The culture of design:  
a critical analysis of contemporary designers’ identities

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Abstract
This paper describes an ongoing project which investigates the identities of 8 contemporary designers based in major cultural centres (i.e. London, Paris, New York, Amsterdam). The goal is to investigate the mindset and significant cultural influences and inspirations of each designer by asking them where their ideas originate from, what influences their work and what inspires them from a popular cultural perspective? The aim of this work is to collect and classify some of the principal cultural ingredients that successful designers use in their design activities, and to discover common traits amongst designers. In so doing, the Watson-Crick DNA model (Crick, 1962) of living organisms will be used as a speculative metaphor to explore the ‘individual’ yet common cultural characteristics of these designers.

Background and Introduction
The designers highlighted in this paper have been selected because they come from different cultural centres and have different mother languages, they are acknowledged as successful in their different disciplines, they have different educational backgrounds and personal experiences (i.e. Architecture, Design, Engineering) and they adopt differing approaches in their design practice (i.e. Commercial, Experimental, Critical). Each designer has been interviewed in a semi-structured, one-to-one manner (Gordon, 1999), and has been asked to respond to prompts relating to their personal cultural iconic influences. Each interview has been observed and recorded at the designer’s workshop or studio environment. The main finding of this work, at this early stage of the project, is that many of the designers interviewed share a significant common design understanding. This is particularly interesting considering the different contexts in which they are immersed.

Recently there has been much debate as to whether there is any ‘common ground’ amongst the numerous disparate sub-groups of the design research community (Durling and Shackleton, Eds., 2002). The goal of these discussions being to explore any areas of commonality amongst the diverse range of interests within these design sub-groups. According to Featherstone (1990), “third cultures” exist in present day society. Moreover, with a growing interest in design, Julier (2000) substantiates the existence of a “design culture”. Featherstone (1990) further describes mass media and globalisation to be the reason for the development of these sub-cultures. That is, that due to the increasing international flows of money, products, people, images and information “third cultures” such as a design culture have developed which mediate between traditional national boundaries. In addition to examining the concept of a design culture, through the designers interviewed, it is speculated that continued reflection on design practice (Schon, 1991) has provided the designer with tools to design more than just architecture and products. That is, designers are designing themselves. In other words designers have created
identities or “brands” for themselves often backed by corporations with which the public identifies. For instance, as Hollington (1998: 63) states:

“Starck may be the last great ‘design hero’, but he is also a brand.”

Karim Rashid, interviewed and described later in this study, is arguably the most recent ‘branded designer’. Rashid’s particular brand of modernist elegance has generated international buzz, as well as the unofficial title of the design world’s hippest jack-of-all-trades. His latest projects include new Emporio Armani Boutiques, several restaurants in New York City, and gallery installations. He also designs products, cosmetics, and fashion accessories for various international clients such as Issey Miyake, Zeritalia, Estee Lauder, Tommy Hilfiger, Giorgio Armani, Sony, Zanotta, Citibank, and others (Rashid, 2001).

This paper presents a theoretical metaphor, using the Watson-Crick DNA model, which examines the identities of contemporary designers and how they brand and market themselves in relation to the designed world. The high incidence of cultural icon confluence amongst the designers interviewed appears to lend weight to Featherstone (1990) and Julier’s (2000) notion of a distinct “design culture”. In addition, the designers interviewed here provide interesting insights into the globalisation of design and the common design culture they embrace. The next section of the paper presents the hypothetical cultural DNA model.

**Designer Identities as Cultural DNA**

As is now commonly understood, the gene or DNA molecule happens to be the replicating entity that prevails on this planet. Each DNA structure is made up of two chains coiled around one another in the form of a double helix with each chain linked by the base pairs adenine and guanine, and thymine and cytosine. Gell-Mann (1995), however, has developed the laws of natural selection and genetic diversity to cultural and linguistic phenomena and combines these ideas and labels into the amalgam “cultural DNA”. Similarly, Dawkins (1989) believes cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution. Dawkins (1989) cites the example of language which evolves by non-genetic means at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution. For instance, art, architecture, engineering and technology all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speeded up genetic evolution.

