DESIGN AND PLACE: HOW CULTURE AND LOCATION

INFLUENCE AND IMPROVE DESIGN

by

EMILIO HALPERIN

A THESIS

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This thesis examines the role that culture and geographic location play on the design process. Using historical and contemporary examples of designers who adapt their designs to their culture, as well as examples of products that have their origin imbued upon, I will argue that the implementation of cultural elements into a design makes it a stronger and more successful project.

A secondary element to this body of work will analyze and examine some of the ways in which Western influence in the world of design neglect recognizing non-Western design philosophies and styles. This section will be both a general analysis of this predicament, as well as a self-reflection of the ways in which my design work is influenced by the Western world and its dominance over the fields of design.

The third portion of this thesis will culminate in a physical design project where I will embody the state of Oregon, and elements from its environment, into my designs. The creative outlet of this thesis will aim to incorporate much of the first two portions of my research to strengthen my design ideas and claims.

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Introduction

In the early 1950s Charles Eames returned from an East Coast business trip determined to design a chair that had the "feel and substance of the heavy, leather and wood chairs he had sat in – a chair that would have the 'warm receptive look of a well-used first baseman's mitt'." (Marylin Neuhart, *The Story of Eames*, p.647) The Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman was born, arguably one of the most iconic pieces of mid-century furniture, both in the United States and around the globe. There is much about the Eames Lounge that makes it a staple of mid-century design, but it is Charles Eames's intention and desire for it to have the look of a worn-in baseball glove, that helps make it such an icon.

The first baseman's mitt is a quintessentially American object. It is an icon of American culture, of America's pastime, and something most Americans, especially in the mid-1950s would immediately recognize. Charles Eames's decision to have a worn-in baseball glove as focal point of his inspiration for the chair demonstrates an aspect of the design process that I consider necessary to a successful design. Culture.

This thesis will explore the role that culture and location play in the design process. How does culture influence and improve design? How does a design's geographic origin manifest itself in the final product? My research and work for this thesis will center on rooting design in a specific place and within a specific culture or environment, while still intending for its audience to be global. This will ideally result in a more contemporary idea of "locally made and designed" that does not fall under the stereotypical categories of kitschy products. I will argue that implementing cultural

elements, or referencing the physical location of the origin of a design in the design process, creates a stronger, more successful design.

As a creative thesis, the product of my research will culminate in a series of products that epitomize the state of Oregon. My designs will consider Oregon's history, vernacular design and architecture, and, most prominently, the natural environment. There will be several problems with this project and with fully characterizing Oregon which I will explain later in this thesis. The most significant issues with my work will be the Western cultural influence on my design which do not fully and truly represent Oregon. One of my primary goals in this thesis and the work that will result from it is to increase the awareness of the non-Western, non-dominant design cultures that have their own design solutions and "styles." Western influence will remain nonetheless, but ideally this will highlight the design philosophies from non-Western cultures present in Oregon and around the world.

A Brief History of Design and Place

Design and culture have been inseparable since both have existed. Victor Papanek, one of the first advocates of socially inclusive and egalitarian design writes that, "All men are designers. All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is the basic to all human activity – [and that the] planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process." (Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, P. 3) Taking this definition, design is a fundamental part of any culture, as the design solution will be unique to the physical or cultural space in which they were brought forth. While Papanek's definition of design is extremely extensive it illustrates how design is not a static independent result, but rather a much more diverse process, completely dependent upon its origin.

On a less basic, "what is design?" level, culture has always been a definitive influence on design and has helped define design not only by its function as a solution to a problem, but from a stylistic perspective. In *Furnishing Modern France* Leora Auslander argues that the meaning of made objects such as furniture, and everything related to their existence, was significantly shaped by "conjunctures in culture." (Auslander, p. 1) In her chapter on *Style in the New Commercial World* she explains how at the end of the 19th century furniture in France consisted almost entirely of "historicist pastiche." (Auslander, p. 306) That although furniture companies wanted to expand their skills and push the boundaries of what domestic furniture could look like, they were economically forced to produce copies of furniture from the Renaissance era, or from the times of Louis XIV and XVI.

The outcome of this external pressure on designers and artists was to utilize the constrains placed upon them by the defined styles from their culture, and "inventing new forms of the old." (Auslander, p. 306) These inventions ranged anywhere from utilizing different materials than their original counterparts, to altering the forms to create more "playful, and sometimes ironic" (Auslander, p. 307) versions. At the time one of the French furniture makers, Pérol Freres, said that "style cannot be invented, because a style emerges from the customs and the social system of an epoch… While we have been inspired by the documents of the period of Louis XV, we have modernized the general form." (Auslander, p. 307) The social systems that Pérol Freres mentions are the elements of culture that have played a role in the development of design and the constant changing of style and form that create diversity in the objects with which we surround ourselves.

