Creativity in the Service of Humanity: Design for an Equitable World

Introduction

Like any generic term, globalization means different things to different people; it is mainly considered in generalized economic terms and seldom do we ever understand the specifics subsumed under this blanket covering, which in its effects, impacts on the lives of so many. Even the protests, an integral accompaniment to any meeting on the globalization agenda since the mid nineties have mainly focused on economic issues and the growing divide between rich and poor, paralleling this with the beneficiaries and victims of a globalized world economy and matching it with benefits to developed nations at the expense of those which are not developed. BBC commentator and author, Diane Coyle makes this comparison in striking terms, in her article 'What's so great about globalization'. Quoting from a Federal Reserve Bank of New York study she states that "American consumers had enjoyed an extra 7600 new varieties of goods through imports each year on average during the 1990s. Even before taking account of lower process, the increased choice alone had increased their welfare by the equivalent of three per cent of GDP.[1] In contrast she observes "The negative aspect (of globalization) is captured by the difference in economic performance between the poor countries which have failed to link themselves to the world economy, mainly in Sub Saharan Africa. These 'non-globalizers' saw GDP fall by about two per cent during the 1990s. Meanwhile the 'globalizers' grew by five per cent a year." She also points out the tragic impact of this change: "it spells high infant mortality, low life expectancy, ill health and hunger."[2] Distressing as this difference is, purely on face value, it is even more disturbing if one accepts the contention that the prosperity of developed nations is at the expense of undeveloped countries: increased riches for one causes more devastating poverty in the other.

Debate about the impact of globalization has often been polarized to the degree that the broader considerations have been overlooked and the more obvious economic implications promoted. It is difficult to imagine that individual or government would purposely target the underprivileged and worsen their lot; but similarly it is equally hard to imagine that either individual or nation would not take opportunities for prosperity and growth when they arise. It is unrealistic to expect there will be a reversal of established global patterns of development in the foreseeable future; one might only expect they will expand, possibly with the attendant negative consequences outlined by Coyle becoming further exacerbated. A more realistic approach is to consider how the negative dimensions of a world market might be mitigated, or al least offset, by accompanying developments and turn our attention to identifying what these developments might be and how they can be achieved and in this it is the detail which might offer some direction.

If we look beyond the economic impact of globalization it is possible to discern other destructive effects which are equivalently devastating, but less relevant to development expectations, not as easily quantified and as a result, less obvious. In his article 'Globalization's Shadow', Richard Devetak comments: "The globalization of production and finance together with the effects of cultural globalization ('coca-colonization') mean that human social relations are increasingly detached from the geographical territory of the nation state. Something like a 'supra-territorial' space

outside and beyond the state is coming in to being and reshaping the way human societies function and connect with each other. Some of the more zealous proponents of globalization believe it is inaugurating a 'global village'".[3] The emergence of a global village raises issues of identity, of how our being is shaped by where we were born, the activities we perform, the beliefs we hold and the cultural meaning which derives from these. Our social existence is an expression of our culture, whether at a personal, tribal, communal or national level; but it is certainly not at a global level. An inevitable consequence of the global push is the diminishing of networks which express identity, both personal and cultural and their replacement by some notion of internationalism which links to a global society without boundaries and without state. This is confronting for the average citizen of the most affluent nations; how must it appear to the increasingly disenfranchised peoples of tribal communities and underdeveloped societies? It is hard to think of a more extreme form of cultural alienation than the loss of cultural identity, and possibly as a result, personal identity.

A further dimension of the global push concentrates on the needs, economic or otherwise, only of developed countries. We all view the world from our own perspectives; if the push comes from the developed world it is the needs and perspectives of the developed world which will shape how the push is made; we interpret needs in terms which affect us and address them accordingly. In general, fresh water, reasonable levels of health and life expectancy, sanitation, safe shelter, opportunities for education, means of agricultural production, transport, basic communications and other fundamental requirements for subsistence are not assured in many undeveloped countries, a situation known in developed countries, only through news broadcasts and documentaries when the situation reaches crisis point. The UN Habitat report in 2002 identifies 5 characteristics of urban poverty in its definition of urban slums: lack of adequate water supply, inadequate sanitation, insecure tenure for its inhabitants, poor structural quality of its housing units, or unsafe physical environment and insufficient living area.[4] It is interesting to not that these are not directly economic issues although inevitably, increased prosperity could, but would not necessarily, impact on them.

