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Keith M. Murphy. *Swedish Design: An Ethnography.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 264 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7966-3.

Swedish Design
An Ethnography
Keith M. Murphy



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Keith M. Murphy's ethnography of Swedish design is not an easy read. It requires commitment and concentration from the reader to engage with a research inquiry that spans more than ten years, involving long-term ethnographic fieldwork and dedicated scholarship. The monograph contributes to a growing body of literature in critical anthropologies of design. Murphy gives focus to what constitutes the political aspects of Swedish design and design work, the effects of the political upon social relations between people and designed things, and how meanings are made through these relations. An important contribution of this ethnography to existing research in this field is the author's attempt to challenge the ways anthropologists conceptualize the relation between form and matter towards different ways of thinking about the meaning of things within sociopolitical systems. He does so by combining in-depth analysis of cultural phenomena with detailed ethnographic studies of designers' design practices and the things they make. In so doing, he proposes a semiotics of material production, which aims to build partial connections between performative aspects of language in use with ideologies underpinning and framing assumptions of the politics of Swedish design.

Murphy asks us to consider two main questions: *How*

are things designed to be political? and *How are things made to mean?* He critically analyzes how the political nature of Swedish design is reproduced, tracing the role played by social actors and institutions. He achieves this through a semiotic analysis of where, when, how, and why everyday narratives of Swedish design have an important role in maintaining ongoing significance for the public consciousness both inside and outside of the nation-state. In the introduction, "Disentangling Swedish Design," Murphy proposes to go beyond a claim that design has politics. Instead, he brings to the fore "the complex ways through which design is constructed, abstracted, distributed, operationalized, and given meaning in Sweden" (p. 25). He explores this through a series of cultural domains: the home, the design world, the studio, and the global design market. In chapter 1, "The Diagram of Swedish Design," the author presents his analytical framework, relating this to material culture studies and science studies. Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze, he argues that Swedish design operates as a diagram mapping sociopolitical landscapes of people, things, and ideologies. Importantly, the diagram makes visible generational aspects of how an object comes into being and the roles that lines of enunciation and visibility play within that. Consideration is given to the ways anthropolo-

gists conceptualize the relations between form and matter, and Murphy argues that a more sophisticated understanding is required while reflecting upon the meaning of things. Building upon the linguistic anthropologist Asif Agha's concept of "registerment," Murphy sets out to reestablish links between "the visible and the articulable, between forms and ideologies of design in Sweden" (p. 49).^[1] In tracing these links, he provides detailed historical contextualization of social democracy and the role played by design, referring to cases in Scandinavia and the former East Germany. He is careful, however, to point out that historical contextualization of the sociopolitical aspects of design are always variable and contingent.

In chapter 2, "Building the Beautiful Home," Murphy provides factual historical detail to substantiate the lines of visibility apparent in the metaphorical use of home as an organizing principle by political parties for transforming Swedish society from the 1930s onwards. National romantic ideals of home and nation become intertwined, laying the path for aesthetic reform, problematization of judgments of taste, and reconceptualization of beauty, encompassing a synthesis of art, design, and industrial production. A key figure here in reshaping Swedish sociopolitical cosmology at the turn of the century was the feminist and social critic Ellen Key. A central issue in her work was how beauty should be made accessible to everyone through everyday products. Importantly, as Murphy discusses, Key began to challenge predominant Kantian ideals of pure beauty confined to the realms of fine art; instead she began to link beauty and the experiencing of everyday things with a different kind of beauty related to simplicity, affordability, and functionality. According to Murphy, the tracing lines of enunciation are evident in the policies and writings of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal and can be compared to a form of social engineering described as a piecemeal approach, characterized by its openness, transparency, and flexibility. However, lines of enunciation appear to become most visible in the publication of the 1931 manifesto "acceptera." "Here, the authors—Sven Markelius, Pers Eskil Sundahl, Walter Gahn, Erik Gunnar Asplund, and Gregor Paulsson—extend Key's ideas of aesthetic reform and reconceptualization of beauty to encompass the entire built environment, whereby the idea of ugliness ceases to exist. The main issue, articulated eloquently by Murphy in this chapter, is how key artists, architects, designers, and academics in this period influenced not only the design of things but the design of the Swedish welfare state (policies) and the crucial role the home and home life played here in social

reform. The author demonstrates clearly how the politics of social democracy in Sweden become embedded in the ongoing material engagements within people's everyday environments.

