

## BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN INTERIOR DESIGN: WHEN GOOD INTENTIONS GO AWRY

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A local professional organization for interior designers issued a student design competition for a community cultural center to celebrate and teach others about a specific culture of the student's choosing. Culture was broadly defined beyond race, nationality, religious, and social beliefs to include any group with shared interests. Students were encouraged to select a culture they might 'admire' and want to learn more about. The premise of the project was well intentioned, however the brief embodied outdated notions of culture and contained language which was arguably insensitive. Adding these issues to underlying problems of 'pick-a-culture' projects, my first inclination was to decline to participate. However, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic exposed racial disparities in the US culture and economy, I recognized the critical importance of bringing conversations about race, privilege, stereotypes, appropriation, and advocacy into the classroom through reading, critique, and discussion. This paper raises multiple questions about the role of design, design education, and inclusion that surfaced through the project and identifies my own faults in the process. I question: who is allowed to design for 'others', was this an appropriate opportunity for minority students to use their own voice, did I imbue my white guilt into the class? I will also discuss how the intention of design as problem solving surfaced as power and privilege in conceptual development.

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### INTRODUCTION

Written with good intentions, aspects of the official Community Cultural Center student design competition description reflected older models of addressing culture in the curriculum, which left me reluctant to engage a classroom of students in the project. Given the backdrop of social upheaval in the United States and an on-going global pandemic, however, I recognized this as an opportunity to have critical, yet difficult, conversations about difference and culture in the classroom.

Although I held many concerns about the foundations of this competition project, I decided to run the project in a third-year interior design studio. By declining to participate, I could express my concerns with the competition organizers in hopes of starting a positive dialog toward cultural competence in the field. However, by not raising these same issues with students, I would not be affording the opportunity to build awareness with future designers. Introducing the competition into the classroom would allow difficult, but necessary, conversations. Was it against my better judgment to proceed?

### CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN INTERIOR DESIGN

Lack of diversity in practising designers and design educators (Travis, 2018; Alderton, 2021; Keh, 2021 & Zara, 2021) as well as increased awareness of how design can impact inclusion in public space are imperative topics for discourse in the interior design studio (Kopec, 2012, Nussbaumer, 2011; Schindler, 2015). Interior design education has successfully integrated the application of standards and guidelines that respect a variety of physical statures and abilities for decades. Program implementation and accreditation standards related to cultural difference, however, has not been as uniform with less recognition of the role interior environments play in exclusion of marginalized populations.

Currently, the Council for Interior Design Accreditation requires inclusive design, multi-cultural awareness, and exposure to a variety of cultural norms as required components

of interior design curriculum (Council for Interior Design Accreditation n.d.). There is broad agreement about implementing standards for physical difference, however, framing the way in which culture is addressed in curricular standards has been an evolving conversation in the field. Moving away from older notions of culture as static, historical, and framed in difference to recognition that culture is constructed and constantly evolving, has afforded new approaches to cultural competence in the classroom. As with the second principle of heterotopias which reflect the shifting meaning, purpose, and location of customs (Foucault, 1986), the spaces we design should respect contemporary contexts and seek understanding from those who will inhabit a space (Hadjijanni, 2013).

In a critical essay targeting appropriate wording for cultural competence in interior design curriculum, Tasoulla Hadjijanni (2013) clearly articulates: "Teaching culture is a long and difficult journey as sensitivity to cultural considerations requires effort and knowledge" (p. vii) For students to read culture as constructed and evolving rather than something static or overgeneralized, requires an unfolding recognition of multiple world views and decentering of the dominant cultural perspective. Hadjijanni points out that framing intent to learn about 'other' cultures is problematic on many levels. At the core of the problem is that 'other' implies 'us' versus 'them,' but who is 'us' (other than implicitly the stereotypical interior design student body of white middle class women, which is not accurately reflected through the diversity in my classroom)?