When discussing the influence that culture and place can have on the objects a group produces, one group cannot be left unmentioned. The Shakers of 17th and 18th century New England believed in simplicity in all aspects of life. Turning themselves away from the rest of society, they built individual communities of large families where they "devoted their lives to work and celebrated their love of God in the rousing dance worship that gave them their name." (Sprigg, *Shaker Design*, p.11) As they developed their communities, they also developed the objects that defined their work. These objects were not merely an exercise in simplicity: it was a practice in crafting objects that had a harmony about them and were in harmony with the objects around them.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of the Shaker ideas of craftsmanship and making was the relationship they believed should exist between an object and its maker.

The founder of the Shakers, Ann Lee, taught her believers "that the mastery of a craft was a partnership with tools, materials and processes." (Sprigg, p. 17) Out of this came a dedication to creating objects that took all the mastery of the craftsperson behind them, anything else was not fulfilling that relationship.

The design process has evolved over time, and there has never been one distinct way of approaching making an object. For some designers there are strict economic restrictions placed upon them which force the design process in one direction – while for others, religious ideologies shape the entire culture of crafting and producing a world of objects meant to last. These two examples demonstrate historical precedents for why the design process should involve elements of one's culture or of one's physical location.

Design and Place Today

At the 2018 Salone de Mobile in Milan, the world's largest furniture design trade show, there was a massive billboard along the main walkway that read, "One design fits all." Regardless of its intended meaning, the sign nonetheless accurately describes the trends many of the world's manufacturers of furniture, home appliances, and everyday products are following. Homogeneity of design in the 21st century is something companies and designers seem to strive for. For business reasons this makes sense; if you can sell one design to the entire world then there is no need to design and manufacture specific objects for specific locations. As efficient as this may be from a business perspective, it creates bland designs that, although designed for *everywhere*, really don't fit in *anywhere*.

Salone de Mobile Advertisement, Emilio Halperin, 2018

Design and place belong together. Whether a specific culture, or a physical, geographic location the origins of a design give that particular design a somewhat

abstract value. Grounding a design in the vernacular of its origin elevates the experience of interacting with said design. Designing within a specific culture or place expands the definition of objects, which creates diversity in the sea of products that are manufactured and distributed globally. A chair found in a rural town will most likely look completely different than a chair found in an urban apartment. This issue stems from the role the designer plays in the design process.

Naoto Fukasawa, the famous Industrial designer behind some of IDEO's and Muji's most successful projects, sees the role of the designer as a participant observer of the culture in which that design will live. Fukasawa believes that the correct "answer" to the design problem is not something the designer conjures from thin air, rather, the solution exists already, it just needs to be found. He writes that the best solutions occur when, "I as designer stand on the side of the public and objectively identify with the end users' 'if only there were something like this' wishes (Naoto Fukasawa, Naoto Fukasawa, P. 6)." Fukasawa goes on to write that "design isn't something I generate, so much as something that already exists *in situ*; all I do is give it concrete form (Fukasawa, P. 6)." The idea here is that the designer can filter out the noise of everyday life and find the solution that has been hiding in plain sight.

Fukasawa's designs, because of his observational role, are not universal. Culture is so fundamental to his work that the works he produces, to someone from a different culture or from a different country, can often seem strange, alien or impractical. Jasper Morrison, one of Fukasawa's contemporaries and frequent collaborators says that, "good design always explains itself naturally, without the need of an instruction manual, without provoking the phrase 'what's that for?'" (Naoto Fukasawa, p. 37) Ironically,

because Fukasawa's design are so grounded in the culture he is observing, some of his most famous designs must be explained to those unfamiliar with this culture. A clear example of this is his Rice cooker for Muji.

Naoto Fukasawa, Rice Cooker for Muji. Photo by Andrew Kim, minimallyminimal.com, 2014.

The Muji Rice cooker is a practice in minimalistic, intuitive design. Most rice cookers include paddles with which to stir and serve the rice. There usually is no place to intuitively place the rice paddle when not in use, leading to a variety of improvised solutions. Fukasawa writes that, "Japanese people are not in the habit of resting utensils on the table top (Naoto Fukasawa, *Naoto Fukasawa,* p. 34)." After observing how Japanese people interacted with their rice cookers he decided to include a small lip on the lid of his design, where someone would naturally rest the paddle until ready to use.

Naoto Fukasawa discusses the role that collaboration between cultures can have on design when he recalls his conversations with designers from various parts of the world. In one instance he was discussing a project with two other designers. They were aiming to design a bench for lobbies or commercial environments, and one of the

designers brought up a sketch of a sofa Fukasawa had done several years earlier. Fukasawa asked the others what the difference between a sofa and a bench was and realized the translations in design are more complicated than one would have expected. He writes that, "It seems obvious, but I felt as if I'd learned the definition of a sofa anew. In Japan, the definition is more ambiguous, and points to the shape of the item, rather than its relative hardness or comfort." (Fukasawa, p. 146) Just like with languages, definitions of objects in design can vary immensely from place to place. Fukasawa's description of this variance in definition shows how much potential there is to not only design from the perspective of one culture, but to collaborate and include multiple cultural perspectives.

