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# After practice: Messy relations in the ethnographic study of design

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**Abstract:** The Thinking While Doing (TWD) project was an ambitious “research-creation” project that involved the designing and building of several full scale, “real” structures by architecture students and professors in “design-build” education. The grant also included two ethnographers (as well as scholars from the humanities). Together the participants in TWD were engaged in intersecting and distinct modes of research, ranging from architecture practice to philosophical reflections. While there were intentions for the insights of the ethnographers to extend and inform knowledge of practice, as the TWD structures were created, it became evident that undertaking ethnography coincident with designing and building was more challenging than anticipated. This paper outlines some of the experiences of ethnographers who followed the activities of designing and building. This paper delves into two interrelated difficulties of cross-disciplinary collaborative work: the logistical organization and implementation of the research project and temporal disjunctions between modes of knowledge production (e.g. design versus ethnography). By exploring TWD as a collaboration between disparate forms of research, each with its distinct rhythms, unpredictable engagements, and contexts of knowledge production, we consider some of the challenges and possibilities of connecting ethnography with the practices of architectural design.

**Keywords:** architecture, design-build education; ethnography; temporality.

## 1. Introduction

Adam Jasper opens his edited volume, *Architecture and Anthropology* (2019), with an anecdote that describes what was apparently the only meeting between the architect Le Corbusier and the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss: when the two men met at the French Embassy in New York City, during Levi-Strauss’s time there as a cultural counselor, rather than discussing their disparate but influential ideas of structure, culture, and human existence, they talked about whether Levi-Strauss should have an ornate salon in the embassy redone. Jasper notes that the architect advised the anthropologist to leave the room alone. Given all the things these influential men could have talked about, Jasper considers their discussion



about the room to be, “irrelevant” (Jasper 2017, p. 1): remarking that the genius of these men was reduced to a mundane conversation about a renovation, with the superficiality of their conversation pointing to the lack of any substantial connection between architecture and anthropology. Jasper goes so far as to state that, in discussing the room, the men had “nothing to say to each other” (Jasper 2019, p1).

But we find the alleged conversation between Levi-Strauss and Le Corbusier to be not at all irrelevant. Rather, it points to the ways that, together, people might wonder about, find meaningful, and talk about spaces and places. Le Corbusier and Levi-Strauss would have been together in the room under discussion as they chatted about its current and potential wall treatments, flooring, lights, and soft furnishings. Perhaps Levi-Strauss, aware of Le Corbusier’s work, would have expected the architect to offer suggestions for modification or even robust change to the ornate room. And yet, Le Corbusier seems to have appreciated the salon’s dense and complex materiality (Wilckin 2010), and so the great architect of Modernism advised preserving the room as it was. This encounter demonstrates how sharing a particular built space might generate particular social experiences of deliberation, debate, justification, and potential misunderstanding. Assessing spaces and places, arguing over how things are and could be, are not small matters. Any particular place can be a powerful generator of collective experience and serve to focus shared attention on its distinctive details in ways that might be meaningful to participants, even if such encounters do not lead to observable transformations in the place itself.

This paper outlines a research project that brought architects together with social anthropologists. In this project, the anthropologists observed what the architects did: a relatively straightforward approach to fieldwork and analysis that can be described as an ethnography “of” design. We argue here that, despite scholarship that advocates for undertaking ethnographies for design (Murphy 2016) or even “by means of” design (Gatt and Ingold 2013, p. 141), nevertheless the kind of traditional, observation-centred ethnographic practices presented here can still point to some of the “shared puzzles” (Gatt and Ingold 2013, p. 150; Marcus and Fischer 1999, p. xvii) between anthropology and design that can be revealing, both of the assumptions and practices of design and of the interpretive social sciences. That is, while new, design-influenced modes of ethnography are being developed, and the engagement of ethnography for and by designers has led to productive collaborations between creative practitioners and social scientists (Clarke 2010, 2017; Gunn et al. 2013; Gunn and Donovan, 2012), traditional fieldwork can still have unexpected challenges and misunderstandings that, when reflected upon, might not lead to observable transformations in architecture but might nevertheless point to how some of design’s “orders and disorders” (Yaneva 2005, p. 269) shadow or reflect some of ethnography’s.

In his book *After Method: Mess in social science research*, the sociologist of science and technology, John Law, explores social science research into “messy” phenomena, i.e., aspects of the world that are complex, diffuse, subtle, and dynamic (2004). Such terms de-

scribe aspects of what we, as ethnographers, noted as we studied architecture practice, specifically as it is undertaken in university programs of design-build education. In such conditions, innovative buildings happen, but not from the clearly sequential processes found in double-diamond, waterfall, or spiral diagrams of process. Instead, architectural practice, plays “out on a battlefield full of unknown internal streams, orders and disorders, flows and synchronization moves, polemics among architects, visual puzzles, and attempts to resolve disputed states of affairs through visual instruments and convincing images” (Yaneva 2005, p. 869). We note Law’s questions of how to research conditions of “generative flux” (Law 2004, p. 7) and Yaneva’s recognition of how creative practices involve both order and disorder, as we reflect here on our engagement in a major research project titled “Thinking While Doing: Connecting insight to innovations in the construction sector” (referred to here as TWD).

