

Design beyond borders: Negotiating connection and identity across nations

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Abstract: Design in the twenty-first century embodies a productive paradox: it is at once a force that connects cultures through global circulation and a medium for expressing cultural and national identities. It evolves relentlessly — every day, every hour — often outpacing our ability to record or preserve its recent past. What was groundbreaking yesterday may already feel distant today, as design moves forward with remarkable speed, disregarding boundaries of nation, style, or tradition. The digital age, with its unprecedented access to ideas and methods, allows nearly anyone to follow emerging trends in real time. Yet this openness also highlights the importance of context: the way design is applied, understood, or valued continues to vary across different cultural and intellectual landscapes. This article explores design as a “boundary practice”: a field that creates shared languages across borders while also safeguarding diversity by preserving cultural differences. Drawing on design theory, globalization research, and cultural studies of nationalism, it examines how design objects, practices, and discourses navigate the tension between universality and particularity. Through comparative analyses — ranging from Scandinavian and Japanese minimalism to French luxury and German precision, from diasporic design practices to global sustainability initiatives — the article shows how design fosters connections between nations without erasing identity. It concludes by advancing a hybrid theoretical framework that positions design as both connective and differentiating, offering new directions for scholarship in design theory, cultural studies, and transnational collaboration.

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Introduction

Design has always crossed borders. The international reach of the Bauhaus¹ in the 1920s and 1930s, the global influence of Italian modernism after the Second World War, and the worldwide adoption

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of digital interface paradigms in the twenty-first century all demonstrate design's capacity to transcend national boundaries. Yet design is never detached from place. It remains deeply intertwined with questions of culture and identity. Designed objects are not only functional responses to practical needs; they also serve as vessels of meaning, bearers of tradition, and markers of collective belonging.

This dual nature — design as both a global connector and a marker of identity — reveals an ongoing tension within design studies. The dominant narratives of twentieth-century design history have tended to emphasize international modernism, functionality, and ideals of universality. In contrast, cultural historians and anthropologists have drawn attention to design's deep entanglement with local traditions, political contexts, and projects of national representation. Yet these perspectives have seldom been brought together within a unified theoretical framework capable of explaining how design can, at once, universalize and differentiate.

The aim of this article is to develop such a framework. It conceives of design as a *boundary practice* — one that enables dialogue and collaboration across communities while preserving diversity and multiplicity. This perspective makes it possible to understand how design connects nations through shared discourses, materials, and technologies, yet simultaneously distinguishes them through symbolic languages, aesthetic traditions, and projects of political identity.

The article unfolds in five stages. First, it situates the central problem within key theoretical debates in design studies, globalization, and nationalism. Second, it proposes a conceptual framework for understanding design as a hybrid practice. Third, it turns to comparative case studies that illustrate how design can connect and differentiate at the same time. Fourth, it reflects on the broader implications of these dynamics for design theory and global cultural exchange. Finally, it concludes by outlining potential directions for future research on the transnational dimensions of design.

Theoretical framework

¹ The Bauhaus, founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, by Walter Gropius, was a revolutionary design school that sought to unify art, craft, and technology. Emphasizing functionality, simplicity, and rational principles, the Bauhaus promoted the idea that design could serve as a universal language, transcending national and cultural boundaries while shaping modern architecture, furniture, and industrial design.

Design theory: Universality vs. particularity

The field of design theory has long moved between two poles: universality and particularity. Early modernist traditions — most notably the Bauhaus, the Ulm School, and the International Style — championed design as a universal language of form. Figures such as Walter Gropius and Hannes Meyer argued that design should be guided by functional and rational principles, rendering questions of style secondary or even obsolete. Likewise, theorists of the Ulm School advanced an approach grounded in systems thinking and communicative clarity, envisioning design as a medium of international visual literacy that could transcend cultural boundaries.

