Decolonizing Design

creating sustainable humanitarian solutions in the era of globalization

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INTRODUCTION

Design is a chimerical tool that empowers humanity to reshape its own existence, but in an increasingly globalized world, the outcomes of this reshaping may not always be ultimately beneficial for everyone involved. Design can elevate us through our intrinsic sense of altruism or destroy us through our rapacity; it is an instrument of great triumph and consequence limited only by our imaginations. However, it is only when the designer understands his or her own motivations, biases, and limitations that the merits of this instrument can be fully realized. Successful design is not only about problem solving but about creating locally sustainable solutions that empower people to become problem solvers themselves. The ethics of design practice are often a question of empathy versus egoism.

At its most elemental level, design is adaptation—the human ability to reshape our worlds. Design is the bridge between people and their environment. Clive Dilnot, professor of Design Studies at Parsons the New School, states that "at the core of design is an ontological and anthropological act… which is also a meditation on and a realization of being" (Dilnot 187). The practice of designing thrives in the reciprocal relationship between the designer and any stakeholders who will be affected by the design—wherein, ideally, each party brings complementary knowledge and perspective to the table to reach a collaborative solution to a problem. Yet, as design theorist Victor Papanek would argue, the commercialization of design practice has often skewed the motivations of the designer away from this reciprocal relationship toward one where the designer's ultimate goal is to satisfy his or her own needs, rather than those of the user (Papanek, *Design for the Real World* 21, 40). We must understand that even the best intentions can be derailed by biases both visible and invisible. Design can be destructive if not carefully driven and, thus, there is an increasing need to design from this basal, ethical foundation. The true aim of design is not to advance the career of the designer (or their client) but to design with an informed empathy toward human beings and their needs. Successful design is the altruistic realization that the benefit of the people and the benefit of the designer are one in the same.

"even the most sincere efforts to 'do good' in other parts of the world can lead to a myriad of unintended consequences"

I: THE CULTURE OF WESTERN HEGEMONY

The history of design discourse is often myopic, lacking a broader perspective of the political contexts underpinning its Eurocentric ideologies and largely ignoring the cultural products of non-Western civilizations (Ansari). There is a deeply ingrained hierarchical mindset in the Western world (and in design practice) that Western knowledge and ideals are more advanced than those of other cultures. After many generations of colonization, demonization, and slavery, this mindset has seeped into the Western psyche as a form of justification for the "manifest destiny" of our imperial tendencies (Tunstall 235, Smith 58, Jepchumba).

Culturally and economically, the hierarchy of our modern world system began nearly five centuries ago when European colonizers began to establish worldwide trade connections (Lechner 2). As a consequence of these colonial expansions, the native peoples of non-Western cultures were labeled as subhumans, heathens, children, and even cannibals in order to justify the exploitation of their natural resources. The native peoples of Africa, India, Australia, the Americas, and so on were enslaved, shipped halfway across the world, slaughtered, or otherwise had their indigenous cultures overwritten by Christian missionaries who sought to "save" them from their own supposed ignorance. The damage these practices have done to world culture is in many cases irreparable, and—as a result—much of the world looks at Western history (understandably) as one of imperialism and ethnic cleansing (Smith 1).

Western culture has not yet completely shed this imperial skin. While this age of active colonization has slowed dramatically, the hierarchical mindset of "us" vs "the other" still often underpins many of our interactions with the people of non-Western cultures. Even contemporary design's use of the term "user" to categorize the recipients of design serves as a form of dehumanization, that the users are somehow less capable than the designer. This form of categorization also serves to ignore the broad range of stakeholders affected by the design process beyond the intended users (Pagán).

Perhaps the most apparent example of this hierarchical mindset can be found in the so-called "savior complex" or, alternately, the "white savior complex" that so often re-emerges, however unwittingly, in the products of humanitarian design projects. As the Nigerian-American journalist and author Teju Cole explains, "The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege" (Cole). In the famous 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden*, Kipling urges his readers to "Take up the White Man's burden" of the colonization and subsequent re-education of the Filipino people who had been recently conquered in the Spanish-American War. This influential poem asked Westerners to enlist their best and brightest to serve the needs of their "new-caught, sullen peoples/ Half-devil and half-child" (Kipling). This idea—that Western culture is not only more

advanced than the cultures of other people, but that, as such, Westerners possess a responsibility to impose their way of life on other cultures in order to save them—is a direct consequence of the systemic justification of colonialism via dehumanization.