Hadjijanni (2013) posits that, in exploring questions around culture, students should be exposed to multiple viewpoints with open-ended questions that move "the role of faculty as a facilitator in the process rather than authority with all the answers" (p. ix). As gender, class, race, power, and equity are embedded in culture, dialogue around diversity and marginalization are necessary. Without specialized knowledge and training, however, many faculty members are not comfortable or equipped to act as a facilitator in this dialogue.

Liz Teston (2019) notes in her letter response to Jack Travis' (2018) call for action to increase diversity in Interior Design, "as a white female design professor... the most appropriate way for me to advocate for diversity... can be confusing" (p. 79). This statement is based in conflicting arguments on the role of white allies as advocates to bring attention to minority voices versus perpetuating notions of the 'white savior' who is emboldened to rescue minorities, falsely perceived as defenseless. Recognizing both sides of this argument, I also find myself questioning what are the best ways to take steps toward, not only, promoting diversity of future designers but also ensuring the spaces we design, and the processes we use to design, are inclusive and culturally sensitive.

At the crux of discourse between ally and savior is the empathetic intention to do good, or be the 'do gooder'. Fritz Breithaupt (2015) discusses these nuances in his exploration of dark sides of empathy which I later expose in the student's thought process.

Similarly, in an effort to bring diverse voices to the table, I am conscious of harmful effects of tokenism (Muhs et al., 2012). It is important to note that I am a white, female, professor of Interior Design in the United States, which bears its own burdens. Even when I am able to bring in diverse role models as speakers or critics, I acknowledge that I am the one who is consistently in the classroom, providing feedback and reacting to ideas through my own cultural framework and values. Purporting anything else will only create an 'illusion of inclusion' (Travis, 2018).

## **STEREOTYPING, OTHERS, AND THE PICK-A-CULTURE APPROACH**

A local chapter of an interior design professional organization crafted a student competition to provide an opportunity for students to learn about and celebrate a culture, purportedly to align with accreditation requirements. Well intentioned, the call seemed fitting to address the role of interior design in providing spaces that are inclusive and culturally sensitive.

The students were provided with a, roughly, 35,000 square foot building shell, project description, and detailed program requirements which included: Entry/Reception, 12,000 square foot Interactive Space, Display Area, Retail, Café, Community Rooms, Library, Amphitheater, Classrooms, and 10,000 Square foot Administrative Office Suite. These spaces, meeting the specified size and other provided detailed provisions for each, needed to be arranged in the 2-story building at the student's discretion. The judging criteria included: Creativity and Innovation, Communication, Cultural Application, Codes and ADA, Space Planning, Finishes, and Furnishings. Although much larger than a typical competition project, the requirements, deliverables, and judging criteria are common for an interior design competition of this type that tends to center on space planning. All competition materials were made available to students on an online course management system, before the first day of class, along with a detailed schedule of interim due dates, critiques, and check-points across nine weeks allocated for the project.

Upon an initial read of the project description, and before instigating class discussions, one of my students privately admitted "some of the things they say are cringey." This student did not elaborate on which parts were cringeworthy but I would venture to guess the list of suggested cultures that ranged from "Japan" or "Hassidic Jews" to "Drag-Queens" and "K-Pop" were among the reactions. This list was provided

to demonstrate a broad definition of culture, opening the door for conversations about how culture is constructed. It also provided grounds to discuss overgeneralization and stereotyping in different ways we categorize people as "other". I found additional parts of the project description to be just as problematic. One example, which was provided for the use of specific products to be selected from competition sponsors, states:

*"If the culture is 'Native American' a detailed tile pattern on the walls leading to the public restrooms might be an interesting wayfinding and cultural reference."*  
(ASID 2021, p. 1)

