Beyond McWorld Design

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This brief essay is a response to the editor's posing of the question, "how can the other (non Euro-American) design and designing be made visible and engaged without being measured against Eurocentric norms?"

The actual *fait accompli* of a globalised world compels me to insist that there is a need for a corresponding new mode of designing, still to be initiated. My proposal is that this new designing be neither 'euro-centred' nor particular to any world culture. Rather, it should be a hybrid of both.

The norms referred to in the question posed by the editor are those developed and enacted by and within 'Western civilisation'. But what precisely is Western Civilisation?

In world geo-historical terms, the 'West' is located on the western and north-western shores of the Mediterranean Sea, an expanse of land bordered by the Baltic Sea, the Northern Sea and the Atlantic. The cultural reality conveyed by the term 'West' is however not so well circumscribed. According to Levack et al., authors of the forthcoming monumental manual on world history, "[t]he West has always been an arena within which different cultures, religions, social groups, values, political philosophies, and ideologies have interacted".[1]

Another conclusion drawn by Levack and colleagues is that a designation of certain cultural values commonly held by a distinct people in a precise place on earth and known as a 'Western civilisation', cannot be substantiated. Contrary to most of the other civilisations of the world, located in a specific epoch, a particular place or within a distinct community, the authors designate the culture of the 'West', as an entity of different realities at different times and different places. We are told that the Western civilisation is and has always been an open-ended process, an ongoing effort to determine the values by which people – of diverse origin and varied creed, as attested by local élites in former European colonies and in non-European countries – learn to live with one another. In his 'World re-foundation' project, Jean-Claude Guillebaud[2] corroborates this assertion and posits the same eternal preoccupation of Westerners, that of a universal corpus of 'anthropological morals' or 'foundations' upon which the 'West' seeks to erect all of the human species codes of conduct. Those values are now typically identified as 'Western', they are a legacy of Greeks, Jewish prophets and Roman legislators, plus some Islamic inputs, in Guillebaud's words. Western civilisation is thus founded upon the notion of **time** and the associated idea of progress, inherited from the Judaic prophecy; the concept of the **individual** and aspiration to **equality** brought about by Christianity; **reason** prefigured by Greek philosophers; **universality** conceived and fixed by Hellenism and Saul (Paul of Tarsus); and finally, the concept of **justice** that the Enlightenment philosophers derived from the Judeo-Christian message. In today's terms, these Western foundational values are expressed as "universal human rights, tolerance of religious diversity, equality before the law, democracy, and freedom of inquiry and expression."[3]

Others would however question these 'positive values' of the West, drawing attention to the negative legacy: slavery as opposed to equality; mass killings as opposed to the value of the individual; individualism, along with egotism and greed, as opposed to justice; totalitarianism and tyranny as vitiating practices to universality; escapism and out-of-touch, irresponsible, 'childish' behaviour.

It must be stressed, however, that Westerners do not retain a monopoly on either positive or negative human traits! Throughout human history, our species has been characterised by an innate propensity to both what moralists call 'good' and 'evil'. The only thing never achieved before by any other human group, is the Westerners' ability to extend their cultural territory to the entire planet. And the above stated Western values and norms are henceforth either overtly, or else unnoticeably, embodied in Western type immaterial constructions and material artefacts. In the modern era, this has been achieved via mass production and distribution. Again, the unprecedented aspect of this phenomenon

in the history of humankind is that these Western ways and means have circulated worldwide – some call it 'McWorld'[4] – and become the predicament of the entire human species.

The Other Design and Designing

Non-Western modes of production, and their associated knowledges and skills, have been displaced by the onslaught of Western industrial culture. Artisanal artefacts from Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Pacific Islands, as well as those from the traditional milieux in the West have been, and in some limited instances, are still produced for relatively small size human groups.[5] However, in the present context of increasingly globalised production and consumption, some argue that those locally bound and individually destined artefacts simply cannnot meet the requirements of the world scale.

The dilemma is often stated this way: In the context of the current hegemony of Western (Euro-American) artefact production and use (along with their associated norms and worldviews), is any room left for other ways of making based on different worldviews, different cultural traditions, different norms and ways? On what grounds would these 'others ways' deserve a certain interest and call for engagement?

