

# Interdependence of Anthropology and Interior Design: An Exploratory Study

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**ABSTRACT:** Design anthropology is an increasingly influential and critical discipline that enriches the understanding of society. As professionally trained designers position themselves as catalysts to social change, they bring with them efficiency in process, sophisticated skills and interdisciplinary collaborations. This paper sets out to explore the connection that has developed between interior design and anthropology in the field of research, by outlining the emergent discourse. It concludes with the identification of interior anthropology as a new social science. This paper aims to look at the crossroads where anthropology and interior design meet and decide to create a new path. Leaning on each other to make their disciplines better and creating something new and unique in the process.

## INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as a discipline came about because of the keen interest in the interactions between humans and larger units of humans e.g. tribes or societies amongst themselves. Anthropology became the scientific study of humanity. Anthropologists seek answers to various questions about humans, encompassing not only the social aspects but also the biological aspects of humans. The uniqueness of anthropology lies in its scope. It is broader in scope both geographically and historically. Not just close proximal humans are its concern, it is concerned with all varieties of humans anywhere. The origin of humans from then to now and from the most populated to the least populated area are all the same to an anthropologist's interest. No aspect of human existence and experience remains untouched by anthropology. Anthropologists are interested in discovering how past humans are different from

modern humans in their appearance, physical traits, customs and practices. When describing a group of people, an anthropologist might discuss the history of the area, the physical environment, the organization of family life, general features of their language: the group's settlement patterns, political and economic systems, religion, and styles of art and dress (Ember *et al.*, 2008). Understanding and connecting the social and physical life of humans is what anthropologists do.

Similarly, being a designer brings with it a lot of awareness towards human interaction with the built environment, the effect of interiors of a space on its residents and also human behavior towards interior design. This interaction of the built environment with humans and vice versa, also forms an important part of the design process. This process has its roots in ethnography. How and why humans made the shift from being nomads for centuries and then went on to establish communities that turned into civilizations. Humans have managed to take residence over the

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complete livable planet. They reside in all climatic extremes, withstanding temperatures as low as  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Sovietskaya, Russia) and as high as  $58^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Ghadames, Libya). This journey from caves to penthouses is an anthropological one.

Interior design can trace its history in early civilizations, where the walls of the tombs of pharaohs were decorated in patterns to make them look beautiful. A first form of decoration on furniture was noticed in Egyptian furniture where the table and stool legs were shaped like animal claws. Interior design evolved into the science of understanding people's behavior to develop aesthetically pleasing, healthy and functional spaces. It gave spaces meaning. Interior design became an expression of one's identity. It endeavors enhancing personal, physical and emotional comfort of the individual or group residing in a given space.

#### DESIGNANTHROPOLOGY

Design has been working and creating from the shadows of human creativity since the beginning. From shaping rocks to form axes and spear heads to using cave walls to document daily lives, humans have been using design to combine both form and function. Design originates in "human need" which is not only physical but also psychological, socio-cultural, ecological and spiritual. It would not be wrong to argue that humans have always designed, because that is what makes us human. Design is those moments in human life and culture when material thoughts come to the fore. Every object ever made has been the result of some intentional exercise and cultural activity. Alternatively, design can also be called a human cultural patchwork (Drazin, 2020). Hence over the centuries design has become an extension of culture both in the material and non- material realm. Mostly material culture is at the heart of design work, not only the output of it. People use material culture - objects, forms and substances - to shape and address possibilities.

In the modern technologically advanced world, global infrastructures of production and manufacture recognize that we live in a designed world. When things are being designed, designers are thinking about who will be using these things, thus asking the constant yet evolving question "what are people like?" (Drazin, 2020) Designers have for long relied

on anthropologists as the source of their research data. And in some cases designers became ethnographers and worked with craftspeople and communities, making design concepts in collaboration with cottage industry. With the passing years the relationship between designers and anthropologists blurred. By the early 2000s, design anthropology became a self-conscious discipline and "Anthrodesign" was formed in the United States which later became Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC), which to this day remains at the heart of design anthropological debates and publications. Design anthropologists included social scientists exploring humanity through studio work, sketching and making; designers who were more interested in cultural commentary than designing concepts. There was a vast spectrum of design fields being explored mutually through transdisciplinary aegis of design anthropology.

Design anthropology's foremost intent is the understanding and creation of a socially and culturally well- thought world. The collaboration of designers and anthropologists during the process of designing, makes the process more immersive and directed towards the people being affected by the said design. When both fields are fully engaged and committed to contribute to the design of a particular product or service, new methods are also devised during the process. For instance, anthropology's commitment to observational detail can help designers see their products from an alternate perspective and learn how their design decisions make an impact in the real world. Also with its focus on the past and the present, anthropology helps keep design grounded in the now rather than pursuing flights into the future (Murphy, 2016). The anthropologist-designer partnership should be promoted for the mutual benefit of the fields, in that way anthropologists can remain true to their social science practice, neither becoming designers nor rejecting design as a practice.

