On the practice of intercultural design

By Georg-Christof Bertsch

"*Between contingency and necessity*"[1], in my opinion this rather grand title of the most recent dissertation from Sandra Groll is the perfect policy objective for intercultural design. Contingency[2] firmly in the sense of the *contingency opening* of the Berlin-based sociologist Andreas Reckwitz[3] – as the *extension of the horizon of possibilities* – and *necessity* in the sense of the limits of design imposed by the plastic arts - in the sense proposed by the Stuttgart philosopher Daniel Martin Feige[4].

Since I became involved with intercultural design in its narrower sense back in 2008, it was always evident to me that, contrary to the mainstream opinion at that time, the world was in no way moving towards an allegedly *irreversible globalisation*.

"The world is flat"[5] was the title of a best-seller of the noughties. In 2006, Thomas L. Friedman, a columnist of the New York Times, celebrated the perceived elimination of *distances* – in other words the barrier-free and cost-free intercontinental mobility and logistics hype driven by the Internet. At the time it already appeared to me to be completely bogus. Not to mention the underlying ideology of liberal market forces. Friedman: "In a flat world every company must make use of the best and cheapest producers and suppliers, wherever they are based".

At that time it was quite apparent to me that the world was already breaking apart precisely through the Internet that Friedman had eulogised. And at the same time, the filter bubble appeared and has been increasingly separating us from each other ever since. Eli Pariser, who coined the term *"filter bubble"*[6] in 2011, stated: "Democracy demands shared principles, but we are being placed in parallel but separate universes."

What appeared all the more important to me was the cohesion that design can offer as a result of the multiplicity of its possibilities based on the fundamental notion of facilitating its use.

It is precisely through *contingency*, that is to say the many opportunities it contains, and *necessity*, in other words the indispensability of design, that design forms the optimal bridge between cultures and can also contribute to the dismantling of

[1] GROLL, Sandra, "Between Contingency and Necessity, on the Role of Design in Today's Society" transcript Bielefeld, 2022
[2] In sociology, contingency and particularly in system theory (Niklas Luhmann et al), contingency is a common expression used to denote the principles of openness and uncertainty in human life experiences. Even the perception of the world is contingent. No-one can say that his or her perception is the only possible and correct perception. And because of the other person's contingency, no-one can predict with any certainty how the other person will perceive this forest. For the definition see also: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kontingenz_(Soziologie) 8.3.2022
[3] RECKWITZ Andreas / ROSA, Hartmut, "Late Modernism in Crisis- What does Social Theory Offer?" Berlin, suhrkamp, 2021
[4] FEIGE, M. (2018): "Design. A philosophical analysis". Berlin: Suhrkamp Wissenschaft
[5] FRIEDMAN, Thomas L., "The World is Flat, a Short History of the 21st Century", Berlin, suhrkamp, 2
[6] PARISER, Eli, "Filter Bubble, How we are being incapacitated in the Internet", Munich, Hanser, 2012

conflicts by acting as an intermediary, illustrating, presenting, explaining and integrating, to use Ezio Manzini's words.[7]

In the DDCAST number 14,[8] Sebastian Herkner demonstrated very graphically how this works in the practice of intercultural design. The collective planning of material processing works through signs, through shared manual construction which takes the place of language. In DDCAST number 77 [9] Britta Wagemann reported on the role that shared *dancing* can play in the social design context for empathetic understanding and conflict resolution.

The urgent topicality of the question

Answering the question of the definition of intercultural design is becoming not less but constantly more important, also against the background of the war in Ukraine, as cultures, whether national or tribal within our society are confronting each other uncomprehendingly - aggravated by social media. The "lateral thinkers" (*Querdenker*) protest movement is a bad example. This is what we are currently experiencing. The Director of the Institute of Contemporary History, Andreas Wirsching, regards the war in Ukraine even as "the end of the hitherto existing globalisation"[10], something which may well mean an even sharper confrontation of ideologies.

I want to have this article understood as being expressly *non-academic*, and instead, aimed specifically at practice, even though I refer to theory. Listeners to DDCAST or readers of my publications are well aware that I have a low opinion of the *"academisation" of design*. On the other hand, I have a high opinion of an active discussion about theory-based *practical design*. I think that designers really have to push beyond their limits. Not for the sake of academic theory but for the sake of practical design.

We are witnessing de-globalisation and the disintegration of social cohesion. Even if all these movements have counter-movements, it is still possible to talk about dismal trends in certain directions.

Intercultural design can and should see itself as an opposing force to counteract the drifting apart[11] of society and the world.

