

ANTHROPOLOGY & DESIGN

by RON BURNETT

“An increasingly common approach to graphic design research involves the application of user-centred design (UCD) methods. The focus of a UCD methodology is to understand and accommodate the needs of users and audience members as a means for improving the designed artifact.” [1]

Design practice is centred on audience(s). It matters little whether the audience is hypothetical, real or imagined, there is always someone for whom designs are created. This is often used as the fundamental distinction between design and art practices. The practice of creating art on the other hand, is seen as personal and evolving out of processes that don't have an overt goal in mind. Yet, there are audiences for art, perhaps best exemplified by the fact that every major city in the world has an identifiable museum. And, do artists try and understand their audiences and cater to their needs? Let's leave that question open for the time being.

The challenge of course is how do we understand audience, client and user? — Or, in the digital design world, the agent, interactor or participant? Another way of approaching audience is to create one, just as Apple did with the iPad and the iPod. Notice that irrespective of historical circumstances, projections or perceived needs, the term audience remains abstract. This is because it is virtually impossible to

draw a straight line between for example, creating a logo and anticipating the response of groups of people to it — or, developing a product and knowing how clients or users will react to it. This is why designers often develop many alternative strategies to their designs and also work iteratively on various prototypes; all with the goal of creating something that will be closer to the perceived needs of the user.

In anthropology, efforts to understand both contemporary cultures and ancient ones are circumscribed by the challenges of observation, analysis and fieldwork. Prior to the revolution in anthropological thought provoked by George Marcus and Michael Fischer [4] in the 1980's, there was endless debate among anthropologists about the relationship between observation and subjectivity. Put another way, to what extent does your own cultural, class and ethnic background influence what you see and what you observe? It is clear that your own personal history, desires and orientation will have a big impact on the conclusions that you draw from the observations you make. [5] The challenge therefore is to try

and articulate what you know and examine how that may influence your assumptions about other people. It means that fieldwork is essential only if you bring to it a self-reflexive awareness of the contingent nature of the experiences you may have with complete strangers.

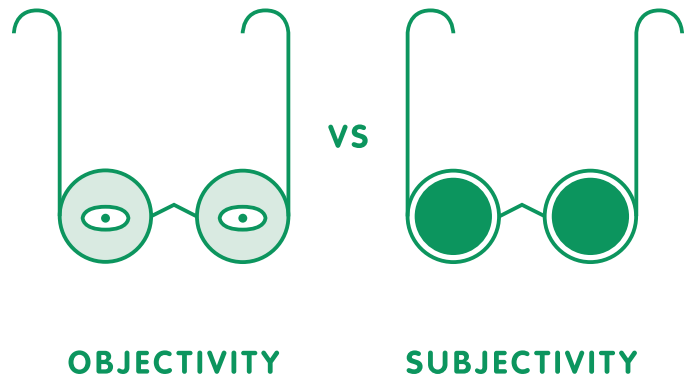
Designers are well aware of these obstacles and have developed many different strategies to deal with them. One of the most important is testing designs with users and trying to learn about utility, reaction and aesthetic response. But, how far does the process of learning about response go? To what extent are designers able to test their assumptions about their audiences? These issues are even more complex if as is often the case, designers are now crossing the boundaries into the ways in which people organize their lives (design thinking, design process), and the many ways in which design thinking is applied to businesses and to innovation.

