CROSS-CULTURAL PARTICIPATORY DESIGN ASSESSMENT ACROSS DIFFERING INTERNATIONAL POLITCAL CONTEXTS

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1   ABSTRACT

The study utilizes areas of scholarship in cross-cultural settings and participatory design to develop assessment criteria for international design studios across varying political contexts (Hou 2010, Nassar & Hewitt 2010). As part of the study, two cross-cultural design courses between American/Egyptian students and American/Iranian students were used to establish baseline relative cultural/political differences utilizing Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessments, "EIU Political Index" assessments, and "Conflict Barometer" assessments. The American/Egyptian student groups and the American/Iranian student groups were observed and surveyed to assess the extent of their community design participation, student learning, listening openness, student group common purpose, individual actions, relative cultural awareness, and their means of collaboration in the United States, Egypt, and Iranian. The study evaluated meaningful work by students in both classes as a comparative metric for educational outcomes. Meaningful work included shared regional and local research; research related to planning for development; collaborative fieldwork for site inventory and analysis; community resident interviews and analysis; collaborative site analysis and conceptual development; group presentations; and presentations to government officials about fieldwork findings including community survey information.
Findings suggest that: 1) the greater the cultural/political differences between the three student groups, the less meaningful work accomplished by the groups (largely as a result of perceived and imposed participation limitations); and 2) the more collaborative means of sharing knowledge, flexible ways of thinking, studying and learning, the greater the perceived influence of culture in stimulating creative thinking and mediating cultural/political differences.

1.1   Key Words
Multicultural, Participation, Design, Politics, Pedagogy

2   INTRODUCTION

While demand for participatory design within democratic cultures remains significant over the last four decades (Alinsky1971, Hester 1990, Sanoff 2000), effective methods for cross-cultural international design education between members of fully democratic and less democratic societies is largely unaddressed. Landscape architecture education scholarship suggests that contemporary participatory design techniques can address both cross-cultural and global contexts (Hou 2010, Angotti 2017, Irazibal 2016). CELA Conference discourse concerning community participatory techniques (Hester & Hou 2015) has also recently addressed participatory cross-cultural design. This paper extends that discourse into contexts of differing cross-cultural political orientation: examining participatory design techniques for landscape architecture educators working across international contexts with distinctly different values related to community participation activities and with significant differences in the political philosophies of student home countries.

An examination of the intersection between design scholarship in cross-cultural political contexts and recent cross-cultural participatory design scholarship suggests several promising areas of research in international design education. Research in landscape architecture international education (Hewitt & Nassar 2005) identifies three topics closely associated with participatory design discourse relevant to this study: 1) course cultural context, 2) means of collaboration, and 3) global political context (Callan 2004; Zeszotarski 2001). International education discourse and participatory design discourse relevant to this study emphasize: 1) an enhanced sense of culture: 2) better participant understanding of place in the design context: and 3) the importance of shared cultural contexts at local/regional and international/global scales (Callan 2004; Haug and Race 1998; Zeszotarski 2001). Hou suggests that these areas of interest may be particularly challenging when impediments related to both language and culture effect communication and participant engagement (Hou 2013).

While Hou rightfully states that many of these challenges can be overcome through an acknowledgement of familiar community perceptions, existing organizations, social groups, and participatory activities (Hou 2011), Giroux stresses learning in cross-cultural settings, particularly in settings where official communication might be restricted, as can occur between societies with very different political systems (Giroux 1997). Friere makes note of the importance of listening openness for learning in such situations, especially where communication may be intermittent and mediated (Friere 2000). Taylor emphasizes the importance of common purpose and action to increase design process relevance during cultural geopolitical conflict and in the face of identity-based politics (Taylor 1992).

These notions of collaborative learning, listening openness, common purpose, recognition of place, and shared cultural context serve as common themes informing both participatory design in cross-cultural political contexts and participatory design in general. It is this sense of common themes between participatory design and international design education that informs our exploration of participatory design in cross-cultural political contexts, and particularly those aspects most amenable to working groups from very different cultural/political backgrounds. The paper draws on research related to student educational experience in collaborative urban design studios between American an Egyptian Universities (Nassar & Hewitt 2010), and in fieldwork courses between American and Iranian Universities evaluating the effects of globalization on the landscape in Tehran (Hewitt, Hekmatfar, Nassar, Mansouri & Eshrati 2009).

