An Architecture by means of Anthropology

Beyond learning the tools of social science

Gisbert Alemnay, Ester
Universidad de Alicante, Departamento de Expresión Gráfica y Cartografía, Escuela Politécnica Superior de Alicante, España, ester.gisbert@ua.es

Resumen

Los arquitectos y urbanistas tienen una larga tradición en el aprendizaje de las herramientas de las ciencias sociales, especialmente las que les permiten analizar y describir mejor los entornos y las personas para las que trabajan. Esto ha llevado a los arquitectos a desarrollar mejores herramientas de observación y descripción del ámbito social y no sólo el material. Sin embargo, la mayoría de las veces este acercamiento interdisciplinar ha identificado las ciencias sociales, especialmente la antropología, con la etnografía. Este artículo parte de la crítica a esta identificación hecha por el antropólogo Tim Ingold y se centra en lo que él propone como el método central de la antropología, la observación participante. Para después revisar varias propuestas actuales de científicos sociales que tratan de desarrollar una disciplina no representacional y orientada al futuro, un objetivo más cercano al de la arquitectura. El artículo intenta imaginar cómo esta práctica transdisciplinar podría desarrollarse.

Palabras clave: arquitectura, antropología, observación participante, diseño, metodologías no representacionales

Abstract

Architects and urban planners have traditionally considered social sciences to learn their tools, particularly the ones that allow them to analyse and describe the environments and the people for whom they work. This has led architects to develop better tools of observation and description of the social realm and not only the material one. Nevertheless, most of the times this interdisciplinary approach has identified social sciences, and specially anthropology, with ethnography. This paper departs from the critique of this identification made by anthropologist Tim Ingold and focuses in what he proposes is the core method of anthropology, participant observation. Then it reviews several recent proposals of social scientists who are searching for a non-representational more future oriented discipline. Which is an aim more related to that of architects. This paper tries to imagine how this transdisciplinary practice could look like.

Key words: architecture, anthropology, participant observation, design, non-representational methodologies

1. The first field workers

In 1984, George Stocking opened the series *History of Anthropology* describing the emergence of what he called "the constitutive experience of social/cultural anthropology": fieldwork by participant observation (Stocking 1992:70). In "The Ethnographer's magic" he traces the importance for anthropologists to experience themselves the life of the 'other' up to Spencer and Gillen's participation in an Arunta initiation ceremony. On that occasion, Gillen himself had taken much effort in making this ritual happen. Both scientists and their supervisors had to be assigned to tribal totems in order to be able to participate in it during no less than three months. According to Stocking, the monograph produced with the data they gathered is characteristically modern as it does not rely any more on the categories established by the *Notes and Queries* but explains a "totalizing cultural performance" that changed previous ideas about how totemism was understood until then (Stocking 1992:79). From then on, "intensive" work started to have more importance than "surveys" in ethnographic expeditions like the ones that involved Malinowski.

In fact, this two characteristics of fieldwork: getting to acquire the "feeling" and being "in touch" (Malinowski 1922:8) with the people you're studying and joining the knowledge acquired in a "coherent whole" (ibid.:11) are part of Malinowski's "self-mythicization" (Stocking 1992:70) as the archetypal ethnographer.

They are not, of course, the only characteristics of classic fieldwork. Moreover, I'm aware the words and examples used above to trace them in early history of ethnographic work are slanted towards the eventual and the sensory. In this essay though, I will focus on them to explore how the methodological particularities of acquiring this embodied knowledge remain in the core of some of the latest debates about the qualities and purposes of the anthropological endeavour. And to make an enquire of how this methodological particularity can make anthropology valuable for architecture and design based practices, making both evolve.