In 1837, Vice President John C. Calhoun gave a speech before the US Congress addressing the abolition of slavery, saying, "I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin" are brought together, "the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good" (Wilson). In other words, the dehumanization of the victims of Western colonization was so complete that the Western populace

The first step towards lightening

The White Man's Burden

is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness.

Pears' Soap

is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances, while amongst the cultured of all nations it holds the highest place—it is the ideal toilet soap.

Pears' Soap ad (1890)

began to believe it as a matter of scientific fact; it was then seen as the duty of Western people to help these "savages" to become civilized and, at last, achieve their humanity—a process which only furthered their cultural persecution.

Though the idea that an institution as exploitative as slavery might actually be good for the enslaved may seem horrific to our modern sensibilities, the hierarchical mindset behind this idea still exists today and cannot be dismissed as mere antiquated rhetoric. Major Western powers still fund missionary ventures to developing regions. In 2010, the United States alone sent 127,000 missionaries to Africa, South America, and Asia.

Humanitarian Design or Westernization?

Not entirely dissimilar, humanitarian design projects which propose to solve the problems of non-Western peoples by imposing Western ideologies (such as design thinking, Gestalt psychology, and concepts of color theory derived from the Bauhaus) can appear eerily similar to the colonial histories of dehumanization and acculturation imposed by European colonizers. If these cultural biases go unchecked or unrecognized by Western designers, even the most sincere efforts to "do good" in other parts of the world can lead to a myriad of unintended consequences.

> *"Successful design is the altruistic realization that the benefit of the people and the benefit of the designer are one in the same."*

Design Anthropologist Dori Tunstall questions the ways in which Western design firms prioritize Western approaches to design thinking above the local ways of thinking and knowing of third-world peoples, effectively positioning themselves hierarchically as more advanced or more capable of solving the problems of other cultures. She states that design thinking, as a methodology, positions itself as "a progressive narrative of global salvation that ignores the alternative ways of thinking and knowing of third world peoples" (Tunstall 235).

> I found that Western design companies are represented as active agents who guide, serve, embed, build, pay, and staff (the design processes). On the other hand, Indian and African institutions are represented as those to be passively guided and directed or to serve as sabbatical hosts, sites for capacity building, philanthropic tourist destinations, and support staff for projects (Tunstall 236).

Tunstall points out how even IDEO, the celebrated design thinking firm that has released how-to guides for working across cultural lines (such as *Design for Social Impact*) ignores non-Western

ways of thinking rooted in traditional practices, showing a disregard for local knowledge and the intent to supplant it with Western thinking as the dominant methodology.

> By framing non-Western design companies outside of the discourse of *Design for Social Impact*, the IDEO document positions Western design companies in a unique hierarchical position enabling them to guide non-Western institutions on how to solve problems (Tunstall 236).

Bringing these nonnative principles to the cultures of India, Africa, or China, for example, where the wounds of colonialism are still tender "risks becoming another form of cultural imperialism that destabilizes and undermines indigenous approaches coming out of other creative traditions" (Tunstall 237).

Design for Social Impact, IDEO

**SET UP
FOR SUCCESS**

Train Appropriately
Optimize for Impact
Know the Players
Demand Skin in the Game

To give an example, the nonprofit initiative One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), was created with the plan of dropping millions of inexpensive computers into remote villages in Africa, China, and India so that children in these developing regions could have access to the Internet and essentially educate themselves. This initiative was met with intense resistance in India when their