Chapter 3, "In the Design World," gives focus to the reproduction of the diagram of Swedish design discussed earlier. Murphy aims to situate design work within the wider social context of the Stockholm design world. His second aim is to account for how contemporary designers reproduce the conditions for the reproduction of stylistic vocabulary common to Swedish design despite the fact that the politics of design are rarely discussed by designers. After Mikhail Bakhtin, Murphy argues that contemporary designers he has been working with continuously juggle their ideals and commercial pressures in order to survive economically. This results in heteroglossic artifacts which are essentially forms embodying multiple meanings. Form and meaning have, according to Bakhtin, become controlled and regimented within the modernist project. Classifying and categorizing design objects to make them culturally meaningful is one of the main roles assigned to the design world, alongside generating economic value for designers. Murphy's main arguments in this chapter rest with, "the circulation of design objects through all of these design world domains, and in various modes, is precisely what affords their appropriation as political objects, even if their creators do not affiliate with such voicings" (pp. 123-124). By way of conclusion, his findings reveal that "to most designers operating in the Stockholm design world, the lines of enunciation are easily recognized but left largely unarticulated in how they conceive and describe their work. But not the lines of visibility. These lines persist, and the designers are quite involved in their reproduction" (p. 127). The designers Murphy interviewed did not explicitly admit to their design work being political. However, some references to moral responsibility of how people should interact with things was apparent; the question remains whether this is particular to Swedish design or the contemporary Stockholm design world. Many contemporary designers across many fields of design, including industrial, interaction, interior, architecture, and so forth in many different countries, are concerned with social and political aspects of design and designing.

In chapter 4, "In the Studio," Murphy traces the effects of everyday design practices on reproducing Swedish design's normative lines of visibility. Ongoing interactions between designers during collaborative design work are understood in terms of shaping the conditions necessary for a cultural geometry to reemerge. At

the same time, collaboration is central to what Murphy calls “form giving” and thus how objects come into being. He argues that form giving is not just a process of a designer’s individual choice. Rather, it comes through the interactive work that the collaborative team do together within the design studio. Murphy observes that after many years of collaborative working it is sometimes difficult to determine who actually designed the things made, due to designers developing a shared style. Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari the argument that all language is made up of order words, Murphy proposes that design interactions are organized through an overlapping between order-words and passwords, which help structure form giving, resulting in an emerging design. He elaborates in detail on inscriptive practices and the role played by perlocutionary inscriptions (after J. L. Austin), arguing that perlocutionary inscriptions are made by ordering practices and result in the fixation of form towards a finalization of an object. According to Murphy, the diagram of Swedish design relies upon multiple forces, with the performative being the most visible and is responsible for keeping “the cultural geometry in play through the order-words and perlocutionary inscriptions that contributes to the ongoing reproduction and conservation of the cultural geometry in the very barest moments of form giving” (p. 149).

Chapter 5, “Displays of Force,” discusses historically the role played by national and international civic exhibitions, trade fairs, museums, and IKEA play in propagating Swedish design. Working with Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, he introduces these four institutions, which he identifies as part of an exhibitionary complex contributing to the “cultural substance” of Swedish design: democratic, functional, modern, and caring qualities (p.203). The public’s role in experiencing these qualities, according to Murphy, is central when experiencing Swedish design, and the four institutions presented are central in conveying a Swedish design identity. He clearly articulates how these institutions do their work in making design Swedish through offering publics imagined futures, embodied experiences, utopian spaces based upon seemingly possible realities, modesty of scale, and the embodiment of ideals into tangible objects for consumption; Swedish identity is thus celebrated as a brand.[2]

