



Guidelines for ethnographic practices in the development of design projects: reflections on an applied model

Orientaciones paraprácticas etnográficas en el desarrollo de proyectos de diseño: reflexiones de un modelo aplicado

Gabriel Ángel López Macías

FIRST AUTHOR AND CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

CONCEPTUALIZATION-RESEARCH-

METHODOLOGY-VISUALIZATION-WRITING

gabriel.lopez@edu.uaa.mx

Autonomous University Aguascalientes

Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes, Mexico

ORCID: 0000-0002-3626-832X

Received: April 7th, 2024

Approved: June 25th, 2024

Published: January 27th, 2025

◆ Abstract

Ethnography has been a tool to guide or operate the information search stage in contexts or groups of people within design projects, but this activity has revealed intentions and actions that are far from respecting its nature. This text reports the results of a qualitative research that takes up the proposal of a model called Ethnodesign for the development of design projects focused on the potential relationship with Ethnography. The study unfolds through the planning, management and iteration of the model in two scenarios: training in Design with undergraduate students, and in professional projects with Design consultants. Finally, it presents the related projects and the main findings during their development, arranged in a series of guidelines to improve ethnographic practices in Design. The paper expresses the need to permanently promote a critical approach that favors a positive impact, both in the formative and professional stages of Design, in terms of its relationship with Ethnography in the development of projects, thus distancing itself from the influences present in the development of design projects: the anxiety for immediacy, the aspiration of results by decree and the subordination to third party interests, which are far from respecting the ethnographic nature.

Keywords: *design, Ethnography, project design, training, profesional*

◆ Resumen

La etnografía ha sido una herramienta que permite orientar u operar la etapa de búsqueda de información en contextos o grupos de personas dentro de los proyectos de diseño, pero esta actividad ha dado cuenta de intenciones y acciones que distan de respetar su naturaleza. Este texto reporta los resultados de una investigación cualitativa que retoma la propuesta de un modelo llamado Etnodiseño para el desarrollo de proyectos de diseño centrados en la potencial relación con la Etnografía. El estudio se despliega a través de la planeación, gestión e iteración del modelo en dos escenarios: la formación en Diseño con estudiantes de pregrado, y en proyectos profesionales con consultoras de Diseño. Finalmente, presenta los proyectos vinculados y los principales hallazgos durante su desarrollo, dispuestos en una serie de orientaciones para mejorar las prácticas etnográficas en Diseño. El escrito manifiesta la necesidad de fomentar permanentemente un enfoque crítico que favorezca un impacto positivo, tanto en la etapa formativa como profesional del Diseño, en tanto su relación con la Etnografía en el desarrollo de proyectos, tomando así distancia de las influencias presentes en el desarrollo de proyectos de diseño: la ansiedad por la inmediatez, la aspiracionalidad de resultados por decreto y la subordinación a intereses de terceros, que distan de respetar la naturaleza etnográfica.

Palabras clave: *diseño, Etnografía, diseño de proyectos, formación, profesional*

◆ Introduction

During the development of design projects, the concept of *ethnography* is discussed directly or indirectly, particularly when it is presented in the academic field or discussed in the professional field, given that our process demands information about others: knowing their environment, their needs, their aspirations, their way of life, their language, their relationships, their behaviors, among other multiple factors that constitute them as an individual and social actor potentially linked to an object or service. Directly, it occurs, for example, when it is stated that Ethnography becomes part of the understanding of concepts such as *knowing, understanding, empathizing or immersing* oneself in contexts; and, indirectly, when only components of it are taken up that will be incorporated into the process, such as: observation, interviews, experiential scripts, among others. In both scenarios, the intention is rooted in presenting, arguing or making visible that Design is a discipline interested in getting closer to others to move towards the construction of arguments. However, given the acceleration system in production and consumption processes, the focus rooted in disciplinary area or specialization, and the anxiety to materialize objectives or justify actions have led to Design becoming part of a system of pursuit of immediacy. In this scenario, Ethnography emerges as an alibi to justify decisions within the design process, where information is urgent for materialization, and where its essence is weakened or inhibited: knowing and respecting people and their contexts.

Following Veggel (2005), in his propositional critique of how Design frequently tries to adapt Ethnography to its own interests in time, process or use of tools, it is understood that there is an atavism, interested or ignored, of adapting it to convenience, ignoring the respect and scope it deserves. In his account, the author mentions that this is nothing more than the origin and the cause why a large number of ethnographers are in constant conflict to demonstrate respect for their discipline, trying to demonstrate its nature and inviting dialogue to prevent it from being subjected to the interests of third parties.

Accordingly, Wasson and Metcalf (2013) speak of a Design whose final purpose seems to be exclusively the material object, that is, that exhibits a clear orientation towards the specific search for information about the desired interaction between the person and the object in question: the fractional observation of aspects that correspond to justify the development. Martín-Juez (2002), as well as Charlotte and Gislev (2015), essentially agree that the relationship between Ethnography and Design ends up showing a directionality focused on finding arguments for the development of products oriented to particular interests. That

is to say, an orientation manifested by the name of Design (industrial, graphic, textile, etc.), or its specialization (corporate identity, packaging, interaction, setting, usability, etc.), with that which attracts Ethnography depending on the interest at particular moments (observation tools, interviews, construction of experiential scripts, the concept of empathy, among others), even reaching the point of adjusting them in a significant or arbitrary way to the times and processes that suit Design.

However, it seems that Design remains, in its generality, anchored to the tendency that marks that all those disciplines that seek to understand people and social groups, faced with the demand for time and the great amount of information that can be generated from it, end up using Ethnography as a pretext to take only that information that allows it to argue or seek the coherence of the whole (Sahlins, 1997). The above, using an adaptation to convenience to provide information that validates particular objects within a continuous production system, and thus adding to the development of products that are only looking to stimulate temporary wonder and curiosity, promoting materializations of the immediate future, but which can quickly become superficial pasts (Suchman, 2011).

According to Lindley and Sharma (2014), this shows a position where Design uses Ethnography mainly to satisfy the demand of environments with anxiety of immediacy, promoting that the resulting products or services adapt in some way to the lives of people (in the generality of the processes, called “customers”), and promoting mercantile systems or temporary notoriety. Thus, Design ends up both evidencing a constant inability to transcend people’s lives in the long term, and being a practice considered trivial, since by understanding people exclusively as recipients of a product developed by others, it ends up reducing social contexts to an environment of mere consumerism (Ladner, 2012) and showing a predisposed incorporation to make the environments and practices of real life somehow accessible to them (Charlotte and Gisle, 2015). In this way, “knowing”, the basic principle of Ethnography, is distorted (Spradley, 1979); since it can and should not only be used with the intention of understanding, describing and materializing products, but it suggests a process of immersion and work whose objective cannot be directed to calm the anxiety of generating information to build arguments for the material configuration of objects (Otto and Charlotte, 2013).

