Rethinking Culture in Interior Design Pedagogy: The Potential Beyond CIDA Standard 2g

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Introduction

An elusive concept to capture and convey, culture—in terms of a way of life—is at the heart of interior design education. The discipline's commitment to understanding and responding to the needs of *all* humans is also reflected in CIDA (Council for Interior Design Accreditation) 2014 Professional Standards that mandate the demonstration of cultural competency in interior design education. CIDA Standards represent minimum competencies for entry-level practice and, as such, they change and evolve as new knowledge, theories, and discoveries emerge across disciplines. Often exceeded by leading interior design programs, CIDA Standards serve as a bridge between the changing world environment and the direction of the profession.

"Standard 2—Global Perspective for Design" (specifically indicator 2g) specifies that interior design programs provide "opportunities for developing knowledge of other cultures" (CIDA, 2014). This essay unravels the complexity of that mandate with the aim of reframing what constitutes cultural understanding. The analysis also encourages interior design educators to ask insightful questions and embrace perhaps new and more sophisticated ways of teaching and learning when addressing the topic of culture. Contextualizing Standard 2g within an interdisciplinary theoretical discourse points to potential limitations of the way in which this indicator is currently framed. In the discussion that follows, Standard 2g is used as a springboard to explore definitions of culture and begin to identify how standards relating to design and culture might evolve in the future. The goal of this article is to challenge faculty in interior design programs to move beyond teaching about "other cultures" and toward facilitating student discoveries of what culture means within specific contexts and how such meanings come to be defined. Imbuing interior design students with a feeling of empowerment to take responsibility and gain knowledge surrounding diverse people, customs, and social organizations may well advance the disciplinary discourse around culture.

Opportunities for Developing Knowledge of Other *Cultures*

Scholars from anthropology and sociology have long struggled with defining the notion of "culture." Up until the last quarter of the 20th century, culture was positioned in an *essentialist* mode—as an "integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society. . . . It is wholly the result of social invention and is transmitted and maintained solely through communication and learning" (Hoebel, 1966, p.6). Essentialists argued that there is truly something "authentic" about each "culture" and this something is tangible and identifiable, made up of separate and distinct elements. By studying how people live, cook, eat, speak, pray, socialize, dress, sing, etc., one can learn about diverse cultures, unearthing uniqueness. The built environment, from built form to spatial layouts and decorative patterns, was another medium by which to understand and, in turn, categorize culture. As it currently reads, Standard 2g can be easily interpreted from an essentialist viewpoint.

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Two decades later (and still relevant today), the more accepted theoretical stance questions the veracity of culture as static and monolithic and embraces the complex, multidimensional, intertwining, and evolving facets of culture that characterize border crossings and modernization processes. In *Culture & Truth*, Rosaldo (1989) called for shifting discourses from defining culture to understanding how culture is constructed and produced. Moving from the singular to the plural and from the static to the dynamic acknowledges the many ways to belong, the multiple lenses from which one can choose to view the world. As a constructivist, Rosaldo positions how people live, cook, eat, and live as means by which culture manifests itself and as vehicles for understanding how culture is constructed. Equally important is scholarship that embeds those explorations within questions around the notions of race, gender, class power dynamics, inequality, and marginalization, all of which are inherently intertwined with the notion of culture (De Genova, 2005; Irazábal & Dyrness, 2010). Exposing students to dialectical cultural discourse is thereby an essential step in the process of turning overgeneralization or confusion into enlightenment (see also Fischer, 1999 for a discussion of essentialism and constructivism).

Opportunities for Developing Knowledge of *Other* Cultures

Building on the above debate about what exactly is culture and how does one go about understanding culture is the question of who does the term "other" refer to. If language is one of the ways by which culture manifests itself, then the complexity of the current American demographic landscape is illustrated by the fact that an estimated 20 percent of the U.S. population, over 62 million people, speak a language other than English at home (http://quickfacts.census.gov). Students in colleges and universities across the nation represent a microcosm of this diversity. Our interior design student body, for example, often includes Hmong Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics, as well as students from every possible mixing of, among others, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Similar demographics are reflected in the faculty body as well as interior design practice, which is also undertaken globally, from offices operating all around the world. Add to that international students and faculty, whose homelands can range from China and South Korea to Cyprus and Nigeria, and the relevance of the term "other" begins to fade even more.

