# CHRISTINA UNWIN – DESIGN AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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## THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY IN IRON AGE AND EARLY ROMAN EUROPE

Christina Unwin

BLOOMSBURY

Christina Unwin’s new book *Design and Archaeology* [Link] has just arrived.

A remarkable path-breaking work, this is the synthesis of archaeology, design studies, material culture studies that we have been waiting for – delivered in elegant case studies of textiles, gold-alloy torcs, shale vessels, and a copper-alloy armband from the world of iron-age and early Roman Europe.

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Here is what I wrote in the Foreword:

“What do the remains of artifacts and architectures tell us about the past?” “How might one understand past societies through the material remains of what they made?” Questions like these are at the heart of the archaeological project.

“What do people do with things?” “How are things made, improved, and made meaningful?” “How is knowledge mobilized in the making of things?” Such broader and closely related questions are shared with other disciplines such as anthropology (material culture studies), science and technology studies (STS), cognitive and behavioral psychology, and professional fields such as engineering and design. And more – these foundational questions of how (human) experience comes to build knowledge of the lifeworld we inhabit, and just what that lifeworld *is*, draw in philosophical debate around epistemology and ontology, materialist philosophies and object-oriented ontologies.

In this remarkable book Christina Unwin presents a synthesis and a clear pathway through these questions and concerns surrounding making and material culture, involving big pictures of cultural change and the social imaginary, situated in the context of the organization and management of production and consumption, even drawing in the technicalities of materials science and manufacturing techniques.

These matters of engaging with lifeworld through concept and intervention, imagining and making are not marginal academic concerns. Their wide range and scope may instill a disorienting dizziness – “Where is one to turn to find firm ground upon which one might decide to act when so much is entangled in complexity?” Yet such matters are inherent in any everyday experience of looking at a reproduction of an artwork hanging on one’s wall, of making and consuming a meal, in the kitchen artifacts and produce, in attending to a social media account, in the everyday choices (or lack of choice) regarding the ways one might manage one’s lifestyle – “What does this experience say of me and mine, and others?” “What are the qualities of the experience, and how might they be improved (in relation, for example, to concerns about economy and environment?”

This is a transdisciplinary space that transcends the boundaries of orthodox disciplinary understanding. For that reason alone it is challenging to navigate such a semantic field, whether one is an anthropologist, software engineer, or an

archaeologist.

Christina encompasses this challenging landscape. It is her unusual standpoint that makes this extraordinary achievement, this tour de force, possible – Christina is a professional designer as well as an archaeologist. She mobilizes her deep and practical understanding of the concept of design and of the design process in presenting “design archaeology” as method and theory that incorporates and transcends current approaches to material culture and artefacts in archaeology, and indeed in the anthropological archaeology of material culture studies.

Before I outline what I find so valuable in this book by Christina, let me offer some personal and anecdotal context for this mobilization of the concept of design.

What is design? Design can mean many things. It was precisely the professional practice of design that confirmed for me the significance of the concept, as well as its scope and ambiguities. As a kind of applied archaeologist or humanist, I had joined a teaching and research team in Stanford University’s d.school, the *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design*. Colleagues were Bernie Roth (a robotics engineer), David Kelley and Bill Moggridge (founders of design consultancy IDEO), Megghan Dryer (business designer at IDEO), Larry Leifer (pioneer in human-centered design and faculty lead in our *Center for Design Research*). My fondness for concepts as tools for practice as well as thought nudged me to press them for a definition of design. What emerged was a fourfold understanding.

**Design awareness.** Most people today are conscious that certain goods are marketed as offering added value because they are “designed”. While what this means is often left vague, there is widespread acceptance, even embrace, of the idea that “designer goods” carry a premium over those that are simply mass produced. A Kate Spade handbag/purse is not just any handbag/purse. The “iconic” iMac was designed by Jonathan Ive, head of design at Apple, and one might take it to represent an intangible commitment to something that the Apple brand cares to stand for, such as creativity. This marks it as different to a regular personal computer.

**Professional studio practice.** Product design, industrial design, high fashion, and architecture are highly professionalized fields organized typically into studios. Art and design schools offer training in the professional practice required to join such studios, or to set one up. Such studios have a long genealogy reaching back

into the workshops, ateliers and guilds of premodern societies. A major change occurred in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the figure of the industrial designer who stood apart from an integrated manufacturing process as one who conceives and plans. (It is vital to realize that such functions of management and decision-making are present in societies throughout history, in the teams that built the megalithic monuments of prehistoric Atlantic Europe, in the administrative bureaucracies of the Mesopotamian city states.) In this sense, one of the first industrial designers was Josiah Wedgwood, whose division of labor in his ceramic manufacturies involved a new and separate role for a designer who conceived and planned a range of goods that were mass manufactured by factory workers. Often, and as in the case of Wedgwood, such design studios are associated with their lead designer/founder – architects such as Rem Koolhas, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Zaha Hadid, for example, work(ed) in studio teams that nevertheless bear the stamp of their style.

