Beyond Borders: Design History, Transnationalisation and Globalisation

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Introduction

If the stereotypical 'Pevsnerist' reading of design history reduces its analysis to the lowest common denominator of the individual, then this attitude of 'hyper-localism' is, in fact, in contradiction with the life of Nikolaus Pevsner himself. He was among a wave of Jewish German emigrés who came to the United Kingdom in the 1930s along with Egon Risse, László Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Kurt Schwitters and many others. And many of these then moved on to the USA, establishing the so-called 'International Style' in their wake. In other words, the nomadic life of Pevsner and those he writes about[i], is testimony to the need to understand design not just as the fruit of individual, isolated labours, but as the outcome of national, international and transational movements, flows and identities.

The point of this opening observation is to establish the notion that if we are to begin to analyse design history from the point of view of national identities, transnationalisation and globalisation then we must regard it as dynamic, contingent and relational. Either of these concepts is reliant on the other. National identity in design is established in relation to notions of internationalisation. Transnationalisation involves the movement of ideas, styles, processes, technologies and objects between nations. And as Saskia Sassen writes, 'a good part of globalization consists of an enormous variety of micro-processes that begin to denationalize what had been constructed as national'.[ii] Just as the profession of design emerged with the growth of industrialisation and global trade, so its objects must be read as the result of the relationships between scale, volume and the vectors (technological, cultural, ideological, economic and so on) that are spatially distributed.

Let us then consider how these notions of national identity, internationalisation, peripheries and cores, globalisation and finally the idea of nodes and networks interact in way that helps us move toward particular accounts of design history.

National Identity and Design

Much of the bibliography that deals with national identity in the history of design suggests that it has invariably emerged as an issue of importance in times of a need to revindicate it in the face of historical experience.[iii] Arguably, three historical periods are particularly noteworthy in this respect. The first would fall in the period 1890-1910. Here we find the search for national design characteristics within the international framework of Art Nouveau.

It had its national variants, for example, Jungendstil in Germany, Modernisme in Catalonia, Secession in Austria and others throughout most of Europe. The second might be discerned in the immediate post-World War Two context. Here, reconstruction following the devastation of 6 years of conflict. Thus, for example, the emergence of neo-realism in Italy in the 1950s in literature, film and design, may be read as need to return to the everyday of localised aesthetics and practices.

A third moment of national identity emergence might be discerned in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is useful to consider the historical context of this revindication as it reveals a number of issues that contest a notion that national identity in design is strictly about the materialisation of essentialist characteristics. In other words, the notion that design, as embodied in its objects, might be an a 'pure' or 'natural' expression of locality – its traditions, history, heritage, customs, everyday practices and so on – is questionable.

Of course, one might accept that design, not as the things of its production, but as process might carry local *modi operandae*. The way that design is carried out is influenced by product of technological and materials resources, educational formations, environmental contexts, economic conditions, social relations, cultural aspirations and institutional norms. Thus where these are concentrated, one also may be able to talk about localised 'design cultures' that, in their turn, produce certain types of objects.[iv]

At the same time, the historiography of design reveals that even this layered reading of identity cannot be successfully made in isolation. For example, the interest shown by designers and design historians (and, indeed, their publishers)

in national expressions of design in the late-1980s and 1990s coincides with several, radical shifts in specific nation-states. The dense bibliography on Spanish design of this period coincides with the increased globalisation of the country's economy.[v] The end of the Francoist dictatorship in the 1970s and Spain's adhesion to the European Union in 1986, spelt the end of its relative cultural and economic isolation. On the one hand designers, manufacturers and design products sought differentiation through their marketing as 'Spanish', while the increased influx of foreign companies and capital into the country constantly challenged this denomination. Equally, the dismantling of the 'iron curtain' between East and West Europe in 1989 saw political and cultural attempts to revindicate national styles in the former Eastern bloc. This was in reaction to the historical experience of Soviet uniformity and in anticipation of a perceived other homogenizing influence of European integration and US economic imperialism. In effect, this was as much an ethical as an economically pragmatic response. So, for example, the rise of the Hungarian organicist architectural movement and an associated craft revival in this period must be seen relationally to these global changes.