Equally problematic is the fact that employing the term "other," automatically implies an "us," which once again is a multifaceted and complicated term. Who should "us" represent? Do we implicitly assume that "us" refers to white Americans who currently constitute the majority in the American population (78.1%)? The U.S. Census defines "white" as: "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as 'White' or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, p.3). Race is hereby intertwined with nationality (e.g., German and Italian) and geography (e.g., Europe and North Africa), yet shying away from other forms of difference, such as history and religion. Searching for the connections of what makes us similar and different from each other, through a vocabulary that does not stigmatize and isolate, is important in embarking on efforts to build global bridges, which brings us to the next point in this essay: developing knowledge.

Opportunities for *Developing Knowledge* of Other Cultures

Designers who know how to search for answers to questions they encounter are better prepared to address the challenges posed by the cultural complexities of the 21st century. To move beyond the "us" versus

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"them" paradigm, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) call for "exploring the processes of *production* of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and independent spaces" (p.14). Exposing students to Native American patterns and motifs is thereby very different from exposing students to the processes by which a motif came to be associated with Native Americans and the implications of that association.[1] The first objective approaches culture as static and categorical, leaving little room for students to question how that culture came to be or how it is evolving. The second objective delves deeper into critical thinking by underscoring the socio-political context of culture where issues such as colonization, globalization, immigration, and power differentials come to the surface.

Faculty developing curricula must carefully explore ways to imbue culture into their programs: What are students to learn with regard to culture? How much cultural sensitivity is to be cultivated? Is the curriculum meant to have a transformational effect, or simply increase awareness and sensitivity? And, what constitutes cultural competence for interior design education and how can it be assessed? When it comes to teaching culture then, objectives can vary from awareness, such as identifying vernacular building types and motifs to understanding the reasons behind the production of culture as well as applications of culturally sensitive design solutions that encourage the development of students' own beliefs and worldviews. Interior design students who are taught to navigate an interconnected global reality should feel competent and secure to identify problems and their consequences as well as be empowered to take responsibility and action.

Instrumental to efforts to integrate culture into interior design education are considerations that not all students will walk through the same stages of development at the same time. Variability in background and exposure to differences in ways of living and being can impact the process of relating and students can instead become more ethnocentric, particularly if the pedagogy challenges the students' political or religious ideas. To explore culture effectively, faculty members must recognize this challenge and plan accordingly.

Which brings us to the question of what skills and background are helpful in teaching issues surrounding culture and design? Teaching culture is a long and difficult journey as sensitivity to cultural considerations requires effort and knowledge. Furthermore, the inherent complexity of culture challenges the imagination and thinking of future designers and this process is often steeped in ethical implications (Paige & Martin, 1996). I encourage faculty to draw on different worldviews in teaching issues relating to culture including environment–behavior studies, the humanities, the social sciences, and health sciences. All these disciplines intersect closely with the design fields when it comes to the notion of culture. Persistent efforts to carve out forms of interdisciplinary collaborations are crucial if culture will be integrated into design curricula in a sophisticated manner. These instances can also be translated into opportunities.

Opportunities for Developing Knowledge of Other Cultures

When it comes to opportunities for learning experiences in the curriculum, the primary questions are: How many, where, when, and at what level? Generally speaking, transformational experiences require greater exposure to culture. "One-off" or a piecemeal approach to teaching a few required or elective introductory disciplinary courses are less than effective ways to teach cultural aspects of design. A carefully planned holistic approach is called for instead (Dobbert, 1998).

In interior design, culture can be taught in studios, classes, or seminars and may occur during first-year offerings as well as senior projects. Class sizes can range from small independent study courses to

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discussion-type seminars, support courses, and large lecture courses enrolling hundreds of students, along with on-line courses. The course can be devoted solely to culture or faculty can add culturally-relevant materials into existing courses. Further, students can be encouraged to take courses focused on culture within other departments and related programs, institutions, or in another country all together.[2]

Each mode of instruction has its strengths and weaknesses. In a studio-centered design program, it is not uncommon for culture to be taught within a studio setting. Being the primary avenue for students to acquire design skills, studios both foster and depend on a student's ability to synthesize the knowledge accumulated in other courses—theory, structures, materials, history, etc. Adopting pedagogies and research methods used in the social sciences allows for a comprehensive inclusion of culture in a studio setting. Examples include collecting original data to inform programmatic development, connecting with the local community through Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects, and international collaborations. One potential limitation is that conclusions based on relatively small sample size from interview and/or survey data collected during pre-design research may led to overgeneralizations that do not uncover nuances around culture.