In contrast, later scholars have challenged this universalist vision by drawing attention to design's cultural, political, and local dimensions. Victor Margolin (2015) calls for a “world history of design” that resists the dominance of Western-centric narratives and acknowledges the plurality of design traditions. John Heskett (2005) emphasizes that design is not merely functional but also deeply symbolic, rooted in the fabric of everyday cultural practice. Tony Fry (2009) takes this argument further, portraying design as an inherently political act — one that shapes not only material environments but also social futures and collective identities.

This enduring tension between universality and particularity lies at the heart of design's central paradox: it circulates across borders, yet its meaning is always grounded in local contexts.

Globalization: Flows and hybridities

Globalization theory offers valuable perspectives for understanding the cross-border movement of design. Arjun Appadurai (1996) conceptualizes globalization as a network of cultural “flows” that move through various - *scapes*: ethnoscap (migration), technoscap (technology), finanscap (capital), mediascap (information), and ideoscap (ideas). Design participates in all of these domains—designers migrate, technologies circulate, capital underwrites production, media disseminates imagery, and ideological frameworks inform global discourses on sustainability, innovation, and creativity.

However, globalization does not simply lead to homogenization. Homi Bhabha (1994) identifies *hybridity* as a defining condition of cultural exchange—one in which forms are not merely replicated but reinterpreted, generating new and composite identities. In design, hybridity reveals itself through the adaptation of global aesthetics to

local sensibilities and through diasporic practices that weave together inherited traditions with adopted styles.

Nationalism and identity

Theories of nationalism remind us that cultural difference endures, even amid accelerating globalization. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously described nations as “imagined communities” sustained through shared symbols, rituals, and collective narratives. Building on this, Michael Billig (1995) introduced the notion of *banal nationalism*, suggesting that every day practices — and even ordinary design objects such as currency, uniforms, or household items — quietly reproduce a sense of national belonging.

Design thus plays a crucial role in the construction and reinforcement of collective identity. Objects embody cultural values: French luxury goods evoke refinement and elegance; Japanese consumer products express harmony and restraint; German industrial design conveys precision and efficiency. Yet these identities do not remain confined within national borders—they circulate globally, generating both recognition and distinction.

Toward a hybrid framework: Design as boundary practice

Bringing these perspectives together, this article advances a framework for understanding design as a *boundary practice* — a concept adapted from Star and Griesemer (1989). Boundary practices enable communication and collaboration across different communities while allowing each to maintain its own interpretations and priorities. Within the realm of design, this suggests that objects, practices, and discourses generate shared languages that link nations, yet remain open to culturally specific meanings.

This framework resists the temptation to frame design solely as a product of global homogenization or as an expression of local essentialism. Instead, it positions design as a mediator between universality and particularity — a dynamic space where exchange and difference coexist.

Comparative case studies

Scandinavian and Japanese Minimalism

Minimalism is often described as a universal design language, yet its expressions are profoundly shaped by cultural context. In Scandinavia, minimalism — most visible in furniture and domestic design — embodies simplicity, functionality, and democratic accessibility.

Designers such as Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen sought to create objects that were not only elegant and practical but also affordable and socially inclusive, reflecting the egalitarian ideals of Nordic societies.

Japanese minimalism, represented by figures like Naoto Fukasawa and brands such as MUJI, also celebrates simplicity and clarity of form. Yet its philosophical roots diverge: it is grounded in Zen aesthetics, the appreciation of *wabi-sabi* imperfection, and a deep cultural orientation toward balance and harmony with nature.

When these two traditions encounter each other in global markets and exhibitions, they often appear to speak a shared visual language of minimalism. However, their differences remain essential, enriching the global design conversation. Together, Scandinavian and Japanese minimalism exemplify how design can unite nations through shared aesthetic sensibilities while distinguishing them through their underlying cultural and philosophical values (see images 1-2).



