

Design in a Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities

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The essays in this volume of *Design Issues* examine contemporary developments in fashion, architecture, and industrial and graphic design in light of the evolving pressures of globalization. Taking as their starting point diverse examples from Africa, Greece, Barcelona, Shanghai, and British-era Hong Kong, the authors analyze the myriad ways that design cultures negotiate the space between the local and the global. They examine how design can exploit or subvert the commercial allure of the “exotic,” and how it is called upon to reference national identity or recast the vernacular. They address the branding of place as a means of reinforcing cultural identity and expanding opportunities in international trade and tourism. And, finally, they highlight the political and social significance of the varying forms of cultural hybridity that have emerged out of our postcolonial and internationalized capitalist condition, suggesting that local design cultures are both challenged and enabled by the increasing globalization of the marketplace.

Ever since Marshall McLuhan published his vision of the “global village” in the 1960s, social and political theorists—mostly coming from a Marxist perspective—have associated globalization with the acceleration of time, the “annihilation” of space, and the expansion of authoritarian control. The priorities of transnational capital, driven by consumerism and neoliberal economic policies, have made the nation-state increasingly irrelevant and state-based democracy more vulnerable. This discourse of cultural imperialism further asserts that the rapidly expanding reach of technology and capitalism is producing a homogenous world culture primarily dominated by America and the West. Indeed, one of the major divides in studies of globalization today is whether increased international trade is imposing cultural homogenization or, in fact, working to enrich and preserve culture through expanded access to the Internet and increased cross-cultural contact. From the perspective of a free-market optimist such as Tyler Cohen, the sharp rise in global trade creates more entrepreneurial opportunities for producers of art and culture by “liberating difference from geography,” making culture less about identifying with a particular region or location. This view entrusts that the consumer-citizen and not the multinational corporation ultimately succeeds in driving

these interactions. On the other hand, one also can argue that this deterritorializing of culture allows it to be “theme-parked,” creating a type of cultural diversity that is merely a simulacrum, and that no longer has ties to any “authentic” origin. In addition, some cultures have access to stronger media infrastructure and greater economic and political resources, and thus can be marketed more forcefully. As Benjamin Barber asserts in his book *Jihad vs. McWorld*, the preponderance of Western culture globally is a major source of provocation for fundamentalist groups who see it as an “aggressive, secularist, materialist attack on their values.”¹

Nevertheless, over the last fifteen years, theorists have increasingly questioned the uniformly dystopian character of the imperialist model of globalization. They assert that it forecloses the possibility of realizing a more complex, multivalent understanding of our contemporary condition—one that takes into account hybrid forms of cultural expression that are not necessarily global or local, indigenous or imported, “Western or non-Western.” Arjun Appadurai contends that the expansion of the global market has in fact allowed for culture and capital to flow from different centers, in different directions, and often with no clear center or periphery. His ideas have become influential within the field of cultural studies and globalization, and are evident as well in the essays included here. Appadurai proposes to replace the center-periphery model with a complex matrix of overlapping and disjunctive global cultural flows, which he terms “ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes.” According to this model, the West becomes just one node in a field of interconnected imaginary landscapes, with “people, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow[ing] increasingly non-isomorphic paths.” Although Appadurai acknowledges that there always has been exchange and cross-fertilization between wide-ranging cultures throughout history, what is different in our current state of affairs is a question of magnitude: “the sheer speed, scale, and volume of each of these flows are now so great that the disjunctures have become central to the politics of global culture.”²

Individuals moving within and between these landscapes—due to either forced migration or voluntary displacement—often find themselves belonging to more than one world. As Benedict Anderson suggests, a passport has come to signify permission to work someplace more than a connection to any essential collective identity or pledge of national allegiance.³ Driving the growth of mobile workforces are a few dozen “megaregions” stretching over national borders to form “vast swaths of trade, transport, innovation, and talent.”⁴ Mobilization has made it even easier for related kinds of economic activity and innovation to collocate in specific areas. David Harvey contends that this type of “flexible accumulation” became necessary due to the failure of the Fordist model of centralized mass production. Fordism’s rigidity and dependence on big business,

