THE BOUNDARY BLUR: INTERFACING ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE—A PERSONAL NARRATIVE ON THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF CAREER DESIGN

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Introduction

The following narrative explores my current negotiation within professional boundaries. Boundaries can establish lines that divide, bind, or exclude. Boundaries can create order, organize, and establish networks. Boundaries separate disciplines, in this case architecture and anthropology. Boundaries can also transform a natural environment into a cultural landscape, providing a sense of place and capturing the identities of people. Although the built environment is not always designed to readily adapt, it still grows. The same is true for education; while disciplines are often designed for the needs of the moment, they grow as well. In reality, people shape their environments, and subsequently those environments shape us. A profession also shapes how we learn, and how we learn shapes how we approach our careers. The stories below illustrate how one's career can inform and be informed by multiple disciplines.

The Story of the Cat Meeting

Many professionals, especially professionally trained architects, find themselves on an increasingly non-linear career path. Similarly, after arriving in Memphis, Tennessee, in 2007, my own professional trajectory was not straightforward. At that moment in my career, I received architectural training after college by working at multiple architecture firms in various cities. A majority of the firms where I interviewed upon arriving in Memphis appreciated the varied experiences of my portfolio and résumé, but saw my nomadic lifestyle after college as a deterrent. While moving from job to job early in one’s career allows for the self-discovery of strengths, architecture firms invest in the people they hire and want to know their employees are mutually invested in a long-term commitment.

After months of searching, I found employment at a corporate architecture office. I found the transition difficult from my previous job at a design-build firm in northern California, where regular interactions with designers and builders occurred under the same roof. The design-build firm encouraged movement and communication; everyone was considered a resource from which to gain knowledge and experience. There were a fair amount of formal conversations concerning construction, how to detail drawings, and the best approach to satisfy governing agencies. There was also time for informal conversations during two paid 15-minute breaks, one of which aligned with the arrival of a food truck, allowing for a temporary gathering place.

In comparison to the design-build firm, my primary role at the Memphis corporate office was stultifying. I was assigned to a cubicle that severely limited my views to the outside, literally and metaphorically, as well as my interactions with fellow employees. There was, however, the opportunity to engage and participate in scheduled weekly departmental progress meetings. After experiencing months of stalled projects and little progress, I started taking my architectural licensing exams. Eventually, the principal in charge of the department posed a question to the employees: how do we move the firm forward? We were told to return a week later with an answer.

Inspired by the challenge, equipped with free time at work, and the desire to expand beyond my cubicle’s walls, I took the principal’s question seriously. At that time, the firm sold drawings for pre-designed homes that could be situated anywhere. That concept was strange to me as my undergraduate education and previous work experiences stressed the importance of understanding the site context. There appeared to be a strong disconnect between the firm and the homeowner and situating the home on the site. I thought we should create a connection between homeowner and home, a kind of how-to guide for our clients about home maintenance and repair. A how-to guide was an opportunity to make homeowners aware of the realities of owning a home and created the possibility to continue the relationship with the architecture firm and the homeowner. My proposal was an attempt to move the firm forward.

At the same time that I was answering the principal’s question, I was also tasked with re-organizing the department’s library. I viewed the library as a resource to create the how-to guide. As part of this process, I photocopied images, graphics, and text from the library’s books, scaling, cutting, and reassembling them on 11x17 sheets of paper. Based on themes from my architectural education, training in non-verbal communication and three-dimensional presentations, I created a mock-up of the layout and content for the how-to guide.

One week after the principal’s directive to answer the question “how
do we move the firm forward?” the architectural team assembled around the conference table. I envisioned that the morning meeting would include a flurry of ideas swirling around the room, offering motivation and inspiration, similar to an architectural studio environment. Once the meeting began, that specialized in designing children’s museums and exhibits. When that contract finished, I found another freelance job assisting with the renovation of a hotel using sustainable methods. More freelance jobs followed.