efforts were perceived as a form of technological colonialism. The Indian establishment was deeply offended at the prospect of a Western company interfering with the education of their children. OLPC attempted to circumvent the Indian education system completely—cutting out all the policymakers, curriculum builders, teachers, and parents of the students—and thought that they could just swoop in and solve what they perceived to be a problem, forgetting the long history of Western colonialism in that country and ignoring local efforts to address the situation (Nussbaum).
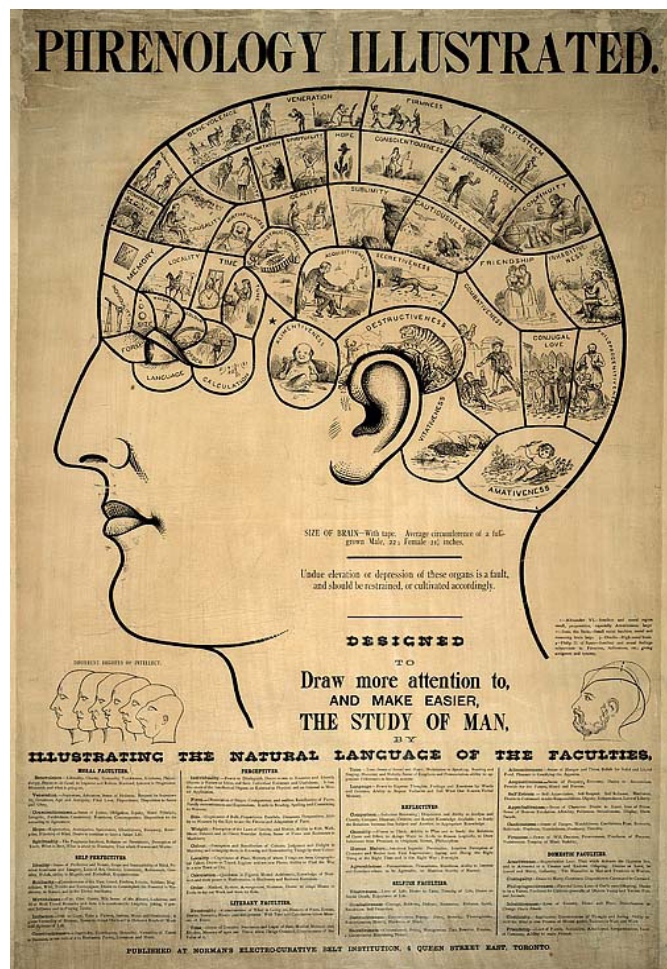
While there are sincere attempts by Western designers, volunteers, and philanthropists to do good for the people of non-Western cultures, it is critical for designers to raise questions about the motivations behind these projects. Is the goal to help the people of other cultures out of sincere, altruistic, human empathy or from a historically-ingrained, misplaced obligation—the moral guilt of the "Western savior" to bring civilization to the child-like heathens of the third world? When this motivation goes unquestioned, this can lead to cultural clashes and the possibility of cultural erasure; at the very least, the designer might be perceived as being ignorant of the historical context of his or her actions.

What we can learn from Anthropology

To mitigate the possible damage caused by these transcultural interactions, designers can learn from the transformational history of Anthropology, a discipline which has been on the front lines of cultural politics for nearly two centuries and has been the subject of intense internal and external criticism concerning the ethics of these interactions. By reflecting on and addressing these criticisms, anthropologists have made tremendous efforts to decolonize their practices.

Anthropology, we must be careful to remember, emerged as a discipline during the height of British colonialism in the mid 19th century. Its historical methods of gathering knowledge through ethnography have been frequently criticized as tools for the British Colonial Office, the claim being that the study of colonized people allowed the colonizers to better rule over them (Uddin 981). Early anthropologists like Henry Morgan and Adolf Bastian pioneered what would become known as the "evolutionary theory," the assumption that all human cultures develop along a unilinear path (Morgan's evolutionary stages moved from "savagery" to "barbarism" and finally to "civilization," claiming that the more complex social structures of the West were more evolved than the tribal structures of places like Africa and the Americas). This type of xenophobic pseudoscience played no small part in perpetuating the hegemonic system of cultural racism that exists to this day.

Phrenology chart illustrating the "natural language of the faculties"

It wasn't until the 1920s that anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski in England or Franz Boas in America began to dispel this evolutionary theory in favor of structuralism, functionalism, and cultural relativism. Boas believed that the differences between cultures were the result of historical, social, and geographic conditions; his ideas on historical particularism proclaimed that each culture has a unique history and that we cannot assume that universal laws govern the ways these cultures operate.

Malinowski's revolutionary methods of participant observation brought about real changes in the ways anthropologists conducted ethnographic studies, showing the benefits of living among the subjects of study in order to generate empathy for them and to better understand the reasons behind their seemingly peculiar activities. However, the publication of Malinowski's personal field diary in 1967 brought about a period of growing criticism against the role of anthropologists as the consumers of the knowledge of other cultures. The diary showed the ethnocentrism of previously-established ethnographic methods and, by the 1970s, critics like Kathleen Gough and Talal Asad began to dispute the colonial power relations between the ethnographer and the other, sometimes proclaiming Anthropology as the "child of Western imperialism" (Uddin 980).

> *"Though design has the incredible potential to make real, positive change in the world, it also has the potential for great cultural devastation should our political histories go unchecked."*

In the time since this critical turn (which, incidentally, occurred simultaneously with critiques of design practice by ethical theorists like Victor Papanek and John Chris Jones), anthropologists have striven to reinvent their practices and to establish the relevance of anthropology in our contemporary world. The book *The Future of Anthropology*, edited by Cris Shore and Akber Ahmed, is one example of anthropologists coming together to reinvent the usefulness of ethnography in the study of contemporary issues like AIDS, tourism, technology, or cultural

imperialism.

