

Selling the Nation: Identity and Design in 1980s Catalonia

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Introduction

The Spanish political transition from dictatorship to democracy was officially initiated in late 1975, at the death of General Francisco Franco. Within that context, there were two main elements that were highly instrumental in configuring the position of modern design in Barcelona and, more generally, the relationship between design, modernity, and regional identity in Catalonia. One of them was the process of urban regeneration that affected both the physical aspect of the city and the quality of the urban experience. The other one, which will be developed here, was the rise of the nationalist discourse that provided the main ideological context for cultural and political life in transitional Catalonia.

While the concern around issues of national and regional identity was paramount in transitional Spain and colored its political discourse throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, it was also of interest in international academic circles and a fashionable topic in design circles at the time. During the 1970s, countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal emerged from the twilight of dictatorship into the brightly lit stage of the European Union; and the breakup of the Soviet Union after 1989 provoked a renewed effervescence of Eastern European nationalisms. The resulting interest in the study of nationalism and the political transformations taking place in Europe led to the reemergence of discussions about the relationships between national identity and design. For design journalism, this revival of the national question provided for easy, if mediocre, copy and simple themes for exhibitions.

In the 1980s, contemporary design discourse became concerned primarily with finding and describing the formal characteristics that could identify a particular product as French, Japanese, Italian, or German. This approach often relied on comparative case studies in order to highlight different national styles; backing the use of product semantics with cursory historical analysis, and emphasizing the commercial benefits of product differentiation. For example, the 1985 exhibition *National Characteristics in Design*, held at the Boilerhouse in London abounded in stereotypes of German “efficiency” and English “heritage.”

Journalist Hugh Aldersey-Williams’s book *World Design*,

written just before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, centered on the role of local cultures of design in the face of an increasing globalization of products, markets, and systems of production.¹ Aldersey-Williams placed a strong emphasis on the economic benefits of product differentiation; an approach that reduced the expression of national identity in consumer goods to its effect on profit margins. In such an account:

... the expression of national cultural identities by design could prove instrumental to the emergence of benign new nationalisms.... Such nationalisms would have to be compatible with technological progress and with free-market practices. They could encourage product diversity, stimulate market demand, and perhaps even do a little to improve mutual understanding among the peoples of different nations and cultures.²

This is a problematic claim. The recourse to “national features” as a marketing ploy more often than not ends up as an offering of national stereotypes for global consumption. As in the case of gendered products, it is a process that reproduces cultural stereotypes instead of challenging them, and therefore hardly represents the best way “to improve mutual understanding.” Furthermore, the notion of “benign nationalisms” seems to imply nationalisms that are not based on ideology, but on formal characteristics: the kind found in shop windows displaying cute and colorful Japanese electronic goods or stylish Italian coffee-makers. By embracing free-market practices, nationalisms could become “benign” and “nonideological” in the author’s view. But the wholesale adoption of a capitalist economic system can in itself mean the renunciation of an important part of a given nation’s specific character, particularly in relation to the design, manufacture, and consumption of goods. It is more likely to lead to the disappearance of indigenous forms than to the appearance of new ones. The distancing of nationalism and ideology, and the former’s reduction to commodity-led, business-oriented formalism, became the cornerstone of approaches to design and national identity, and even to the design of national identity itself throughout the late twentieth century.

By looking mostly at furniture design, this paper addresses issues of collective identity in the context of regional and national identity, responding both to the Spanish political context of the political transition in the 1980s, and to a growing international interest in local production. In doing so, it explores conflicting perceptions of national and regional character, and the varying roles played by individuals and institutions in the configuration of ideas of the nation.

Catalan Nationalism

Since the nineteenth century, Catalans have seen themselves as

1 Hugh Aldersey-Williams, *World Design: Nationalism and Globalism in Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992).