Not only are the economic benefits of globalization by passing societies in underdeveloped nations, but the global issues which are being addressed, ignore those societies' basic requirements. The result is that not only do the poor get poorer, but their identity is eclipsed and their needs ignored; while this may not be a starred item on the global agenda, it is a devastating repercussion which must be counterbalanced if the 'global village' is to ever emerge in any way which embraces the human condition.

Just as issues of identity and need emerge from behind the mask of the global, as an unforeseen result rather than an intention, so once there is an acknowledgement of this result, it can be addressed in future global moves. The issue becomes how to share the benefits of globalization by economic growth on the one hand, while preserving culture and addressing needs on the other; ensuring global means 'global' and that all societies reap its benefits, if in different respects. This would not only humanize the face of globalization but it would also dispel many of the objections which surround it. Economic growth could continue at a rate which has come to be expected while cultural identity and fundamental human needs were being supported; the prosperity of developed nations could increasingly flow to poorer countries, as their basic needs were stabilized and opportunities for development increased.

The Arts and Cultural Identity

Probably the most definitive dimension of cultural identity is made manifest through the arts. Some years ago a colleague who had spent much of his life in different universities around the world remarked that although his main area of study was art, he found poetry to be the art form he best related to; whenever he visited a new country he looked for a book of local poems and this was how he came to know the society.

There are many interesting examples of the relation between the arts and cultural identity; a particularly important one is found in the visual art of Amlash, which totally shapes our understanding of the society which existed there. Amlash is a tiny town on the Iranian plateau south west of the Caspian Sea. Up to 1934 almost nothing was known about the culture which thrived there between the 8th and 9th centuries BC, until swimming pool excavators came across a number of strange artifacts. In subsequent excavations 159 objects have been discovered, mostly baked clay but also some bronzes and jewelry. These mark out the totality of our knowledge of Amlash- no written texts, no agricultural implements, no traded goods, and yet we have an extraordinary rich image of the cultural life of the society which thrived there from their art. The vitality of the clay animals, their plastic and abstract qualities communicate with such intensity that they remind us of early modernist forms and art speaks of culture across millennia. Of the range of creative art forms, it is possibly the visual images of a culture which speak most directly to us and which in non literate societies, provide the basis of our understanding of the values and subjects a culture holds dear.

Many contemporary artists offer striking examples of how their creative work conveys the legacy of their culture/s. Consider the paintings of Neville Weereratne and Sybil Keyt. Three decades of living in an Australian environment have not dimmed the intensity of their reflections on their Sri Lankan identity; their native environment remains deep within and as with any faith or feeling that shapes our destiny, it is in the most personal of our activities that its presence is most clear. Art making is from the heart, it transcends the everyday and lingers as the corridors of time, past and present, dissolve in what is meaningful to the artist, where the heart abides, for this provides the substance of his expression and these artists are no different. Both erase time and distance treading the pathways of memory as they shape their feelings into images. Their vision is both a bondage and a freedom for it is the chain that ties them to traditions and values that have long since ceased to be their world but this distance allows them to use their ideals to create and evaluate, to monitor and reflect. It gives freedom to discern what is important and liberates each artist's expressive moods.