“Professional design is now operating within an expanded and increasingly complex field. Some design professionals take solving complex social issues as their domain, often but not always working in close collaboration with specialists in public services from healthcare to those working with disadvantaged families to policing. Other designers and their ways of working are welcomed into business schools to teach the next generation of managers and leaders. Concepts and language that used to be associated with designers now enter other specialist areas: policymakers are told that public services should be more user-centered (Parker and Heapy 2006); businesses engage with customers by offering new meanings for things (Verganti 2009); the US Army is considering the role of design in warfare (School of Advanced Military Studies n.d.). Professional design, in particular design as practiced within the studio-based tradition of many art schools, is taking a new place on the world stage.” [3]

So much of the knowledge that we share in any given society is tacit. So many of the assumptions we make about ourselves and about others are unconscious. It is easy to say that designers should uncover their cultural bias. [6] But, which methods are best suited to the task? Janet Murray suggests bringing multiple stakeholders into the discussion of the design process “and elicit their different perspectives and needs.” [3]



DESIGNERS PLAY INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT ROLES, LESS AS MAKERS OF FORMS AND MORE AS CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES.



UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS. Our culture, class and ethnic background make our research subjective, rather than objective. Designers must be aware of the cultural lens they wear, and how it can impact their observations.

Here precisely is one of the key intersections of design and anthropology both as disciplines and as practices. Ethnographers have always tried to “elicit” responses from their subjects. It became clear to many anthropologists in the 1980’s that the context, circumstances and pressure for response often overwhelmed not only the truth, but the capacity of individuals to actually surface their insights and concerns. This was in part the reason that Marcus and Fischer began to talk about language and representation. To say that a product is comfortable or useful is to use a particular language of description or analysis that may not reflect deeper or more complex concerns.

Many products come and go in the marketplace and most are unsuccessful. We are surrounded by an infinite number of media, logos and brands. Most are not successful. Focus groups, test audiences and surveys are in constant use. Facebook gathers data on users, as does Google. The data gathering is now so large that designers are being asked to develop visualizations of the information. All of this activity is centred on better understanding human behaviour. All of it is intended to bring some degree of coherence to the struggle to match human desires and proclivities with images or products or artifacts. “When design thinking emerged more than a decade ago, it offered a response to the ebbs and flows of a global, mediatized economy of signs and artifacts; in this context, professional designers play increasingly important roles, less as makers of forms and more as cultural intermediaries (Julier 2008) or as the “glue” in multidisciplinary teams (Kelley and Van Patter 2005). They are interpreters of changes in culture who then create new kinds of cultural form.” [3]

Anthropologists have played the role of cultural intermediaries ever since the discipline gained respectability in the 1920’s. It was in the 1960’s and 1970’s that anthropologists began to seriously question not only their practices in the field, but also their assumptions about culture. In some important respects the term culture is both too diffuse and too broad to mean much.

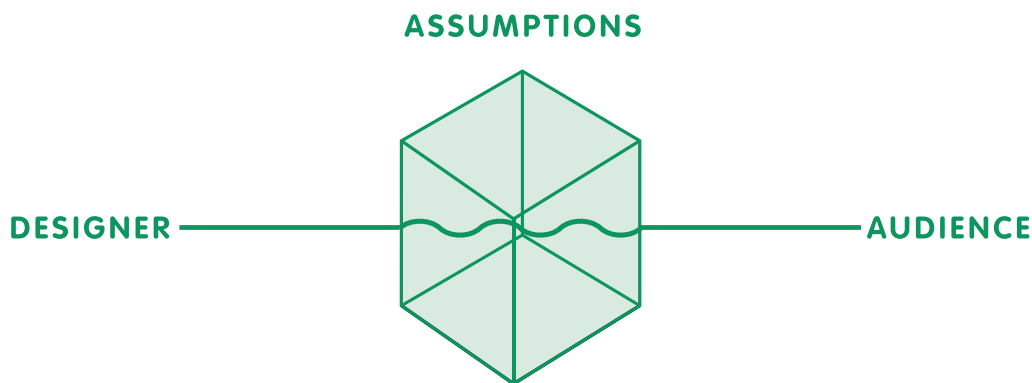
Often, we read backwards from human activities into cultural meanings in order to explain behaviour. And, we try to examine the symbolic framework behind those meanings. But, as much as cultures are systems, the way people behave, act and respond to culture cannot be reduced to their behaviour — to the ways in which they act and respond to the cultural and social demands of the day.