Although there are, certainly, opportunities to respectfully incorporate cultural motifs and patterns within the design of a space for multiple purposes, I felt that statements such as these needed to be qualified through discussions of appropriation and understanding of symbolism. Additionally, the categorical association of motif with culture denies students the opportunity to question how such motifs came to be associated with the culture in question (Hadjiyanni, 2013). For example, many patterns and motifs we associate with indigenous people were influenced by economic and social impacts of colonization on native arts and crafts. The suggestion that there are patterns and motifs associated with "Native American culture" in itself does not recognize the history and diversity of indigenous tribes. The way in which the brief was written, this community cultural center was not necessarily conceived of as a place for people who share cultural traditions but as a way to place aspects of culture on display as "other". As an example:

*"The experience of the cultural community center starts as the visitor approaches and enters the building. Make the entry experience interesting and reflective of the culture."*

*Examples:*

*If the culture is 'Norse ship builders,' the entry might include something to suggest the timbers of a wooden ship, or perhaps some sort of sail.*

*If the culture is 'Japan' where shoes are frequently removed, then there could be an experience created at the entry for this 'ceremony.'*

*If the culture is 'hip-hop' where shoes are key, then maybe a shoe-camera is part of the entry experience"*  
(ASID 2021, p. 3)

Rather than integrating cultural norms for a specific group, students are tasked with creating an experience that reflects a cultural custom in an interesting way for a dominant culture to consume. Unless carefully considered, this seemed to invite exoticism, mirroring superficiality by focusing on product rather than production of culture found in travel writing (Burney, 2012). This was reflected, again, in the example provided to explain a 12,000 square foot interactive space:

*"Example: If the culture is 'Irish,' 'German,' or 'Dutch,' the Interactive Space might accommodate a gymnasium to accommodate dancing" (ASID 2021, p. 3)*

If my students were to take on this project, I wanted to ensure we were not embodying travel writing in the design, or what Burney refers to as the "western gaze" (2012, p. 26), but competently recognize stereotypes and gain a respect for evolving culture as integral to systems of living.

The project brief provided definitions distinguishing community and culture. This was the first thing we reviewed and discussed as a class when the project was introduced. The brief also stated "You can select the city, the culture, and the name of your facility for this competition" (ASID 2021, p. 2). After discussing culture as evolving rather than static, I revised this statement for the class to read: "You can select the city, *the community*, and the name of your facility for this competition." We discussed how this change re-frames the project away from treating culture as a product and toward the discovery of cultural customs, traditions, and habits that are shared within a specific community, which can be expressed in the community cultural center.

Additionally, I required the students select a community with members that they could speak with throughout the design process. I hoped this would avert over-generalized cultural stereotypes in favor of a more contextual investigation of community and the unique aspects of culture they share. Rather than relying solely on what others have written about a culture, students needed to speak with, at least, one person, belonging to the specific community in question, that was willing to provide insight and feedback as they made design decisions. Although I was still concerned about the potential of tokenism if a single voice was selected to speak for the group, I felt strongly that voices from the community needed to be present in defining and expressing their culture as well as the design solution. Figure 1 depicts one example of how a student integrated community voices into their project.

### **Appropriation, Exoticism, and Diverse Perspectives**

Re-structured studio instruction, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, added to the challenge. To maintain physical distance, we met in small groups on alternating class days. I was only able to meet, in-person, with a given group of students one time per week. One advantage to this structure allowed me to assign readings to the entire class and stimulate large group dialogue through an online discussion board. Required written responses afforded an opportunity for each student to express thoughts when they might otherwise be too shy to speak up in the classroom setting. We continued to discuss the material in small group, face-to-face, meetings working from what was written in the larger discussion posts. I used this forum to introduce issues of appropriation,



This mural is the design of the custom tile wall expressed through Daltille's Keystones collection's 1"X1" hexagonal tiles. These paintings were created by local artists depicting the life stories of some of the formerly incarcerated involved in Blue Jacket in Fort Wayne, IN. This organization offered many ideas and inspiration for RISE ABOVE. Here are the artists and who they have depicted:

1. Wes McGhee, Artist: Jeremy McFarren  
 3. Daniel Lopresti, Artist: Jerrod Tobias

2. Tobias Ward, Artist: Tim Parsley  
 4. Andy Walter, Artist: Josef Zimmerman

**FIGURE 1.** Proposed mural comprised of artwork portraying stories from a selected community with artist and personal credits (excerpt from final student presentation).

exoticism, and diverse perspectives before engaging in community selection, cultural investigation, or design.