This relationality works in several other ways. In the first instance, while many accounts of design and nationalism have tended to focus on the more obviously spectacular and monumental of its expressions (civic buildings, pageants, flags, international exposition pavillions etc.), Billig argues that national identity is more frequently and effectively carried out at 'banal' levels.[vi] Hence, the design of tv soap operas or fast moving consumer goods packaging come into the frame. Here national identity in design may not necessarily be expressed in terms of instrinsic design style, but in subtle and iterative associations. Even the 'Made in…' stamp that accompanies products

reminds the consumer that global economies are still organised into national segments, each carrying its symbolic values and associations. Furthermore, this banal underwriting becomes itself networked into transnational productive flows. The iPod MP3 player, for example, carries the 'Designed in California' stamp, arguably associating it with a place known for its refinement in the innovation and design of digital media consumer products, particularly that of Silicon Valley. Meanwhile, the absence of a 'Made in…' on the object itself reinforces the notion of it as a truly global product. It is in fact assembled from components made in the UK, Taiwan, mainland China, Korea, India and California.[vii] Otherwise, the minimalism in its actual form and operation implies a more internationalistic aesthetics, closer to Augé's notion of non-places of airports and supermarkets. [viii] While the 'Designed in…' label may give a certain resonance of value in its assocation with a locality of cultural production, at the same time, it points toward a global supermodernity within which that location conspires. Silicon Valley is as global as it is local. Banal nationalism may imply a certain parochialism. But it may also be about emphasizing the cosmopolitanism of a place.

Myth therefore plays a strong role in this system. Banal nationalism is perhaps more semantically nuanced than institutionalised nationalism. Within this process of national identity production there may often be an element wherein it is self-consciously fashioned for global consumption. Hence, for example, Skov argues that Rei Kawakubo's the fashion collection Comme des Garçons in the explicitly emphasised the elements of its designs that would be specifically perceived and understood as Japanese.[ix] Such a tactic has also been discerned in other Japanese cultural products.[x] While targetting an export market, post-WW2 Japanese design often included easily-

recognizable national features in its products. Hence, for example, the 1956 Canon VT Rangefinder camera incorporated the geometry of Japanese pagodas and the colouring of martial arts clothing. In the case of Comme des Garçons, its detailing involved a deliberate attempt to portray a Japanese, exotic 'other', the international consumption of which in turn would take place within a transnational community of taste. Kawakubo was consciously designing to a national role that was defined by the global consumer gaze. This is both performed and taught.[xi] Japanese-ness is adopted and played out, but its materialisation plays a didactic role, informing consumers what might be its 'essential' characteristics.

At the same time we know that this 'essential' notion is in fact flexible and changing. As Hobsbawm establishes, traditions are an invention in themselves. Equally, the objects that might materialise tradition may be mutable. In his discussion of Scottish crafts, for instance, Peach argues that the more that makers depend on tourism for their living, the more they have to adapt their products to the taste requirements of tourists.[xii] In turn, the crafts tradition is undermined, or, at least, changed.[xiii] 'Authenticity', it seems, is contingent.

Globalisation

National identity in design is intimately bound up with processes of globalisation. However, if this is expressed unevenly, at different levels and in response to different spatial and temporal features, then this also relates to the unevenness of globalisation itself.

While the term 'globalisation' has been in more frequent use since the 1980s, a review of its principle features suggests that it has been in its ascendancy for over a century. These include: deregulation of finance; growth of new manufacturing zones (such as South East Asia); decentralisation of manufacture (parrticularly toward post-Fordist modes); the centralisation of cultural production (for example, the geographical split of design from manufacture); growth of information technologies; growth of shipping; political change, in particular, the alignment of hitherto 'peripheral' nations to Western neo-liberal, capitalist systems. Clearly these issues – or at least some of them -- have been underway since the late industrial revolution if not before. However, the past 30 years have seen their acceleration and a more knowing and orchestrated political support of them among alliances of nations.