**Design research.** This is the field, quite a recent one, that aims to understand how design operates. Questions typically focus on teamwork and division of labor, on integrated processes and systems of conception, procurement of materials, understanding of need and demand, prototyping, manufacture, distribution, consumption, curation and discard. Design research is the foundation for the academic field of Design Studies, though research might not be pursued for academic purposes – corporate design teams are research-based and may have no formal interest in academic output.

**Design thinking.** This term has come to be closely associated with the design group at Stanford, though it has been used elsewhere. While it might be summarized as human-centered design (emerging out of user-centered design in the information and communication technologies of Silicon Valley), design thinking is not actually *thinking* but a particular model of design *praxis* (informed and reflexive, self-conscious and iterative, flexible and improvising practice). Design as concept here refers to process, to project management. More than method and theory, design is a *pragmatics*, more or less formal sets of protocols to be pursued in projects aimed to deliver products, services, experiences, meanings, values.

In the 80s and 90s I had been part of the establishment of a sub-disciplinary field that came to be known as material culture studies. A branch of anthropology, it devotes attention to the materiality of culture, one of the defining features of

archaeology. The field took off at University College London, featuring the likes of Danny Miller, Chris Tilley, Victor Buchli, Suzanne Küchler, and has had a good deal of influence upon archaeology. Rooted in post-structuralism, Marxism, and phenomenology, the field responded to older anthropological models that treated objects as secondary to social structure or symbolic systems. Artifacts are treated as active agents, not passive but shaping social relations, memory, identity, and embodiment. There was a turn to materiality in everyday practice – how people live with, use, modify, and attribute meaning to things – in ethnographic focus (on shopping, clothing, housing, walking, looking), with consumption as a form of creative world-making, not merely passive reception of commodities.

But I was deeply puzzled. My work with ancient ceramics had led me to study contemporary studio pottery as a field of design. Encounter with science and technology studies in Paris in the early 90s led me to appreciate how making was always wrapped up in ways of knowing the world, and in embodied technique, know-how. Anthropologists in material culture studies were hardly making any reference to these fields. Experimental archaeologists, modeling past processes of making, made little reference, in my experience, to contemporary design. Most conspicuous was the absence of any engagement in archaeology with design studies, or even with the concept of design.

It ran the opposite way too. My colleagues in the d.school had never come across, but were fascinated by the big picture that an archaeological perspective offers on the workings of the design process – archaeologists draw upon such a wide range of case studies. Yet the field of design studies makes little reference to material culture studies, even less archaeology.

The reason for this lack of dialogue and integration around a fundamental concern such as making and materiality is to be found, of course, in disciplinary boundaries and research paradigms. This is a failing of contemporary academic research in the face of complex challenges in the world today that cannot be contained within any single discipline.

Let’s just consider material culture studies and design studies. They have quite different intellectual genealogies, one drawing upon anthropology, sociology, Marxism, and critical theory, the other evolving from art and industrial design schools, influenced by systems theory, ergonomics, cybernetics, and semiotics. The

two fields typically ask different questions: “What do people do with things?” versus “How are things made, improved, or made meaningful?”. They take a different view of the concept of “Design”.

Anthropologists may well be suspicious of design as an elitist or Western-centered and modern practice, contrasted with the everyday, lived engagements of people with things. In contrast, scholars like Margolin, Buchanan, or Forty have taken design as a crucial cultural and historical process, often linking it to power, modernity, or aesthetics. Different audiences and institutions: material culture studies emerged mainly within anthropology departments, with an emphasis on ethnographic credibility and theoretical innovation. Design studies developed in art schools, architecture programs, and interdisciplinary departments, focused more on production, usability, semiotics, and aesthetics with a methodology that involves historical, semiotic, or systems-based analysis, increasingly incorporating user-centered research into human-computer interaction.

Similar contrasts may be drawn with archaeology and the differences are, arguably, greater. Close affiliations in the nineteenth century with museum institutions and with the accumulation of artifacts through excavation of sites and monuments accompanied a focus upon the classification of artefacts into styles, periods, and cultures. This has provided a systematic framework for organizing archaeological data, a time-space systematics. Convergences with anthropological interests had long been favored by the institutional affiliation of archaeologists with academic departments of anthropology in the United States, and grew stronger with the roll out of processual archaeology from the late 1960s. Until the 80s at the earliest, representation (of social identity or socio-cultural process, for example) was favored over investigation of processes of making and consuming. At least in the Anglo-American sphere: French and German archaeological traditions are somewhat different, though neither took up the concept of design. Creative practices were largely invisible within this schema, except as witnessed in the distinction drawn between art and everyday artifacts, and until artifacts have come to be conceived as active agents in the negotiation of social life. Archaeology remains predominantly seen as concerned with the past, as a mode of historical knowledge; this remains the major obstacle to using the concept of design, when design, as indicated above, is typically associated with modern and contemporary processes of manufacture and consumption.

