

THE FUTURE CULTURES OF DESIGN

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ABSTRACT:

This paper attempts to create the basis for a deeper discussion on the value different cultures can bring to the design professions. It explores the cultural roots of the design professions as we know them, very much defined by Western thought. The fields of comparative cultural studies and the philosophy of culture are used to pinpoint how the consideration of the metaphors that underlie other cultures could inform fundamentally different perspectives on the nature of design.

1. THE CULTURE OF DESIGN

Although the act of designing is said to be a basic human activity (Cross 1990), the Design professions have only really come to the fore in the last Century, in the Western world. The rise of these design professions faithfully mirrored the industrialisation and the rise of an affluent middle classes in Europe and North America. During this period, design was closely associated with the ideology of Modernism, that has

deep roots in the socialist idealism of the 1920s and 30s. The creation of a Modernist Utopia, an unornamented environment, simplicity and beauty attained through harmony in dimensions and 'honesty' in the use of materials, was seen as a way to create a society that would be equally harmonious, honest and egalitarian. Thus the design professions were seen as an agent for social change. We now seem to be living in an age where these grand Utopia's and ideologies have lost much of their attraction, and thus Modernist design has lost its original ideological grounding. It has now become more of a stylistic preference than a way of constructing a better future world. Yet Modernistic designs are still very much in evidence. Modernism has been dominant for so long that in the public mind, 'Design' is completely associated with the Modernist stylistic ideals. The impact of Modernism has been huge and largely irreversible: through Modernism the Western cultures have lost their own ornamental languages, and Western designers have lost the very ability to create ornaments – any thirst for ornamentation now is addressed by adopting ornamental languages from cultures that have not been touched by Modernism.

2. QUESTIONING THE CULTURE OF DESIGN

The growing number of designers in the newly industrialising countries tend to get caught between the urge to remain faithful to the traditional culture of their countries and the idea that if they want to be considered to do 'good design', they would need to be referencing Modernism. This tension results in many designs that are somewhere between the two – these often are unhappy compromises, but some designers do manage to create a true synthesis between different worlds. There is a lively discussion among designers from these countries to define what an appropriate design style would be.

These discussions are very important and urgently needed: one would not want the deep cultural messages of the world to be completely ravaged by Modernism (such as happened in the West). In a complex world, we need the all the richness of the different human expressions in the world cultures to feed into our design repertoire: one would want that repertoire to grow, not to shrink in a time of globalisation. This could be an uphill struggle, in a time where the 'International Style' (and its dumbed-down derivative, the 'Airport Style') is gaining ground.

There are some deeper cultural issues that are often missed within these discussions, that often focus on the questions of 'style'. The objective of this paper is to get these deeper issues on the agenda and speculate on where the discussion of these deeper issues might lead us. In this paper we try to move away from the style-based discussions on design. We need to understand that if design can be defined as *'the creation of value for people'* (or more properly: *the creation of objects, information, environments, services etc that afford the opportunity for people to create value in their use* (Meijkamp 2000, Lancaster 1991), then the way values are seen and created within a culture must be the basis for construing of design within that culture...This is a key point because we do know that different cultures have widely differing value-sets and ways of dealing with values. *"Our community helps us interpret and codify many of our felt patterns. They become shared cultural modes of experience and help to determine the nature of our meaningful, coherent understanding of our world"*. (Johnson, 1987).

We have to start by realising that "Design" as we know it, in all its different forms, is very much a child of one particular culture, that of Western thought. But what does that mean? What kind of assumptions has the Western way of dealing with values brought to design? How might these be different in other

cultures? What would the adoption of the assumptions of other cultures mean for design?

In posing these questions we take the cue from the Japanese writer Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's wonderfully poetic 1933 essay 'In Praise of Shadows'. In this essay Tanizaki describes the culture and aesthetics of traditional Japan. Tanizaki's sensitive description evokes a complete world of austere, subtle aesthetics, that has long since disappeared. The essay is quite melancholic in tone: it was written at a moment that Japanese culture was at a crossroads, with Western influence becoming stronger and stronger. At one point in the essay Tanizaki ponders how different Science and Technology would have been if they had been developed in the East. In this paper we want to ask the same question for Design.

3. THE STUDY OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: UNDERSTANDING THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Cultural differences and the way values are dealt with in different cultures are the focus of much research in our globalising world. Comparative Cultural Studies is an ever expanding field in academia (Hofstede 1997, 2001), and an obvious point of departure in our quest to find answers to the questions coined above. Let's take the seminal work of Hofstede and his group as a starting point to see what this scientific field can bring to our design discussions. The core body of work within the Hofstede-approach consists of the elaborate statistical analysis of thousands of answers to questionnaires with culturally related questions. This has led to the identification of five key descriptors of cultural difference that – in their view – could serve to characterize cultures the world over.

