

# DESIGN + CULTURE

A Return to  
Fundamentalism?

## David Report

issue 13/March 2011



YOUR PATHFINDER INTO THE FUTURE

**'Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future.'**

**Albert Camus**

## Foreword

Design and Culture have always been closely interrelated, but in many instances design is flaunted as the true measure of culture, rather than belonging to part of cultural context of the society. Design has become the embodiment of a larger process of creative 'culture-mongering' that has become a means to capture ideation, innovation and enterprise and made to stand for cultural identity.

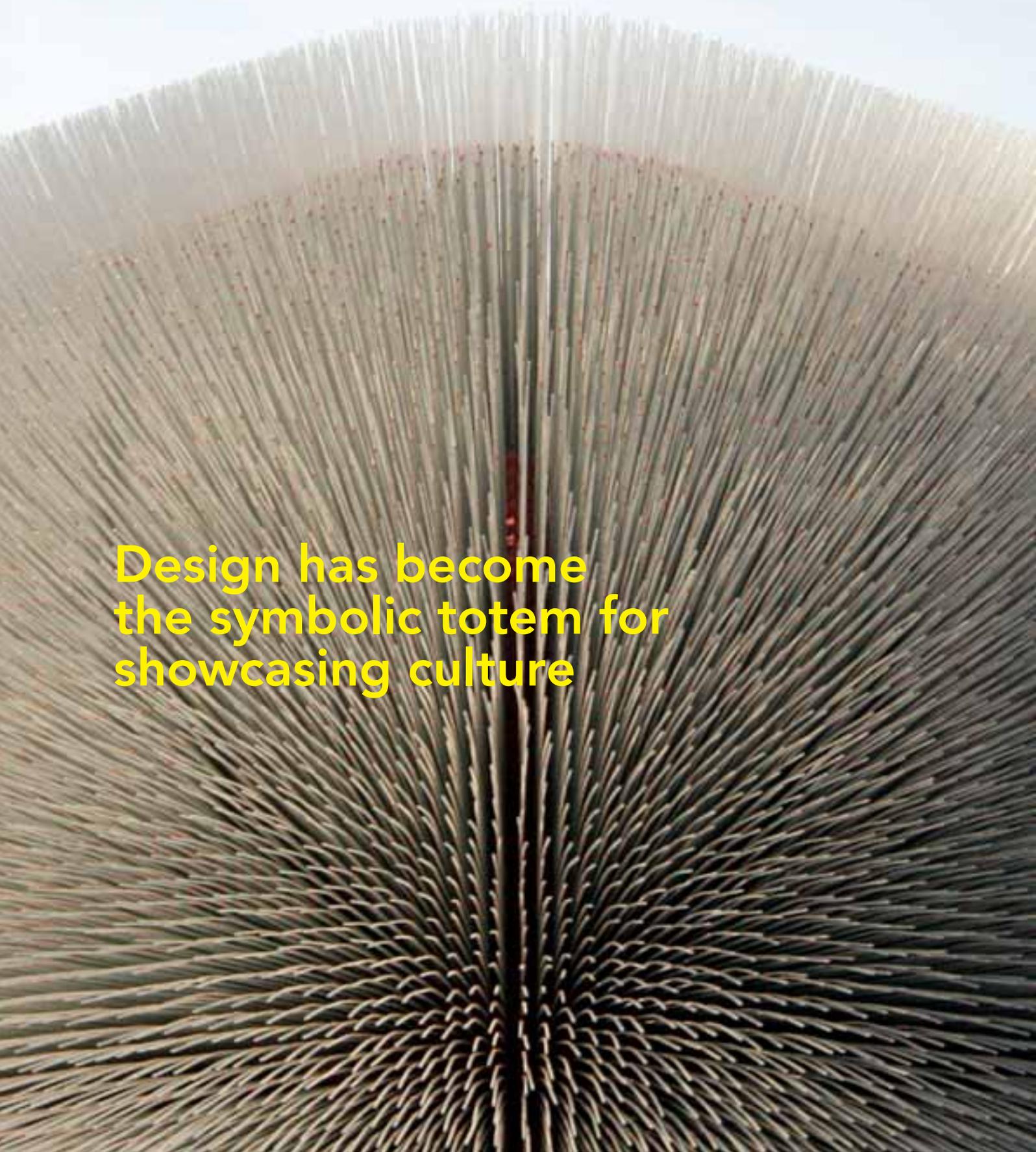
Design has become synonymous with the labeling of culture; 'designed culture', which now represents both the emblem of prosperity and is the considered means to legitimise areas of urban regeneration in order to gain international recognition as well as mediating for social change. For example, the siting of the London Olympics in the east of London and Qatar's award to host 2022 World Cup Finals and to build a national identity solely based on Football. Which is an amazing feat for a tiny peninsula in Persian Gulf that was no more than barren desert twenty-two years ago.