Therefore, in the field of Design, the justification for intervention, the idealized object, or the search to redesign a particular object, should not condition the approach (Button, 2000); that is, what is seen should never be what one wants to see or what one senses needs to see. A design, then, that does not deviate from the above, will continue to show its inability to understand that the objective of relating to Ethnography should never have the intention of projecting the designer’s own interests, as an individual or professional, into the lives of others (Crabtree et al., 2012).

◆ **State to be amended**

The atavism of practices such as the above is considered a scenario that invites to propose discourses to favor respect for nature and a scope of both Ethnography and the proposal of a design with an interested approach to people and their contexts. Following Garfinkel (1984) in his approach to the concept of ethnomethodology, it favors a critical reflection on the position in which the outsider (in this case the designer) sees or places the social actor in order to approach him during his actions. The proposal allows us to identify a series of practices that any discipline that incorporates ethnographic aspects should avoid: 1) operating by looking for general descriptions, 2) looking for what is isolatable, typical or uniform (self-regulated vision at convenience), 3) operating under the usual way of looking, 4) developing at the lowest level of demand: as anyone could see, 5) putting personal biographies before what is observed, generating a closed perspective anchored to assumptions, and 6) assigning appearances or imputing the observer's own biography. These points favor in principle the identification of adulterated ethnographic exercises that seek immediacy through trivial information, and that do not require a significant investment of time or skill to be worked on.

In this context, Wolff and Robles (2006) identify the following errors that are manifest in a recurrent manner in the immersion in social contexts within disciplinary processes outside of Ethnography: the selective treatment of information to accommodate what is seen to the phenomenon of study; The failure to integrate members of the context as experts; the idiotization of the field of study by abstaining from any a priori consideration of what is happening; forcing reality to correspond to the concepts of design; being sensitive only to the most visible points and not to the structures; trivializing any case of counter-evidence; developing linear or falsified reports to suit the logic being pursued; prioritizing results; the opportunistic change of putting what is accessible before what one does not know how to obtain; and, finally, making exclusively illustrative use of the data obtained and not as a solid argument for development.

This work then takes up the Ethnodesign model proposed by López-Macías et al. (2020), an approach that the authors project to recover the essence of Ethnography and enhance its relationship with Design. The model, created through a nodal interrelation of key aspects of both Ethnography (nodes of destination, member and risk) and Design (nodes of understanding, projection, development and materialization), favors a system for the development of projects aimed at conserving nature and relating both disciplines.

Based on these nodes, a system of interrelations is proposed that deploys four matrices as an instrumental projection; these expose both the conceptual definition of each relationship (reference), as well as the priority actions to be put into practice (guidelines) and a series of relevant tools as a reference (work proposal) (see figure 1).

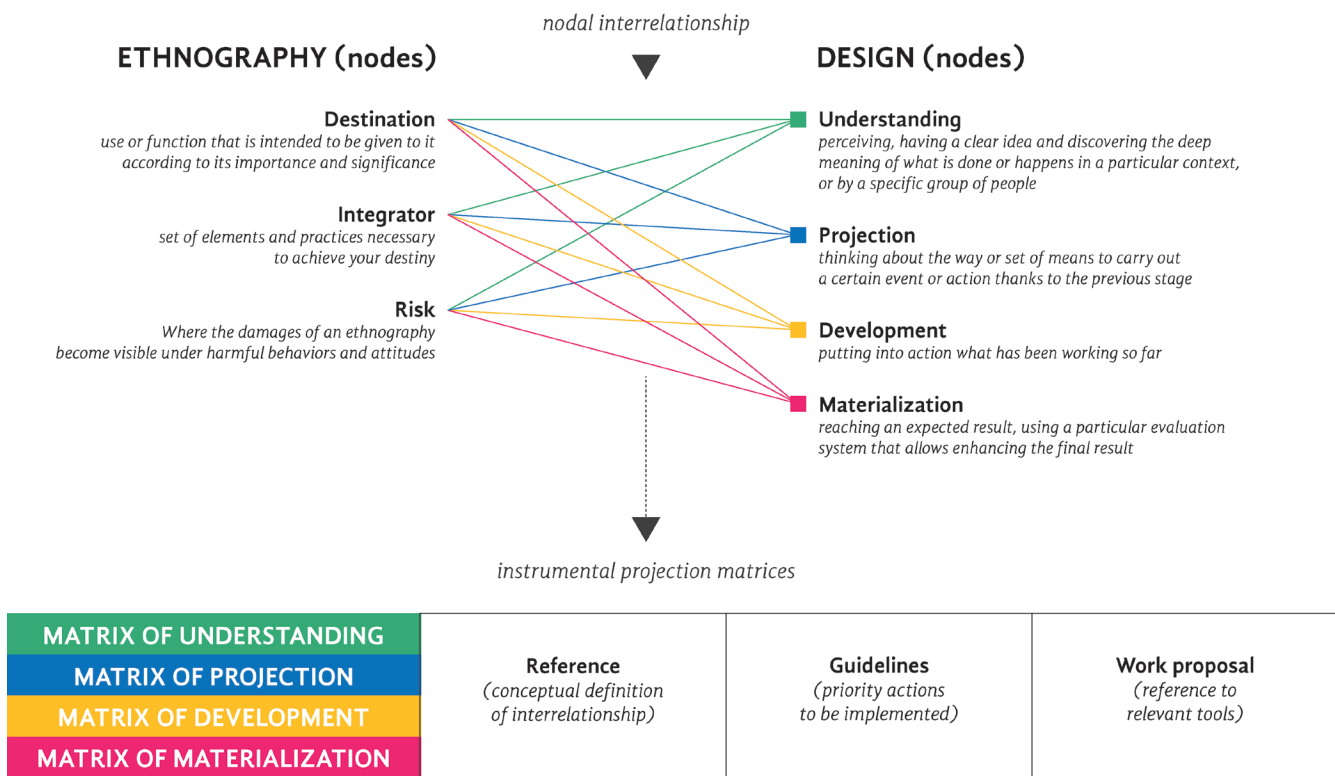


Figure 1. Visualization of the Ethnodesign model. Source: Own elaboration.

The model also establishes three imperative principles throughout the process: 1) incorporate holistic behavior at all times, and encourage the active and constant participation of all those involved; 2) examine and choose the techniques to be applied according to their relevance, reflecting on why, how, when and where they will be applied; 3) eradicate any assault behavior (arriving and stealing the information you want), parachuting (appearing and disappearing without warning taking the data that is considered "sufficient"), and extractivist (extracting from people what the third party is interested in and leaving).