#### *Interior Anthropology*

Home was a private sanctuary, a place to be at ease and be with one's own thoughts. The inside of a home was both a protective shelter and a mirror of self. It was a worthwhile exercise in anthropology to research the relationship between man and his

relationship to domestic interior spaces, an extension of the subjective self. Although the mundane insides of a home may not be as appealing as the jungles of the Australian outback, there are vast caches of data inside these domestic spaces that hold the power to transform those residing in them. (Pint, 2016). There are several classic studies on this theme, spanning from American anthropologist Henry Lewis Morgan's examination of the Native American home in 1881 to anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's crucial studies on the Kabyle house in 1972.

The modern mix of culture and technology has left an imprint on homes as well. The modern occupant is no longer the inward-looking sensitive subject but an outward-looking over-sharing author and over-seeking spectator at the same time. Studying interiors would mean gaining insight into the self that created the interior and vice versa. The researcher looks into private rooms and turns them into objects of study, with the sole purpose of gaining objective knowledge in this specific subdomain of humanities (Pint, 2016).

Although anthropological researches related to interior design and interior spaces have been appearing from time to time, its analysis is lacking, making it difficult to gain an understanding of what has been investigated, in what context they were undertaken. This problem has been addressed by reviewing the relevant literature already done in the field. This paper contributes towards a better understanding of ways in which research has been undertaken and reported. The purpose is to explain some of the present issues and suggest further areas of exploration.

Ray Lucas (2020) in his essay "Home and What it Means to Dwell" defines home as a place where an individual has control over their surroundings. They have the ability to remodel or decorate the space to make it useful and meaningful to them. Identities are established and expressed via homes. The terminology of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as mentioned by Lucas (2020) is invoked to explain that the home can be understood as a set of social relations. Besides Lévi-Strauss, the works of other anthropologists are also referred to in the context of a home. The thread of interior design is woven into the narrative by explaining the locations affecting design choices. The idea of self-identification as a

mirror to their dwellings is presented in this essay. How people like to see themselves and the image they would like to project to others via their home.

The relationship between material culture, home and inhabitant is also thoroughly analyzed in the text. To make relevant points, the researcher relies on the research done by anthropologists in the domain of domestic space. Concluding it to say that spaces have a way of becoming an extension of self, and being mindful of this while designing spaces is crucial.

Palmieri *et al.* (2021) adopted a design anthropological approach in this research on participatory ways for retrofitting suburbs into more sustainable urban environments. The paper addresses two important questions How can "dwelling patterns" be developed as a design anthropological approach to participatory future-making to (1) contextualize sustainable dwelling futures in people's everyday lives while (2) understanding, exploring and debating them as also part of their larger socio-spatial and political context with actors at different scale levels? (Palmieri *et al.*, 2021) The study was performed in a Flemish suburb. Notable results of the study were that an open-ended design representation leads to building bridges between people's everyday lives and the larger socio-political context in which these dwellings exist. The research indicates that working with patterns is just one approach among many in design anthropology for reconnecting with the politics of sustainable dwelling futures. However, it suggests that for design anthropologists to contribute to the re-politicization of sustainability debates, they must discover methods to enable others to collaboratively problematize and articulate sustainable futures in an ongoing and inclusive manner.

"Interior Decoration—Offline and Online" a paper written by Daniel Miller (2018) dissects a few anthropological studies done in interior design. The first one compares householders to museum curators, stating that "If households have selected from their possessions which objects to display, and given thought to how they will be organized and presented, then it is reasonable to see a normal householder as at least analogous to a museum or art gallery curator." Household curation just like a museum has two attributes, objects are treated for their function as

memorabilia and not for their aesthetic appeal. And the other is the real imposition of Interior Design as interpreted by the householder. The second study looks at the correlation between design of the home and interiors that people live in and the ones that they create for themselves in the online realm. Using various platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, Minecraft to create worlds that they share and connect with others just like they would in their own living room. The researcher points out that design anthropology gives an insight that interior design is not limited to just professional expertise or to offline worlds, how people spend their time online is important too (Miller, 2018).

In “Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange,” by C. Miller (2018) the realm of interior design anthropology is explored with a focus on understanding the cultural and social dimensions of interior spaces. The chapter delves into the concept of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, emphasizing the importance of challenging norms and introducing novelty in design while considering people’s comfort and familiarity. Cultural understanding and ethnographic research are highlighted as essential tools for designers to create spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also meaningful to diverse communities. By embracing diversity, challenging assumptions, and engaging with users throughout the design process, anthropology contributes to the creation of transformative interior environments. Building upon this anthropological perspective, the chapter offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of interior design, encouraging designers to explore the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of human interactions within designed spaces.

