Anthropologists and Designers
Co-Designing the Future
Report on the Sixth International
Applied Anthropology Symposium in Lisbon

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During the last weekend of October 2018, specialists from around the world met in Lisbon for the sixth ‘Why the World Needs Anthropologists’ symposium (WWNA). This yearly conference – which provides a space for sharing information, experiences and discussions regarding applied anthropology – has gone from a one-afternoon symposium to a three-day event with lectures, panel discussions, speed-talks, workshops, guided tours, social events and ‘Hot-Spots’ – stands where a range of institutions, sponsors and partners can present what they do. This year’s conference gathered more than 300 people from 33 countries (and more than a thousand online visitors via live-streaming) to reflect on the possibilities that the emergent discipline of design anthropology brings to anthropologists and designers and for cross-disciplinary collaborations. Significantly named, Designing the Future was a response to what many in the field feel is a time when the world needs more engaged anthropologists to spark ideas and bring out informed and well-thought-out research-based solutions.

The event was organised by the Applied Anthropology Network (AAN) of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in collaboration with the Centre for Research in Anthropology (CRIA); ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon; The Colours of Labour (ERC-funded project from Institute of Social Sciences (ICS); the Portuguese Association of Anthropology (APA); and the Research Centre of Design (UNIDCOM/IADE-UE). In addition to these Portuguese institutions, the event was supported by 13 partners, 31 corporate sponsors, six media sponsors, and a dedicated crew of volunteers.

Engaged and Public Anthropology

The event opened with a motivational welcome speech by two local anthropologists, Miguel Vale de Almeida and Rosa Maria Perez – both professors of anthropology at ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon and researchers at CRIA. Both spoke about their concerns with the overlapping crises related to fake news, intolerance, the rise of nationalistic and homophobic politics, and the overall social injustice in society, and they both pointed out that the present is a crucial moment for the rise of an engaged, public and committed anthropology.

Vale de Almeida affirmed the importance of the involvement of anthropologists as principal agents of change ‘the general education of our society’ – within educational programs, the mass media, politics and popular culture – so that they can help assure the creation of cultural dialogue and a general understanding of diversity. He concluded with a story from his participation in the Portuguese Parliament as an LGBT rights activist, where his role as an anthropologist was instrumental in the passing of a same-sex marriage and gender identity law. Vale de Almeida was convinced that if a positive change was possible in politics, an ‘arena of conflict, strong emotion and opposing values’, then it is possible elsewhere. In addition to this, Perez presented two inspiring projects from India, where anthropological research combined with an interdisciplinary approach was the main feature for the empowerment of a Dalit woman’s group. Perez concluded with reaffirming the importance of public anthropology, collaborative action and applied practices beyond
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Stereotypes, where theory and praxis are joined in the same efforts to assure a better future.

Chasing Anthropologists outside the Ivory Tower

The first keynote speaker was the Head of Design and User Experience for the Americas at Philips Lighting, José Manuel dos Santos. He conducted his speech in quite a different way than most would imagine, raising many questions about how anthropology is perceived by outsiders. With the help of 10 interviews that he had held with workers from different departments of Philips, Santos prepared a striking reflection on an overall lacuna about anthropology in the outside world, where most of the interviewed individuals were not aware of the variety of settings in which anthropologists can operate. Santos questioned whether this could be related to how people label their research at corporations like Philips – design research, user research, user experience research? Furthermore, he claimed that the human-centred approach is a core value for Philips, where they try to understand people within their proper contexts and according to their real needs. Altogether, this makes him believe that they should collaborate with anthropologists more often: ‘If you are going to go for a human-centred approach, work with human experts’, he concluded.

Humans and Technology Shaping Each Other

Next, the stage was given to Sarah Pink, an anthropologist known globally for joining forces with professionals from a wide spectrum of disciplines, both inside and outside of academia. Through an overview of some of her recent projects, she explained how she sees the role of anthropologists in the framing of future technologies: ‘We need an interventional design anthropology on emerging technologies’. In her argument, Pink questioned the narrative held by many scientists and politicians in which technologies seem to be able to solve societal problems. On the contrary, she explained that it is actually the world’s problems that will shape the uses of technology. Any outcomes, positive and/or negative, will come from the interaction between people, culture and technologies: ‘Futures are as human as technological’. People will continue to appropriate and improvise with technologies while shaping their uses, relations and implications; in this sense, anthropologists can help policy-makers and technology creators/providers to understand future problems from different perspec-

Figure 1: Full auditorium in Museu do Oriente in Lisbon (photo by Andre Castro Soares).
tives. In conclusion, Pink advocated for a more experimental anthropology with a deeper focus on the future and a greater inclination towards interdisciplinary collaboration.

