

PRESERVING CULTURE IN DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Technology has created a new culture, a new community - the online community. The ability to interact with a person 8.000 kilometres away has all but dissolved boundaries that once existed. This super-connectivity unifies the human race; but as cultures blend, some aspects are lost. As designers we need to recognize this trend and return to our roots - return to what makes us who we are.

The Cikrak chair by Adrien Garderè, a designer from Paris, is a brilliant example of tying historical or traditional culture to the modern-day context. The chair came from a project on the island of Surabaya in Indonesia and employed a method of weaving that the indigenous people employed to make shovels. Garderè found one way of acknowledging the culture in his design of the chair. If we as designers let culture help inform the product, we will not only create a more meaningful piece but one that celebrates that which makes us unique.

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1 CULTURE AND DESIGN - INTRODUCTION

In his novel *1984*, George Orwell describes a very bleak, grey setting of “the future.” The main character Winston Smith lives in a dystopian society ruled by a totalitarian government. The government has complete control over nearly everything in the citizens’ lives: where they work, what they eat, when they exercise, even when they give service. The government informs the general population that Oceania, their country, is currently warring against Eurasia. The citizens are forced to participate in two minutes of hate every day in which they decry Eurasia for their faults. However, in a moment’s notice, the government claims that they are now at war with Eastasia, not Eurasia, and always have been fighting Eastasia. The public accepts the new information without a second thought. The people do not have access to outside information: books, mail, or Internet. This control over information creates an interesting society. Since all knowledge comes from the same source, they begin to think, believe, and behave the same as everyone else. In short, general public becomes one homogenized mass.

Communication is absolutely key in the formation of culture. Today we are witnessing a massive technology boom. From smart watches to Twitter, our world changes every year. The question is: what is the effect on culture?

2 CULTURE DEFINED

Culture is what defines us; it’s who we are. “Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings...concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.” [1] This definition of culture mentions a cumulative deposit. This cumulative deposit is a bank in which all contribute. Groups of people grow as a community; it is a give-and-take action. Beliefs are preached, knowledge is passed on to the youth, and experiences are shared. These communities share commonalities that bind them together and it is this that evolves into what we know as culture.

If culture is created from this cumulative pool of shared knowledge and experience, then communication is key, whether it be the oral traditions of Nordic mythology or the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt. Cultures in the past have been defined partially by whom they were able to communicate with. One basic example is the difference between Europe and the United States. Europe has a much longer history than the USA. Countries such as Italy or France have been around for thousands of years. When they began to be formed, communication was relatively slow whether

by foot or horse. When they developed into nations, they became two separate and distinct cultures and languages partly because of the speed of communication. However, in the USA, Georgia and Virginia have a much shorter history. Not long after the colonization of the states, the telegraph was invented. This led to the acceleration in communication and now the two states have similar cultures and language.

Though it is a simple, flawed example, the principle is clear: communication has a profound effect on language. There are numerous articles describing the effect of language and the formation of thought. People gravitate to those whom they feel think or believe similarly. This is evident in many instances, from adolescent grade schools to churches; from political parties to social media. The halls of many American grade schools are filled with the Preppies, the Emos, the Footballers, and the ever-present Goths. And what is a church but a place where people who share doctrinal beliefs commune? So if how we think is affected by language, then it will ultimately affect with whom we interact.

There are also different levels in which one could break down culture: national, regional, corporate or social class. The national level could be French culture. Regional could be West coast. However, with the advancements in technology, there has been a creation of a new culture - the online culture. This culture is a new and very interesting development on the anthropological scene. The ability to interact with a person thousands of kilometres away has all but dissolved physical boundaries. What one person sees on a website can simultaneously be seen by another across the globe. Companies are no longer bound by the small town it occupies but can do business with customers anywhere in the world.

