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Locating Design Cultures

Design cultures is scary. The specialist in design cultures has to move through many academic fields. If this new discipline includes the study of the production, mediation, circulation and regulation of design, she or he must be an expert in psychology, management, technologies, politics, cultural studies and be an historian, an economist, an anthropologist, philosopher, sociologist and geographer. In addition to these, he or she has to be visually, materially and spatially literate. Design culture is about processes, people, relationships, flows, fluxes and vectors, but it is also about stuff. Knowing what this stuff is, being able to *read* it provides us with a fuller account. If Science and Technology Studies, Actor Network Theory, Latour, Woolgar, Law, Callon and all tell us that both people and things are actors, that they are affective in the processes through which we live and decisions are made, then all those parts should be understood fully. This means that not only the people and institutions are studied but the patina of things should also be closely observed.

But where should the student or the professor of design cultures start? If we are to talk in the plural, that is of design *cultures*, then this suggests that it exists in different locations and temporalities, in distinct formats, manifestations, systems of valorization, rhythms, meters and intensities. A myriad of entry points and exit strategies present themselves.

It might sensible as I have often advised, to start with the design object itself – or even to start with the constellation of design objects since we deal with suites of objects that can add up to a brand, a practice, a service or a value-chain. Whether we analyse the design of an individual product or the various manifestations that make up product-service, at least we have a something that is more or less tangible. We can then move onto the design historian's most traditional question, 'why does it look like it does'? We can otherwise go onto more interesting questions – that are move typical of this field of design cultures – such as, 'how is it functioning?' How is it performing a task in helping to produce meaning and value?

Of course, we then find ourselves up against the constant source of hermeneutic agony here – that all readings are subjectively constructed through the viewers' gaze. So perhaps the next task for the design cultures expert is to remember that all things are located. The challenge of design cultures is, in a sense, a geographic one. Even if we are dealing with something diasporic, we are having to confront the relational positioning of things. More on this later. In the meantime, let us consider and dispense with certain myths about design that are promulgated, tacitly or strategically, within design itself.

Design is frequently presented as independent of causality and location. For example, the visual language of design

publishing most frequently abstracts the object from its own materiality. It floats in space. Even the most basic context of consumption is stripped away so that the everyday mess of use is absent. In turn this denies questions of location . Where would this be found? Who would use it? Where might it have been made? How did it get there? What will happen to it next? Design magazines aren't the only perpertrators. Most design museums and student graduation shows, on the whole, do the same. Department stores have been doing it for over a hundred years.

So this points to a wider ideological orthodoxy that is as established as capitalism itself, but that has been given increasing credence and promotion in recent years. At its most basic this represents Marx's notion of commodity fetishism wherein through exchange the object takes on almost supernatural powers. This coincides with contemporary ideas of how the global economy should function.

The rise of neo-liberalism – with its three, overlapping phases of deregulation, New Economy and financialisation – has seen to the promotion of a variety of semi-myths and half-truths as to design and creativity, and, indeed, their symbolic role in promoting certain notions of labour and technology. These include the idea that knowledge is increasingly tacit and thus craft-like; that their is a borderless relationship between amateur and professional activity; that we conceive of 'work' rather than 'jobs'. These states do exist and some compelling research work has been undertaken by Premsela in these domains. But at the same time, there are many areas of work in design that have become increasingly subject to codification and the construction of professional norms and that as the profit motive has become more dominant in

design, so it has been routinized and turned into alienated labour.

But the neo-liberal construct of creative value – of it being more about network sociality than fixed work spaces; of it involving the flexible accumulation of cultural and knowledge capital – keys in with other attempts to somehow disembed economic processes from location and infrastructure. Deregulation, New Economy and financialisation depend on the removal of national, legal and logisitical barriers to the free flow of finance and goods. They also depend on the speeding up of their the circulation. And, by the way, design works as a powerful laxative, helping to shift goods and money. A plethora of semi-academic texts have appeared and been avidly read in business schools to support this neo-liberal orthodoxy. Coyle's *The Death of Distance* (1997), Cairncross's *The Weigthless World* (1997), Kelly's *New Rules for the New Economy* (1998) and Reich's *The Future of Success* (2000) all promote a vision of a globalized economy where location doesn't matter as much as the rapid satiating of desire.

More recently, Kasarda and Lindsay's idiotic text entitled *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next* (2011) argues for a world where industrial complexes are planned around mega-airports to allow for even swifter movement of goods to their market. The most frightening aspect to John Kasarda is that he is a professor at University of North Carolina's business school and an urban theorist whose 'vision' has already influenced planning in North Carolina, Memphis and Louisville. Just as business school academics such as Simon Johnson of MIT and Columbia's Samuel Hayes encouraged the triple-star rating of sub-prime mortgages or multiple leveraging that led to the global economic meltdown in 2008, so Kasarda's academic

influence is both destructive and sociopathic.

