



## THEME

# Modernisms' locations II: Transnational exchange through design

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## Panel abstract

This panel examines the entanglements of design with political processes of decolonization and nation-building post-1945. It presents three historical case studies that cut across different fields of design and compares disparate postcolonial contexts. The three papers critically analyse the role of design discourses, practices, artefacts and institutions in postcolonial identity formations. The first looks at graphic design in the context of 1960s Beirut and, by extension, the Arab East at a tumultuous global moment to probe design's role in articulating transnational political subjectivities and aesthetic sensibilities. The second investigates the architectural discourse of the Commonwealth Institute in London and associated exhibition displays, where ideas about modernity, national identity and transnational relationships were formed and communicated during Britain's turn from Empire. The third considers the ways in which fashion and textiles were utilised in the construction of a modern Jamaican national identity, negotiating notions of race, class and gender to come to terms with a colonial history. Through these three papers, the panel aims to contribute to current debates in design history about the circulation of design beyond Euro-American geographies of modernism and frameworks of knowledge.

## Keywords

Transnational circulation, identity, decolonisation, design modernism



## PAPER #1

# Double trouble: Decentering the West, dislocating the nation

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## Abstract

Design histories from long-silent margins have begun to fill the numerous gaps in a world map that stretches beyond the Euro-American canon. This paper contributes to emerging debates in global design history by proposing an alternative approach particular to 'non-Western' geographies. I argue for a double decentring in design history: the first, through a postcolonial lens, displaces the West in understanding global modernity; and the second, through a transnational framework, attends to the dislocation of the nation from a privileged site of particularity. I exemplify this conceptual approach by presenting as a case study my research on graphic design in 1960s Beirut–Lebanon.

## Keywords

Beirut 1960s, Arab world, decolonization, design modernism, transnational cultures

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## Introduction

This paper draws from research I have been conducting on the history of graphic design in Beirut-Lebanon's long 1960s, extending roughly from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. It is generally concerned with the nexus of political and aesthetic fields in everyday visual and material culture. It probes the particularity of this intersection in the context of the Arab world at a tumultuous moment that conjugated local political struggles and regional decolonization processes with an emerging global Cold War order.

The question of how to write a history of design from the 'non-Western' margins, without uncritically valorising national or cultural difference, remains, however, a complicated one. This paper focuses on this question and its complications, to propose a transnational perspective to graphic design history that is grounded in postcolonial critique.

## Decentring the nation from global design history

My study ventures 'beyond the pale', to borrow Judy Attfield's words (1999), in terms of the geographical territory that has produced the modern design canon and claimed its universal validity. I situate my work among emerging scholarly efforts to write the histories of modern design from the margins, outside a traditionally Euro-American history. A number of prominent scholars in the field have been pressing for the necessity of a globally inclusive design historiography (eg. Adamson et al. 2011; Fry 1980; Margolin 2005; Woodham 2005 and most recently Huppertz 2015).

The question of how to write this history, as Victor Margolin (2005) pointed out a little more than a decade ago, involves points of divergence. His approach takes on an exhaustive world history perspective that opens the definitions of design to wider terrains covering 'the conception and planning of visual and material culture' that would not exclude the non-industrialized parts of the world (ibid: 239).

Likewise, Anna Calvera proposes a multi-sited global design history map, which works itself outwards starting with the local as the initial site of research (Calvera 2005). She advocates the latter as an approach to peripheral geographies that have been invisible on the world map of design history. 'To get a place in history and enter inside its boundaries' she argues, 'it is necessary to have a history, and to have a history, it is necessary to build up local and national histories and begin to tell them' (Calvera 2005: 375). I do recognize the importance of a history written from the purview of the site of locality and expanding outwards. This is what I set out to do in my project. However, Calvera does not clarify what she means by the local. How does this site of particularity not fall into a binary relation to the global, denying from the outset of any research project the complex dynamics in which the global and the local interact and contend with one another? If anything, her text confounds the local with the national, a problem that I think is shared across a number of emerging design histories, specially the ones hailing from the long-time silent margins. In their efforts to fill the gaps on the global map of design, historians have mostly centred on the national as the locus of their enquiries. But I want to argue that in looking for the production of locality in design at the scale of the nation don't we run the risk of objectifying it? And in doing so becoming complicit with the homogenizing voice of modern nation-states, excluding what does not get subsumed under its national project?

