Perspective and reflection

Anthropology is about understanding *the others point of view*, trying to see the world through the eyes of the people studied. The anthropologist starts as an outsider, through fieldwork and participant observation s/he gradually obtains an insider perspective. From this combination of outsider and insider perspectives new understanding is born. Within participatory design the same process is happening in reverse. Through participation in the design activities and reflecting upon their own work practice users see themselves through the eyes of the designers hereby obtaining an outsider perspective. From this combined insider and outsider perspective they are able to conceive new ideas for future work practices. Design anthropology is a point of view: Not *our (the designers)* point of view not *their (the users)* point of view, but an additional point of view, a double perspective.

Video as design material can be a valuable contribution to such a double perspective, both as tool and as metaphoric device for thought and ideas. The videotaped material can be used to make sense of ambiguous situations or to represent ideas for design. The camera itself can function as a catalyst for actions through provocation, as a tool for working with and filming of scenarios or through letting the user control the camera. Though video material is always situated, some things only emerge in certain contexts, or emerge differently in different contexts, and those watching shape the context as well.

Opposites attract

Design and anthropology both has to do with getting involved in social settings and the gathering of data. Anthropology tries to make sense of *what is there* in the present, whereas design wants to remake what is there *into something new*. The attraction between these opposites is to be recognised as an extension of both points of view through a merging.

There are different levels of intervention in the field with users, but design is always a social activity. Involvement in situated practice is about people and their activities, and understanding ones social intervention through a piecing-together. The process of piecing-together does suggest a merging of design and anthropology into a double perspective, into the shape of a *bricolage* of its own.

Bibliography

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