2 *Ibid.*, 13.

providing the modernizing drive in an underdeveloped and inward-looking country; trying to open up a window to Europe that was repeatedly shut from Madrid. The strength of this drive was first materialized in “modernisme,” a Catalan version of northern-European art nouveau. David Mackay, an English architect working in Barcelona since the 1950s, has defined it as: “Much more than a local variant of art nouveau, because it became a style identified with a total movement to affirm Catalan nationhood and cultural autonomy; differentiated from Spanishness and attuned to its advanced European counterparts.”³

In its nationalism as much as in its preferred architectural style, the Catalan bourgeoisie at the turn of the century were in line with the latest European trends. The complexity of Spanish politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and especially the tense relationship between the underdeveloped center and the richer but politically subordinate periphery—turned this search for a Catalan national identity into a powerful and ever-present dynamic that has been the backbone of the region’s cultural life to this day. Throughout the century, Catalan architects and designers have had to contend with the politics of place and memory; weaving into their work their individual response to modernity and tradition, and the collective tensions of a community that has been endlessly constructing its identity. Where the formal language that could express such an identity was to be found depended as much on current cultural trends as on what “being Catalan” was supposed to mean. For 1860s romantics, the answer was in representations of a glorious past; in the 1910s it was in the civic ideal of the City; for 1930s modernists in a better, rationalized future. The sediment of all those efforts provided later generations of designers with a rich heritage they could adopt and use.

At the height of European nationalism in the late nineteenth century, the search for a “national style” became a pressing issue.⁴ Although the recourse to vernacular typologies was a common solution to that concern in its early stages, the rise of modernism added a layer of complexity to the expression of national character. That complexity only increased from the late 1970s with the development of postmodern approaches to architecture and design. The context of postmodernity not only transformed practitioners’ relationships with local typologies and motifs, but also introduced a degree of ambiguity to their use that often led to confused interpretations of their meaning. The transition to a democratic government in Spain afforded the regions the opportunity to redefine their political status. In Catalonia, this involved intense campaigning on behalf of the Regional Government to establish the legitimacy of its claims to nationhood based on language, culture, and historical precedent. Rather than actual independence, these claims sought to validate the uniqueness of Catalan culture, known as “the Catalan difference,” and the government was quick to find a place for design as one of

3 David Mackay, *Modern Architecture in Barcelona* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).

4 See David Crowley, *National Style and Nation-State: Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the International Style* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Nicola Gordon Bowe, *Art and the National Dream: The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the-century Design* (Blackrock Co. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993).

its distinctive elements. It also proceeded to successfully “rebrand” the region, an approach that became widespread during the late-eighties and nineties as economic changes pushed cities, regions, and nations to seek a higher profile in an increasingly competitive global market.

If the new Spanish political framework bound Catalonia to the realities and pragmatic acceptance of regionalism, the local discourse of identity definitely remained that of nationalism. As the *Generalitat*'s institutional campaign in 1992 was careful to point out to foreign readers of publications such as *The Economist* and *Time*, Catalonia was not a region, but “a country in Spain.” In such a tightly framed environment, the role of design as part of the discourse of nationhood became especially significant. Although it might not have overtly adopted a nationalist formal vocabulary, it was used as a marker of local identity, and could not fail to become instrumental in a context so deeply saturated with these issues.

In strictly political terms, Catalonia is a Spanish Autonomous Community. The Constitution of 1978 states “the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation,” but also “recognizes and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions of which it is comprised.” The current Catalanist agenda, in place since the political transition, is based on the right to self-determination. Catalonia wants to see itself as a potential nation-state which chooses to remain an autonomous region. Jordi Pujol, President of the *Generalitat* from the first democratic regional elections in 1981 until 2003, always cautiously stressed his wish to serve the interests of Catalonia “within the framework of the Spanish state.”⁵ While that certainly was the case, it also is true that Spain's incorporation into the European Union in 1986 represented a golden opportunity to integrate Catalan national claims and material output into a structure that was greater than Catalonia itself as a region, but that could bypass the Spanish state. The passion with which Spain pursued its integration into Europe, seen both as a path to cultural modernization and to economic prosperity, provided its regions with the perfect environment in which to channel their nationalist aspirations.



Figure 1
Antoni Gaudí. Iron gate of the Finca Güell
(1884–1887). Saint George the dragon-slayer,
the patron saint of Catalunya.