If communication drives culture, then this new method must have some effect on culture. One of the major factors in this change is the source of the information. In pre-Internet days, people learned and observed from their environment. Libraries, professors, and parents were the main channels of information. Long gone are the days where students actually had to use books from the library. The advantage to the pre-internet age is it provided for a strength in and attachment to community. Information was found in the community and thus thought and belief structures were very much connected to those people around themselves. It also formed societies with distinct cultures because their knowledge, experience, beliefs, etc. were independent of their neighbours 100 kilometres away. They had to deal with life using their own methods. With the magnificent invention of the Internet, a new channel of information was created. Suddenly, we no longer were dependent on our geographic community to inform our culture but are affected by the massive online culture. Answers to history questions were found in milliseconds using Wikipedia. Reasons for the Great Depression were discovered on the first page that showed up on Google. Look at any rhetoric class and ask where the students find their sources. You would be hard-pressed to find any student that didn't use the Internet to help inform the subject.

So what is the ultimate effect on culture? The cumulative deposit that used to be found in one's community is now generally found on the Internet. This new deposit is one massive pool from which many people pull information. If we all retrieve information from the same source, we essentially become one community. We communicate in the same manner because we hear and see the same things. As communication helps thought formation, we will begin to think the same. We may even become a shadow of the community of Orwell's *1984*, thinking the same, acting the same. This dependence on the Internet for information could lead to the homogenization of culture.

2.1 The Onion Model

In *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* [2], authors Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov offer some insight into understanding culture. In their "onion" model, they explain the varying depths of culture manifestations.

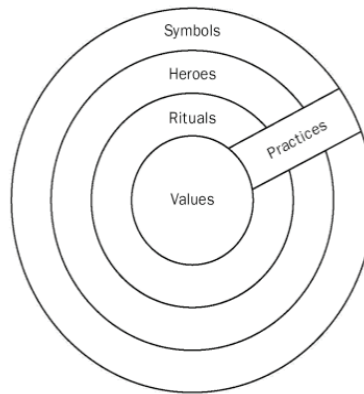


Figure 1. The “Onion”, Manifestations of Culture at Different Levels of Depth

As explained in the book, the manifestations become deeper and more meaningful the closer they get to the centre of the model. So the deeper the level of manifestation a product incorporates, the deeper it can connect with the user. Symbols are “words, gestures, pictures, or objects” that hold a meaning to a culture. Symbols have short lives; they come and go with time. An example of a current symbol would be the hashtag. The hashtag is the name for the number or pound sign that recently has acquired a new meaning to some current cultures. Let’s say there is a product using this symbol - a hashtag waffle iron. This fictitious product would form waffles in the shape of the hashtag. The hashtag waffle iron would likely be treated as a cheap, informal gift meant for a laugh rather than being treated as an actual product. But why? The hashtag has become associated with the current generation of youth; it is a symbol. Symbols, according to Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, are only a shallow representation of culture. The waffle iron doesn’t draw from any deeper cultural manifestations and thus it is treated lightly. On the other hand, a product like Adrien Garderè’s Cikrak chair attempts to dig deeper.

2.2 Example 1



Figure 2.1. Cikrak chair, Adrien Garderè



Figure 2.2. Shovel, traditional Indonesian weave

Recently, Adrien Garderè visited Brigham Young University to discuss culture and its role in design. Much of his discourse revolved around understanding the importance of the culture in which the product belonged. Essentially, Garderè stated as a designer created a product with the context in mind, the product would be a more meaningful product.

As an example, he described his workings on the Cikrak chair. The chair comes from collaboration between the French Cultural Centre of Surabaya (Indonesia), the University of Technologies in Surabaya, and Garderè. While visiting Indonesia, Garderè noticed an interesting process that was used to make a shovel. The process involved splitting a stalk into fingers and weaving reeds through the fingers to make a basket. Garderè and his team used this process to help create a chair that was later used for the Cultural Centre’s auditoriums and classrooms. But the important thing is that Garderè

observed and gained insight into their culture. Involving their culture in the design connects the people to the product. The chair, used in Surabaya, pays great respect to the Indonesian culture and history. By doing so, the chair becomes more meaningful. The Cikrak chair is more likely to become a design classic than the hashtag waffle iron because it draws from deeper cultural connections. Garderè mentioned also the importance of avoiding cliché or shallow connections to culture. Using stereotypical views to attempt to connect to the culture was a poor method. One could use surfboards to make a chair designed for Californians but is that really their culture? Or is it just a stereotype? It is a more difficult thing to really capture the deeper meanings and feelings in a culture; however, when understood fully, one can design something of worth.

