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Vernacular Design: Alive and Alert

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Abstract This article debates that vernacular design is not a social reflection, but a social operation that stems from revisiting indigenous intelligence and employing it to generate social power, which could establish a nature-culture balance. Such a balance is intended to respond to the local way of life and address different daily-life problems encountered by each individual. This direction differs from that of industrial design, which, by promoting uniformity, requires customers or users to adjust themselves and their lifestyles. Whereas industrial design focuses on mass production and creation of a unified mega-culture known as globalization, vernacular design aims to address individuals' problems, drive their chosen way of life forward, and strive for sustainability. In other words, vernacular design responds to an individual's needs in his or her own way of life and promotes knowledge sharing with every community member. In this system, community members are skilled designers who possess their own aesthetic vernacular and utilize public property as an asset for their designs. Aiming for sustainability, vernacular design progresses in four levels: 1) hybridizing, by modifying the function of a modern, mass-produced commodity; 2) maintaining indigenous identities to propel the native way of life; 3) common-pooling to benefit all community members collectively; and 4) devising a strategy to address social issues or to change public policies.

Keywords Vernacular design; Industrial design; Post-industrial; Creative common pool; Resources management

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Introduction

This article stemmed from the debate about whether or not ordinary people can be designers and what alternatives to industrial design can be. Historically, designing was first established in Europe and America, in the northern hemisphere, but this study attempts to examine an alternative to the mainstream practice.If Europe, America, and most other developed countries represent the Global North, then Africa, South America, and developing countries in Asia and the Middle East would represent the Global South.Therefore, the industrial design concepts established by the Global North should be examined along with their southern counterpart, which is presented in this article as 'vernacular design', whose origin is the Global South.

This line of questioning started during fieldwork involving the development of community products. The research process led to an argument about whether or not community products would need redefining. There are two reasons for this. First, community products exhibit a thinking process inspired by worldviews, life outlooks, and social ideals as the basis for production. Second, cultural products demonstrate tastes and aesthetics, which are integral elements of the evolution of human civilization.

Community products or cultural products are expected to arouse users' or consumers' feelings of nostalgia, déjà-vu, or 'previous-life recollection', as if they had experienced the product before, or to reintroduce their experience of warmth, 'hand taste' (in the case of food), and human intellectual technology. Such experience perceived through cultural commodities or cuisines is believed to transform gloom into willpower to live on (Prapattong, 2007). However, community products have been underrated as mere 'tourism souvenirs' or 'reminders of consumers' experience. In fact, in social reality, community products not only preserve the way of life and culture of the community, but they also serve as memorabilia of past struggles and symbols of beautiful accomplishments. Inspiring and empowering, such products strengthen the familial bond, while sustainably connecting individuals with society and nature. In other words, these products are created in line with the path of a people's culture and in response to their problem-solving needs. Because producing such commodities is usually a shared responsibility amongst community members, the participating members may be called 'vernacular designers'. Unlike industrial designers, who focus on a world of uniformity, vernacular designers create post-industrial[1] alternatives.In a sense, the industrial sector's suppression of cultural products—to deprive them of voices and spaces in the mainstream economy—and appropriation of public resources from communities to support industrial investments have caused vernacular designers to be labeled makers of products they do not even use' and 'sources of local alienation'.

The review of the definition of vernacular design as a basis for building knowledge of the Global South began with the article 'Vernacular design: a discussion on its concept' (Lena et al., 2012). According to this article, vernacular design is independent of, even to the point of resistant to, the

[1]First used by Alain Touraine, the concept 'post-industrial', closely related to other similar sociological concepts like post-Fordism, social data, knowledge-based economy, and post-industrial economy, entails the following principles.