To briefly stick with the credit crunch, it must be remembered that it all started with foreclosure on those triple-starred sub-prime mortgages. Those houses – those designed objects – were *somewhere*. In fact, 41% were in Florida and California, many, if not the majority of which were in black, working class neighbourhoods. Just as design is frequently represented as disembedded, free-floating and frictionless, so finance is expected to adopt enigmatic qualities. Ultimately, though, there are spaces where these things are invented, infrastructures through which they travel, places where they are gathered, exchanged or recovered.

So how do we, as students of design cultures, conceptualise its geography? How do we deal with design's fixity and fluidity, its habitation of place and exploitation of space, its implication in both material and immaterial processes? How do we map design culture's loops through and between people and objects? I'd like to present four overlapping and related scenarios by which we might locate design cultures. These are global , relational, intensified and local design cultures.

Global Design Culture

Neo-liberalism mostly involves the competition of monopolies (Lash 2010): Microsoft v Apple; Google v Bing; Sony Ericsson v Philips; Ford v Toyota; Coca-Cola v Pepsi; Unilever v Procter & Gamble; Zara v Benetton; Exxon v BP v Shell; Virgin Airways v British Airways; Nokia v Samsung; Goldman Sachs v Morgan Stanley and so on. In all of these, the competition is not just between products or services for market share but between brands. Brands work through difference based on knowledge that is constructed relationally through multiple sites. Each brand is singular in that while it may deliver a product that is relatively undifferentiated in its performance (petrol is just petrol), its way of operating, its way of interfacing with other clients or customers, its 'instruction manuals', if you like, is distinct to those competing brands. Locationally brands may seem pervasive. Hence fears of a Coca-Colonisation effect by global brands that infiltrate and appropriate space, wiping out local differences are heard. And indeed, the broad tactic of neo-liberalism is to make extensities out of intensities. This is where high volume product or service is spread broadly. Its basic unit is that of a carefully developed template which is then finely tuned to varying market conditions. Local designers might alter colours on products for the Chinese market, but the major conceptual design work could be undertaken Europe or the US. Global corporations still need to keep an eye on things from above. So, for instance, in 2007, Unilever's global market research budget, for example, was $400m. Notwithstanding the small local adjustments, the rhetoric of this global design culture involves 'flattening out'. The neo-liberal assumption of the speedy, free movement of capital and goods also embraces an assumption of networks and flows without resistances, blockages or containments. Corporate, civic or state power is evenly spread. Environmental disasters don't happen, even if the earthquake in Japan did, in fact, slow up the availability of iPad components and Toyota parts. Where the study of this locational category might get interesting is in only in relation to the next three, I think.

Relational Design Culture

A recent, as yet unpublished, study by the UK's Confederation of British Industry reported that 64% of the 267 manufacturing firms it surveyed in the UK said that it was important to co-locate design and development with production. Offshoring production could therefore offshore design as well. Thus the manufacturing powerhouses of the world are also become become design powerhouses. The assumption that the West can maintain dominance through knowledge industries, getting developing countries to do its dirty work is questionable. 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. By 2004, South Korea had planned to create 36,000 design graduates per year. In 2010, Brazil saw 48,000 design students graduate. The Chinese manufacturer BenQ produced Motorola phones for its domestic market but soon moved to producing their own – an upscaling of Shanzai (that is, knock-off or bandit) culture. It established its own Lifestyle Design Centre in Tapei where over 50 designers were recruited and also created design teams in Paris and Milan to extend its global reach. These examples come under the notion of relational design culture because they show how it can be responsive to global shifts. In the 1980s Charles Sabel had shown how innovative, flexible specialization in manufacture had sprung up in Mexico and Italy in the late 1970s through workshop tinkering with Fordist products and tooling. Thirty years later this 'backwash effect' still takes place. The location of design and development is uneven and spread through tiers. At the same time, we must remember that such countries are also consumer markets. On a big scale, for example, it is noteworthy that since 1850 commodity prices have risen twentyfold: half of that has taken place in the last decade due the rise in demand by countries such as Mexico, China, South Africa, Turkey, Indonesia and so on. This puts pressure on prices in the West – as we have seen – and everywhere else and, in turn, this affects consumer landscapes. More expensive fuel and food leads to a shift in consumption patterns as, indeed, was also seen in the 1970s. Meanwhile, new patterns of everyday life are experienced by consumers (which includes designers) everywhere else. In short, then, relational design culture means that locations are not hermetically sealed off nor flattened out. Instead, we see endless cycles of appropriation, adaptation, response and, sometimes, rejection. Design places exist and function in relation to one another.

