Design and Geographically Liberated Difference

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Abstract: The concept of geographically liberated difference has emerged from the overlap of cultural studies and economics as a critique of the effects of globalisation on cultures through the manufacturing and distribution of artefacts with unique differences across diverse territories. Although this concept is known in the domains of cultural studies and economics, very little has been written on its effect and understanding within design, especially industrial design. Industrial design has vast influence on the production and distribution of products across the globe from small scale to mass production of millions of units. The mechanisms by which design influences the evolution of cultures through the concept of geographically liberated difference are important for future development. Research by the authors indicates parallel streams of both digital and analogue methods supporting successful models of geographically liberated difference in design practice. Examples of these approaches are discussed to uncover the operable mechanisms and arguments concerning the future value and influence of this feature of globalisation.

Keywords: Design, Industrial Design, Globalisation, Geographically Liberated Difference

1.   Introduction

The concept of geographically liberated difference has developed as an economic and cultural studies area of interest via theorists that include Karen Fiss (Fiss, 2009), Kwame Appiah (Appiah, 2006), Benjamin Barber (Barber, 2003) and Tyler Cowen (Cowen, 2002). These theorists have explored the meaning and diverse mechanisms of cultural difference and its relationship to geography.

This paper extends the examination of geographically liberated difference into the context of industrial design. Industrial design is essential to – and has a vast influence on – the production and distribution of products across the globe. The authors consider it important to better understand the way in which geographically liberated difference influences cultural change, in particular through the duality of digital and analogue methods.

2.   Research in the field

What follows is the authors' review of literature relating to the value and influence of design in geographically liberated difference. The literature is drawn from the domains of cultural studies and economics – the authors found that little has been written on geographically liberated difference within design, in particular industrial design.

Karen Fiss introduced a series of articles in Design Issues (Fiss, 2009) that explore the postcolonial and transnational possibilities in a diverse range of locations ranging from Africa, Greece, Spain, Shanghai and Hong Kong. In her introduction essay she established the two contrasting approaches:

> "one of the major divides in studies of globalisation today is whether increased international trade is imposing cultural homogenization or, in fact, working to enrich and preserve culture through expanded access to the Internet and increased cross-cultural contact……the sharp rise in global trade creates more entrepreneurial opportunities for producers of art and culture by "liberating difference from geography," making culture less about identifying with a particular region or location….On the other hand, one also can argue that this deterritorializing of culture allows it to be "theme-parked," creating a type of cultural diversity that is merely a simulacrum, and that no longer has ties to any "authentic" origin."

Fiss's article cited both Benjamin Barber and Tyler Cowen as diverse proponents of Geographically liberated difference in the homogenization verses heterogenous worldviews (CATO, 2003) of the eventual effect of accelerated cultural influence due to increased trade, transport and digital methods. In his book 'McWorld versus Jihad', Barber describes the polarised states of McWorldist corporations colonising the willing west and exploiting dysfunctional global regions with a vast array of untenably seductive offerings. These are contrasted against fundamentalist and anti-western forces lined up to face each other in a form of early 20th century warfare. These lead to an inevitable clash based on a range of oppositions from religion, race, ideology and the exploitation of natural resources in developing countries (Kaplan, 2000).

Barber quotes from Pat Cardigan's Cyberspace novel 'Synners':

> 'First, you see video. Then you wear video. Then you eat video. Then you be [sic] video.'

Cowen (2002) by contrast sees a broad field of cultural interactions creating differences that can enhance or subtract from an existing status. He carefully and successfully deconstructs accepted myths and wisdoms of prevailing ideas to expose the successes and benefits of increased differences arriving from other geographic locations and how these can grow indigenous and other types of cultures. Where there is loss in some areas, others have greater gains. He states that all cultures are hybrids and that their future survival is based on their ability to absorb and understand new enriching differences. The western liberal ideal of 'museum cultures' preserved for future study is roundly demolished. The scenario of shopping streets across the world with the same fast food chains, clothing stores and mobile phone concessions (where it is presumed that an inevitable homogenization is the outcome) is challenged due to the observation of the sheer density and diversity of cultural interaction on top of each cultures filtering system of values. This development in fact accelerates diversity rather than producing homogenization.