If my background included cross-training in anthropology, perhaps the program in applied anthropology to expand my approach to architectural design.

Anthropology proved to be difficult throughout graduate school. Anthropology was a foreign language to me, and I often tried translating anthropological buzzwords into architectural speak and vice versa. The articles I read made little sense, and I felt as though anthropology professors and students talked at me rather than with me. I realized that I might have lost others in conversation when speaking architecturally. Since then, I have consciously made the effort to communicate more effectively by brokering my architect-anthropologist identity.

In the meantime, I struggled to make sense of it all until I found an anthropology professor who helped translate anthropological concepts into terms I could understand. The epiphany started with a 20-second discussion on the layout of kitchens:

**Entering Graduate School as a Non-Traditional Student**

Eventually the freelance jobs ended, and I did not have the resources or energy to continue working independently. Now out of work, a friend connected me with a seasonal job selling snow cones at the zoo. The job was not long-term, but the memories of learning about local Memphis customs lasted. These discoveries about Memphis were my first step moving forward into anthropology. As traditional architecture work was no longer available due to the recession, continuing my education in a field that complemented architecture began to look like a viable option. The goal was to increase my chances for stable employment. Thanks to a confluence of events while living in Memphis, which included a lot of late night conversations and potluck dinners where anthropology training was recommended by trusted friends and mentors, I found myself applying to a two-year master’s

Cat Meeting would have been different. Anthropological insights into understanding office cultures, the relativity of norms and values, and how people work within group settings would have helped me to better appreciate that particular experience.

**In the process of learning to apply anthropology, I discovered that my older, architecturally informed ways of communicating had new and interesting uses.**

we were told that presentations would proceed in a counterclockwise direction. I quickly realized I would be going second. The first person to go opened her mouth and simply uttered, “I love cats.” I sat in silence, thinking that cannot be all that she prepared, that cannot be a sufficient response, but she had nothing else to say and she remained silent. The principal shifted his gaze from her eyes to mine. It was my turn, and I talked about the people side of design and the need to engage and educate clients. As I spoke, I received a lot of blank stares, to the point that I opted not to share my how-to guide. Reflecting on this experience, I realized I did not know my audience—or the seemingly complaisant office atmosphere created by corporate offices with cubicles. Feeling defeated, I sat there and slowly peeled my orange rind in one piece. My prior experiences at small collaborative design firms did not adequately prepare me for an appropriate response to this corporate environment.

It seemed obvious that the economic downturn I tried to avoid through geographic relocation made its way to the Mid South region. I left that firm after four months, and it was only a matter of time before many employees were terminated. I focused on passing my architectural licensing exams. Through connections I made in Memphis, I landed a contract job at a firm...

Architect: Why are certain patterns in kitchen layouts perpetuated?

Anthropologist: Societal changes; for example, women’s roles at home, when suddenly women worked full-time jobs in addition to maintaining the home. Now consider other kitchen appliances such as the microwave or dishwasher....

Our subsequent discussions focused on the commodification of public space, and I started thinking more about how to use anthropology to translate my passion for spaces and places into a career. As I began to explore anthropology more deeply, it became clear that....
modifying my design thinking with a more authentic people-centered approach would be beneficial.

In the process of learning to apply anthropology, I discovered that my older, architecturally informed ways of communicating had new and interesting uses. My first professional experience in anthropology was during my practicum, which involved conducting an applied project outside of the academy rather than writing a traditional academic thesis. My master’s practicum took place at a local government agency involved in establishing and regulating architectural design standards for historic structures and districts in the city. The two primary tasks for my practicum included drafting a new version of existing illustrated design guidelines for a downtown historic district and gathering qualitative and quantitative data to help develop a future grant application.

Fieldwork for the practicum integrated my design and technical skills within the larger economic, social, and political context of Memphis. The design and technical skills matched my architectural skill set, while the ability to plan the work in larger social contexts tested my new anthropological tools of developing holistic results, defining and interviewing stakeholders, and collecting and analyzing data. The project also fulfilled my desire to experience and develop an understanding of the politics of place in order to overcome barriers in the decision making process.

