

**ARC 553 THEORY FORUM**

**A WORLD OF CONVERGENCE**  
SEEKING THE PROTAGONIST OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN

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## Introduction

The key inspiration for this essay is the seminar session with keynote speaker Leslie Kane Weisman at the International Conference of the AHRA. Universal design, described as ‘an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability or situation’<sup>1</sup>, is truly a thought provoking issue. The history of its beginning could be portrayed as follows, ‘The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s inspired the subsequent Disability Rights Movement that greatly influenced the legislation of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These new laws prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities and provided access to education, places of public accommodation, telecommunications, and transportation’<sup>2</sup>. Despite the fact that its contribution in reshaping a better built environment for everyone is enormous, the connection between Universal Design and its main purpose which is ‘to foster relationships of human equity and environmental health and wholeness’<sup>3</sup> remains vague in several ways.

Throughout the session in which the whole concept of Universal Design as a way to think more deeply about human diversity is explained, it cannot be helped but to think about it from the other side of the story. Each and every aspect that has been discussed is much more of tangible factors; from its 7 Principles<sup>4</sup> (equitable use, flexibility use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use), to its fortitude of ‘creating environments and products that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible’<sup>5</sup>. ‘Universal design does not have standards or requirements but addresses usability issues’<sup>6</sup>. But to be exact, **whose** boundaries are to be embraced here, in terms of being ‘universal’ in designing? Are other factors that might be more likely to be intangible supposed to be included? In a globalized era, would the term ‘usability’ require more consideration than it has?

By referring to *human equity*, it is inevitable to think about culture. By all means, culture is the product of human civilization that has a long history of agony when it intercepts with other different cultures. The large number of wars and conflicts had jeopardized human equity because of cultural differences; including race, beliefs or way of life. These differences would most likely be intangible because they trigger the non-physical values of human life.

This essay attempts to observe how cultural diversity relates, and contributes to designing ‘universally’. Concerning the globalized world phenomenon, would it affects how cultural difference influences Universal Design in any way? Would there be any mutual understanding on top of those differences? Its purpose is not to be an opposition of current values of Universal Design, but rather try to articulate any protagonist side of it. In other words, tries to question whether cultural differences are one of the issues that need to be considered in order to accomplish human equity and wholeness from an architectural point of view. Theory-based analysis would be the approach to build up arguments in this essay.

## Viewing Universal Design from ‘Other Geographies’

Universal Design could not be practiced in the same way in every country. After all, ‘significant cultural differences between countries have influenced how the movement has been adopted and evolved in each location but the common goal of social inclusion transcends national laws, policies, and practices’<sup>7</sup>. The term ‘Other Geographies’ refers to Esra Akcan’s article in *Architectural Theory Review*,

*'Critical Practice in the Global Era: The Question Concerning "Other" Geographies*<sup>8</sup>. This term became relevant to confer in Universal Design because there are differences on how Universal Design has been practiced in the other side of the world. These differences are substantial for observing how critical the issue of cultural diversity in the dialogue of Universal Design. In addition, by referring to 'the other side of the world', it means Middle Eastern and Asian countries which generally have an entirely different attitude in their daily life compared with Westerners. They are mostly bound with traditions. Therefore, to make it slightly easier, the term 'Eastern' would be used as an alteration of 'Other Geographies'.

For example, in most of the Eastern countries that ordinarily enfold with tradition in their culture, there is an impact that affects people's actions in their everyday life. Balaram explains that in his article *'Universal Design and The Majority World'* on the *Universal Design Handbook* by saying: 'Moreover, centuries-old traditions are bound to have a profound influence on people's behavior and patterns of choice, which go beyond physical rationale. It is in this context that Universal Design needs to be viewed differently from the way it is viewed in the Western countries'.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, as described previously, the usability issue is highly important on Universal Design. It tries to include people to use such design as wide as possible. But in the East, the barrier of usability might be more cultural-related, rather than merely caused by physical flaws or other tangible reasons that are usually the common feature in Western countries. Although, Balaram maintained that because the 'Universal Design argues for the importance of wholeness and the importance of making, through design, the so-called weak component in the society as strong as every other part'<sup>10</sup> then it is acknowledgeable that 'In the industrialized and relatively wealthy countries, this weakness is merely physical and sensory'<sup>11</sup>, which could also be analysed that most of the Eastern countries that are probably still developing industrially, might become relatively less wealthy than the Western countries.