The internationalization of cultural studies in the last decade of the twentieth century faced a similar problem. In efforts to prioritize the particular over the universal, the nation-state was privileged as the site of particularity (Stratton and Ang 1996). The resulting form of a globalized cultural studies was criticized as an unproductive intellectual endeavour likened by Frederic Jameson to 'a kind of United Nations plenary session' in which each group was given respectful (and "politically correct") hearing' (cited in Stratton and Ang: 365). Jon Stratton and Ien Ang have argued that this risks concretizing differences into fixed mutually exclusive categories. They suggest that rather than valorise uncritically any asserted particularity, 'cultural studies needs to reflect on the concrete processes of particularization itself, and to interrogate its politics'. A postcolonial framework, they suggest, offers one such critical strategy (ibid: 367).

The same critique and suggestion could be extended to globalizing design history, which takes the national for granted as a site of cultural locality and difference. Evidently, some studies have been more successful than others in unpacking the constructed nature of a given national identity and ensuing design style. David Crowley's study of design in Poland is undoubtedly a pioneering effort in that regard (Crowley 1992). Nevertheless, such a nationally bound lens is not adequate to cases like Lebanon (and others I presume) where the national is a contested terrain, fraught with political incongruity.

In contradistinction to an overarching narrative of world history and a nationally circumscribed one, Glen Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley propose a global design history approach which 'recognizes

the multiplicities and fragmented condition in which we experience and enact design, as part of being in the world' (2011; 2–3) and which 'demands that all design be understood as implicated in a network of mutually relevant, geographically expansive connections' (ibid: 6). Their conceptualization for a globally sensitive and decentred logic of design history, along with their proposed models, intersect and resonate most with the aims I have set out in my project. Rather than ask what is Lebanese, or what constitutes Arab design, I am interested in understanding how graphic design in the context of 1960s Beirut articulated identities and negotiated them between the global and the local.

Studying the history of design from a global perspective requires critically attending to the transnational dimension of politics. The hegemonic formations and ensuing subjectivities involve struggles not only of different domestic registers — cultural, sectarian, national, and economic. But also of different geopolitical scales of power relations and antagonisms that are not circumscribed by the contours of the nation.

Focusing on the city, rather than the nation, as my site I adopt a non-essentialist definition of place that takes into account, as Doreen Massey urges, a 'global sense of the local'. A place, she describes, formed by networks of social relations, 'meeting and weaving together at a particular space and time where a large portion of those social relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the space itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent' (Massey 1991: 28–29).

I deploy a postcolonial perspective to critically study the interface of the global with the local in design history. As I shall be discussing, postcolonial critique deters binary conceptions of this cultural interface, which is essential to unpick the global enterprise of modernity and to study its everyday material cultures.

### **Decentring the West from global modernity**

Edward Said's study of Orientalism, as a discourse of European scholarship on the Orient, has been crucial to our understanding of the process by which the East was set against the West and constituted as its inferior other. The study of the nexus of power and knowledge that animated an Orientalist discourse, along with associated institutions and colonial practices, Said contends, is requisite to 'understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.' (Said 1979: 3)

Power in this form — embedded in discourse as a system of knowledge and through dividing practices between self and other — Michel Foucault has argued objectifies and transforms individuals into subjects (Foucault 1984). It ties people to an identity imposed on them, which they must recognize and which subjects them to others in this way. Said's study, in drawing on Foucault, is thus a critical genealogy of a discourse through which the oriental subject was historically constituted.