I saw firsthand the importance of collaborative and process-driven approaches and outcomes. Through the practicum, I witnessed the benefits of social capital or how an anthropologist can facilitate social networks for holistic outcomes. The importance of documenting and disseminating information became even more apparent as I expanded my knowledge base and that of others. I also appreciated seeing the connections between theory and practice through engagement.

A goal of the practicum was for me to continue the work as full-time employment. Unfortunately, the government agency that supervised my work was under a hiring freeze. A few months after graduating from the program, in need of work, I accepted yet another contract job at another traditional architecture office. There were no opportunities to advance my anthropological knowledge base in human ecology, the study of the interaction of people within their environments, nor my interests in incorporating cultural heritage in the adaptive reuse of places. I continued looking elsewhere for a position that allowed me to use my anthropological skills in a design capacity.

The Initial Integration of Anthropology and Architecture

My first opportunity to integrate anthropological concepts with the practice of architecture came months after receiving my graduate degree. The opportunity resulted from numerous informal conversations with an anthropology professor who is also the director of a museum operated by the university where I did my anthropology training.

The museum is located at a prehistoric archaeological site, and its mission is to protect and interpret the site’s cultural and natural environments by providing the public with exceptional educational, participatory, and research opportunities on the landscape’s past and present Native American and traditional cultures. The director approached me with the idea of designing a “ghost structure” to be built by a visiting AmeriCorps team. A ghost structure is an indication of the space a structure once occupied. In this case, the form was shaped by data from archaeological excavations on a prehistoric earthen mound.

I worked with the AmeriCorps team by discussing project details, including the size, location, and materials of the proposed structure. Based on limited construction experience, time, and budget, a minimum of tools were used. The

Figure 1. The AmeriCorps Team Poses within their Ghost Structure during the Construction Process
structure was made of bamboo, a material that is readily accessible on-site. I researched simple construction methods and opted to assemble the structure with zip ties.

Half of the team members chopped the bamboo into small pieces for easier handling and assembly. The remaining team members and I created a model of the ghost structure using pipe cleaners, which were color-coded to understand the construction process. Since the other team members would be the ones most involved with constructing the ghost structure, it was important that they understood the construction logistics, while I provided design input when needed.

The project was a learning experience for all. Watching the AmeriCorps team trying to understand the model they were building and connecting the concept with the built form was enlightening. Rendering the idea in three dimensions helped us to think outside the box with the space and resources. The experience, one of my first opportunities to apply a more participatory design, provided insights into anthropological principles and how they intersect with an architectural skill set that could not be found in the classroom. The leadership at the museum also played a valuable part because of the director’s vision of a museum complex as a living laboratory with endless possibilities.

After this initial project concluded, the museum director encouraged me to explore my career path by enrolling in the Museum Studies Certificate Program at the University of Memphis, where I am currently a student. In addition, I am also a graduate assistant at the museum. Continuing in academia part-time allowed me to explore a variety of projects and receive a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the realities of a small museum.

For example, I conducted a short-term project on wayfinding at the Museum. Wayfinding is a term that means different things to different people and can change depending on the context. As an architect and anthropologist, I think about wayfinding as spatial problem solving. Wayfinding is a manner of assessing spatial cues that affect one’s ability to navigate through an environment. Common architectural features used in wayfinding include: lighting, sight lines, and signage.

Think about a trip to a grocery store where you have never shopped before. Do you reference the signs hanging in the aisles, or can you navigate the space based on previous experiences at other grocery stores? If you park in a parking garage, how do you remember where you parked your vehicle? Paying attention to how you unconsciously chose to “find your way” can open the possibilities for a little “lifehacking” (online slang for doing small, everyday things more efficiently).

