

Impact of Critical Regionalism and Reflexive Modernism on Cultural Continuity Manifestations in Contemporary Interior Design Pedagogy and Practice



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Abstract

India is a vast and diverse country with a strong cultural heritage and deep rooted vernacular traditions in the arts and crafts. Currently it has a growing economy largely due to the impact of the IT industry. Globalization impacts all design domains and endangers local identity preservation and its effects are perhaps most evident in the domain of interior design. The threat to local cultural identities and their systematic erosion is matter of concern to academicians, design professionals, sociologists and concerned citizens at large. At this juncture its is important to examine the preservation and propagation of cultural identity amidst the rapidly homogenizing forces of globalization by emphasizing critical regionalism and reflexive modernism rooted either in the local cultural context or in the local vernacular traditions. The theoretical foundation for this exploration is based on the interconnected ideas and themes of globalization, identities in the realms of design, critical regionalism and reflexive modernism. This study is largely a qualitative systematic review leading to the identification of relevant approaches and delineation of appropriate strategies considered essential to the preservation of either cultural or local identity. The objective is to understand and communicate the integration of heritage factors, cultural or vernacular elements within contemporary interiors of varying typologies and striking a balance between cultural identity preservation and modern functionality. A few selected and relevant case-studies have been quoted as exemplars for showcasing cultural, local or regional identity along with efficient and effective performance of functions. The attempt is at providing actionable insights for interior design students, academicians and professionals navigating the homogenizing effects of global trends and opening up the domain at promotion of heterogeneity through local cultural, contextual or vernacular explorations.

Keywords: Globalization, homogenization, interior design identity, critical regionalism, reflexive modernism, heterogeneity for identity, innovative approaches and strategies

1.0 Introduction

India, a vast and diverse country, has a strong cultural heritage and deep rooted vernacular traditions in the arts, crafts and built-forms. Its cultural ethos expresses intangibly – music, dance, languages – tangibly through architecture, arts, crafts, artefacts which are also examples of external influences and the most visible showcases.

There are varied vernacular traditions in built-form, textiles, arts and crafts. The artisans and skilled craftsmen use local materials and traditions to create products characterized by utility, stability and beauty.

India has a growing economy due to the Information and Communication Technology industry creating a demand for interior designers. The aim of this paper is to explore cultural continuity manifestations within the domain of Interior Design.

2.0 Globalization

Globalization is an economic process. Businesses – multinational corporations– expand their spheres of influence internationally facilitated by mutual interests. Policies supporting open economies on both international and national levels reinforce this influence and create a network of enterprises as highly productive and efficient business models. Globalization is supported by the growth of communication technologies & information systems and influences visual culture and design.

3.0 Homogenization

Globalization develops financial markets and expands transnational businesses. Developing countries improve their economies and raise their living standards. It benefits the multinational corporations in developed countries at the expense of local businesses and contributes to the erosion of local cultures. In the design domains it promotes increased intercultural contact and furthers a homogenized aesthetic.

Globalization fosters a global aesthetic that overrides and erodes local cultural variations resulting in built environments that despite their sophistication lack original identities. Homogenization undermines local vernacular or historical identities, marginalizes diverse ideologies and fosters a universal global culture.

4.0 Interior Design and Identity

Rapid technological advancements have led to interior environments being stripped off cultural and local identities due to standardized construction methods, materials and styles. The new research focus is – preservation of design identity through interior environments.

Interior designers - academicians and practitioners - have to navigate contrasting cultures and design styles of both the past and the present. Integrating referents from historical sources, local / vernacular traditions or addressing contextual environmental issues, interior designers can create spatial environments that respect and preserve cultural distinctiveness while adopting global trends. Identity is an individuals' or

groups' sense of belonging expressed through shared values, beliefs and symbols, culture or lifestyle.

5.0 Critical Regionalism: A Design Approach Rooted in Local Culture

Critical Regionalism addresses the issue of globalization, modernization and the universal aspirations of modernism balancing with prevalent histories specific to locations and contexts. Lewis Mumford, an early advocate of Modernist Regionalism, discerned two elements in every design:

- i. The local or regional which adapts to the unique human capacities and circumstances of a specific people and place.
- ii. The universal which transcends local boundaries and is essential for advancing beyond a primitive existence.

Kenneth Frampton coined the phrase Critical Regionalism to define the elements of topography, climate, light and tectonics, fundamental to the art of building. He called to counter universalization by making a case for the topographic, climatological conditions of a site, the tectonics of architectural construction and the tactile sensibility of architecture. It was within the specific conditions of a local context that an approach in which the tactile would surpass the visual, the tectonic would win over the scenographic, and the hybrid or heterogeneous would be favoured over the homogeneous. Geoffrey Bawa's Kandalama Hotel in Sri Lanka is an example.

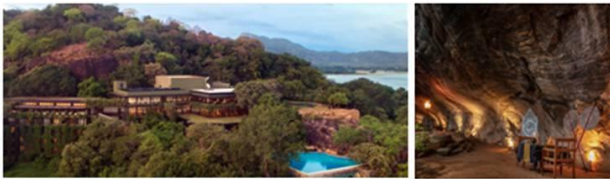


Figure 1: The setting and an interior view of Kandalama Hotel, Sri Lanka

Interior Design examples include:

- a. Ryonaji Temple in Kyoto –Japanese Zen Temple, the main building or hōjō; is divided into six rooms by sliding doors called fusuma. The significant interior elements are wooden beams, fusuma with paintings.



Figure 2: Interior views of Ryoanji Temple Kyoto Japan

- b. Cairo Railway Station – Traditional Egyptian motifs - lotus flower rosette, abstracted palm columns- have been reinterpreted within a modernized context, reflecting cultural pride and functional adaptability.