Although this thesis is predominantly focused on design in the sense of industrial design, there is an enormous aspect of the design world that involves culture in its process; architecture. Although I am not an architect, and do not claim to know much about the history of architecture ever I can see that culture plays an important role in the process of designing buildings. Even to the untrained eye, architectural design and culture are inseparable. In San Francisco, for example, the residential architecture is clearly predefined and, apart from small individual alterations, there is a style to which even modern projects seem to adhere.

Just as with the issues of homogenization in industrial design that I have been discussing, similar issues exist in the world of architecture. An example of this I recently came across is the implementation of air conditioning on buildings around the globe. Invented in 1902 and made for the domestic unit by the end of the 1920s, air conditioning had an enormous impact on global architecture. Humans no longer had to

weather unbearable or even mildly uncomfortable summers in places like the American Southwest (99 PI, *Thermal Delight,* 2018). "On-demand cold air freed architects from the challenge of designing a home that was uniquely suited to the climate around it. Air conditioning systems were expensive, but home builders made up for the costs in part by cutting down on passive cooling features, and little by little the local architectural traditions rooted in the climate gave way to tightly sealed, mass produced tract homes for growing suburbs." (99 PI, 2018) The demand for air conditioning units soared and as people were able to live more and more comfortably in previously harsh conditions, the need for the vernacular architecture they had developed to keep cool disappeared. New construction methods began to replace traditional construction methods, such as adobe or stone use their natural properties of heat absorption to trap heat in the walls during the day and release it at night.

This happened on a global scale, with air conditioning drastically altering the design of nearly every type of architectural unit. Glass and steel buildings quickly took over skylines around the world and today, in most cases it is difficult to identify a given city by a quick glance at its skyline. The homogeneity of commercial architecture has created a blandness on skylines which have historically defined cities. All hope is not lost, however, as there are examples of contemporary design projects in the architectural world that have begun to employ traditional and local methods of construction and design that have historically been associated with the local cultures.

Manit and Sonali Rastogi, the heads of the New Delhi architecture firm Morphogenesis have begun employing traditional, vernacular elements of Indian architecture into their modern projects. On a recent project to redesign the Pearl

Academy of Fashion in Jaipur, India, they decided against using air conditioning units to cool the building. Because the school is in a desert climate Manit Rastogi "studied old palaces and forts for inspiration on cooling techniques. And he was particularly impressed by a feature called a "baoli," or: stepwell." (99 PI, 1,16,2018) Stepwells like these first occurred in India between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. (Archdaily, *India's Forgotten Stepwells,* 6/2013). They were used for water preservation, irrigation and climate control in areas that tended to have hot dry weather for most of the year, followed weeks-long monsoon season. For the Pearl Academy of Fashion, Morphogenesis created a modern interpretation of a baoli. They dug several meters down and created a water recycling system that allows for the water's evaporation to cool the entire building. This technique allows the building to maintain a temperature level of around 84 degrees Fahrenheit, while the outside temperature it is over 115 degrees.

Consequences of Mass Manufacturing

As industrial design and manufacturing become increasingly globalized, one consequence is the loss of local, traditional manufacturing methods which rely on traditional local materials. Objects designed in the style of fitting in everywhere tend not to use the local and time-tested production methods and instead rely on mass production techniques. Whereas this is not to suggest that modern manufacturing methods are bad (in fact, in many cases they are the most efficient and economically logical methods of production), it is a fact that today's world homogenization of products comes at a cost. It's important to realize that the greater emphasis placed on

mass and rapid production of an object, results in a reduced "need" for the traditional methods of design and production.

These traditional methods of construction or production are often deeply rooted in culture. The loss of that knowledge base and skills sets poses a serious risk to those cultures. Indeed, "There is an urgent need for the country to protect these artistic expressions because they are an invaluable part of the culture. Yet at the same time we are aware of the fact that folk craftsmanship cannot remain static. The crafts are a living expression of a people and as such undergo constant change and renovation." (Carlos Espejel, *Mexican Folk Crafts*. P. 8) Although this passage was written in reference to Mexican folk crafts, it can be applied to any culture of making, anywhere in the world. Corporate design agencies tend to not express their cultural origins, mostly because doing so could alienate much of their global clientele, therefore it becomes critical to protect and retain cultural knowledge of making objects in order to continue developing and evolving the forms and styles that are reflective of that culture. Without them we would have sterile designs watered down to fit anywhere.