3   METHODS

Research methodology includes the use of pilot surveys administered to four groups of students in one landscape architecture studio and one field study course from three countries, each exhibiting considerably different cultural values and different political orientations. In the studio, Egyptian and American students were surveyed with identical instruments at the end of the analysis phase, the master plan phase, and at the conclusion of the studio. Collaborative studio methods and techniques addressing decision-making and design participation were recorded. The Iranian and American collaborative course on globalization and landscape change in Tehran included undergraduate, and graduate American students in landscape architecture and undergraduate students in landscape architecture at the University of Tehran. Both groups of students were surveyed with identical instruments at the conclusion of the course. Attention was paid to the collaborative transactions between and among student designers. Constituent community members were not available out of concern for adverse political ramifications.

Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessment maps (World Values Survey 2017) and a "Democracy Index" (Boudagga 2014) were used to approximate the relative cultural/political orientations associated of the student groups' national societies. Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessment maps locate values of national

societies for analytical purposes along two perpendicular dimensions, based on a national society's preferences related to traditional values and secular-rational values, and based on each national society's preferences related to survival values and self–expression values. According to this assessment method, traditional value rankings correlate with levels of societal preferences for religion, traditional family values, and deference to authority, often including high levels of national pride and nationalistic outlooks. Secular-rational values, in turn, reflect opposing preferences to those associated with traditional value preferences. Similarly, survival values emphasize economic and physical security, indicate relative ethnocentricity, and include lower degrees of social trust and tolerance. Self-expression values prioritize environmentalism, tolerance of outsiders, gender and sexual equality, and often include individual decision-making in economics and governance.
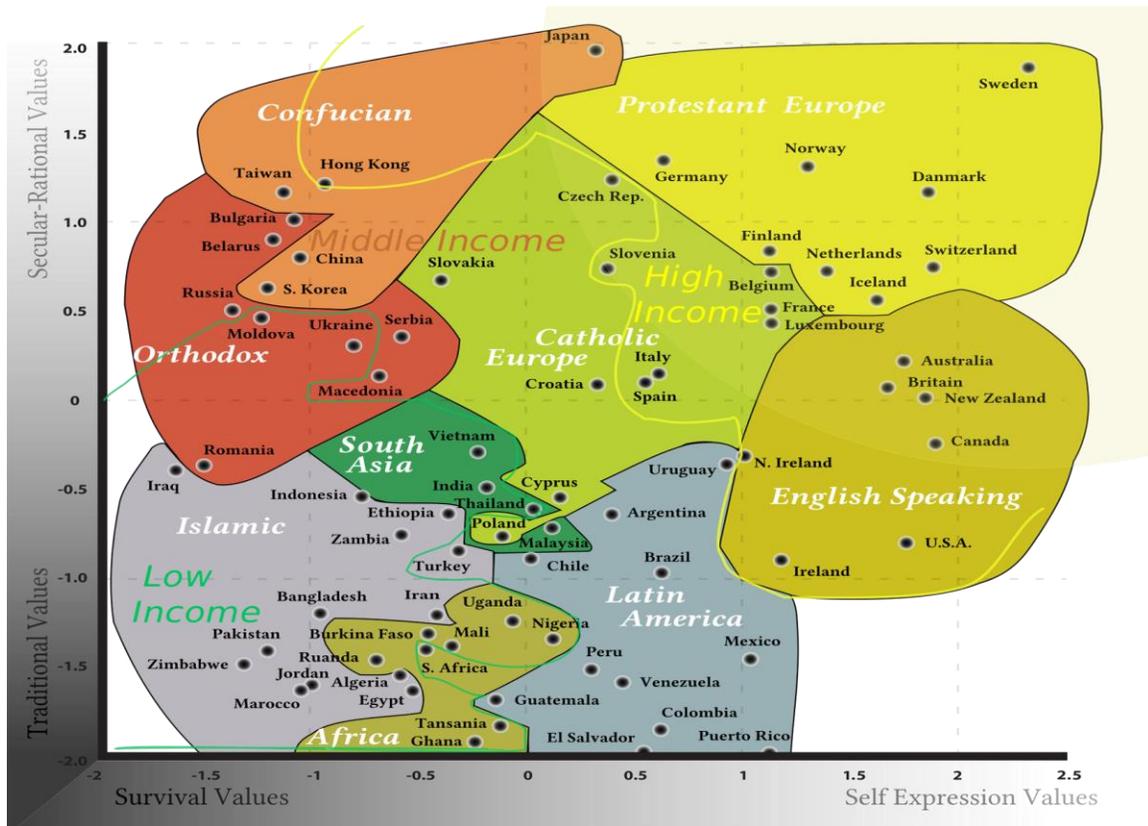

Figure 1.   Ingelhardt - Welzel cultural assessment map for Geography, Income, and Religion 2014, Public domain image from World Value Survey: Ingelhardt-Welzel cultural assessment map http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp.

