

Outside the Center: Defining Who We Are

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Globalization promises a unification of the world that strengthens the similarities between peoples and cultures, improves communication, and minimizes the differences. In reality, it has been perceived as a vehicle of westernization; it has provoked resistance and the defense of distinctive cultural practices and heritage. Regardless of whether one is an advocate or a critic, globalization has unleashed or accelerated cultural exchange and transformation. Our efforts to describe the dynamic processes through which elements from one culture pass to another are undermined when we employ interpretive frameworks that are crude and increasingly inadequate. In addition to concerns with cultural survival, environmental survival has emerged as a key concern in the age of globalization. While design is deeply implicated in the problems of globalization, my experiences in teaching design around the world have convinced me that design, though often seen as a luxury for the few, can contribute to the elaboration of new and better solutions and frameworks. This essay is an effort to identify ways that design can become an active force in extending its role in the sustainability of culture by reflecting and representing the respective peoples and places in which it is working—by defining and dispersing itself in many locations rather than perpetuating its present predominantly Western centrality.

The situation is now one in which both designers and clients need to consider development in terms of sustainability.¹ Design, which utilizes essential aspects of cultural identity, can serve to synthesize the past with the present for the benefit of the future. This process could then assist the design profession to determine which changes are destructive or sustainable so that designed spaces, practices, technologies, narratives, and identities can remain integral to society. The practice of design might then become a critical aspect of the establishment of a sustainable condition with consideration to the history, tradition, and identity of culture. The outcome of these processes might lead to confident identities, resilient and capable of sustaining cultural norms, meanings, values, and traditions.

I have been involved, through teaching design, with cultures from the South Pacific, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. My purpose here is to examine some of these experiences during the past decade that suggest possible directions, potential solutions, or at least illustrate a range of changes that directly impact upon design and design education. It is my hope that some of these examples might

1 Sustainability has become readily connected with environmental issues but the same intention is used here within the context of cultures. The idea of sustainability is to keep something in existence by providing support for it, by upholding its validity. In this article, I use it as part of a process of developing both an awareness of and a responsibility to identify, maintain, apply and even transform aspects of a culture's unique visual language so that it is not totally lost or subsumed by outside influences.

Figure 1

The natural beauty along the coast of New Zealand compensates for the lack of a built history.

All photos courtesy of the author.



Figure 2

A student design interpreted the use of signage and found typography in a New Zealand neighborhood.

empower designers to take an active role in the future direction of the profession, not simply to oppose the effects of globalization but to work toward the creation of alternatives within the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of assimilation.

I have found five factors that work toward building cultural self-esteem. They simultaneously improve design and lead to an awareness and acceptance of their value by business, government, and other users. They can be summarized as:

1. Awareness of the local/personal culture
2. Valuing visual traditions and folklore along with an understanding of their impact/influence on contemporary design
3. Exhibiting confidence that leads to less dependence upon an imitation of large, dominate cultures, and which allows the emergence and integration of local aesthetics
4. An increase in publications that promote local design and recognize individuals who serve as role models for young designers
5. A vision for the future.

1. Awareness of the Local/Personal Culture

A little more than ten years ago (1993), most New Zealand designers denied that New Zealand had an identity of its own or, thought that if one did exist, it was too shameful to exhibit. By 1999, they had begun to recognize their uniqueness. They were less likely to imitate, however badly, design from Australia, the U.S., or Europe, and were creating their own aesthetic that had been transformed by local design community. Acknowledging the paucity of their built past, they began to look to their geography and environment for inspiration. Design students began searching for evidence of the recorded history which eventually led to exhibitions and publications about aspects of a distinctively New Zealand design history. Much of this development was achieved because of the changes in the design education programs that encouraged the students to initiate projects with in-depth research components. Students and educators began

