

## **Flow of Culture: Material thinking & design in the human synthesis of form**

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### **Abstract**

Most people think the technology shapes our environment and objects in our lives, but few would consider the possibility of this being far from the truth. While technology is indeed one of the drivers of giving shape to the objects in our lives a far more potent force is culture that in most mature societies deeply influences how our objects and environments are shaped, in the production of meaning and in our constant striving to transcend the technology that we use to create these in the first place. This paper uses evidence of form giving seen in tribal societies and in the highly evolved and stable village forms that dot our landscape in India to argue that as our digital technologies develop and mature we will be increasingly using culture as a determinant of the form of our software and hardware interfaces just as we have been using it to shape our living spaces and artifacts that we use in our lives. We will therefore return to our roots and discover local solutions and in the process understand design at a new level of maturity. Design has been a core driver for the shaping of culture and we will need to redefine its role in then shaping our future and in forming and providing meaning to our future selves.

### **Full text**

India and the Indian village has been the subject of design study in the search of the discovery of the roots of the synthesis of form. Why the Indian village? Christopher Alexander in his masterful thesis called “Notes on the Synthesis of Form” used the generalized Indian village as his object of investigation using as many as 144 parameters that have helped organically shape the relationships that go to make up the structure and form of the typical Indian village. The Indian village was chosen since it is perhaps the only surviving form of settlement that has endured the 5000 year long evolutionary process in arriving at a mature and sustainable model for human settlements and which continues to stand as a living organic system today. This is a model which has been insulated from mass destruction and migratory pressures and stand as living forms that can represent the synthesis of forces that give shape to human intentions and designs. While flying from my base in Ahmedabad to Delhi and onwards to Guwahati I can see below the dots that are the villages that Alexander studied in 1961, still living and being shaped by many of the forces that he helped describe in his analysis in search for a synthesis of form.

Looking down at our village from the air and now by doing the same using Google Earth, we can all participate in the live analysis if we can see the forces acting on the ground as did Alexander in the course of his field study. He identified many forces, some technological no doubt but many are attitudes and belief systems as well as rules and laws that have a far greater influence on the shaping of the village than mere technology and the economic parameters that we hold in such high esteem when we consider the modern day artifacts and environments that are being rapidly thrown up by the technological society that we have built in the recent past.

We are now using an evolved definition of design which places it on a level that is at the very core of human explorations and innovation over the years. Design is about the insightful and sensitive use of human intentions through our opportunity seeking thoughts and actions to produce meaning and value for ourselves and for society as a whole. In this form it is a very potent force that helps shape culture and it is achieved through our manipulations of materials and in giving shape to our intentions at both the material and at the immaterial and intangible level of systems, services and spaces as well as our artifacts and our interfaces with technology products in the software and artefact space.

Design can bridge cultures with its core ability for the sensitive creation of value from channeling human intentions through informed thoughts and actions. Design helps a society connect all of human knowledge with its deeper sensibilities and aspirations and it was an integral part of social and economic action till recent times when it got divorced from daily life in the process of industrialization and mass production. Access to new technologies and the democratization of global communication promises to give new meaning to creative expressions in a two way process that we are now attempting to build into our efforts to use design and its related initiative.

Design is a powerful integrator at the systems level while it may continue to be operative at multiple levels and work across multiple sectors, materials and fields of business and social life. Our conviction about its effectiveness stems from the experience of numerous development projects that we have had in India over the past fifty years of using design as a critical tool for economic and social development. Other countries too are veering towards this new view of design as a vehicle for culture and it is here that we are likely to see its true value for human development.

Design as a core human activity evolved from its first appearance over two million years ago when per-humans used fire to ward off predators and provide a sense of security to the early users. From the use of fire to the use of materials and tools is a long journey that chronicles that evolution of design and separates it from the organized forms of both science and art, since it predates both these disciplines when seen at this very general level of engagement with human aspirations and actions. This very integral set of capabilities that were part of rural habitats got separated and differentiated into specialist activities both with the birth of formal education and the university systems as well as through the processes of industrialization and it is now seen as a profession in the periphery of business and social action. Now we have embarked on a journey that goes

well beyond material and tools and it includes the creative shaping of ideas about society, politics and ethics just as we looked at function, form and aesthetics and in this new journey we see interesting possibilities for design to expand and embrace this expanding universe of action with growing influence in shaping all our lives.

We will need to build new models to understand this evolving profession and build both processes and platforms for education in order to embed these new capabilities in a more formal manner into the shaping of our culture in the days ahead. Some of these approaches are part of our experiments in teaching design to students at the schools in India where design has been largely neglected by both Government and industry for the past fifty years since independence. However the recent surge of interest due to globalization should not limit the scope of its application to just business and industry but make it accessible in its significant role as the core capability in shaping our culture in a rapidly changing world order.