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Whiteness in design practice: the need to prioritize process over artefact.

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Abstract: This article will interrogate the issues associated with non-Indigenous designers working with Indigenous knowledges in commercial design practice. It will analyze the position of 'whiteness' to appreciate the ongoing impact of colonialism on Indigenous representation and identity creation. The article attests there are times when non-Indigenous input into design outcomes is not suitable. However, if non-Indigenous engagement in the design process offers benefit to Indigenous stakeholders, the International Indigenous Design Charter serves as a guiding document on the best practices to follow. There is still a concern that regardless of the extensive consultation, strong industry support and the best intentions informing the development of the Charter document, 'whiteness' may still permeate the design outcomes. This article concludes the only way to mitigate or remove 'whiteness' in commercial design practices is to preface the design process over the artefact to ensure design outcomes are Indigenous led and Indigenous self-determined.

Keywords: indigenous design; charter; process; best practice

1. Introduction

In 2006, Katherine McCoy introduced a new focus when she referred to the nature of changes in the practice of graphic design. McCoy argued for over 150 years designers have worked to satisfy the Industrial Revolution's need for mass communication. Mass production was based on the principle of one product, one communication strategy and all problems solved. "The economies of mass production reduced diversity and individuality but produced lots of affordable goodies" (McCoy 2006, p.201). According to McCoy, we have experienced the end of mass communication, and now we have "narrowcasting instead of broadcasting, subcultures instead of mass culture, and tailored products instead of mass production" (2006, p.201). Diversification, decentralization, downsizing and disunity have led us to a producer centred system with specifically tailored communication processes through specifically tailored channels.

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This, in turn, has led to a stronger focus on cultures and sub-cultures in design outcomes.

Design provides the opportunity for Indigenous communities to actively shape the identity and representation of their culture for a broader audience (St John 2018, p.269, Kennedy 2015, p.112). Cato, prominent Australian non-Indigenous designer, made the statements that as designers “the one thing you’re chasing is something different, and yet we ignore thousands of years of history because we feel we’ve got to fit in while at the same time pretending to stand out” (Kennedy 2015).

There is an emerging perception that drawing on Indigenous knowledges would break down Eurocentric design influences and create a new visual vernacular that is unique and appealing. Findlay (2000, p.316), in a similar vein to Cato, identified an Indigenized vision would have great benefit to everyone, and would serve as a valuable resource as long as it was done through a process of self-representation. Findlay (p.314) argued the necessity to create a new alliance between English literature studies and Indigenous studies, for instance, when he explained Indigenous knowledges are an ‘invaluable resource’ especially as we seek ‘new national imaginaries’. He maintains there is an undervaluing of Indigenous knowledge and acknowledges the challenges of how to proceed (p.311) identifying that it is “not fully allowable when the indigenizing is being undertaken by the non-Indigenous academic collaborator rather than the insurgent Indigene” (p.313). Findlay explains:

“Outsider essentializing of Indigenous history and cultural practices must be respectfully strategic rather than presumptuously exotic, and driven by the need to benefit Indigenous people according to their rights, needs, and aspirations.” (p.313)

The comments of Findlay resonate with the tensions now at play in the design industry. The apprehension of working with Indigenous knowledges in design practice is clearly articulated by Dori Tunstall, Dean of the Faculty of Design at Toronto’s OCAD University and design anthropologist, in an interview published by Janna Levitt where she acknowledges the challenges and awkwardness faced by many designers working in this field.

“I would characterize it more as anxiety. What I mean by that is that it’s coming from a place of “I want to be able to do this, but I don’t have the knowledge, I don’t have the tools, I don’t have the resources.” (Tunstall cited in Levitt 2017)

Russell-Cook (2017) addresses this tension when he explained after a long history of misrepresentations it is fairly well understood that non-Indigenous designers must only engage with Indigenous knowledges in partnership with Indigenous peoples and with recognition for Indigenous goals and expectations. This might sound logical, however there are challenges when putting these ideals into practice.