In addition to mapping socio-cultural values, Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessment maps correlate well with designations reflecting political orientation and governance such as post-communist, liberal democratic, authoritarian, and traditional sovereignty. (See Figure 1) An analysis of the Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessment map identifies Egyptian relative cultural values as among the most traditional (-1.70 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0) and moderately skewed towards survival values (-.50 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0). Iranian relative cultural values are very traditional (-1.25 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0) and moderately skewed towards survival values (-.50 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0). American relative cultural values are moderately traditional (-.75 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0) and are among the highest in self-expression (+1.75 on a scale of -2.0 to +2.0). These value assessments suggest a range of deference to authority and traditional values from most deferential in Egypt to very deferential in Iran and moderately deferential in the United States. They reflect relatively equivalent survival values in both Egypt and Iran with very high self- expression values in the United States.

Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessment maps correlate well with "EIU Democracy Index" designations reflecting political orientation. The Democracy Index, published by the U.K. - based Economist Intelligence Unit, is an assessment of national political orientation ranging from fully democratic to authoritarian. The index derives from 60 indicators grouped in five different categories measuring pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture. Countries are rated as Full Democracies (greens in Figure 2), Flawed Democracies (yellow in Figure 2), Hybrid Regimes (oranges in Figure 2), or Authoritarian Regimes (reds in Figure 2). In the context of our study, the Inglehart–Welzel cultural assessments correlate with "Democracy Index" assessments describing Egypt's political orientation as a "hybrid regime" (3-4 on a scale of 0-10). It describes Iran's political orientation as "authoritarian" (0-2 on a scale of 0-10), and the United States as "close to full democracy" (8-9 on a scale of 0-10). Please note that the Inglehart–Welzel assessments describe Egypt as relatively more culturally deferential to authority, while the "Democracy Index" identifies Iran as relatively more authoritarian politically. (See Figure 2)
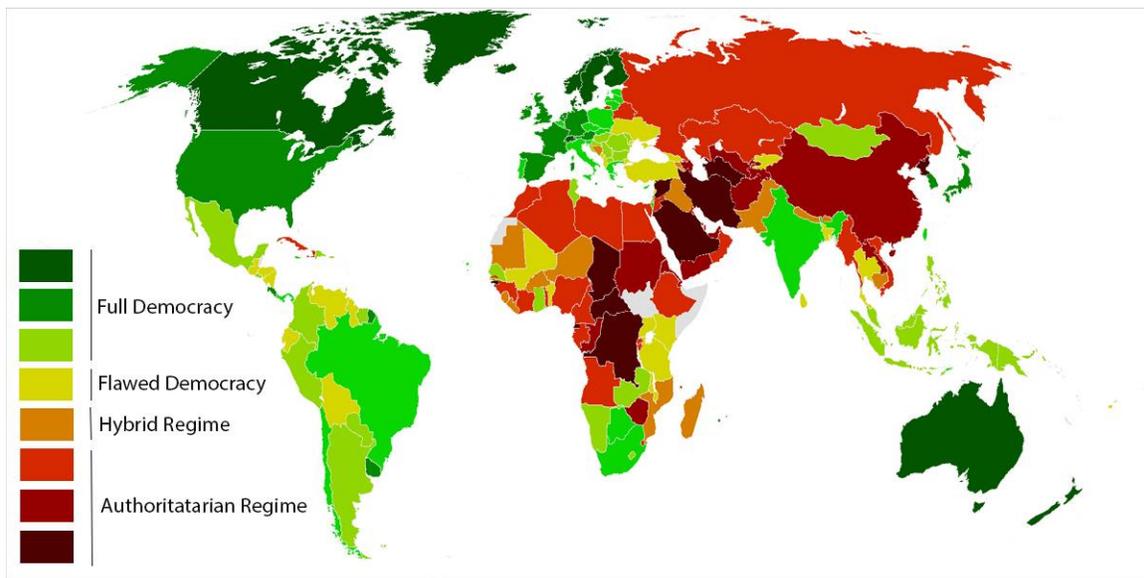

Figure 2. EIU Democracy Index map 2014 Adapted from public domain image "EIU Democracy Index 2014 green and red by Boudagga" from eiu.com. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Commons.

