ARCHAEOLOGY > DESIGN



This post is in a series of commentaries on a class running at Stanford, Winter Quarter 2010 – "Transformative Design" ENGR 231 – [Link]

Pragmatology and Pragmatogony

I like to say that archaeologists deal in the history of people's relationships with stuff, with things. And this covers a lot – basically 150,000 years of human living.

I also say that archaeology is about the history of design. Given the definitions of "design" that I outlined the other day [Link], and particularly the way that design is fundamentally about certain (post)modern(ist) attitudes and trends, it is the case that archaeology covers the history of design. And there is much more.

Since the 1980s archaeology has been allied with that branch of anthropology that calls itself "material culture studies" ([Link] [Link] to a couple of books from University College London) – though I also think this is something of a tautology – all culture is material; we should reconnect the tangible and intangible.

The "Handbook of Material Culture", a textbook from Sage, does a great job of introducing a range of approaches to things. Most come from the disciplinary field of anthropology; archaeology is not so well-covered; design and design studies are hardly mentioned, likewise art history and science/technology studies.

There is actually no discipline of things. Archaeology, in its long history from antiquarian studies and the early days of experimental natural philosophy, is certainly a candidate for the title. But only in principle – few of my archaeology colleagues would want to cover this ground.

This non-existent discipline or field of study doesn't even have a name.

I suggest pragmatology – the study of "pragmata" – things, things done.



Acheulean lithic – 1.6 – 0.1 million years b.p.

As for the history and geneaology of things, under this expanded agenda – pragmatogony – where things come from.

Pragmatology and Pragmatogony are the subject of my class this quarter called “An

archaeology of design: ten things” – [Link]