

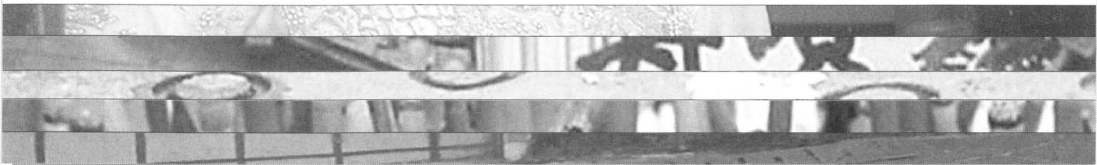
CULTURAL
DIMENSIONS *of Visual Communication*

AN INTRODUCTION

**the impetus to question
the conventions of others
and thus our own**

cultural flow

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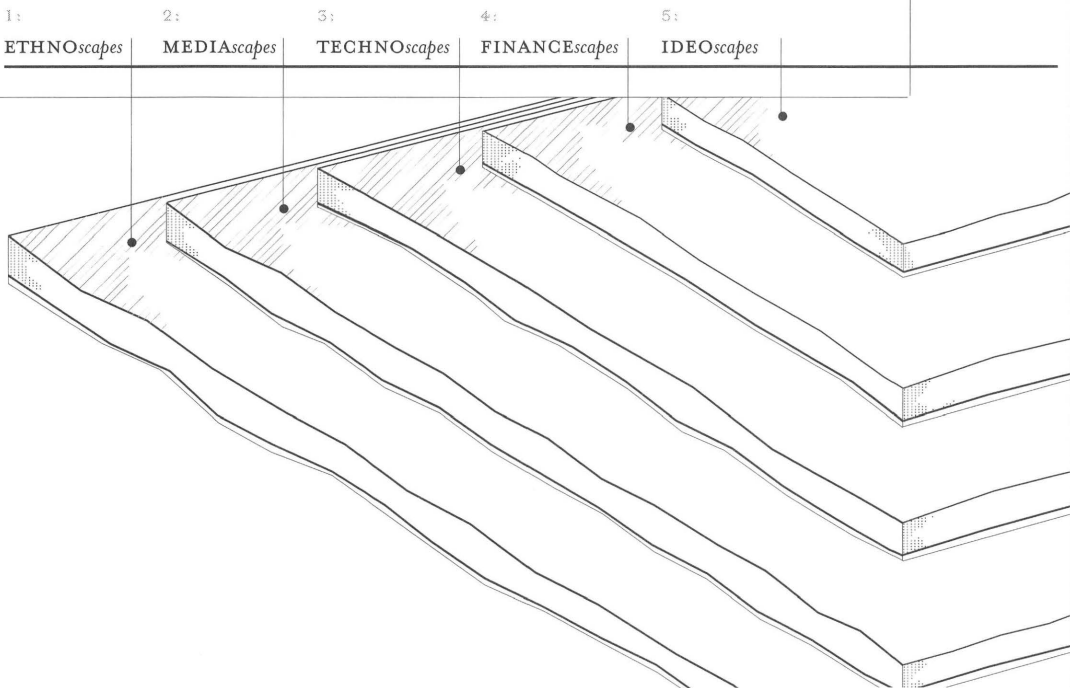
This special issue addresses a multifaceted communication perspective that deserves our increasing attention. We live and communicate in both global and local contexts, consequently the world in which we live is both large and small. It is peopled with those similar to us and quite different from us in language, culture and communication habit. The need to communicate beyond our own arena of comfort provides the impetus to question the conventions of others and thus our own.

Much has been written in recent years about globalization. For example, David Harvey (1990) has given us a theory of space-time compression. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have speculated about the social and political ramifications of these ongoing global adjustments.

Using a framework from global theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996), it is useful to explore this issue in broader terms. He writes of media and migration as the creators of a global cultural flow. The media present us with news and vicarious experience of other's lives elsewhere — under different circumstances of climate, culture, social structure and expectation. Media can be turned off or ignored, but migration is a local fact as a new neighbor cooks things whose smell is unique and unforgettable. And this neighbor may share citizenship and language, yet is keeping alive the culinary heritage of a now remote homeland. Cultures mix and intermingle beyond the borders — integrated into a complex daily life. New cultural hybrids and syntheses evade stereotype; they are created as adaptive responses to complex and changing life circumstances.

Taking the vision of a global cultural flow further, Appadurai creates a framework of five dimensions:

- 1:
ETHNOscapes
the shifting diasporas of tourists, guest workers, immigrants, etc.
- 2:
MEDIAscapes
electronic production and distribution of information
- 3:
TECHNOscapes
irregular distribution and linkage between technologies
- 4:
FINANCEscapes
global flows of capital
- 5:
IDEOscapes
political conceptions like democracy, rights, representation, welfare, etc.