The point here is that the crises and criticisms leveled against anthropology at these various stages is what has allowed the discipline to recognize its own ethnocentric trappings and to adapt its methods in ways that mitigate this ethnocentrism and allow the discipline to remain relevant in the face of globalization.

As the world becomes more interconnected, and as our overall sense of empathy toward the people of other cultures continues to grow, the discipline of design must continue with this line of criticism. Designers who may not be quite so informed about the history of Western imperialism and subjugation as our brothers and sisters in Anthropology must be made to see that the same rules apply to design in a way that has an even greater direct impact on the lives of the people of other cultures; for where anthropologists have historically been very careful to study their subjects in a way that does not interfere with that culture, design has the exact opposite agenda.

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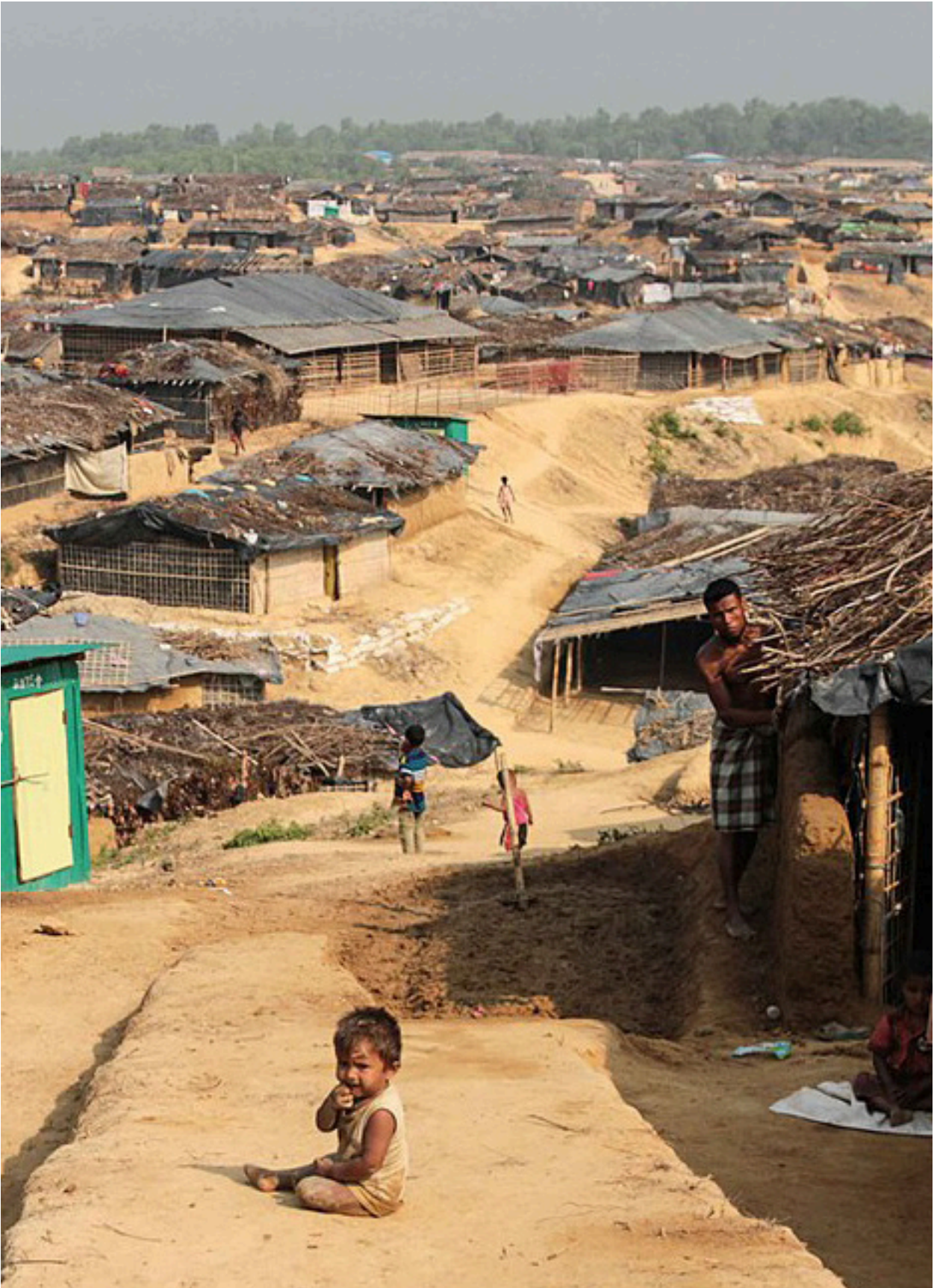
Ronald McDonald in China

