Anthropology 253: Design | Aesthetics | Social Life
Spring 2016
Professor Keith M. Murphy

Time: Tuesday 9:00-11:50
Office Hours: Tuesdays from 2-3 & Thursdays from 10-11; or by appointment
Course Web Page:

Course Description

The central theme of this course is an exploration of design and aesthetics from an anthropological perspective. While anthropologists have long been interested in phenomena like art, architecture, and theater, we have only recently begun to recognize that design demands consideration as both a cultural form and a cultural practice linked to, yet nonetheless distinct from, other aesthetic endeavors. This course is thus largely oriented toward working through a conceptual basis for an anthropological approach to design—one aligned with, but also distinct from, those other aesthetic domains. As such, the material is in many ways rather mixed: some ethnography and some theory; some social science and some philosophy; some art and design and a bit of art history. Over the course of the quarter we'll cover a lot of ground—not all of which is obviously related—exploring some of the possible directions in which an “anthropology of design” might lead.

Required Readings

There are two (2) books you'll need to purchase or borrow, both of which are available at the UCI bookstore or at various online retailers. They are also available at the library, I think.


The rest of the readings can be found on the course webpage:

Course Requirements and Logistics

In addition to showing up prepared each week to participate fully in the seminar, there are three (3) main requirements you’ll have to fulfill to perform successfully in the course.

The first is to lead class discussion for one week of the course. You’ll be responsible for preparing and leading one entire seminar. I’m not expecting slideshows or anything fancy (though it’s not discouraged, either). I’m more concerned that we have interesting and lively conversations about the class materials. This means the success of the course rests largely on your collective shoulders. I’ll of course bring my own input each week, but I expect the bulk of the discussion to be self-generated and self-propelled. The best approach is to come prepared each week as if it’s your turn to present, even if it isn’t. We’ll work out some more specific mechanics, including who is responsible for which readings, on the first day of class, and if you’ve got any concerns about the materials or about presenting, please talk to me beforehand.
The second requirement is a set of design reflections—let’s say two (2) over the whole quarter—which you’ll write up and submit to the class. This is actually really easy: you just need to find something “out there” that somehow relates to the course materials, think about it, write up a page or so about it, and be prepared to talk to the group about it. This something can be a material object, a news article, an internet clip, whatever. The idea is for you to demonstrate some reflexivity with regard to the way we can look at design and the everyday world from an anthropological point of view. We’ll discuss the mechanics of this during Week 1.

The third requirement is a final assignment, due Wednesday, June 8, 2016, via email. This can take one of two forms, but no matter which you choose, it must in some way deal with material we’ve covered in class, and also include material from outside sources.

A) a paper on a topic of your choosing (including something you’re already working on)
B) a paper based on a specific question I give you, sometime towards the end of the quarter

Please let me know which option you’re choosing by Week 7. The paper should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words, though I’m more interested in the quality and usefulness of what you produce than its length. We’ll negotiate the specifics as the quarter progresses, but again, remember that whichever option you choose it must focus on design and anthropology and draw heavily upon the course readings.

### Week 1 Introductions and Orientations

- No reading due for week 1

### Week 2 Six Perspectives on Design and Aesthetics


### Week 3 Design Anthropology, Then and Now


**Week 4  Deconstructing Design Thinking**


**Week 5  Making as Social Action | Theories and Methods**


**Week 6  Forms, Qualities, and Objects**


Week 7 An Anthropology of Brand


Week 8 Aesthetic Communities


Week 9 Design and Politics


Week 10 Design and the Subject