Cowen asks:

> "The benefits of cultural exchange usually have come from dynamic settings in great imbalance, rather than from calm or smoothly working environments……Does trade in cultural products support the artistic diversity of the world, or destroy it? Will the future bring artistic quality and innovation, or a homogenous culture of least common denominator ? What will happen to cultural creativity as freedom of economic choice extends across the globe?"

The description of emerging 'chameleon characters' where netizens form eclectic cultural collections from diverse sources ranging from obscure Japanese manga artists to growing rare South African succulents to niche clothing brands and co-created music forms abound. The digital domain has allowed the extraction of differences from geography in a form and density unparalleled in history. Individuals can form unique compositions of personal culture from a global menu. The commonality between Barber and Cowen revolves around the continued fragmentation of society with Barber citing ethnic, religious and racial intolerance, while Cowen describes the panoptical appeal of myriad digitally enables micro cultures.

Neil Stephenson (1996) in his future novel 'The Diamond Age' describes neo-victorians living in geographically translocated havens while communicating via nanotech devices based on physical Victorian accoutrements and living to the same ethical codes. In this future vision, cultures are connected by what they believe and do rather than where they are, they have translocated from geography and fragmented.

The philosopher Kwame Appiah (2006) describes the concept of cultural contamination as a vital and necessary force of interaction and enrichment for the development and future of all cultures. The worldviews of cultural conservators and cosmopolitans are explored through examples of welsh bards in Llandudno, Akan dancers and the Huli of Papua New Guinea. He describes a particular observation from Ghana:

> " On Kumasi's Wednesday festival day, I've seen visitors from England and the United States wince at what they regard as the intrusion of modernity on timeless, traditional rituals - more evidence, they think, of a pressure in the modern world toward uniformity. They react like the assistant on the film set who's supposed to check that the extras in a sword-and-sandals movie aren't wearing wristwatches."

He goes on to describe the value of cultural contamination:

> " Living cultures do not, in any case, evolve from purity into contamination; change is more a gradual transformation from one mixture to a new mixture, a process that usually takes place at some distance from rules and rulers, in the conversations that occur across cultural boundaries."

Fiss, Barber, Cowen, Stephenson and Appiah provide a backdrop for the conceptualisation of geographically liberated difference from a globalised worldview, but do not provide the level of

operational detail useful to design. The following sections explore the operation and value of geographically liberated difference in the design sphere.

3.　　　The core components

The authors argue that the core themes of geographically liberated difference in the context of industrial design are those of *liberation, the mediator, transnationalism, and analogue-digital methods*. Each of these core themes interact in the research area and they are now discussed in detail.

For the purposes of this research, the authors use the term *analogue* to reflect physical and spatial processes and locale-based activities. In contrast, the term *digital* is used to reflect information-based and remote communication activities, including advanced manufacturing and the web. In terms of the digital culture phenomenon, the term analogue has shifted to encompass human or societal aspects, and digital as more information-based and transformative (Rabinovitz, 2004).

4.　　　Liberation

The globalisation concept of geographically liberated difference sees its activity opening up a new way for participants to engage and interact with a culture than is not based in their physical locality or geography – through digital media, for example. Although the globalisation concept is useful at a meta-level further consideration at a granular level can aid the understanding and value for design.

Traditional analogue influential difference occurs through physical objects being transported across the planet to new regions where the materials, processes, technologies and forms influence the creation of new local making practices. This process can be observed in 18th and 19th century British industrial production including the development of import substitutions to combat successful foreign cultural imports (Berg, 2004). By its nature, physically moving objects to generate difference is slow and the supporting culture that surrounds the artefact and its use are often left behind. In the emerging analogue-digital world of geographically liberated difference, the supporting culture can be included via a number of methods. The development of systems and service products has allowed the activity of using the service product to support new cultural behaviour and beliefs, for example drive in fast-food restaurants. The interactive medium of the internet has facilitated globally shared immersive gaming environments alongside social environments like second life. In other words you do not need to travel in order to take part in a culture not based in your local geography. The internet has facilitated cultural immersion through media which can support remote inclusion in new forms of behaviour and belief.

Specifically, in terms of design, geographically liberated difference is a facilitator of *liberation*, in terms of the 'untethering' of objects, cultural systems, and creators:

1. Objects – artefacts that are relocated to a new geography where their influence increases diversity through new functions, material techniques and cultural transfer.

