

Aarhus School of Architecture / Design School Kolding / KADK

Rehearsing the Future

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Publication date:
2010

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Halse, J., Brandt, E., Clark, B., & Binder, T. (Eds.) (2010). *Rehearsing the Future*. The Danish Design School Press. <http://www.dkds.dk/nyheder/DAIMbook2010#.Us5vWrR0nYY>

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FOREWORD

This book is a treatise on the Design Anthropological Innovation Model (DAIM). When I was invited to write its Foreword, I was honored, flattered, even slightly embarrassed. But I also found myself reacting with a certain degree of trepidation. After all, my professional commitments, not to mention a large portion of my personal sense of identity, have been strongly tied to my sense of self as Anthropologist (with a big “A”). So how could I, with any sense of integrity, give my backing to a book that advocates to “Forget sending anthropologists to the field to collect data” (DAIM Principle 2 of 6) and is almost relentless in its insistence on materializing each and every action and concept into tangible form and in its “here and now” tenor?

I could, because the efforts embodied in this book bubble over with precisely the kind of experimental spirit that nourishes and advances the changing field of anthropology. It does this while promising to unseat signs of early stultification emerging in anthropology’s intersection with design. In its recounting of a 20-month journey to develop DAIM, the book reveals participants’ efforts to grapple with what it is they come to know, and how; and what it is they are really doing, and why. The results of their individual and collective grappling waver between the certain and strongly committed, and the still open and probing. This produces a mix both refreshing and productively engaging, inviting new insight and fresh debate. Indeed it has been a long time since I’ve so argued with a text, all the while turning expectantly to the next page. I flip-flopped between cheers of support – “Yea! They aren’t just tolerat-

ing, but are working and advocating, recognitions of incompleteness!” – and shouts of disagreement – “Isn’t it a leap to go from the acknowledgment that accounts of practice are always partial, to advocating the use of “short fragmentary snapshots” from field studies? Is there not a difference between field research for design (which can, but shouldn’t always, be called “ethnography”) and design-related ethnographic research meant to render social understanding? Is this just butterfly collecting, as Edmund Leach admonished us from, or are we indeed building forms of social knowledge appropriate to the times?”

I could, because it seems to me that the DAIM does not make a claim for how all knowledge production should happen, but rather aims to provoke a re-examining of how knowledge, social experience and design interpolate, with the purpose, ultimately, of informing practices of design. The authors – designers, anthropologists, architects, professors, students – advocate for an open system of exploration intended to produce meaningful, innovative and sustainable design solutions. To be sure, this is not a venture that Danes have come to recently, but rather is deeply supported by decades of dedication to participatory design.

I could, because at the heart of this work is a concern for the nature of relationship. I’m not talking about the sort of feel-good appeal to pleasing different stakeholders or to the unrealizable hope that all voices can be represented. Rather it is a more profound grappling with the recognition that a design

discussion is a profoundly social discussion. It is “as much a joint exploration of existing and new relationships as it is a negotiation of needs and goals.” [Prototyping: Act it out!](#), page 178. This insight, at once sobering and hopeful, is to me suggestive of its kinship with anthropological ethnography, which has always been, at its core, a way of relating to others.

I could, because I have a thing about garbage. I find it useful to think with. So I was helpless to resist a book about practice – and about anthropologically and ethnographically-informed social, organizational and material design solutions – which threads through various takes on garbage and waste management as a means to illustrate and explore its claims. Maybe it awakens the archeologist manqué in me, wanting to explore society in a profoundly historical way through excavating the treasure troves of garbage heaps. Maybe it was my momentary experience as an undergraduate anthropology student sorting the trash of a wealthy Tiburon, California neighborhood as a part of one of William Rathje’s famous “Garbology” studies. Or maybe it was the thinking I’ve entertained briefly with colleagues at IBM to imagine the possibilities for waste management systems that build from people’s often unexpected and creative uses of and practices with disposed-of items, considering, for instance, how sensors may be helpful in managing not only what goes into the trash, but what is taken out and by whom. Smarter Waste Management, in the parlance of the company.

Or maybe it’s because my first close introduction to the tradition of work underlying and developed here also concerned garbage. I first met Eva Brandt when invited by Thomas Binder to Sønderborg, Denmark in 1996 to facilitate their learning (they claimed) about video techniques for ethnographic data gathering and analysis. For a week and a half I “led” a video-ethnography workshop and video-interaction analysis laboratory – a practice developed especially at the Institute for Research on Learning, where I was at the time, and at Xerox PARC – with a group under the direction of Jacob Buur at Danfoss. We focused the workshop and analysis around a particular project, a work practice-oriented examination of the city’s power plant, a power plant, I was thrilled to discover, fueled by the garbage of the city! To this day I have no doubt that I walked away having learned more from them – about the value of prototyping, about rendering visible and material ill-formed thoughts and ideas along the way, and about working pedagogically – than they did from me.