What remnants of this discursive binary and ensuing oriental subjectivity can be seen in post-colonial Beirut? Postcolonial time, as a historical conjuncture, refers to a shift in global power relations marking the transition from the age of Empires—direct colonial rule, to the post-independence or post-decolonization moment (Hall 1996). Undoubtedly, the Middle East has lived different politics of colonization and temporalities of decolonization that would imply in turn different postcolonial subjectivities ranging in particularity from Algeria, through Egypt and all the way to the Levant's Lebanon and Syria, the complexity of the Palestinian case notwithstanding.

Postcolonial theory, building on from Said's *Orientalism*, has helped decentre the West in understanding the global enterprise of modernity, displacing now tired notions of 'influence' and 'imitation' of a Western origin (Bhabha 1994; Mitchell 2000). Its different scholars, despite their varied theoretical reasoning, have criticized the cultural binaries claimed by imperialism — colonizer and colonized, the West and the non-West, the modern and the traditional — and reconceived their relation as forms of transculturation, cultural translation, appropriation and transfiguration. Homi Bhabha has argued that the non-West is not a location of pure cultural difference to the West. He urges us to think beyond narratives of originary subjectivities and primordial antagonisms and focus instead on the emergence of 'the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference' in the articulatory processes of colonial and postcolonial cultural hybridity (1994: 2). Timothy Mitchell (1991; 2000) contends that 'the production of modernity involves the staging of differences' (2000: 27); it is not a product of the West but of its interaction with the non-West. He elaborates that the modern is staged as representation, in open-ended differential relations to an original that only exists as an authoritative yet elusive promise. This process lends modernity the immense capacity for replication and expansion, and at the same time makes it vulnerable to disruption, open to displacement and re-articulation. Accordingly, Mitchell sharply concludes that the universal claim of modernity is never complete.

In similar vein, reflecting on the intensification of globalization processes in recent history, Arjun Appadurai invites us to rethink the centrality of the West as a purveyor of cultural flows and forms and to examine how a multiplicity of forces, not only economic ones, determine the complex entanglements of global modernity. He argues that 'the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models' (1996: 32). The transnational framework he outlines, helps me to consider the context of Beirut in the 1960s — in its multi-directional (East-East and West-East) flows of incoming designers, political discourses, cultural practices and forms (including images and aesthetics), operating as he contends within overlapping, disjunctive landscapes whose centres shift according to the different kinds of cultural affirmations and networks of political solidarities taking shape regionally and globally.

In sum, I am proposing here a double decentring in global design history: the first, through a postcolonial lens, displaces the West in understanding global modernity and the second, through a transnational framework, attends to the dislocation of the nation from a privileged site of particularity.

I will now exemplify this conceptual approach by presenting, as a case study, my research on graphic design in 1960s Beirut–Lebanon.

### **Case study: The three Beirut(s)**

In studying graphic design in 1960s Beirut, I examine the archive of artefacts in question, as well as their associated moments of design and circulation, along three competing discursive moments and geographies, in Appadurai's terms three overlapping and disjunctive landscapes, that conjugated the global with the local in laying claim over the city's cosmopolitan identity:

'Beirut: the Paris of the East': a site of cosmopolitan leisure and tourism on the Mediterranean

'Beirut: the Arab capital of culture': a pan-Arab cultural and publishing node

'Beirut: the Arab-Hanoi': a revolutionary node in the Third-World

I ask what the 'Paris of the East', and conversely the 'Arab Hanoi', looked like in the visual and cultural materialization of competing discourses of locality. I am full-ears to the geographic decentring devices already at play discursively in such statements: Paris–East and Arab–Hanoi.