During and since 2014 to 2018 (when we undertook the ethnographic fieldwork for TWD), commentary on social anthropology’s relationship with design has grown: as well as Jasper’s edited book (2019) mentioned above, there are texts by Clarke (2010; 2017), Gunn and Donovan (2016); Gunn, Otto, and Smith (2013); Murphy (2016, 2020); Pink et al. (2017); and Smith et al. 2016. These are in addition to the substantial work done before the 20-teens including works by Suchman (2006; 2011), and Rabinow et al. (2008). While we were informed by some of this scholarship during and since our fieldwork, it is primarily our experiences of the specific structural logistics and temporalities – that is, some of the “messy” idiosyncrasies – of the TWD project that have particularly shaped our perspectives on ethnography and design. In this paper, we focus on two (related) idiosyncrasies: first, we outline the nature of the project’s organization (where a proposed sequential cycle of design-build practice shifted to simultaneous activity); and second, we consider issues of temporality.

## **2. The structure of the project: cycles of practice**

A simplistic explanation of the way that the TWD project was organized is that the “doing” part might be understood as the making of a series of pavilions through the practices of what, in the organization and nomenclature of the project, was called the Design-Build Group (DBG). The DBG included architecture professors and students of “Design-Build Education”: a particular type of architecture education wherein professors, students, clients, and others, collaborate to build “real” buildings for use by “real” people (as distinct from many of architecture’s usual pedagogic practices, wherein students create drawings and models of hypothetical structures that are not constructed). Accordingly, the “thinking” part of the project might be thought of as the activities of what was called the Insight Group (IG): a group of scholars from the social sciences and humanities who tracked and reflected upon the work of the DBG. While a historian, philosopher, and architect were also involved in the IG, it is the ethnographic work undertaken by the authors of this paper that is the focus here.

Clearly, the previously described division between the activities of thinking and doing is simplistic and inaccurate, since we as ethnographers witnessed a great deal of thinking done by the DBG: thinking that occurred with, through, and alongside people, tools, materials, sites, and technologies (Nicholas and Oak, 2018; 2020; Verderber, Cavanagh, Oak, 2019). Accordingly, we, as IG social scientists did a great deal of “doing”: we prepared and managed ethics applications and documentation, we travelled extensively to visit the sites, we spent time with participants, observing and talking with them, making video and audio recordings, taking photographs and notes, acquiring documents, and arranging for, or undertaking ourselves, the transcription of portions of the collected data.

The TWD project was funded by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), through a type of grant known as “research creation”. Research creation projects link aspects of creative practice with reflections upon practice but, further, in the case of TWD, the grant was also a Partnership Grant – SSHRC’s category for large, collaborative projects that connect universities with external organizations, institutions, and agencies in Canada and beyond. As both a research creation and a partnership grant, the TWD project was an ambitious undertaking with many moving parts and a diversity of cooperative relationships: this paper only speaks to the connections established between members of the Insight and Design Build groups.

The central idea that underpinned the partnership between the Insight and Design Build groups was that the ethnographers’ insights into the socio-material processes of the design-build participants, as they created a series of buildings, would enable an accumulation of understanding concerning how knowledge gained by novice and professional architects is transferred from one context to another. That is, the intended benefit of the original study was that the perceptions of the ethnographers concerning the designing and building of the first building would feed into the designing and building of the next, and so on. Once the series of buildings were constructed, they would demonstrate iterative understandings, both of the architects’ accumulated knowledge of design and construction, and of the ethnographers’ understandings of the multimodal sociabilities of collaboration. It was anticipated, perhaps especially by the architects, that the insights provided by the social scientists would enable greater understanding of what was, perhaps, the more-or-less successful modes of communication and multimodal activities, thereby fostering a potential set of “best practices” to be outlined for future design-build activities. In this way, an ethnographic study of design-build education in the context of the design and construction of specific series of structures might provide observations and documentation that could offer some generalizable insights that otherwise might not be readily apparent to the practitioners.