Globalisation involves the growing interconnectivity and integration of social, cultural and economic practices on a world scale. Stereotypically it is associated with an homogenisation of products and services – hence pejorative references to its effects of 'McDonaldisation' or 'Coca-colanisation'. However, its forces penetrate unevenly, sometimes bypassing certain institutions, industries, people and places. It is sometimes resisted and sometimes exploited. It operates on different levels – global, regional, urban and neighbourhood. Similarly, then, design operates at different levels in relation to this concept.[xiv]

This unevenness may also be experienced in the multilayering of the components of globalisation. Global flow of ethnic groups, media, technology, finance and ideologies means that place and identity may be understood in several different dimensions. Their shifting nature and rapid movement continually disrupt the unity of economics, culture and politics and challenge attempts to impose order and coherence through programmatic approaches to place identity. The disjunctures between these five elements are experienced and articulated in different ways, by different people and groupings in different micro-localities.[xv]

Thus the rise of the use of branding to give a unified appearance the identity of a location is constantly challenged. Slogans, logos and other graphic devices have increasingly been used to differentiate cities, regions and nations as part of a programmatic attempt to market places. However, in so doing, and in trying to represent locations that are already highly diverse and complex in themselves, these markers often reduce the signifiers to the lowest common denominator. Hence, 'vibrant' and 'cosmopolitan', for example, are frequently used descriptors as part of the designed marketing of global cities. By attempting to represent urban agglomerations as important players on a world stage, homogenization of design input results more often than differentation. Equally, in the contemporary era of globalisation, a world-league list of 'signature' architects such as Renzo Piano, Zaha Hadid, Frank O. Gehry and Richard Rogers to design 'iconic' buildings for respective cities. This process acts to both concentrate design intensity on the nodes of such cities and lay out a specific network of designerly interchanges between them (a kind of aesthetic flow of modernity, if you like). In effect, global design provides a process by which difference may be ironed out, within particularised contexts of its consumption. However, at other levels of its consumption, such symbols global coherence and modernity lie in contrast to the uneveness of everyday life where experience is multilayered and complex.

The movement of goods, images, finance, ideas and people can also lead to

hybridisation, as distinct global cultural sections are assembled to present new identities. With the weakening of the nation-state, globalisation can result in a growth of various modes of ideological and cultural organisation so that groups and individuals may be represented at transnational, international, macro-regional, national, micro-regional, municipal and local levels. This is criss-crossed by the functional networks of corporations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations as well as professionals and even, simply, internet users.[xvi] Within this complex matrix, the meanings of design objects are multivarious as they are subject to multiple paths of reception, circulation and reception.

Cores and Peripheries

Globally, the design profession has seen exponential growth over the past two decades. A number of examples bear this out. The European design market grew at around 25% between 1982 and 1989. By 1994, the Netherlands Design Institute was predicting a growth of the European design market from $9.5b. to $14b. by 2000.[xvii] Country by country data appears to lend weight to this prediction. The independent design profession in France is relatively new, with 53% of organisations operating for fewer than 10 years. Sweden has seen a rise of 272% in the number of firms between 1993 and 2002.[xviii] However, in the twenty-first century, the design profession is set to grow beyond further, beyond the preserve of economically advanced countries. China, for example, saw a 23% increase of enrolment on art and design degree courses between 2003 and 2004. A further 1200 design schools are planned to add to the 400 that have opened in China in the last two decades.[xix]

The geographic concentration of design practices has also changed. Globalisation has led to a dispersion of the processes of conception and execution of design artefacts. In 2006, for instance, merchandise trade grew by 21 per cent.[xx] The creative development of objects, images or spaces may be distributed across continents and time-zones and they may be assembled from components made in various countries or mediated through multiple communication networks. The location of global design centres for Ford, Sony and Nokia in London since 2000 evidences a presumption that design studios may be physically distanced from both their productive infrastructure and their consumer bases.