Students were assigned a variety of readings from scholarly and non-scholarly sources for the discussion posts. Students were asked to provide critical reflections about each reading (comments, questions, or contentions, but not summaries) and respond to scenario-based questions, I developed, to consider how the presented material can be applied in practice. Scenarios were designed to elicit opinions without clear right or wrong answers. Each student was required to comment on, at least, two posts by peers after writing their own (peer posts were not visible until after a student posted their own response). Students were also required to reference the readings to support their positions. I encouraged respectful dialogue, even disagreements, in peer-to-peer comments. To model respectful dialogue, I suggested wording like: "I am familiar with this argument; however, I see it differently from my perspective and here is why..."

Scholarly sources, included in the readings, provided a foundation for recognizing our assumptions and how they play a role in questions we ask as well as interpreting answers. This was followed by in-class exercises which revealed differing perspectives between students. In one exercise, students were provided with blank post-it notes and were asked to describe a typical student who attends the University where we are located, using the school's mascot name ("What is a Boilermaker?"). Students were tasked to come up with as many descriptors as possible and write each descriptive

word, or phrase, on a single post-it note, resulting in multiple post-it notes per student. After 1 minute of writing, they were asked to hang the post-it note descriptors on the white board, one student at a time. Each subsequent student was asked to hang their notes so like-responses were grouped together. Each student was free to re-arrange the notes as they determined to be appropriate. After all the descriptors were up, we identified and evaluated the created categories as a group, combining and separating some in the process. When the group was satisfied with the large categories, we discussed what was reflected on the board. The exercise exposed stereotypes, not reflected in themselves, and varying feelings of belonging. Many students were surprised to find words like "inclusive" and "unwelcoming" were both present on the board. This opened a conversation to consider how designing through assumptions and stereotypes can easily neglect many active members of a community.

Assigned blog post readings, and their respective comment sections which feature opposing perspectives, as well as online magazines provided dialectical arguments to discuss different perspectives on cultural appropriation and exoticism. These included conventional, feminist, and minority perspectives. Scenario-based questions required students to consider the relationship between appropriation and inspiration. They also responded to ethical questions, which I created through situational anecdotes with stated and assumed client desires, in the discussion format. Resultant in-class discussions about appropriation developed into questioning

the role of a designer in a project. Are we advocates, advisers, agents, experts, or does our role shift between these lines at any given point? Is it dependent upon the client, end-user, or our own identity? This led to some students crafting design philosophy statements, included in their presentations, to communicate their personal beliefs (Figure 2).

Readings on value systems helped students understand the reflexive nature of self-identity in forming design ideas (Robinson & Parman, 2010). Discussion post responses to this reading required students to reflect on their own values and make them explicit in five to eight short statements. We are never able to separate who we are, as designers, from what we design because what we know is embodied in how we know. After all, design is an act of creation, not an a priori discovery (Kant 1969, Nelson & Stolterman, 2014, Robinson & Parman, 2010). That does not excuse us, however, from doing our best to understand and incorporate the cultures, values, perspectives, and needs of people who will inhabit the spaces we design.

As we discussed issues of appropriation in class, I tasked students to identify a community they will work with for the hypothetical center. We talked through the difference in framing the center for a community, discovering aspects of their culture, rather than identifying a culture as something static, centering on difference. Although we were working in a hybrid online and in-person environment due to the ongoing global pandemic, I felt it was imperative for students to speak with people who are part of the community in question. Equally as important, students were required to explain the project, in full, to potential informants, outline expectations for participation such as amount of time, number of conversations, as well as mode of communication, and seek acknowledgement of the community member's willingness to participate. Their selection of community, then, hinged on whether or not they were able to connect with, at least, one person. This, however, was not the difficult part of community selection.