- 1 “Globalization and Culture,” *Cato Policy Report* (May/June 2003): 8–10; Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1995).
- 2 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 37.
- 3 See Benedict Anderson’s meditation on the evolution of nationalism from the nineteenth century to more current trends of immigration and long-distance nationalism. “Exodus,” *Cultural Inquiry* 20:2 (Winter 1994): 314–27.
- 4 Richard Florida, “Megaregions: The Importance of Place,” *Harvard Business Review* (March 2008): 18.

big government, and large-scale fixed capital investments led to a surplus of goods and high unemployment in the 1970s.⁵ Today, business practices rely on flexibility in organizational structure, labor relations, and financing; all of which must adapt quickly and efficiently to shifting markets and patterns of consumption. Because of the current mobility and “unruliness” of transnational capital, along with increased migration and sophisticated connectivity, some assert that we have moved into a postnational era in which power is increasingly privatized, and identification with a particular nation is weakened to the point of obsolescence.

In a world characterized as diasporic, transnational, and deterritorialized, how does one understand the production of locality? Appadurai maintains that “locality as a relational achievement is not the same as locality as a practical value in the quotidian production of subjects and colonization of space.”⁶ What is understood as local depends on context: on the relationship between a particular social space and the larger matrix of power and cultural relations in which it is embedded, whether it is the more normative system of a “nation” or another postnational form of imagined community. From Appadurai’s perspective, the local can be a source of potential political subversion, and for that reason it is fragile—subject to the pressures of normalization and control.⁷

In keeping with Appadurai’s argument, the authors included in this issue unpack the problematic notion of “authenticity,” particularly as it is applied to cultures viewed as exotic, passive, and potentially “endangered” by Western encroachment. Victoria Rovine, in her study of the popularity of African forms and motifs in early twentieth-century French fashion, scrutinizes the oppositional model of “tradition” and “fashion” as an empty cultural construction, useful only for reinforcing the dominance of the Western subject and the logic of the colonial enterprise. Non-Western dress historically has been considered costume and not fashion, and assumed to be timeless and tied to “primitive,” unchanging group identities. Fashion, on the other hand, is assumed to be the product of “advanced” societies. Its cosmopolitan and whimsical nature is in constant flux to keep up with the rapid pace of industrial society. Yet the way the terms were employed by the colonizers reveals a paradoxical social hierarchy. On the one hand, the colonial empire undertook to “civilize” and advance African cultures; on the other, the infusion of a “primitive” and “exotic” frisson was seen as necessary to rejuvenate and enrich Western cultural production. The colonies were there to be mined for their raw materials, both literally and aesthetically. The French love affair with all things African—from beads and boubous to the animal prints and palm tree textiles invented to meet the exotic expectations of the French consumer—is still very much in play in contemporary fashion. The “Africanisms” employed by such French icons as Jean Paul Gaultier, with collections based on such inflammatory colonial stereotypes as the “Hottentot Venus” and “Fétiche” (Figures 1 and

5 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 141–51.

6 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 186.

7 Other theorists find a similar liberatory potential in diasporic and cosmopolitan subjects who, in many respects, have taken the place of international workers in the traditional Marxist class struggle. See Aiwaha Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 15.

Figure 1 (above)

Jean-Paul Gaultier, "Hottentot Venus," Spring-Summer fashion collection 2005.

Figure 2 (below)

Jean-Paul Gaultier, "Fetiche," Spring-Summer fashion collection 2005.



2) extend the exploitative and erotic imaginary landscape of French colonialism into the present.

