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A Cultura como *alma matter* e fonte de inspiração do design e da inovação

Culture as 'alma matter' and resource for inspiration and design innovation

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As demostrações culturais abrangem uma série de manifestações como a arte, a arquitetura, a dança, o design, o cinema, o entretenimento, a moda, a gastronomia, a história, a literatura, a música, o teatro, a tecnologia, a religião, a fotografia, etc. Poder-se-ia considerar a cultura como o pilar de qualquer civilização, caracterizando a manifestação superior de qualquer sociedade. Por outro lado, as interpretações culturais divergem de acordo com as origens socioculturais, que são influenciadas pelo reconhecimento individual e do grupo.

Numa sociedade cada vez mais global, a consciência cultural é essencial para as interações sociais, afetando as nossas crenças e os comportamentos sociais.

A natureza interdisciplinar do design requer uma compreensão de distintas manifestações culturais, que também englobam o design e a inovação, permitindo o desenvolvimento de soluções sustentáveis.

Atualmente, as academias oferecem um amplo currículo nos seus cursos de design que incluem cultura visual, tecnologia, estudos em design, metodologias aplicadas e processos de aprendizagem baseados em projeto oferecendo um currículo adaptado ao mercado de trabalho. O problema põe-se quando os alunos no ensino superior criam interações de design (comunicações, produtos, serviços), desconsiderando questões e manifestações culturais, concebendo soluções de design de forma desadequada. A maioria das academias de design apresenta um amplo currículo em cultura visual, história das artes e estudos de design. No entanto, nem sempre os alunos obtêm os conhecimentos culturais necessários para conceber soluções adequadas e inovadoras. A questão põe-se quando alunos de design concebem produtos ou serviços, atendendo a questões culturais, proporcionando interações que estimulam o utilizador, criando uma resposta adequada ou desadequada à intenção.

Palavras-chave design como saber, globalização, estudos culturais, educação interdisciplinar.

Culture includes a series of manifestations covering art, architecture, dance, design, cinema, entertainment, fashion, gastronomy, history, literature, music, theatre, technology, religion, photography, and so forth. One can consider culture to be the foundation of any civilization, characterizing the uppermost manifestation of any given society. On the other hand, cultural interpretations diverge according to socio-cultural backgrounds, which are influenced by individual and group acknowledgments.

In an increasingly global society, cultural awareness is essential for social interactions, affecting our beliefs and social behaviour. The interdisciplinary nature of design requires an understanding of distinct cultural manifestations, that also encompass design and innovation, and the development of viable and sustainable solutions.

Nowadays, design schools deliver a broad curriculum that includes visual culture, technology, design studies, further applying project-based learning processes to convey a curriculum. The issue presents itself when higher education design students create design interactions (communication, products, services), disregarding cultural issues to adequately devise viable design solutions. Design schools nowadays provide a specific program in visual culture and history of the arts, refuting a broad design studies approach. Therefore, students do not always obtain the necessary cultural understanding to devise adequate and innovative solutions. The issue presents itself when designers convey culture, providing interactions that stimulate the end user's imagination, leading to responses that are expected or not to occur, many times falling short in quality and lacking awareness.

Keywords *design science, globalization, cultural studies, interdisciplinary education.*

1. Culture in context

The path to the future requires acknowledging the present and understanding the past in its evolutionary process. From its origins, cultural identities generate multiple manifestations in distinct topics such as: Cognition, Language (e.g., literature fiction/non-fiction, vocabulary, expressions, jargon); History (e.g., as learned in school); Visual Arts (e.g., architecture, sculpture, symbols, painting, photography, fashion, arts & crafts, digital arts); Technology; Performing Arts (e.g., music, theatre, entertainment, cinema); Ethics (e.g., mannerisms, rituals religion, sports, ethnic and moral values); Gastronomy; Design (e.g., communication, product, services); Politics and Business, etc. Culture in a broad sense, encompasses all manifestations of a society, shaping our implied beliefs and behaviours.

> *The measure of a civilization is the strength of its culture, and this is personified in the signification of its cultural identity and cultural objects.*
> *(Brent Richards, 2019)*

Cross-cultural relations depend on understanding, accepting and further creating distinctive cultural manifestations. This creates, in due time, cultural diversity, influencing individuals and eventually generating added social value. Lifestyles are therefore influenced by cultural interactions and interpretations as well as reactions to such manifestations, and individuals who appraise those relations in context, identifying cultural idiosyncrasies that eventually shape society.