Working with Indigenous knowledges in design practice requires returning visual sovereignty to Indigenous groups and empowering self-determination of cultural heritage representation to Indigenous knowledge holders (St John 2018, p.269, Andersen 2017). Understanding this, there is a shift in focus to Indigenous knowledges role in contributing to contemporary design practice (Heike, Nicola, and Edwin 2012, St John 2018), in particular to reposition Indigenous visual culture in creating a nation style (St John 2018, p.225). Indigenous contributions

are not recognized in current historical design frameworks as they are not tied to western tools and technologies commonly aligned to design practice (St John 2018, p.259). St. John encourages a recognition of design history independent of European influences and more inclusive of national expression. However, she also clearly articulated “Indigenous visual culture has been used and abused by western designers” (p.262). The contested and highly political space of misappropriation has been perpetuated by commodification and objectification of Aboriginal art and a history of exploitation “not only by commerce but also by western designers” (p.262). If we take this path, Pedro Oliveira (cited in Schultz et al. 2018, p.94) argues, decolonizing design is less about an opposition of ‘decolonized’ and ‘colonized’ and more about a process of un-learning and re-learning how we see the world.

This article will examine the complexity of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous representation in design practice through the lens of ‘whiteness’. Whiteness is not a categorization based on the colour of one’s skin. It is a way to define cultural dominance that is reproduced and maintained; willingly, unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly according to the privileges associated with a dominant cultural group (Kowal, 2010, p.327). This paper does not imply all non-Indigenous participants in design practice act based on the principles of ‘white anti-racism’ or ‘whiteness’. Instead this paper explores ‘whiteness’ discourse to inform the complexity, the potential impact and the perception of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous knowledges in design practice. ‘Whiteness’ narratives highlight the need to consider the non-Indigenous designers’ position in design practice and the inevitable impact of being non-Indigenous. The article will then present the International Indigenous Design Charter (Kennedy and Kelly, 2018) as a tool to address the need to engage respectfully and ethically with Indigenous knowledge in a blatant attempt to mitigate the impact of ‘whiteness’. Yet, it is questionable if ‘whiteness’ can be fully removed from any engagement leading us to an impasse. The author offers two ways forward; firstly, non-Indigenous designers do not engage with Indigenous knowledges; secondly, if non-Indigenous engagement is to occur, the design industry foregrounds process over the artefact.

2. The influence of ‘whiteness’

The International Indigenous Design Charter (Kennedy and Kelly, 2018) is based on the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional expressions of their cultures, including designs (United Nations 2007, p.11). Emerging from this is the debate over the level of participation of non-Indigenous people. The argument in a post-colonial environment is that any involvement of non-Indigenous people with Indigenous knowledges is a new attempt at maintaining non-Indigenous dominance. Said (1991) explains that knowledge about the ‘other’, and the establishing of this knowledge, creates power, while Carnes (2011, p.3) explains that non-Indigenous people naturally frame everything within a western colonial paradigm, and a western way of ordering the world, which means historically the perspective of the Indigenous voice is marginalized. Therefore, it can be argued, that when non-Indigenous

people are involved in the design process, prevailing colonial power relations will always emerge.

Adding to this debate, it is understood that although designers work to formal practices, their own cultural preferences and tastes impact on the production of solutions. Arguably, designers should become self-reflective and acknowledge this influence as part of their professional duty and ethical accountability as a designer and educators should teach the need to understand the impact of personal beliefs, race, religion, socio-economic class and other differences (Buck-Coleman 2010, p.191). Yet it is difficult for a designer to be self-reflective.

“You cannot escape yourself. You have culture. Not necessarily one of appeal or relevance to your audience, though you may hope so, but the culmination of your evolution. To a large extent, regardless of how you present yourself, this culture will remain visible, a display of self, for better or worse, which cannot easily be distinguished or ignored.” (Rowden 2004, p.133)

To interrogate this further, this article draws on the work of Emma Kowal, Professor of Anthropology in the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University. Kowal presents the notion of the ‘white anti-racist’ to explain there are ‘white’ people who work with Indigenous peoples with good intentions.

The term ‘white anti-racism’ is aligned to progressive ‘white’ people who accept some responsibility for the poor state of many Indigenous communities and with their concern, have sought to help them. Kowal writes “white anti-racists prefer to think of their role as temporarily supporting Aboriginal people to reach their own goals until such time as their help is no longer needed” (2011, p.314). This involves a sacrifice on oneself for the pursuit of a greater goal (Stirrat 2008, p.412) and, as Kowal explains in the Australian context:

“White anti-racists seek to generate new forms of national identity by exposing the unpalatable aspects of perpetrator history, so persuading White Australians to distinguish themselves from their (biological and social) ancestors.” (Kowal 2011, p.320)

‘Whites’ want to be seen as being good and “it is those most privileged who provide the opportunity and means for voices to be widely heard” (2011, p.4). Carnes believes there is benefit to increasing the volume of those less heard, and this will help to demonstrate respect for Indigenous ideas and to ensure Indigenous ways are at the forefront.