Hazel Clark and Earl Tai, in their respective essays on Hong Kong and Shanghai, dissect another flawed binarism, that of East and West, which also relies on the myth of authenticity and essentialized identities. What does it mean to convey Asian qualities and characteristics through design? As Clark points out, Hong Kong represents a unique case study, being historically positioned as a site of exchange between Asia and the Occident. The agreement to transfer Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997 provoked a crisis of identity for the territory, "a culture of disappearance." With the looming uncertainty about its future, Hong Kong needed a hybrid or "hyphenated" subjectivity that could negotiate the future complexities of globalization, while acknowledging its mixed legacies of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism. The "authentic inauthenticity of Hong Kong, its unsituated situatedness"—its state of constant becoming—in fact helped to define the region's unique design opportunity.⁸ The visual practices examined by Clark allow for such experimentation with hybridity, thus potentially giving shape and substance to a subjectivity that remains in formation. The designers she discusses engage a wide range of strategies, some deliberately exploiting the codes of Orientalism, exoticism,

8 Hazel Clark quotes Tony Fry from a previous *Design Issues*. See Tony Fry, "The 'Futurings' of Hong Kong" in Hazel Clark, ed., *Design Issues* 19:3 (Summer 2003): 72.

and nostalgia through self-parody and quotation. Others, such as G.O.D. (an interior and lifestyle products company), offer alternative approaches to designing for a hip Asian identity by making local and vernacular cultural forms and practices relevant to a larger global consumer context.

Tai's examination of Shanghai domestic interiors through the photographic lens of Hu Yang also counters traditional East-West narratives, rejecting the usual opposition of Chinese indigenous culture and Western colonial influence as insufficient for understanding contemporary Shanghai's complex visual culture. Tai shifts the weight of his analysis from production and design to the realms of reception, consumption, and modes of display. He examines how Shanghai's diverse residents construct their identities by looking at what they are "actually bringing into their spaces." Hu Yang's documentary portraits of Shanghai residents, all taken within the context of their own homes, cut across a diverse spectrum of social classes and cultural backgrounds. Some of the photographs demonstrate a strong desire on the part of Hu's subjects to connect with the tradition and cultural history of China. A French expatriate embodies an Orientalist fascination with China's classical past through his self-conscious collection of artifacts, decorative kitsch, and traditional garments. In contrast, a Chinese academic's reverence for classical literati culture is revealed more through her actions and engagement in traditional activities than through obvious patterns of consumption. In her simple quarters, she plays a classical zither on her bed, her skillful calligraphic exercises casually tacked to a wall behind her. But as Tai notes, her literati lifestyle is not fully steeped in a Chinese past—the compact disc player and a book about Audrey Hepburn lying on her bed point to a more multivalent passage through our globalized condition.

A major theme of Tai's essay is that the mere possession of goods identifiable as Western—a Shanghai school teacher's obsession with Harley Davidson motorcycle collectibles or the display of McDonald's advertisements in the spare home of a lower working-class family—does not automatically signify Western or neo-colonial cultural dominance. Rather, one can regard this situation as the result of "the pervasiveness of global culture simultaneously being enacted upon many stages, including Shanghai, with many agents and actors..."⁹ Again, Appadurai reminds us that culture in a global context is a participatory, though at times uneven process, involving diverse individual agents and a plurality of "centers." The term "indigenization" refers to the fact that consumer goods, along with their attendant symbolic and ideological values, are not transferred in an uninterrupted and unmediated way to passive consumers. Instead, culture is continuously reterritorialized, resulting in the texture and experience of the local being altered through the unique interpretation and adaptation of external influences. Although Helen Tiffin proposes that the production of hybridity within a postcolonial

9 Quoted from the essay by Earl Tai, "Decolonizing Shanghai: Design and Material Culture in the Photographs of Hu Yang," included in this volume.

context can serve as a significant counter-discourse, as a manifestation of resistance, Tai argues that it also can occur without any “irony, angst, or conflict.” By reading indigenization as exclusively a means of undermining dominant cultural forces, one only reaffirms the colonial paradigm.

Rovine similarly evokes the concept of “cultural authentication” in discussing women’s dress of the Herero of Namibia and Botswana, which displays characteristics of eighteenth-century German clothing, and the absorption of European style into men’s clothing among the Kalabari of southeastern Nigeria. These examples also demonstrate that the idea of cultural authenticity is an artificial one to begin with. Cultures always have been “inextricable hybridities”—the products of migration, exchange, and cross-fertilization—even before the advent of the colonial era. In view of Tai’s historical example of the complex connections between Chinese and European porcelain centers; or Rovine’s elucidation of wax print textiles by way of Indonesia, the Netherlands, and Africa; it becomes apparent that what ends up being considered traditional is not necessarily indigenous.