1. The economy is changing from being product-based to service-based.
2. Knowledge is valuable capital, along with human capital.
3. Idea generation is the primary means of economic growth, through globalization and automated systems. The value and significance of labor unions to the economy, including labor itself (like in a production line), are decreasing, while professionals (like scientists, creative industry specialists, and IT experts) grow in value and popularity.
4. Branches of behavioral science and information technology are widely developed and implemented (like behavioral economics, information architecture, cybernetics, game theories, and informatics theories).

mainstream design. Main purpose of vernacular design is self-reliance through the utilization of daily life objects in response to problems in the production sector. The separation of vernacular design from mainstream design has continued since 1990, resulting in hybrid designs initiated by technology and globalization. This article's definition of vernacular design differentiates it from that used in the neo-creative industry and attributes patterns for small-quantity production to the definition of design. This has given official birth to vernacular design, qualifying all non-industrial creators as designers. In addition, according to the article, vernacular design is defined as belonging to an informal design framework.This framework has the following features: 1) creators are not necessarily mainstream designers trained by designing schools and may even be anonymous; 2) the production process is largely informal; 3) the users and the creators are members of the same community; 4) some products become so commonplace that they are distributed and shared with every community member; and 5) vernacular design functions as an aesthetic medium of communication amongst the people.

Development of conceptual framework

Based on the above article, which sparked a debate underlying this study, vernacular design seems to have stagnated in society. To respond to the said article, this study argues that vernacular design involves a designing hierarchy that is not only a cultural reflection but also a social mission undertaken by different groups of people in their struggle. This study presents synthesized contents acquired through fieldwork having continued since 2004. The conceptual framework for this study was developed as follows.

Initially, the concept of domestication of wild animals was employed in formulating a question for the study on how wild fowls became domesticated. The study found that such domestication was not part of natural selection, but a result of human intervention that adopted cultural methods to select wild fowl species for domestication, a process known as 'innovation through cultural technology' (Fumiito, 2007). The findings were used to connect anthropological knowhow, which developed bodies of cultural knowledge through fieldwork, to two other branches, namely, designing and marketing, to formulate a concept called 'Deep Play Design' (Prapattong, 2021).

This new concept was experimented with at three national exhibitions through two research projects. It was found, however, that this concept detached itself from intellectual power.In a subsequent study, therefore, the researcher, using Ostrom's 'Common-Pool Resource Management' concept (2002), concentrated on small communities' creation of works of art to develop a design process based on the locals' intellectual capital.The study findings were of significant interest and were exhibited at an art gallery.The researcher then undertook a more extensive project to create a design model based on intangible cultural heritage.Such was a strategy adopted by communities to protect the environment and subsequently to design local products, using their cultural capital. The strategy aimed to counteract the political economy policy that attempted to transform cultural assets into publicly managed assets.

The outcomes of the studies were then synthesized and compared with the conceptual framework 'Design Ladder', which identifies different levels of designing. The comparison revealed that these levels served different purposes (Doherty, 2015). The researcher, therefore, developed a 'Vernacular Design Ladder' for comparison and found that this concept could enhance the knowledge of vernacular design in the academic world. The results of the study are presented as follows.

1. Separation of design from fine arts

Creating works of fine arts traditionally benefited groups of with the power of control over resources. Works of art were used to separate the civilized from the uncivilized. For this reason, during the early 20th century, design was separated from fine arts.One prominent example was the Bauhaus,

which gave design a new life, making it friendlier and more accessible to people than fine arts had been.

Despite its historical evolution route, design spent most of its early life under the industrial system, which attempted to maintain global uniformity by influencing people to switch to mass-produced, easily accessible commodities. It was consumers who had to adjust to industrially designed products. Because advanced technology made it possible to mass-produce both products and services, expanding the market and keeping production resources under oligarchic control was necessary. With the science of design tied to technological advancement, designers were mere workers confronted by various limitations imposed in the name of industry.

During the start of the 21st century, the world's stepping into the post-industrial era became inevitable, catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of various applications has helped people self-educate and become experts in different fields, including design. For this reason, despite its detachment, vernacular design still progresses alongside industrial design in a parallel fashion.

2. Hierarchy of vernacular design

This study employs the Design Ladder[2] as the frame of hierarchical benchmarks to study vernacular design compared with industrial design.