2. Cultural systems – ways of behaving supported by products and their systems of use, distribution and manifestation of supporting services and experiences. These can be manifest in movies, financial instruments and services, food and fashion retailing, technology, communications offerings and gaming. Methods can include embedding cultural behaviours in retailing systems via experiences that reassure, reward and surprise consumers.

3. Creators – traditionally by travelling to new locations to liberate their creativity from its origin via new experiences in new terrains. One of the original models for this includes the British "Grand Tour' where the sons and daughters of wealthy families travelled through post-renaissance Europe to experience new developments in arts, architecture, and culture. A spectacular example of this is Ruskin – a great influence in design, with his resulting five volumes of 'Modern Painters', 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' and 'The Stones of Venice' (Hilton, 2003). Digital creators can now travel and collaborate simultaneously across many diverse geographies.

5. Analogue-digital mediator

The mediator for geographically liberated difference is *analogue* and *digital*. These can co-exist and indeed should do if they are to be most effective. In terms of the analogue, mechanisms for cultural transfer between indigenous cultures and developed market driven economies are being developed and researched. Key papers include those by Richie Moalosi (Moalosi, 2007), Rungtai Lin (Lin, 2007), Mohammed Razzagi (Razzagi, 2006) and Liz Ogbu (Ogbu, 2009). The authors of this paper have begun to establish practice-based models of cultural transfer with the level of operation ranging from material culture to the behavioural and philosophical (Barker & Hall, 2009; Barker & Hall, 2010). Work of this nature by educational establishments has researched the initial phases of the exchange of values between cultures for enterprise and knowledge enrichment. Longer term initiatives that bridge the policy to implementation gap and build sustainable and more in-depth relationships are now required. Enterprising design models can interface at the lower end of economic agglomeration theory (Scott, 2003; Angharad, 2006) for developing economies where the density of interaction of networks of artists and makers contributes towards the critical mass for success.

In digital terms, the recent global financial crisis (GFC) has forced a radical change to southeast Asian manufacturing (Morelli, 2006; Anderson, 2010) where the minimum production volumes that used to reside in the 10,000's or even 100,000's has now been replaced in effect by scale-less manufacturing where improvements in technology and communications have allowed companies to tackle the dual threat of the GFC and the long tail effect (Anderson, 2006) by offering units of one and upwards. Business-to-business (B2B) facilitation websites like Alibaba (http://www.alibaba.com) offer efficient ways for entrepreneurs and clients to set up manufacturing deals. New advances in software like Google sketch-up lower the entry level of computer aided design applications to a novice level allowing relatively inexperienced users to generate usable 3D CAD files. With the importance of design collaboration in the context of

technological change (Barker & Kokotovich, 2010), collaborative or co-creativity tools to facilitate these activities are of great value.

The table in Fig. 1 describes the characteristics of design for manufacture, distribution and sales for both the analogue and digital elements.

Phase	Analogue	Digital
Creation	Face to Face, Hands-on	Online Co-creativity tools
Communication	Face to Face, Written, Telephone	Email, Cad Drawing
Logistics	Physical records	Web, Internet, SAP (Systems Applications and Products) / ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning)
Transaction	Negotiable instrument	SET (Secure Electronic Transaction), SMS Banking

Fig.1 Analogue and digital elements of geographically liberated difference

The eArtisans project (Barker & Hall, 2009) in Ghana, Africa had both analogue and digital elements. The core creative work was facilitated via teams of Ghanaian and graduate students from London's Royal College of Art (RCA) in intensive workshops while the enterprise and distribution model was global-digital. Some concepts generated in the workshop included customised feedback for individualised designs. This model used a combination of analogue and digital media for a sustainable model of design enterprise for developing economies. The localised nature of artisan production however required face to face design and development of new product concepts. eArtisans was part of a global collaborative design initiative called GoGlobal. Some examples of the design outputs are shown in Fig 2. The design teams used craft techniques as well as advanced digital design tools and manufacturing. These examples began to show the creative models and mediation of analogue and digital methods in the liberation of difference through geography via transnational project initiatives.

6.   Transnationalism

Barber describes transnational design agents varying from the polar opposites of Jihadist terrorist campaigns to Macworld advertising and marketing campaigns, both seeking to maximise the impact of their strategies to gain believers and power. Cowen describes the cultural cross fertilisation powered by creativity and digital technologies. It is clear that design inhabits a number of layers in geographically liberated difference from the detail resolution of artefacts, the concepts for aesthetics and functions, systems level creativity through the services that surround products and ultimately global delivery and information systems that transmit the values of objects and physically move them from Fedex to the containerisation of freight.