- *Power Distance*, that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders.

- *Individualism* on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families.

- *Masculinity* versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between the genders. Studies revealed that men's values from one country to another contain a dimension from very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other. In the masculine countries there is a large gap between men's values and women's values.

- *Uncertainty Avoidance* deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures. People in uncertainty avoiding countries are also more emotional, and motivated by inner nervous energy. The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, try to have as few rules as possible.

- *Long-Term Orientation* versus short-term orientation: this dimension can be said to deal with Virtue regardless of Truth. Values associated with Long Term Orientation are thrift and perseverance; values associated with Short Term Orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

For instance, in a Hofstede-type analysis of data gathered in China, we can see that China scores extremely high on Long-term Orientation, in fact is the highest-ranking in the world. The Chinese score on Individualism is comparatively low. Also of note is China's significant Power Distance ranking of 80, indicative of a relatively hierarchical culture. (Please note that some of this may not hold true as strongly anymore in contemporary China. China is in a state of explosive economic growth – this must have a huge impact on Chinese culture, too. On the other hand, societies are notoriously slow in changing their fundamental value patterns, a superficial change may just as easily swing back in the long run...)

The conclusions of the cultural comparison studies are very useful and have been taken up widely: any company that operates on a world-wide basis needs a keen, hands-on understanding of the nature of the cultural differences – from a market perspective (selling into different cultures), from a perspective of use (how are designs interpreted, valued and used in different cultural arenas), and from a workforce perspective (how will the cultural differences within the company impact its operations?). The large array of comparative cultural studies are helpful in at least helping us understand the misunderstandings that we are facing in a globalising world.

Yet for the purpose of this paper, these studies are of limited value. They deal with culture in a quite limited way, centred as they are on interpersonal communication. They refer to the

differences in communication as being symptoms of deeper philosophical differences, yet this philosophical level is not systematically explored. What we need to inform our discussion on the design professions is a deeper description, going into the fundamental way value is dealt with in these cultures, how this is defined in the culture's leading metaphors, value-statements and discourse-structure.

In this paper we need to concentrate on the 'metaphors we live by' [Lakoff, 1980] in our different cultures. For instance, Medical Doctors can be seen within two different metaphors: as care-givers or as mechanical repairers of human bodies. These 'lead metaphors' then structure the kind of discourse that there is around such a profession, and the values that its practitioners strive for. Within this paper we will be trying to tease out the 'lead metaphors' that could characterize the design professions within different cultures. The field of Comparative Cultural studies doesn't quite explicate the structural metaphors we are looking for. These structural metaphors are often quite explicit and open to analysis, and they pervade the way we perceive and act upon the world.

4. THE STUDY OF DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES: THE CORE CULTURAL METAPHORS

We now turn to the work of philosophers that have ventured to approach the difference in cultures in a non-empirical way. They have delved into the 'Great Books', anthropological studies and other key literature on the different cultures to create characterisations of the culture, to derive a deeper understanding of the underlying 'drivers' of a culture. From their understanding of these 'drivers' they have created systems that model the cultural differences they perceive on a much more abstract and conceptual level. We will here use the framework presented by (van Praag 1986). He states that

cultures can generally be seen to fall into five fundamentally different value systems, the 'cultural codes'. They range from (1) *Shamanic*, (2) *Indian/Tibetan*, (3) *Chinese/Japanese* to (4) *Revelation Religions* and (5) *Western Scientific* thought.

Each of the five categories in this typology represents a completely different set of values and a different orientation, that is a different way of giving meaning to the world and human existence within it. These orientations, expressed in metaphors, are quite key when we want to draw knowledge on cultural differences into the design discussion. We will not be dealing here with the truth-claims that are associated with these ways of making sense of the world; we will just be taking them as the basis for the metaphors people in the respective cultures live by.