Catalan Style and International Postmodernism

In Spain during the mid-eighties, a number of objects, particularly high-design furniture, self-consciously drew on national vernacular typologies and historicist motifs. There were, however, important differences between the product semantics of nationalism in early-twentieth-century *Modernisme* and *Noucentisme*, and in 1980s design. The *Modernista* art nouveau architects of the turn of the century did their best to turn Barcelona's *Eixample* into a baroque manifesto of brickwork, ceramics, iron, and stone. (Figure 1) In the 1920s, *Noucentisme*, with a more restrained vocabulary, was keen to convey its own version of Mediterranean classicism and the strength of the roots attaching the Catalan essence to the ancestral soil. However,

5 Paul Heywood, *The Government and Politics of Spain* (London: MacMillan Press, 1995), 161.

with the few exceptions discussed below, the designers and architects of the transition rarely incorporated into their work such literal and self-conscious references. It is true that the precedent of the modern movement, whose directives and priorities related to design practice precluded any recourse to extensive detailing or ornamentation, made it somewhat more difficult for Catalan designers to expose specific signs of local identity. But by the early eighties, the more generous tenets of postmodernity would have legitimized a playful menagerie of dragons, dragon-slayers, Madonnas, and other icons of local myth. However, whereas Catalanism at its beginnings sought to validate its historical lineage and to compile its own local iconography, the nationalism of the 1980s was in turn very much concerned with the construction, development, and expression of an image of the nation, both for internal and for external consumption. In that sense, it became less important to popularize specific formal icons than to convey more general ideas such as technological competence and Mediterranean creativity or modernity, as suggested by the numerous institutional campaigns run by the regional government through the 1980s. Accordingly, the objects designed during those years generally shunned all references to the vernacular. Rather than compiling a recurrent and distinctive formal vocabulary, Catalan designers combined a variety of resources in what looked like a personal and occasionally ironic expression of character. The coincidence of the political transition to democracy in Spain with the dissemination of postmodern theories in architecture and design had certainly very much to do with this “pick and mix” approach. But even though there were instances of direct historicist quotation in the Barcelonese designs of the eighties, they should be read with circumspection.

From the late 1960s into the 1980s, postmodernist theorists, particularly those involved in architectural practice, argued for a new approach to design. They sought to transcend what they felt to be the cold-hearted rationalism of the modern movement by incorporating into their work the sediment of history and local popular cultures, narrative, and humor. This was presented as a way to reclaim a sense of place, and to promote a closer cultural relationship with buildings and manufactured things, in the face of a growing and often stylistically reductive globalization. This recourse to local character in design and architecture, however, was not necessarily indicative of a will to present them as vehicles for the conscious expression of political values. Consequently, the reappearance of vernacular motifs in the 1980s was as ambiguous as could be expected in the context of late-twentieth-century postmodernity; both seriously addressing an increasingly complex reality and playful in its proposed solutions, ironic and earnest, local and global. This seemingly obvious localism, therefore, was not usually intended as an expression of national feeling, making the search for national characteristics in design an intricate and elusive task.

In 1986, the Spanish presence at the Milan International



Figure 2
A las Cinco y Cuarto, wool rug by Eduard Samsó for nanimarquina, 1987.

Furniture Fair sent a ripple of excitement across the world of furniture design. The products of (mostly) Barcelonese design were praised as powerful newcomers, and the interest of the specialized press turned to the city where, so it seemed, design was “happening.” The Italian magazine *Domus* published a special report on Barcelona. In one of the articles, the writers tried to cope with the diversity and composite nature of the local production: “These young Barcelona architects and designers are eclectic and fragmented, interested more in individual discovery and expression than in social perceptions.... The lack of any identifiable Spanish or national character in their work represents, not so much a loss of identity, as a spirit of the international age.”⁶ The editorial image that was placed opposite this text in the magazine to illustrate the article depicted a couple of flamenco dancers silhouetted against an evening sky—precisely the kind of cultural cliché most likely to make “young Barcelona architects and designers” deeply uncomfortable.

On occasion, Catalan designers responded playfully to the international craving for “Spanishness.” Eduard Samsó’s *Bregado* daybed of 1987 combined, with postmodern largesse, suede upholstery, a metal wire armrest, and an astrakhan-covered humped backrest: if it were Spanish, it had to be bullfighting. That year, Samsó made another, even more direct, allusion to the *fiesta nacional* with his design of a large round rug for Nani Marquina. Called “*A las cinco y cuarto*” (a quarter past five in the afternoon; the time at which the *corrida* traditionally starts) it reproduced the markings on the sand of the bullfighting ring. (Figure 2) While the 1980s witnessed an ongoing concern on the part of Catalan professionals and critics alike as to whether the objects that were being designed—particularly furniture—expressed a strong local identity, the answer to that soul-searching question was more often than not a lukewarm “possibly” with vague mentions of Gaudí and Latin exuberance. It seems only fair to say that most of the explicit references to the existence of a Catalan or Spanish style were articulated for the benefit of foreign design periodicals.⁷ As Guy Julier has noted: “The notion of ‘typical Spanish’ in a Spain of autonomous regions, recuperation of regional languages, and de-centralization was, for many young Spaniards, both anachronistic and amusing.”⁸ Moreover, in the specific context of Catalonia, it would be naïve to assume that Samsó’s expression of *Spanish* character was a deeply felt, non-ironic attitude. A report published in 1989 by the *Generalitat* revealed that a meager 8 percent of Catalans supported bullfighting; while 53 percent strongly opposed it. However much Samsó professed a sincere liking for the *corrida*—briefly fashionable in the early eighties as a tongue-in-cheek postmodern pastime—his two pieces mentioned above also should be understood as a pun intended for gullible “design tourists,” as well as a Catalan private joke at the expense of the rest of the Spanish state.

