Design and the Question of Eurocentricity

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The question of Eurocentricity has been with us for a while now, yet it remains complex and challenging. It has been widely probed in various disciplines, particularly with regard to history and culture, but hardly pursued with regard to design and the issue of sustainability. The concept of Eurocentricity arose in the post-colonial and post-orientalist discourses that were concerned with Western hegemony. It has enthused both Western and non-Western intellectuals, who have relentlessly questioned Western authority and supremacy as revealed in discourses, canons and established paradigms.

As it moves across disciplines, however, the Eurocentricity question carries with it a problematic package that has been unpacked and critiqued. To begin with, the question has been criticised for setting up a divisive polarity of self and other, European and non-European, which has been used interchangeably with Western and non-Western. This polarity assumes that there are *other*, non-European domains where *reality* presents different possibilities of thinking, making and

engagement; that the agents of these domains are *essentially* different; and that their non-reducible and non-erasable *otherness* can be unveiled, captured and engaged using our current conceptual tools.[1] It has also been criticised for engaging the other in a desperate search for, and reconstruction of, their assumed *difference*.[2] With the growing awareness of the failure of Western capitalism's systems and values to ensure sustainable "futuring" (to use Tony Fry's term), the other's difference is frequently invoked in the search for different possibilities of being (living, thinking, producing, consuming, building, engaging, and so on), and thus has acquired a renewed sense of legitimacy and significance.

These problematic issues, however, have neither been resolved nor abandoned, hence the complexity and challenge of dealing with the question. Invoked with regard to the design discourse, the question can lead to a protracted thinking of the discourse itself as well as the many aspects it covers, such as design temporality, practices, ethics, philosophy, aesthetics, technology, culture, modes of engagement, and so on. To what extent any of these can be isolated within a particular cultural sphere is difficult to determine, let alone the viability of the task itself. It also prompts one to think of the ultimate aim of the question. Is it about seeking greater inclusiveness or diversity in design thinking and practicing? Or is it about going beyond Eurocentrism by searching for new possibilities? Or is it simply about exploring and engaging difference? Maybe it is about all of these.

In navigating one's way through the question and its problematic assumptions, one needs to consider the temporality of the analytical frame: are we concerned with contemporary or historical reality? Although the focus seems contemporary, the question seems to be motivated by a deep historical gaze that sees marked differences between different cultural groups being gradually eroded or neglected by the rapid globalisation of Western views and modes of living. But to what extent is the "universalist construct" of the dominating Eurocentric views really *universally* undesirable? To what extent is the "fear" of obliterating or ignoring *difference,* or even the desire for being different, actually shared by the other?

The answers to such questions are, to some extent, already prefigured in the question of Eurocentricity itself, about which I am feeling less enthusiastic now than I was ten or even five years ago. I am no longer sure about the self-legitimating and self-directing thrust of questioning that is often pursued without a clear vision of what the unsettling and destabilising process of questioning will ultimately lead to. In negating certainties, questioning seems to point in certain directions but without leading to an end. The only certainty it reveals is that questioning itself is a viable mode of being. With the question of Eurocentricity, I am no longer clear about the direction in which it is pointing. Facing the thrust of the current globalising tendencies, what is our orientation when we

invoke the question? Are we trying to work with globalisation to find all-inclusive, universalised approaches wherein differences are fairly represented and democratically shared among all societies, who are no longer expected to remain attached to, claim exclusive ownership of, and live their differences? Or are we trying to engage in the struggle against globalisation, to promote, protect and nourish the other's essential difference? Or are we indeed lost somewhere in between, since both targets seem unattainable?