I begin with the first moment by asking how is a statement such as 'Beirut: the Paris of the East' both an affirmation of a deep-seated East–West division yet simultaneously an act of displacement of this binary relation? If Beirut is both Western and Eastern, as the statement claims, then it is not exactly Eastern, nor exactly Western either; the hybridity disrupts the binary relation and undoes the essentialism inherent in any quest for cultural authenticity. We could think of the statement in that sense as performing a discursive disarticulation between East and West in imagining and living Beirut as a city. It is telling of Beirut as the space of 'transculturation' where the hard cultural poles of East and West get contested. I am interested in the material form of this articulation — its aesthetics, meanings and practices— and the way it is carried through the design of everyday visual and material culture. The first section of my project looks into the different modalities through which 'Beirut: the Paris of the East' historically emerged and took visual and material form. I examine the promotion of Lebanon as a Mediterranean site of modern tourism and leisure within an emerging global economy of travel and consumer desires. I analyse how Mediterranean seascapes and associated leisure tropes get appropriated and rearticulated discursively along a particular political discourse of nationhood and its cultural materialisation (Maasri 2016).

One important point this statement brings forth still requires elaboration. Beirut is likened with nothing but the French metropolis that had ruled over it. It is undoubtedly telling of the lasting cultural hegemony that characterized the colonizing experience. But acquiescing to this simple explanation undermines a critical analysis of the politics claiming Beirut as a cultural hybrid between East and West. If the frontiers between East and West are displaced in this statement, what other/new frontiers does it discursively articulate? In other words what new relations to the East, notions of locality particular to the Arab East does such a statement refer to or determinedly muffle?

The cultural hegemony of the colonizing experience did not go by uncontested in the wider Arab East; as a matter of fact its effects gave rise to anti-colonial political mobilization, which was coupled with a quest to recover indigenous cultural forms 'uncontaminated' by the colonial encounter. Political movements emerging in the 1950s in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, which were pan-Arab in scope, articulated a discourse of Arab identity in antagonistic relation to European colonial power. A discourse summoning an Arab identity as such, constructs a relation of equivalence between elements of difference with the western colonizer such as language, cultural heritage and aesthetics, giving thus material form to the antagonism. This found resonance in postcolonial forms of modern Arabic

literature and artistic practices. Beirut was not impermeable to this discourse and ensuing cultural practices (Kassir 2003). The city in fact took a leading role in the publishing and transnational distribution of Arabic literature, playing host to the first Arabic book fair and to new adventures in the Arabic press (Mermier 2005). I am concerned here with the publication design and visual culture of this emerging literature, paying equal attention to the flow of 'pan-Arabist' discourses and its transnational subjects— Lebanese, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Palestinian publishers, authors and designers that weave through the city, in and out of its flourishing publishing industry.

The third discursive moment revolves around the re-articulation of the 'pan-Arabist' Beirut into the revolutionary 'Arab Hanoi' (Traboulsi 2001), in the late 1960s and through the 70s. This third discursive framework situates Beirut within Third Worldist political geography and connects it, through the Palestinian Resistance, to a transnational discourse of anti-imperialism and revolutionary struggle. This last framework is attentive to the visual and aesthetic discourses of the 'Arab Hanoi' as designed and circulated in printed media. I am interested here in tracing the signs, symbols and aesthetics that are carried through such media, in the way these travelled across transnational networks of solidarity from Cuba to Africa and all the way to Vietnam, in and through political discourses and imaginations, constituting in their trajectory revolutionary subjects who espoused violence as a legitimate means of struggle.

In all three discursive formations— the determinedly cosmopolitan Westward looking Beirut; the authenticating 'pan-Arabist' Beirut; and the revolutionary Arab Hanoi— the question of cultural modernity in its relation to the West is lurking. Outside the struggle over this question as claimed within the different discourses of the moment, I am wary of an analysis that represents cultural artefacts of either of these formations as a simple binary between, on one hand, a passive absorption of a 'Western' modernity and, on the other, an active resistance to its cultural hegemony. While these different discourses may politically contend with one another over this very issue, the cultural and aesthetic articulations of these politics are not reducible to a simple dichotomy between East and West nor are they impermeable to one another, let alone mutually exclusive monolithic fixed categories. To configure it otherwise undercuts the complexity in which modernity is sought, enacted and wrestled with in and through the everyday material culture of Beirut and across the differences that make up its postcolonial subjects.

