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Editorial

Design and Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity can be defined as the rich variation that exists between different cultures, as opposed to a society marked by a monoculture, such as the global monoculture, which is sometimes described as a homogenization of cultures, akin to cultural decay (Cultural diversity, 2018). The term is also used to denote the variety of human societies or cultures in a specific region, or in the world as a whole. In 2001, UNESCO defined it this way:

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations. ... In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. [...] (UNESCO, 2001, Article 1 & 2)

Cultural diversity within a limited area like a country, city or neighborhood, is a growing phenomenon that constitutes many challenges. The transition from a colonial to a postcolonial era is still a problematic matter. In spite of great attitudinal changes, the tension between the ruler and the ruled, the self and “the other”, as described by the late Edward W. Said, is still valid (Said 1978). According to Said, orientalism (the Western scholarship about the Eastern World) is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power. In her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak (1988) too, addresses diversity, but from an influential feminist perspective. Her main effort has been to try to find ways of accessing the subjectivity of those outside the mainstream culture, especially those who are being investigated by the mainstream. She is hailed as a critic who has feminized and globalized the philosophy of deconstruction, considering the position of the subaltern, a word used by Antonio Gramsci as describing ungeneralizable fringe groups of society who lack access to citizenship. In the early 80s, she was also hailed as a co-founder of postcolonial theory, a position confirmed by her equally influential book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), which suggests that so-called postcolonial theory should be considered from the point of view of who uses it, and in whose interest. Obviously, the political implications are considerable (Parekh, 2005). At the other hand, history has proved that cross-fertilization between cultural groups may cause innovation. For instance, this was evident in late Antiquity, in the meeting of the Occidental and the Roman world (Panofsky 1939). The influence from Japan has been particularly strong in the Nordic countries, and seems to be a lasting phenomenon (Gelfer Jørgensen, 2013; Weisberg, 2016).

In our paradigm of experience, it has become evident that the aesthetic dimensions of our daily environment have great impact on how we feel and interact (Saito, 2010). Their symbolic meaning might differ according to point of view, and be subject to negative reactions

(Skjerven, 2016). This raises the questions of how artefacts might stimulate or prevent social integration, in what way they could be transformed or reused, and how they should be shaped to satisfy the various socio-cultural and geographic segments of the market. The matter of consumption, waste and sustainability should also be considered (Skjerven & Reitan, 2017). The different traditions of how things are made and by whom in indigenous and Western societies, and in the new urban multicultural enclaves should be pursued, combined with analyses of the impact of design in informal and alternative economies. What should constitute the essential competence of a designer in today's diverse society is a matter that is in high need of investigation. The matters of user involvement and associated participatory design are vigorously promoted as preferred methods (Simonsen, 2013). Still, indigenous traditions can easily be overruled, and should be particularly given attention, focus and nourishment (Fry, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2018).

The present situation in much of the world, where different cultures exist side by side, is reflected in the variety of products and how they are produced, but the imbalance between dominant and not so dominant cultures also reveals the fading away of indigenous traditions and skills. The complexity of this scenario constitutes a great challenge to designers. It is also an issue of great importance for design educators, both as regards contents and teaching methods.

By raising this theme in this special issue of *FormAkademisk* we hope to stimulate a broad cross disciplinary discussion on the interplay of cultures within the field of design and design education. The main dimensions of the topic might be summarized as:

- The dimensions and meanings of cultural diversity
- Politics and power
- Transmission and transition of cultures
- Heritage and innovation
- Indigenous and vernacular traditions versus fashion and euro-centered attitudes
- Design and learning approaches

These matters are complex, deeply interwoven and interdependent. This series of articles discusses how design might support an innovative development that takes care of diverse traditions and attitudes, supports equality and peaceful co-existence.

Throughout the coming year, we will publish more articles on the theme of design and cultural diversity.

Articles in this issue

Grete Swensen and Joar Skrede's article *Industrial Heritage as Cultural Sustainable Options in Urban Transformation: The case of Skien and Moss*, deals with the reuse and transformation of industrial heritage to contemporary use. It represents a possibility for architects and designers to combine a building's robust form with creative solutions that may enhance cultural integration, long-lasting and sustainable solutions in urban development. A former methanol factory in Skien used as art hall, and a former paper mill in Moss used as a music venue, exemplify the ways in which cultural provisions for a diverse urban population can be accommodated. What the projects have in common is that they have succeeded in linking heritage, culture and diversity in sustainable ways, and they have proven to be successful in stimulating the local community. The adaptive reuse of industrial structures demonstrates that cultural sustainability is as important as the other sustainability goals – and equally important: the goals may cross-fertilize each other. The study is based on solid statistical and demographic

evidence. Their thorough investigation will hopefully serve as a starting point for similar projects.

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Astrid Skjerven, Richard Daly, Liv Lande and Janne Beate Reitan

Special Issue Editors

Astrid Skjerven

Professor, Ph.D.

Department of product design, Faculty of technology, art and design, Oslo Metropolitan University

Email address: astrid.skjerven@oslomet.no

Richard Daly

Ph.D.

Freelance social anthropologist researcher

Email address: dalybred@gmail.com

Liv Lande

Ph.D. Cultural Adviser

Embassy of Japan in Norway

Email address: livlande@getmail.no

Janne Beate Reitan

Associate Professor, Dr. ing.

Department of art, design and drama, Faculty of technology, art and design, Oslo Metropolitan University

Email address: janne.reitan@oslomet.no

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