Cultural Codes will now briefly be described in some more detail – still a broad sweep, but hopefully just enough detail to shed some light on the deep issues that we have to face when transplanting the metaphors that are the drivers of these cultures towards the field of design. According to Van Praag, the Shamanic tradition (1) makes none of the 'hard' distinction between Man, the World and the Higher that Western thinkers are used to. Life takes place in a state of constant creation (see the notion of 'Songlines' within Australian Indigenous cultures), within a **wholeness**. Because there is very little distance between humanity and the world, there is no room for socratic questioning, as that is based on divisions. The (2) Indian/Tibetan tradition positions humanity and the world as having **layers** of consciousness, the goal of a human life then becomes to attain clearer consciousness and ultimately a complete connection in harmony with the world. The Chinese/Japanese tradition (3) also seeks harmony with the world, but in a different way: it sees the world as the dynamic operation of opposite forces (like Yin-Yang), where the attainment of **balance** is a key goal. The Revelation Religions

(4) of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, see the connection with the higher in the connection to a single God that can be addressed (prayed to) directly. In this way of thinking, man is separated from God – the relationship with God is a **transactional** one, where morally good behaviour is rewarded by God's love and a place in heaven. In Western Scientific thought (5) humanity is separate from the world, which makes that world a subject of objective study through the application of Reason, for the attainment of Truth. This is a staunchly **mechanistic** view of the world and human existence. The overwhelming emphasis on control, combined with a mechanistic world view, easily leads to an exploitative relationship to the natural world and fellow humanity.

To illustrate the way these different cultural codes work out in professional practice we could return to the example of the medical profession (issues of sickness and health are a universal human concern, all cultures have developed a way of dealing with them). Not only do the different codes have widely different way of dealing with sickness, they also have widely different concepts of what a doctor is. We do not have the space here to go into any detail here, but it would be clear to the reader that the role and methods of working of the shamans, of Indian medicine, of Chinese medicine and the Western medical practice that is dominated by science could hardly be more different.

5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS NEW METAPHORS FOR DESIGN

The objective of this paper is to speculate on how the profession of 'design', that has originated and matured within the context of the Revelation Religions and the Western Scientific code, would be different if it had developed in a different cultural environment. We will take the central

metaphors that lie at the heart of the cultural codes, and apply them to the most general definition of design as 'creating value for people'. To start we first need to consider the metaphor that leads design in the Western world. The main 'culture' of designers around the world is dominated by Western thought, and based upon the specific assumptions that come with the heritage of the Revelation Religions and Western Scientific Thought. This results in a mechanistic view of the world (i.e. through the unflinching exploitation of resources, and the reifying of humanity into 'target groups'), and a striving for rationality in the design activity. Within the framework of this cultural code, some designers tend to be **utilitarian**; they would use the metaphor that a design that people want and buy is, by definition, a good design. Others would argue that a design can be **intrinsically good**, regardless of the reaction of the public. They say that Quality is deeply engrained in the things we make, and not dependent on the whims of public opinion - cherishing the notion of 'design classics' as absolute 'truths' for this reason. Still others argue that designs that are made in correspondence with certain **virtues** (like simplicity, honesty, care, 'showing the hand of the maker'), and that designs derive their real Quality from this (see Dorst, 2006).

Both the Chinese/Japanese and the Indian/Tibetan cultural code lead to variants of this 'virtue' aesthetics, where the virtue in the Chinese/Japanese cultural code centers around the notion of 'balance' between opposing forces (say male and female principles (Yin-Yang)), where within a decidedly long-term perspective, the Qualities might be slowly revealed over time. The Indian/Tibetan culture could lead to designers focussing much more on the layers of meaning on emotional, rational and energetic levels within their creative works. The Quality of design would then be to create things that express the maker's connectedness on these levels, and by this example helping the users to also reach a deeper inner understanding. These kinds of qualities may be difficult to achieve as they are in a sense

indirect. They are not connected to what the renowned Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa (Fukasawa 2007) would call the 'first wow' of instant attraction, but to the second 'wow' of the slow discovery of deeper value through use. While his own products are clad in a Modernist stylistic language, they do embody some of the qualities above in different ways – while he wants his designs to look 'natural' (so clear in expressing their affordances that they look they have always been there), he takes pain to detail them to the point where one can really savour their use. Through this detailing he tries to create for the user a real emotional connection to the product, where it moves beyond mere functionality to become an object for affection (he sees this as a contribution to sustainability, too: things we love, we do not throw away so easily). His products together make up a fascinating body of subtle design work. They could be forerunners of the new design within these cultural codes, showing that it is possible to imbue products with subtle layers of virtue.

Examples like these are a fertile basis for discussion, helping us to reinvent design within the metaphors of the different cultural codes. But this discussion belongs to the designers from these cultures themselves. It is a territory that where the author of this paper, as a designer with his cultural roots firmly in the West, can only be on the sidelines. The importance of this discussion must be clear: we are running up against the limitations of where the Western cultural code can bring us. If the young designers from the newly industrialising countries can create their own reconceptualisation of the design professions, design can start to deeply reflect the world's cultures that show us different sides of humanity.

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