### Identity and Design

In the initial call, the organizer mentioned the intent of the competition was for students to learn about a culture.

*"You can select the city, the culture, and the name of your facility for this competition. The location selected might inspire you to focus on a specific culture, as there might be*

## CULTURE AND IDENTITY

When it comes to designing for a group of people who share a common culture or identity there are various factors to take into consideration. Stereotyping is one important factor that many communities, especially minority communities fall victim to. It is important moving forward that we check our biases and make sure we aren't functioning and designing under stereotypes. We believe in the need for inclusiveness, allowing different perspectives and committing ourselves to representation from all members of our diverse community. Designers are meant to be advocates for different cultures and communities, not experts. This is why it is important to approach the design process with an open mind and willingness to listen and learn.



**FIGURE 2.** This student felt strongly about including a DEI statement that reflected her personal values (excerpt from early process work).

*a settlement of people that have created a 'pocket-culture' there. Or you might select a culture and a city that you admire and want to explore." (ASID 2021, p.2)*

It was implied that the culture should be outside of the student's own identity, and many students held this assumption, but it was not explicitly stated. The project description continues to state:

*"We are in a critical time in our society to understand and appreciate all peoples regardless of their similarities and differences to ourselves. This project provides the opportunity to demonstrate the key aspects that make up the selected culture. Select carefully, there are so many cultures that could be represented." (ASID 2021, p.2)*

It is suggested that offering choice to explore personal interests fosters intrinsic motivation for learning, resulting in positive outcomes (Patall, Cooper & Wynn, 2010). However, offering the choice of a culture to design for inherently frames people as "other," advances implicit positions of power, and encourages exoticism. These issues surfaced during the selection process.

During in-person, small group, sessions I asked everyone to share the community they were considering. When an Asian-American student expressed interest in designing a

center for Asian-Americans, glances were exchanged between other students. The same was true when another student stated they wanted to create a center for the LGBTQ+ community so they could "learn more about the culture." Based on the unspoken reactions, I decided to address the group, later, letting them know that, if they identified with a minority or marginalized community with shared cultural values, they were allowed to design the center for the community to which they belonged. I justified this decision based on an assumption that, most likely, this may be the first opportunity they have had to bring their own unique voice from the perspective of that identity in the classroom. By not allowing a person to design through a divergent identity, would that not also perpetuate the notion of "other" that we were trying to overcome? Besides, was it not also inappropriate to make assumptions as to whether or not the students in front of me identified with any category of broadly diverse communities, and even more so to ask? In any case, they were still required to speak with people in the selected community to form design ideas and not just rely on their own perspectives.

An expected follow up to this conversation occurred in the following class period when one student announced a desire to design the center for protestant Christians. I explained that because Christianity, especially protestant Christianity, is the majority held religion in our culture, it has been institutionalized in our everyday lives from swearing into government office with a Christian bible to nationally recognized religious holidays and school breaks. I pointed out that there are multiple organizations and dedicated buildings in our society which represent this community so it is hard to justify a need for this project. I continued to discourage this direction by noting that someone with a marginalized identity typically needs to hide that identity to design spaces for the majority population. In essence, they are almost always designing outside their own culture and values.