In this way, the work presented here is aligned with the objective of promoting a change in the way of exercising and understanding the potential of the Ethnography-Design relationship, by incorporating an approach that in itself invites reflection on how the Design discipline has been making use of Ethnography, and encouraging Design to move away from a system that pursues quick answers: immediacy. The development, then, moves from the conceptual and instrumental proposal of the model to its iteration in two scenarios: training in Design in the undergraduate academic field, and the development of design projects in the professional field.

◆ Implementation: A model in action

This section presents the planning and experience of iterating the Ethnodesign model in two scenarios, with the objective of assessing its behavior in its instrumental dimension and conceptual scope in projects as a reinforcement tool to create and operate development in favor of people and their contexts. It is worth contextualizing that the city of Aguascalientes, the territory where this research is carried out, has a population of more than one million four hundred thousand inhabitants, located in the central area of Mexico, and where design actively participates in the economic, social and cultural context, being a profession of continuous supply and demand.

Scenario 1. Design Training: Graphic Design students in their final semester at the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes (UAA), within the Strategic Design course.

The relevance of implementation within the Center for Design and Construction Sciences (CCDC) of the UAA is based on a solid teaching experience of 13 years in said center. The CCDC offers seven undergraduate programs in Design and has more than two thousand active students; standing out locally, regionally and nationally for the accreditation of its programs at the highest level by the Interinstitutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES), and for having international certifications and links given its academic quality.

This scenario focuses on ninth semester students in the Strategic Design course, a curricular subject that promotes the approach to complex projects aligned with current trends in design. Their participation is relevant as they are designers with practically developed academic skills, who also have professional experience, through professional internship programs or even part-time jobs. Therefore, the iteration of the model is projected as a reference tool in the development of complex projects.

Scenario 2. Professional projects: design offices and consultancies in Aguascalientes, Mexico.

The implementation is developed in the professional context given the direct relationship of more than 10 years in the sector in the development of design projects with regional, national and international scope. The link with the work teams includes designers in offices, agencies and design consultancies; acquiring relevance in a context where there is a government initiative to include the state in the global network of creative cities and geoparks, highlighting the importance of design and creative industries in the region.

It is projected, then, that the design offices and consultancies have a focus on micro, small and medium-sized companies in the trade and services sector; that they work in multidisciplinary teams made up of areas of Design (graphic, interior, industrial, architectural, fashion), Communication, Advertising, Sociology and Marketing; and that they also have a plurality of profiles of national or international postgraduate degrees

or specialties in design management, innovation, direction and other related disciplines. The implementation is adjusted to projects already scheduled in the work spaces, inserting the model naturally as a guiding, support and reference tool.

Regarding the period, this implementation is carried out during August-December 2021, time available for the development of the research and which is aligned with the semester program of the aforementioned subject in the academic context, while adapting to the average time of project development within offices and consulting firms.

It is considered pertinent to mention that, during the present work, the academic and social context continued to be affected by the health contingency due to COVID-19, which resulted in a challenge both to the development of this research, as well as to the adaptability and relevance of the model to adjust to “restrictions” of mobility, distance learning, confinement, among others.

1. Four-point strategy for scenario configuration

To generate a relevant implementation system in terms of the possibility of observation, analysis and assessment, an iteration system is developed for both scenarios based on the four-point strategy proposed by Robinson (2014), enlarging a relevant sampling to collect information.:

- ❖ Definition of the sample universe: necessary inclusion and exclusion attributes, weighing the parameters of homogeneity and heterogeneity.
- ❖ Decision on the sample size: number necessary for its implementation, remaining flexible and considering the design, duration and allocation of available resources.
- ❖ Selection of a sampling strategy: deliberation of the necessary particularities.
- ❖ Sourcing sample: determination of the context that provides participants with a sensitive approach and operation of ethical skills to enhance their participation.

Similarly, a congruent implementation is projected between the conceptual model proposal and, following Taylor and Bogdan (1987), the guidelines for the qualitative development of research. Therefore, guiding considerations are established to safeguard and favor a non-forced or influenced scenario that is congruent in itself with an ethnographic exercise: facilitate the development of projects in the environment, take advantage of the potential of the platforms and record the cooperative work, guarantee easy access to the work developed, establish a permanent relationship of trust, use descriptive terms instead of evaluative ones, implement a continuous registration system, adopt

a non-offensive social dialogue approach, and encourage the creation of various spaces for dialogue that facilitate the comparison of results and experiences among participants.

The scenarios are then formed as follows: Design training: 30 students from the Strategic Design subject group (21 women and nine men). Their distribution is configured based on the analysis of information in three key aspects: professional profile, immediate social context and experience around confinement (see figure 2).

1	Definition of the sample universe	Sample size	2
	<p>Heterogeneity: professional profiles</p> <p>Homogeneity: graphic designers, ninth semester, contextual affinity</p>	5 projects	
	Selection of sample strategy	Supply sample	
	<p>At least 1 member with a management profile</p> <p>At least 1 member with multi/interdisciplinary experience.</p>	Graphic design degree from the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes, Mx	
3			4

Figure 2. Four-point strategy for design training. Source: Own elaboration.

Professional Projects: Design offices with a work system oriented towards consulting and the development of strategic projects for public and private institutions (see figure 3).

1	Definition of the sample universe	Sample size	2
	<p>Heterogeneity: different offices.</p> <p>Homogeneity: lead designer, multi or interdisciplinary approach, regional projects</p>	5 projects	
	Selection of sample strategy	Supply sample	
	<p>Multi or interdisciplinary orientation.</p> <p>Closeness to user-centered design, participatory design or slow design (discourses referred to in the construction of ethnodesign)</p>	Aguascalientes, Mx	
3			4

Figura 3. Estrategia de cuatro puntos para proyectos profesionales. Fuente: Elaboración propia.

II. Implementation system and calendar

In both scenarios, implementation takes place in the naturalness of the work system. In the first, during the course sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3 to 6 p.m. through virtual meetings and work on the Miro platform. For the second, in weekly meetings of at least one hour with the team in charge of the projects through Zoom or Miro, or in person. All sessions occur according to the time available for research and under a balanced projection for the comprehensive approach to the model. Sesión 1. Planteamiento general de la implementación (tres horas): socialización de la propuesta de participación del grupo en la fase de la investigación.