"In order for the products of design to be successful, they must be able to integrate with people's daily lives as seamlessly as possible"

II: GLOBALIZATION

Globalization is dramatically changing the ways cultures interact with one another. Since the dawn of the Information Age, communication technology has provided the disparate cultures of the world with new opportunities to share ideas in ways that were never previously possible. It has given a voice to the voiceless—to the subjugators and the subjugated alike—in a way that is changing world politics and world culture on a daily basis. With all the potential issues that may arise from the interaction of one culture with another, these issues are amplified exponentially on the global scale where this interaction can occur for all the world's cultures at once. To make matters more complex, it is not just the interconnectedness of people via media technologies that we must consider but also their physical movements from one part of the world to another. The reasons for these movements and their effects are incredibly various. Sociologist Frank Lechner states that:

> there is no one experience of globalization. That, in itself, is an important aspect of the process. The formation of a new world society does not involve all people in the same way, and it does not create the same texture in everyone's everyday life (Lechner 107).

While globalization can, at times, be incomprehensibly complex, I will attempt to condense the global interconnectedness of the world's people into a few overarching concepts that may elucidate the changing role of the designer in this ephemeral landscape.

Just as the experience of globalization can vary greatly from person to person, the drivers of globalization are just as diverse. Though the term "globalization" may elicit visions of multinational corporations like McDonald's, Exxon, or Samsung—companies whose purpose is to homogenize the planet in order to better sell a product—this is not by any means the only source of global transculturation. Globalization occurs on a daily basis in the small-scale interactions of people: from your Pakistani neighbor to enclaves with catchy names like "Chinatown" or "Little Italy."

American anthropologist Gordon Mathews has spent decades studying the effects of globalization in the uniquely multicultural city of Hong Kong. In his ethnographic book, Ghetto at the Center of the World, he emphasizes what he calls "low-end globalization" through the study of a single international marketplace on the bottom floor of an immense apartment complex known as the Chungking Mansions:

> Low-end globalization is very different from what most readers may associate with the term globalization—it is not the activities of Coca-Cola, Nokia, Sony, McDonald's, and other huge corporations, with their high-rise offices, batteries of lawyers, and vast advertising budgets. Instead, it is traders carrying their goods by suitcase, container, or truck across continents and borders with minimal interference from legalities and copyrights, a world

run by cash. It is also individuals seeking a better life by fleeing their home countries for opportunities elsewhere, whether as temporary workers, asylum seekers, or sex workers. This is the dominant form of globalization experienced in much of the developing world today (Mathews 10).

The Chungking Mansions

While Mathews brings an important concept to light here, his use of the term "low-end globalization" (and its alluded inverse, high-end globalization) does not quite encapsulate the intent present in these differing forms of purposeful vs accidental globalization. Instead, the terms "active" and "passive" globalization would better describe these forces. Active globalization, thus, would be the deliberate attempts by governments and corporations to homogenize the world's cultures into a new world society; passive globalization would be the ground-level migrations of people who interact and share their cultures with one another as a bi-product of their commingling. These two forms of globalization each pose unique concerns for the designer.

The Era of Transculturation

In order for the products of design to be successful, they must be able to integrate with people's daily lives as seamlessly as possible, but as cultures become more interconnected, the daily

lives of people across the world become—at the same moment—more individually varied and more widely homogenized. A yoga instructor in Omaha may share more cultural overlap with the people of India than with his own neighbors, while a teenager in Bangalore may daydream about the glamor of America depicted by Hollywood cinema. Design plays no small part in this transculturation.

Every year, Coca-Cola spends around 3 times as much on advertising in foreign markets as they do in the United States. This is an active attempt to globalize—to Americanize—the world by influencing disparate people to purchase a product. They are selling the prospect of the American dream to them one bottle at a time and, at the center of this campaign, are designers whose job it is to make this pitch convincing. This is imperialism by another name and designers must be mindful of the ramifications of their actions. "If certain activities or institutions become global, they must displace existing, locally variable activities and institutions" (Lechner 3). Is the designer's responsibility, as a kind of translator, to protect consumers from the potentially exploitative messages of corporations, or is it to persuade them to forgo their best interests and traditions for the promise of upward mobility through "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen)? This is an increasingly complex question for contemporary designers in all fields. With whom does the designer's allegiance lie: with his or her client or with the people who must live with the design?