Christina bridges these divides. This is extraordinary and unusual. Hers is a comprehensive and transdisciplinary synthesis that takes in this broad disciplinary field. I suggest that this is the great strength of this book. And in this light, I want to offer a summary of what I see as Christina's key points of resolution and integration.

**Design – process**

Design is a fundamentally collaborative practice that links creative practitioners, communities, materials, and traditions. Designers and makers are presented as embedded within their societies, shaping and reshaping social identities through their work, in pragmatic improvisation that amounts to worldbuilding. Design is not limited to "high art" or individual genius but includes everyday creativity within households, workshops, and broader regional networks.

**Design – agency and worldbuilding**

Design is thus a concept that informs our understanding of agency. Agency is best understood as one's capacity, or lack of capacity, to act, to get things done, to perform everyday life, to effect change, however minor. Agency, manifested in design, is the building of lifeworlds. Agency is always thereby situated, involving relationships with other networked members of community, of ecosystem, conceived inclusively to incorporate non-human members too, things, materials, other species. This inclusivity involves the application of the concept of agency, symmetrically, to all components of the networked associations at the heart of design.

**Design – polychronic, transmedial, and associative**

Christina introduces design as three-fold mobility or fluidity – polychronic (bridging past, present, and future), transmedial (crossing materials), and associative (binding together people, artefacts, gestures, and meanings across time and space). This enables her to explore how designs circulate, are reused, remade, and repurposed in different contexts – especially important in societies facing change, such as her case studies in the Roman expansion into Iron Age Europe.

**Design – informed by contemporary practice**

Drawing on design studies, and particularly an understanding of design as pragmatic

process, Christina integrates contemporary concepts such as reflective practice, material thinking, collaborative prototyping, and creative improvisation into archaeological theory and method. She emphasizes workshop practice, transmission of skill, the interplay of emulation and innovation, and how new forms emerge through risk, experimentation, and collaborative reworking of traditions.

**Design – symmetrical past presences and futures**

The application of an explicitly contemporary understanding of design to archaeological case studies, and conceiving of design as polychronic involves a principle of symmetry between past and present. Just as we design our lifeworld, so too did people in the past. And more. Christina regularly refers to contemporary makers and designers. Archaeologists too are designers, working with the past to forge knowledge, and in future-oriented projects.

**Design – assemblages and conversations**

The designed artefact is an assemblage of attributes and relationships. To this Christina adds Flusser's emphasis on design as a way of "informing" materials with conceptual strategies. Artefacts become conversation pieces, involving commentary and critique, that carry forward the socio-political and aesthetic negotiations of their communities. Material culture is best understood as an evolving field of such design conversations that actively reconfigure communities in their socio-political environments and in their living adaptive ecosystems. In doing so, she advocates a hermeneutics of material-immaterial forms, emphasizing what remains invisible or residual—such as reuse, memory, affect, and display.

**Design – beyond art/craft, art/technology, material/conceptual binaries**

Christina is particularly critical of traditional archaeological typologies that divide material culture into binaries such as "art" and "craft," or treat "technology" as a separate domain. In the case studies she shows how such binaries obscure the entangled, emergent, and strategic character of Iron Age and early Roman creative practice – design. And how an emphasis upon a category of fine art has denigrated everyday making – she shows how a focus on elaborated "Celtic art" metalwork has marginalized the design significance of other media such as shale, wood, ceramic, or textile, despite their intricate techniques and conceptual sophistication.

**Design – for the future**

By introducing design archaeology as theory, method, and critique, Christina calls for a fundamental reassessment of how artefacts are analyzed, displayed, conserved, and taught in institutions of research, teaching, collection, and curation. She proposes that the concept of design should inform not just archaeological interpretation, but curatorial strategies and projects in heritage management.

Christina is not at all alone in promoting such an agenda. I certainly count myself one who is largely in agreement with the case she makes. She draws upon much support from many disciplinary fields. This adds to the strength of her argument. I hope it is clear from this brief forward that I see the distinctive and unique strength of the book to lie in the consummate skill and clarity of Christina's synthesis, the integration of so many matters of fundamental concern to contemporary archaeology. Few have achieved this.

By situating design as a multivalent practice – strategic, collaborative, time-traversing, materially reflexive – she enables an archaeology that is better attuned to both the complexity of ancient societies and the interpretive and pragmatic challenges of the present for the future. I suggest that design archaeology, in its polytemporality, its actuality, its past-present symmetry, is itself a process of design, making arguments and stories with archaeological sources, a speculative and creative process of building knowledge *with* the past, not just telling stories of what happened.