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## ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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*The world we live in is a complex amalgam of spaces, from the private, intimate ones of the home to the public, vibrant ones of the cities. Every corner, every architectural line, every chosen texture, contributes to creating an atmosphere, to transmitting subtle but profound messages. In this context, environmental design rises to the rank of language, a means through which collectivities express their identity, values and history. This study explores the intrinsic relationship between environmental design and cultural identity, arguing that our spaces are not simple passive containers, but active entities that shape and, in turn, are shaped by the culture from which they emanate.*

**Key words:** ambient, design, culture, identity, heritage.

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental design, through its choices regarding form, color, texture, spatial organization, etc., becomes a mirror of a culture. It can evoke memories, reinforce a sense of belonging, transmit ancestral values, or reflect contemporary aspirations. From traditional houses, with their regional specificities, to lively public squares and historical monuments that tell stories of the past, each element of environmental design bears the imprint of collective identity.

Understanding the connection between environmental design and cultural identity is crucial in an increasingly globalized world, where the pressure of cultural homogenization is palpable. Rapid urban development, the influence of international architectural models, and the desire to adopt global trends can often lead to the dilution or even loss of local specificity. Precisely for this reason, the study of environmental design as an expression of cultural identity becomes not only an academic analysis, but also a necessary step for the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity. It is a call to recognize the intrinsic value of local specificity, to protect intangible cultural heritage through tangible heritage, and to create spaces that resonate with the history and spirit of communities.

### PURPOSE

Through this study we propose to open new perspectives on the role that architects, interior designers, urban planners and even citizens have in transforming spaces into authentic manifestations of cultural identity.

The connection between these two concepts, environmental design and cultural identity, is the focus of the research. Phenomenological theories (such as those of Gaston Bachelard [1] or Yi-Fu Tuan [4]) emphasize the importance of the



subjective experience of space and the way in which it is imbued with personal and collective meanings. Space is not just a geometric container, but a “place” loaded with emotions, memories and feelings of belonging. Cultural identity is reflected in the way a place is experienced, perceived and understood by the members of a culture. Semiotic theories (related to Havva Alkan Bala [2] or Umberto Eco [3]) help us understand how environmental design elements can function as signs, carrying specific cultural meanings. Colors, shapes, patterns, materials can have profound connotations, recognized and interpreted by members of a culture.

Vernacular architecture is often the purest and most authentic expression of local cultural identity, as it evolved from traditional practices and was influenced by the environment and the community's way of life. By contrast, we also note the impact of globalization and modernity on environmental design and cultural identity. Globalization has brought with it standardization, external stylistic influences and a tendency towards uniformity, which can endanger local specificity. The major challenge becomes the balance between integration into the global context and the preservation and valorization of identity elements.

Finally, we appeal to the concept of cultural heritage, both material (monuments, historical buildings, archaeological sites) and immaterial (traditions, knowledge, practices, etc.). Modern environmental design has an important responsibility in relation to this heritage, whether through the conservation and restoration of historical buildings, or by integrating traditional elements into new constructions, or by creating spaces that celebrate and transmit elements of intangible heritage. In this way, we emphasize the deep and essential interconnection between the physical space we create and the culture we are part of.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study highlights the difficulties faced by professionals and communities in maintaining an authentic coherence between contemporary design and cultural heritage. These challenges derive from interconnected economic, social and theoretical factors, but the most acute is the stylistic uniformity generated by globalization. International architectural models, promoted by corporations and global aesthetic trends, replace locally specific constructions, erasing cultural identity and solutions adapted to the context. The consequence is an increasingly generic urban environment, lacking belonging and reflection of community values.

The central challenge lies in the perceived opposition between traditional and modern, which blocks the creative integration of local elements in contemporary design. Traditional is often seen as outdated, and modern as innovative and efficient, which leads either to the avoidance of authentic elements or to superficial imitations, lacking cultural relevance. In addition, the lack of awareness among both professionals, trained mainly in international styles, and the public, oriented towards superficial aspects, makes many design interventions uninspired and even harmful to cultural heritage.

Economic pressures and immediate pragmatism lead real estate developers to privilege standardized, quick and cheap solutions, aimed at maximizing short-term profit. This approach avoids investing in traditional materials, local artisans or



sustainable techniques, considered expensive but essential for cultural identity. The result is to reduce perceived financial risks, but compromise the cultural integrity and local specificity of built spaces.