The work with the students is developed in 16 sessions deployed as follows:

- ❖ Session 1. General approach to implementation (three hours): dissemination of the proposal for group participation in the research phase.
- ❖ Session 2. Comprehensive dissemination of the model (three hours): dialogue on the components of the model, its conceptual construction and, in particular, the structure of the matrices for its instrumental application for the development of projects.
- ❖ Sessions 3 to 12. Teamwork (three hours each): the work system proposes that the consideration of the matrices begins on Thursdays and that progress be presented on Tuesdays, thus allowing more time for their development.
- ❖ Session 13. Project presentations (three hours): the space gives each team the opportunity to present the development and scope of the projects, sharing their work system, the integration of the model, the landing of the proposals, their development experience, as well as the scope and assessment of the model as a guide.
- ❖ Sessions 14 to 16. Individual interviews (thirty minutes each): interview sessions with at least three members of each team individually, with the aim of investigating their experiences; thus providing a space to confirm and reflect on ideas previously expressed as a group, as well as to learn about those individual perceptions related to the scope of the model, the vision of Ethnodesign and the experience in general (see figure 4).

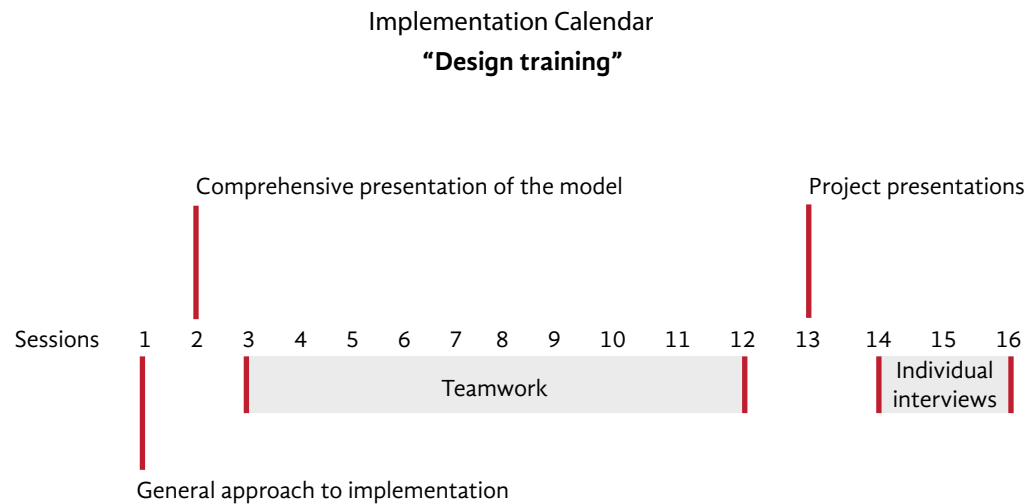


Figure 4. Implementation schedule for training in Design.
Source: Own elaboration.

The work with the offices and consultants is carried out in nine sessions as follows:

- ❖ Session 1. General approach to implementation (two hours): socialization with the teams responsible for the projects regarding the link with research.
- ❖ Session 2. Comprehensive socialization of the model (three hours): presentation and dialogue on the components from their conceptual construction to the particularities of the matrices; these, finally delivered as guiding tools for the development of their projects, respect the integrity of the teams’ own work model.
- ❖ Sessions 3 to 7. Work sessions (minimum of two hours each): development of spaces for dialogue on the status and succession of the development of the projects, allowing a flexible exchange of experiences, progress and concerns.
- ❖ Session 8. Project presentations (three hours each): face-to-face visits to the work spaces where the teams openly present the status and scope of their projects as their exercise of linking with the model.
- ❖ Session 9. Individual interviews (thirty minutes each): development of one-on-one interviews with at least three members of each team to learn about their experiences and confirm, complement or reveal aspects not made visible in the previous sessions (see figure 5).

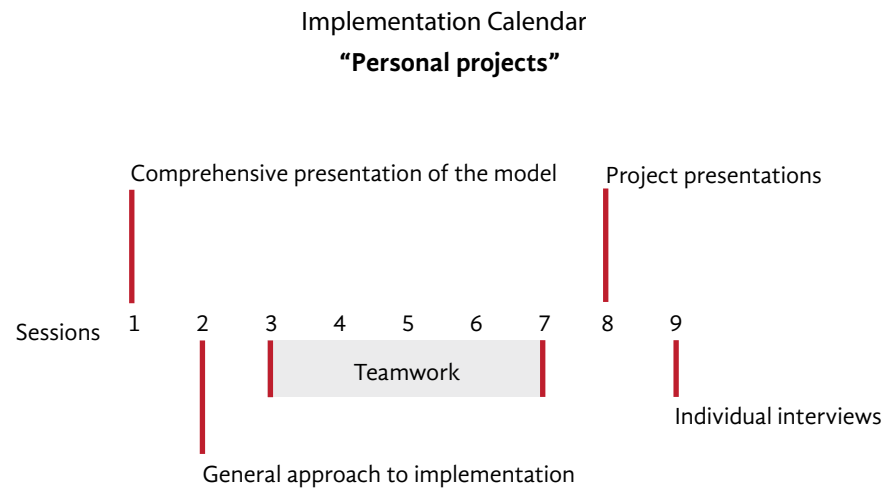


Figure 5. Implementation schedule for personal projects.
Source: Own elaboration

Results: reflexions and orientations

1. Projects resulting from training in Design

Below is an overview of the five projects carried out by the students using the model as a reference:

1. *Dinostress*: initiative focused on improving family dynamics through a playful and empathetic communication system between the members of a household as a strategic response to friction, the demand for reorganizing living spaces and the new dynamics due to confinement conditions. The project proposes that each member designs an “individual dino-diary” and a “family dino-diary” is developed together; in it, through language and graphics, each member promotes a “positive dino-spirit” and an “efficient dino-work”, making visible the proposal of pertinent co-delimitation of the environments and promoting empathy towards how the other experiences the cohabited environment. The application of the model allows to positively impact, through a playful system, family coexistence during confinement.

2. *ADN-tro*: intervention based on the concept of synchronicity, influencing empathetic thinking and behavior among family members regarding what they feel, think and do during confinement. The model becomes the key tool to identify areas of intervention and articulate actions through design, materializing a system of notes made by household members that are placed in strategic spaces to empathetically break into the environment, making visible emotions and ideas that can hardly be transmitted verbally or directly given the emotional sensitivity, affected by the considerable increase in the interaction time between each member of the household. The project highlights a positive impact on emotional and behavioral “synchronicity”.

3. *School by Mural*: This is a project that addresses the educational problem in rural areas through a proposal for an analog interface; this is in response to the difficulty of accessing an academic monitoring system for primary school students in areas where technological devices practically do not exist. Therefore, a system is co-designed—with families and teachers— where the traditional school wall is transformed into a communication interface; in it, teachers periodically post the activities that students must develop in a week, so that, later, parents can collect said material to give it to their children during the trip to their home or work. At the end of the week, they return to post it on the wall so that the teacher can take it and return it later with feedback, attaching at the same time the new activities of the week.