The model presented here has been explored and exploited to describe individual designer identities based on the cultural DNA base pairs of *cinema* and *music*, *architecture* and *automotive design*, *art* and *literature*, and *product design* and *influential individuals*. The schema of a single deconstructed strand of cultural DNA is shown in Figure 1.
Cultural Identity and Memetic Replication

Dawkins proposes the term “meme” to describe the replicating entity of cultural development. That is, besides the general characteristics of individual human beings, additional information is present in the human system, including the specific songs, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or building bridges of the group. This can be regarded as the cultural DNA of the individual or, as Dawkins (1989: 201) describes it:

“We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines.”

An individual’s cultural identity is shaped largely depending on the customs, traditions, words, and superstitions the individuals within the community utilise. Thus, just as quarks compose atoms, which compose molecules, which compose elements, and so on, so individuals compose communities, which compose societies, which compose identities (Gell-Mann, 1995). Individual members of society are complex adaptive systems in their own right, because people select which aspects of cultural DNA they pass on to their families and friends. Thus, cultural and linguistic diversity, for example, are precious systems which are in constant struggle for survival.

Figure 2. Memetic Replication

Memes, suggests Dawkins, can be songs, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, or automobiles inasmuch as just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 1989). So, for example, if a designer has a good idea he might pass it on to his colleagues, competitors, students, and so on. He might then demonstrate the concept in his product, an article or a lecture. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (Figure 2).

To an extent, the “genetic structuralism” theories of Lucien Goldmann which propose the existence of parallels or “homologies” between literary works and specific influential social groups of the period can be viewed as a forerunner of memetic replication. Goldmann, for example, established parallels between the philosophy of Blaise Pascal and the plays of Jean Racine (Evans, 1981). Goldmann speculated parallels and unusual similarities
between very different plays and playwrights, thus establishing the theory that ‘genetics’ or ‘cultural DNA’ influence those who create cultural objects. The following eight designers are examined according to their individual ‘cultural DNA’.

**Designer Identities**

This section of the paper outlines a very small but significant portion of the 8 designers’ identities from the perspective of their responses to questions regarding where their ideas originate, what influences their work and what inspires them from a cultural context. The goal is not to detect specific cultural influences, but rather to collect and classify the principal ingredients which successful contemporary designers utilise in their design work.

**Designer 1: Arnout Visser, Amsterdam, The Netherlands**

Arnout Visser is best known for his glass and ceramic work and for his output as part of the DROOG design collective. Trained at the College for Fine Arts, Arnhem and the Domus Academy, Italy, Visser is driven by the simple laws of science and nature. Visser states in van Zijl (1997: 107):

“The oil and vinegar cruet set ‘Salad Sunrise’ from 1990, the ‘Archimedes’ letter balance from 1991 and the salt glass from 1993 were all motivated by that (science and nature) interest.”

**Figure 3. Arnout Visser Cultural DNA**

The strong scientific interests Visser has is evident in his cultural responses shown in Figure 3. The figure illustrates that Visser’s cultural DNA is influenced significantly by the tectonic qualities of Norman Foster’s work, such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai bank, the physical and working attributes of the humble bicycle, the technically robust build quality of Hummer vehicles, and by the scientific advances made by Leonardo da Vinci. Visser is also a huge fan of the Rolling Stones, the video artist Pipi Lotti, the work of the film director Peter Greenaway (e.g. The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover movie), and Lieve Joris’ literary work. Summarising, Visser’s predominant cultural DNA trait can be defined as “scientific - experimental”.

**Designer 2: Nick Crosbie, INFLATE design, London**

INFLATE’s philosophy is to design and produce original, fun, functional and affordable products. Launched in 1995, INFLATE exhibited their collection of inflatable products at 100% Design in London and achieved a remarkable response. Recently, INFLATE have added a range of dipped PVC products to their portfolio as well as their inflatable products (Williams and Albus, 1998).
Nick Crosbie’s DNA specimen (Figure 4) shows his main influences to be the work of Charles and Ray Eames as doubly for both their furniture and their enduring spirit, and the pop artist Bridget Riley. The popular, playful and fun nature of Crosbie’s influences are further evident in his selection of the VW Beetle, the music of the Pet Shop Boys, the movie Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, and Future Systems’ Media Tower at Lords Cricket Ground as major cultural influences. The cynical but often hilarious novels of Charles Bukowski are also an important cultural reference point for Crosbie. In summary, Crosbie’s key cultural DNA trait can be defined as “playful - commercial”.