Many folk crafts have strongly impacted the development of modern design and have influenced other major design cultures around the world. In terms of contemporary designs, one example is the Shaker influence on Danish furniture. The Shaker traditions of designing and making objects were well known to the design world, and Shaker furniture is often regarded as one of the strongest influences on modern Scandinavian design. Kaare Klint, a founder of the Danish Academy of Fine Arts Furniture school, was "not interested in cultivating new design idioms; instead he wanted to develop and simplify existing furniture types." (Michael Muller, *Børge Mogensen: Simplicity and*

Function, p. 37) This led Klint and his students, among them famous designers such as Hans Wegner and Børge Mogensen, to Shaker furniture and Shaker notions of what and how objects should exist. One of the first and most successful examples of the Shaker Influence was the Church Chair, a simplified version of the typical post and rung chair found in abundance in Shaker communities. Shown below is a side by side example of these two chairs, and the influence a designed object steeped in cultural tradition can have on a contemporary design. The resulting inspiration and influence helped define mid-century Danish furniture design as the minimal and elegant iconic style for which it is known today.

Rocking Chair from the New Lebanon, New York Community, 1820-50s. Photo from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Kaare Klint, Church Chair 1936. Photo from Designmuseum Danmark.

Droog and Dutch Design Culture

The primary portion of my secondary research will involve conducting a case study that examines the role of culture on specific designs. I will be observing scenarios in which cultural elements, or distinct markers of a designs origin have been purposefully incorporated into specific designs and observing the results of those amalgamations. This study will be an observation on contemporary Dutch design and how design in the Netherlands has embraced cultural elements and created and iconic style. I will focus on Droog, a design collection from the Netherlands in which culture strongly informs their designs.

The Netherlands is an example of a nation that has aimed to define and map out its distinct design culture. In 2001, the Dutch government set up a committee to obtain different perspectives that would inform what Dutch design would mean, with the aim of making future recommendations on design policy (Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History*, p. 7). While a governmental committee discussing design is not a particularly unique idea, the process was interesting as it encouraged designers to incorporate elements of Dutch culture into their work. The government did not define one particular style or aesthetic and declared it to be the *official style*, but instead helped develop an immensely diverse platform upon which design could be debated in the public arena. These intellectual exchanges and the government's encouragement to continue developing a uniquely Dutch design culture, have helped the Netherlands stand out among other Western design cultures.

Design in the Netherlands, especially regarding public design, urban planning and architecture is extraordinarily diverse. This stems from a collaborative mindset

where varying schools of thought on what is the "correct" design answer have been able to cooperate, compromise and work together towards a vision that incorporates ideas from various perspectives. Discussing the overall city planning and design of the city of Rotterdam, Aaron Betsky, director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, says that, "this being the Netherlands, these debates [about the city's design] were not violent and were solved not by one party or the other proclaiming victory, but through the integration of features from both schools of design into the final plan." (Aaron Betsky, *False Flat*, p.38) On paper, and to some extent in practice, this doesn't work- it can be perceived as creating chaos in designs that make it more complex, or unnecessarily busy. Betsky continues by saying that although "one could say that Rotterdam is a mess as a result – the very confusion of principles produced a collage of urban moments that seems open to interpretation, use, and change – to me, it seems very Dutch (Betsky, *False Flat*, p. 38)." While to outsiders this may seem like a convoluted design process, it is rooted in the ways Dutch culture works. The need to complete a successful project where the majority is satisfied and has made some compromises overrides the need for one opinion to prevail over the others.

Betsky continues to discuss the variety of design processes that have incorporated quintessential elements of Dutch culture to make them successful – as well as the design projects that chose to ignore their local culture and ended up paying for it in their limited popularity. Possibly the most significant claim that Betsky makes is that for design "in the Netherlands, there is a tradition of representing as accurately as possible all the artefacts of everyday life." (Betsky, *False Flat,* p.146) The fact that most designers, according to Betsky, would incorporate their own individual

experiences, and the experiences of those from a specific area, exemplifies how the creator's personal experience and culture influence the creative process and the created objects.

The focus of this case study is, however, a particular element of contemporary Dutch design that purposefully reflects Dutch culture in order to create and present objects and products that stand out in a sea of blandness and homogeneity in the design world. I will be analyzing Droog, a design collection/company that focuses on products that are "dry (droog), which is to say that they are based on clear concepts [that are] carried out in an equally clear manner. [Their] criteria are very flexible, being led by cultural developments and by [their] intuition." (Renny Ramakers and Gijs Bakker, *Simply Droog*, p. 4) The products they present are often bizarre (for example, a log to which various chairs' back rests are attached effectively converting it to a bench), and often reflect an ironic representation of the design world. The objects both call attention to themselves and to objects around them as a critique. Aaron Betsky believes that there is an odd familiarity with the objects Droog presents, attributing this to the fact that those who design for Droog mostly "grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, there is something hippie-like and thus familiar about Droog." (*Simply Droog*, p. 14)

Tree-Trunk Bench, Jurgen Bey for Droog, 1999. Photo by Droog.

The Tree-Trunk Bench for Droog was one of the first objects that caught the attention of the design world. Meant to represent the Dutch tradition of physical adaptation the bench also calls attention to the absurdity of efforts that go into making a tree look like a proper piece of furniture. The bench's intention is to communicate to the buyer that the local environment is perfectly suitable for creating furniture, thus, only the chair backs are sold (Droog.com).