1. Alvar Aalto's Stool 60
(Scandinavian minimalism)
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/stool-60>



2. MUJI wall clock (Japanese minimalism)
<https://france.muji.eu/products/analogue-clock-large-brown-18911>

French luxury and German precision

French and German design traditions hold distinct yet complementary positions within the global marketplace. French design — especially in fashion, cosmetics, and high-end consumer goods — embodies refinement, elegance, and a deep sense of cultural heritage. The label *Made in France* functions not merely as an indication of origin but as a symbol of national identity, evoking artistry, craftsmanship, and the continuity of tradition.

German design, in contrast, is grounded in the principles of engineering precision, functionality, and technical mastery. The enduring legacy of the *Deutscher Werkbund* and the Bauhaus continues to shape German industrial design, where clarity, rationality, and efficiency define both process and form. Iconic companies such as Braun, Volkswagen, and Siemens exemplify this design ethos, blending utilitarian rigor with aesthetic restraint.

On the global stage, these two traditions often converge—particularly within luxury and technology markets—where both sophistication and precision are prized. Yet their distinctions remain essential: French luxury speaks the language of cultural elegance, while German design communicates reliability and performance. Together, they illustrate how design identities can coexist within shared economic and aesthetic spaces, forging connections while preserving the integrity of their national narratives (see images 3-4).



3. Chanel No. 5 bottle (French luxury)

<https://www.chanel.com/fr/parfums/p/125530/n5-eau-de-parfum-vaporisateur/>



4. Braun SK 4 “Snow White’s Coffin”
radio/record player

<https://braunaudio.de/en/snowwhitecoffin-sk4-dieter-rams-hans-gugelot-design-moma/>

Diasporic and hybrid designs

Diasporic communities generate hybrid design practices that bridge the cultural spaces between homeland and host nation. Armenian diasporic architecture in France, for example, gracefully fuses traditional Armenian elements — such as *khachkars* (cross-stones), carved stone ornamentation, and domed silhouettes — with French architectural styles, techniques, and materials. These hybrid structures act as cultural mediators: they embody Armenian spiritual and aesthetic identity while becoming part of the French urban and social fabric.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Indian-inspired design across Britain, from restaurants and interior spaces to fashion and visual culture. Such designs reflect a dynamic negotiation of dual belonging — preserving cultural memory while adapting to contemporary Western contexts. The result is a fertile hybridity that enriches both hosts and homeland cultures, producing new forms of expression that are simultaneously familiar and reimagined.

Diasporic design thus reveals design's inherently transnational nature. It is not confined to the borders of a single nation or the logic of global markets, but emerges from lived experiences of migration, memory, and cultural transformation — where design becomes a tangible form of connection across distance and time (see image 5).



5. Armenian Apostolic church Sainte-Marie in Decine-Charpieu, France
Photo Author: Martin Harutyunyan, 2024, May 18

Global sustainability movements

The contemporary movement toward sustainable design exemplifies how global principles can take on distinct local expressions. Across the world, international organizations, design competitions, and professional networks champion sustainability as a universal imperative — promoting renewable materials, circular production systems, energy efficiency, and ecological consciousness.

Yet, the way sustainability is understood and practiced is profoundly shaped by local environments, materials, and traditions. In Southeast Asia, bamboo is celebrated as a renewable and rapidly regenerating resource; in Scandinavia, timber construction and passive heating systems reflect a long-standing harmony with northern

climates; in Armenia, stone masonry and vernacular building methods are being reinterpreted for contemporary ecological challenges.

These localized variations reveal that sustainability is not a singular model but a plural practice — one that connects nations through shared ethical commitments while respecting their material and cultural distinctiveness. In this sense, sustainability operates as a *boundary practice*: a global discourse that fosters collaboration and innovation without erasing local knowledge or identity (see image 6).