Another common thread running through many of these essays is the fate of nationalism, the nation-state, and regional/local identities in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Three essays in particular—those by Jilly Traganou, Viviana Narotzky, and Hazel Clark—engage the debates over nationalism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism in light of specific case studies of national and regional identities in historic moments of transition. Traganou examines the Greek government’s use of the 2004 Athens Olympics as a springboard for rebranding Greek national identity. She considers this design endeavor in light of Greece’s inclusion in the European Monetary Union in 2001 and the country’s continued conflicts over immigration and cultural difference. The Olympics presented Greece with an opportunity to rebrand itself as a modern, forward-looking state, ready to engage in international business alongside its European partners. The hiring of the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava to design the Athens Olympic stadium seemed to signal Greece’s embrace of a pan-European identity. Yet the debates that surrounded his design revealed just how extensively globalization was perceived publicly as a threat to Greek identity. As much as possible, Calatrava and the stadium were discursively reintegrated into a familiar Mediterraneanism and classical architectural legacy. The opening ceremonies held in the stadium celebrated Greece as the birthplace of civilization, and valorized Greek heritage and ethnicity as an uninterrupted march from Hellenic prehistory to the present. In order to uphold this national mythology, all histories of cross-cultural encounters and immigration were repressed. The seamless narrative was opened only during the closing ceremonies in which Greece’s regional cultures and its distinct subculture, the Roma, were included in the festivities. The Greek public regarded the spectacle as

an unwelcome reminder to international audiences of Greece's close link to "Eastern" rather than "European" communities, and it was met with widespread disapproval. Traganou demonstrates, therefore, that Greece, like other Western countries, is anxious about the new terms of globalization and transnational migration—unnerved by the knowledge that it can no longer discipline and naturalize all of the people living within its borders according to what are now outmoded codes of nationalism and national identity. In a utopian gesture, Traganou suggests a form of "hijacking" of traditional international events such as the Olympics, so that they can instead serve as a means of promoting cultural heterogeneity and postnational forms of allegiances.

Viviana Narotzky's study of the "Catalan difference" also examines efforts to brand place in the wake of the European Union through visual markers that evoked modernity and technological competency. The transition to democracy in Spain offered Catalonia the possibility of legitimizing its claim to national identity, even though it did not push for separate political self-determination. The regional government extended the institutional reach of the Catalan language, which it promoted through successful radio and television broadcasting. The visual identity of Catalonia in the 1980s, however, was achieved through a confluence of factors that made its furniture and product design an international success. These design forms did not as a rule hark back to a vernacular iconography or cultural clichés—rather Catalan design spoke to a global market through the elusive values of modernity and creative heritage. In so doing, Catalonia was able to distance itself from Spain's largely negative image at that time of "siesta and mañana," establishing its own distinct economic profile and privileged market share.

Narotzky's analysis dovetails in an interesting manner with Clark's, for one could argue that strong brand and design identity materialized in both Hong Kong and Catalonia in lieu of real political authority, with both regions existing in a liminal space between dependence and independence. For Catalonia, the possibility of gaining visibility on the international stage opened up once Spain's fascist era came to a close. In the case of Hong Kong, identity became a crucial enterprise at the moment of the Sino-British Declaration, when its citizens feared that life as they knew it was about to disappear. Populations can empower themselves culturally and economically without challenging the ambiguity of their political status. Branding and design, favorably positioned between culture and commerce, are ideally suited for redefining identities that are circumscribed within these two realms.

I would like to join with Hazel Clark in thanking the authors for their vibrant contributions to this volume of *Design Issues*. Their essays point to new avenues of investigation in design studies that engage contemporary debates around globalization and take advantage of the field's transdisciplinary context. Before

concluding, we would also like to thank Marcelo Viana for his original and thoughtful design for this issue's cover. We extend our thanks as well to the editorial board of *Design Issues* and its managing editor, for their support and encouragement in bringing this volume to fruition. We hope that readers will find these essays thought-provoking, and we welcome any comments: kfiss@cca.edu and clarkH@newschool.edu.