As a modern design brand or collection, Droog has adopted a less corporate direction than other contemporary firms. While most design companies have sought to design, produce, and sell objects based on marketing research, Droog has chosen to go in a different direction. "The core belief of Droog Design seemed to be that design was not a question of making more objects, using more materials or even inventing new

ideas or solutions to the problems we encounter in our daily lives, but one of finding more ways to experience, explore and expand the possibilities of existing objects, images, spaces and ideas." (*Simply Droog,* p.16) This way of thinking, and its close relationship with developments and elements of Dutch culture have given Droog much attention and recognition.

After reading the philosophies behind the processes of creating Droog objects, there are two distinct thought processes which stand out to me. The first is the idea of creating a dialogue through the design of a given object. Whether it be beginning a conversation that could lead to a collaborative, and ultimately better designed solution, or challenging people's opinions and preconceived notions about the material goods with which they surround themselves, this idea of communication is strongly at the center of what Droog has done for the last 15 years. Frequently, this dialogue is initiated through how the objects play with one's memory of how these objects exist. Louise Schouwenburg, a Dutch artist and writer says about Droog products that, "we know immediately what we are seeing, we recognize them and only notice a certain strangeness on second glance (*Simply Droog*, p.36). The familiarity and strangeness presented simultaneously are what allows for the object to carry more meaning past just its physical form or properties.

Chest of Drawers, Tejo Remy. 1991. Photo courtesy of Droog.

The Chest of Drawers by Tejo Remy is arguably not the most beautiful and elegant product ever designed, but it has still become an icon of modern Dutch design. The chest is specifically designed to be organized in whichever way its user desires; there is no "dead-end specificity" to how the chest should look, feel, or exist. The open-endedness – its "open specificity" and the freedom it gives the user "define its attractiveness." (Simply Droog, p.60)

The second idea in Droog design that I find noteworthy is   a strong focus on the impact that industry – and consequently, industrial design – impacts our physical environments. While the notion of "environmentally-conscious" design thinking is not uniquely Dutch, it is the perspective that Dutch designers have, specifically because of their location and of the unique Dutch physical environment, that sets this thinking apart. Possibly more than in most of the world, much of the Netherlands' physical space has been truly shaped by its inhabitants, as the waters have been forced back by dykes to make inhabitable entire regions of the country that would otherwise be swamped and

unlivable. Due to the unique characteristics of their country, the Dutch are keenly aware of climate change and of how little is done to curb the detrimental effects of mass production and mass consumption on the environment. According to Betsky, among designers in the Netherlands "there is a particularly Dutch way of acting in this manner, which is to engage in a sparing preservation of an artificial landscape that has been made at great cost in order to produce a palimpsest in which one can mirror, map and then elide or deform that reality. This is a way of saying that Droog does respond in a deep and consistent manner to the Dutch condition." (*Simply Droog,* p.21)

The design world in the Netherlands is in many ways not dissimilar to that of other Western design cultures. The historical influences and modernist ideas that graced the scene in the mid-20th century are akin to those from France, Germany, and other dominant design cultures. What has set the Dutch design culture apart has been its shift in the last thirty-some years to being reflective of the ways Dutch culture has evolved, and continues to develop, and how that constant evolution informs the design process. As an example of Dutch design, Droog clearly reflects the Dutch process of incorporating cultural factors and concerns into the design process, and this has earned them immense success in the field.

The objects presented by Droog are not developed only to sell in great quantities Concerns about environmental degradation, and an effort to foster conversation and dialogue are core elements of any Droog product, and these are elements they have taken directly from their own experience. While selling their products and creating a sustainable business is critical, Droog has approached the field of product design as an opportunity to share with the world part of what it means to be Dutch.

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Western Dominance in the Design World

After four years of design school, with countless lectures on historical and contemporary examples of design, the majority of what I have been taught stems from Western culture. The dominant Western/European influence stretches beyond notions of aesthetics, or the idea that the acquisition of consumer goods is desirable. Western influence has shaped our ideas of which objects we consider "designed," how we produce them, and which products we separate from the art world. While this is not a novel observation, the field of design has experienced dramatic change over the last decades changed due to the fast-paced changes in the technological, social, cultural, and political landscapes on Earth. Globalization has allowed goods to be produced in greater quantities and at lower costs than ever before, and the greater global interconnectivity has made it possible for these products to reach nearly every corner of the Earth. With emerging technologies and an increasingly interconnected world, the boundaries of design are continuously expanding. It is, therefore, important that as an emerging American designer, I reflect on what I consider to be design and how that notion may differ greatly for designers in other parts of the world.