This weakness in economical significance could influence the way Universal Design works, as there would be other difficulties. Balaram called these difficulties the 'oppressing realities'; they consist of: 'poverty, population pressures, illiteracy, and lack of infrastructures'<sup>12</sup>. He also noted that there are several concerns in this part of the world that might restrain the Universal Design to be established conventionally; such as problems of integration, communication, living, function, production, acceptance, and marketing<sup>13</sup>. However, as much as those problems are connected to the economical weakness, they are also highly related to social arrangement system and community role in countries that are vastly influenced by their culture. Balaram gave an example of a family system in India called Panchayati system. It is a traditional self-governing system<sup>14</sup> where they value the elderly and disabled in a mutual way if not higher with the other member of the family and by that embrace the need of communication universally for everyone.

In relation to architectural point of view, the difference between Eastern and Western in architecture is real. Snodgrass also acknowledged this in his two notions about architecture in the Asian context, which is 'first, that the architectures of Asia and the Middle East are different from those of the West; and second, that architectural research and training should include study and research into these different architectures'<sup>15</sup>. He also said that 'These two notions are not, however, as simple and straightforward as they might at first appear. They involve contradiction and paradoxes. In a range disciplines—literary criticisms, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology...'<sup>16</sup> In other words, it could be said that Eastern architecture is influenced thoroughly by its culture. The contradiction and the paradoxes that include so many branches of learning as described above are essentially important in the Eastern architecture. It is covered with so many fabled entities or a tradition-bound regulation as an insight on its forms and details. Even Snodgrass added into this: 'To attempt to consider Asian

architecture in the absence of myth is already to misunderstand what it is intended to do and what it is intended to convey..<sup>17</sup>.

From the explanation above, it could be concluded that for the 'Other Geographies', tradition-bound culture have been a major part of people's everyday life, and they seem to automatically react and correspond with that. However, new questions arise in this regard. Does it happen merely because they have been constantly taught to value traditions at almost every part of their lives? Or is there more than that? Would it be entirely different approach post industrialization? Would the traditions be something in the past? Would everything change cultural and social-wise afterwards? These questions are significant to measure the profound influence of culture in Universal Design.

In his book *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why*, Robert Nisbett reveals the astonishing fact particularly which is '...the differences in people's attitude and beliefs, and even their values and preferences, might not be a matter merely of different inputs and teachings, but rather an inevitable consequence of using different tools to understand the world'<sup>18</sup>. In apprehension with Nisbett's words, it must be something that is built inside everyone which develops in their very early stage that makes them comprehend their cultural values intensely within their communities. Although Nisbett stated that residing in other's culture for a while might help in changing one's cognitive processes, he also said that 'the study does not really prove that time in another culture produces such dramatic changes in behavior'<sup>19</sup>.

The difference between how the Eastern and Western world reflect and act could also be understood as the performance difference between what is stated by Hofstede as 'mental programs or software of the mind'<sup>20</sup>. He also noted that 'The source of one's mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences...A customary term for such mental program is *culture*'<sup>21</sup>. This could also mean that everyone has a different mental program in their minds, in which it is highly interrelated to their own culture. When people from different cultures meet or intercede, their behavior or any physical action would not match with each other's reference of characters, because they have different programs in their *hardware*. This may cause confusion at the first instance and sufficient adjustments are needed for a while to relate both concerns together.

These different programs cause people to react differently with others, in an incredibly broad range of discipline. Nisbett's observations cover science and mathematics, attention and perception, causal interference, organization of knowledge and reasoning as several areas when there are differences in their system of thought<sup>22</sup>. In apprehension to the question of how definite are these differences in their system of thought, Nisbett stated that '(m)y research has led me to the conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world have maintained themselves for thousands of years. These approaches include profoundly different social relations, view about the nature of the world, and characteristic thought processes'<sup>23</sup>. This would mean that culture has definite power on influencing people on what to act in response, and in countries whose bounds with tradition in their daily life, this could transcends beyond logic. The way people utilize or use design could change because of these influences. Thus, it is clear that defining the term 'usability' in Universal Design differently for these 'other geographies' is necessary.