In order to put the terms "design" and "culture" in perspective, it is possible to start by playing with the arrangement of the terms. There is no question that *design*

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[7] Manzini, Ezio / Jegou, Francois, "Quotidiano sostenibile. Scenari di vita urbana", Edizioni Ambiente, Milan, 2003

[8] DDCAST number 14. With Sebastian Herkner on 1.11.2020 https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/ddcast-was-ist-gut-design-kommunikation-architektur/id1525186605?i=1000496850170

[9] DDCAST number 77 on 13.2.2022 https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/ddcast-was-ist-gut-design-kommunikation-architektur/id1525186605?i=1000550941467

[10] Interview on 10.3.2022 in DLF https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/amp/historiker-russlands-ukraine-krieg-markiert-das-ende-der-bisherigen-globalisierung-100.html

[11] And it is possible and indeed necessary to steer when drifting. The wonderful title of the book by Fritz B. Simon hits the nail on the head SIMON, Fritz B./WEBER, Gunthard "Navigating when Drifting – Post from the Workshop of Systemic Therapy", Carl-Auer-Verlag, Heidelberg, 5th edition, 2017.

cultures exist as well as the *design of cultures*; *designing cultures* is also possible with an extended definition of design. *Design* cultures are derived from designers' different work cultures.

Intercultural connections can be defined and discussed in the relevant sense with regard to all these relationships. In this way the *global, allegedly uniform pretension* of industrial design that was the overall industrial modernity through educational paradigms in universities is being intensely eroded.

It is amusing to join in as this is where terms become design material. It is becoming particularly clear that the somewhat extremely restricted perception of the term "intercultural design" as the intercultural consideration of *national design* is only a side issue of the discussion and not its essence.

Linking design to a territory defined by a body politic just does not work. If this were indeed the case, a design, conceived by anyone, in the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany or the Swiss Confederation or the Republic of Kenya would be a German, Swiss or Kenyan design. Or a design created by an Austrian in London would be a British design. But what is this actually all about? Always a fun discussion.

It is to be hoped that there is no need to disagree about the existence of stylistic and process-related differences of design cultures. These exist beyond any doubt. For all that, an informed look is necessary - the *general Italian or Scandinavian look and feel* of furniture design are admittedly clichés, but differentiating in this way nevertheless helps a little in terms of stylistic history. Even if it is possible to find *Italian aspects* in Scandinavian design today, material, structural and proportional preferences with national origins are evident.   However, these are mainly regional phenomena: Milan, Berlin in the 1980s, Paris Haute Couture, the Tokyo of Issey Myake. Nevertheless, in the context of this approach, these sources of inspiration are rather superficial phenomena.

Social design and humanitarian design as important aspects of intercultural design

The examination of sections of design that are totally unable to get by without intercultural experience is certainly more interesting. This could definitely be said about all sections of design, but is particularly evident in the field of *social design*[12] and *humanitarian design*, in which, as Dr. Keneilwe Munyaj said, it is always important "to design with people not for people"[13]. This means the direct exchange of ideas is the essence of the designer's activity, and admittedly in sometimes tenuous

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[12] AMATULLO, Mariana, BOYER, Bryan, MAY, Jennifer, SHEA, Andrew ed.; "Design for Social Innovation – Case Studies from around the World", Routledge, New York, 2022

[13] DDCAST 23 am 25.1.2021 https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/ddcast-was-ist-gut-design-kommunikation-architektur/id1525186605?i=1000506391705

contexts and always with a need to get on with the job - in other words: not in the context of gallery design.

We must also always apply a post-colonial perspective to the phenomenon. At this point I will take the liberty of directly quoting my answer to a relevant question during an interview: "Nowadays we usually take the idea of the general intelligibility of signs in the discussion of design for granted, as in, "*But everyone understands the iPhone*". This idea seems to be self-evident to us. But a quite different view is taken in the literature on interculturalism.[14] If we look at the classic works of our Offenbach-based product language (…), the works of Jochen Gros, Dieter Mankau and Richard Fischer [15] – who during the 1970s were considering what they would publish in the 1980s - we can see that they were following a Euro-centric perspective."[16]

But even today we have still not put this truly behind us. However, we must bear in mind that our textbooks are full of restricted, Euro-centric viewpoints and the noticeably local perspectives of the IT scene in California's Silicon Valley.

Ever more individual

As is well-known, universal design is understood to be barrier-free design; this was, and sometimes still is, equated with *intercultural design*, as it appears to offer a common language. But is this right?