Rendille Tribesman Taking Picture With His Mobile Phone, Kenya

And yet, if it is the responsibility of the designer to serve the needs of the people, how can we know what those needs are when the effects of globalization are blurring the lines between cultures? Designer Jane Fulton Suri, in her article *Poetic Observation*, writes about the experience of designing a new type of handbag for the Brazilian brand Havaianas, whose iconic flip-flops are revered around the world as a representation of Brazilian culture:

> The design team wanted first to understand the brand's tight connection to Brazil. Obviously, a good way to explore this was to go and spend time in Brazil. Less obvious was what Miguel Cabra, the exuberant and reflective Barcelona-educated design leader on the project, told me about the team's process: "We had to go to India to understand Brazil… Europe and Brazil are different in so many ways, from culture to social structure to weather; so much so that it was hard to learn deeply about Brazil because we didn't have anything to compare it to, and that's how the idea of India came. We thought it might be useful to visit another (but different) third world country just so we could figure out what really belonged to the identity of Brazil… you can't just research around the people and the product, you need to really immerse yourself. You have to be there because, before you go, you don't know what you need to know or even what you can know" (Suri 23).

Successful designers in the age of globalization cannot base their assumptions on antiquated stereotypes of cultural experiences. Designers cannot address the people of Brazil or Hong Kong or even Omaha based on superficial notions about those people and their needs. Instead, designers must interact with those people, empathize with them directly, and attempt to address their needs by including them in the process of designing at every stage possible. "What's important," says Suri, "is to make sure we leave room in project plans, daily schedules, and in designers' heads for this kind of intuitive curiosity to play its magic" (Suri 23).

Whether globalization is a positive or negative in the end is irrelevant. It is an unstoppable force that will occur passively regardless of the intentions of designers, but this does not mean that design must suffer as a result; it simply means that designers must adapt their practices (as have anthropologists) to remain relevant in this changing landscape.

"We decolonize design not by telling the people of other cultures what we're going to do to solve their problems, but by asking them what they are doing to solve these problems and what we can do to help."

III: DECOLONIZING DESIGN

It is critical that designers, much like anthropologists, be increasingly mindful of the moral implications of intentional intervention in the lives of people of other cultures. Design theorist Keith Murphy states that:

> design represents perhaps the most common channel through which humans intervene, directly and indirectly, in the lives of other humans… when design is considered comprehensively as form, action, and effect all at once, questions regarding the morality of social engagement tend to emerge (Murphy 435, 440).

As the world becomes more interconnected and as designers increasingly intervene in the lives of people around the world, the ways by which they interact with these various peoples must shift toward the Boasian ideologies of cultural relativism and historical particularism. Designers must find methods of engaging people, of working alongside them in a way that not only builds empathy but also includes them in the design process. When designers trained in Western schools of thought are called upon to design for the people of other cultures, they bring with them the wrong set of precedents. As Saki Mafundiwa, founder of the Zimbabwe Institute for Vigital Arts says:

> force-feeding Afrikans design principles born in Europe, principles that were the product of the European experience, just doesn't work… Afrikans have their own palettes that have no kinship with the principles of color devised by such schools of thought as the Bauhaus (Jepchumba 2009).

Victor Papanek also makes this observation: "It is not possible to just move objects, tools, or artifacts from one culture to another and then expect them to work" (Papanek, *Design for the Real World* 18). In order to design successful, sustainable solutions across cultural lines, designers must understand that the design process and its underlying principles must remain malleable enough to adapt to people's cultural histories and traditions. The only way to do this is to include users, local designers and leaders, and other various stakeholders in the actual design process in order to create a collaborative, cooperative, reciprocal relationship that generates solutions from the people who have to live with them.

But, just as the design process must vary based on the culture of the user, so it must also vary based on the biases and motivations of the designer. To understand why some humanitarian design ventures succeed and some fail, I believe that we must look at the innate motivations of the designers themselves. What is the contemporary driver of the "Western savior" complex? Why do some designers feel obliged, compelled, or even qualified to design for the people of other cultures?

Social Motivation

In the book, Social Motivation, a group of psychologists and sociologists take a look at this very question: What motivates people to want to help others—be it through design, philanthropy, or volunteerism? They separate this motivation into two basic categories: egoism and altruism. Egoistic motivations are those driven by one's concern for him or herself (the true motivation for their desire to help others stems from some sort of guilt or perhaps the expectation of a reward). Conversely, altruistic motivations are driven by the legitimate desire to help (the true motivation

stems from the earnest desire to alleviate someone's suffering with no expectation of personal gain).