Yet, Leslie Roman (1997, p.274) suggests that white “redemption fantasies,” in which the good white “supposedly comes to know and be at one with the ‘racialized other’” and his or her struggles against racism, may even be a new form of white privilege. It is based on the principle that at least the white person tried and became a better person in the process. The good-white narrative sees the white guy battle both the bad white guy and their conscious as they deal with their own moral struggles. Audrey Thompson states that notions of ethics look very different from the standpoint of white privilege where fairness and equity, as well as mainstream ideas of morality, are determined by the people who hold the power (2003, p.18). This leads us to a place of paralysis where white people are stricken by guilt rather than placing the situation at the centre of the discussion. White people exist in a tangle

not of their own making as they are born into a racist history of colonialism. As Thompson explains:

“We do not now wish to choose whiteness or racism, but there they are, part of our world; so we try to distance ourselves from them, to show that we would unchoose them if we could. White guilt mourns genocide, slavery, land theft, lynchings, and broken promises as part of a past that can no longer be changed – and in so doing seeks to return to an imagined innocence. Since the past cannot be changed, we insist on being allowed to feel good about ourselves. Yet this is a solution only if the problem is white helplessness rather than racism. Taking on the alleviation of white guilt as an antiracist project keeps whiteness at the centre of antiracism.” (2003, p.24)

According to Kowal (2011), there is always a danger the good ‘white anti-racist’ will revert to ‘white’ dominance and utilize status. To do such would ruin the goal (s)he strives to reach. It is argued if self-sufficiency is to be achieved, then ‘white’ input must be removed and progressively ‘white’ people must detract their influence. Carnes (2011) likens this to the concept of an apprentice with a master. The intent is the ‘white’ participant relearns history and reviews their beliefs of the world, creating an opportunity to minimize the ‘white’ voices in the conversation.

“The stigma of Whiteness is resolved most completely, and most fantastically, through the figure of the child. The child does not wish to impose their beliefs, nor are they able to. The fascination of the child with the ‘other’ hides no agenda of self-interest or exploitation, and is not suspect. The epitome of innocence and powerlessness, the figure of the White child realizes the ultimate goal of post-colonial spaces: the inversion of colonial power relations. Through this imaginary inversion, the White anti-racist is cleansed of stigma.” (Kowal 2011)

Adding to this debate is the concern of merging cultures. Winschiers-Theophilus, Zaman and Stanely (2017) acknowledge “a transcultural approach to indigenous knowledge preservation and digitization efforts with indigenous communities opens up a controversial debate about protecting versus integrating local epistemologies” (2017, p.419). In their research project created to achieve a community technology development, the authors conclude a recognition of contributions from all participants and a blending of knowledges was critical for success in their project. With deep immersion and full collaboration, cultures enter into a transcultural mode of engagement which reveals the challenging space of preservation versus incorporating cultural knowledges. Winschiers-Theophilus et.al call for a reconsideration of the methods and techniques associated with co-designing to recognize this shift in professional practice.

The idea of blending knowledges is acknowledged in other literary commentary. Marian Sauthoff (2004) refers to Indigenous expressions of South African design and the hybrid nature, or cultural mix, of design practice that underpins the visual representation of Indigenous knowledge in South Africa. She argues design practice in South Africa freely references the diversity of the cultural and ethnic mix drawing on cultural forms and Indigenous creative expressions to recreate meaning. This is representative of a social change, and Sauthoff argues, designers must be more aware of the broader impact of their environment on their design outcomes, critically reflecting not only on the designed object

but the sites and circumstances of how a design outcome was produced and will be used.

3. The International Indigenous Design Charter

Returning to the discussion of non-Indigenous participation with Indigenous knowledges in design practice, it is understandable with such complexity surrounding this issue there is apprehension and concern. Non-Indigenous input may result in an inaccurate representation of Indigenous knowledges due to the colonial constructs in which the engagement has occurred. An extension of this concern is the process under which we can ensure the dominant voice is that of the Indigenous knowledge holder. For this reason, the author identifies two potential ways forward. The first option is to have only Indigenous designers working with Indigenous knowledges. This may present limitations for some projects. The second option is for non-Indigenous engagement to occur, and the design industry foregrounds **process** over the **artefact** which is the central focus of this paper.