2.1 Hybrid vernacular design

Hybridizing involves either modifying a product in line with modern production or modifying an industrially manufactured product in line with the local way of life because the community cannot produce modern materials.In either case, the vernacular designer structurally and functionally reconfigures the product and assigns a new concept and expected outcome to serve his or her culture's way of life.Examples include converting plastic chairs into a funeral 'castle for the deceased' or a towel into a wreath, and offering light bulbs instead of Buddhist Lent candles.In industrial design, this level of design is referred to as 'kitsch' which means poor taste reflected by artistically inaesthetic imitation of the original.Even so, this kind of design is favored by local people, and hybrid vernacular designers know how to create hybrid works of art and cleverly redefine 'design' countering designing experts' 'vernacular' with their newly developed 'vernacular'. Modern technology for the distribution of commodities has caused the number of hybrid designers to increase, even in the mass communication and graphic design circles, where digital platform applications play an essential role.

2.2 Identity vernacular design

The primary purpose of this kind of design is to uphold local identities that drive the way of life forward. Industrial design has caused people to somehow detach themselves from their identities. In some cases, such detachment is irreversible, resulting in permanent reliance upon technology in the name of modernity or development.Those caught in this trap find it difficult to progress towards true modernity, some becoming hybrid vernacular designers but others resorting to their original intellectual skills for self-reliance and dependence upon small-scale community-supported production based on folk intelligence, for example, earthen homes, hand-woven fabric and local cloth-weaving networks, chemical-free farming, and handicrafts.

Such practices contribute to a nature-culture balance that steers the local way of life towards forming local people's identities, covering their ethnicity, genders, indigenous traits, religions, history, and even nomenclature. These practices give birth to designers who create their works based on existing intelligence and modify them in response to the modern way of life to display how they differ from other groups. The strengthening of ethnicity may be understood as a process of an interest group's exploitation of design as an instrument of access to resources or its effort to establish aesthetic

[2]The Design Ladder concept employed in this study is the application of the Design Ladder framework developed by the Danish Design Centre in 2001 for industrial design.

superiority in a creative economy area. Over the years, industrial-sector designers have been using their influence to generate their financial wealth for cultural appropriation—often with wrong items, and purposes. However, identity vernacular designers will proclaim their authenticity, which no-one can appropriate.

Figure 1 Plastic chairs assembled into a funeral 'castle for the deceased' will later be used for public charity activities. This practice reduces waste resulting from the traditional unreusable 'castle'.

2.3 Vernacular design for the sharing of common resources

This level is characterized by an assembly of designers attempting to create an identity to represent their shared culture or connection which resembles an association, a club, or a group of subcultures. The primary purpose of such an assembly is sustainability, as it is known amongst the designers of every network that without cooperation and sacrifice of certain individual benefits, the entire system will suffer a considerable loss and come to an end. Cooperation will guarantee the group's survival and lead to its sustainability and capability of sharing its accumulated resources, knowledge, and assets with other people. This achievement will allow people to collaborate and share the benefits. Each vernacular designer will connect his or her designs to the common pool resources management system, which is open for all members to join and share. This system aims to empower communities to divert from industrial design, which stresses private utilization of public resources, and redefine exploitation thereof to regain the communities' and every member's right to resources utilization.

Figure 2 For the Tai Lue community of Sri Don Chai in Chiang Rai province, hand-woven fabrics constitute an essential identity, serving as the pillar of conservation of their cloth-weaving expertise, cultural identities, and religion. Cloth-weavers, in service to the interrelationship between religion and ethnicity, produce 'talipot fans' (long-handled fans used to hide Buddhist monks' faces during a prayer recital) using hand-woven cloth featuring modern Tai Lue designs, as replacements for factory-made items.