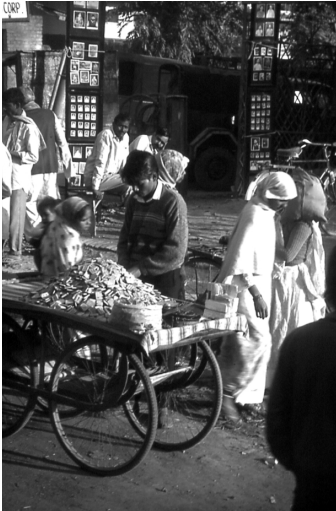


Figure 3
A vendor in India sells biscuits individually from his wagon.

to recognize the uniqueness of their experiences, and take pride in them. These factors allowed them to reevaluate their own design traditions, and to bring them into the present, where their value and meaning were no longer eclipsed by globalization. In fact, new titles written by New Zealand designers about New Zealand design have begun to emerge.

2. Awareness of the Impact of Visual Traditions and Folklore on Contemporary Design

India (1996)—an ancient culture rich with religions, languages, crafts, and arts—has had many experiences with Western values due to its colonial history, as well as through current advertising, TV, movies, and tourism. Indians have been seduced by the West, and often view the imitation of the West as the hallmark of success. There are economic aspects of Western-style capitalism to be envied and enjoyed but, ideally, not at the expense of losing the folklore and traditions of the past.

The school where I taught began in the 1960s with a curriculum developed by consultants from the West. There was little consideration for the Indian culture, since the curriculum was based on what had been done in Europe and the U.S. with the modernist assumption that design was universal, and therefore the people of India were assumed to have the same needs and understandings. Recently, the school has begun integrating many of the local crafts into the curriculum, as well as requiring students to work for one semester in a setting where they use design to improve the lives of the local people.

I conducted a course, *Indian Design for Print in the West*, which indicated the obvious desire for an economic link between their design and that of the West. Within the course, students explored their personal relationship to India, first by finding an object that symbolized India to them. They then began to explore their objects as a means for developing a design which encapsulated their perspective of an Indian ideal. The final designs ranged from an identity for a tribal theater group on the border of Tibet to the “Bollywood” interpretation of women to an illustrated cookbook from Kerala in the south. There was no consensus about what was truly Indian, but each student found expression for a personal and local sense of who he/she was, and was able to defend it through numerous heated discussions and critiques.

The discovery of an identity is not easy. Most countries are diverse in many ways, whether through race or religion, or geography or traditions, but even among these differences a core of similarities exists whether the country is large or small. The U.S. and Europe are not totally homogeneous, but the visual work retains characteristics that we easily identify or categorize. The difficulty lies in the recognition and understanding of fundamental characteristics

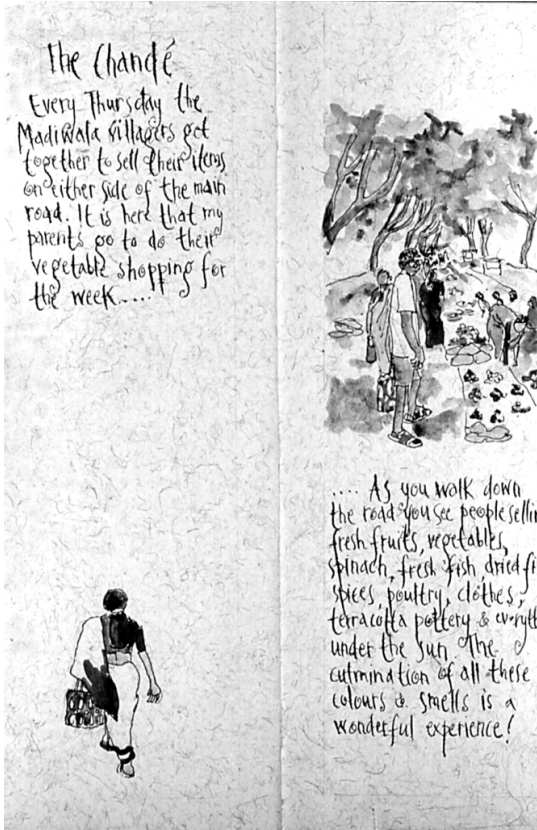


Figure 4 (left)
A double-page spread from a student's cook-book in which he illustrates Indian life through stories and family recipes.