To facilitate the ethnographic study of knowledge transfer in design-build education, and to enable the architects to design and construct with some coherence between the conditions of multiple participating universities, organizations, individuals, and locations, a uniting characteristic of all the builds was that they would be gridshells (Chilton and Tang 2016). A grid-

shell, built from wooden laths or metal rods, has a curved roof structure that is created either through pushing laths or rods up from the ground and then connecting them, or by draping them over a temporary scaffold that is eventually removed once the laths/rods are connected at their intersecting nodes. The complexities of each gridshell posed challenges for the students and professors at each university, as they grappled with issues in design, various modes of digital and analog representation, unpredictable complexities of construction, and seemingly capricious materials. It is no surprise that gridshells – and all their component parts – are agentic beings that ask difficult questions that likely would not be posed by the simpler creature of, say, a rectangular, wood-framed structure.

The particular idiosyncrasies of these structures were not anticipated in the initial organization of the project since, at the time of the grant's proposal, gridshells had not been chosen as the architectural typology that would be shared by all the builds. The initial plan for TWD, regardless of what kind of buildings were made, was to have (as already noted) each structure created one after the other so that the "insights of the humanities and social sciences" could be "directly and continually connected to [the] practical application" of designing and building (SSHRC TWD grant proposal). As stated in the grant proposal, "the entire cycle – research, design, build, assess, transfer knowledge, and redesign" would be "transparent for input from the social sciences" (SSHRC TWD grant summary). As the project unfolded, "the entire cycle" of practice was (reasonably) clear to us as ethnographers. However, as the builds moved along in three locations in the USA and one in Canada (none of which were locations at which the ethnographers were based), it was the differences between the ethnographic and design-build activities that became transparent: we as ethnographers could not carry out the thinking and doing of fieldwork and analysis fast enough to craft insights that could act as relevant inputs into the cycle of practice.

To some extent the difficulties we experienced with managing our ethnographic work occurred because we were dealing with multiple builds, in different places, that were in various stages of design and construction at the same time, so we never really grappled with how insights gleaned from one set of design-build circumstances might reasonably be translated into interventions in another. But, our inability to undertake such analyses points to larger questions concerning the relationship between anthropology and design; such as, how and/or when should social scientists have input into creative practice?; what issues and assumptions of expertise, epistemologies, and/or ethics might be embedded in modes and expectations of such knowledge transfer?; and, how might the disconnections between ethnographic time and design-build time be reckoned with? Discussing these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, so we will shift from discussing the project's organization to comment on the last question: the issue of time.

### 3. Temporalities

Many have indexed temporality as a topic that is pertinent to the relations between design and ethnography: e.g, a section of Gun, Otto, and Smith's *Design Anthropology* (2013), is

dedicated to the “Temporality of Design”; and, both, *Design Anthropological Futures* (Smith et al. 2016) and *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Rabinow et al. 2008) explicitly use terms that reference time in their titles. This paper adds to this work. For us, the somewhat abstract terms of “time” and “temporality,” while relevant, do not quite capture the issue of *speed*. Specifically, we experienced a sense of the speediness of designing and building in contrast to the comparable slowness of what we could accomplish as ethnographers. The velocities of interpretation and decision making that we were engaging with could not keep up with or analytically map on to the velocity at which the design build participants were working.

Such temporal disjunctures have (as noted above) been referenced by other ethnographers of design, but one of the interesting aspects of the TWD project was the ways that the multiplicity of design practices being undertaken seemed to contribute to this sense of acceleration. Further, there are interesting ways that particular kinds of communication technologies used throughout TWD fostered aspects of some of the disjunctions between the velocities of design and ethnography. For instance, weekly conference call meetings across multiple time zones enabled the DBG to communicate with each other and with the project engineers: these calls – attended and recorded by us as ethnographers – allowed us to collect data when we could not visit the fieldwork sites of university design studios or build locations. But, along with the conference calls, a range of sophisticated digital technologies (used in both the professional and pedagogic practices of contemporary architecture and engineering) also contributed to the rate at which the creative practices rapidly outpaced us. While these technologies do not actually increase the speed of specific architectural processes beyond how they are normally practiced, it seems that they did afford the differentiation and simultaneity of multiple build projects in ways that, for us as TWD ethnographers, contributed to our perception of accelerated activity. That is, while the speed with which each specific gridshell could be constructed was influenced by many non-technological issues (such as the academic schedules of students and professors, the availability and input of subcontractors and clients, and the climate at each location); nevertheless, the ability of the gridshells to be created as more or less coincident, rather than sequential, projects only occurred because knowledge transfer across great distances was enabled through reliable forms of digitally-facilitated communication – including conference calls, online meetings, and shared screens and representational software that, despite the unreality and substantial inaccuracies of the images produced, could nevertheless foster the belief that participants at great distances could adequately jointly puzzle through problems of edge beams, node construction, or cladding, in ways that allowed good enough decisions to be made, so that the next stage in the cycle of practice could follow.