The challenge lies in how to interpret and integrate cultural heritage into contemporary design, avoiding kitsch, superficial imitations or folklorization. It requires a deep understanding of meanings and traditions, but also the recognition that cultural identity evolves and must be reflected dynamically, not frozen in stylized forms. In the absence of coherent urban policies and legislative frameworks, many cities fail to protect and capitalize on local specificity, leading to design interventions lacking authenticity and cultural relevance.

The issue of coherence of environmental design with cultural heritage is complex, involving tensions between global and local, traditional and modern, economy and culture, awareness and ignorance. Overcoming these challenges requires a redefinition of the role of design and a collaboration between professionals, communities and authorities, to create functional and aesthetic spaces, but also carriers of cultural identity. Culturally aware design is becoming a necessity for sustainable development, strengthening belonging and creating meaningful environments, supported by innovative strategies applicable from the interior to urban planning.

A fundamental strategic approach for authentic design is in-depth contextual research. Before designing a space, a real understanding of local history, traditions, values, symbols and ways of life, as well as the community's relationship with the natural environment, is necessary. This research must avoid stereotypes and be based on direct dialogue with the community, on the study of archives, literature and cultural artifacts. In this way, design becomes an authentic expression, stemming from knowledge and respect for the context.

The proposed strategies aim at two major directions: celebrating vernacularity by reinterpreting traditional principles in a contemporary key and integrating cultural symbols and narratives into design. Vernacularity does not mean imitation, but intelligent adaptation to climate, local resources and social structure, using traditional materials and techniques combined with modern innovations for efficiency and relevance. In parallel, cultural symbols, myths and stories can be integrated with respect and authenticity, so that the space becomes meaningful and tells an identity story. The ultimate goal is a hybrid design language, anchored in the local, but open to the future.

Authentic design involves collaboration and community participation, so that spaces reflect the values and aspirations of those who use them. Community involvement through consultations and participatory projects strengthens cultural relevance and a sense of belonging. In parallel, the promotion of sustainable local materials and techniques supports the economy, reduces environmental impact and capitalizes on traditional knowledge, offering sustainable and identity-based solutions to current challenges.

Education and advocacy are fundamental to raising awareness of the role of environmental design as an expression of cultural identity. This involves including the topic in university curricula, organizing conferences, publishing studies and



engaging in public debates, but also promoting policies and regulations that protect local heritage. Through these steps, environmental design transforms from a simple technical and aesthetic activity into a cultural and participatory process, capable of creating authentic spaces, bearing collective identity and cultural resilience.

### CONCLUSIONS

Environmental design is not a separate field from cultural identity; they are intrinsically interconnected. The spaces we create not only reflect but also shape culture, and culture, in turn, informs and shapes design. This relationship is dynamic and bidirectional.

Culturally aware environmental design has immense potential to strengthen a sense of belonging, preserve heritage (tangible and immaterial), promote cultural diversity, and create more meaningful and resilient spaces.

Environmental design, however, remains a powerful tool for affirming and preserving cultural identity. Through conscious, informed, and participatory approaches, we can create spaces that not only serve functional needs, but resonate deeply with the spirit of a community, telling its unique story and contributing to a rich and diverse cultural future.

### REFERENCES

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### МОКАН- ВОЗИАН Л.

#### ДИЗАЙН СЕРЕДОВИЩА ЯК ВИРАЗ КУЛЬТУРНОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ

*Світ, у якому ми живемо, – це складна суміш просторів, від приватних, інтимних дому до громадських, яскравих просторів міст. Кожен куточок, кожна архітектурна лінія, кожна обрана текстура сприяє створенню атмосфери, передачі тонких, але глибоких повідомлень. У цьому контексті екологічний дизайн піднімається до рангу мови, засобу, за допомогою якого колективи виражають свою ідентичність, цінності та історію. Це дослідження досліджує внутрішній зв'язок між дизайном середовища та культурною ідентичністю, стверджуючи, що наші простори – це не просто пасивні контейнери, а активні сутності, які формують і, в свою чергу, формуються культурою, з якої вони походять).*

**Ключові слова:** *навколишнє середовище, дизайн, культура, ідентичність, спадщина.*

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