*ArcelorMittal Orbit by Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond is a 115 metres (377 ft) high observation tower under construction in the Olympic Park in Stratford, London.*

*Thomas Heatherwick UK Pavilion at Expo Shanghai*

**Design has become  
the symbolic totem for  
showcasing culture**



*SAANA Serpentine Pavilion Hyde Park London.*



This is further evidenced by the increasing visibility of design, and engineered art and architecture, re: Marks Barfield London Eye, Thomas Heatherwick UK Pavilion at Expo Shanghai, Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate Chicago USA and SAANA Serpentine Pavilion Hyde Park London. Design has become the symbolic totem for showcasing culture, and the official cultural tag at international events such as the Olympics, European Capitals of Culture, Trade Expositions,

Design Fairs and Biennale, Creative Industries, around the world.

In this sense, whilst the application of design is multiplying exponentially, it is also losing its validity as an authentic cultural icon. It has become synonymous with cloning the face of global culture itself, more often representing the uniformity of mass globalisation, rather than reflecting the facets of cultural difference and diversity.

**'Designers are interested in Culture. But sometimes they treat it in a way corporations used to treat design: something consulted too little, too late... its odd when we consider how often designers have shaped Culture.'**  
**–Grant McCracken**

*Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao Spain*



The cultural attributes of difference and diversity have been fundamentally weakened, and like face that has undergone cosmetic surgery, the result is a facsimile vaguely familiar but disturbingly without a true sense of identity. It is everyone's and no one's, and belongs in no single place more than another.

For example compare Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao Spain, which has a specificity of setting and place, with the lack of connectivity of SANAA's Museum of Contemporary Art in New York USA. Despite its architectural merit, as cultural icon, it could be located in any number of cities and lacks genius loci and true connectedness.

SANAA's Museum of Contemporary Art in New York USA

The application of design is multiplying exponentially, but it is losing its validity as an authentic cultural icon



Traditionally, Culture is referred to as a pattern that signifies human activity manifested by the arts, music, sculpture, theatre, dance, film, fashion, design, food and architecture. In contemporary popular culture, it also includes the Internet, entertainment, and the cult of celebrity, as part of a range of cultural signifiers.

But in a wider ethnographic sense, Culture embraces complex ways of living, value systems, traditions, beliefs and habits; including knowledge, morals, law and customs, acquired by those within that Society. These provide for a set of 'cultural objects', which symbolise a shared schematic experience, and which we recognise as having cultural value.

Culture in the classical sense, was considered distinctive and distinguishable, and by definition represented the 'ethos of a civilisation'. It was celebrated by the quality and of its sophistication', beliefs, and level of enlightenment. Customs and practices were informed by the Arts, and identified a particular place, class, time or a set of specific attitudes of a group. Like a biological culture, it was nutrient rich and diverse in its concentration of medium.