The idea of the domestic interior being a protection and an extension of self, became the fundamental principle of interior design when it started out. Kris Pint (2016) points out in his paper “The Experience of the Interior: Outlines of an Alternative Anthropology”. The home was a private sanctuary to be oneself and one with the self. The industrial revolution destabilized this notion, forms of mass communication like newspapers, magazines, television series and more recently also the internet has led to a proliferation of images of private interiors. The once

private became the “un-private home”, transforming itself into binary codes of images, sounds, text and data. The interiors once the extension of self, became a spatial and visual representation of this new kind of subjectivity. The occupant and his home had an active role in societal dynamics. The everyday mundane interior became a vast arena to be explored anthropologically. The researcher looks into private rooms making objective deductions about the subjective domains of the occupants of interiors.

Whitemeyr (2017) in his paper “Anthropology in Design” states that ethnography is the best way to understand how people engage with their environment, and interior designers can use this knowledge to make interior design better. Whitemeyr writes that although designers put in the research to understand the individuals they are designing for, the methodology at use is flawed and ethnographic observation is a better way to understand the people for whom the design is to be. Ethnographic researchers can provide pertinent details to designers who use their imagination, creativity and skills to augment the spaces. The mutually beneficial relationship that both fields gain from each other is being commercialized and channeled by global design consultancies like IDEO to impact design solutions worldwide.

Meloni’s (2017) purpose via the paper “New Domestic Rituals: Note on Design Anthropology” is to look at domestic space from an anthropological perspective, the role that objects and material culture play in the definition of identity and places, the new domestic rituals which affect the perception of private spaces, and the use of the new media in domestic intimacy. Meloni looks at the works of previous researchers to derive conclusions about design anthropology. A few conclusions that the researcher derives are; that objects are closely related to each other and never truly isolated, the same applies to spaces and lives and things. The interiors of a home have imaginary boundaries, which can be shared with the virtual world. In the professional fields of anthropology and design the interest in ethnographic research of domestic cultures is growing. Anthropologists, with their ethnographic approach, give to scholars of other disciplines a precise qualitative and subjective view of how people live in

their own world, a world of designed objects. Thus making design is essential to anthropological studies, which have looked at materiality and non-materiality both of the culture of interior aesthetics. In the same way, today, anthropologists conceive of daily life practices as the result of conscious planning which is motivated by imagination and social aspirations to produce new cultural identities.

Finding a critical path towards a combined interdisciplinary research methodology is important for the development of the interior and integrated cityscape. This is the theme for Rod Adams's (2018) paper "An Interior Anthropology: Frontiers, Thresholds and Boundaries". Adams talks about the importance of interior design in providing situations where human behaviours and social structures can be observed. Stating that it is impossible to separate the environment that humans subsist in from their behaviour, it is these environments where humans form their social structures and community networks. Ignoring the interiors of where humans dwell when it comes to Anthropology is not suggested, by fusing the disciplines together, a powerful platform can be created where the locations of human activity are explored, influencing the conditions for the interior and the city. When looked at from a deeper perspective, design is about understanding human behaviour and providing solutions accordingly. Interior design is steeped in human-centered design because humans are in it and surrounded by it. Interior design is mostly based on knowledge of predictive human behavior both functional and speculative.

The paper also points out that there needs to be a continuous alignment of both disciplines for mutual benefit. There could be detailed analysis of designed spaces, and research possibilities beyond the design studio, that encompass a broader view and live experience of interior design should be looked at. By having an integrated collaboration between the two, a new interior hypothesis can emerge, highlighting the power of interiors to influence individual behaviour and the testing of the space to perform (Adams, 2018).

### *Interdependence*

The dependence that the fields of interior design and anthropology have on each other is undeniable.

And the existing research narrates the importance of combining the disciplines of Anthropology and Design. Design anthropology is directed towards creating a culturally and socially well-thought world. Recently homes or personal living spaces are also being looked at from an anthropological perspective because it is where social relations take place. The occupant and his home have an active role in social dynamics. Designers are essentially researchers and ethnography in a simplified form has always been a part of the interior design process. Interior design is not only about the beauty of the space. It is where people have control over their surroundings. It is about how people use the space and how the space affects them, thus intrinsically tying itself to anthropology. Different researchers liken interior design to different aspects of human lives, at times interior design is the extension of self, a vision of a better future for residents and the environment or a museum of memories online and offline. Modern technology has equally impacted culture and design. There is no denying that the human aspect cannot be dismissed, and anthropologists like Rabinow and Ingold have also talked at length about the importance of the two disciplines working in tandem. The collaboration between design and anthropology can bring impressive results and should not be disregarded. That said, more work in the sub-grouping of Interior anthropology is still wanted because the impact they have when they work together is indisputable.

### CONCLUSION

The academic research world is ready to accept that none of the fields exist in silos and the interdependence on each other is essential. There is no moving forward without it. Design is a human need, a need to solve problems to make living better. And hence the recognition of design anthropology as a legitimate field. Further, a foray into this field is needed by the further exploration of the world of home interiors. The anthropological study of humans in their immediate settings is absolutely necessary and critical to the furtherance of the field.

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