My doubts and sense of ambivalence have much to do with my double identity as an Australian-Arab (or Arab-Australian, depending on the standpoint) and my personal experiences in both worlds. I was born and brought up in Damascus where I completed my Bachelor of Architecture degree before moving to Australia. I lived in Damascus only a few years more than I have in Australia. In the late seventies and early eighties, academic and professional design thinking and practices appeared from the Damascene perspective to be a universal enterprise concerned with commodity, firmness and delight. Creativity, originality and individuality constituted the core of what designing was all about, regardless of its geographic or disciplinary context. Influenced by the French model, we had a five-year design-focused program. We were taught in design studios, had lecture-based history, theory and technical courses, had design crits and juries, had access to Western journals, such as *Architectural Record*, *Progressive Architecture*, and *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, and were aware of the latest trends. We were made aware of the disciplinary differences between urban, interior, industrial, landscape, architectural and fashion design; however, there were little concerns for design ethics and the socio-environmental consequences of designing. Sustainability was never an issue! Shortly after graduation, I joined the University of New South Wales to do a Master's course in Architectural Design. Despite my limited language skills and being the first time in a Western country, I experienced no difficulties with regard to architectural design thinking and practicing. Design culture appeared to me then as being truly universal. I knew exactly what was expected of me: I was able to read, interpret and understand the foreign built environment, to communicate my design ideas in an advanced graphic language, and indeed to excel. Since then, I was also able to practice in Australia, Saudi Arabia and Syria and was exposed to a range of design and teaching ideologies and practices in both the Arab and Western worlds.

In this cross-cultural exposure it became clear to me that, despite the growing theoretical resistance to Westernisation and concern for local identity, the institutionalised context of design education and corporate context of design practices in the Arab world have continued to mirror what is happening in the West. Increasingly, design appears to be taught and practiced in a complex globalised context dominated by digital technology,

sophisticated visual culture, and interdisciplinary values. Cultural differences have remained somewhat marginal to the "mechanics" of designing, and so have building technologies and construction techniques.

Although the discourse of design remains predominantly "Eurocentric," its adaptations and assimilations into the Arab world seem to raise no noticeable intellectual, moral or practical concerns. Interestingly, Arab scholars have invented a modern term for "design," *mīmƎtas*, that has been used – uncontested – in the contemporary Arabic discourse. Its appearance goes back to the nineteenth century, however, its institutionalised usage has a much shorter history concurrent with the establishment of architecture schools mostly in the second half of the twentieth century.[3] Modern lexicographers render the new term, together with its derivations, *sammama* (to design) and *musammim* (designer), as the only equivalents to the English terms, although they were not used in this sense in pre-modern Arab-Islamic literature. In fact it is not easy to single out one term in pre-modern literature that has the same comprehensive scope and applicability in various contexts, except perhaps for the term *san'a*, which denotes the idea of "making" rather than "designing". The Arabic root of *tasmīm* (design), *samam*, literally means "deafness," whose various shades convey the meanings of "solidity" (*asamm*), "innermost" (*samīm*) and "a very sharp sword" (*samsām*). The current usage, however, seems to be based on *tasmīm* as "determining", "making up one's mind" and "resolve" to follow up a matter. Thus in linguistic terms "design" is an act of determination, of sorting out possibilities, and of projecting a choice. It has little to do with problem-solving, the prevailing paradigm, as the designer (*musammim*) seems to encounter *choices*, not *problems*, and to engage in *judging merits,* not *solving problems*. But whatever the linguistic parameters or demands of the new terms were, the conceptual terrains were already prefigured in the Western conceptualisation and institutionalisation of "design" and acts of "designing" that were to be adopted. Modern Arab lexicographers, scholars and designers have hardly exercised any critical assessment of the overlap or match between their lexical and conceptual choices. The lack of historical and philosophical depths of the new terms seems to have assisted in their appropriation and the perpetuation of their uncritical usage throughout the Arab world.

Here I am inclined to ask: if the question of Eurocentricity was not a matter of concern to the Arabs when they invented new terms and consciously adopted the Western models, a choice that has obviously enabled many individuals like me to adapt to, and perform in, a Western context, why are we preoccupied with it now? The answer may lie in the complex folds of *difference*, yet such preoccupation still conceals a condescending attitude.