This next section of this thesis will focus on the limitations of my research and of my work. One of the goals of my work has been to initiate a dialogue among my colleagues and peers about what *influences* our work. In design we tend to *expand upon* our *inspiration,* often searching for analogous experiences to which we can relate our designs, as well as make our designs relatable to our intended users. The goal has been to develop a design that is innovative, exciting and boundary-pushing while also being accessible, comprehensible, and familiar. I have been taught that if someone cannot

recognize what my design is, or what its intended use is, the design will not be successful.

While inspiration and influence are often difficult to distinguish, and may be synonymous for some, I believe that influence plays a much more significant role in my design process than does inspiration. When I visited Milan Design Week and the Salone de Mobile I was *inspired* to continue designing furniture and lighting, but I am continuously *influenced* by the Western ideologies of design that have and continue to surround me. The shortcomings of this thesis directly stem from the influence that Western ideas of design have on my design process. Although researching non-Western design philosophies has given me a better understanding of how design fits into the world at large, it still feels insufficient, as I am still primarily influenced by the more dominant Western ideas of form and functionality.

Non-Western Examples of Culturally rooted design

Aside from Japanese design, one of the few non-Western cultures that has had a significant impact on contemporary design, few design philosophies not rooted in Europe or the United States are taught in our schools. The few designs I have learned about in school that involve non-Western parts of the world rarely focus on the designs originating from those places, but instead on Western designs aimed at helping those impoverished areas of the world.

Upon researching some examples of non-Western cultures' design philosophies and practices of making, I found a rich array of design ideas I had never learned about. Although there is an immense history of design practices and ideologies from non-Western cultures that are no longer practiced today I wanted to focus this part of my

research into designs that continue to be designed, produced, distributed, and used today. These designs co-exist with objects from the Western world of mass production and mass distribution.

Mexican Design Culture

One of the first examples of this that I came across were the traditional equipale chairs from Mexico. During the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish Empire in the 1500s, hand-drawn manuscripts illustrated the types of furniture used by the native population in Mexico. The type of furniture was called *icpalli* in the Nahuatl language, but was appropriated by the Spanish conquistadors and changed to *equipal* (eh-kee-pahl) (Shipways, *Mexican Interiors*, p. 128). Although there are different methods of "upholstering" the surface around the frame of the equipal, be it weaving rushes, fur-on animal skin, or tanned leather, the construction methods of the equipal frames are the same.
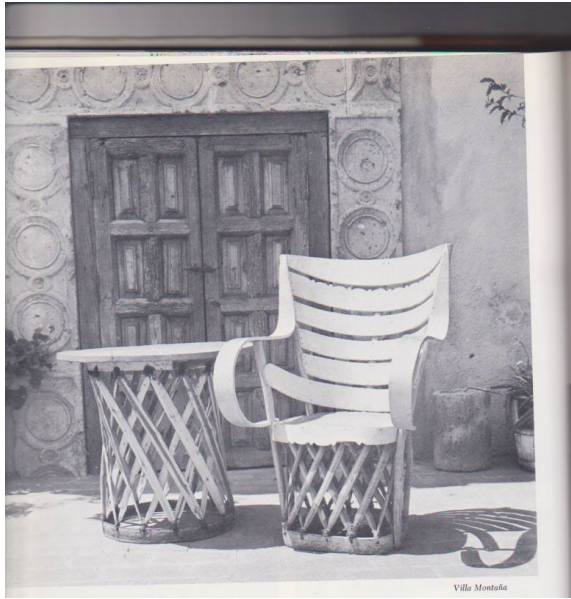
uernavaca

Villa Montaña

lajara and its environs.

Home of Judith Van Beuren

Varieties of Equipales in different environments. From Vera Cook and Warren Shipway's *Mexican Interiors*, 1962.

These chairs are constructed from a frame of vertical wooden posts and a base of diagonally woven wooden slats. These are fastened with a shaved bark strap. The seat and backrest of the chair is comprised of two pieces of stretched leather that is sewn to the wooden frame and stretched tight to create a solid backrest with a slight bounce. The seat is the same material stretched over the horizontal parts of the frame. This is a type of chair that has been made in the same way for over half a millennium, its basic form and construction remaining virtually identical. It continues to be used today and can be found in wide variety of settings in Mexico.

Design in Mexico holds a very close relationship to Mexican culture, and there has been a purposeful attempt to keep Western influence from dominating the local design world. To this day, equipales are found all over Mexico, in a variety of settings, from private to public spaces, and poor to high-end establishments, because they work well, are an integral part of the culture, and represent a practice of making that is

distinct to Mexico. "We note that some indigenous groups produce and sell such furniture. At the second level, vernacular furniture is found in cities thanks to its comfort and its accessible pricing. At the third level, we find that vernacular design has been revisited by designers, who reformulate it in new materials, proportions, and degrees of sophistication, and integrate it into households with greater purchasing power." (Kartofel, Mexican Design: Furniture Section II, 2011) What is fascinating about these chairs is that, from far away, a collection of them will seem identical in every way, but upon closer inspection, the variances of these hand-crafted objects give them a very personal beauty. Each one has an individual appearance that sets it apart from the next, but they are nonetheless mass manufactured objects.