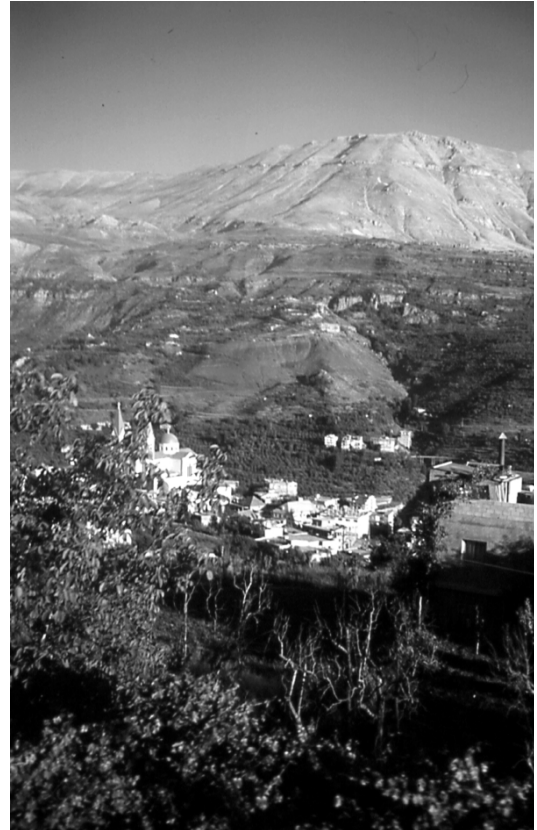


Figure 5 (right)
A village set in the mountains of contemporary Lebanon.

that communicate the essence of a people and a place, not the senseless repetition of hollow motifs. The former is most difficult; the later becomes superficial and disposable.

3. Less Dependence upon Imitation of Large, Dominant Cultures with the Emergence and Integration of Local Aesthetics

Lebanon (2002) often is described as the place where East meets West. Indeed, Beirut is in a receptive location on the coast of the Mediterranean where, for millennia, invading forces have left their mark. But it is this very particular interpenetration that has resulted in a unique combination of cultures that differs from any other place on earth. The unique nature of this heritage is not easy to recognize, since it often results in utter chaos, but beyond that chaos is the true nature of the Lebanese identity.

Like the New Zealanders, the Lebanese often negate or deny what is uniquely theirs. The East assumes the subservient role. Most Lebanese designers would even deny that there is any such thing as a specific visual identity. Yet, theirs is a very complex, intricate, multilayered experience which has yet to be investigated. Because of the length of the civil war, the breakdown of the infrastructure, and a failing economy, Lebanon faces a massive challenge to retain what little remains, and to redirect energies internally rather than

Figure 6

A collage from a packaged set done by a Lebanese student to express personal and cultural conflicts.



externally. Local designers have begun to understand that any country can imitate Europe or the U.S., but only Lebanon can work to retain what it has and establish greater pride in the local folklore and culture.

Design students and design curricula are beginning to take an interest in this process, even if they continue to doubt that it is possible. Courses in some of the local design programs encourage students to initiate projects and to do research. Although they continue to embrace Western standards, more and more students strive to understand their past, and are becoming willing to confront the taboos or controversial subjects within their culture.

4. An Increase of Publications that Promote Local Design and Recognize Individuals Who Serve as Role Models for Young Designers

During a workshop in Istanbul (1999), I asked students to consider what it was like to be outside of the centers of design. To my surprise, the Turkish students felt that they were at a center of design. They were rather surprised that I didn't know this. They were at least geographically closer to recognized centers than any of the other students I had taught.