The model, then, guides the reflection on the implications of distance education and proposes a tangible solution based on Design that shows both the natural integration of the proposal in the community, as well as the commitment of parents and teachers.

4. *Coping with the contingency*: initiative focused on improving coexistence in work spaces during confinement through an interactive manual. The proposal co-designs a digital bulletin shared on social networks by the work groups, where, based on an empathetic graphic, supported by characters and colloquial language, the “official” information on mobility restrictions shared by the mass media is summarized, exposing in the form of tips those specific practices that promote an improvement in coexistence, relationships and the work environment, safeguarding health and empathy among members.

Thus, Ethnodesign, in the words of the members, invites understanding of individual behavior among the different actors, given their specific conditions as people, highlighting that, despite the initial difficulties of resistance to consulting the material, the work groups found fun information that reflected the implications of their own behaviors, promoting a positive impact for dialogue and adjusting collective activities.

5. *Love Bullets*: co-design project of an emotional interaction system for university students affected by distance learning. Initiative where the model serves as a guide to overcome individual paradigms and achieve a people-centered design through a diary-type instrument, at a prototype level, which facilitates planning, time organization, the link with positive thoughts, empathy towards resilience within the individual conditions in which academic confinement is experienced, as well as constant emotional empowerment, based on understanding oneself first as a person and then as a student. The project ends up generating a notable interest among around 100 students who carry it out, where the team members emphasize the relevance of adaptability and the ability to generate people-centered solutions, favoring a positive impact by committing to challenges that integrate empathy and social responsibility as fundamental pillars.

II. Design Training. Reflections on its implementation

The development of the sessions flowed smoothly: the Tuesday and Thursday sessions exceeded the scheduled time (a favorable aspect to guarantee the flexibility and scope of the information obtained), and it is noteworthy that the teams invested on average three more hours of daily work between sessions. Meanwhile, for the project presentations and individual interviews, the willingness and involvement of the members in general allowed a critical, natural and open approach to the individual, group and collective experience, also exceeding the scheduled time.

Based on the implementation of Ethnodesign in this scenario, a series of reflections are then presented based on both comments from the participants themselves, as well as on the analysis of the general experience of iteration; the objective is to prospect commitments presented as integrative guidelines, as designers with intentions of linking with Ethnography.:

Fostering distance from traditional challenges

The initial insecurity and anxiety of participants is common when moving away from traditional design practices, where predefined objectives and results are given to them at the beginning, and which end up conditioning the development of the project towards the achievement of idealized results. The proposed implementation context places them in front of the freedom and responsibility that the development of a project without a predefined direction demands, where they address a context, and where they define their work system only with the guidance of the model.

“We saw and understood the idea of several of the points, but we have a hard time knowing how to do it or we are a little afraid of knowing if we are doing it well.”

“It generates a little anxiety for us not to see a concrete work plan, although we read the matrices and understand where we have to go.”

“It is strange not to see the step by step with deliverables”.

Promote a change of focus in the approach

Participants mention that the model leads them to change their traditional approach to approaching people, who are traditionally classified in workshops as users, public or clients, and where occasional, unique, accelerated approaches and attention to predefined questions predominate. They assure that they now tend towards an understanding of the requirement and relevance of a constant and deeper contact with people.

“The truth is, when we approached users we did it only once and with very specific questions.”

“I think that we are rarely asked or have the time to really get to know people.”

“We are not used to being given the freedom to make the decision of the way and the time that we are going to invest to approach people.”

Provoke learning in the reality of the context

Participants emphasize the importance of continually interacting with people and not just at the beginning of a project, recognizing that they often base their analysis or decisions on assumptions and that the model allows them to approach unknown and previously unconsidered aspects.

“From the first matrix we realized that we often work with assumptions and that’s how we go and make decisions.”

“We know the importance of certain things in the matrix, but we are not used to interacting with people constantly and at that level, but we have seen how important it is and that it makes sense.”

“We thought something and suddenly, talking to people two or three times, we realized that it wasn’t that!”

“It was very powerful to know more closely what my relatives thought and felt, the truth is that I ignored some things that are important to them.”

“It is different to think about people than to live them”.

Promote flexibility and adaptation

The projects demonstrate the flexibility of the model by not imposing time frames, allowing teams to adapt to the demands of the contexts in which they work. The enthusiasm and empathy generated by the closeness to people and the possibility of positively impacting their context are also highlighted.

“It’s great that we and the people we understand participate in our project and make the decision of what is best for everyone, it is something we have hardly done in our careers.”

“The truth is that in all projects we either assume what people are like, or we force the information to fit with what we know we have to deliver.”

“We realized that one thing is what I think and another is what people say and why they say it.”

“The truth is, this is forcing us to invest more time than we thought because we don’t want to assume things”.

Promote the appropriation of concepts

It is observed how the participants internalize the concepts of the model in terms of their connection with Ethnography, incorporating them naturally into their vocabulary. This shows a successful appropriation of the vision and structure of Ethnodesign.

“At many times it was motivating to find information that we surely would not have reached if we developed something as we normally do, but it was a challenge because we reached points where we did not know what to do or how to continue, thanks to the recommendations we saw in the matrices.”

“The truth is that it is not very complicated to understand the model, it helps a lot that the matrices explain to you in some way what to do, only in some terms we had to reinforce what they meant on the Internet or with the teacher”.

Dilute anxiety about specific projects

Each project ends up addressing different problems, from improving family and social communication, or even intervening in emotional synchronicity at home; thus displaying evidence of the scope of the model’s proposal to generate solutions focused on people and adapted to particular and unique contexts.

“It was motivating to find information that we surely would not have reached if we developed something as we usually do, but it was a challenge because we reached points where we did not know what to do or how to continue, but we wanted to continue.”

“It’s great to start seeing that I can contribute something so that together we can make everything better here.”

“The truth is, we had used some tools, such as archetypes, building profiles or some of those, but we realized that sometimes we continue making decisions with subjective information and to present something like what they initially tell us is the ideal thing to do.”

Drive positive impact and engagement

The projects end up making visible favorable impacts in the environments in which they are implemented, whether by improving family or social coexistence, promoting the emotional stability of a group of people or facilitating education in vulnerable contexts. In addition, the ethical commitment of the teams and the responsibility towards the communities addressed is an aspect that is considered remarkable.

“We are realizing that, the truth is, we can have a positive impact on our families, even when we have gone through complicated situations.”

“We have needed more time, but, the truth is, we do not care because we know that we can do a project that improves certain things.”

“We realize that people need us to do something and we want to do it together.”

“People keep calling us to see when we talk and to continue thinking about what else we can do.”

“We fell into the reality that many of the projects we have done we do not even know how they end up being applied, we just do and launch them without worrying about how people receive or reject them.”