> The empathy–altruism hypothesis claims that empathic concern produces motivation with an ultimate goal of relieving the valued other's need—that is, altruistic motivation… Considerable evidence supports the idea that feeling empathic concern for a person in need leads to increased helping of that person (Batson, et al. 111).

This distinction is important from a design perspective because the initial motivations of the designer will determine the depth to which their process must include the stakeholders. If the designer's motivations are altruistic, he or she is more likely to want to empathize with people and to create a solution that works for them; if their motivations are egoistic, he or she is less likely to want to empathize and more likely to create a solution that satisfies his or her own needs. The important thing to recognize here is that this moral quandary is not black and white—most people (even designers) fall somewhere on this spectrum of egoistic versus altruistic tendencies—but this questioning is an important part of the process. Depending on the designer's motivations, their design process must adapt in a way that as closely as possible aligns those motivations with the needs of the user so that a solution can be reached that works for all stakeholders.

Participatory Design

The best method to achieve this collaborative relationship is through a process of "participatory design" (sometimes referred to as "co-design") which endeavors to bring all stakeholders into the design process. Jesper Simonsen and Toni Robertson, in the Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design, define participatory design as:

> a process of investigating, understanding, reflecting upon, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between multiple participants in collective 'reflection-in-action'. The participants typically undertake the two principal roles of users and designers where the designers strive to learn the realities of the users' situation while the users strive to articulate their desired aims and learn appropriate technological means to obtain them. (Simonsen, et al. 2)

Participatory design was originally borne out of Scandinavian trade unions in the 1970s. As information systems and computer technology began to be introduced into the workplace, discussions about these changes highlighted the problem that when the workers who would be using these new systems were not actively involved in their development, designers "were unable to create visions of future working conditions and practices that would improve or even match their current ones" (Simonsen, et al. 3). Participatory design was, in this first instance, about designing information technologies in a way that included workers as experts in their domain,

allowing them to develop their work practices in a way that would include these technologies to improve working conditions.

"Participatory Design has always given primacy to human action and people's rights to participate in the shaping of the worlds in which they act" (Simonsen, et al. 4). This process is not limited to asking users to answer questions in an interview about their knowledge or opinions, but rather it is asking stakeholders to "step up, take the pen in hand, stand in front of the large whiteboard together with fellow colleagues and designers, and participate in drawing and sketching how the work process unfolds as seen from their perspectives" (Simonsen, et al. 5). This is a process of creating a reciprocal working relationship that empowers humanity, designing in such a way that enables people to come up with solutions that work for them. Rather than designing at the user, it is a process of elevating all stakeholders from being mere informants to being legitimate participants in the design process.

At the current time, participatory design is a tactic most commonly found in the design of information systems like software development, but with the right tact, this process could be made to work on a humanitarian scale that generates a respectful, reciprocal relationship between the designer and all stakeholders, even across cultural lines.

Community involvement in the Incremental Housing Strategy, Bombay, India

The ideology of social design centers around the concept that the designer has a social responsibility to prioritize the needs of humanity and to use the design process to bring about positive change in society. There is an ethical obligation underlying the act of designing that "recognises an accountability of design to the worlds it creates and the lives of those who inhabit them" (Simonsen, et al. 5). Especially in our contemporary era of globalization, designers must be incredibly mindful of the fact that their designs hold real consequences for real people once pushed out into the world. Above all, we must strive to break free of the antiquated, imperial mindset of Western hierarchy and design in a way that respects people and preserves their cultures.

We decolonize design not by telling the people of other cultures what we're going to do to solve their problems, but by asking them what they are doing to solve these problems and what we can do to help.

"Successful designers in the age of globalization cannot base their assumptions on antiquated stereotypes of cultural experiences."

CONCLUSION

Designers are in the unique position of being the instigators of cultural flow, and I find it exceedingly important that designers work from an awareness of this fact. Design choices have real consequences once birthed into the world, and designers must be careful to include all stakeholders in their process and to give their best interests top priority. Through participatory design, designers become not the direct agents of change but, rather, the conduits through which people can improve their own lives.

By embracing altruism, designers can focus on higher values of truth and humanity, rather than that of the self, inoculating their ideas against the persuasion of ego. "Concern for the environment and for the disadvantaged of our society are the most profound and powerful forces with which to shape design" (Papanek, The Green Imperative 57). The purpose is to improve life, not just for humans but for all living creatures and the environment as a whole. Ideally, design should not have to concede any of these, but, if it does, I feel this is ultimately the designer's burden to carry.