Observations throughout the two classes concerning student cultural values and political orientation occurred throughout the semester. For example, in the American/Iranian course, initial discussions among students and between professors identified concerns from both groups about the sensitive nature of the collaboration given the political climate between the United States and Iran. Fieldwork aspects of the course were limited because of travel restrictions imposed by the respective national governments. Both American university personnel and the professor of landscape architecture at Tehran voiced concern about potential political ramifications associated with official contact between American and Iranian universities. As a result, official communication was limited to informal communication through the internet, while community participation was not possible at that time.

A "Conflict Barometer" developed by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg Institute 2009) informs deeper understandings of the relationship between Inglehart–Welzel cultural values, the "Democracy Index" assessments, and the American/Iranian students' sense of inhibiting political climates. The Institute's "Conflict Barometer" cites continuing conflict between Iran and the United States during the time of the course related to Iran's nuclear program, the finance and arming of various regional militia groups, and sporadic low-level diplomatic and military confrontation. The year of the studio, the U S President made several positive diplomatic overtures, reciprocated by the Iranian president, which in retrospect may have contributed to a political climate favorable to our informal collaborative work.

In contrast to the American/Iranian course, the American/Egyptian studio presented only modest concerns about cultural/political sensitivity, and few concerns about collaboration given political relations

between the United States and Egypt. Fieldwork was modestly limited because of political instability within Egypt at the time. There was little apprehension about punitive actions by either government, or about official contact between American and Egyptian participants. While transactions occurred only between Iranian students and their constituent community members in Iran, transactions between both American and Egyptian students and their constituent community members in Egypt took place informally, and were not officially sanctioned.

The "Conflict Barometer" also informs deeper understandings of the relationship between Inglehart–Welzel cultural values, the "Democracy Index" assessments, and the American/Egyptian students' inability to work officially with community participants. The "Conflict Barometer" cites a decades-long continuing conflict between the Egyptian government and several large banned opposition groups and a formal state of emergency in effect since 1981. It also notes Egyptian police detention and arrest of several political opposition groups for activities in support of Palestine, which upon retrospect may have increased the sense of domestic instability that limited official contact with the community.

3.1 The Participation Assessment Conceptual Model

Student and educator perceptions and activities, cultural assessment mapping, indices of national political orientation and metrics of national conflict between the three countries, taken as a whole, suggest an assessment model for cross-cultural/political orientation and participatory design. It suggests a preliminary scope of design participation that can range from: 1) (in re Iran) field work limited by travel restrictions, fear of political potential political ramifications due to official communication, and restricted community participation; to 2) (in re Egypt) concern about political instability, modestly limited field work, little apprehension of punitive actions for official contact, and some restricted community participation with supervised data collection and analysis; to 3) (in re United States) long-practiced community design participation, concern about best-practices for cultural inclusion, few limitations on fieldwork or data collection, but significant to modest concerns concerning contact and work with different countries related to US domestic and international political orientation.

3.2 Studio and Course Survey and Findings: The American/Iranian Course

Communication between the American/Iranian groups was facilitated by one student from each of the student groups acting as intermediaries to share information, to translate English and Farsi as needed, and to act as contact points for communication. The students in Tehran provided a website to post information, but the provision of a complimentary website at Clemson was perceived as too controversial given the political climate in the United States. Students shared the results of research findings over the course of the semester, and the results of fieldwork in Tehran throughout the semester with intermediaries and the Tehran website (Hewitt, Hekmatfar, Nassar, Mansouri & Eshrati 2009).