*Biological culture, in a Petri dish*



**Culture in the classical sense, was like a biological culture, it was nutrient rich and diverse in its concentration of medium**

## HINDU

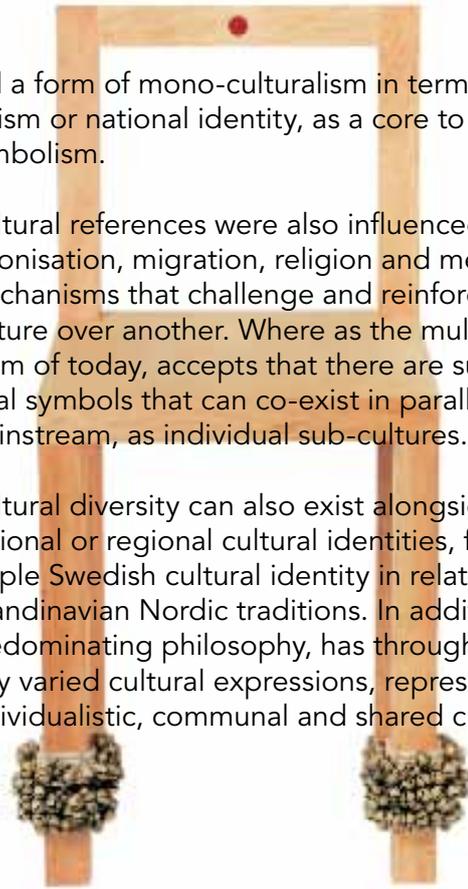
In the context of human development the measure of a civilisation lies in it's strength of culture, as is personified in its signification of its cultural identity and its richness of cultural objects. Typically, from the Inca's, the Egyptian's, the Greek's, the Roman's, to the Renaissance etc. all were characterised by distinctive cultural signatures, and celebrated by the wealth of meaningful artefacts.

Historically, culture has been identified with creation of the 'civilised state' and social cultivation, (the progressive refinement of social behaviour) frequently associated with persons who were educated, stratifying culture into high, low, popular and primitive. The identity of a given culture within a society is that which is sustainable and is widely recognised. But where the primary culture is challenged, sub-cultures emerge and are recognised as tangents to the mainstream, whereas classical culture represen-

ted a form of mono-culturalism in terms of nationalism or national identity, as a core to cultural symbolism.

Cultural references were also influenced by trade, colonisation, migration, religion and media, mechanisms that challenge and reinforce one culture over another. Where as the multi-culturalism of today, accepts that there are sub-cultural symbols that can co-exist in parallel to the mainstream, as individual sub-cultures.

Cultural diversity can also exist alongside transnational or regional cultural identities, for example Swedish cultural identity in relation to Scandinavian Nordic traditions. In addition, the predominating philosophy, has throughout history varied cultural expressions, represented as individualistic, communal and shared cultures.



## KRISHNA



## ELEPHANT CAVE



**Cultural intervention can accelerate change, and we are now experiencing the affects of cultural fusions**

*REALITIES IN A MEETING is an art project about multicultural design. Following a study trip to her native India Sanna Sevika Hansson, who grew up in Sweden, designed a collection of conceptual chairs, bringing together two radically different design traditions.*

*Noma Copenhagen, Danish cuisine  
in relation to the Nordic Diet.*



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But contemporary culture can also be appreciated as a complex of shifting patterns that link or bind social formations into recognised sub-cultural identities. One can argue that globalisation, tied to consumption, is a really a continuation of the monoculture that has been challenged and is being replaced by alternative sub-cultural niches. The niches form new identities and in turn embrace as well as resist change. A dynamic flux that is affected by expansion, reproduction or domination, which can apply challenges to the nature of the cultural norm, but also provide coherence to shared values.

Subsequently, expansion can lead to 'acculturation' whereby the characteristics of one culture are replaced by another. In other cases, cultural intervention can accelerate this change, and we are now experiencing the affects of cultural fusions, particularly in the context of a fracturing and migrating global economy. Design has become omnipresent within Culture, as it has been adopted as a convenient badge to add value and market commodity, and to signify identity. Following Designer era of 1980's, the added value of design was replaced by design as cultural value, embodied in leading Brands of the 1990's.



*Snøhetta's Opera House Oslo Norway*

This was followed by creative entrepreneurs and the formation of Creative Clusters promoted design as innovation, in the 'culture of economic recovery', led by the recreation of cultural identities motivated. The notion of a traditional national cultural identity being replaced by regional and city cultural identities, personified in Europe by emergence of 'The Cities of Culture' program, and co-supported by a annual matrix of Trade, Design Fairs and Fashion Shows of Milan, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Moscow.