“I think that models like this change your vision of Design, seeing how your work really impacts people and can either benefit or affect them.”.

Promote reflection on the discipline of Design

Participants express the need to train in projects that go beyond the plastic or aesthetic aspects, and that, on the other hand, focus on promoting a positive change in society. Students emphasize the importance of understanding Design as a discipline focused on working in favor of people and its transcendence when seeking that the project is developed in conjunction with all the people involved.

“We are usually more interested in the striking or impactful aspects of the design, but we must also realize that we can generate a positive change in society.”

“The truth is, Design requires us to focus more on positive things for people than what we regularly do and that has to do with consumption, marketing, advertising and those things that often do not have the sense of contributing to people.”

“As designers we usually aspire to generate a product with certain characteristics, but we do not stop to think what happens if we generate another with qualities more oriented to generating a positive aspect than aesthetics.”.

Commit to improvement and continuity

The participants suggest having more time to develop this type of project and to approach it at earlier stages of their academic training. In addition, they express the need and excitement to participate more frequently in projects with this orientation, considering that they manage to generate significant learning due to how they are approached, prioritizing empathy, continuous interaction with people and social responsibility in Design.

“We realized, more clearly, that Design must work closely with people and not from their individual space.”

“It is strange to see all this at the end of the degree, the truth is, I am interested in continuing it, but let’s see how it goes trying to get rid of some vices, hopefully they can do it from the first semesters.”

“Although we had all this time, I would have liked to have more, especially because it was the first time and because I was afraid to start at the beginning.”

“I think it is clear that design projects should have more time, not requiring us to adapt everything to very short times”.

III. Related professional projects

Below is a general context of the offices and consultancies, as well as the five projects in which the model was incorporated as a support tool:

1. Consulting for the development of a social project: developed within a strategic design consultancy made up of 15 people distributed in the Management, Design and Administration departments. A work team of three designers is appointed, who interview the client and generate a document that outlines the needs and projects a six-week work schedule. The demand for work arises from a group of health professionals to receive advice to articulate a social impact project aimed at addressing the food shortages of a vulnerable sector. The approach to the consultancy seeks to request support in the design of the project name, and to land the value proposition, graphic identity, dissemination strategy and interior design of facilities and furniture for customer service.

2. Comprehensive brand development for a music company: deployed within an agency specializing in design and advertising, made up of a team of 30 people divided into the Design, Marketing, Advertising and Administration departments. The agency appoints two Design specialists, one in Marketing and one in Advertising, for its management and development, who meet with the client to establish the project guidelines and establish the commitment to deliver the result within a period of eight weeks. The company requesting the design service is within the

music industry at a national level and requests advice for the development of the new brand system on its different platforms: corporate and customer service offices, recording studios, social networks, points of sale, fairs and exhibitions, promotional and dissemination videos, clothing and labeling of machinery and equipment.

3. Service design and brand experience for a beverage company: developed within a design studio made up of 12 people who work under a horizontal system, where everyone is involved without having an absolute hierarchy by organizational chart. In this way, part of the team holds a series of meetings with the company and shares the information with the rest, establishing the guidelines and establishing a delivery period of around four weeks. The project is based on the need of a company led by two people with a track record and experience within the fruit concentrate production industry, to design a new business model based on offering fruit-based drinks with a complement of artisanal mezcal flavor. Advice is therefore requested to boost and sustain growth given the current demand, because according to the words of the businessmen, the design has a more global vision to impact the markets; therefore, nothing specific is required and they remain open to listening to proposals on the next steps that the brand should take.

4. Consulting for the development of a real estate brand: the project is handled by a design consultancy made up of seven people distributed across the Management and Development departments, and three professionals are appointed to take the lead, continually informing and inviting the rest of the team. For its development, they establish a delivery period of nine weeks. The work demand consists of building a brand that stands out within the commercial context of real estate investment companies at a local and regional level, particularly in their new field: adaptation and restoration of housing for sale, focused on interior architecture with experience in social spaces. The business is led by a group of partners, who request advice for the construction of a brand, a service model, promotion and the positioning plan on digital platforms.

5. Consulting for the strengthening of an entrepreneurial project: developed in a design consultancy made up of 35 people distributed across the Management, Design, Marketing, Administration and Liaison departments. Two Design specialists and one Marketing specialist are appointed for its development, who meet with the client, generate the guide document and establish a delivery period of approximately five weeks. The demand for work comes from a team of young people from different professions with an entrepreneurial idea, whose objective is to develop teaching materials for primary education. Advice is requested to strengthen their business model from their value proposition, hoping that the design can support them in the development of the material and even in their promotion and positioning system; thus requiring support in the entrepreneurial model specialized in products, advisory service and training around mathematical thinking, through tangible teaching resources.

IV. Professional projects. Reflections on their implementation

The work sessions in this setting allowed us to confirm practices rooted in the development of projects regarding the implementation of the concept or ethnographic tools, as well as to identify favorable routes of respect for this discipline and its potential relationship with Design. Although the model ends up being excluded in most of them, the work schedule continues its course, promoting conversations aimed at identifying the causes and activating a permanent exercise of reflection on the approach of the model, its frictions and future opportunities for incorporation.

It should be noted that, although it is true that the exclusion does not respond to a difficulty inherent to the instrumental configuration of the model, during the nine sessions it is possible to identify aspects that favor reflection regarding the vision of the relationship between Ethnography and Design in the professional field, which are presented below, in the form of integrative guidelines and based on comments from the participants:

Promote distance over time as a factor of resistance

The resistance to adopting the model in traditional design practices reveals the gap between the learned and established work systems, and a proposal that invites us to stop an inertia of meeting deadlines. These systems end up pursuing a schedule for delivering results in the shortest possible time and a process of continuous improvement for this, above, then, a projective reflection on the impact of the project on people's lives. Consultants and offices end up identifying and exposing approaches rooted in the search for quick answers for efficiency, which move away from a deeper understanding of people's needs and contexts.

“The truth is, we tried to do it, but when we understood that it would take us longer, we decided to leave it aside because clients do not expect so much.”

“We believe that we could invest time in it, but we do not know how to schedule it and clients are not going to pay for it.”

“The truth is, the times that clients demand do not allow for extending the development of projects, they get desperate or look for other faster options.”

“We have a deep-rooted work methodology that we have perfected to respond quickly to market demands”.

Consider profitability as a guide and generator of tension

In all the projects, the participants refer, both at an early stage and permanently during the sessions, that the main tension between the model's approach and its traditional work system is that inherent to a commercial environment: profitability. The teams express the dilemma of balancing the demands of the clients, their project development proposal and the objectives of a design that requires planning, immersion and permanent co-participation. They also recognize that the model's orientations end up being limited by financial and temporal aspects of the traditional market for supply and demand of design services.

