

# Scratching the Surface

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You're getting this newsletter because you generously support the ongoing production of Scratching the Surface — thank you! In this month's issue, we talk with Shannon Mattern about The New School's new Design and Anthropology minor and take a look at a new biography of Florence Knoll.

In June, we talked with the architecture critic for The New York times Michael Kimmelman about writing criticism for a general readership and the role of the architecture critic in 2021 and writer and curator Glenn Adamson about the intersections of design history, craft, and contemporary art.

  

## INTERVIEW

# Shannon Mattern on the intersections of design and anthropology and why cities are not computers

My interview with [Shannon Mattern](#), from all the way back in April 2018 was an important episode for me. It was one of the first where I started thinking about people I could talk to who were just outside of design to hear from other perspectives and how design does or does not intersect with their work. Shannon, who then was a professor in the media studies department at The New School here in New York, seemed like a great person to talk to. I'd been reading her writing consistently for years and her approach to thinking about design was fascinating to me. It's still one of my favorite episodes. Since that interview, Shannon's output has not let up (her productivity amazes me): she's since moved to the anthropology department at The New School where she's coordinating a new minor in Design and Anthropology. Her fourth book, *A City is Not A Computer*, is also coming out later this year. I caught up with Shannon last month to talk about the intersection of design and anthropology and what students will get from the program as well her new book.

**You are the coordinator of a new graduate minor at The New School called Anthropology + Design. Can you tell me a little about what kind of students this minor is for and what they'd experience in the classes?**

Given that The New School is home to both the New School for Social Research and the Parsons School of Design, the institution has sought for years to create more opportunities and conduits for integration between these two divisions. In 2014 my colleague Hugh Raffles initiated the [Graduate Institute of Design, Ethnography and Social Thought](#), which hosts a seminar series and a fellowship program fostering transdisciplinary ethnographic research. And in 2019 I was recruited from the School of Media Studies, where I'd taught for 15 years, to develop a new "area of study" in Anthropology + Design. That "area of study" proved quite popular, so we transformed it into an official minor in spring 2021.

"Design Anthropology," as some folks call it, is not a new field, but we wanted to see how we might create our own version — one that takes advantage of our existing curricular strengths, one that's infused with the progressive ethics and experimental pedagogies that have historically defined The New School, and one that uses the city as its library, field site, and lab.

Our program is meant to serve both social scientists and designers, and I've been hearted to see that our classes have attracted students from 10 or 12 different fields and disciplines: from anthropology, sociology, politics, and environmental policy to design + technology, design and urban ecologies, transdisciplinary design, fashion studies, and architecture. As we state [on the "official" webpage](#), the minor allows graduate students to explore the designed world through the conceptual frameworks and grounded methods of anthropology. Anthropologists and designers, working in tandem, can improve their own techniques of aesthetic and ethnographic analysis, expand their repertoire of multimodal methods, and think more critically and creatively about the mediated and designed forums in which they perform and share their research. We also wanted to prioritize reflective methodology (including critique of ethnographic method itself), ethical frameworks of analysis, and awareness of the political stakes of both research and creative practice.

In the core course, "Anthropology + Design: Objects, Sites + Systems," students examine the myriad relationships between the fields: what it means to use ethnography *\*in\** design; what we might learn from longitudinal ethnographies *\*of\** design practice; how anthropological research could productively inform design work; why anthropologists should pay closer attention to the designed world, and how knowing about design practice could enhance their observation; how design methods could expand anthropologists' own set of methodologies and modes of expression; and so forth. You can read more about the class, and see synopses of student work, [on the class website](#).

I also teach a few electives in the minor. My Spring 2020 "[Data Artifacts, Infrastructures, and Landscapes](#)" class examined how the design of data-based systems scales up to inform the design of objects, buildings, cities, and entire geographic terrains. My Spring 2021 "[Mapping the Field](#)" studio examined the history, politics, and aesthetics of mapping, and explored how we might use cartography — broadly conceived! — as a field method. I'm teaching a new "Design Ethnography

Workshop” in the fall, which will allow us to practice applied, collaborative ethnographic research with and \*for\* a community partner — and, all the while, to critically reflect on our methods and design new ones. Every semester I also curate [a list of relevant electives](#) from around the university.

The connections students forge in the classroom then spill over into extracurricular projects. You can read more about those opportunities on [our “unofficial” website](#) (...and the very fact that we have \*two\* websites is itself a fascinating anthropology-design case study: it reveals how institutional politics, territorialism, and a host of other social factors are manifested in graphic and information design!)

**The intersection of anthropology and design has become a surprisingly recurring topic on *Scratching the Surface* (surprising to me, at least!). The podcast audience is primarily designers so I’m curious how and where you see anthropology could fit into more traditional design studies and where design could augment more traditional anthropology education?**

I think I’ve already partly answered this question above — but I’ll offer here some anecdotal responses, based on what I’ve heard from students and colleagues.