**Designer 3: Karim Rashid, New York City, USA**

Karim Rashid is one of the best-known and most prolific designers at work in the world today. Rashid works in diverse fields such as architecture, high-tech industrial design products, and cosmetics’ packaging for clients such as Flos, Italy, Herman Miller, USA and Sony. Rashid has coined the term “Sensual Minimalism” to describe much of his design work (Rashid, 2001).

Rashid’s ‘sensual minimalist’ approach is heavily influenced by the natural/organic movement within art and design. This is best reflected in his specific responses of the work of Brancusi, Eero Saarinen’s TWA Terminal in New York, and Starck’s phone for Philips (Figure 5). Rashid indicated during the interview, however, that he is also heavily influenced by fresh developments of their time such as the Smart Car, the film Tron, French disco music, and to some extent the work of Bret Easton Ellis (e.g. American Psycho). Rashid also highlighted Andy Warhol as a significant influential figure to him and his work. In summary, Rashid’s strong cultural DNA trait can be defined as “organic - commercial”.

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**Figure 4. Nick Crosbie Cultural DNA**

**Figure 5. Karim Rashid Cultural DNA**
Ron Arad originally studied architecture at the Jerusalem Academy of Art before coming to London to complete his architectural training at the Architectural Association in 1979. Today, Ron Arad is seen as one of the International superstars of design (Sudjic, 1999). Arad is as famous for his architecture (e.g. Tel Aviv Opera House, Belgo Restaurant, London) as he is for his furniture and product design (e.g. Tom Vac chair, Bookworm shelving). Arad always seeks to challenge conventions in his work, yet prefers truth to sincerity. Arad believes that Bob Dylan (one of his key iconic influences in Figure 6) sums this feeling up best when he says:

“…to live outside the law you have to be honest.” (Guidot and Boissiere, 1997: 78).

The honesty inherent in the work of Issey Miyake, Le Corbusier (i.e. Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp), and Charles and Ray Eames influences greatly Ron Arad. During the interview, Arad also expressed his admiration for the work of Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Tati movies (especially Playtime), and for the rebellious nature of much of Bob Dylan's music. Arad drives a 1950s Fiat 500 which he views as an iconic piece of automotive design, and is fond of the author Philip Roth's work. Ron Arad's most potent cultural DNA trait can be defined as “honest - rebellious”.

SMART design's Director of Industrial Design Scott Henderson has an approach to design which he terms “expression sessions” which exploits the power of spontaneous thinking. His commercial work has been included in the ID magazine's Annual Design review five times and he has won a number of International Design awards. SMART produce a wide range of products for clients such as Black and Decker, Hewlett-Packard and Timberland.
The strong and distinctive industrial design influences of Scott Henderson are best illustrated by his responses to film, automotive design, literature, product design and influential individuals (Figure 7). That is, North by Northwest (where Eva Marie Saint as spy adopts the cover of an industrial designer), the iconic E Type Jagaur, Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead (where the main character Howard Roark as architect represents the individualism of Frank Lloyd Wright), Ron Arad’s ‘Tom Vac’ chair, and the work of Charles and Ray Eames respectively. The influence of the Seagram building in Manhattan, New York where he works is also listed as significant as is the work of the Prodigy as one of his key musical influences. Henderson also admires the formal qualities of Brancusi’s work, which he shares with Karim Rashid, as important to his work as an industrial designer. Scott Henderson’s significant cultural DNA trait can be defined as “serious - commercial”.

Designer 6: Florence Doléac & Olivier Sidet, RADI designers, Paris

RADI designers of Paris (i.e. Florence Doléac, Laurent Massaloux, Olivier Sidet, and Robert Stadler) view the process of design as one of interpolation and transfiguration, rather than of merely representation. In other words, design is not about the interpretation of the meaning of an object only, but rather about the many possibilities of its interpretation. This is best summarised in Fiell and Fiell (2001: 395) when RADI state:

“By transposing our philosophy of design into forms that are at once humorous and subtly out-of-step but also thoroughly humanised, we try to project a gentle yet profound way of imagining tomorrow.”