> *As technologies allow us to become increasingly interconnected, the manner in which we communicate has an increasingly global context. This places a further demand on the visual communicator to understand the significance of many of the smaller elements of a design.*
> *(Nobel; Bestley 2016)*

The digital world reshapes cultural perceptions instantly, creating a series of emerging niches, answering to individual aspirations, and thus reshaping society. Information is nowadays more available than ever before in human history, but we are less enlightened and mindful of ethos. Society is nowadays an assortment of concerned coalitions that communicate manipulating information, misinterpreted, and most often misused, requiring scrutiny and unbiased awareness.

Cultural manifestations require decoding, interpretation, and understanding, requiring an ever-demanding cultural awareness. On the other hand, the paradox of globalization and the widespread use of the internet, allows local cultures and trends to emerge within a global context, gaining expression, influencing individuals and groups, thus contributing to a foreseeable homogenization of culture. On the other hand, globalization and subsequent cultural manifestations allows design to research and attain distinct insights from various socio-cultural topics, that are often overlooked.

> *American culture tends to be fairly flat - meaning that there is not a rigid status hierarchy, while Japanese culture is much more hierarchical, and so the relative status of everyone in the room determines the way people interact with each other.*
> *(Mooij, M.; Hofstede, G. 2011)*

Civilization is constantly shaped by cultural interactions that result in numerous interpretations, along with reactions between users and products/services, who evaluate these relations emotionally depending on a specific cultural framework and individual perceptions.

> *The visual realm has been an incredibly effective tool for shaping people's understandings of the environment. (Boylan, A. 2020)*

Nonetheless, understanding cultural issues emotionally, require an in-depth knowledge, usually gained over the years with a hands-on experience and reflections, requiring ethnographic research (traveling to other cultures); interaction with individuals (different socio-cultural backgrounds and behaviours); and critical thinking, which combined with project-based learning and design methodologies allow improvements. Failure to understand cultural patterns and details can consequently lead to product design that is misinterpreted, undermining interactions and cultural meaning. This happens because many students fail to assimilate cultural idiosyncrasies and ultimately create a problem.

2. Culture as resource in design curricula

The purpose of any education is to stimulate perceptions, acquire knowledge and develop a unique set of skills, eventually attaining social improvement. Higher education students are asked difficult questions, indulging in discovery, broadening horizons, exploring unfamiliar domains, identifying the state-of-the-art, learning specific tools and applying methodologies in a new environment while experiencing and building up their own identity. Nevertheless, many students will acknowledge that adaptation is an essential expertise in an ever-changing world, and that control is difficult to grasp and delicate to maintain.

> *Designers are professionals, who, by education, outlook and experience, are capable of developing new, interdisciplinary solutions to improve quality of life.*
> *(Montreal Design Declaration 2017)*

Design as a discipline has come a long way surpassing its singularities, it has become the integration of science and culture, engaging multiple interdisciplinary processes and methodologies. The concept of design has no longer one single expression and expertise as above, it has become an evolving area of research that produces a wide range of outcomes and cultural manifestations.

Figura 1.
Nossa Senhora de Fátima sculpture has an unclear and misunderstood shape, undermining understanding, and interactions.

> *The ability of designers to produce effective, efficient, imaginative, and stimulating*
> *designs is therefore important to all of us.*
> *(Cross, Nigel 2006)*

Prospective designers are asked to promptly understand changing cultural manifestations, requiring a broad research conveying a variety of issues without prejudice of local beliefs, addressing several scenarios quite often depicting cultural facilitators. Still, sometimes they fail to provide a holistic solution, mainly due to lack of insight and lack of end-user analysis, neglecting the design outcome.

> *Visual culture is everywhere: on television, in museums, in magazines, in movie theatres,*
> *on billboards, on the internet, and in shopping malls. As a result, learning about the complexities*
> *of visual culture is becoming ever more critical to human development.*
> *(Freedman, K. 2003)*

Palaeolithic cave pictograms (symbols understood as representations of an idea/object/relation) are taught to design students as visual reference and as cultural manifestation. The Bauhaus School (Gesamtkunstwerk) pioneered design teaching, combining aesthetics and functionality across art, architecture, technology, processes, and craftsmanship in a learning by doing process. Nowadays, design is recognized as a multidisciplinary creative process that uses design thinking methodologies to create communication, products, and services in a complex global market, involving technology, time restrictions and budget limitations.