Aside from the equipales, Mexican design has Mexican culture as a core component, autonomous from the Western influences placed upon it. One example of this is illustrated in José Ignacio Conde and Díaz Rubín's essay *Un Excepcional Mueble Mexicano del Siglo XVIII/ An Exceptional XVIII Century Piece of Mexican Furniture.* In it they describe a storage piece which clearly had a Western European influence on its design.

"Son múltiples las influencias que se advierten en este mueble. En primer lugar, puede estar inspirado en ciertos lineamientos del estilo inglés Reina Ana, pero estos lineamientos están aquí manifiestos en forma tan *sui-géneris*, que más bien constituyen una versión mexicana, atreviéndonos a decir que es autónoma al referido estilo. // *There are multiple influences present in this piece of furniture. At first glance one can see clear English influences in the style of Queen Anne, but these characteristics have*

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manifested themselves in such a sui-generis way that we can say it is entirely

independent from its Western influence."

> *Conde and Rubín, Excepcional Mueble Mexicano del Siglo XVIII/ An*
> *Exceptional XVIII Century Piece of Mexican Furniture, p. 2*

Exceptional 18th Century Piece of Mexican Furniture. Photo Courtesy of Ignacio Conde
and Díaz Rubín.

What this piece of furniture shows is a simultaneous embracing and rejection of

Western design influence. As an object and with its basic construction, this piece of

furniture could share similarities with English furniture at the time, but the form, colors,

and aspects of its functionality set it apart. Another example of a similar piece of

furniture is detailed in Verna Cook and Warren Shipway's Mexican Interiors when illustrating how "a highboy with scrolled baroque pediment is, in silhouette, unmistakably Queen Anne. It breads radically from tradition, however, in the use of lavishly carved doors to replace the customary tier of drawers." (Shipways, Mexican Interiors, p. 108) While the Western influence may have been present at some point, cultural elements unique to the area prevailed in coming through the design and making process.

Coming from a Western design educational perspective, it has been far too easy for me to assume that non-Western examples of made objects are simply "art," and it has taken a conscious effort to redefine some of these objects as being designed. In the continuum of art and design objects, there is a clear demarcation of where art ends and design begins. Many folk crafts, as Carlos Espejel described, are significant to Mexico, "because of the forms, materials and methods employed in their manufacture – They represent an essential part of the Mexican culture and reveal the Mexican's artistic and creative sensitivity, his view of the world around him, and his history." (Carlos Espejel, *Mexican Folk Crafts*, p. 8) If anything, Mexican design culture and the traditions of making have enforced the cultural aspect of these processes and any influence on their objects has been outdone by the heritage and traditions brought to the table.

Where to turn to?

It often seems futile to imagine the incorporation of non-Western perspectives into both professional design projects and design education. Even after long discussions about these issues with professors and colleagues, I have not seen as much change as I would hope to see. Recently, however, there was a very local example of a

collaboration between cultures on the University campus that influenced and informed the final design of the newest residence hall. During the initial design and preliminary construction of the new building, Mahlum Architects, the Portland, OR-based architecture firm "conducted extensive solar studies to ensure that neither Kalapuya Ilihi Hall nor Global Scholars Hall casts a shadow on the longhouse at any time." (AroundtheO, *Close to the Kalapuya*) This was because "the center [of the longhouse] must have an unfettered view of sunrise for ceremonial purposes (AroundtheO)."

Whereas this isn't an example of two ideologies completely collaborating on a design project --the aesthetics of Kalapuya Ilihi Hall remained mostly in the control of Mahlum Architects--, it nonetheless shows progress in the design world. Directly addressing the needs of the people that will be impacted by your design is not something that happens regularly; too frequently, those needs are ignored or are not even considered or discussed in the design process. Ideally this project could serve as precedent for future designs to center on the needs and perspectives of cultures and groups that have been historically marginalized.

Collaboration is a step in the right direction and may in fact become the norm in our globalized and interconnected world. Inclusion of non-Western perspectives in both design education and professional design processes will hopefully lead to more diverse, and more inclusive designs. The majority of the design philosophies I have been taught in school, and the designs and styles that have influenced me, have been almost exclusively from European and American ideologies, and what my research has shown me is that there many sides to the design world that I had never considered.

Although I have argued for the inclusion of elements of the designer's culture in the design process, it is important to point out that for a design to be successful it should not completely alienate its user. Because we do not design in a vacuum, our ideas must also be understood by those outside the designer's culture.

Petrichor

Aside from discussing the influential roles that culture and geographical place play on design, the bulk of my thesis will be implementing these studies into a physical project. I will be designing a small collection of furniture pieces that exemplify the idea of "Oregon." To design under the umbrella of what Oregon represents has inherent flaws: there are many distinct cultures native to Oregon and many more have transplanted into the state over generations. To design for one would require alienating the rest – which detracts from the Oregon identity that I am trying to imbue into my designs.