Or maybe I could write this Foreword to a book about a Design Anthropological Innovation Model which proclaims, nonetheless, to upend the expert anthropologist’s role because I take the very mainstay of anthropology, culture, to be less a concept directed towards some fixed and bounded worldview (that is, not “culture” or “cultures”) but rather to be about how cultural practices lead to the emergence of new or transformed worldviews, objects and practices. And about how these worldviews, objects and practices move

and are inflected across time and space. Indeed, as co-editor Halse points out, “design and ethnography are both concerned with subject matters that are not given” [Theorizing through Practice](#), page 146. It is this “not given-ness” that the work here embraces and explores. Reading around in this book with that in mind proved a pleasurable romp and offered a thought-provoking journey.

This is a moment in which not just the design community but other professional communities are caught up in the catchiness of the notion of “design thinking.” Great stuff, design thinking. The value of emphasizing that the possibility of rethinking, recombining and creating new things (and things anew) comes from the processual and transformational is clear. The clarion call to suspend focus on the end product at the expense of the becoming offers a welcome respite. But I find that the name alone, design *thinking*, not to mention some of the abstracted hype that moves it, draws attention away from a dimension so vitally evoked throughout this work, and that is the act of design *doing*. It is true that neither design nor ethnography is concerned with subject matters that are given; they are instead *made*. That is why anthropologists have so often turned their attention to matters of ritual and the unfolding of action, for example, and why theories of performativity and *techne* (to gesture towards just a few), have so resonated in accounting for cultural practice.

I can’t say for sure what kind of anthropology this *is*. But I welcome the tasty morsels it provides to ponder that. How we define and use notions of culture

is changing – might this work suggest tools that allow us to more fully grapple with those changes? As the end of this politically-laden first decade of the 21st century draws to a close, concerns for forms of engagement have catalyzed, if not in some cases nearly paralyzed, the anthropological quest. Does the radically participatory form of engagement proposed here help sharpen the dimensions against which to rethink matters of ethnographic and anthropological relationship?

At the same time I am excited for the kind of design challenge and program that *Rehearsing the Future* suggests, and to entertain, within that, what anthropology *does*. In the appeal of *techne*, I am grateful for the performative role played by the anthropological in this approach. *Rehearsing the Future* presents a design program perhaps rarified and not without difficulties, to be sure. But, it is one that seems to want to engage and honor the profoundly social and relational basis of everything from objects to organizational forms to design practices themselves. Curtain up! ■

Melissa Cefkin
Editor, *Ethnography and the Corporate Encounter*

PROGRAMMATIC VISION/ESSAY/ MODEL/PRINCIPLE/ REPORTAGE/ INTERVIEW/ CASE/TOOL/ STATEMENT/

It is hopeful that you read this book because you are eager to reflect on your own practices while learning about ours. We would like to address fellow practitioners of design research who are equally committed to reflection and effective practices.

By mixing in high-level visions and discussions with very concrete project experiences we hope to convey an overall coherent approach, where the practical examples serve as precisely that: a repertoire of different ways this approach can be practiced. But it comes with a demand and expectation that particular procedures and techniques always be re-invented to suit the uniqueness of your present situation.

Don't expect procedural techniques to produce certain results from this book. It is not a handbook and it does not contain step-by-step introductions to specific techniques. The content is organized in the style of a collage, and to guide your reading experience, these are the types of contribution you will find:

PROGRAMMATIC VISION

This is a visionary, sometimes provocative, text that presents the major points of the book. While rooted in project experiences, it goes beyond reporting on the well tested and points to further potential that we, the collective DAIM partners, believe to see.

ESSAY

The essay reflects on various issues and experiences of individual authors from the DAIM project, while expanding the discussion to broader topics and related work.

MODEL

The models are abstract visualizations of major points, sometimes accompanied by explanatory text. A common feature of all the models is the emerging landscape, the contours of which only become visible as we meticulously move through it, as we do with design projects.

PRINCIPLE

During the tool seminars the DAIM partners formulated six principles for design researchers, consultants and clients concerned with carrying out exploratory design projects. The principles are brief but central encouragements to think and act the future as something to be rehearsed.

REPORTAGE

The reportage brings you close to a concrete project experience. It is written by a participant in a particular situation and seeks to provide flesh and blood to the account.

INTERVIEW

This is a dialogue between a DAIM researcher and a bureau partner about topics that especially link the commercial and academic practice of design research.

CASE

The DAIM project includes three mini projects on waste and four Golden Projects with bureaus. The case descriptions provide brief overviews of each of these. The case descriptions are referenced from several other contributions as background material.

TOOL

This is an example of how the DAIM approach can be used. The tools should not be regarded as stand-alone methods; they are resources for inspiration to readers who want to explore how the DAIM approach can be realized in their own context.

STATEMENT

During the mini projects and the Golden Projects we have collaborated with many different people in different situations. To tell a varied story of how different actors with particular points of view look at this field, we have collected some of these as short statements expressed in text or photograph form.