2.4 Strategic vernacular design

This level starts with the question of whether or not design can better society or whether or not it can, through legal procedures and mainstream culture, instigate a change to the state's repressive policy imposed upon the people and their way of life.Ordinary people's rejection of knowledge and introduction of newly established knowledge has led to the emergence of so-called experts.What these experts do is explain and justify the reappropriation of resources by the state and state-supported interest groups.The Rainbow Village case in Taiwan is an obvious example.The residents who were opposed to the state's relocation policy employed art to redesign their community as an art tourist attraction.Their effort successfully convinced the state to change its policy.Superficially, fine arts appeared to be the driving force; however, the residents also employed space design as a strategy in their struggle to keep possession of the resources or to gain access to the resources from which the public was supposed to benefit.The residents' identity, long suppressed by the mainstream culture, was also used as an impetus for the campaign, which aimed to bring change through every member's cooperation.This level of design transcends stage 4 of the Design Ladder, lebeled 'Design as Strategy' and commonly used in the narrow business sense. For vernacular designers, however, this is a level of design as a strategy to drive society forward.

Figure 3 This lady, known as Aunt Saeng, has returned to the cloth-weaving career to be reunited with her family—grandmother, mother, and granddaughter. Leaving the job of cleaning chemical-sprayed vegetables behind, she not only has become a designer of weaving motifs reflecting the Lanna Tai ethnic group's traditional irrigation system but also is teaching her granddaughter the craft of weaving, passing on the skill from her generation to the next.

Figure 4 Through common pool resources management, this community has redesigned its area to exhibit its works of art (the poems by the community's youth members) and apicultural products. The income generated by the sales of the products is spent on its forest protection campaign—'benefits from the forest must be used to protect the forest.' These are the outcomes of domestication, the recourse to original intelligence to adapt to the changing world by establishing a balance between nature and culture.

Figure 5 The design of a prayer activity at a deserted temple to restore faith amongst community members has transformed an ancient site—civilization-wise only a material object possessed by the state—into an accessible religious place. Using strategic design, community members have designed the system of activities and the instruments in their fight for a significant space.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Ordinary people employ vernacular design as a fighting tool that makes them 'alive and alert' to drive their chosen way of life forward. Vernacular design is not a reflection of society. Instead, it is a social operation originating from people's review of their ancestral intelligence, interpreting it, and using it to generate social power to create a balance between nature and culture. Such a balance is intended to respond to people's way of life and solve their daily problems on a case-by-case basis.

The concept of vernacular design has been assigned several definitions. However, every definition signifies a static, form-oriented meaning. This article, presenting alternative findings accumulated during the past 15 years, argues that vernacular design is a social process adopted as a 'weapon' in politico-cultural spaces. As such, vernacular design is a social dynamic with four escalating intensity levels, as shown in Figure 6.

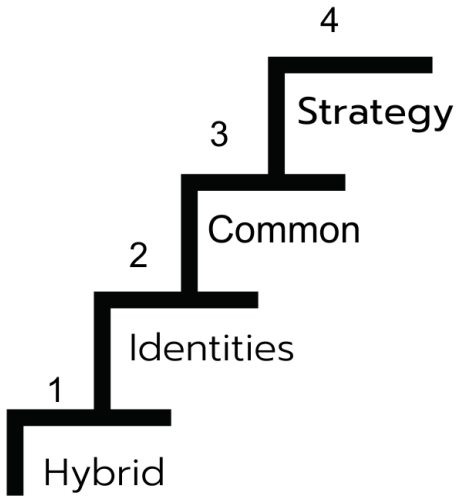

Figure 6 Vernacular design ladder

This distinguishes vernacular design from industrial design, which attempts to maintain uniformity and subject people and their way of life to domestication, thereby causing industrial reliance and downgrading humanity. Whereas industrial design promotes mass production and a unified 'mega-culture' called globalization, vernacular design promotes people's use of design to address their problems, advance their means of livelihood, create options, strive for sustainability, respond to their needs in their way of life, and to distribute bodies of knowledge to all members of the community. Thus, in the culture of vernacular design, everybody is a skilled designer with an individual aesthetic vernacular.

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