Just as universal design is anchored in the rationalisation and generalisation of industrial modernity, individualisation in design is anchored in the late-modern era. As the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, who demonstrated the universal tendency towards *singularisation* in the late modern era, argues, this comes as no surprise. Rationalisation, harmonisation and standardisation in the framework of the aestheticisation of the world[17] have long since been eroded, starting with customisation, for example of motor cars. *The world is moving in quite the opposite direction today, and by no means in the sense of universal design, particularly towards increasing individualisation.*

We a great deal of products, we are now faced with an unmanageable abundance of versions that approaches this *singularisation* and the wish for maximum individualisation. Nevertheless, the subject of the various design cultures is not concluded but rather multiplied.

"Finding a common language"

[14] HEPP, Andreas, "Transcultural Communication", UVK, Konstanz and Munich, 2014

[15] FISCHER, Richard, "Principles of a Theory of Product Language, Functions of Evidence", University of Applied Design in Offenbach, Offenbach am Main, 1984

[16] BERTSCH, Georg-Christof, "Design must be taught as a politically highly charged practice", pp. 412ff in: VÖCKLER, Kai, SCHWER. Thilo, "The Offenbach Approach. On the Theory of Product Language". Transscript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2021

[17] RECKWITZ, Andreas, "The Invention of Creativity – On the Process of the Aestheticisation of Society", Berlin, suhrkamp, 7th edition, 2022

We need manageable concepts for the practical application of designs in the intercultural and international context so that we can speak to each other with the goal of finding a "common language".

Finding a common language in this intercultural arena appears to me to be essential. This language can be cobbled together from many other specialist languages. The key point is that in practice, it acts in the sense of prototyping. The definition of a new specialist language therefore appears to me to be exciting. In the preface to "*The Language of Family Therapy - a Vocabulary[18]*" published in 1975 for what was then a new specialist language, Fritz Simon wrote "The evolutionary theoretician François Jacob pointed out that the infinite combination of existing modules represented the principle of evolutionary history. All manner of junk is thrown into a junk room and rediscovered as usable in due course." In this sense, rummaging around in the junk room of other disciplines and practices is a method we should use to develop our terminological apparatus in intercultural design.

Cultural differences lead to conflicts rather than to peaceful agreements. We must therefore learn to understand cultural differences in intercultural design and attempt to use them positively.

There is no need whatsoever to present further proof of *substantial differences* between cultures. We have more than enough evidence of this in the qualitative and quantitative research of Hall[19], Trompenaars[20], Meyer[21] and Hofstede[22]. These differences relate to behaviours, thought processes and also the understanding of time and space. Robert Levine[23] has convincingly presented this in his "*Geography of Time*".

We also know that cultural differences lead to conflicts rather than peaceful agreements. Richard Lewis proved this in great depth. It is no coincidence that his most important work is called "When Cultures Collide".[24] We can help to dispel conflicts through clever intercultural design. This is the modest message of this article.

In conclusion: Disciplinary definition for discussion

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[18] SIMON, Fritz B. / STIERLIN, Helm, "The Language of Family Therapy. A Vocabulary - A critical Review and Integration of the Terms, Concepts and methods of the Therapy System", Stuttgart, Klett Cotta, 2nd edition, 1982.

[19] HALL, E.T./ HALL, M.R. "Understanding Cultural Difference", Yarmouth Press, 1990

[20] TROMPENAARS, Fons, "Riding the Waves of Culture – Understanding Diversity in Global Business". (3rd extended edition) London/Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2012

[21] MEYER, Erin, "The Culture Map - Decoding how People think, lead, and get things done across Cultures", Perseus Book Group, New York, 2015

[22] HOFSTEDE, Geert, "Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind", McGraw Hill, New York / Chicago, 2010

[23] LEVINE, Robert, "A Geography of Time, the Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist or How every Culture keeps time just a little bit differently", Oxford 2006

[24] LEWIS, Richard D. , "When Cultures Collide". (4th extended edition) London/Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2018

To clarify the term, I propose a simple paradigm:[25]

a) Monocultural design – a design restricted to a single culture, whether national, regional or tribal (almost impossible)
b) Transcultural design –Transcending more than one culture. The actual global design (a wonderful illusion / a nightmare)
c) Intercultural design – Design that is conscious of the variations of cultural codes and uses the variations constructively (possibly a viable route)

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Website of the IPPO Design Institute of the University of Art and design of the State of Hesse
http://ippo-hfg.org/
Website of the German Designer Club with backlist of the DDCAST
https://www.ddc.de/de/magazin/ddcast.php
Website of BERTSCH.Brand Consultants https://bertschbrandconsultants.de/home.html

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[25] Bertsch, G.C., based on the "E-Journal of Inter-cultural Relations", number 6, 1998, p.1