Some scholarship on materiality, technology, and temporality, such as Judy Wajcman’s *Pressed for Time* (2014) and chapters in *The Sociology of Speed* (Wajcman and Dodd 2017) tend towards a critical approach to assumptions of time’s acceleration in relation to the development and use of technologies, arguing that the late modern perception of, or at least commentary on, time as speeding up in relation to digital technologies, is not inevitable.

Others, such as Rosa (2010), note the layered complexity of the relationship between specific technologies and time, particularly when different institutions or processes – such as ethnography and designing/building – seek to synchronize. In such circumstances, temporal incompatibility and tensions between “differently paced systems - and fields – are particularly problematic” (Vostal 2014, p. 102). It is this perspective that resonates with our perceptions of ethnography and design in our specific engagements through TWD.

The characteristic differences in the temporal practices of design and ethnography have been clearly described by Jamer Hunt in “Prototyping the Social: Temporality and speculative futures.” (2017). Here he states that,

in a simple sense, an ethnographic project attempts to illuminate the present by interrogating its (recent) past. Its methods are observational, descriptive, analytical, and interpretive .... Ethnography is rarely projective; it does not speculate on what might happen next. ... Design on the other hand, is a practice of material and immaterial making, but its mode of being-in-the-world is generative, speculative, and transformational. ... the designer uses the present ... as a provisional leaping-off point for reimagining possible futures ... (pp. 88-89).

Further, Hunt notes that “designers are comfortable with the need to intervene into the context they are exploring” (p. 90) while, given social anthropology’s history as a discipline, and its material of study – i.e., the behaviours and contexts of the recent past – ethnographers might be ambivalent about recommending interventions into others’ practices.

While some anthropologists have noted differences between design and ethnography, many have attended to, and fostered the development of, parallels between these fields (Murphy and Marcus 2013; Murphy 2016); with some arguing that ethnography should become more like design, for instance, by “speed[ing] up certain aspects of its practices” (Rabinow and Marcus 2008, p. 95); by emulating the environment of the studio (Rabinow and Marcus 2008); including adopting the time-constrained, collaborative brainstorming event of the design charette (Murphy 2020); or even by conducting anthropology *by means of* design (Gatt and Ingold 2013, 141; emphasis in original. In this case Gatt as an ethnographer overtly intervened in the lives of participants by designing draft policies for a Brazilian Friends of the Earth International NGO).

Yet, while some anthropologists argue that undertaking traditional, observation-based studies “of” design are “too limiting” (Gatt and Ingold 140), we would disagree, noting here that such ethnographies as we conducted on TWD are of value, both in the slow revealing to the designer-builders of the nuances both of their – and our - practices, and in the awareness by us, as ethnographers, of the ways that the language, practices, and temporalities of design might intersect if not always correspond fully with, those of ethnographic anthropology. Accordingly, while the TWD project unfolded in a way that militated against the ethnographers’ having their insights inform a series of sequential structures, the very dis-junctures and temporal disconnections may provide a useful axis around which the tacit practices and expectations of ethnography and design build education (as well as architecture and grant acquisition) may be considered.

## 4. Conclusions

We have outlined a couple of the “messier” aspects of the TWD project – including a grant and project proposal whose initial structure, ambition, and somewhat overly optimistic conceptions of practice – both of design and of ethnography – contributed to eliding some of the complexities of each of these fields; and, our experiences as ethnographers with what felt like an accelerating spiral of relevant experiences that we were not always able to observe, let alone analyze. For the DBG, while our ethnographic contributions did not happen fast enough to facilitate understandings of knowledge transfer concerning the builds, perhaps they are now contributing to deeper notions of knowledge transfer between design and anthropology. The ongoing commitment of TWD’s architects and ethnographers to understanding each other’s modes of creative practice demonstrates the building of trust and some interest in shared perceptions: a level of engagement that only happens over time and across a shared humility towards each other’s epistemologies and endeavors.

We hope that that the TWD architects believe that ethnographers have things to say that they want to hear, though perhaps not at the speed they had hoped; and, as ethnographers, our observations of architecture (and its pedagogies) have benefited from considering how its “generative flux” and its “flows and synchronization moves” might illuminate perceptions of multimodal sociability beyond the contexts of designing and building: for instance, our awareness of the negotiations between order and disorder, the management of joining disparate materials, the iterations of anticipation embedded in scalability, and the achievement of consensus through the simultaneity of imagery and talk have all informed our perceptions of situations beyond the specific circumstances generated by TWD (Nicholas and Oak 2018, 2020). The TWD project has offered us a glimpse of anthropological fieldwork and architectural practice as potentially simultaneous places that are mediated through discontinuous temporalities; places where anthropologists and architects together place different modes of attention and analysis on the details of site, material, technologies, and modes of collaboration. Such moments of joint attention may or may not have lasting transformative effects on either ethnography or the practices and products of design, but they suggest that ethnographers and architects still have things to say to each other.

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