2. From the inside, "facts about" turn into "learning from"

In his introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Malinowski also made a plea to fieldworkers to be objective and exhaustive, and insisted very much in how to collect, review, contrast and organise the facts collected (Malinowski 1922: 9). He was making a clear distinction between the work of the anthropologist and the ethnographer that has carried along the history of the discipline. Ingold (2013) revives it in his book *Making* and finds in participant observation the key methodology of anthropology. If Malinowski separated the function of "the theoretical thinker and worker" from "the field worker" (Malinowski 1922: 9), Ingold sees the difference not in the practical work in the field but in what, for him, are two contrasting approaches to knowledge making: "learn about" and "learn from" (Ingold 2013:3).

Malinowski's urge to exhaustive ethnographic documentation had to do with a sense of disappearing worlds. As he said: "the material of (anthropology) study melts away with hopeless rapidity" (Malinowski 1992: XV). In Ingold's terms it could be said that these worlds needed to be recorded, described, so one could look back at them after and even revive them (Ingold 2013:3).

Anthropological fieldwork, since Malinowski, has changed along with the discipline as its purposes in the academia and political contexts have changed. For example, Gupta and Ferguson (1997:39) show how the field itself cannot be understood any more as "a limited area". Instead, they emphasize the importance of being attentive to ideas of location. For Watson, (1999:9) the nature of the relationships with 'the other' changed in the 60's and now anthropologists collaborate with those who were called informants before to understand "what is it to be human". According to Ingold, what remains in anthropology is participant observation as a way to "join with people in their speculations about what life *might* or *could* be like". For him, the focus on what participant observation means methodologically can be precisely what takes anthropology out of the dilemma between a "retrospective commitment to descriptive fidelity" and turning the people we work with into "unwitting mouthpieces for philosophies" that would hold the key to our future. In this view, what remains of the distinctive science Malinowski and others helped to create is the idea of "knowing from the inside" (Ingold 2013:4-6, emphasis in the original).

3. An inquiry on the future of fieldwork

This proposal of a future oriented anthropology is the one that naturally meets with architecture. If, following Ingold, we move away from ethnography, which he understands as documentation, what work is the anthropologist supposed to do in the field? Experiments, he proposes linking this work with the one practising artists and architects do: "You try things out and see what happens". This work is addressed to the future, not in the sense of "plans and predictions" but in joining with people in their dreams (Ingold 2013: 7). With this last

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distinction Ingold is making a call not only for anthropologists but also to all "designers to broaden their disciplinary engagements and the scope of their creative involvement in the continual shaping of the world" (Anusas and Ingold 2014: 58). And moreover, Ingold is opening up space for a community of practice linked together by the idea of working in-between (Ingold 2015:147): knowing, building, designing, etc.

The following words try to imagine how the work of this community could look like in a practical way[1], starting to consider the tendencies and examples in anthropology. I will be specially enquiring the developments in non-representational methodologies and sensory anthropology. With some examples coming also from the journey anthropology has made to practical experiments related to art, architecture and design. These are not anthropologies *of* but anthropologists whose work is about "how the present can unfold in the future" (Vannini 2015b). I won't be looking at the journey made the other way round by practitioners of art, architecture and design because of the extension of the essay. Also because, with some exceptions (e.g. the work of Marjetica Pôtrc), they depart from "the identification of anthropology with ethnography" (Ingold 2103:8) that is being avoided here.

However, of course, in this community of practice, anthropology would not be the only discipline to redefine its work. In architecture, for example, there could be no in-between practice until surpassing some of its fundamental assumptions like the hylomorphic model that maintains the practitioner detached from the world, as Ingold (2010) has shown himself. It might be precisely in this journey of anthropology to experimental practice that some of these key points can be discovered and transformed.

4. Non-representational methodologies

I will start then with a proposal that directly abandons the "obsession with representation" (Vannini 2015b:1) that has been so problematic for ethnography. Non-representational research methodologies, as explained by Vannini, depart form Thrift's non-representational theory (Thrift 2008) which "concerns itself with practice, action, and performance" (Vannini 2015b:4), it deals with flow itself and is not obsessed with meaning. It is relational more than individual and specially focused on materials, movements and affective bodies in its experiments in building "new forms of life" (Santner 2001:6, cited in Thrift 2008: 14, cited in Vannini 2015b:6).