Intensive Design Culture

The aforementioned BenQ Lifestyle Design Centre in Tapei is just one of many such corporate design centres. The location of global design centres for Ford, River Island, Sony and Nokia in London since 2000 evidences a presumption that design studios may, contra my argument above, be physically distanced from both their productive infrastructure and their consumer bases. In fact, what is happening in these examples is that they are design and prototyping centres where new products can be fashioned and tested. Part of their reasoning is that a cosmopolitan city like London provides both a consumer testbed and stimulus. As a global city, it is assumed, it can model a global marketplace. Two additional reasons exist. One is that with some 268,000 working in the creative sector, London provides a willing and accessible

labour resource for such centres. Second, and relatedly, it buys these coporations status by locating in such a 'creative city'. As an intensified centre of creativity, London provides additional capital to the brand. In policy, urban economic and spatial planning terms, this has been mirrored with the almost global adherence to notions of clustering. The idea that industry sectors thrive when they are concentrated together was developed from the 1980s. In terms of design, the foundation or encouragement of 'creative clusters', 'creative quarters' or hubs has become an orthodox planning choice. It is not just about the aggregation of design businesses to interchange skills, knowledge and personnel, the milieu of these environments involves the provision of consumption resources (bars, restaurants, boutique shops etc.) to satiate the '24-hour creative lifestyle'. As such, an intensived design culture is located. However, recent research has begun to challenge the significance of this creative quarter idea specifically and the cluster mantra more generally in terms of their relevance to commercial success. It is possible that, alternatively, these romanticized phenomena are of themselves a promotional device, forming part of the marketing apparatae of cities. The personal, lonely-hearts ad might be 'City with creative quarter, into the arts and venture capitalism, would like to meet investor(s) for no-strings-attached fun. GSOH essential.' This raises the question of the symbolic and reflexive roles of design culture. Built on needs production, design re-produces itself. It is about shaping artefacts, but also about the creation of dispositions and arrangements that give rise to their demand in the first place. Intensive design cultures might be milieux that engender a heightened designerlyness, be it the furniture trade fair, the design festival, the

design association or, indeed, the 'design district'.

Local Design Culture

This intensification of designerly capital on locations is worth studying in a design cultures kind of way. Such locations could be the Parisian fashion system, the Milanese furniture scene, Barcelona's designscape, Montreal as design city -- at least in their most obvious, spectacular forms. But they can be more focused localities such as the households of a street in Ghent, currently being studied by Hilde Bouchez. Observing the fluxes between lifestyles, identities, everyday practices, technologies, professional socialities and assemblages, formation, regulation, policy, politics, mediations and so on in a given place often reveals their rich interrelationships and contingencies. It allows the student of design culture to enter into the research using a mixture of methodologies. Archival, survey, content analysis, media watching, ethnographic (or deep hanging out, as I prefer) and action research may all be the tools of the design culturist. Local design culture allows for the dignity of the specific. A close-up reading of things, institutions and people can be undertaken from and for larger, transdisciplinary understandings. That visual, material and spatial literacy I mentioned earlier kicks in here alongside a range of academic fields. The inflections, nuances or, even, indigenously 'natured' qualities and quantities of a location may be investigated and articulated. At the same time, just as we must be careful with the word 'community' – often taken as some pre-postindustrial, romantic ideal of locality – so we must have, if you'll excuse the apparent contradiction in terms, an expanded view of the local. Local can be the precarious ecology of the fashion catwalk, behind the scenes life

and its audience. It can be the small world of a group of computer geeks working together on some Linux coding. It can be the system of provision – from designer/manufacturer to consumer – of Turkish coffee makers, as Harun Kaygan is currently researching. It can be a group of activists trying to relocalise food networks in a deprived neighbourhood, as Katie Hill is engaged with. It can be an evening spent in the evangelical company of service designers, as Lina Kang will be doing. Local design culture also allows the researcher the possibility of intervention, to be actively engaged within the field, to turn design culture into a practice. By being a participant researcher, by sharing the results and insights of that research, and even to make proposals or carry out actions that stem from a deep understanding, design culture becomes not just the subject of study, but an affective means or an attitudinal approach where the researcher is a knowing interventionist.

In a sense, locating design cultures is an easy task. Enrol for a Masters in the subject at VU Amsterdam. Or go for a drink with Timo de Rijk. Those are both very recommendable ways in. Design Cultures is becoming an established, recognized academic discipline and I applaud Ginette Verstraette's vision in making this happen at VU Amsterdam and Premsela's support in this project. But as I hope I have demonstrated, there are many forms of design culture working out there at different scales and with varying dynamics. Undertaking their study and publishing findings is a way that we can have an enriched understanding of our world. And armed with this understanding, I hope that its specialists can also contribute to its amelioration.