Complementing studio courses in challenging students' cultural sensitivity are lecture and seminar courses. Combinational, innovative, and even experimental approaches can be considered, such as linking studio with other required or elective courses that consider culture so that students can utilize knowledge from one in the other. Electives in anthropology, sociology, political science, geography, or history also offer an in-depth lens through which to learn about culture. This approach has its own perils: lack of emphasis on the culture–design relationship or on spatial issues and concerns; unclear transferability and applicability of their information and concepts to design; and limited ability by design schools to influence course content. An alternative is to cultivate interdisciplinary collaborations with faculty from anthropology and sociology, which has proven to be a fruitful model (Blau, 1991).

Regardless of the type of learning experience, an exercise involving literature review can set the stage for exploring culture in all its intricacies. Because much of the current knowledge about culture comes from, among others, the fields of anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, and psychology, inquiry in the form of a literature search by definition needs to be interdisciplinary. Adding knowledge from fields that draw mainly from large empirical studies, such as medicine and public health, complicates the lessons that students must draw. The challenge to faculty is training students at all levels to translate quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research findings into program requirements and building characteristics.

Learning from the humanities, cultural issues can be brought to life through the use of films, documentaries, videos, or photographic exhibitions. The visual imagery and sensory stimulation in the form of sound embedded in these communication channels have an immediacy that can instill in students not only knowledge of what culture entails but also a willingness to engage and see what often is rendered invisible. Actors, scenes, settings, and the stories themselves can redirect a student's attention in a way that can be missed in a book, highlighting contradictions and invigorating enigmatic relationships, forcing the viewer to confront issues one would rather ignore or feel he/she does not know much about.[3]

Research methodologies employed in the humanities can also enrich interior design education. Pedagogies that fuse ethnography and cultural immersion can complement reading and thinking as tools for recognizing how culture displays itself and the spatial implications of these manifestations. Students can visit and engage with people in cultural institutions, venues, or communities where members of diverse groups

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gather or live, allowing them to understand the "whole person" within the context of their community. Many public places woven into the urban fabric are easily accessible to outsiders and include ethnic enclaves, markets, malls, restaurants, festivals, special events, and cultural centers that enable students to experience first-hand the places, artifacts, colors, sounds, smells, feelings, and energy that come with diverse ways of life without leaving the country or embarking on an international trip.[4] Museums and exhibitions also offer valuable insights on historical narratives and traditions, revealing additional cultural facets.

The challenge to programs trying to infuse culture into the curriculum is aligning the expected objectives and outcomes described earlier to a holistic curriculum, pedagogical styles, modes of instruction, and faculty roles. For intercultural education to be effective, it must incorporate cognitive, behavioral, and affective forms of learning into its structure (Paige, 1993). Therefore, determining whether enough opportunities are provided must encompass a combination of factors and issues considered, including types and number of courses as well as variability in the pedagogies used.

Raising the Bar for Learning

Based on the myriad issues surrounding the study of culture, we may want to revisit Standard 2g, beginning with language and learning expectations that enhance the prospects for a more complicated cultural understanding within the interior design curriculum. A new expectation for student learning about culture might read:

> *Interior design programs provide exposure to questions around how "culture" is constructed and the role that interior environments play in the process.*

The term *exposure* recognizes the multiplicity of ways by which students can respond to questions around culture and is open-ended enough to position the role of faculty as a facilitator in the process rather than an authority with all the answers. Focusing on *how* culture is constructed concentrates on process rather than an end, setting in motion the questioning and inner reflection that is instrumental to these dialogues. Placing "culture" in quotes aligns Professional CIDA Standards with current interdisciplinary debates and allows room for thought and criticism. Lastly, by delineating the parameters to which interior design students can relate—interior environments—this revised language enables them to focus their questions and enhance their contributions to theoretical and practical knowledge around this arena.