In addition to the Iranian-only fieldwork studies, surveys were distributed among all course participants. Six American students responded to the survey questions, as did twelve students in Tehran. The survey questions to the students addressed: 1) communication barriers and facilitating communication within the course: 2) student perception of official and unofficial communication: and 3) the learning and personal benefits of the cross-cultural course. Findings from the surveys suggest that: 1) both groups of students considered geopolitical distance most pressing while the Iranian students were more concerned with how to bridge the communication barriers: 2) both groups of students agreed that official communication between the two groups remained inhibiting, and that unofficial communication was critical to the course's success: 3) both student groups emphasized the value of unique and collaborative ways of sharing knowledge, and the usefulness of the seminar's communication techniques: and 4) both groups reported a greater understanding of people, ways of thinking, studying and learning, and their place in the larger world (Hewitt, Hekmatfar, Nassar, Mansouri, Eshrati 2009).

American student responses emphasized the value of "unique ways of sharing knowledge," unique subject matter, and the usefulness of the course communication techniques. The students from Tehran were especially interested in the collaborative aspects of the course. Student comments noted the importance of "collaborative education between universities," of comparative cultural experience, "understanding of life styles," of "cooperative and individual learning," the exchange of professional information, and the importance of these kinds of collaborations in a globalizing world. They also expressed greater personal appreciation for the role of education in interpreting and mediating the relationship between conflict, place and culture. The students from Tehran described the personal benefits of participation in terms of a greater understanding of people, of "ways of thinking," "studying and learning,"

and of their place in the larger world. Concern was voiced by Iranian students concerning the confidentiality of their participation in the course, (Hewitt, Hekmatfar, Nassar, Mansouri, Eshrati 2009).

Consideration of meaningful work by the two groups is particularly important in establishing value related to course educational outcomes in these contexts. Meaningful work in the form of specific findings related to globalization and landscape change in Tehran suggests that: 1) resistance to modernization in Tehran has been relatively consistent over the last fifty years; 2) global technological and economic forces nevertheless has prompted significant changes in the landscape of Tehran; 3) change included the loss of traditional urban/village forms like the city wall, streets with water channels, and heritage trees that contributed to local identity; and 4) the loss of these traditional forms is exacerbated by extensive urban growth with non-traditional forms of streets, residential blocks, and industrial areas (Hewitt, Hekmatfar, Nassar, Mansouri, Eshrati 2009).

3.3   Studio and Course Survey and Findings: The American/Egyptian Studio
Surveys were distributed to both groups of students. Fifteen American students responded to the survey questions, as did twenty Egyptian students. The survey questions addressed: 1) cultural navigation skills, 2) understanding cultural attitudes, 3) awareness of common global and local contexts, 4) differences in language and areas of knowledge, and 5) communication. Findings from the surveys suggest that cultural exchange in different cultural settings can increase the sense of cultural understanding, develop/enhance respect for other cultures, and grow with greater collaborative contact (Nassar & Hewitt 2010).
In terms of the learning aspects, American/Egyptian student responses were similar to American/Iranian responses concerning the value of communication and sharing knowledge, and the value of both cooperative and individual learning. American/Egyptian students exhibited enhanced culturally related critical thinking; on-line communication skills to enhance face-to-face communication; awareness of the value of culture shock in stimulating creative thinking; and an increased awareness of common global and local phenomena ((Nassar & Hewitt 2010).
In contrast to the American/Iranian course, the American Egyptian studio had fewer barriers for community participation. Meaningful work accomplished by the American/Egyptian students, included: shared regional and local context research, research related to planning for development, collaborative fieldwork in Egypt, community residents interviews and analysis, collaborative site analysis and conceptual development, and presentations to government officials that included resident survey information.
While the American/Iranian course provided a preliminary baseline for minimum levels of participation and significant meaningful work, the American/Egyptian studio produced higher levels of participation and significant amounts of meaningful work despite greater difference in cultural values according to Inglehart–Welzel assessments. This is likely the influenced by relatively less American/Egyptian political conflict during the course period as noted in the "Conflict Barometer" assessment.

3.4   Discussion and Conclusions
In sum, the above examination assessing culture, political orientation, global context, and participation in landscape architecture education suggests: 1) the value of listening openness, common purpose, action, culture, and collaboration in course pedagogy across differing cross-cultural political contexts; and 2) the worth of predictive political and cultural assessment models to evaluate community participation course components in differing cultural/political contexts. Promising areas for further study might address: 1) methods of virtual community participation in cross-cultural landscape architecture pedagogy in the context of differing cultural/political orientation; 2) the effect of predictive models on community participation planning and development in cross-cultural political contexts; and 3) the effect of individual student and group cultural/political values on landscape architecture pedagogy in the context differing cross-cultural international landscape architecture education.

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