In addition, the rise of the museum as the Ark of cultural identity in 1990's permanently converged Design and Culture into one cultural fusion, and became universally communicated as measure

of cultural success, perfectly personified by the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum in Spain 1997. Described on its completion as one of the most admired works 'a single moment in architectural culture' because it represents 'one of those rare moments when critics and academics and the general public were all completely united...'. This fusion has continued with the adoption of other cultural buildings such as Snøhetta's Bibliotheca 2002 Alexandria Egypt, Calatrava's Hemispheric City of Arts & Sciences 2006 in Valencia Spain, Snøhetta's Opera House 2008 Oslo Norway, Hadid's MAXXI Museum of Contemporary Art 2009 Rome Italy.

However, in the 21st Century the task of capturing Culture has become more and more difficult in terms of expressing culture through the medium of design. Design increasingly struggles for a clear sense of definition, and one is left asking, what can Culture really mean today, if it is no longer tied to consumer lifestyle? We remain in a post-contemporary state where we require a redefinition of meaning, value and identity.

In our loss identity we reveal our lack of well being that we are even more needy of an informed cultural identity to counteract the confused nature of urban context, which is in a state of flux and rapid change. There appears no time to allow for new forms of culture to grow, to be cultivated, and to restore our environs.

The uncertainty of a designed fusion Culture has replaced the certainty of traditional cultural monoculture. Which in turn has been diluted by an obsession with 'cultural materialism'. What remains of the original cultural sources are being plundered in order to restock our lack of creative DNA. The net result is an erosion of the remaining authentic sources, but also the creation of a 'cultural time lag' which has been generated by a convergence of trans-cultural fusions,



Poster by Edholm Ullenius



Pouf by Monica Förster inspired by Lapp handicrafts



Chairs by Lina Nordqvist



*Embroidery chairs by Johan Lindsten*

hybridisation, and of recurrent cultural cross referencing.

The comprehensive scale and the rapid growth of globalism has undermined independent cultural identities, due to the disparate nature of where design and production takes place, and lack of knowledge concerning the true origin of materials and products. This is further confused by a combination of diverse sourcing, and unsustainable methods of labour and manufacture. Previously well defined and rooted cultural sources like British, Scandinavian, Italian and Japanese Design have been diffused by Far Eastern production, and simulation of ideation and copycat design.

In addition, the world financial crisis of the last three years has seriously undermined the traditional sense of culture in the West, giving rise to a myriad of niche sub-cultures. Niches that are primarily sourced and transacted digitally over the Internet, and whose origin and sourcing are both hybrid and the result of fusion. These products are largely concealed in processing and

fabrication techniques, and are non-brands that are camouflaged.

However, there are signs that despite this confusion and fusion of cultural identities, new cultural strands are being revived and are re-appearing. Some are intended and strategically driven, and some indirect reactions to the desire to reclaim a more long lasting cultural integrity. There has been a return to a type of 'Cultural Fundamentalism' which has been prompted by a reconsideration of the roots of national design in Europe, led by Dutch Design, and more recently by Flemish and Scandinavian Design. With new Swedish Design in furniture and product leading areas of sustainability, use of materials and relating to areas of cultural nostalgia and design anthropology.

*Clogs by Ineke Hans with  
a folkloristic reference*

To see the real value of culture  
as designing through the lens  
of humanity, to create memorable  
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Chinese art by Zhang Xiaogang



There has also been a rise in a more authentic Chinese Art and Design that is no longer derivative of Western styles, but is culturally rooted and seeking to explore an oriental techniques and appreciation to artworks.

Similarly, in India there is a new generation of contemporary craft-designers that are successfully exploiting traditional techniques in new ways and with contemporary approaches to narrative, ornament and detail. These designers are educated in the West but exploring their own cultural influences afresh, and with a new eye for cultural value.



*The Dinner stack, new Indian design from Gunjan Gupta, connecting luxury, craft and design.*



Another recent example is Icelandic Design. Despite the collapse of the Icelandic economy in 2008/9, which brought the country to a halt in days and could have resulted in a mass cultural migration. Instead Iceland is experiencing a period of intense design activity. This has involved the revival of the country's Nordic/ Viking cultural heritage, and as a result Icelandic art, crafts, fashion, product design, music, food and cultural tourism are all experiencing a boom of international interest and notoriety.