The United Nations Convention (UN, 2001; UNESCO, 2005) on the protection and promotion of cultural expressions includes the following statements particularly relevant to design:

> ***Recognizing*** the importance of traditional knowledge as a source of intangible and material wealth, and in particular the knowledge systems of indigenous peoples, and its positive contribution to sustainable development, as well as the need for its adequate protection and promotion,

> ***Being aware*** that cultural diversity is strengthened by the free flow of ideas, and that it is nurtured by constant exchanges and interaction between cultures,

> ***Emphasising*** the vital role of cultural interaction and creativity, which nurture and renew cultural expressions and enhance the role played by those involved in the development of culture for the progress of society at large,

> ***Being convinced*** that cultural activities, goods and services have both an economic and a cultural nature, because they convey identities, values and meanings, and must therefore not be treated as solely having commercial value,

> ***Noting*** that while the processes of globalisation, which have been facilitated by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, afford unprecedented conditions for enhanced interaction between cultures, they also represent a challenge for cultural diversity, namely in view of risks of imbalances between rich and poor countries,

Coupling this with the vast influence of industrially produced objects aligned with the new emerging ultra-flexible models of manufacturing emerging from China and southeast Asian economies demonstrates the key role of design as a driver and negotiator of cultural transferrance between territories. This in itself is not new, humans and their ancestors have relocated objects

about the face of the planet for tens of thousands of years incrementally improving life. The new challenges revolve around how to understand design, its location, impact and practice in the manifold density of contemporary communications and manufacture. All of this is the locus for transnationalism. In the light of kaleidoscopic and chameleon characters increasingly adopted by modern consumers, two key questions emerge concerning (i) how design understands its role for the most beneficial outcome, and (ii) what are the operable mechanisms, at each scale and effect.

Unlike the grand tour (q.v.) which could take many months, today's cultural tourist can gather vast amounts of data and experiences from the internet. The benefits are naturally a much greater access to large amounts of difference eliciting material very quickly while the consequence is that these sources can be experienced outside of their cultural fit and at a lower level of sensorial immersion. The authors contend that an innovative stimulant in this scenario is 'getting it wrong'. Where influences are wrongly perceived out of context, deliberately mis-compared and understood in incompatible models, frames or theories. The outcome engages a non-linear process of sampling and juxtaposition (Hall, 2009) where new and unique combinations of thought can provide different and improved solutions to design challenges.

7.   Conclusions

Research by the authors has indicated parallel streams of both digital and analogue methods supporting successful models of geographically liberated difference in design practice. Examples of these approaches have been discussed to uncover the operable mechanisms and arguments concerning the future value and influence of this important feature of globalisation.

The aim of this paper was to establish the relationship and value of design through geographically liberated difference. By means of a literature review, examples and analysis, a case has been made for the strategic value and influence of design in the context of this relationship. The authors believe that the continued increasing density of digital media and logistical innovations will accelerate the liberation of difference from geography.

The paper has postulated that the discrete but interconnected core themes of geographically liberated difference are those of *liberation, the mediator, transnationalism, and analogue-digital methods*. Each of these has been discussed in detail and their relationships reviewed. Furthermore, the connecting technologies that facilitate kaleidoscopic cultural behaviour in the liberation of difference from geography will be key agents in design and cultural production in the future. The agency of design in this sphere has the scope to generate new paradigms of both user-creator interface, cultural expression and hybridisation in the creation and production of design works. The mechanisms by which design influences the evolution of cultures through the concept of geographically liberated difference are important for future development.

Design is a crucial agent in this accelerating transformation due to its synthesising nature operating between produce, media and service. The emergence of 'cloud culture' and its resultant new physical manifestations are part of this cycle. Further research can help in the understanding of the

structures of influence and the underpinning creative models that are essential to positively manage beneficial future development. The design effect of liberated difference is currently little understood and requires further case studies and analysis to understand in more detail the mechanisms that operate at different levels and how they affect the outcomes. The consequences of the mutuality of these activities bear large effects on communities, nations and cultures of which designers and the design industry are responsible and should be cognisant.

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