West and Akama (2018) refer to process when supporting the idea of designing *with* rather than *for* a community. West and Akama identify some of the challenges are exasperated by the concept of “design-as-problem-solving that places people into categories of a commissioning client or a passive audience” and the focus becomes a ‘problem’ for a designer to resolve” (2018, p.10). For this reason, West and Akama argue for designers to design appropriately there requires a shift in emphasis where designers do not speak on behalf of the community but act in respectful relation *with* the community through the design process.

The International Indigenous Design Charter (Kennedy and Kelly 2018) is a tool created to guide design practitioners on the process to engage respectfully and ethically with Indigenous knowledge in commercial design practice. It must be noted, the author of this paper is a non-Indigenous academic, researcher, design practitioner and also co-author of the International Indigenous Design Charter. The Charter document positions non-Indigenous people in the discussion and places the designer, not as the arbiter of what is right or wrong, but as a participant working with the custodians of Indigenous knowledge. The document attests this process must be Indigenous led to ensure knowledge remains with the owners and defenders of Indigenous cultural heritage.

The International Indigenous Design Charter (the Charter), conceptualized and developed in Australia, offers ten steps of best practice protocols to guide design educators and practitioners when working with Indigenous knowledge. These include Indigenous led with Indigenous stakeholders overseeing the design process; self-determined with respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples to determine the application and representation of their culture; community specific with respect for the diversity of culture; deep listening and ensuring inclusive and active engagement; ensuring ownership of Indigenous knowledges remains with Indigenous custodians; shared knowledge with courteous interactions and an awareness of Indigenous cultural realities; ensuring Indigenous people share in the benefits from the use of their cultural knowledge including any commercial engagements;

consideration for the impact of design over deep time (past, present and future); legal and moral rights and obtaining permissions as required; and implementing the Charter steps to safeguard design integrity and build cultural awareness in all stakeholders.

Primarily, the Charter was created to lead non-Indigenous people who have the opportunity to work with Indigenous people and engage with Indigenous knowledge in their design practice and outlines how to do this respectfully and ethically in a collaborative manner. The document can be used as a guide for all stakeholders of design practice including design practitioners, design clients and the buyers of design such as governments, corporations, businesses or not-for-profit organizations. The Charter was written with good intention, to empower Indigenous communities, and follows the principles of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2008). The declaration describes the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional expressions of their cultures, including designs.

The Charter was developed and launched in 2018 at the World Design Summit in Montreal. The document is acknowledged and supported by the International Council of Design (ico-D) and the Indigenous Architecture and Design Victoria (IADV). IADV recognizes the document will help both non-Indigenous designers and Indigenous designers working in or out of country. IADV's Indigenous Architect and advisor to the Charter, Jefa Greenaway (Greenaway Architects, IADV and Melbourne University), highlighted that in 2018 only 13 Indigenous architects can be identified as having graduated from architectural schools in Australia and anyone operating as an Indigenous architect is very much a trailblazer who will encounter aspects of their professional practice which may not have been discussed within the architectural community (cited in Sebag-Montefiore 2016). Similarly, these comments resonate in other areas of design practice where only a small number of Indigenous designers are available for potential Indigenous led design projects around the world.

The Charter document has not been active in industry for a long period of time. Although discussions are emerging, feedback was most apparent at the Australian *Indigenous Design Thinking Conversations* presentation as part of Melbourne Knowledge Week, (City of Melbourne, 2019). Each of the six speakers at the Symposium were Indigenous industry and design professionals who provoked a rigorous discussion; Jefa Greenaway (Greenaway Architects, IADV and Melbourne University), Marcus Lee (Marcus Lee Design), Kyle Vanderkuyp (Schiavello Group), Michael Hromek (WSP), Nimrod Wies (Eness) and Master of Ceremonies, Shelly Ware (presenter on Marngrook television program, Melbourne).