The four group members of RADI collaborate, as well as pursue their own interests, on a variety of projects covering product, exhibition and interior design. RADI’s clients have included a number of diverse companies such as Air France, Issey Miyake, Cartier and Schweppes. In terms of their cultural DNA, Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet share a common automotive design base with Nick Crosbie of INFLATE (i.e. VW Beetle). The humorous nature they state pervades much of their work is evident in their responses to art (i.e. Gabriel Orozco, the Spanish Artist), product design (i.e. Frank Gehry’s furniture), the influence of Salvador Dali, and architecture (i.e. Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao). The subtly ‘out-of-step’ approach adopted in the film making of Stanley Kubrick, and musical production of Beck were listed as crucial to Doléac and Sidet’s working style during the interviews (Figure 8). The literary work of Umberto Eco was also registered as a potent icon in their cultural make up. Doléac and Sidet’s key cultural DNA trait can be defined as “playful - humanised”.

Designer 7: Hella Jongerius, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Hella Jongerius specialised in the development and application of synthetic materials during her study at the Design Academy in Eindhoven. She is particularly interested in materials and their techniques which is best illustrated in her soft vase ‘Urn’ (1994), ‘Knitted Lamp’ (1996), and soft washtub ‘Fountain’ (1997) where she
designed first the material and then the form (Teunissen and van Zijl, 2000). Jongerius’ approach to projects is more akin to an artist or scientist than that of an industrial designer. She mixes fragments from the past of both industrial and art objects and turns them into something contemporary (Terragni, 2002).

Jongerius, herself, best summarises this paradigm when she states:

“As hyper-modern alchemists, today’s designers should use and abuse traditional techniques so as to create new and better solutions.” (Jongerius quoted in Fiell and Fiell, 2001: 248).

Figure 9. Hella Jongerius Cultural DNA

Hella Jongerius’ blending of the modern and traditional is well represented by her responses during the interview. For example, Jongerius is a devotee of the modern when it comes to automotive design (i.e. Mercedes cars – “...the bigger the better...”), architecture (i.e. Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron’s Bankside Power Station transformation into Tate Modern), and the modern musical interpretations of jazz, Latin rhythms, which hover on the verge of experimental music by St. Germain. The traditional is represented by Jongerius’ love of Delft porcelain and fictional works such as the Dutch author Koos Rozemond’s novel ‘Two Stories’. Jongerius is also an admirer of the artist-come-architect co-operative ‘Atelier van Lieshout’ whose architectural structures and mechanisms for living suggest alternative ways of thinking, working and playing (Smith and Topham, 2002). During the interview, Jongerius gave no reply to prompts relating to her cinematic or influential individuals influences (Figure 9). Jongerius’ most significant cultural DNA trait can be defined as “industrial - experimental”.

Designer 8: Marcel Wanders, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Marcel Wanders’ work, according to Andrea Branzi quoted in Joris (1999: 10), is:

“...placed within that range of researches that investigate about a new relationship between technology and nature.”

This is best exemplified in Wanders’ “Dry Tech Knotted Chair” where he integrated macramé, a traditional way of working, with Dry Tech experiments (air and space technology) with new materials at the Delft University of Technical Engineering (van Zijl, 1997).

Marcel Wanders has been called a magician for the way that he assembles materials as diverse as rice, maize, sponge, resin and lace to produce some of his wonderful creations¹. The range of Wanders’ natural and technological influences are highlighted in his DNA specimen (Figure 10). This comprises the sculpture (art) of Tony Cragg, the music of George Michael, and the products and philosophy of Swatch watches. Wanders admires greatly the work of Le Corbusier, particularly his Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp (which he shares with Ron Arad). Wanders also lists Ken Wilber’s books, Porsche cars (particularly the late 1980’s 928 model), and the Rocky
movies as huge influences on his work. Finally, he cites the work of Charles and Ray Eames as a powerful source in his work. Wanders’ most powerful cultural DNA trait can be defined as “playful - exploration”.  

Figure 10. Marcel Wanders Cultural DNA

Cultural DNA Mix

One of the objectives of this paper is to explore whether there is any ‘common ground’ amongst the designers described here who have been drawn from disparate working practices and physical locations within the ‘Western’ design community. The aim of this exploration was to seek out any areas of commonality amongst the diverse range of design influences and interests amongst the designers. This section of the paper maps the mix of cultural DNA from the designers interviewed. As the philosopher, Alain de Botton (2002) points out:

“…inspiration is drawn from a global pool…”

However although this may be the case, the range of responses from the designers highlights a number of common as well as unique cultural influences.