But if the highly postmodern approach to stereotyped national identities cannot be taken for granted, the direct quotation of historical

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- 6 Rosa Maria Rinaldi, and Patrizia Scarzella, “Report from Barcelona,” *Domus* 669 (February 1986).
- 7 Hugh Aldersey-Williams, “The Catalan Connection,” *ID* (May-June 1988); and Lucie Young, “Innovation to Autopsy,” *Design* 469 (January 1988). As the debate on design progressed into the 1990s, local critics became more involved with the issue of defining the specific character of Catalan consumer goods. See Daniel Giral-Miracle, “The Identity of Catalan Design,” *Catalonia* 24 (May 1991). It should be noted, however, that *Catalonia* is a magazine published in English by the Generalitat and UNESCO, and therefore intended mainly for foreign readers.
- 8 Guy Julier, *New Spanish Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).



Figure 3
Launch of the Gaulino chair collection at La Sala Vinçon, Barcelona. Designed by Oscar Tusquets for Concepta, 1986.

precedents can still be read as an authentic, if considerably mediated, expression of national character. In Barcelona, obvious sources for a formal vocabulary were the local design heroes, especially Gaudí. Oscar Tusquets's *Gaulino* chair was designed in 1986 as homage to 1940s Italian designer Carlo Mollino, as well as to Gaudí. (Figure 3) It quoted their formal organicism, and adopted their use of solid wood and local craft-based manufacturing processes. With his careful choice of mentors, Tusquets placed himself at the hub of what was felt to be the essence of Catalan identity: a world-renowned design heritage and a conscious participation in wider, more cosmopolitan cultural interests. In this respect, sociologist Lise Skov has noted that, in the world of fashion—and the same could be said generally of those commodities that are especially subject to fashion trends—“designers of whatever nationality more or less consciously address their design, not to national communities, but to certain enclaves of taste” which tend to transcend national boundaries.⁹

Not surprisingly, many of the studies that have looked for formal national characteristics have failed to find an ultimately defining “local style” in the goods produced by any particular country. Often this very search for national characteristics in consumer goods can be the cause, rather than the effect, of the designers’ attitude towards their work. In an article on Rei Kawakubo’s early 1980s collections, Skov developed a critique of the ways in which fashion garments had national identity “thrust upon them.” The media’s search for “Japaneseness” in Kawakubo’s and Yoihi Yamamoto’s work generated a high degree of self-consciousness, especially in the latter’s case. Having at first admitted that his designs were essentially Japanese, he later said: “There is no nationality in my clothes.... But when I first came to Paris ... I was pushed to realize that I am Japanese because I was told ‘You are here representing *mode japonaise*.’” This leads Skov to remark that “...the search for ‘Japaneseness’ sprang from social confrontations in the fashion world, rather than from qualities in the designs themselves.”¹⁰

Thus a discourse of national identity, which generally draws on pre-established cultural stereotypes, can be arbitrarily constructed “from the outside” around certain products, reflecting the global context in which they are created and consumed rather than their intrinsic formal or “essential” qualities. Such was often the case with the media’s reception of Catalan design, but with two particularities. First, the stereotypes used by the international press to look for national characteristics in the objects reviewed were related to the idea of “Spanishness” and thereby often inaccurate when applied to Catalonia, as suggested above. Second, this foreign search for a national identity coincided in time with the region’s own concern with the reconstruction of its political and cultural identity, thereby giving it a greater degree of resonance.

Moreover, postmodern readings of contemporary culture

9 Lise Skov, “Fashion Trends, *Japonisme* and Postmodernism, or What Is So Japanese about *Comme des Garçons*?” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13:3 (1996): 137.

