

# Culture

Soumya Gupta

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Ar Madhuri Rao & Dr Salila Vanka

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## Abstract

Culture is often treated as an impetuous guest in design, yet the frequency of the word in discussions alone provides an insight to its significance. The concept of “culture” is polysemic and thus is often used quite subjectively. This paper attempts the formulation of a clear and precise definition that may be used to consciously design with an awareness of the depth of this word, and connect it to other fields (like linguistics, psychology, philosophy, economics etc.) that may foster holistic informed decisions as an architect.

Culture, as an eloquent overwhelming word, may be attempted to be conveyed as: ideas, values, beliefs, behavioral patterns of a collective determined by a group. It is a larger framework (system) including various subsystems (as discussed earlier) that are defined but usually blurred in boundaries. These subsystems are learnt by adapting to the geographical and social context of the mentioned group, and are transmitted accordingly.

## Key words –

Symbol , Value patterns , Ethnographic , Anthropological concept , Culture

Culture is often treated as an impetuous guest in design, yet the frequency of the word in discussions alone provides an insight to its significance. The concept of “culture” is polysemic and thus is often used quite subjectively. This paper attempts the formulation of a clear and precise definition that may be used to consciously design with an awareness of the depth of this word, and connect it to other fields (like linguistics, psychology, philosophy, economics etc.) that may foster holistic informed decisions as an architect.

The word dates from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century from “cultivate” in 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was derived originally from the Spanish word culture, based on the Latin “cultura” that meant ‘to tend to’. It was originally “colere” (Latin). Starting out as cultivation of agriculture, , the meaning gradually widened to a cultivation of mental faculties – “cultura animi”

(cultivation of the mind), a metaphorical phrase of Cicero. (Kuper 2000) In the first edition of the dictionary of the Spanish language of the Royal Spanish Academy (1726 – 1739), one of the definitions of culture is “care and application for anything, such as teaching in the young, for what can show off your understanding.” (Spanish Royal Academy Vol 2 1998)

The modern concept of “culture” seems to have its origin from the reaction of German intellectuals to the French notion. It seems imperative to understand the anthropological concept of the word in order to understand its relation with tongue and writing (language) and thus, logically derive the dichotomy between elitist and popular culture. “Culture, or civilization, in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, art, beliefs, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man to ace as member of society.’ (Edward taylor 1871) The phrase – any other – allows

inclusion of any learning to be shared as part of the definition. It centers around the knowledge and behaviors adopted by individuals by the virtue of being included in a social group/collective. Since then, the word has been provided several definitions primarily studied in 7 categories: descriptive, historical, regulatory, psychological, structural, genetic and incomplete.

Cultural objects – “are symbolic elements of the cultural tradition, ideas or beliefs, expressive symbols and value patterns.” (Parsons 1951)

Culture is a symbol of material objects, ideologies and collective behavioral patterns of a group – “everything that people have, think, or do as members of a society” (Ferraro 1992). Herrera provides a more precise definition based on its relationship with geographical, historical and social context – “everything that humans have imagined, selected, created, learned, constructed for adapt and lived in a means, medium natural determined and in terms historical and social precise.” (Harrera 1993)

The semiotics of “culture” then developed fairly elastic with interpretations ranging from it being a complex collection of interrelated systems than a monolithic entity (D’Andrade 2000) to malleability of the manifestation of the word when layers of economic and political power (Wolf 1997) are added.

With all these variables and mildly diverging meanings over a period of time, the common thread seems to be that culture is acquired through learning, by the virtue of a collective. Social and technological aspects, along with the layer of time, make the understanding of the concept increasingly complex. It encompasses the ideas, values and beliefs of the collective of groups specific to humans, that are expressed through symbols.

Thus culture, as an eloquent overwhelming word, may be attempted to be conveyed as: ideas, values, beliefs, behavioral patterns of a collective determined by a group. It is a larger framework (system) including various subsystems (as discussed earlier) that are defined but usually blurred in boundaries. These subsystems are learnt by adapting to the geographical and social context of the mentioned group, and are transmitted accordingly.

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