In one sense, the question of Eurocentricity amounts to saying: we – the Western experts – now know that our models are flawed, and just as we promoted them we now want everyone to question them. Put differently, we have come to realise that our modes of living, including design thinking and practicing, are "defuturing" humanity, so we have to find alternatives, and this is a collective responsibility[4] Noble and altruistic though it may seem, this call is still entrapped in the question's predicaments. First, the question itself reinforces the Western/non-Western divide and announces a one-sided ownership of the project of modernity and its current design enterprise. The non-Western other remains on the borrowing, adopting and receiving end. The other is not a partner in the making of the project, but is nonetheless a partner in dealing with its consequences, the various socio-economic and ecological problems. Curiously, the Arabs, like many others, have willingly accepted this position. Looking back, they may lament the fact that their forefathers had Westernised their present by adopting flawed systems and ideals, however, they are at least happy to blame someone else for the current problems. Second, having been effectively alienated from the project of modernity, and themselves having theoretically disowned it, their effective contribution, their difference, seems to lie in their past and not in their present, which is already condemned for becoming too Westernised.

While the developed West works in the present to deal with the "agency of unsustainability," to "counter the inherent defuturing of the economy, cultures and institutions of the contemporary 'developed' world,"[5] the developing world, in general, having been denied ownership of the present, is left to dig in their past glory to rediscover something to identify with, something to cherish and claim ownership over. For them the question of Eurocentricity points in the direction of their "golden age," the real source of their otherness.

But the quest for difference in a polarised world does not always result in fresh insights, constructive cross-cultural understanding, and new possibilities of being and togetherness. In fact these are becoming increasingly marginal outcomes. The more forceful outcomes that are impacting our daily life are extremism, aggression and destructive conflicts. This complex trend has now matured and already delivered some of its most tragic consequences in the latest bloody encounter between Islam and the West, unveiling new modes of fanaticism, chauvinism and Anglo-American-centrism that are fuelled on one side by religious fundamentalism and on the other by belligerent reassertion of supremacy and power.

In this confrontational context, the question of sustainability may momentarily loose its urgency, slipping completely out of view, but it retains its currency as a potentially unifying cause. In recent years, a growing concern for sustainability has indeed emerged among Arab scholars and designers, who, following the Western popular

trends, seem to be concerned more about the future of humanity than about the Eurocentricity of the question and its related discourse. The urgency of sustainability seems to consume the desire for, or even necessity of, difference. Interestingly, the issue of sustainability in that it presents itself in the form of a "crisis" rather than a "project" or "venture," like that of modernity, for example, offers a possibility of unity and solidarity, an opportunity to move beyond the West/non-West polarisation and its concomitant questions and discourses towards an engagement with the common core of humanity – its survival ethics and responsibility to sustain life on this unique and fragile planet. This may generate a new global sense of togetherness but will not necessarily provide a solution. A sense of togetherness does not mean, of course, a uniformity of visions, interests and desires, but a shared realisation of the nature of the *unsustainable* and a collective will to deal with it before it becomes a terminal condition.

Notes

1. See Peter Gran *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History* Syracus: Syracus University Press, 1996.
2. See Glenn Bowman, 'Identifying Versus Identifying with "the Other": Reflections on the Siting of the Subject in Anthropological Discourse' in Hocky and Dawson (eds) *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology* London: Routledge, 1997, 34 – 50.
3. On the crisis of the Arabic terminology in the nineteenth century, see Mohammed Ǝalah Ǝt Ǝ Sawaie Azamat al-Mus al-'Arab ꞮꞮ f Ꞥ al-Qarn al-Tāsi' Ǝalah Ǝt Ǝ Azamat al-Mus 'Ashar Damascus: Insititut Franais De Damas, 1999.
4. See Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: an Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.
5. Tony Fry, 'The Dialectic of Sustainment' *Design Philosophy Papers* 5, 2003, 1.