10 *Ibid.*, 141.



Figure 4
Xavier Mariscal, Garriri chair for Akaba, 1988.

have outlined the cross-pollination and transnational nature of global trends, as well as the shifting borders between high and low culture. They represent a real challenge to essentialist approaches that look for the “pure” expression of a national zeitgeist, and try to describe the local as the result of a closed-circuit flow of information. At the same time, the concern with globalization has generated a renewed interest for the local, reconfiguring the conceptualization of cultural expression as the tension between the local and the global. This late-twentieth-century dichotomy led to certain confusing readings of 1980s Catalan design. Some strongly postmodern qualities such as its eclecticism (as in the work of Oscar Tusquets), and its recourse to mass culture (Xavier Mariscal’s use of comics imagery) and popular culture (Eduard Samsó’s references to bullfighting) were all at some point simply interpreted as the earnestly sought-after Spanishness of Barcelona design.¹¹ (Figure 4) If there can be no doubt about the weight of local formal references in these designers’ work, it is just as important to note that through them they sited themselves firmly within the international aesthetics of postmodernity.

On the whole, if there was a search for identity among 1980s Barcelonese designers, it was for a regional identity. Iconic Spanish cultural practices such as bullfighting or flamenco (both of them originating from Andalucía in southern Spain, and both of them actively promoted in the past by General Franco’s government) were useful more as part of a dialectical approach to otherness than as an integral part of the Catalan self. There was no theoretical debate over the use of vernacular typologies or local craft techniques; and no call for designers to express the essence of their *catalanitat* through lamps, tables, buildings, or street benches. Nevertheless, they did. Art historian and critic Robert Hughes captured the unspoken kinship between the two main cultural undercurrents of 1980s Barcelona:

Design consciousness pervades the city, in an irritated ecstasy of angular, spiky, spotted, jerry-built, post-Memphis, sub-Miroesque mannerism. Designer ashtrays, designer pencils, designer kitchen gear, designer food... Even children appear to have been designed.... They, too, will grow up to be designers, as their remote ancestors were encouraged to be Catalan secessionists.¹²

It might be difficult to pinpoint the specific Catalan characteristics of Barcelona design, but certainly easier to argue that modern design had become the closest thing to a national style. As the director of a gallery in Washington, D.C., that in 1997 held an exhibition of twentieth-century Catalan design put it to the press, it was the “registered trademark of Catalan culture.”¹³

Rebranding and Nation-Building Agency

One of the goals of a national movement is “the development of a national culture based on the local language, and its normal use

11 Claudia Hart, “International Design: Barcelona” *I.D.* 31:3 (May-June 1984): 58–61; and David Redhead, “Spain Gets Serious,” *Blueprint* 86 (April 1992): 31–34.
12 Robert Hughes, *Barcelona* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
13 “Washington exhibe una selecció del disseny barcelonés del segle XX,” *La Vanguardia* 21 (February 1997).

in education, administration, and economic life.”¹⁴ Throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s, this process was high on the *Generalitat*’s agenda, placed under the heading “normalization.” Such was the single-minded enthusiasm with which the *Generalitat* pursued this goal that, according to historian Josep-Anton Fernandez, it made “cultural normalization” the main cultural policy of contemporary Catalan nationalism. Its aim was to turn Catalonia into “a ‘normal’ society: that is, a society in which Catalonia’s own language would be hegemonic; in which citizens would share a common sense of (Catalan) national identity based on their cultural traditions; and which would be comparable to any other modern European society in terms of cultural infrastructures, habits of cultural consumption, and the balance between high and mass culture.”¹⁵

The idea of what is or is not “normal” is a highly debatable one, and the *Generalitat*’s long-term utopian vision of one nation, one language, and one culture is not only questionable as regards the increasing diversity of Catalan society itself, but even more so in the case of most contemporary nation-states that need to integrate the presence of large ethnic minorities and high levels of transnational migration into their definition of “normality.” In the 1980s, however, ethnicity was much less of an issue in Catalonia. Rather, the main issue at stake was ultimately extending the use of Catalan in institutional communication and among the Spanish-speaking local population.