*Blanket Shield of wings by Icelandic Vik Prjonsdottir designed as a homage to the Sea Eagle - the king of birds.*



# Traditional cultural strands are being revived and reconfigured in new ways



*A pouf by Icelandic design group Volki referring to old fishermen's ropes as a technique for new furniture.*



*Flatpack antiques by Studiobility from Reykjavik.*



*Brand Identity with a clear reference to Icelandic cultural heritage from Spaksmannspjarir.*



According to the recent ISEAD (Confederation Indian Industry) 2010 Global Innovation Index, which evaluates 132 countries using a range of world data sources the World Economic Forum the World Bank and UN, positioned Iceland as No.1 (in the top ten in the world) as the innovation champion, displacing USA.

Icelandic design has grown culturally distinctive, and more genuine in its culture referencing. There is a real sense that the basis of this optimism is as a direct result of the rediscovery and resurgence of Icelandic Culture and an appreciation of the value of its shared Nordic identity.

*Birdy coathanger by Asdis Jorundsdottir from Iceland. "The Birdy coathanger moves gently when overcoats are put on or taken off it, it moves from the constant activities of humans. All the while, the three birds sit quietly on their branch".*



**The desire to reclaim a more long lasting cultural integrity and a return to a type of cultural fundamentalism**

Whilst it has been argued that Design has been manifesting and consolidating an outmoded position in relation to Culture as a monoculture, Design can now adopt a central role as the creative nutrient for a form of 'cultural permaculture.'<sup>\*</sup> (\*Note: This term is an adaptation of the term permaculture that is typically related to an approach to designing human settlements and agricultural systems that are modelled on a relationship to natural ecology.)

There is a opportunity to borrow from this concept, to employ an approach to combine the knowledge of indigenous people's and ethical ecological design, to permit an exemplary form of sustainable 'cultural permaculture' to be evolved. Central to this new concept would be to develop an approach to Culture that maintains an authenticity and meaningful use of identity, through a broad based and holistic approach.

This progression involves a paradigm shift in the nature of cultural dependence – from relying primarily on universal globally imported cultural criteria, to more specific, locally based, and the referencing of native traditions, rituals and symbolism. It is necessary to look further and include values such as authenticity, aesthetics, affectivity and compatibility, and to see the real value of culture as designing through the lens of humanity, to create memorable experiences, and emotionally rewarding objects.

**Design can now adopt a central role as the creative nutrient for a form of 'cultural permaculture.'**



*Crystal milk bottles by Samantha Sweet made as a reminder of individuality with a reference to authentic bottles which are rapidly discarded.*

**'Lack of culture means  
what it has always  
meant: ignoble  
civilization and  
therefore imminent  
downfall.'**

**Frank Lloyd Wright**

## Our wind-up

A return to cultural fundamentals is essential if we are to reengage our tribal past to the present and towards a collective local global future. Cultural Fusion may be good for the status quo, but it creates cultural confusion for the soul.

# David Report

## about:

### This issue

This issue of David Report is created by David Carlson and Brent Richards.

### About David Report

The David Report covers the intersection of design, culture and business life with a creative and humanistic approach. By challenging conventional thinking we are always trying to make a difference.

### About David Carlson

David Carlson is a figurehead in the international design community as a culturally-connected trend insight specialist and multi-disciplinary design thinker. He is regularly invited as a speaker, moderator and panel member at conferences worldwide.

### About Brent Richards

Brent is multi award winning Chartered Architect and Designer, ex Dean of Design at Saint Martins, he has Design Masters (Distinction) Saint Martins College University of the Arts London. Brent has over twenty years experience a International Creative consultant and Design Mentor to major Corporations, SME's and Academic Institutions. He is a regular speaker on UK Creativity, Innovation and Sensory Design around the world.