For such a program Vannini suggests that researchers focus on "(e)vents, relations, practices and performances, affects, and backgrounds" (Vannini 2015b:9). Both backgrounds and events are a useful way of redefining the field itself when "groups are no longer tightly territorialized" (Appadurai 1996). If events are a way of gathering collectives, backgrounds are where this gathering occurs and stabilizes.

A good example combining both events and backgrounds is the book *What is a city?* (Shields and Steinberg 2008). After the Hurricane Katrina, the city of New Orleans was revised by scholars from a range of disciplines. Contrary to other research on the same topic, authors were not focusing on disaster management and social inequalities descriptions that could explain what happened and provoke reflection on how to plan and manage this and other cities. Instead they use Katrina as an event that makes the infrastructural and social background unfold in different ways that they normally do and thus challenges our ideas of what cities "are and can (or should) be" (Steinberg 2008:4).

However, we do not need such tremendous natural hazards to work with events. This is the case in the work of Obrador Pons about mass tourism. In order "to produce a livelier account of the beach that incorporated a sense of performativity and enjoyment", he researches everyday events. His focus on active relations with materials and flows allows him to think of haptic experiences as making sand castles, even of sun-bathing, as a way of attachment that is not only superficial and hedonistic, "but as evidencing how the contemporary world still inspires deep and powerful attachment" (Obrador Pons 2009:207-208). This work is still making "accounts of" and still does not have the experimental approach Ingold and Vannini are searching for fieldwork. Nevertheless it shows how, departing from relations, doings and affects, moments of enchantment can open us "to the disturbing and captivating elements of nature" through "a sense of wonder at minor experiences" (Bennett 2001 cited in Obrador Pons 2009:208) that can lead to more empirical projects.

In Thrift's theory, the non-representational is linked to embodiment and sensory research practices. For him, relations between body and things, even a passive body like the one described by Obrador Pons, question "the solidity of the world" (Thrift 2008:10). Maybe that is why in Thrift and Vannini's proposal a localized site does not define the field. Contrary to the classical definition of fieldwork as "the intensive study of limited areas" (Haddon cited in Stocking 1992:81), 'site' is instead "an active and always incomplete incarnation of events" (Thrift 2008:12).

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[1]   Knowing from the Inside Research Group in Aberdeen is already a good example. All the researchers and practitioners related to it try to practice this "in-betweenness" disciplinarity.

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5. Learning the art of participant observation

For a sense of what the experimental and arts-practice-related anthropologists do in their everyday work, Pink's proposal can be useful. She describes a practice of sensory anthropology[2] (Pink 2009). Although written in the form of an actual manual, the chapter on participant observation is based on examples from the practices of many researchers. In this case, it is based on stories and anecdotes of the role of the senses in fieldwork to achieve new understandings of what was taking place. Showing how being sensory attentive, the observer became more an apprentice, a dinner guest a fellow walker.

Vannini (2015a) too identifies many examples under the rubric of vitality, performativity, corporeality, sensuality or mobility. And, from the book he edits with Lorimer (2015b), we can take ideas from the practice of several authors. Also, we could search for the "hints and tips that (Ingold) has discovered during the course of (his) work" (Stewart cited in Ingold 2013:14) that is presented to us in *Making* as a mix of practical experiments and the theoretical reflections they made emerge in the author.

However it seems as if none of these scholars wanted to give a closed description of the practice, which is quite coherent in fact with the idea of thinking about anthropology as an art. That is what artists and architects would normally do. An art cannot be learnt only throughout the accounts of how others practice it. There are two simple reasons for that which anthropologists know well: it is difficult to talk about practices since learning is an embodied experience. To learn you have to try yourself (Ingold 2013:1).