2.3 Example 2



Figure 3. PP501 or “The Round One”, Hans Wegner

Many people find Scandinavian furniture to be beautiful or admirable, whether it fits their tastes or not. Why? What is it about Scandinavian furniture that somehow seems to reach to so many people? Scandinavia was never an easy place to live before the discovery of electricity and the industrial revolution. Long, harsh winters were interspersed with beautiful mild summers. Being so far north on the globe led to very dark winter seasons. Possibly because of these conditions, the people of northern Europe were moulded into a group with distinct, interesting values. Light was an important theme in their culture. Living rooms were designed to be light and spacious, avoiding clutter in order to keep their spirits uplifted during the winters. Bright, colourful accents brought textiles to life to help offset the dark season and to indicate the beauty of northern summers. Wood became the material of choice as it was readily available and had a warm touch as opposed to steel or concrete. These are some of the core values shared by many Scandinavians.

Perhaps one reason people recognize Scandinavian design as among the greatest is the Scandinavians’ ability to encapsulate their own culture into their products. One example of successfully accessing these cultural icons or cues in design is Hans Wegner. Hans Wegner’s PP501 or “The Round One” utilizes the deepest levels of cultural manifestation, if we use the “Onion model” from earlier.

The use of hand-carved wood rather than machined methods indicates the importance of humanism in products. It also pays respect to the environment by celebrating a material produced by the earth. The warmth that wood provides isn’t found in other man-made materials. The overall form of the chair is simple from a distance but complex upon examination. It is also unpretentious, something very typical of Danes. The viewer can see the values of post-modern Scandinavia incorporated into one chair. Perhaps this is why Wegner’s PP501 is one of the most respected and appreciated chairs in history; it is more than just a beautiful chair; it connects with people on a deeper level.

3 APPLICATION

Understanding this concept should start early in the designers’ education. Incorporating the cultural aspect to products should be part of the design process and part of design thinking. It should never become an “after-market accessory”, or something that is thrown on in an attempt to create the façade of consideration. As it becomes integral in the design process, the products will naturally inherit the features and characteristics needed to become meaningful.

One example of an exercise that can be employed could be directly based on this “Onion model.” Have the students design two versions of the same product – one that only uses the outermost one or two layers of the “Onion” and one that draws from the centre of the “Onion.” By controlling other

variables, the teacher can isolate the cultural variable. The students will then be able to focus on cultural factors. The intent is to help the students recognize cultural factors and how considering cultural context affects their work.

Another exercise that can be used would be to design to another culture. One branding exercise used at Brigham Young University involved applying a brand to a random product. A spin-off of this type of exercise would be taking another culture and designing a product to that culture. For example, have the students design a toothbrush for a Japanese businessman and/or an Argentinean construction worker. The exercise would help the students immerse themselves in the culture and context of the problem. Beyond showing the students to look outside their own realms of knowledge, it would build empathy and understanding of the user, which would ultimately help inform the product.

4 CONCLUSION

The importance of understanding the effect of culture is critical to design education. Students who understand how culture plays a role in our lives will not only create more meaningful products but will contribute more fully to society. There is pressure from owners, leaders, or other managers to pump out ideas and to create fast products. As designers we are the creators of artifacts. We determine what history will remember our communities by - whether through our successes or failures. With the majority of the developed world addicted to the latest and greatest gadget, there is a great homogenization of culture. Unless we find the world painted by George Orwell in *1984* attractive, we need to let culture inform our design. As we do so, we will create a world full of beautiful, diverse design.

REFERENCES

- [1] Samovar and Porter. *Intercultural Communication: A reader. 7th ed.* 1994. Belmont, CA. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- [2] Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.*