### **Universal Design in a Globalized World**

'The world is flat'. This term, coined by Thomas L. Friedman, an American journalist, is referred to the phenomenon of globalized world that took place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The phenomenon is

influenced highly by the development in technology. 'What happened in the last (few) years is that there was a massive investment in technology, especially in bubble era, when hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in putting broadband connectivity around the world, undersea cables, all those things'.<sup>24</sup> It is doubtless that the massive development and modernization on technology has a large impact on human life. The broadening of communication limits enable people to travel in a vast distance and still could communicate with others. As summarized by Abel: '...new technologies and decentralized patterns of production and consumption are reinforcing the same trend, making it possible to live and work in smaller communities and at the same time communicate more easily over large distances...'.<sup>25</sup> The bubble of human existence is developing, which means the regional boundaries are no longer seen as significant barriers. Bauman tries to convey this idea by saying:

'Nowadays we are all in the move... In the world we inhabit, distance does not seem to matter much... There are no 'natural borders' any more, neither are there obvious places to occupy. Wherever we happen to be at the moment, we cannot help knowing that we could be elsewhere, so there is less and less reason to stay anywhere in particular...'.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of culture, this indicates that in our daily life, it is now less difficult to have contact with other people who come from completely different background and culture. Culture is very much related with the sense of place where it belongs to, thus, the cultural change and globalization would influence the practice of Universal Design. When people from *tradition-bound*<sup>27</sup> countries (the Easterners) started to live closely together with Western people, whose point of view should be used, regardless of the place where they live? Would there be any mutual understanding between them on how the usability terms should be defined and practiced in the 'world' culture?

It is easy to mislead the globalization that is caused by modernization in technology with being universalized. Nowadays we could easily experience everything that happened in other part of the world. It is common to eat hamburger in Asian countries. We all clapped together during the inauguration of Obama. As verified by Doreen Massey in her book *Space, Place and Gender*:

'This is an era—it is often said—when things are speeding up, and spreading out. Capital is going through a new phase of internationalization, especially in its financial parts. More people travel more frequently and for longer distances. Your clothes have probably made in a range of countries from Latin America to South-East Asia. Dinner consists of food shipped in from all over the world...'.<sup>28</sup>

We are able to feel and sense the same thing all across the world, because of the advancement of information technology. Nevertheless, it is disputable whether its impact is the same across the world, or whether it is being prevailed by countries that have the most advanced technology of information beyond everyone else's. It is a possibility that globalization is for the one who shouts the 'loudest', the one who gains more privilege to have impact on influencing the world culture. For example, American culture must be one of the cultures that are vastly spread out all over the world these days. Joseph Nye argues in the book *America Against the World*, that 'because of the multicultural nature in the U.S society—with large, vibrant populations of Asian, African, and Hispanic Americans—the United States has become a laboratory of globalization. And, driven by modern communication technologies, including the Internet and satellite television, the pace of information that flows from this laboratory has accelerated, rapidly spreading American culture'.<sup>29</sup> However, it is unbelievably vast that it is common even for using the terms 'Americanized culture', and by that reaches the boundary of universalism. Eun Y. Kim mentioned this in his book *The Yin and Yang of American Culture: A Paradox*, 'According to the August 1999 issue of National Geographic, the new global culture is American culture. Many people already used Westernized and Americanized interchangeably, and soon the world culture is going to resemble American culture'.<sup>30</sup>

It is an inevitable risk of globalization that several parties with the utmost rapid technology development would be the ones who would obtain the advantages. Bauman describes 'state' as an alteration of these parties. He said that '(t)he meaning of 'the state' has been precisely that an agency claiming the legitimate right and boasting sufficient resources to set up and enforce the rules and norms binding the run of affairs with certain territory'<sup>31</sup>. This means a globalized world where cultural diversity is everywhere in our daily life. Where natural boundaries does not really exist anymore physiologically along with a blurred sense of place, the state that has the most sufficient resources would be the one with the highest possibility to decide what rules and what norms should be used in some territories (that are highly influenced by the state's culture, although the territories are not officially belong to that state regionally).