What is of particular interest here is the concept of normalizing certain “habits of cultural consumption.” In that respect, the *Generalitat* was extremely diligent, not the least in its promotion of Catalan in radio and television. In 1983, the *Corporació Catalana de Ràdio i Televisió* was created to support and develop public broadcasting in Catalan. By 1989, it controlled four radio stations and two TV channels. This altered profoundly the composition of the Catalan audio-visual space, as Catalunya Ràdio and TV3, the main radio and TV stations, rapidly became popular. By 1987, TV3, competing directly with the Spanish public TV stations, was being watched regularly by 54.2 percent of the Catalan audience.¹⁶ The main goal of “language normalization” also was promoted through uneven official support of the use of Catalan in publishing, the theater, newspapers, and cinema. But the success of TV3 achieved something else as well: it contributed to the creation of a visual language of identity.

Funded by the regional government, TV3 brought together a team of young media professionals and graphic designers who shaped the looks of Catalonia’s first official TV channel. With its carefully designed studio sets and computer graphics with minimalist music, its newsreaders’ choice of clothes and hairstyles, and its selection of furniture; the visual world it brought into more than 50 percent of Catalan households every day was a designer’s world.¹⁷ Using the same didactic insistence with which

14 Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe” in *Mapping The Nation*, Gopal Balakrishnan, ed. (London: Verso, 1996).

15 Josep-Anton Fernandez, “Becoming Normal: Cultural Production and Cultural Policy in Catalonia” in *Spanish Cultural Studies*, Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 343

16 Joan Maria Corbella, *Social Communication in Catalonia: General Survey of the 1980s* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 1988).

17 See Jordi Ambrós, Esther Casaldàliga, Beto Compagnucci, and Joan Sibina, “El diseño en televisión. La Dirección Artística de TV3” *On* 96 (1988).

Figure 5
Design in Catalogna travelling exhibition.
Milan, 1988.



it was promoting a habit of cultural consumption in Catalan, it normalized a certain type of visual and material environment. “Normal” Catalans spoke Catalan, listened to Philip Glass, wore designer suits, and sat in designer chairs. How different they were from other Spaniards! One only needed to switch channels to see the proof. Contemporary design became the tool of choice for the construction of a visual world that would concretize the “Catalan difference,” and it proved to be as efficient in familiarizing a mass audience with a certain aesthetic as dubbed soap operas were in diffusing the language.

Moreover, the *Generalitat* also saw the promotion and mediation of local design as a pivotal aspect of its nationalist agenda. It recognized the value of design’s privileged position at the point of articulation between culture and industry. As such, design was an ideal vehicle for the expression of a local identity; a powerful visual manifestation of many elements that were at the heart of the Catalanist discourse: the region’s longstanding industrial preeminence in Spain, its internationally acclaimed architectural heritage,¹⁸ and a bourgeois identity forged in the nineteenth century through commerce and manufacturing. Throughout the 1980s, mostly through a number of public exhibitions, many of them international, the *Generalitat* encouraged this merging of national identity and design as part of a concerted drive to reposition Catalan goods, and Catalonia itself, both at home and abroad.¹⁹ (Figure 5)

During the last couple of decades, the relationship between the traditional/vernacular form and national identity, and that of national identity itself with the nation-state, has been shifting ground. It is not only the ways, but the reasons behind the ways, in which objects might seek to embody the collective aspirations, values, and self-image of a given national group that are being reconsidered. With a weakening of the nation-state brought about by the

18 That heritage already was part and parcel of the nationalist discourse, for there had been an obsessive debate in the late-nineteenth century—echoing similar concerns across Western Europe—around the idea of a “modern national style.” See Angel Isac, “Eclecticisme i Nacionalisme Arquitectònic al Segle XIX” and Judith Rohrer, “Una visió apropiada: el temple de la Sagrada Família de Gaudí i la política arquitectònica de la Lliga Regionalista.” Both are in *Gaudí i el seu temps*, Juan José, ed. (Lahuerta, Barcelona: Barcanova, 1990).

19 See Viviana Narotzky, “‘A Different and New Refinement’: Design in Barcelona 1960–1990,” *Journal of Design History* 13:3 (2000): 227–43.

globalization of markets and the growing power of transnational political, military, and economic institutions, the very role of national identities has been reassessed. Some analysts have argued that “The core argument for taking a strategic approach to national identity is that it creates an economic premium.”²⁰ This emphasis on the close links between the nation-state, national identity, and the national economy is certainly not a recent one. For the liberal national movements of the nineteenth century, economic development was such an important concept that small states were not considered viable if they could not have a self-contained national economy. As the German economist Friedrich List noted in the 1840s:

A large population and an extensive territory endowed with manifold national resources are essential requirements of the normal nationality ... A small state can never bring to complete perfection within its territory the various branches of production.²¹

With the globalization of production, the way in which that economic premium is extracted has changed. While, in the nineteenth century, the fostering of the national economy by the state involved the use of protectionist measures, in the late twentieth century, analysts have defended the use of a strong national identity to brand commodities and to position them favorably in the global market.