To overcome ever-extending issues, global media agencies employ multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural teams that can address an array of assignments on behalf of multinational corporations, regularly creating a merger of cultural manifestations in their design output. From a cultural standpoint, biased individuals without a comprehensive understanding and critical sense will eventually run into misinterpretations and poor design solutions. The ability to question, analyse, understand, and provide valid arguments is paramount.

Cultural interactions are of the utmost importance to develop a flexible mindset, conveying critical insights and diversity, thus developing the ability to accept differences, in individuals and groups, as a natural phenomenon, becoming the foundation for **Understanding**, **Inspiration**, **Reinterpretation**, and **Design & Innovation**.

> *The ability to apply knowledge broadly comes from broad training (experience).*
> *(Epstein, D. 2020)*

In a global society culture is an everchanging process, its peculiarities require constant attention, only possible with individual curiosity, flexibility, resilience, principles, and vision leading to research and applicable knowledge. Can one question what motivates a design student to acquire, understand and apply culture into context. Surely, it depends on expectations and assignments, in a project-based learning process, to develop critical thinking, improving the ability to adapt to new constraints and overcome issues.

1. Research Interactions (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How)
2. Learn – Theoretical (observations, reading, audio, video) & Practical (hands-on tasks)
3. Improve Curiosity and Critical Thinking (creativity and knowledge)
4. Communication (honest, humorous, open-minded, and assertive)
5. Design Methodologies (Project Based Learning, adopt real-life problems)
6. Assignments that stimulate cultural awareness (group/individual)
7. Build cultural awareness (create meaning in a society of constant change)
8. Accept error (focus on overcoming obstacles and addressing unfamiliar issues)

Innovation is fundamentally creativity linked to risk assessment and venture investment applied into a design manifestation that simplifies a complex undertaking. However, creative ideas as well as innovation are driven by previous acquired knowledge and cultural interactions, by what one sees, hears, and feels, the richer the input the greater the odds to create valuable design. Knowledge (explicit, implicit, tacit,) allows individuals and organizations to improve processes (e.g., R&D&I), facilitating engagement and adding value to the design output (products and services) thus enriching expected outcomes.

> *The contexts of museums, television programs, advertisements, as well as school curriculum,*
> *all influence the ways in which a single work of fine arts is understood.*
> *(Freedman, K. 2003)*

This presents another issue, that of cultural homogenisation consequence of globalization, influences every student and produces a multinational generation that share interests, ambitions, and resentments. Optimistically, concepts like freedom, democracy, equality, and humanity are also promoted, reshaping cultures and cultural engagement. On the other hand, the internet also exposed cultural minorities, that serve as inspiration for different design innovations itself. Nevertheless, a design that is unclear, unessential, and without end-user feedback leads to cognitive misperception and erroneous interaction.

Despite many graduates not ending up working in design, they acquire specific methodologies (research, experiment, test and improve) as well as a broad cultural understanding allowing them to develop a mindset and address different issues throughout their active life.

3. Conclusions

Design shapes our environment, empowering end-users by creating solutions and overlapping different areas of knowledge. As creative problem-solvers, designers are intrinsically among those who create cultural manifestations (communications, products, services), requiring knowledge or learnability on different subjects, understanding human idiosyncrasies, and developing critical skills to design without prejudice of all those involved.

The context of design has become the embodiment of contemporary culture, merging trends, and creating subcultures especially in multicultural megalopolis transforming society and culture into new manifestations. This rationale is the basis for institutions that lecture design courses and project-based learning methodologies, empowering students to overcome tangible indicators, and understanding risks and rewards resulting from innovation, accepting, and learning from error, fostering the future of economic growth and social drive.

Regrettably, lack of understanding of cultural references in context hinders critical thinking skills and the ability of students to fully comprehend the potential of project-based assignment, thus impairing the design output enormously. Research of cultural manifestations provides the means to create better designs responding to emerging issues, eventually empowering the end-user's cultural identity. Future design professionals need to ask questions and understand diversity and cultural aspects before engaging in design, combining different subjects, and addressing issues without prejudice of specific users in a global culture.

Cultural studies are essential in any higher education design course, institutions should not only motivate individuals to develop their autonomy, fostering research and comprehensive conceptual reasoning skills, identifying human needs, providing solutions, and aspiring social cohesion, but ultimately empowering society to improve. More importantly, design students need to learn how to improvise and adapt, learn from error fostering resilience, and overcome constraints through design processes, assuming responsibility for their creations in a global culture.

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