I soon realized that there were some critical differences between the experiences of the Turkish students and those in New Zealand, India, and Lebanon. Although they looked to Europe for both design trends and celebrities, they also had some of their own who were able to incorporate into their own visual language their sense of time, lettering and illustration traditions, icons from shop signage, traditional food and parts of Ottoman architecture. They were knowledgeable about national designers and their work because of local conferences, exhibitions, and a vital professional organization. These factors offered a critical difference—Turkish students recognized and celebrated the Turkish designers within their own country. They tended to name David Carson or Neville Brody as their favorite



Figure 7

The Blue Mosque, one of the architectural icons of Istanbul, is particularly resplendent with springtime flowers.



Figure 8
2D and 3D work by Turkish students who used found materials from the streets of Istanbul.



Figure 9
A traditional rondavel located near the walls of the Great Zimbabwe site in the south of the country.

designers, but also had a long list of Turkish designers that they held in high esteem.

This awareness is possible because the Turkish design profession has recognized the need for, and benefit from, publishing and promoting their own designers, while designers in other countries leave it to dominant countries to provide their standards. This lack of local material forces their students and professionals to look to foreigners and foreign styles, because they are the only design publications available to them.

Even though my Turkish design students had never considered their own culture as worthy of investigation and, when they began the workshop, were at a loss as to what to explore, their innate pride in their heritage eventually enabled them to see what had influenced the particular style of design practiced in their country. They used humor; they investigated the vernacular and popular culture; and they began to see how many of traditions of the street, of the shops, and of the home had contributed to their contemporary designs.

5. A Vision for the Future

In Zimbabwe (2000), I was overwhelmed by the confidence of the students who live in the shadow of the larger, more established design culture of South Africa, and look to it just as other countries might look to the U.S. or Europe. As in Turkey, these students have local role models who inspire them. They also have a new school, the Zimbabwe Institute of Vigital Arts (ZIVA), established by Saki Mufundikwa, a Zimbabwean who went to the States for his education and professional work, but returned to his own country to give something back. So here was more than a role model—here was a person with whom the students could interact as a teacher, a friend, and a colleague within the local design community.

Despite a multitude of problems in starting the school—finances being the primary one, and the deteriorating political situation another—Mufundikwa’s philosophy serves as a valuable model for design education in the future. He explains that the mission of ZIVA is to create a new visual language—a language inspired by history, a language that is informed by, but not dictated to or confined by, European design, and a language that is inspired by all of the arts (sculpture, textiles, painting, African religion)—a language whose inspiration is African. His is a clear articulation of the same message that I see emerging worldwide.

Young designers are rejecting the straightjacket confines of the Western world. They are rejecting the judgment of their works by Western standards which may precipitate new criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of their designs. What has the corporate style of the West contributed to people whose existence and environment has nothing to do with those experiences? In order to work toward

Figure 10

A Zimbabwean student explored type as form through a series of exercises that used collages of text and letters.



sustainability in design, we need to introduce new ways of thinking about design, new ways of looking at the world around us that encourage new visual languages.

The previous examples suggest a growing desire and awareness on the part of many design educators, design students, and design professionals to create and use such visual languages based on their own cultures and experiences—languages which are authentic, enriched, and diversified. Each culture and, with it, each designer has valid experiences upon which to build a visual language that reflects the flash of the human spirit by which the soul of a culture reaches into the material world.

While writing this article, I attended and participated in a design conference at Virginia Commonwealth University's Qatar Campus that focused on the theme of cultural sustainability. The speakers, most of whom had connections to the Middle East through heritage, education, and/or work experience, repeatedly stressed the acknowledgment of their background as a significant force in their work. The influence of their culture through their memories and senses informed their work, and served as a treasury of inspiration that contributed to their success as designers. They also acknowledged that each of us needs to maintain our individuality despite the influences of passing fads and imported styles. Each of us, with our own cultural heritage, can enrich the worldwide cultural exchange rather than imitate it.

The challenge then is to identify aspects of our cultures that need to be maintained in order to ensure a meaningful future.

Design should not focus only on the artifacts and communications it produces, but also serve as a guide for the sustainability of cultures for the future.

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