At a museum, visitors rely on visual cues to make decisions about where to go and how to get to their destination. When wayfinding is poorly executed, the result can deter a visitor from deciding their course of action or cause confusion or a sense of disappointment. Adhering to good wayfinding principles enhances a visitor’s experience. The museum’s outdoor nature trail is a great resource for experimentation. Over the course of the semester, we relocated and reoriented the trail signs on more than one occasion. As a result, we created a few temporary versions of the trail map, while we continued to develop a comprehensive outdoor guide of the earthwork complex.

Expanding Boundaries

The decision to enter the Museum Studies Program is shaping my career in corollary ways. I am able to academically and professionally explore my passion for place by enhancing the Museum’s site as a teaching landscape that demonstrates the elegance and efficiency of the natural and built environment, resulting in an increased awareness and appreciation of evolving ecologies.

In addition to the graduate assistantship, I took the opportunity to apply anthropology to two 150-hour internships required by the Museum Studies Certificate Program. I became increasingly convinced that my interests could be explored within the museology field: expanding the boundaries of architecture and anthropology, researching the natural and built environments, and educating others about cultural heritage.

Through the advisors of the Museum Studies Program, I learned that a board member of a proposed museum sought to develop an internship opportunity. Emails were shared between participating parties, informal meetings occurred, and eventually there was a contract created for my internship. The board member defined the project objectives: conduct surveys and audience interviews to identify the programming goals, priorities, and interests of the public for the proposed museum. The final deliverable was a report that incorporated the results of the research, offered recommendations, and proposed next steps.

During my initial interactions with the board member, I learned more about the proposed location of the museum, the work of the artist that would be prominently featured in the museum, the names of the individuals to be interviewed, and the board member’s vision for the museum. During this process, the board member and I got to know one another to establish a level of trust. Eventually, the board member and I discussed the individuals for interviews and the types of questions to ask. I must admit that my knowledge of museum practices, participatory design, and community development informed my desire for a community-based approach. Yet, the board member was focused on only talking to museum professionals. I pointed out that in addition to speaking with “the experts,” we should also talk to community residents surrounding the proposed museum site. The board member viewed the project as top-down; I countered by proposing a bottom-up approach in which we would talk to all stakeholders. We seemed to be deadlocked for weeks. Then, one day, he read a book about non-profits that he felt confirmed the validity of what I explained. While he appreciated hearing my thoughts based on experience and museum literature, he needed confirmation from his book’s authoritative voice. We were making progress. We created a list of people to interview from the
community. The board member provided me with a list of questions, and with heavy editing, I provided revisions in order to talk with them rather than at them, brokering between a cultural institution and the community. This approach was key to the goal of gaining an understanding about potential partnerships and symbiotic relationships at the community level.

I contacted the people on the list and found that most were willing to participate in an hour-long discussion. There were reoccurring themes that the community members captured: creating awareness, providing authenticity, inclusivity versus exclusivity, connecting indoor and outdoor environments, and digital versus analog.

After additional discussions with the board member and a synopsis of what I discovered in the first round of interviews, we proceeded to another phase, which was to talk with museum professionals about how they believe museums effectively engage community. This time there were no set questions; the focus was simply to ask the museum professionals about how they define and act on visitor engagement. Key themes appeared, similar to the ones that emerged from the community interviews. Through qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, a list of recommendations were compiled:

1. Establish a museum identity that is also relevant to the community.
2. Provide effective leadership, educate staff, and reward volunteers.
3. Write a mission statement and five-year strategic plan.
4. Create awareness by building a strategic marketing and public relations plan.
5. Authentically engage the community.
6. Collaborate with the community on exhibits and educational programming.
7. Cultivate and maintain relationships with potential institutional partners.

More than likely, these recommendations already exist in a best practices manual, but the supporting text from both the community and professionals places these recommendations in context, creating actionable tasks. The above themes also create a framework through which I can continue interfacing anthropology and architecture in a professional setting.

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