I believe that art and design should elucidate whole truths of life and emotion and the human experience, that what matters are "the human implications of the situation: its capacity to hold promise for how we can better—which today means more sustainably—live our lives" (Dilnot 184). This endeavor must be sown from an understanding of our own biases, limitations, and desires; without that understanding, the designer remains susceptible to his or her own failings, taken in by the power of design rather than humbled by its responsibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An increasingly globalized world leads to changes in popular opinion concerning the interaction of cultures with one another. Design practices, especially cross-cultural humanitarian design efforts can put a strain on the relationship between the designer and the user. In much the same way that the discipline of Anthropology has undergone transformational criticisms to allow it to become more sensitive to the political context linking the ethnographer to his or her subject, Design must also undergo the same criticisms if it hopes to legitimately "do good" for the people of other cultures.

Design Ethics theorists like Victor Papanek, Clive Dilnot, and John Chris Jones have written widely about their concerns that the commercialization of design practice is skewing the motivations of designers away from the true purpose of design, which is to solve human problems (Papanek, Dilnot). Design Anthropologist Dori Tunstall takes this argument a step further and criticises the hegemony of Western design practice, specifically the notion that Western designers often design from a hierarchical position by which they ignore the traditional ways of thinking and knowing of non-Western peoples (Tunstall). This concept can (without much of a stretch) be compared to the colonial history of Western anthropologists, missionaries, and colonizers.

This form of imperialism or "Westernization" is often criticized by sociologists as a negative, contributory factor to globalization (Lechner, Nussbaum), the argument being that the globalization of certain practices thereby results in the erasure of traditional, indigenous practices. The question then becomes, "how can designers aid other cultures without influencing them?" This was the same criticism leveled against Anthropology in the 1960s (Uddin). The articles by Bruce Nussbaum and Emily Pilloton in Fast Company have begun to generate a more public argument about the validity of Western designers imposing strategies like "design thinking" on other cultures in the course of humanitarian efforts (Nussbaum). These are questions which obviously echo the work of Papanek and the critical turn in Anthropology.

At the same time that these early criticisms of Anthropology and Design were beginning to surface, the onset of information technology in Scandinavian workplaces during the 1970s led designers to question the role of the user in the design process. This led to a branch of design methodology known as "participatory design," "co-design," or, originally, "collaborative design," a process by which the user might be more completely involved in the actual process of designing (Simonsen, et al). The two books published by Lawrence Erlbaum (Design at Work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems from 1991, edited by Greenbaum and Kyng, and Participatory Design: Principles and Practices, from 1993, edited by Schuler and Namioka) have, to date, been the key handbooks available on Participatory Design and they are still widely cited. However, at the 10th Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design held in Bloomington,

Indiana in 2008, the idea was raised that an updated handbook on Participatory Design should be written, resulting in the Routledge handbook edited by Simonsen and Robertson (Simonsen, et al).

Though the practice of participatory design has, to date, been mostly limited to the design of information technology, it is my feeling that this method is the future of cross-cultural design practice and might help Design and designers to curb the imperialism of Western history and move forward from a place of altruism by elevating the status of the user from that of a subject to that of a co-designer.

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Decolonizing Design

creating sustainable humanitarian solutions in the era of globalization

The history of design discourse is often myopic, lacking a broader perspective of the political contexts underpinning its Eurocentric ideologies and largely ignoring the cultural products of non-Western civilizations. Centuries of Western colonialism have created a hierarchy so culturally ingrained that it is still apparent today, even in "human-centered design." Design Anthropologist Dori Tunstall argues that Western design companies position themselves "in a hierarchical position enabling them to guide non-western institutions on how to solve problems," showing a "disregard for local knowledge and the intention to supplant it with Western design thinking as the dominant methodology" (Tunstall 236). This disregard can easily lead to cultural erasure, as sociologist Frank Lechner writes: "If certain activities or institutions become global, they must displace existing, locally variable activities and institutions" (Lechner 3). This is Imperialism by another name, and careless design is fuel for this engine. To create more sustainable humanitarian solutions, Western designers must be aware of the history of imperialism that is inherent when they design for other cultures. If these inherent and hidden biases go unquestioned, even the best intentions can perpetuate the long history of Western colonialism. However, we have the opportunity to decolonize design practice by introducing methods of participatory design, including all stakeholders in the design process to generate solutions from the people who will live with those solutions. Sustainable design is culturally relative, and we decolonize design not be telling people how we're going to solve all their problems but by asking them what they're doing to solve these problems and what we can do to help.