Besides museologists, folklorists, patrimony historians, antiquarians, curio hunters and traditionalists both in the West and elsewhere, is there nowadays anyone else interested in 'outmoded' and anachronistic 'relics'?[6] Why should Western and westernised designers be interested in those foreign and 'archaic', 'backward', 'quality wanting' and 'outmoded' artefacts, when the overall world trend is towards a limitless forward 'progress' and 'growth' – promised and abundantly delivered through the neat rationality of western production? "Life has changed, the past is gone and it is no longer of use, in present times, even less for the future!" This is said and believed by many in the West and elsewhere.

There are a few traditional practices and artefacts that have somewhat resisted and are still in use (not without difficulty though).[7] But mostly this survival is at the price of being adulterated to various degrees, to the point that in many cases it is now hard to distinguish which world view, design, artefact or technique is foreign and which is authentically local.[8]

Conceptually and technically, Western type artefacts, material and immaterial, can now reach all humans wherever they may be on this planet. What, then, should those artefacts from other places and other epochs be revitalised for, since the Western type is so functional and so 'powerful'?

Some argue that, in certain circumstances, there could be, somewhere in the world, some special human needs that can only be met with a limited special series of one or another of

those local artefacts, or some of their peculiar processes and techniques.[9] But then, how best to reproduce, enhance, replicate and distribute those potentially valuable traditional artefacts, since local experienced artisans, workshops, materials and techniques are often no longer existing, let alone simply remembered?

The above unpacking of the question posed leads to 'essentialist'[10] argumentation on respective merits, those of the Western design mode and those of all other designing cultures. Whereas, ideally, as one of the eminent American designers, William R. Miller reminds us,[11] the merits of each of the two types of design should rather be judged against the designing purpose of simply 'facilitating life'. On the basis of certain criteria, some people would indeed assert that the Western mode of designing is the best means to life facilitation ever. Henceforth, it is argued that, obviously, there is no need for alternatives. As it is commonly accepted, the West has achieved the highest level of a 'good life'. All other cultures should be brought to achieve the same.

But others would also passionately argue for the unique human-centered characteristic of non-Western and pre-industrial Western design modes. Consequently, these 'other' designs, long despised and denigrated, urgently need to be salvaged, revitalised and reinstated on a worldwide scale, side by side with the dominant design mode. They indeed are judged to be better at maintaining living systems that are open, self-organising and self-sustaining;[12] however, only at a relatively circumscribed local level.

But, now, the scale of human life has manifestly changed. No human is any longer bound in closed physical and mental boundaries. On the one hand, in the West, at least since the cultural revolution in the 60s, individuals are increasingly aware that the values and conceptions of the previous era are far from truly facilitating life. The abstract, rational, universal market, its judeo-christian cultural kernel and its bureaucratic mode of functioning are increasingly questioned and challenged from within and from outside, with respect to the ultimate aim of each human individual, that of assuring for oneself a 'good' life.

On the other hand, cultures are no longer relatively hermetically closed, as they had been for centuries. Many individuals now move out to explore, physically and mentally (some more easily than others) other lands and different cultures around the planet. Consequently, non-Western cultures, and traditional circles in the West as well, are now equally under pressure: from the inside, from individuals 'suffocating', longing to break away from tradition and embrace indiscriminately whatever arrives from the outside; and from the outside, by invaginated aliens claiming equal recognition and privileges, including that of spreading their own modes of life within local host cultures. Traditional cultures are thus being opened to individuals from all corners of the planet, they all are becoming 'universal'.

Given this new world context and "age of [reflexive] (often not so reflexive, in my opinion) global heterophilia"[13] it appears that neither of the above presented arguments – the triumph of mass design vs. the authenticity of local design – can pretend, even less aspire, to be the only single, valid, world option. The fact is that we are rather bound to find ways to refer to both modes of designing and, hopefully, come up with a new way, the most appropriate, to designing life-facilitating means for the 21st century and beyond.