The result is two individual groups of work, different in style and content but complementary in concept. It is life-enhancing; it looks at paradise in a human world. Its values assert the beautiful, the decorative, the sensual; it holds pleasure for artists and viewer alike. It chooses the rich and meaningful qualities that enhance existence from what debases it. Its memory celebrates not demeans, choosing to offer fulfillment rather than criticism, to seek humanity and joy in a world that inevitably must contain that which is evil. Weereratne's work holds an exotic intensity while

Keyt builds a more serene atmosphere in her works, but both derive from the passionate intensity of their reflections on their cultural identity.
Aloma Treister is another artist who has used the richness of her origins in her art. The strength in Treister's art comes from its culturally diverse inspiration. As the great Modernist painter, Wassily Kandinksy pointed out, "every work of art is the child of its age", all art work, is the product of its society and reflects the nature of its culture.[5] Treister's work takes this to an unusual, perhaps unique, extreme. Born in Baghdad into a Jewish family she moved to Iran in 1948, as a result of political pressures due to the formation of Israel, and stayed there until moving to Australia in 1973. Born into a Sephardic (Middle Eastern) Jewish community she lived in a Judaic island in an Islamic society blending the rich and decorative visual culture of both into her distinctive visual style.

Cultural integration has shaped Treister's artistic development. It is as if she has carried youthful observations and perceptions of a society tolerant of conceptual diversity and sympathetic to visual similarity, to her new home in Australia; and also curiously, to her art years later at the beginning of the 21st Century. In the last decade she has drawn on her personal history, reawakened the memories of a distant and now geographically inaccessible past, to reconfirm her personal identity and the cultural diversity of its aesthetic values. We all live with the shadows of our history, the features which individualize our past and directly, or indirectly, shape our present, but which, because of their cultural distance, seem not to have relevance to the present. These shadows are often obscured by the values and experiences of our immediate way of life, the daily routine which constitutes our everyday reality. But Treister has pushed past this immediate world to look through memory and sift the treasures from her past. Few can claim to have been born in the cradle of civilization just kilometers from ancient Babylon, or to see with the eyes of cultures now locked in public conflict. Creativity often thrives in the context of social discourse or, even conflict, but Treister's art reconciles her cultural history into a peaceful coexistence. It transcends the potential for despair or disillusion and transforms her feelings and reflections into a contemporary force, establishing a body of interesting and engaging art. Its sources engage in social dialectic, East and West, Islamic and Jewish, old and new, public and personal and her images give this dialogue meaning and in doing so express her cultural identity.

Preserving Cultural Identity

When we travel we seek out the museums and galleries, the repositories of a culture's visual creativity, the buildings and spaces which reflect how they live, the music and literature which explore their emotional lives; these are the ways we understand culture and they are the mechanisms cultures use to express who they are. I live in a multicultural society, largely made up of immigrants and their descendants from more than 120 different nations. While there is a high level of integration reflected in how the disparate cultures represented by this diverse group interact, there are also mechanisms by which cultural identity is preserved, intact, from generation to generation. Many national groups hold annual cultural festivals to celebrate their arts; others celebrate their distinctiveness through cuisine, resulting in the richness and diversity of the restaurant life. But the strongest form of preservation across national boundaries is the forms of education in traditional culture, its values and its beliefs and practices, which preserve a sense of identity. It is through education in culture that the roots of identity are transmitted from parent to child, to grandchild and

beyond, to keep in tact the prestige and identity which shapes the legacy of the past. If cultural identity is to be preserved in underprivileged societies, it will be through targeted support to ensure that cultural values remain in tact. Education is the most certain way that a culture can be reinforced, understood and enacted, regenerated through engagement and lived as an integral expression of a society's identity.

Addressing Basic Needs

If we return to the 5 UN Habitat characteristics of urban poverty, 4 of the 5 could be considered design problems. Never before has the design industry been so important, so pervasive or so effective, and yet these crucial design issues remain unaddressed. Developed societies enjoy the refinements of designer goods, brand labels and product diversity, while poor societies seldom have even the least refined of such products. The design industry is represented by a world network of professional societies, sometimes linked to UNESCO with Non Government Organization status; the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA), the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) and others traverse the globe with their executive meetings, exploring issues in design and design education, treating design as if it were an abstract entity with its own ethereal identity and world agenda, considering it as a phenomenon independent from the products it creates or the impact these have. In his keynote speech to the Design Research Society Conference in 2002, Peter Butenschon, then President of ICSID, observed: "we have become so proficient and advanced as designers, we may have removed ourselves from the needs which actually confront a major part of the world population. We have become part of a system of close-knit interdependence that assumes well-functioning finances, marketing and infrastructure, individual purchasing power, access to shop, a system that is simply not relevant in Congo or on the mountain plateau of Afghanistan."[6]