There isn't space in this article to look at the powerful influence of behavioural thinking on design and designers. More often than not, what people do need not be tightly connected to what they say and what they say may have little connection to what they do. Similarly, designers tend to read their artifacts, as expressions of intention when what they should be looking at are the differences between their intentions and what they have produced. There are no perfect points of symmetry here just as there are no simple strategies available to understand human motivation and human choice. No amount of data collection will narrow the complexity of human subjects, their motivations and their conflicted understanding of the cultures they inhabit.

I began this short piece with a tease. Do artists try and understand their audiences and cater to their needs? Or do artists simply act on their desires and create artifacts without reference to the market or the

viewer? Is this the dividing line between artists and designers? I think not. Notwithstanding the ambiguities of the term audience, everyone involved in creative practices is “speaking” to an ‘other,’ to someone else and they are hoping to be understood and appreciated. While design is often seen as more utilitarian, what could be more practical than applying creative insights into the creation of objects that are ultimately intended for some sort of consumption?

There is a much more important reason to bring up this false dichotomy between the practical and the artistic. Designers, like anthropologists, cannot operate under the illusion that they understand their audiences any better than artists, who often don't know whether they will have an audience at all. It does not matter how many times designers create and generate alternative strategies and scenarios for hypothetical users. The connections between artifacts, subjects and creative practices are thankfully indirect and non-linear if not asymmetrical. The challenge for designers is to accept, if not celebrate, complexity (Figure 2). As Roger Keesing, one of the great anthropologists of the 20th century said, “Feedback mechanisms in cultural systems may thus operate both negatively (toward self-correction and equilibrium) and positively (toward disequilibrium and directional change).” [2]



NAVIGATING ASSUMPTIONS. Designers need to recognize their own assumptions and those of the audience to bring a self-reflexive awareness to the design process.

REFERENCES

[1] Fraher, R. and Martinson, B. Process and Pedagogy in Undergraduate Graphic Design Education. *The Design Journal*, 14, 4 (2011): 390–412. [2] Keesing, R. Theories of Culture. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 3 (1974): 76. [3] Kimbell, L. Rethinking Design Thinking: Part I. *Design and Culture*, 3, 3 (2011): 286–287. [4] Marcus, G. and Fischer, M. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1986. Their work and the work of many others changed anthropology as a discipline. I am thinking of the work of Edmund Carpenter, James Clifford, Jean Comaroff, Vincent Crapazano, Michel De Certeau, Johannes Fabian, Clifford Geertz, George Marcus and Michael Fischer, Paul Rabinow and Ben-Ami Scharfstein. See Edmund Carpenter, *They Became What They Beheld* (New York: Dutton, 1970); James Clifford (1988); Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Vincent Crapazano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context* (New York: New York University Press, 1989). [5] In 1992, Marcus gave the Provost's lecture at Rice University where he worked. He reflected on the tumultuous changes in anthropological thought. Here is an extract from that speech. “The core of this crisis had to do with both language and authority in the conduct of those disciplines that produce current knowledge about society and culture. First, there was the bedrock sense that the concepts developed in various disciplines to describe, assimilate and domesticate reality were no longer adequate. The language of culture, class, sets of binary distinctions such as modern vs. traditional, individual vs. society etc. — while these might have been critiqued piecemeal at different times in the past in various disciplines — now seemed en masse to no longer capture the magnitude or quality of changes occurring in the contemporary world. There was a sense, differently expressed in different disciplines, of the need for a major overhaul of ways of thinking and writing, and ultimately of questions asked. This was far from a cosmetic or partial self-critique and it has led to a variety of productive and not so productive debates about different models of work and different objects of study in fields ranging from economics, to history, law, architecture, art, and philosophy.” [6] As Janet Murray has done in her recent book, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice*, MIT Press, Cambridge. 2012.