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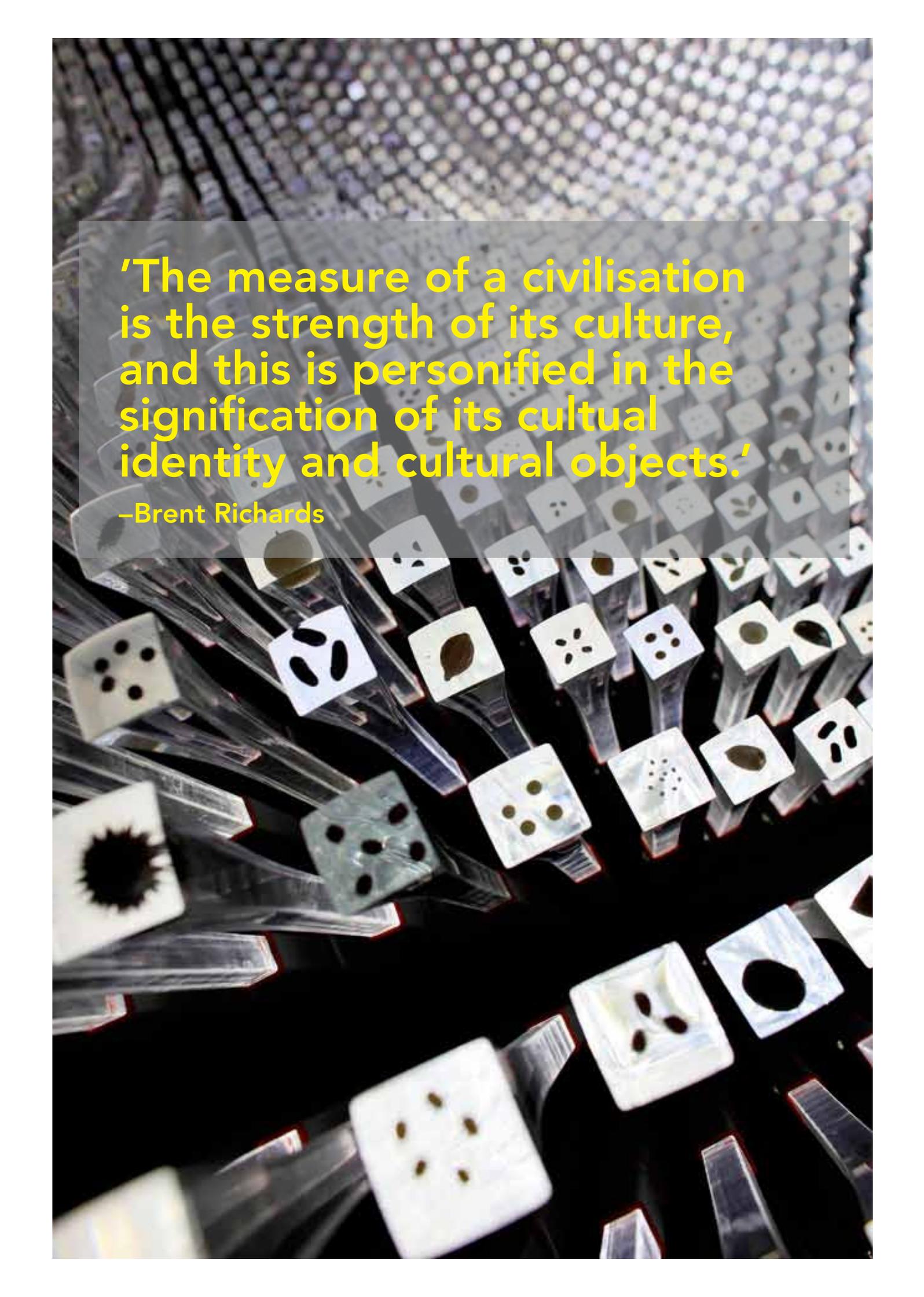
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A close-up photograph of a computer keyboard, focusing on the keys. The keys are white and have various symbols and characters on them. The image is slightly blurred, creating a sense of depth. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the upper portion of the keyboard.

'The measure of a civilisation is the strength of its culture, and this is personified in the signification of its cultural identity and cultural objects.'

—Brent Richards