With this recognition, the most direct way forward may be to consider how we can diversify the approach to design, which in essence must, like any other discipline, be through research and development. Finding innovative ways to address the needs identified by societies overlooked by global developments, which fall outside the 'system of close-knit interdependence', could constitute a bridge to link tradition and modernity, refinement and necessity, development and neglect and the other divisive dualities which separate rich and poor.

There is, unfortunately, no specific definition of what we refer to as 'design'; it is essentially a cluster term embracing a potentially vast array of applications. If we are to find a way forward attention must be given to what 'forward' means and how it is determined in various design domains. An interesting parallel is provided by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussions of our use of the term 'game' where he argues that there is no necessary condition to being a game, but rather a group of shared characteristics some which link some games with others, but none of which are shared by all games.[7] Design can be regarded as emulating this notion; there are several aspects to what we call design in the general sense, any of which identify a domain in which the notion of design applies; all share some characteristics with others, but not all can be characterized by any one feature.

Some clarification might be derived from the history of science, where the domain of ‘natural philosophy’ segmented into the disciplines of chemistry, biology, physics and others, as the knowledge base and domain of application for each identifiable discipline, expanded. Design has so diversified in recent years that ‘the designer world’ we live in can no longer be dealt with by a generalized concept with an amorphous range. Perhaps the first function of research in regard to design is to research the concept of design itself, just as the Conceptual Art movement of the nineteen-seventies scrutinized the nature of art and opened the doors to the rich and diversified notion of art that we enjoy today. On this model different areas of design could clarify their role, their focus and their relevance.

Regardless of the approach, any discussion of design at the beginning of the twenty-first century must be predicated on research into what design means and how it contributes, or should contribute, to culture. Fundamental to development in any discipline and integral to the design process, research has recently become a priority in design education. Issues which have arisen confirm that clarification is needed across the concept of design, its breadth and application and a review of the criteria by which design success is determined, which invites attention to the broader concern that design has not yet turned its skills to solving the basic needs of humanity.

We usually think of design existing to improve function, to enhance appearance, to improve quality of life and these are integral to its ongoing purpose; but are they sufficient? The need for design permeates not just culture but the world in general. Design in its broadest sense covers management of production, resources, the environment, et al.; its processes involve planning, for sustainability, for growth, for survival, for everything. And yet how much of this broader sense is ignored in the functional view of design that dominates our short-term perceptions? Looking from first world context, from a modern industrialized city, we might conclude that design is solving ‘our’ world’s problems, improving ‘our’ experience of life, enhancing ‘our’ surroundings and even shaping ‘our’ identities, as brand name culture symbolizes our status, our occupation and our taste. Life might seem to be a matter of right ‘choices’ rather than effort and origination. However, when viewed from a third world context, design might seem to have sold its soul and be spiraling towards rampant materialism. As individuals we place little emphasis on broader design concerns, the need for food, water, agriculture, social issues, the design solutions that impact on the larger part of the world population. No wonder globalization is often identified with narrow materialistic interests and the neglect of human needs-the economic priority on which attention has focused.

The purpose of design is inextricably linked to how we determine what is good in design, the standards of design. We all know improved function is important; this thermos flask keeps its contents warmer than that one. Similarly with aesthetic concerns, this car looks better than that, (although the standards of what is better visually seem to fall increasingly within a narrow range, an issue in itself). These however are object based concerns, they do not address issues beyond the immediate consumer; they do not address the materials which may have impinged on environmental problems and resource depletion, the means of production which may have involved sweatshop oppression and social exploitation, or marketing concerns of truthful representation; in general the social/environmental spectrum of issues that underpin all material development.