Throughout the book, Murphy refers to an impressive list of theorists and utilizes their concepts with skillful precision. In designing a social cosmology, he refers to Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemonic political systems to discuss how the cultural geometry and its forms

of organization in Sweden are not enforced upon people living and working in Sweden. Rather, people have taken up political systems in Sweden because they “resonate with people’s experiences” and as such are plausible (p. 213). As he says, “Thus the myth of Swedish Design is, in fact, real” and proposes that the reason for this could be that design has an important role to play in the Swedish social cosmology (p. 214). This is made possible through widespread accessibility to household products which “perform much of the mundane work of managing mundane hardship” (p. 215). By way of conclusion, he outlines the broader implication of his findings and proposes further areas for consideration in an anthropology of design: further elaboration of his semiotics of material production; interrelation between political systems and the role played by designers in shaping social life through designed objects; the relationship between broader categorization of style, material culture and politics, and the details of design processes and practices; and development of the means for registering the ways designed things are made, transformed, and embedded into social life. Importantly, underpinning the foregoing is a coupling of thing making (what he terms cultural geometry) with meaning making (what he terms the final vocabulary) as closely related social processes. He acknowledges, however, that while language is crucial for his semiotic inquiry, it is one among many resources used by people engaged in meaning making.

The strength of the ethnography is the attempt to link the generation of form with the wider social and political conditions for reproduction of form. Building upon primarily the theories of Austin, Paul Ricoeur, Deleuze and Guattari, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Charles Goodwin, he offers a detailed analysis of designing in action and form giving within design practices of designers working in design studios in Stockholm. While this is a fascinating study in its own right with regard to how design form comes into being during collaborative design processes, I am still left wondering if this was particular to the Swedish design diagram or characteristic of collaborative designing practices (for the most part industrial designers—furniture and consumer products) in general. I say this because I recognize and have experienced firsthand, through participating in collaborative design practices, similar characteristics of collaborative design processes and practices in Denmark and Norway. In the fifth chapter, Murphy convincingly demonstrates the role institutions play in creating, substantiating, and branding Swedish design; here, the lines of enunciation and lines of visibility are clearly accentuated.

Throughout the book, the author refers to design in a general sense and presents excerpts of dialogues with himself and industrial/furniture designers within design studios in Stockholm. Design processes and practices are not the same across all design fields, and there is a tendency for the author to overlook this when making claims regarding the nature of the political in Swedish design and the influence different design methodologies and methods have upon form giving. There was also a tendency to present an anthropological point of view as providing understandings of Swedish design, which until Murphy's ethnographic study have been limited. In this respect, reference to literature on cooperative design, participatory design, co-design, sustainable design, and design activism to name but a few approaches might have been helpful. As it is, I was not entirely convinced that the empirical materials of designers practices presented to support the claims of the particularities of Swedish design are in fact any different from more general understandings of industrial design processes and practices.

Design is presented at points throughout the book in generalist terms. As such, it is difficult for the reader to know what kind of design the author is referring to, what kind of designers he is working with, and therefore what particularities of different kinds of design practices are specific to each design field. Design can be concerned with the design of objects, but it can also be concerned with non-object-oriented processes—for example the design of strategy, policy, engineering systems, and infrastructure. I was also struck by the focus on the Stockholm design world as being the center of world design and Swedish design. I wonder how designers and design educators working and/or being educated in Umeå, Gothenburg, and Malmo would respond to that. What appears absent from the Stockholm design world that Murphy refers to is designers working either as indepen-

dents or within larger companies who are focusing on more user-oriented approaches to designing. Here, there is an extensive history that references and acknowledges the social, political, and collaborative aspects of designing computer systems, artifacts, and industrial products in Sweden.

The monograph is well written, eloquently interweaving theoretical concepts from anthropology, philosophy, and politics with historical and ethnographic detail. While impressive in the way he utilizes these concepts to trace the lines of enunciation and visibility, traces of his own critical reflexivity as a researcher concerning the limits of semiotic analysis for understanding what happens between designers during collaborative design practices in the generation and reproduction of form are for the most part unarticulated. *Swedish Design: An Ethnography* will be of interest to scholars and graduate students in anthropology, sociology, design studies, and the history of design as well as scholars engaged in design research. Murphy provides the reader with an approach to carrying out anthropology of design, outlining thematic areas for consideration; in so doing, he offers an invaluable resource for researchers and students with interests in design and its wider social political relations, interaction analysis, and anthropological approaches to understanding the relation between the political, design processes and practices.

Notes

[1]. Asif Agha, "The Social Life of a Cultural Value," *Language and Communication* 23 (2003): 231-273.

[2]. Further reference could be made to Penelope Harvey, *Hybrids of Modernity: Anthropology, the Nation State and the Universal Exhibition* (London: Routledge, 1996).

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