I leave you with three ways by which as a discipline we can move these ideas forward. First, synergies must be orchestrated through critical and inquisitive discussions among interior design educators on how to incorporate culture holistically into interior design curricula. Tackling this daunting endeavor can begin by identifying and building on existing strengths. Assessing what programs do well is the first step in the process. With the gaps recognized, programs can expand their efforts and foster interdisciplinary collaborations with non-design fields or hire faculty who have the background, experience, and commitment to teach culture to their students. Second, the creation of communities of congruence or support networks among like-minded educators offers a foundation to create meaningful inquiry and learning experiences surrounding culture. And third, future research can investigate what is being taught, what courses are offered, who teaches them, what pedagogical modes are employed, what readings, exercises, and assignments are used, how they fit into the curriculum, what the outcomes are of these teaching efforts, and how best to assess

and evaluate their effectiveness. The results can be summarized in a set of best practices that faculty can incorporate into their studios, seminars, or courses. Charting new territories for how interior design education relates to culture can re-instill a passion for imagining in the discipline's pedagogies, scholarship, and practice.

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Notes

[1] Crafts have always played important and evolving roles in sustaining the Ojibwe people. Trading with Europeans supplied the Ojibwe with new materials, among them colorful beads. The Ojibwe adopted beads into their sewing, a prime example of cultural appropriation, pushing the evolution of their unique visual language by creating beaded scrolling floral designs. Becoming symbols imbued with tradition, spirituality, and kinship, Ojibwe beadwork stands for resistance and survival. Delving into these conversations exposes discourses on power dynamics, colonization, and oppression.

[2] Study abroad, also referred to as *field study*, is another widely adopted methodology to expose students to the notion of culture. As CIDA reviews only required courses, elective study-abroad experiences are typically not evaluated by site visitors. Concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of this widely adopted pedagogy. Ranging from western European countries to remote parts of Africa, the impacts of study-abroad classes are hard to quantify: some consist of an overview of historical precedents and offer little insight or exposure to questions around culture while others are immersions where students live with a local family and study alongside local design students. Variability can be the result of the faculty leader's experience with the place, length of the program, and opportunities to engage with residents of the country.

[3] Such films include Taggart Siegel and Jim McSilver's *The Split Horn*, which documents the struggles of Hmong immigrants to adjust to life in the United States, shedding light on family dynamics when tradition and modernity collide. Eva Mulvad's documentary *Enemies of Happiness* documents Malalai Joya's campaign for Afganistan's National Assembly and challenges a rethinking of the veil, the covering used by many Muslim women, as protection. In the film, both Malalai and the Danish filmmakers relied on the *burka* (the Afghan veil that covers a woman's whole body, including her face) for their safety in the public. Mainstream films can also be transformative such as Lee Daniel's *Precious*, which exposes inner-city poverty and all the ills associated with it through the life of a young African-American girl. Apart from films, photography exhibits, such as the American Anthropological Association's The *RACE: Are We So Different?*, can help

visitors delve deeper into how race is constructed and formed. Faculty can develop a database of relevant material as well as be attuned to opportunities in cultural institutions and museums in their community to expose students to other artistic forms struggling with the same questions.

[4]Visiting an inner-city Somali mall, for example, can provide students with invaluable insights on how religion and gender relations can define spaces. With Somalis being primarily Muslim, students visiting the mall can see women, covered in the *hijab* or veil, tending the small shops that line the building while they hear the calls of the imam for prayer over the sound system. The building itself also bears witness to adaptations that support religious rituals: bathrooms boost foot basins to accommodate the washing that must take place prior to praying and scores of men's shoes can be seen outside the mosque that is found inside the mall.

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NOTE FROM THE COUNCIL FOR INTERIOR DESIGN ACCREDITATION (CIDA)

CIDA thanks the Journal of Interior Design for this thought-provoking piece about imbuing the importance of cultural context during design education. CIDA's accreditation standard that addresses global perspective states, "Entry-level interior designers have a global view and weigh design decisions within the parameters of ecological, socio-economic, and cultural contexts." The intent of the accreditation standard, as a whole, supports a wide range of approaches to teaching students about culture, including those discussed by the author. The author's recommendations, and others, about how to improve methodology are timely as CIDA is in the midst of launching the next major standards revision project. The educator community's thoughtful input will be necessary to achieve the best possible outcome for interior design education. The CIDA Board of Directors sincerely encourages lively debate as quality standards are formed. We also commend the Journal of Interior Design for exploring topics that lead to enrichment of the profession's knowledge base.

Holly Mattson
CIDA Executive Director

CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE IN JID: 38(4)

The upcoming issue of Journal of Interior Design: 38 (4) will feature a related Perspective essay that broadens the discourse from specific accreditation expectations, to the larger discussion of how CIDA accreditation standards have evolved to reflect emerging practices, which often become norms, and ways in which the interior design community is involved in shaping the content of future standards.