Solving Problems Through Design

I t becomes apparent that no concept of 'what is good' in design should be entirely separated from the human factor, the community which design serves. An intrinsic dimension of research in design must be the ethical considerations that are mediated through the design process and evaluative scheme which link ethics to aesthetic and functional standards of design. In regard to achieving this it is design educators who are in positions of influence and power and with that power comes a responsibility to use it judiciously. The same may be said of the executive committees of the major design professional associations, ICSID, ICOGRADA, IFI and others. A first steps to addressing these issues could be taken by educators who can assert the role of ethics in the practice of design at all levels; educators are responsible for the next generation of designers and the development of their design consciousness, their standards and their expectations. If ethical considerations are integrated into design briefs they become just another parameter of the brief, integral to its success. Some Design Schools have already introduced ethical issues into their curricula and if their efforts receive attention, other schools might follow suit.

At a professional level the issues can be addressed in other ways; it is hard to blame individuals, or indeed the design industries in general for neglect of social and environmental concerns. These are not directly on the design agenda although they are inevitable components of it. Therefore the needs of planning in distant places and resource management in isolated locations never arise as issues. Perhaps it becomes the responsibility of professional associations to require 'pro bono' work from their members. Just as successful law professionals contribute to poorly paid causes for the public good, so perhaps should designers participate in design projects that fall outside the normal range of their briefs, working also for the community rather than the usual rewards of the profession. In the longer term, the provision of pro bono work could be extended to cover a range of professional needs including engineers, lawyers, medical personal, teachers and other contributors to achieving an equitable and harmonious world, for with equity and the satisfaction of needs, comes also peace and personal fulfillment.

A foundation for such developments has already been laid by Butenschon's paper. When discussing the future role of ICSID he says: "I believe there are at least two important roles for us. One is to address the big issues, build bridges between knowledge fields and professions, connect people, provide the meeting grounds and the useful events. The other is to ...relate design challenges to that half of the world population that has less than 15 dollars a day to spend, to the 86% of the population who have never heard a phone ring, to the 93% of people who have never been on the web."[8] This confirms there is strong support for the humanizing of design and the application of its practitioners' creative skills, in the service of a better world for all. The next step is to realize this potential in the identification and management of design projects which address the world community.

Summary

This paper has attempted to look under the more obvious aspects of globalization and its economic implications to find ways the benefits of a global economy might be

extended to a more diverse group of nations. It is not an argument against globalization, rather it is an argument if favour of the benefits which have been seen to accrue from the development of international markets; but this support is tempered by the need to ensure the benefits to some, do not disadvantage others and to find ways the global market can evolve hand in hand with support mechanisms which will ensure non developed nations move forward in parallel, if not similar ways, to developed countries.

Two major factors emerge, beyond the economic, as requiring attention, the necessity of supporting cultural identity and the further necessity of addressing basic human needs. It has been proposed that the first might best be solved through education in traditional cultural activities, to support and celebrate a society's identity and that the second be addressed through finding the ethical face of design, turning the creative skills of designers toward the problems which face developing nations and inviting their professional bodies to ask work from them on a pro bono basis. Ensuring that global developments support and build prosperity for all will align humanitarian considerations with economic advancement and stabilize disenfranchised peoples, before they turn to aggressive expressions of their despair. Through cultural pride and dignified living for all, opposition to the economic achievements in the developed world can be modified if not dispelled, as increasingly more nations gain benefits from globalization.

Notes:

[1] Coyle, Diane. What's So Good About Globalization, in Around the Globe, Vol No 2 August 2004, page 24.
[2] Coyle, Diane. Ibid, page 27.
[3] Devetak, Richard. Globalization's Shadow, in Around the Globe, op cit, page 8.
[4] UN Shelter for All. UN Habitat Report, www.un-habitat.org
[5] Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Dover edition, Page 9.
[6] Butenschon, Peter. Worlds Apart: An international agenda for design, Design Research Society Conference, Common Ground, 2002, page 5.
[7] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Philosophical Investigations, Section 68.
[8] Butenschon, Peter. Op cit, page 8.

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