A New Obliged Vision of Design

In our quest for a mode of design appropriate to the new reality of individuals roaming more or less freely all over the planet and continually adapting to different environments and different cultures, a different relation to artefacts would be needed, one in which artefacts transcend their over-determination as commodities and bearers of gratuitous sign values. This goes to a deeply felt and generalised longing worldwide to restore the quasi-organic bonds that existed (or are imagined to have existed) between artefacts and users.[14]

Whether immaterial or material, in the West, as well as in all other cultures, human-made things are indeed much more than simple functional instruments, exchangeable commodities or pure ornamental appendices. Rather, once embodied into any kind of materiality, artefacts are then full fledged social agents, on equal footing with humans in more ways than one.[15] Their only peculiarity is that they need their makers in order both to exist and to perform their ontological purpose. Both humans and artefactual agents do indeed exist as hybrid.[16]

The instrumental hybridity of humans and artefacts has existed since the emergence of *homo faber*. This liminal hybridity has then been coupled with sociality, producing a second level of cultural hybridity. Today, we witness local social phenomena further extended and globalised, forming a third level of the hybrid state: global multicultural hybridity. A 'global society' of hybrid humans and artefactual agents is thus currently unfolding worldwide, and designers can no longer afford to ignore this. By 'designers' I do not mean traditional western professionals, like draftspeople. Neither do I mean artists and artisans, occupied in all cultures in exploring material in order to draw out idiosyncratic and cultural forms; nor do I mean estheticians, whose passion is to interpret, translate and diffuse different cultural notions of beauty. In the present essay, 'designers' are neither engineers, busy in building mechanisms and machines, nor philosophers aiming to reach the outer limits of human thought. The perspective privileged here is that of new kinds of professionals dedicating their energy to creating 'virtuous' artefacts, in the Aristotelian sense of 'righteousness'.[17]

The mission and role devolved to sages in all cultures has always been to prevent excesses of any kind and maintain

individuals and organisations into a prudent and life-sustaining middle.[18] As hinted at above, our current 'global society' badly needs a corresponding breed of sages, and not individuals locked into any particular cultural background, as has been the case thus far. As any other 'situated agent', these new kind of social actors must correspondingly be cosmopolitans and 'transnationals',[19] not privileging any one of the world multiple cultures. And I submit that designers be some among those new sages.

In our present era, the transformation of energy and materials occurs at a speed never experienced before by humankind, and at a scale much wider than that of the single individual and her close community. But even if Western abstract universalistic pretensions are put aside, *worldwide*, we are still equipped *locally*, with mostly, Western-made artefacts. Yet we still know very little about the existential consequences upon minds and bodies, of often ill-adapted, intellectual, physical and socio-cultural tools, nor the effects on social life at the level of local communities, and now more and more, at the global level too.[20]

From the perspective of a hopefully emergent new design profession for a 'global society', as briefly evoked, these 'disjunctures' are what now urgently require mending, so as to re-tune individuals and societies towards their existential purpose: their participation in 'life facilitating' processes, and 'sustainment'.[21] Designers need to synergetically[22] contribute with full and clear knowledge of what is going on in the 'global village', at the individual level, at small communities level, and at the world global level which now transcends the Western/non-Western dichotomy. That is, I guess, what is meant by the 21st century leadership, called for by many, such as the founders of the New York based 'NextDesign Leadership Institute'.

The profession of designing needs to be 'collectively re-rethought'[23] and the task shared among sub-fields in order to be adequate to the current global challenge. On equal footing, design from all other cultures of the world, including the traditional and the actual so-called 'modern' Western, ought to be thoroughly researched, assessed and each methodically adapted to current new world requirements.[24] These need to be more focused on authentic needs, in opposition to the priority traditionally given, in all world cultures, to institution-building and reinforcement.[25] Authentic human needs are met through individual human action, or human 'special case technology' as Miller would say. And human action is accomplished through a dynamic interaction of the human body, mind, artefacts, and diverse physical and social environments in which the individual happens to be. It is this interaction, wherever it occurs on the planet, that calls for the designer's attention, this latter being no longer engaged in any cultural particularism, the Western or any other.

Notes

1. Brian P. Levack et al *The West: Encounters & Transformations* New Jersey: Pearson Education/Ally & Bacon Longman, 2004, 23.

2. A free interpretation of Jean-Claude Guillebaud's *La refondation du monde* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999, 13.

3. Levack et al *op cit* 23.

4. Frank J. Lechner and John Boli *The Globalisation Reader* Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000, 2.

5. See, among many others: Ethel Alderete PhD dissertation on the effects of Andean traditional knowledge and techniques, compared to Western style health artefacts and services provided to urbanised 'indigenous' peoples in the Argentinian province of Jujuy, 'Western Development and the Health of Indigenous Peoples. Behavioral Aspects of Cultural Change and Cultural Persistence in the Andes', dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Public Health in Public Health, Graduate Division, University of California, Berkley, 1996. Another indirect statement on the effectiveness of traditional knowledge and techniques is found in 'Surviving in a Globalising world', by Aprna Bhagirathy and Nirmal Sengupta, of Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, published in *Seminar* 523 (Symposium: Celebrating Craft), New Delhi, March 2003.