This does not mean that those accounts are not useful though. In learning a practice, as Ingold recognises, all help is welcome, not to recreate others ways of doing it but to sharpen our faculties (Ingold 2013:6). In fact, one could imagine that among this in-between community of practice, apprenticeships might be more useful than academic lectures or studios; autobiographical accounts more demanded than manuals; and practical workshops more appreciated than exhibitions or conferences. Similarly to an urban musical scene, performances, rehearsals and personal tales could make a nice school for practitioners.

6. Stretching ourselves

This is why it will be useful to consider some examples of embodied practice that put the experience of the researcher at the centre stage. Literally the researcher is the field note (Jackson 1990): "'my' bodily experiences and memories... constitute their own record of fieldwork events" (Vergunst 2011). And this has no way back for the experiencing body. As Grasseni (2004:45) explains, the skill acquired,

> "…cannot be bracketed off or exchanged for another (not without further training, at least). However localised and historical, it becomes permanent sediment, an embodied way of accessing the world and of managing it – in other words, an identity."

This fact has implications beyond participant observation as apprenticeship. Once we take personal transformative experiences as the base of research, even activities regarded as more passive, become a way of acquiring knowledge. This is what Home-Cook shows investigating "what arises from and in the process of attending theatre" (Home-Cook 2015:15-16). In fact, his research starts with him listening to radio drama whilst he discovered that this activity required "not only rigour but practice". To introduce this research Home-Cook uses the notion of stretching ourselves as what happens when we pay attention (ibid.:2-3).

His book shows what Ingold might have been searching when he says that anthropology is not meant to be documentary but transformational (Ingold 2013:13). The notion of participant observation can be amplified to any activity in which we "stretch ourselves" to "reach out" (Home-Cook 2015:146).

7. Experiments in making: grounding knowledge

Now, we can easily understand why this transformational participant observation can also be done among non-humans "(e)vents, relations, practices and performances, affects, and backgrounds" (Vannini 2015b). This is what happens in the examples Ingold (2015) shows in *Making*. Objects and materials are touched and brought back to life: weaved, knapped, piled, broken, thrown, flown, wound and even drawn. Each of these activities gives researchers a way of reaching out themselves to join the flows of materials.

Harkness, Simonnetti and Winter (2015) proceed in a similar way with a much less noble material: concrete.

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[2] I've changed the word ethnography on the title to maintain the coherence of this essay but that her approach to the use of the senses leads to another anthropology similar to Ingold's or Vanninin's is also implied in Pink 2010.

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Dealing with instructions, gravel, sand, water, moulds and a number of other tools they are able to join the materials in their mixing and concrescence. In the process, impulses raise and reflections emerge. They have to fashion the samples and take care of (curate) them as if they were a living thing (ibid.:318) and this leads them to question solid modernity itself (ibid.:323).

8.   A note on designing transducers

However, participating of material worlds sometimes is not made directly through our senses. This is what Helmreich (2010) became aware of in his immersion on a submarine seeing how signals from the water medium had to be transduced to the interior with an array of devices and mechanisms. The resulting sounds and lights changed the actual sounds from outside to make it possible for human ears to feel the vibrations and to differentiate the direction of the sound. Ingold (2013:102-3) shows how transducers are also not only high-tech devices and, similarly, McCormack (2015) uses a simple balloon to apprehend atmospheres. In this case, the balloon, which is always changing itself affected by the atmosphere and slowly diminishing its volume, is "more or less than an object" that participates in the relations it helps to perceive and understand (ibid.:108).

This is what we have been experimenting in a Design Studio course in my School of Architecture in Spain[3]. We have oriented the students, to build, test and rebuild devices and prosthesis that are not meant to resolve problems but to train students in "their client's" ways of perceiving and dwelling. Transducers become a way to accelerate the apprenticeship in fieldwork. Transducers also make apprentices go forward what could happen in the field, augmenting their sensitivity to the environment, they enhance their experimental and creative attitude. And, also, the possibilities of design scenarios. This helps to overcome timidity and as in the classical example of Gillen, the apprentice ends up making things happen. Transducers then can be not only a means of perceiving but also an entrance to this experimental anthropological work.