The In-Between(s) as Space(s) of Possibility and Discovery

Pink’s talk was followed that given by Jamer Hunt, Associate Professor of Transdisciplinary Design at Parsons School of Design in New York. His presentation lay in the ‘in-between’ of social research, design and a philosophical reflection on the importance of the materialisation of ideas. Hunt pointed out that it is through the ‘making of things’ that one can (re)think problems, grasp their limits and high points, and discover new unknowns, and thereby generate new ideas. In this sense, he encouraged anthropologists to be more experimental, as Pink did in the previous talk. He encouraged ethnographers to think of writing as a form of materialisation of ideas and to experiment with it in different ways. While asking why is it that we have not seen ground-breaking hypertext ethnographies so far, he continued to criticise the reductionism of various methods, be they related to ethnography or design (an example of the latter being that design thinking ought to be simplified to five steps, instead of acknowledging that each designer or project has its own process and that it is usually messy and complex). Overall, Hunt’s talk focused on the importance of transdisciplinarity and encouraged the audience to experiment with the materialisation of theoretical ideas.

Personal Is Political and Professional

The last speaker, Anna Kirah, was also the first repeat speaker in the history of the symposium. The internationally respected practitioner, design anthropologist, and psychologist had participated in the first event in 2013. Now, five years later, she was back with vibrant energy and profound personal messages. In a 40-minute speech, Kirah discussed the current global situation, risks and opportunities from a professional, political and personal perspective. One of the most emotional moments was when she shared a personal story on how to design a better future. Through the touching story of her mother’s dying process, where she had decided how to spend her last 19 days of life, she sent a very clear and powerful message to the audience: if we are seriously discussing how to design the future, how to design

Figure 2: Anna Kirah on the WWNA stage talking about designing a better future collaboratively (photo by Andre Castro Soares).
a better world, we also have to learn how to design together with people how it is that we want to spend our last moments of life.

The first day of the symposium was closed by a panel discussion moderated by Dan Podjed, founder of EASA AAN and co-founder of the event WWNA (Why the World Needs Anthropologists), where together with the speakers he argued about the present and the future of applied anthropology, about the daily struggles and frustrations for anthropologists working in the private sector, and about dystopian futures and how anthropology can contribute to societal well-being.

All the talks, including the panel discussion, can be watched on the Applied Anthropology Network’s YouTube channel.

**Interactive Activities and Learning Together**

In addition to the speeches, the event offered interactive activities and entertaining social events. On the first day, participants mingled in the Design Hotspot Area, which included stands and exhibitions promoting products, services and collectives related to applied anthropology. An interesting innovation of this symposium was the session with speed-talk presentations named Perspectives. Some 17 participants went on stage to present their ideas and projects briefly in a Pecha Kucha format. Also, on the second day, participants had the opportunity to engage in 13 workshops where theory was challenged in practical cases with hands-on design anthropology methods.

A reflection on the two intensive days was provided in the plenary session by, Alisse Waterston, Presidential Scholar and Professor of Anthropology at City University of New York (CUNY), and immediate past-president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Waterston presented overarching conclusions and personal observations about the relationships between anthropology in academia and applied sectors from her own standpoint. She mapped out some of the obstacles that exist between the two sides and focused on outstanding and forthcoming opportunities for the future of our discipline and for human well-being based on three main pillars – collaboration, innovation and sustainability.

![Figure 3: Key speakers re-imagining the future together in the panel discussion (photo by Andre Castro Soares).](image)
Waterston visited the conference as the ambassador of the AAA: an important role for the creation of long-term collaborations, a topic that was discussed publicly between Waterston and Dan Podjed on the final panel.

The event was topped off with two guided excursions – provided by the Municipality of Lisbon and EGEAC, Empresa de Gestão de Equipamentos e Animação Cultural – and the interim network meeting, where the future of the AAN was discussed. This year, the event had a special symbolic meaning for the future of the AAN community, since Dan Podjed and Meta Gorup (initiators and founders of the network) officially stepped down from their roles as convenors. Nevertheless, their legacies will be carried forward with the network’s diverse projects and promising future initiatives. On behalf of all network members, the acting AAN team wanted to express its deep gratitude to Dan Podjed and Meta Gorup for the conference. As a result, the final meeting also held technical elections, which resulted in officially establishing new positions within the network: two new convenors, a people manager and four national ambassadors.

Looking into the (Promising) Future

This sixth event raised a lot of interest amongst the global public (the event was fully booked within six days after the online registration launch), designers, anthropologists and business partners visiting the event. This opened up significant opportunities for the future. One of the important points of consensus amongst the members was the dissemination of satellite events, which would be one-off events endorsed by the EASA AAN using the WWNA name and format and would be independently organised by volunteers in different countries and sectors to communicate the importance of applied anthropology on a local level.

A long-term collaboration with the strategic and graphic design company Vínculo has been established. However, to keep the event free of charge (as it has been for the last six years) and for practical, collaborative and interdisciplinary purposes, the AAN is now looking to establish other long-term relationships with institutions and organisations. More details as well as membership forms are available on the AAN website, where the convenors’ contact information is also available.

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1. www.applied-anthropology.com