Instead of designing within the philosophies of a culture or group to which I belong or which I have observed, I am focusing my design around the physical space of Oregon. I want to incorporate environmental elements that I have experienced, and that I have seen others experience during my time living in the Pacific Northwest. One of the primary reasons my thesis centers on culture as well as place in design is because culture and physical location do not necessarily go hand in hand. To design with a physical place in mind will allow me to incorporate much of what it means to live in Oregon: to experience the Oregon climate, being surrounded by its various and diverse ecosystems… the list goes on.

My goal with designing with a physical environment in mind is to address, even indirectly, cultural elements that exist on a macro-level in Oregon. The broader facts of life or "traditions," as I am calling them, experienced by most people who live in the Pacific Northwest.   Apart from a few sunny and blue skied weeks in the summer, one of the environmental fact of life that has most keenly defined Oregon for me has been

the rain. The sometimes torrential and often incessant rainfall makes Oregon a place that is drenched for the majority of the year. I walk or bike to and from my house and I often end up in the doorway waiting for the majority of the water to drip off my coat before taking a seat or walking inside. The ritual I have come to know and try my hardest to fight is the subconscious instinct to hang my (perpetually) drenched coat on the back of whatever chair I intend to occupy.

Walking or biking in the pouring rain, hanging wet coats to dry, or experiencing extended periods of darkness during the winter months are all unifying experiences for people who reside in Oregon, and what I believe design can do is address these unifying experiences and incorporate them to create objects that are relatable and easily understood.

The second aspect of Oregon that I will focus on in my designs in the lack of sunlight during the winter months of the year. Many people in Oregon are affected by the lack of daylight. I have avoided using blinds of shades as a way to allow the greatest possible amount of natural light into the room, but this practice robs me of my privacy.

The Project

Petrichor – a pleasant smell that follows the first rain after an extended period of warm, dry weather. It is a word that describes an almost indescribable aspect of Oregon's climate, something that is simultaneously familiar and odd. Petrichor sums up, with one word, what I want to achieve with these designs – fusing cultural and environmental aspects of Oregon into contemporary designs that make them simultaneously familiar and unique.

Similar to the ideas presented in *False Flat*, I want to incorporate the "artefacts" from everyday life into my designs. I see this as the most direct way to address and honor the origins of my designs and ground them in the place where they come from. Stylistically, my designs are not entirely grounded in Oregon. There is influence from contemporary and historical precedents – mainly from Danish and Japanese design. It is in the functionality and material use where my designs incorporate the elements of life in Oregon that are meant to be focused on.

This project begins with two pieces of furniture – a side chair and a partition screen. The chair will reference the rainy climate of Oregon by having a space specifically design to hang coats on the back, behind the backrest. The partition screen encourages keeping the blinds open year-round, providing some privacy while allowing the greatest possible amount of natural light into the room.

Conclusion

One design does not fit all, or at least it shouldn't. From furniture to home goods to civil architecture, the design process should include pieces and ideas from the designer's culture, or references to the design's physical origin. Culture and place give design a reference point, an origin that gives it either a comforting familiarity, or an intriguing strangeness. Incorporating these cultural and locational elements into one's designs ensures that there is diversity in the design world as varying ideologies about form and function can share a stage. This doesn't happen when "one design fits all."

This isn't to say that globally-focused designs are bad, only that too much of this practice can lead to homogeneity in design with consequences that extend far beyond a bland product landscape. The dominance of the Western design world has led to the loss of many traditional methods of making and crafting objects, as well as a loss in distinctive design ideologies that could help diversity the field. When only one designed "solution" is presented, there is little room to collaborate between design philosophies that can lead to more interesting and unique ideas. Although I have argued for the inclusion of elements of the designer's culture in the design process, it is important to point out that for a design to be successful it should not completely alienate its user. Because design does not take place in a vacuum, our ideas must also be understood by those outside of the designer's culture.

The design world should be a reflection of the world; including as rich a diversity as we have on earth could lead to incredibly innovative ideas and directions in which we could take the field of design. Ideally, it begins with an admission of the dominance that Western cultures have historically had on the world, and an attempt to

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give voice in the design world to other, less known and more marginalized cultures and their design philosophies. For this to happen, designers from Western backgrounds, myself included, must be reflective of the fact that there is much beyond our Western influences of art and design. William McDonough, the architect and designer said that "design is the first signal of human intention (McDonough, William, *Cradle to Cradle*, TEDtalk)." The objects we make and the systems we design represent the ideas we put forth. If these ideas have no origin and no grounding, then they do not represent either the people who made them, or the people they were made for. The design world has enormous potential to fight for inclusion and to foster dialogues about any issue, ranging from the underrepresentation of non-Western cultures to the detrimental effect that mass manufacturing and over-consumption can have on our environment. It is critical that this potential not go unused.

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