The editors of this volume have compiled 14 papers, half of them presented at the 11th European Association of Social Anthropologists Biennial Conference (2010) and the other half commissioned especially for this work. In the opening chapter, two of the editors, Ton Otto and Rachel Smith, “argue that design anthropology is coming of age as a separate (sub)discipline with its own concepts, methods, research practices, and practitioners” (p. 1). They do not explicitly define this new field but, instead, reveal some of its hallmarks by enumerating the contributions that design makes to anthropology and vice versa. Thus, design anthropology is “future oriented” by virtue of design’s “tools and practices of collaborative future making” (p. 3) because it assumes the overtly interventionist agenda of design, “both to create contextual knowledge and to develop specific solutions” (p. 4). And it becomes, like design, “(almost) always a process of collaboration between different disciplines and stakeholders” (p. 4). Anthropology provides the new field with theory and the tools of cultural interpretation so that design concepts benefit from “theorizing the context of usage and interpreting the cultural meaning of things” (p. 4). Anthropology, Otto and Smith suggest, also provides investigation of the past for understanding the present and “anticipating the future” and “endows design anthropology with a unique sensitivity to the value orientations of the various groups affected by design projects” (p. 4).

Otto and Smith set the stage by reviewing the history of collaboration between anthropologists and designers with an emphasis on the incorporation of ethnographic methods into design processes, a theme that is picked up in several subsequent chapters. They offer design anthropology, however, not as a better way to do design—although they suggest that it will improve design practice—but, rather, as a “distinct style [of knowing]”—a new way of doing anthropology that is more sustainable, more collaborative, and more interventionist.

The organization of the book offers additional clues to what design anthropology might be. The chapters are grouped into a section on concepts, methods, and practices followed by three sections on the materiality, temporality, and relationality of design, respectively. The first of these four main sections reviews how design anthropology is done: what people do to organize themselves, participate, collect and analyze information, generate design concepts, and so on. The last three sections take up the material concerns of design anthropology—the orientation to things and ideas in the world—as well as the attention to past and future, sustainability and foresight, and the collaborative and sometime conflict-ridden relations that emerge in and around design anthropology projects.

There is another way in which the book is organized, although it does not appear in the table of contents. At its center are 32 glossy, high-quality plates; they contribute immensely to the book by clearly illustrating many of the methods, processes, and findings discussed in the text. Wrapped around this core is the chapter by Caroline Gatt and Tim Ingold, which provides perhaps the strongest programmatic statement about the new field as “anthropology by means of design,” that is, anthropology that is strongly action oriented and even activist (p. 141).
This description of the new field, however, is not shared by all contributors. Design anthropology appears to be anything but unified. While this diversity is considered a strength by Keith Murphy and George Marcus (p. 251), the lack of a consistent referent or approach puts in question the claim that design anthropology is a separate (sub)discipline. Some of the different meanings of design anthropology that emerge include, for example, a way to revitalize how anthropologists do ethnography, as Murphy and Marcus write, by placing design “alongside and within ethnographic work” to “help us substantially reconfigure the fundamental building blocks of what ethnographers do, so as to better match the conditions shaping research that we now inhabit” (p. 257). Elizabeth Tunstall suggests that design anthropology is an alternative to an anthropology of colonialism and inequality that “enacts the critique of positionality and power articulated by Third World scholars, indigenous scholars, and second and third wave feminists by reframing the problem areas of social impact as within the value systems of imperialism” (pp. 244–245).

Other chapters provide descriptions of design anthropology projects in which further possible meanings of design anthropology emerge. These range quite widely. Ian Ewart, for example, provides a fascinating example of the anthropological study of design; he documents and analyzes the building of bridges using traditional or introduced processes and materials observed in the course of a field project (pp. 85–99). In a very different vein, some authors examine and theorize the combination of anthropology and design to understand and evaluate the process and its outcomes. For example, Wendy Gunn and Christian Clausen’s chapter on the design of indoor climate asks whether “qualitative knowledge gained through field studies of everyday practices of negotiating indoor climate products and systems of control [could] be a resource for innovation potential in the building industry?” (p. 160). Christina Wasson and Crysta Metcalf’s chapter on a Motorola project, for which University of North Texas students conducted field studies, provides how-to’s and, especially, success factors for “partnership” (pp. 216–231).

The authors of several chapters reflect on projects in which they played active roles in determining goals and influencing outcomes, thereby raising questions about how feasible or desirable it is for researchers to study themselves. In some places convoluted writing gets in the way of exposition and argument. Nevertheless, as we see increased numbers of projects that combine anthropology and design, whether to build better widgets or to make a better world, we need more and riskier work to question the meaning, methods and value of these projects. Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice recognizes this need by addressing if not resolving the question of design anthropology’s status as a new (sub)discipline.