

## Chapter II

# The Nature of Culture in Design

There have been many definitions of culture hypothesized by theorists and scholars as a way to understand human beings, other species and entities; human nature; Mother Nature, and artifacts (Giles & Middleton, 1999; Hall, 1996; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1966; Williams, 1958). Culture has been characterized as being descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural, and genetic (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1966). Kroeber (1948) theorized culture as “how it comes to be” versus “what it is” (p. 253). Therefore, culture is socially constructed. Geertz (1973) interpreted culture as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (p. 89). Hofstede (1991) proposed that culture is learned; it is not part of one’s genetic makeup. In the area of cultural studies, culture is concerned with how meanings are interpreted and created in a society (Gray & McGuigan, 1997; Hall, 1997). Williams (1958), a cultural theorist, believes that “culture is ordinary” (p. 74). It is made in the human mind, making possible effort, examination, and explication. This means culture is what is known (tradition) and what comes to be known through investigation and invention (creativity). Baumeister (2005) argued that culture is not innately human. Other species (e.g., monkeys and chimpanzees)

show patterns of learned behavior that is passed on from generation to generation. Culture is artificial; it is civilization. (Kroeber, 1948).

A simple question-and-answer scenario about culture might proceed as follows:

What is culture? Culture is everything human made and nature made.  
 What is the purpose of culture? The purpose of culture is to serve humans.  
 How does culture function? Culture functions as directed by humans.  
 When will culture end? When humankind ends, culture will end.  
 Where is culture? Culture is everywhere.  
 Why do we need culture? We need culture to tell our history.

## **CULTURE AS A DESIGN CONSTRUCT**

Design is about creating something that does not already exist; it is a deliberate action (Banathy, 1996). Design has an intention. This purpose may be what a product, process, or program may do; how it is used; or how it is perceived. Design functions by centering on the concerns of human beings. It is a conscious act, influenced by the interactive or iterative process between the designer and the medium. Design is creative; it requires knowing what humans need and recognizing what they should have. The act of design generates meaning; these meanings are up for interpretation by the designer, user, learner, consumer, or observer. Design becomes a social act because of the focus on human needs (Winograd, 1996). Specifically, design may concern the culture of the workplace, home, or school; this signals a focus on environmental or ways of life aspects of a culture. Design may also concern the culture of employee relations, family connections, student learning, or user interactions; this signals a focus on the individual/group or the human behavior aspects of a culture.

Design is a disciplined, selective, and evaluative process that is concerned with finding solutions for what is and what should be (Banathy, 1996). Design frameworks, such as CBM, look at solutions or guidelines to design (van de Akker, 1999). Design theories are broadly constructed based on evidence. Design constructs function to explain, predict and interpret design related data. As a design construct, culture takes on the properties of design. Culture functions as an explicit act, focuses on the needs of human beings, promotes creativity, supports social acts, maintains meaning and order, and manages the design and evaluation process.

“Culture is a design” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1966, p. 120). As a design, culture takes on the properties of design such as the process to develop a plan for a product, system, or service. This semiotic relationship is managed by the designer. Culture

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