These 'scapes' have irregular shapes and shifting edges, their specific form depends on the perspective from which they are viewed. Inflected by history, language and politics, they are the building blocks for imagined worlds. The global flows revealed by this framework suggest we might now live in a new condition of neighborliness (Poggenpohl & Heskett, 2001).

Communities are increasingly not only in contact, but are interdependent for communal well being — from sharing resources and trade to sharing ideas and human values — from sharing aid during disaster to sharing common visions of a future. Whether the contact is technically mediated or a product of migration, this is a complex interwoven web of humanity with each of us being at times indigenous and at other times the 'other.'

What constitutes indigenous design and what is design for the 'other' is now ambiguous. For example, in Chicago election ballots are now printed in three languages: English, Spanish and Chinese. The 2000 census revealed that the Chinese community in that city had grown to such an extent to merit acceptance of their language in order to guarantee their political franchise. Language is an obvious cultural cue of belonging. And it is a site of conflict dealt with politically and culturally in many ways.

Culture in this issue has at least a double meaning if not more. Culture has referred to specific location, but now with the shifting ethnoscares mentioned earlier, geography or country of origin is a less certain cultural marker. Culture also refers to complex human associations organized through professional activity, socio-economic affiliation or other identifiable and variously permeable indicators.

Cultural Dimensions of Visual Communication is a reflection of current themes relating to communication within a global community. The articles can be examined from several overlapping viewpoints: they deal with either processes of developing or making design or of design as it exists in the service of its users, using design; from a geographical perspective, the articles are grounded in Korea/Japan, India, the United States, international travel or cyberspace; and many of the authors reflect on the materiality of communication design or the use of rhetoric. Despite these similarities among the articles, each has a specific and unique core concern. Returning for a moment to Appadurai's framework, the articles reflect his notions of ethnoscape, mediascape and ideoscape.

The first three articles are about making communication in a professional context. The first is about learning to control typographic design, the second is about experimenting to provide alternative structure for the still emerging digital culture and the third is about understanding cultural heritage and influence among designers in a region.

Martha Scotford's article examines language as a cultural divide. In a previous essay in this journal (Scotford, 1988), the author discussed the problem of translation, not just linguistically but also from a glyphic and visual structural standpoint, from Russian to English for Mayakovsky's poem, *For Reading Out Loud*, as presented typographically by Lissitzky. In the current article her concern is teaching principles of typographic structure and manipulation that transcend a specific language or writing system. Teaching design students in India, the challenge was to explore both Latin and non Latin typographic systems as carriers for English, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, and Malayalam and Tamil to a lesser extent. The book review (and the book reviewed) at the end of this journal, *Language Type Culture* (Berry, 2002) provide a complementary perspective to this article.

Located in cyberspace, Patricia Search questions Western hierarchical conceptions of communication and finds them deficient for use in the fluid more relational context of interactive digital communication. To escape the blindspot of Western cultural conventions, she develops a new syntax derived from aboriginal oral culture. This exploration of a connection between an earlier form of communicative order and the digital moment in which we live is an interesting strategy with which to attempt to remove pre-existing and hard to elude preconceptions. The author intimates that connections can be made between aboriginal ideas and more recent (19th and 20th century) conceptions of time and space.

A strong and recurrent cultural theme is the problem of identity in a world of immigration, migration and changing political action. Min-Soo Kim closely examines the identifying characteristics of design action from a generational perspective based on Korean-Japanese history and politics. His concern is exploration of the materiality of design and the 'genetic' traces that connect various designers' work in Asia. What emerges is an idea of internal cultural transformation in South Korea that continues today. Kim provides a hermeneutic reading of communication design that probes more deeply than aesthetics or style to confront the social and political situation it reflects.

The last two articles are about using communication design in daily life. The first of these has vernacular overtones as many of the signs with which it is concerned are handmade and even naïve. The last article is not a demonstration of design, but one of defining good social intentions with design in a context that often lacks a base of reasonable communication culture. Both of

these articles challenge design as an elite activity. International travel and the problem of dealing with human necessities, i.e., finding toilet facilities, is at the core of Lynne Ciochetto's article. Framed by an historic perspective on travel and commerce, she documents variation relating to this common need. Symbols and icons and their references are key to reading cultural similarities and differences and even the etiquette they acknowledge. Her analysis examines the materiality of signs and the contexts in which these messages occur.

Immigration with its inherent issues of adaptation, cultural assimilation or resistance, figure significantly in Barbara Martinson and Sauman Chu's article. Somali and Hmong residents of Minnesota need access to social service information in their own language and English. Such information is not benign as its presentation raises subtle issues of language and imagery from an identity standpoint. Further, it reveals status and dignity accorded to the immigrant by the host country. The materiality of messages is an important discriminatory element in these situations.

The book review for *Language Culture Type* rounds out this issue and returns attention to language, writing systems and the global interest in effective communication.

RESOURCES

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