Some may argue it was wrong to discourage this person to design through their privileged identity when I encouraged students with marginalized identities to use their own voice, perpetuating an attitude of discord, but I stood by my decision based on the provided rationale. The point of the exercise, after all, was to build respect and understanding of 'similarities and differences', which is understood through the dominant lens. This student decided to change directions



**FIGURE 3.** Project justification for weavers and spinners (excerpt from final student presentation).

and, instead, chose to create a center for women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. As a female student, this allowed her to design through her identity as a woman while exploring issues surrounding participation in STEM fields. It still begs the question, when we discuss issues of difference in the classroom, if we implicitly encourage exploration of marginalized identity are we promoting an 'us' versus 'them' mentality by posturing against dominant majority? Furthermore, if we are truly unable to separate ourselves from what we design, is it ever possible to design outside of our identities? If we always bring some aspect of ourselves into the process, will it not be fused into differing perspectives through judgement?

Although the call did not explicitly preclude a student from designing through their own cultural identity, it did position the project within the United States. This became an issue of concern for an international student who expressed a desire to design the center for traditional weaver and spinners in her home region in India (Figure 3). Presented through the narrative of colonization, the student demonstrated a broad view of how this culture developed, followed by a severe economic decline after mechanization, and how they are currently positioned in society. However, because the project description specifically placed the community cultural center in the United States, the student was reluctant to follow this interest, even with my encouragement. Therefore, I reached out to the competition organizer to explain the situation and requested consideration for a project location outside of the

United States. The organizers provided assurance that the project would be considered. Interestingly, in the response, the organizer clarified: "The idea behind the center is that it embraces the culture, but is not a museum (e.g. Holocaust Museum)." The response was encouraging in allowing a change of venue; it also hinted at moving away from a static reading of culture. Still, it was unsettling that there were concerns that this particular call could be misinterpreted as a museum, as described.

### The Problem with Problem-Solving

Questions of designing through diverse identities were not the only dilemmas that surfaced during this phase of project development. Many students excitedly contemplated a variety of possible communities through the lens of solving social problems, presenting ideas through a formula: X community has Y problem, therefore a center will be designed to solve Y. Reinforced early in the curriculum that design can help solve problems, these students had a difficult time formulating an approach that did not start with problem identification. With 'filtered empathy' these students were placing themselves in hero-identification roles, fostering victim status of the community (Breithaupt, 2018) rather than working with groups, they had yet to speak with, as allies. It was not a question of whether design can solve problems as much as how we should be framing our approach of design to embrace culture. I led a discussion through a series of open-ended questions that aimed at whether we should be looking for problems if the intent is to celebrate community. From there we discussed our role as designers and aspects of our identities that situate us in positions of power and privilege to demonstrate harmful effects of filtered empathy.

Bringing into the conversation what one student had stated in our reading responses about appropriation:

*'who are we to determine what represents their culture and which elements should be incorporated?'*

I asked who are we to determine that the community *has* a problem and *what* the nuances of that problem are? It is important, here, to make sure we are not conflating culture and community. Marginalization, discrimination, and systemic inequities have created problems for communities, but it does not mean the *culture* that community shares

has a problem. I felt it was important to clearly state this as part of the discussion because the intent of our agency through design was to celebrate the culture of a community. We collectively redefined the design problem: Respectfully integrate the culture, history, artefacts, and accomplishments of a community into the design of a public gathering space.

Although we should not ignore struggles caused by oppression, this was an opportunity to celebrate the community's accomplishments. As one student stated through our on-line discussion board about exoticism:

*'...just because it is a culture we are not used to does not make it exotic. It is as normal as the culture we belong to...'*

The recognition of normalcy was already getting lost in efforts to design something unique, creative, and innovative. Rather than looking for problems to solve, we needed to be exploring potentialities.