## Conclusion

In sum, my project is committed to a double decentring, of the West and the nation, in design history, which I have outlined in this paper. I am cautious that the decentring strategy proposed, far from constituting a de-politicized form of pluralism, indeed accounts for the transnational dimension of power relations in the everyday, in which design is one important site of struggle.

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## Biographical Note

Zeina Maasri is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton, UK. She is the author of the book *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: IB Tauris, 2009), curator of related travelling exhibitions and online open archival resource ([www.signsofconflict.com](http://www.signsofconflict.com)).



## PAPER #2

# Displaying the Commonwealth:

## Modernism, nationalism and decolonisation at the Commonwealth Institute, London, 1958–73

Tom Wilson / Design Museum / London / UK

## Abstract

The opening of the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1962 was a striking expression of faith in the emergence of an united and diverse Commonwealth. For its director Kenneth Bradley, the modernism of the Institute's hyperbolic paraboloid roof and its displays inside were positive representations of the political and social ideals, which marked the emergence of the new Commonwealth. But despite the building's forward-looking ethos, it was also a legacy of Britain's imperial past; many of the exhibits inside came from the Commonwealth Institute's predecessor, the Imperial Institute, where they supplied material for the domestic imagination of the British Empire.

This paper locates the Commonwealth Institute as a significant and complex space through which ideas about modernity, national identity and transnational relationships were formed and communicated during Britain's turn from Empire. It begins with a study of the Institute's architecture, and shows how the building itself was rhetorically evoked as an example of the Commonwealth in action. The discourse around materials, in particular, was used to suggest a mutually beneficial economic relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth, and had the effect of occluding the economic relationships that made the actual exchange of materials possible. This paper then addresses the complexity of decolonization by showing how newly independent countries sought to take control of their own representations, paying close attention to the case study of 'Instant Malaysia', a new display by Archigram Architects in 1973. As representations of both Empire and Commonwealth, the Institute's exhibition galleries were decidedly unsteady projects of British influence.

## Keywords

Archigram, Commonwealth, Empire, British modernity, Exhibitions

### Biographical note

Tom Wilson is a graduate of the Royal College of Art and Bath Spa University. He is currently working on a AHRC-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the University of Brighton and the Design Museum. His research interests relate mainly to twentieth-century design history. In addition to undertaking research, he works closely with the Design Museum in managing and developing its permanent collection.



### PAPER #3

## Fashioning Jamaica from colony to nation:

### Textile production, dress and the fashionability of African diaspora between 1950–1975

Elli Michaela Young / University of Brighton / Brighton / UK

### Abstract

Design has played an important role in the remaking of the Caribbean, particularly in the fashion and textiles industry. This research project considers the ways in which fashion and textiles, produced in Jamaica between 1950 and 1975, were employed to navigate shifting subjectivities in a nation undergoing transition. In particular, it studies how national identities were constructed in a period of decolonisation and how fashion and textiles were utilised in this process. Considering the complex relationship between colony and metropole and subsequent narratives, I examine the acts of resistance to Empire that formed part of the struggle for independence, in addition to considering the role played by design in resisting and/or accommodating a globalized British and European aesthetic.

Using the Jamaican Fashion Guild as a case study, this paper aims to show how Jamaicans sought to control their own representations, engaging with design practices to construct a 'modern' Jamaica. It considers the ways in which Jamaicans negotiated notions of race, class and gender to come to terms with their colonial history. It argues that an examination of postcolonial design practices can help us rethink and reconceptualise fashion and textiles histories.

### Keywords

Caribbean, fashion and textiles, Identity, Jamaican Fashion Guild, Post-colonialism

### Biographical note

Elli Michaela Young has a BA in Design from The Cass, London Metropolitan University, an MA in Post-colonial Cultures & Global Policy from Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is currently a DESIGN STAR AHRC Research Student at University of Brighton. Her research considers the way in which fashion and textiles were utilized in the construction of identities in Jamaica.