9.   Imagining a future in correspondence

To summarize, it is important to remark that all the examples mentioned above have in common what Vannini calls "a different orientation to "data"... to the temporality of knowledge". They work with a concern for "how the present can unfold in the future" not only for the reality existing before the research or design was done (Vannini 2015b). In this case, anthropologists are certainly joining (some) architects and artists and their practices. But, as seen above, classic participant observation ican be a privileged departing point to build a practice that is oriented to the future but in a grounded, collective and non-representational way. As a practising architect myself and a Design Studio Lecturer in Architecture I feel there is something precious in participant observation that we have to keep revisiting and searching for its implicationsAs it did with anthropology since Malinowski, it has the it has the potential to#change other disciplines too. Notwithstanding that, participant observation can gather together practitioners across disciplines in this in-between community of practice I have been trying to imagine through this essay, not to represent but to "'co-produce' the world" (Thrift 2000: 5) and to "make the future for ourselves" (Ingold 2013:6).

Many attempts have been done in this sense (e.g. see KFI, Akama and Pink) and all of them find a difficulty in defining the ideal mediums to use. The different historical institutions and means of production of each of these disciplines shape the outputs they produce and the skills of their practitioners. An encounter between disciplines will mean a change in all of them and the creation of shared outputs and skills. Several of the authors mentioned above are recently making their proposals. Vannini (2012) and Pink (2009) are experimenting with video in several formats and broadcasting media in webs and TV. Ingold proposes that we practice the craft of words. According to him, "we need a new understanding of language". One that is ever changing and creating itself in correspondence with mobile and lively practice (Ingold 2015b:ix).

I agree with the importance of words. They are fast travellers, easy to repeat, change, misunderstand, debate, etc. They cling on our thinking and change the way we do things. In the end is through conversations among humans (as well as non-humans) that we rebuild the world collectively. And, though it is difficult for architects to express their practices in words, architecture critic scholar Beatriz Colomina (1994) shows how those architects who have been more capable to do so have been the most influential in how the world is built. Of course, drawings, images and buildings themselves have to do with the spread of their ideas. However, drawings are more difficult to make your own, they are not as pliant as words are. In my work with students and in interdisciplinary workshops with anthropologists, I have found that published conversations among practitioners combine drawings and words in

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[3]   For seeing examples of the work done with the students check http://colabores.net/2015/01/27/rehabitar-el-sureste-un-curso-de-proyectos-en-la-universidad-de-alicante/ and http://experimentosconeloficio.arrsa.org/

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an effective way. Talking about building processes, referring to drawings and details, makes it easy for understanding each other and incorporating the outputs of other disciplines in our thinking (e.g. Balmond and Ito 2004, Ingold 2011). In those conversations, they talk about the processes themselves, the movements, the materials and even about how they changed and what the practitioners learned participating in the processes. These material stories of correspondence seem a good place to start. Maybe just as pidgin languages appeared in in-between places of different cultures like ports and markets, this successful conversations and stories show that more spaces of encounter are needed. The kind of scene I referred above in which such a language could grow.

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Biografía

Ester Gisbert Alemany. Profesora Asociada de Proyectos Arquitectónicos en la Universidad de Alicante. Actualmente cursa un Máster en Antropología Social en la Universidad de Aberdeen y está afiliada al Proyecto de Investigación "Knowing form the Inside" liderado por Tim Ingold. Arquitecta en su propio estudio que trabaja la antropología del diseño como forma de superar una arquitectura centrada en el objeto y de desarrollar una práctica del diseño en correspondencia con un mundo en continua regeneración.

Ester Gisbert Alemany. Associate Professor in Architectural Design, University of Alicante, Spain. Currently studying a Mres in Social Anthropology and affiliated to the Research Group "Knowing form the Inside" leaded by Tim Ingold in University of Aberdeen. Practising architect interested in design anthropology as a way to overcome an object centred architecture and develop a correspondent design practice entangled with a world in continuous becoming.