In Mark Leonard’s *Britain*[™], a 1997 paper by the New Labour think tank Demos, funded by the Design Council, the parallel with the use of corporate identity in business practice was made explicit. It literally designed an alternative national identity out of what it perceived to be the real strengths of contemporary Britain; replacing concepts that are seen as outdated, such as empire, industry, religion, language, and institutions with multiculturalism, creativity, tolerance, and global business. Thus, a new attitude towards national identity was being developed; one that somewhat incidentally put design practice at its center because it was primarily concerned with the successful marketing of goods and services through the use of a strong product identity. This approach made use of the techniques of corporate identity design to develop and implement a coherent national image that could enhance the appeal of those goods in the international marketplace. In his book *The Corporate Personality*, Wally Olins introduced the new concept in the late seventies by comparing it with a country’s national identity.²² By the early nineties, he was turning the argument around; describing how the new post-Soviet states could benefit from a thorough corporate redesign that would define their confused—and confusing—national identities:

The Ukraine, for example ... will need a national identity as powerful, clear, and distinctive as that of any other nation of a similar size—say France. It will need major international brands, and recognition for its cultural achievements, its style of living, its cuisine and traditions ... until it does

20 Mark Leonard, *Britain*[™] (London: Demos, 1997).

21 Friedrich List quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1995), 175–6.

22 Wally Olins, *The Corporate Personality* (London: The Design Council, 1979).

project a clear idea of itself, Made in Ukraine, Visit Ukraine, or Invest in Ukraine are likely to be idle invocations.²³

And where could these new nations turn in their search for a successful model?

Catalonia has allocated a massive budget to market itself as a recognizable political entity ... nations, regions, and cities will, like Catalonia, project themselves professionally and powerfully as they fight for tourism, investment, and trading opportunities.²⁴

The business community has been aware of the commercial benefits of this approach for a long time. In fact, it seems in many cases to have taken over the task of nation-building from politicians and academics. The practice of branding and rebranding whole nations currently has become an accepted idea, and the *Journal of Brand Management* devoted a monographic issue to it in 2002.²⁵ Place-branding, and especially the way in which cities and nations are competing for an international tourist market, is increasingly receiving attention both in terms of academic research and of business studies and marketing.²⁶ The notion that national identity—its upkeep, construction, and mediation—belongs to the realm of business at least as much as it does to that of politics or culture is now firmly established.

In his study of the role of Orientalist imagery in Japanese and Western advertising, Brian Moeran mapped the way in which certain cultural stereotypes have been used to promote goods and services.²⁷ His analysis revealed how their use in contemporary Japanese advertising derived from a shift in Japanese attitudes towards these reductive narratives. After the Second World War, a whole literary genre emerged in Japan, devoted to defining “the unique characteristics of the Japanese people.” It relied on the same categories developed by the West (silence, ambivalence, inscrutability, emotionality, and uniqueness) to explain everything, from the Japanese business ethos to education or parliamentary democracy. But this introspective process was at first as wary of “things Japanese” as its Western Orientalist counterpart. “With the emergence of the Japanese economy as a major world force in the 1970s and 1980s [it] shifted in tone from criticism to positive eulogy.”²⁸ While this is not the only case in which societies have turned negative stereotypes of themselves into what could be defined as “positive ethnic qualities,” what sets the Japanese apart in Moeran’s interpretation is the reason behind the shift. This appropriation of the Orientalist discourse, described by Moeran as “counter-Orientalism,” was the basis for a new cultural nationalism that now sells cars and personal stereos:

It has been educated *businessmen*, or “intelligentsia” who have been primarily responsible for this resurgent cultural

23 Wally Olins, “Mapping the Millennium,” *Blueprint* 100 (September 1993).

24 Ibid.

25 “Nation Branding” *Journal of Brand Management* 9:4-5 (2002): 281–93.