"Honestly, we believe that we cannot continue because it will not be cost effective."

"We do not know how much time and resources we should invest in following the model's orientations, we do not know how to charge for it, nor will the clients pay for it."

"We are a company and we seek profits, so everything is optimized to increase profit margins in the short term."

"We believe that design is almost always offered and demanded based on a price negotiation."

"Our calendar, honestly, is designed to make time efficient in order to win."

"The inertia of projects is focused on generating short-term profitability, very few talk about the positive impact they intend to generate in society or end up justifying it through other means".

Eliminate subordination to customer decisions

The influence of clients on implementation decisions highlights the tension between market expectations and the model's proposal, such that teams say they are forced to compromise the principles of Ethnodesign to satisfy client demands and guarantee the economic, temporal and aspirational viability of the projects by decree. This dynamic ends up highlighting the need to strengthen the relationship between client, designer and context, to promote a permanent collaboration that favors the recovery of the principles of human-centered design and ethnographic practices, which end up being adapted to suit or disappearing, given the instructions of whoever finances the project.

"Honestly, the projects we do are more about satisfying the client than positively impacting people, that is why we decided not to change the direction."

"The client is the one who pays, so we have to adjust in some way or another to their expectations and instructions."

“The truth is, the client is the one who has control in general, therefore, we do not have much room to propose in that sense.”

“We are used to the client giving the go-ahead at all stages, regardless of the arguments, he is the one who approves in the end”.

Promote reflective dialogue around the relationship between Ethnography and Design

Despite not continuing with the link between the model in the projects, there is a proactive dialogue towards innovation and improvement of the relationships between the development of traditional projects and what is now understood by the link between Ethnography and Design. Thus, despite the difficulties in fully implementing the model, there is a willingness to adapt and explore new ways of working in the medium and long term, showing a willingness to move away from its traditional position to a potential rescue and vision of the relationship between disciplines.

“We do not have the capacity for certain things that are proposed now, we do not know how to do it because we know the basics of Ethnography.”

“We realized that the approach with people is more of a pretext to extract information.”

“The tools we use serve more to identify how people can fall in love with a brand, sales, above the benefit that this product or service brings them regarding their real needs.”

“Thinking about everything proposed by the model was worrying, because we reflect on whether we are really doing a good ethnographic practice or just using it for sales arguments.”

“We see that Design can improve its relationship with Ethnography, be more powerful, we want to see how we can do it and discuss with clients this new vision that can also be incorporated.”

Promote reflection on the social responsibility of Design

The model promotes questioning established practices and the search for more ethical and sustainable ways of working; this, by questioning the judgment of prioritizing other aspects over social impact. The teams recognize the importance of reorienting their practices towards the creation of value for people and society, which would imply changes in project development models, as well as in the mentality and parameters that guide decision-making; thus reflecting on the challenge of balancing or redirecting market needs towards more social objectives.

“We have accustomed clients to a process of asking and giving, and not of involving them in projects more towards aspects such as sustainability.”

“We believe that the projects that are requested are rarely oriented towards generating a positive social impact, we believe that it is

necessary, but they do not ask us for it nor have we found a way to make it interesting for everyone.”

“Benefiting people and the market are two things that unfortunately coexist in the minority of cases.”

“Many of us have a permanent concern about leaving commercial interests and client demands behind and working on projects with social impact, but the inertia that exists is very strong, and I believe that the model helps, at least, to see a possible route for the future”.

Redirect the focus on the practice of Design

The need to reorient design practices is highlighted by the urgency expressed by professionals to adopt a more human and contextually informed approach. It is stated that Design must move from a customer-centered and merely economic approach to the real needs of people and their communities, in such a way that it permanently seeks and implements actions that favor the breaking of paradigms based on commercial and operational interests and short-term efficiency, prioritizing the impact on people.

“We believe that this vision is often lost due to the same dynamics of supply and demand; we want guidance on how to improve certain practices that we believed were already well established.”

“The model is helping us to stop and see how much we are doing things by inertia and to highlight work as a discipline.”

“We believe that we can generate added value if we work on how to land certain components, mainly the vision of working close to people at all times.”

“We want to develop at least one short-term project with Etnodiseño and show that we do projects not only pursuing the commercial, and that it can also be sustainable to have the impact on people as an objective”.

◆ Conclusions

The implementation of the model in both scenarios is an innovative tool that seeks to enhance the approach, projection and development of design projects, unlike faster approaches focused on priority aspects for the traditional supply and demand system, such as time, profitability and material aspiration. Although it initially faces resistance in its iteration, particularly in the professional field, the panorama invites us to continue exploring its potential incorporation in consulting firms and offices to promote significant changes. This, given the questioning or discomfort that is caused around the value and priority given to time and economic profitability. Thus, the aim is to promote, almost immediately, a dialogue that goes beyond the usual and that also stimulates reflection on existing practices and the intrinsic relationship between Design and Ethnography.

Following Cross (2001), it is about promoting an understanding that, as a discipline linked to the above, probably continues to reinforce a thinking oriented primarily towards solutions (solution-based thinking) and not so much towards problems (problem-based thinking). And that, therefore, must move towards more sustainable collaboration and innovation approaches (Thackara, 2020), which demand the understanding of people within increasingly complex systems (Buchanan, 2015). Therefore, the understanding of the discipline should move away exclusively from the focus on the tangible to explore the intangible (Sosa, 2020), that is, what gives rise to needs, problems or areas of opportunity for people in various contexts.

Likewise, the experience of the work carried out makes visible the need to continue exploring paths and proposals that foster empathy regarding this approach, and that promote the responsibility of Design, given its natural link with people from different contexts. Particularly, taking into account what has happened in the academic field, the need for an earlier insertion of the model in the training stage is foreseen, which would allow for the cultivation of a Design rooted in the co-participation of clients, society and designers. In this way, the reorientation of practices towards a Design that is more responsible with society would be encouraged, which advocates for projects that genuinely benefit people and their contexts. In this way, understanding and not emergence, description and not intervention, and proximity over distance would be sought (Charlotte and Gislev, 2015).


It is also highlighted that the model manages to act as a catalyst to improve practices both in academic training and in the development of professional projects, by promoting a deeper understanding of the context and an awareness of the realities of people; thus encouraging designers to move away from quick solutions to focus on understanding the values and beliefs of these people at a greater level of depth.


In this sense, Ethnodesign succeeds in presenting itself as a valuable tool to promote a Design practice that is more aware of its potential relationship with Ethnography and, following Fulton (2011) and Kilbourn (2013), also to reflect on how Design constantly skews its observations of the world towards what it calls “design opportunities”, leaving behind the complex system of values and meanings that surround social life.