The analysis of the individual interviews indicate that there are a number of common ‘cultural DNA’ elements amongst the designers which suggests, as Julier (2000) proposed, that a collective “design culture” exists. The seeming globalisation of design is not too surprising when one considers that:

“…of all the creative fields, design is perhaps the most international one…it has no boundaries.” Samoilova, in Busch et al. (2002: 141).

Reassuringly, however, the results verify that although there are areas of ‘common ground’, there are no direct clones amongst the designers. Figure 11 contains the complete breakdown of the common responses. Le Corbusier’s Ronchamp is a cultural highlight which is shared by both Ron Arad and Marcel

Figure 11. “Cultural DNA” Mix Breakdown
Wanders, for instance. In terms of product design, there are a variety of responses which illustrates the diversity of skills, knowledge and interests the designers possess. However, the work of Charles and Ray Eames, in particular, is cited frequently both within the product design base and the influential individuals’ base. Half of the eight designers presented here list the work of Charles and Ray Eames as culturally significant to their work in some way. This is not surprising given that:

“The Eameses solved more basic human problems, whether posed to them by clients or – as with most creative geniuses – posed by themselves.” (Albrecht et al., 1997: 19).

Likewise, the recent establishment of the Eames’ original studio work in the new Eames Office Gallery in Santa Monica, California coupled with a number of world-wide travelling exhibitions such as ‘The Work of Charles and Ray Eames: A Legacy of Invention’, organised by the Vitra Design Museum has further raised the profile of Charles and Ray Eames. A number of books have also been published over the last few years to celebrate these events (Barkley, 2001; Eames, 2002; Stungo, 2000) which may also have alerted the designers interviewed here to their importance within 20th century design and thus provoked this response.

The automotive design base comprises one other notable cultural connection point, namely the VW Beetle car which links Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet of RADI designers, Paris with Nick Crosbie of INFLATE, London. Within the domain of art base responses, the ‘cultural DNA’ of the designers interviewed reflects a wide range of artistic pursuits which includes the video artist Pipilotti Rist, Tony Cragg, Gabriel Orozco, and Pop Art protagonists such as Andy Warhol and Bridget Riley. Karim Rashid and Scott Henderson of SMART design, New York City list the work of Brancusi as one of their most important artists.

Literature typifies most the cultural boundaries which exist between the designers in that the literary influences reflect the cultural experiences and education of the designer’s physical location. That is, designers based in the UK and USA state well known “Western” authors and books as their major influences whereas designers based in Paris or the Netherlands, for example, list non-English language literary works as inspirational to them.

Musical influences, like literature, highlight a wide range of responses. Unlike literature, however, these responses do not mark out the cultural boundaries of the designers themselves but, rather, they illustrate that musical influences cross traditional national borders (e.g. Dutch designers citing English musicians and USA designers stating French musicians as influential). An interesting outcome of the music base responses is that although the replies are not geographically dependent, they appear to be temporally dependent amongst the designers interviewed (i.e. the age of the designer reflects directly their taste in musical influences, such as Ron Arad – Bob Dylan, and Nick Crosbie, INFLATE – Pet Shop Boys).

The high incidence of cultural icon confluence amongst the designers interviewed here appears to lend weight to Featherstone’s notion of “polyculturalism”. Votolato (1998: 268) validates this notion in his book ‘American Design in the Twentieth Century’ when he states:

“…design has become international…and the international nature of design practice have tended to standardize the design of goods, environments and the presentation of services around the world.”

Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has described the results of an ongoing project which is investigating where designers’ ideas originate, what influences their work and what inspires them from a cultural perspective. The paper details a selection of
eight of the world’s top designers’ responses to prompts relating to their personal cultural icons. While Nietzsche, quoted in Bernd and Higgins (1996), states:

“…from knowledge of the influences to which a person has been exposed, it is possible to make a reasonably good prediction of his beliefs.”

the aim of this work is not to detect specific design influences or beliefs, but rather to collect and clarify some of the principal cultural ingredients that successful contemporary designers utilise in their design and development activities. To this end, the paper has described the personal influences and the important iconic references of each designer involved. The main findings of the work at this early stage in the project is that many of the designers already interviewed share “cultural DNA” elements which lends weight to the notion of much “common ground” within design. This is interesting bearing in mind the fact that the designers are from different cultural centres, have different educational backgrounds and personal experiences and also adopt differing approaches in their design practice.

Future work planned on this project is to publish a book which describes in greater detail the responses collected during the interviews, and which contains all the designers who have participated in this study to date.
References


Notes

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