6. 'Surviving in a globalising world'1.

7. One case is the 'modern' Japanese home with its indispensable *tatami room* and *o-furo* bath.

8. One among many flagrant cases is that of the soap stone sculptures by the Inuit, made under the inspiration, training and order of the *Qallunat* (Euro-Canadians). See Louis Gagnon, 'L'intromission des légendes dans la sculpture des Inuit du Nunavik'. In Turgeon, Laurier, Denys Delage et Réal Ouellet, (Sous la direction de) *Transferts culturels et métissages Amérique/Europe, XVIe – Xxe siècle* Laval, Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1996, 551–567. In spite of the claim made throughout this volume and in several other historical studies on cultural exchanges, the transfer in the other direction (non-Western to Western) has been rather meagre and less disturbing to Western Civilisation, since it is precisely in the nature of this civilisation to absorb and harmoniously integrate whatever it 'borrows' from others.

9. This is another claim by some avant-gardist 'international development workers', advocating for 'indigenous knowledge', 'crafts promotion' and 'South-South co-operation' movements and enterprises.

10. A term widely used in the social sciences to designate each world culture as a distinct phenomenon.

11. William R. Miller 'The Purpose of Design' in *Trimtab Newsletter* Sebastopol, Ca: Buckminster Fuller Institute, Summer 2003, 6.

12. *Ibid* 6.

13. Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Making and Unmaking of Strangers' in Pnina Werebner & Tariq Modood (eds) *Debating Cultural Hybridity* London & New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 46–57.

14. Concepts drawn from many authors, among whom Arjun Appadurai 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' in Frank J. Lechner and John Boli (eds) *The Globalisation Reader*, 322–330.

15. François-Xavier Nzi iyo Nsenga 'Les objets matériels de la vie quotidienne, comme partenaires actifs dans les rapports sociaux', Masters' Degree Thesis in Sociology, Université de Montréal, 2001.

16. Bruno Latour, 'Pramatogonies: A Mythical Account of How Humans and Nonhumans Swap Properties' *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol 37, no 6, May 1994, 791–808 and Michel Callon & John Law 'Agency and the Hybrid *Collectif' The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 94, 2, 1995, 481–508.

17. Michael Polanyi *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958; Richard Hooker, 'Greek Philosophy, Aristotle, The Doctrine of the Mean. Nicomachean Ethics 11.6-7' in *World Civilisations* 1996, http://www.wsu.edu:8080/˜dee/GREECE/MEAN.HTM Accessed September 2003.

18. Basarab Nicolescu 'Le tiers inclus – De la physique quantique à l'ontologie' in *Bulletin interactif du Centre International de Recherches et Études transdisciplinaires* (CIRET) no. 13, Paris, 1998.

19. Pnina Werbner *Debating Cultural Hybridity* op cit, 'Introduction: The dialectics of cultural hybridity' 11.

20. From an ethno-social vantage point, Arjun Appadurai has summarised those adverse effects on individuals, on local communities and on the global world, resulting from the increased speed of energy transfer through ill-fitted artefacts – including the human individuals themselves and their mental schemes – into five "disjunctive *scapes*: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes* and *ideoscapes*". See Lechner et al, *The Globalisation Reader*, op cit, 324.

21. Concept proposed and extensively explained by Tony Fry in 'Why Philosophy' *Design Philosophy Papers*, Issue 2, 2003.

22. In reference to Herbert A. Simon *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 1969 and Richard Buckminster Fuller *Synergetics*, 1975.

23. This is the motto of the newly initiated 'NextDesign Leadership Institute', New York. It is also the avenue proposed in early 60s

by Gordon Ratray Taylor in his *Rethink A Paraprimitive Solution* London: Secker & Warburg, 1972.

24. This seems to be the perspective of UNESCO's recently initiated project, 'Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity'.

25. James K. Feibleman's study *Mankind Behaving: Human Needs and Material Culture* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1963) is to me, thus far, the most complete and extensive study on human needs, devoid of any economism and marketing connotations.