It is essential to recognize that models such as the one implemented in this research should not be taken as an absolute solution, but rather as a continuous process of strengthening and improvement; thus encouraging designers to come closer to recognizing their relationship with social complexity, and promoting an action that breaks away from paradigms that make use of Ethnography at their convenience and that move away from the commitment to orient their practice towards the actions, aspirations, needs and contexts of people. In this way, the iteration of the model encourages the detachment of paradigms, since,

finally, it will be necessary to notice that a paradigm privileges certain logical relationships to the detriment of others and, therefore, can continue to control the logic of a discourse that was distorted from the start (Morin, 1994).

In conclusion, the implementation of the model in the academic and professional setting emerges as a space for dialogue and reflection in the field of Design, by promoting a new way of conceiving and practicing the relationship with Ethnography, and awakening a series of reflections and orientations that challenge conventional practices, pointing, consequently, towards a more human, ethical Design focused on the real needs of people.

The exposed iteration accounts for situations, frictions and visions that represent an opportunity to transform the way in which Design is conceived and developed, since the historical anxiety as a discipline to cover the stage of approaching and obtaining information about people, through the ethnographic approach or tools, has ended up transforming it into an input for extracting information for the construction of arguments in decision-making when talking about clients, public or users. The latter, linked to the permanent and accelerated search for information to justify the development and the result of a design based on immediacy, ends up showing a violation of the premises of Ethnography (Murphy and Marcus, 2013). 

-  **References** Buchanan, R. (2015). Worlds in the Making: Design, Management, and the Reform of Organizational Culture. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 1, 5-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2015.09.003>
- Button, G. (2000). The ethnographic tradition and design. *Design Studies*, 21(4), 319-332. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X\(00\)00005-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(00)00005-3)
- Charlotte, R. y Gislev, M. (2015). Design Anthropology in Participatory Design. *ID&A: Interaction Design and Architecture(s)*, 26, 73-80. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2662155.2662209>
- Crabtree, A., Rouncefield, M. y Tolmie, P. (2012). *Doing Design Ethnography*. EUA: Springer.
- Cross, N. (2001). Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science. *Design Issues*, 17(3), 49-55. <https://doi.org/10.1162/074793601750357196>
- Fulton, J. (2011). Poetic Observation: What Designers Make of What They See. En: A. J. Clarke (Ed.), *Design Anthropology* (pp. 16-32). New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-7091-0234-3_2
- Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in Ethnomethodology (Social & Political Theory)*. Los Ángeles: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kilbourn, K. (2013). Tools and Movements of Engagement: Design Anthropology's Style of Knowing. En: W. Gunn, T. Otto y R. Charlotte, *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp. 68-82). Londres: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ladner, S. (2012). Ethnography matters. Recuperado el 16 de enero de 2021 de <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/01/13/does-corporate-ethnography-suck-a-cultural-analysis-of-academic-critiques-of-private-sector-ethnography-part-1-of-2/>
- Lindley, J. y Sharma, D. (2014). *An ethnography of the future*. Recuperado el 22 de enero de 2021 de https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/74701/1/SISL_E_OF_THE_F_PURE.pdf
- López-Macías, G., López-León, R. y Mollenhauer-Gajardo, K. (2020). *Etnodiseño: Modelo de diseño desde la perspectiva etnográfica y su aporte a la formación en diseño*. *i+Diseño*, 15, 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.24310/ldisenio.2020.v15i0.9574>
- Martín-Juez, F. (2002). *Contribuciones para una antropología del diseño*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Morin, E. (1994). *El pensamiento complejo*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Murphy, G. y Marcus, G. (2013). *Epilogue: Ethnography and Design, Ethnography in Design... Ethnography by Design*. En: W. Gunn, T. Otto y R. Charlotte, *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp. 251-268). Londres: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Otto, T. y Charlotte, R. (2013). Design Anthropology: A *Distinct Style of Knowing*. En: W. Gunn, T. Otto y R. Charlotte, *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp. 1-29). Londres: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Robinson, O.C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Sahlins, M. (1997). O “pessimismo sentimental” e a experiência etnográfica: por que a cultura não é um “objeto” em via de extinção. *Mana*, 3(1), 41-73. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-93131997000100002>
- Sosa, L. (2020). *Nociones sobre diseño complejo: proyectar considerando la emergencia de los sociosistemas*. Nuevo León: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León/Labyrinthos Editores.
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Orlando: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Suchman, L. (2011). Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.041608.105640>
- Taylor, S. y Bogdan, R. (1987). *Introducción a los métodos cualitativos de investigación*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Thackara, J. (2020). *Cómo prosperar en la economía sostenible: Diseñar hoy el mundo del futuro*. España: Experimenta.
- Veggel, R. (2005). Where the Two Sides of Ethnography Collide. *Design Issues*, 21(3), 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0747936054406708>
- Wasson, C. y Metcalf, C. (2013). Bridging Disciplines and Sectors: An Industry-Academic Partnership in Design Anthropology. En: W. Gunn, T. Otto y R. Charlotte, *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice* (pp. 216-231). Londres: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wolff, S. y Robles, F. (2006). Diez errores y máximas en la investigación social cualitativa. Articulando metodológicas comunes entre la etnometodología y la teoría de sistemas. *Sociedad Hoy*, (11), 111-125. Recuperado el 22 de enero de 2021 de <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/902/90201106.pdf>

◆ About the Author *Gabriel Ángel López Macías*

PhD in Anthropic Sciences, a Master's degree in Integral Design and is a graphic designer. He works as a professor-researcher at the Center for Design and Construction Sciences at the Autonomous University of Aguascalientes, where he teaches undergraduate courses in the areas of design theory, research workshop, comprehensive workshop, project quotation and presentation, brand identity, design and user, strategic design and comprehensive design studies. In graduate courses, his teaching has focused on subjects related to applied creativity and innovation and creativity.

In the area of institutional strengthening, he is a member of the Accreditation Committees for study plans and curricular redesign of undergraduate and graduate programs and has been academic secretary of the ccDC Undergraduate Program. He is also a member of the network of Design Researchers in Mexico, of the Ixel Colombia Academic Council, and was invited to join the Sustainable Design category of the 2020 Chile Design Awards.

Professionally, he works as a consultant for public and private organizations in the areas of design management, strategic design, and social enterprise design, a service oriented to consulting on the impact of design on competitiveness, innovation, and sustainability indicators. He is also a certified consultant in the sustainable design cycle. He has been a speaker and workshop facilitator at conferences and colloquia on topics related to social design, integral design, strategic design, and the value of design. Part of his work has been integrated into specialized publications such as book chapters and indexed articles. He is currently a member of the National System of Researchers (SNI-C).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons license.
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivate Work 4.0 International