At the same time, a variety of 'space shrinking technologies'[xxi] speed up and intensify these processes. This is not just in terms of the physical dispersion of design outlined above; it also impacts upon the design process itself. For example, until the advent of Computer Aided Design in the last two decades, the typographic designer would mark up a proof for a printer to set up, or a product designer would be reliant on the specialist technical support and working hours of a workshop to make up prototypes. Digitization means that such intermediaries in the process are dropped out. Information technologies facilitate a different quality of proximity and the acceleration of interaction between designers, producers and consumers. Designers interchange their proposals with clients more frequently, creating thicker, less linear and less one-directional communications in the development process. A feedback loop between these interests is evermore instantaneous as consumer information or attitudes are more readily and accurately collated.

This process reinforces globalisation's unevenness. The growing policy of

promoting cities in the first world as creative hubs[xxii] assumes the distancing of the knowledge economy from the economies of manufacture, both spatially and financially.

Furthermore, it underlines the role of capitalism in its requirement to both open new fields of production and consumption while maintaining disparities in the concentration of power and finance. It should be noted that this tendency may be detected even in the earliest manifestations of the design profession. Adrian Forty, for example, shows how the industrialisation of ceramic production in the UK in the eighteenth century involved 'proto-designers' being based in London, close to the leading edge of style demands, while manufacture was located in the pottery factories of the North West of England.[xxiii] What more recent versions of globalisation have done is disperse more widely and intensify this process of differences.

The twentieth-century historiography of design as a project of modernity is none the less partial. Margolin notes how the key design history texts of Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* and Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, both pre-WW2 publications, strive to understand the world holistically. Theirs are limited to the places where modern industrialisation appeared most evident – Western Europe and the USA.[xxiv] A counter-narrative to this might establish the notion of an active periphery that interacts with or resists this Western core.[xxv] This approach may capitulate to a viewpoint that places Western, neo-liberal, market-driven economics at the centre, assuming that contexts outside these are none the less held in a necessary relationship to these. However, this might at the same time acknowledge that in the era of globalisation, few areas of everyday life around the world remain untouched by it. It also helps to open up a plurality of histories of design that begins

to establish local narratives.[xxvi] A big challenge for design historians of the twenty-first century is to recuperate local histories, particularly those that lie outside the western core, while acknowledging the vectors of power and influence that exist through the processes of globalisation.

Finally, the challenges of peak oil and climate change may vindicate a relocalisation of design, production and consumption. Reliance on global flows of finance and goods has proven to be unsustainable, both economically and environmentally. At the same time, globalisation has allowed for the emergence of a supra-national consciousness that in turn plays into a perceived need to rethink spatial practices.[xxvii]

A turn toward the reconcentration of value, creation and everyday practice into geographic intensities is a counter-measure that ensures greater resilience in the face of the accumulative damage that globalisation inflicts. This is where the design historian can intervene to provide localised accounts of material and visual heritage. And armed with an understanding of the complex, multispeed processes of globalisation and transnationalisation, it is also where models for future action can be forged.

Conclusion

The privileging of modernism and the International Style in early accounts of design history implies that its global spread involved an homogenizing of its processes and aesthetics. Equally, the effects of globalisation in its more recent wave suggests a different kind of evenness, this time driven by corporatism. However, just as local identities are rarely 'natural' or 'authentic' but are shaped by

a criss-crossing of regional, national and international forces, so the converse happens. Global signs are invariably reoriented, recycled and appropriated into local idioms. The unevenness of globalisation stems from the concentration of power on the one hand, and conscious resistances or pragmatic uncoupling from any dependency on them on the other. At times local identities may be served up, through design, for global consumption. At others, global resources may be sucked in, chewed over, digested or spat out. What perhaps marks the purpose of design in the processes of globalisation more than ever is its symbolic role. It exists not merely for utilitarian purposes – to fulfil needs and sell things – but in order to communicate values. These values are as much cultural as they are economic, directly and indirectly establishing local, national and cosmopolitan reputations within global networks. Thus the design historian has to go beyond borders while also paying attention to the local conditions of design cultures, itself being both ideologically constructed and embedded in the material practices of everyday life.

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