I know that designers are attracted to this hybrid field because they want to more critically interrogate some of the critical concepts — like “community” and “participation” and “resilience” – that drive their work. They’re eager to think about the politics of their practice; and about design’s relationship to colonialism and white supremacy, and how they can work against these forces in their own practice (of course anthropologists have to ask these questions, too!). Many students are also eager to explore how designers and anthropologist think about “ethnography” differently, and what they could learn from one another.

Our anthropologists are commonly attracted to the field because they’re eager to infuse design methods into their research and modes of presentation and publication; to develop new methods of observation and analysis that will allow them to recognize how their core critical concerns are manifested in the material world; and to engage in modes of knowledge production that fit the epistemological diversity they see \*in the field\*, with their research collaborators.

And across the board, students are universally eager for more collaborative, creative work. They love learning from and with students from other fields, and figuring out

\*how\* to responsibly, respectfully practice interdisciplinarity and to \*do\* collaboration. Collaboration isn't just something that happens; it, too, has to be designed — and that process is best informed through anthropological reflection!

**You also have a new book coming out! *A City Is Not A Computer: Other Urban Intelligences* will be out in August from Princeton University Press. The book is a collection of some of your essays for *Places Journals*. How'd this book come together? Why did you decide to focus this on cities and urban planning (especially considering the range of writing you do!)?**

I was actually invited to develop this book! I've been a columnist for *Places Journal* since 2012; since then I've written over two dozen long-form pieces — one of which was an essay called "[A City Is Not a Computer](#)." That piece came into being because I was invited by two book editors to write a chapter about how the city functions as an information processing machine. As I started writing, I became frustrated by how \*limiting\* the framework was, so I wrote instead about how the city is \*so much more\* than an information processing machine — and how reducing the city to a computer, as many "smart city" enthusiasts have done, can derail urban design, planning, administration, maintenance, etc. I was really pleased to see that that article circulated and resonated pretty widely. It was translated into other languages, anthologized in a couple printed volumes, and it inspired a few design studios.

*Places* has a relationship with Princeton University Press, and when they invited me to gather together some of my existing articles into a short book, they suggested that "A City Is Not a Computer" could be the central piece. I honestly wasn't sure about the value of repackaging work that was already freely available online (I'm a strong proponent of open-access scholarship), but my editors — and about 1000 potential readers! — assured me that "bookifying" the articles could put them in a new context and allow them to reach new readers. I was also assured that the book would be affordable and thus accessible. We even redesigned the cover to keep the cost under \$20 :)

When compiling the book, I decided that rather than simply republishing existing work, I'd remix and refresh everything and add some entirely new material. And then the pandemic descended upon us, and the summer of 2020 brought the Movement for Black Lives uprisings — and I felt compelled to reconceive the whole project. Given

how profoundly 2020's compounding crises impacted our cities, I struggled to determine how \*topical\* the book should be. I ultimately decided that, rather than making it \*about\* COVID-19 and BLM, I would instead focus on enduring questions that are now "re-inflected" through these contemporary challenges. Yet this approach still required rewriting much of my existing work and adding a lot of new material!

So, *A City Is Not a Computer* does focus on my urban-oriented material. But I'm also developing a few new projects on sound design and furniture design and trees :)

**When you were on the show, you were still teaching in the Media Studies department but you've since switched to the Anthropology department at The New School. I always have a hard time mapping your various interests and research and how they fit together from maps to libraries, infrastructure to design, anthropology to media studies. What do you see as the connecting thread, or core, of your diverse research interests?**

I've always been interested in how epistemology is spatialized or materialized — or how our ways of knowing are embodied in the design of our data models, interfaces, maps, furnishings, buildings, parks, neighborhoods, cities, infrastructures, logical systems, and so on. I'm always asking how designed objects, sites, and systems shape what we know about the world.

**Let's talk about some book recommendations!**

**A book you'd recommend to a designer interested in learning more about anthropology:** Lilly Irani's *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in Modern India*; and Christopher Kelty's *The Participant*

**A design book you'd recommend to an anthropologist:** Chris Ware's *Building Stories*; Georgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec's *Dear Data*; Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Russert, eds., *W.E.B. DuBois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America*; Mark Allen, Charlotte Cotton, and Rachel Seligman's *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection*

**Your favorite primer for someone interested in understanding media theory:** Miyarkka Media, *Phone & Spear: A Yuta Anthology*

**A fiction book that's profoundly influenced your research:** Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

**Last book you've read that's stuck with you:** Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism*

**Book you're most looking forward to spending time with this summer:** Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories*; la paperson, *A Third University is Possible*; Andrea Cetrulo et al's *Interior Realms*; Jer Thorp's *Living In Data*; Kat Anderson's *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*