Figure 3: Cairo Railway Station, Egypt

6.0 Reflexive Modernism

Reflexive Modernism inherits the avant-garde principles of modernism. It maintains a distance from local referents by defining great art as that which challenges norms and resists conservative tendencies. This philosophy complicates the task of connecting design to the often physically anchored identities of communities. It supports the creation of designs that establish a nuanced relationship between how designers interpret local identities and how populations perceive their own identities within their environments.

Designs that preserve local identities go beyond merely mimicking the physical aspects of their surroundings. It fosters a dynamic interplay between design and identity, where the interpretation of local characteristics leads to innovative and meaningful design expressions. Reflexive Modernism employs techniques such as site-specific design and symbolic identity to create contemporary interpretations of local heritage - applied independently or in combination, each with its distinct process. Example is the atrium of The Burj Al Arab Jumeriah, Dubai.



Figure 4: The Burj Al Arab Jumeriah, Dubai and its atrium

7.0 Heterogeneity for a Collective Identity

The vivid expression of collective identity is material culture. Design is a tool - crucial medium for conveying meaning through symbolism, cultural narratives and ideological connotations. Interior design as a tangible manifestation with contextual referents –historical, built heritage, local vernacular – reflects cultural identity. The influencing factors include human interactions, emotions, desires, lifestyle-living habits, traditions, attitudes, beliefs, culture, psychology, economics, temporality and

built environments. The cultural dynamics, inherent diversity, is a vibrant source of inspiration for interior designers to create environments that encapsulates heterogeneity for a Collective Identity.

Collective Identity emanates from:

- a. the adoption of modern technologies with design referents from the local historical or built heritage context.
- b. the use of local vernacular elements and techniques employing local craftsmen and artisans.

These, ensure that interior spaces serve as powerful expressions of collective identity adapting to the evolving societal needs while still being anchored to a distinct past.

8.0 Innovative Approaches and Strategies

Interior Designers can create characteristic features across various interior environments for organizing collective memories enhancing their designs' relevance and resonance. Distinct Innovative Approaches include:

- a. Application of modern technology with contextual design referents.
- b. Application of vernacular techniques with appropriate design imagery.

Strategies for application of modern technology with contextual design referents are:

i. Revivalist – Historical or Cultural Context

Thoroughly, research the historical or cultural context of heritage elements for authenticity and relevance. Collaborate with experts – historians, architects, culture experts – to accurately interpret and integrate heritage elements in the contemporary design settings. Use modern materials and techniques to adapt historical forms for functionality and sustainability while preserving their cultural essence. Example is The Souk in Dubai Mall, Dubai.



Figure 5: The Souk in Dubai Mall, Dubai

ii. Eclectic Historicism

Select historical elements with thematic or stylistic cohesion to ensure a harmonious blend of diverse influences. Graphic software and visualization tools are used to refine proportions and spatial configurations before implementation. Choose a central theme inspired by heritage and create a unifying narrative that

ties all design elements together. Example is Terminal 2, Kempegowda International Airport, Bengaluru, India.



Figure 6: Terminal 2 Kempegowda International Airport, Bengaluru, India

iii. Free Historicism

Emphasize abstraction and reinterpretation of heritage elements, focusing on their essence rather than a literal replication. Engage with local communities to understand the cultural significance of motifs and forms, ensuring alignment with contemporary social contexts. Balance creative experimentation with cultural sensitivity, subtly. Example is Lobby of Armani Hotel, Dubai.

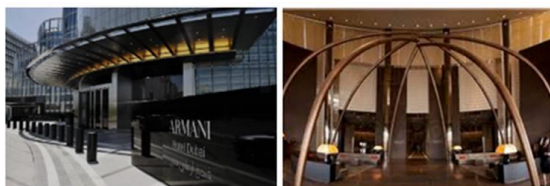


Figure 7: Lobby of Armani Hotel, Dubai

Strategies for application of vernacular techniques with appropriate design imagery

i. Earth or Mud

Focus on built-forms that use earth or mud as the principal building material. Employ masons and artisans familiar with working the material to create built-forms. Example is Desert Resort, Mandawa, Rajasthan, India.



Figure 8: Desert Resort, Mandawa, Rajasthan, India

ii. Bamboo

Bamboo is the principal construction material. Employ artisans and craftsmen familiar with bamboo techniques.



Figure 9: The Green Village, Bali, Indonesia

iii. Wood

Employ artisans, craftsmen, carpenters familiar with wood and techniques of manipulation. Example is Palmyra House, Alibagh, Mumbai, India



Figure 10: Palmyra House, Alibagh, Mumbai, India

9.0 Conclusion

Globalization, modernization and urbanization threaten erosion of cultural identity in design domains and enhance risk of a universal design aesthetic. Interior Designers are challenged to effectively define and preserve local identities within the modern context with globally available technology, materials and resources; emphasizing the evolutionary process of cultural identity formation rather than fixate on a singular, unchanging identity. Incorporate identity aspects that reflect a community's culture, psychology, economy and traditions. Inherited visual elements are central to collective memories and it is necessary that these significantly influence design decisions. Re-orient Interior Design pedagogy and practice to navigate through the circumstantially shifting work environments sensitively.

In the Indian context distinct and innovative approaches include contextual design referents using modern technology as well as a design imagery based on local vernacular with its own techniques. Strategies for the approach using modern

technology include the revivalist, the eclectic and free historicism. Strategies for the vernacular based imagery focus on the utilization of local materials employing skilled artisans and craftsmen. The anticipation is an integration of the cultural ethos through the involvement of the local artisans and skilled craftsmen for the preservation of local identity. Interior designers working in India need to embrace contemporary trends, bridge the past, present and future for cultural continuity, collective memories and distinct design identities.

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