6. A bamboo pavilion by Vo Trong Nghia Architects (Vietnam)
<https://vtnarchitects.net/bamboo-forest-pe257.html>

Discussion

The comparative cases illuminate several core dynamics that define design as a boundary practice:

1. Shared aesthetics, and distinct philosophies: Scandinavian and Japanese minimalism may appear visually similar, yet their foundations differ profoundly — one rooted in social democracy and functionality, the other in Zen philosophy and natural harmony.
2. Convergent markets, and divergent identities: French luxury and German precision coexist within global markets but express contrasting cultural narratives — refinement versus reliability, heritage versus innovation.
3. Hybrid forms, and transnational belonging: Diasporic design practices connect homelands and host nations, generating hybrid forms that embody layered identities and lived experiences of movement.
4. Global discourses, and local adaptations: Sustainability offers a shared global vocabulary, yet its realization varies according to local materials, climates, and cultural values.

Together, these dynamics reaffirm that design is never neutral. It operates as an active mediator between universality and particularity, enabling exchange without erasure. In doing so, it challenges reductive views of globalization as a force of cultural homogenization and highlights instead the persistence of diversity and difference as engines of creativity.

Beyond these insights, the analysis broadens the horizons of design theory by placing its *transnational dimension* at the center. While universalist approaches privilege function and usability, and particularist perspectives foreground tradition and identity, the boundary-practice framework reveals their mutual dependence. Design is not purely global or national—it is *dialectical*. Its capacity to connect derives precisely from its ability to differentiate, and its cultural specificity gains meaning through participation in global networks.

Methodology

This study uses a *qualitative, interpretive methodology*. It draws on design theory, globalization studies, and cultural studies of nationalism to investigate design as a boundary practice. The approach emphasizes comparative analysis of design traditions, diasporic practices, and global sustainability initiatives to understand how universality and particularity coexist in contemporary design. The methodology foregrounds context-sensitive interpretation rather than purely quantitative measurement.

1. Comparative case studies: The article examines Scandinavian and Japanese minimalism, French luxury and German precision, diasporic Armenian and Indian hybrid designs, and global sustainability practices to illustrate the dual role of design.
2. Visual and material analysis: Selected design objects, architectural works, and products are analyzed for form, symbolism, and cultural significance.
3. Literature review: Design theory, globalization literature, and studies of nationalism provide the conceptual framework for interpreting case studies.
4. Cross-cultural interpretation: Objects and practices are analyzed in both local and global contexts to understand their boundary functions.

Analysis

The analysis identifies *patterns of convergence and differentiation*:

- Scandinavian and Japanese minimalism shares a visual language but differ in philosophical foundations.
- French luxury and German precision coexist in global markets while maintaining distinct national identities.
- Diasporic designs mediate between homelands and host nations, creating hybrid cultural expressions.
- Global sustainability initiatives demonstrate universal ethical goals implemented through local practices.

This demonstrates that design operates dialectically, connecting cultures without erasing their unique identities, confirming the proposed hypotheses. The analysis validates the concept of design as a *boundary practice*, providing a theoretical framework for future research on transnational design dynamics.

Conclusion

Design must be understood as a *boundary practice*—a force that simultaneously connects and differentiates nations. It creates shared platforms of discourse, markets, and aesthetics, while preserving distinct cultural identities. This hybrid function not only enriches design theory but also contributes to broader conversations in cultural studies, globalization, and transnational scholarship.

The implications are far-reaching. For practitioners, acknowledging design's dual role encourages attentiveness to both global frameworks and local traditions, fostering more culturally sensitive and contextually aware practices. For scholars, the boundary-practice framework provides a lens for analyzing transnational design dynamics without reducing them to either universalism or essentialism.

Future research might build on this framework by:

- Mapping specific cross-national collaborations and their negotiation of identity.
- Investigating diasporic design practices as laboratories of hybrid cultural expression.
- Examining the politics of cultural appropriation and power within global design flows.
- Exploring the impact of digital platforms — such as online marketplaces and AI-driven design tools — on the tension between universality and particularity.

By rethinking design as a practice that transcends yet respects borders, we gain a deeper understanding of how creativity connects nations while sustaining the uniqueness of their voices.

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