Questions to emerge from the audience, who were design practitioners and purchasers or stakeholders of design, can be summarized as; time, cost and control. Concerns were raised that **time** was needed to engage with deep listening and was not always adequately accounted for in a schedule or a budget. The panel were united in their response to this point saying if there is a project with Indigenous content, organizations need to understanding the project would take some additional time but this would only have a positive outcome on results. An audience member questioned how to determine the **cost** to include Indigenous

knowledges and whether there were intangible benefits by publicly increasing the profile of Indigenous knowledge in the broader community without the need for financial recognition. To this Greenaway made the point that people pay for engineers with many years of university education however, you must consider the cost of engaging with 40,000 years of Indigenous knowledge passed on over many generations. Ware elaborated by explaining there were many requests for Aboriginal people to do things for free because they are Aboriginal and they should want to pass on their culture to 'do the right thing', yet someone was making money out of their knowledge and she suggested it was not Indigenous people. Lastly, concern emerged about managing the design process and the designer's ability to maintain professional design integrity and **control** when working with an Indigenous community. Hromek reminded the audience that designers need to remember the first point of the Charter document, Indigenous led. Greenaway provided the following advice; the starting premise should be to leave all egos behind when working with Indigenous knowledge and remember the designer is often the least knowledgeable in the room.

While the above is only a brief account of the feedback provided in the symposium and further details can be obtained from the live-recording (City of Melbourne, 2019), presenters clearly articulated the challenges of working with Indigenous knowledges and resolved the Charter document's guiding principles were essential to change current practices and enhance engagement methods. They agreed the concepts of community led, self-determined, community specific, deep listening, using community knowledge and shared knowledge with shared benefits are all steps that will positively impact on design practice. The presenters concluded this rich discussion would only improve professional practices in the coming decades however, the changes in the way designers are taught, the expectations of an industry and the shift required in professional practices will continue to present some challenges.

4. Foregrounding process over outcome

This article highlights the complex tensions at play in the discussion of non-Indigenous designers engaging with Indigenous knowledges. For this to occur, there needs to be a shift in design practice where designers appreciate their non-Indigeneity and practice knowing they are the least knowledgeable in the room. This paper draws on the philosophical position of Kowal (2011) and Carnes (2011) framed in the discourse of white sovereignty and colonialization, which emphasizes that whiteness will always have impact on any engagement. Understanding and applying the concepts of 'white anti-racism', and reducing white noise in discussions when non-Indigenous are working with Indigenous knowledges, is important to change the process of design practices. This paper argues the design industry needs to turn the spotlight to the importance of process over the artefact and celebrate the ethical and appropriate way in which we, as designers, are guided by Indigenous knowledges to a design outcome.

There is a risk the Charter document, endorsing non-Indigenous designers working in collaboration with Indigenous communities, may be seen as supporting pre-existing colonial power structures and is a new attempt at maintaining power and 'white privilege'. Yet, the intent of the Charter document was to provide guidance on how designers, when privileged with the opportunity to work with custodians of Indigenous knowledges, could change their focus to process over design outcomes. This would provide the landscape for a relearning of history and challenge the non-Indigenous designer's belief of their world to eventually create a space where Indigenous voices are privileged.

5. Conclusion

This article places a spotlight on the ongoing impact of whiteness in commercial design practice. The author agrees there are many times when non-Indigenous designers should not be engaged with Indigenous knowledges. This is particularly pertinent when the role of the designer as the knowledge holder of design practice is at tension with the role of the custodian of Indigenous knowledges. The culture of the designer, and their good intention to amend the wrongs of the past, have the potential to reinforce colonial power structures.

If it is deemed suitable by Indigenous knowledge holders for non-Indigenous designers to engage with custodians of Indigenous knowledges, cultural awareness needs to be developed and understood. The decision for participation is an Indigenous choice and an Indigenous community can withdraw their input at any stage when they do not feel their representation is self-determined. However, this article introduces a new consideration; if it is decided by stakeholders to be a joint project with Indigenous and non-Indigenous input, the **process** of how the outcomes are achieved should determine the success of the project, and not the **artefact** itself. The International Indigenous Charter Document provides guidance to navigate the process with ten steps of best practice protocols. It is only effective if the ten steps are followed rigorously, are Indigenous led and the benefits are returned to the community. The Charter document, currently an ethical obligation, provides the framework for the design community worldwide to reconsider how they acknowledge impactful design and reward design outcomes. Taking a more central focus on **process** would provide significant steps towards a recognized, rigorous practice whereby the origin of cultural knowledge is protected and celebrated, self-determined and Indigenous led.

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