26 Simon Anholt, “Foreword,” *Journal of Brand Management* 9:4-5 (2002): 281–93; R. Bennet and S. Savani, “The Rebranding of City Places: An International Comparative Investigation,” *International Public Management Review* 4:2 (2003): 70–87 and Guy Julier, “Urban Designscapes and the Production of Aesthetic Consent,” *Urban Studies* 42:5-6 (2005): 869–87.

27 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth Penguin, 1991); and Brian Moeran, “The Orient Strikes Back: Advertising and Imagining Japan,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13:3 (1996): 77–112.

28 Brian Moeran, “The Orient Strikes Back,” 95.

nationalism.... In other words, while Japan's earlier spate of invented traditions was conjured up by politicians and intellectuals for *political* purposes, post-war inventions ... have been recreated by businessmen for *business* purposes.²⁹

In the ruthless fight for markets and profits in the ever-expanding arena of the world economy, the concept of the nation-state as what Immanuel Wallerstein called "our primary cultural container"³⁰ seems to have much to offer. Its strength as a bearer of identity is still powerful enough to arouse the interest of the business community, shifting the focal point of nation-building closer to the world of goods, and giving a new depth to the role of commodities in the construction of collective identities.

Conclusion

Given that the nation-state currently remains the legitimate international norm, it is easier to achieve international credibility within that model or, barring that, as a national group that claims the right to be a nation-state even if it does not wish to fully implement it, as in the Catalan case. The recourse to strengthening the "national brand" therefore is still an obvious choice for any community that wants to compete successfully in the global world. However, while it is increasingly viewed as an integral aspect of institutional practices, branding countries or regions often disregards the relation of national identity to society, and artificially distances it from the realities that shape national movements and local cultural identity. "Rebranding" a whole country might seem like a good marketing idea. Viewed historically, it also sounds like a rather unlikely one. One of the main problems is often the necessary implementation of a simplified—not to say simplistic—understanding of national identity, drawing on shared stereotypes that gloss over the underlying complexities that constitute the rich breeding ground of local cultures.

It is worth taking into account, however, that this place-branding process took place in Catalonia before the notion of branding places became widespread in the late 1990s. As Guy Julier has noted in the specific case of Barcelona: "The range and extent of design activities was too varied and widespread for any centralist organization; being that they belonged to individuals, small companies, and professional associations as well as local government departments."³¹ Their organic implementation reflected current cultural and political contexts, and generated a degree of "aesthetic consent" which placed contemporary design at its hub. For Catalonia, design offered that elusive symbolic value, bringing together industrial competence and creative heritage. The late seventies, and even more so the eighties, provided a very fertile context. The general rise of designer culture offered a particularly active and internationally coherent environment in which to integrate Catalan production in a field that enjoyed at the time a very high cultural profile. It suited

29 Ibid.

30 Immanuel Wallerstein, "The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?" in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, Anthony D. King, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1991).

31 Guy Julier, "Urban Designscapes and the Production of Aesthetic Consent": 869–887.

Catalanist aspirations perfectly, since they were historically mostly linked to expression through high rather than low or popular culture, and to an awareness of contemporary trends in European cultural production.

Whatever its weaknesses, the market-led approach to national identity appears to be a pervading trend, and in their bid to belong and “upgrade,” many transitional countries have had to negotiate their own institutional relationship with it. In its previous incarnation as a totalitarian state, Spain’s regional diversity can be said to have been “[h]idden behind a façade of cultural homogeneity,” generated centrally and representing “at best ... the oppressive maintenance of a hegemonic majority culture.”³² In Catalonia, the “redesign” of a national identity was masterminded to a great degree from within the renewed state institutions. But their greatest success was the ability to bring together and coordinate a whole range of activities and outputs, many of which were emerging from individual designers and civil society. Transitional Catalonia was particularly keen to distance itself from Spain and what were thought to be its negative international connotations: a fascist past and a culture of *siesta* and *mañana*. Although shaped to fit the context of the European Union, and expressed increasingly through the market, commodities, and the built environment, the new post-Francoist identities that emerged in Catalonia in the nineties—although shaped to fit the context of the European Union and expressed increasingly through the market, commodities, and the built environment—were deeply rooted in previous historical conflicts and in the more recent political tensions of the transition. In that sense, they emerged as much to address internal friction as to enable the economic success of a new southern European democracy in the world market.

32 Jürgen Habermas, “The European Nation-State: Its Achievements and Its Limits” in *Mapping the Nation*, Gopal Balakrishnan, ed. (London: Verso, 1996).