In relation to Universal Design, this would mean that the context of Universal Design would be used and practiced dominantly is the state's context rather than the local context in the territories. However, there is an exception for this based on Nisbett's theory. It could be stated that such '*tradition-bound*' countries should be able to preserve themselves from culture attack, or even if they have got influenced, the changes are not impeccably dramatic that would change their own local context into the state's context.

### **A World of Convergence**

Finally, it could be concluded that culture is one of the factors that should be included in the consideration of Universal Design to be successfully practiced. In certain countries that are boldly bound with tradition and rich in cultural diversity at local context, the way people react is heavily influenced by it. Because this influence is rather stable and able to preserve along with the modernization, then the context of usability in Universal Design (that is derived from Western point of view originally) should be revised in accordance to this kind of local context. If not, than the result would not be effective and wasteful. However, subsequently there will be an impact of globalization in the way we address the context in an area. But it's not always a culture contending with another culture. Nisbett maintained this possibility by saying 'a third view should be considered, which is the world may be in for convergence rather than continued divergence, but a convergence based not purely on Westernization but also an Easternization and on new cognitive forms based on the blending social systems and values'<sup>32</sup>. He said that there is likelihood that 'if social practices, values, beliefs and scientific themes are to converge, then we can expect the differences in thought processes would also begin to evaporate'<sup>33</sup>. In other words, in a world of convergence, it is possible to have a mutual understanding on how the terms usability in Universal Design could be compromised and practiced thoroughly.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Universal Design Education Online, found at <http://www.udeducation.org/learn/aboutud.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> AGENCY. AHRA Conference Booklet. 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Universal Design Education Online, found at <http://www.udeducation.org/learn/aboutud.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Polly Welch. *Strategies for Teaching Universal Design*, found at [http://www.udeducation.org/resources/readings/welch\\_design.asp](http://www.udeducation.org/resources/readings/welch_design.asp)

<sup>6</sup> Universal Design Education Online, found at <http://www.udeducation.org/learn/aboutud.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as A Way of Thinking*. Routledge. Oxon. 2006, page 167.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang F.E Preiser and Elaine Ostroff. *Universal Design Handbook*. McGraw-Hill Professional. Berkshire. 2001, page 5.1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, page 5.2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 5.3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 5.7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 5.6.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as A Way of Thinking*. Routledge. Oxon. 2006, page 167.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 184.

<sup>18</sup> Richard E. Nisbett. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing. London. 2005, page xvii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 228.

<sup>20</sup> Gert Jan Hofstede. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw-Hill Professional. Berkshire. 2005, page 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Richard E. Nisbett. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing. London. 2005, page xix.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page xx.

<sup>24</sup> As told by Nandan Nilekani to Friedman, Thomas L. Friedman. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of Twenty-First Century*. 2006, page 5.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Abel. *Architecture, Technology, and Process*. Architectural Press. Oxford. 200, page 18.

<sup>26</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Polity Press. Cambridge. 1998, page 77.

<sup>27</sup> The term tradition-bound countries refer to the countries that blessed with the richness in cultural diversity and cultural traditions. Wolfgang F.E Preiser and Elaine Ostroff. *Universal Design Handbook*. McGraw-Hill Professional. Berkshire. 2001, page 5.2.

<sup>28</sup> Doreen Massey. *Space, Place and Gender*. Polity Press. Cambridge. 1994, page 146.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes. *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked*. Macmillan. New York. 2007, page 142.

<sup>30</sup> Eun Y. Kim. *The Yin and Yang of American Culture: A Paradox*. Intercultural Press. Boston. 2001, page 1.

<sup>31</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Polity Press. Cambridge. 1998, page 60.

<sup>32</sup> Richard E. Nisbett. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently—and Why*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing. London. 2005, page 224.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, page 226.