When crafting initial lines of questioning, hopefully engaging in more listening than asking, it was important to make sure students did not lean into problems. As interviewers, students could easily direct the conversation toward areas of their own interest. Reading and discussions (online and in-person as previously described) on leading vs non-leading

**Interview with Community Member**

Q: What activities does the Deaf community often take part in?  
 A: Visual and performance arts are very important to Deaf culture.  
 Q: What activities would you like to see take place in this space?  
 A: Social gatherings, performances, perhaps an art studio as well.  
 Q: What type of space would you like to see community members interact in?  
 A: Spaces that consider the principles of Deafspace such as glare control of lighting and proximity. Visual clarity is very important in order to communicate effectively as a member of the Deaf community as ASL is a visual language. If lighting is too bright, many Deaf individuals could experience strain and may want to leave the space.  
 Q: Are there a set of values for the Deaf community that should be taken into design consideration or represented in the design?  
 A: The main symbols of both the Deaf community as a whole, as well as the Deaf art genre called DeVia Art, are resistance, affirmation, and liberation. I strongly connect with these values. Incorporating these into the design would be a great way to connect to the Deaf community.  
 Q: Are there any elements (ex. colors, materials, etc.) that are significant to the Deaf community that you would want to be represented in the design?  
 A: Resistance is about going against identity confusion and establishing a clear identity uninfluenced by oralism and audism. Transparent materials could work when connecting back to this idea. Affirmation is about embracing that being Deaf is natural. Natural materials could connect back to this idea. You should utilize a bright or cheery color scheme as well, as being Deaf is something to be proud of, and neutral or muted colors could come off as somber or depressing.

**INTERVIEW SUMMARY**

<p><b>What would you say are a few stereotypes of this industry?</b></p> <p>A few stereotypes or assumptions of the weaving and spinning industry is that, people only care about the final produce and the art of producing the final cloth is no longer relevant. People also assume that women do the spinning of the cloth while the men do the weaving.</p>	<p><b>Are there any economic or political considerations one must consider in this industry?</b></p> <p>Yes, when it comes to economic considerations of the community unequal pay is a major concern among the local artisans. High fashion brands source all their raw materials and finished cloth from the weavers but fail to give them the recognition and importance in terms of wages and branding. Local weavers are daily wage earners, earning around 250 - 300 rupees a day (\$3-\$4), barely enough for them to support a livelihood for themselves.</p>	<p><b>What would be the top 3 requirements in a community center for the weaving industry?</b></p> <p>The first main feature would certainly be to subtly introduce digital literacy to the local artisans. It can be introduced in small ways of finger print scanners, face scanners and even very simply swipe features on an E-Catalogue. Next would be to improve branding and marketing for this industry. To appropriately brand the work of local artisans and showcase their talents and skills to a new market base. Lastly, to have an activity zone dedicated to connecting and networking of other weavers as well as potential clients.</p>
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**FIGURE 4.** The first interview summary illustrates a student's attempt at asking open-ended questions about activities (for functional planning) and aesthetic preferences (design elements). As an unintentional result of the in-class exercise, the second student asked their informant directly about stereotypes. (both excerpts are from final student presentations).

interview questions were critical. Before crafting a few questions to start conversations with their informants, I required each student to free-write all stereotypes they were aware of that are associated with the community in question. This, uncomfortable task, was modelled after an equity and diversity session I had participated in. Putting stereotypes on paper allowed students to acknowledge their awareness, consider how harmful stereotypes can be, and consciously attempt to avoid using them when asking questions and making design decisions. As one student stated in response to our reading:

*"I now see how detrimental assumptions can be to conclusions, and ultimately design solutions. A question I have relating to underlying assumptions is how can we check ourselves to ensure our questions don't have assumptions? If we had the assumption to begin with I feel as though it may be hard to check yourself."*

Rather than taking the information at face-value or taking an agreement stance, this student thoughtfully considered the reality of a world-view in practice. Because stereotypes feed our biases and assumptions, bringing them to the forefront was a way to "check ourselves." Due to the sensitive nature of stereotypes, I did not ask students to share their lists with the entire group. I did, however, ask them to pair with the person next to them to share notes and add to them. Figure 4

illustrates two examples of student interviews and respective responses.

## OUTCOMES

Students commenced with the project in varying forms. I asked the students to continually be aware of stereotypes and assumptions and asked that they speak up during weekly small-group interim critiques if they see these driving anyone's work. I acknowledged that, even with the best of my efforts, there will be times that I fall into my own world view, so I asked that they keep me accountable during critique sessions as well. Even stating this clearly, I recognize that students may still have been shy about speaking up due to the instructor–student power dynamic.

As I think about the life of the project during the semester, I cannot help but draw parallels in student's thinking to the arguments around white allies and white saviors. Where framing the community selection as expert designer solving problems perpetuated the white savior, there were instances when the students took on a role closer to ally. This occurred when they actively sought input from people in the community to form design ideas. If community members, on their own volition, raised issues of social problems they wanted to see embedded in the design, students were free to explore

**DESIGN GOALS**

- Digital Literacy**  
To create a space which introduces digital form of communication and marketing in an easy and simplistic manner. The main aim of this is to allow the users of the weaver community to start networking and meet potential clients through digital platforms. To make the transition into digital platforms easy and smooth.
- Marketing and Branding**  
To create a space/building that rebrands and restructures the perception of the handloom community. To advocate and display new ways of thinking and appreciation for the community to be recognized for its culture and traditions. In addition to create a brand which upkeepes the traditions of the past with the culture of the present
- Sustainability**  
To create an eco-friendly building which goes hand in hand with the sustainable cloth and garments being produced. To create a design using sustainable materials and design elements of light fixtures, upholstery and even appliances requiring minimum energy and maintenance.
- Accessibility and Inclusivity:**  
To deign a space in a manner which can be equally comfortable for all users. To be accessible to any user with any form of disability and promote a workspace inclusive of all members.

**CONCEPT AND INSPIRATION**

Marigold is a vibrant yellow/orange flower which symbolizes happiness, optimism, positivity and good luck. It is used as raw material for organic dye to create the perfect hues of yellow and orange. Due to its organic properties, the marigold is chemical free, making it safe to wear and manufacture as well as being a sustainable material.

My design, follows a radial pattern mimicking the directional flow of a marigold. In addition, it incorporates the colors and textures of the flower and other organic dyes of gallnut and rubia to create balance and harmony.

The slide also features a vertical column of four colored circles (yellow, orange, light grey, brown) and circular images of marigold flowers, gallnut, and rubia with their respective labels.

**FIGURE 5.** Design goals, developed from interviews, aided in functional planning and determined what kind of spaces would be included in the "interactive space". (excerpt from final student presentation).

## Mission Statement

A community center for the formerly incarcerated is needed in the Indianapolis area. This building would transform our city to be safer for everyone. These individuals are 10x more likely to become homeless. We also know that 2/3 of homeless ex-prisoners re-offend within a year. RISE ABOVE can and will help our city's people to be safe and successful.



## Community Context

The UNITED STATES has the highest incarceration rate in the WORLD. According to a report from the Vera Institute of Justice, the national prison population decreased by 1.3% between 2017 and 2018. But in Indiana, the population increased by 3.3%.



This is a game called Kerplunk. When you pull out too many sticks, the marbles all fall.



The sticks represent the support this center provides, with the marbles being the individuals we service.



When provided with support, a safe environment, and guidance in their new lives, the formerly incarcerated are held up and achieve great things.

## Interview and Research

In order to understand what is most needed for the formerly incarcerated, a series of interviews were conducted with Emily Moffett-Heifer (New Leaf, New Life). She works at an organization in Bloomington, IN that has many of the same goals as RISE ABOVE. After speaking to her several times, here were the biggest takeaways that were found important to include in RISE ABOVE.

- 30% or less members of the community claim to have a strong support system
- Homelessness is a terribly common recurrence after being released. This leads to a likely fall back into old habits.
- Access to computers is crucial to obtain jobs, education, and a personal email. Many do not have this access on their own.
- Classroom settings grouped together help the individuals to not feel like they are going through this alone.
- Something the formerly incarcerated cherish now being back to society is the open sky and closeness to nature that they lacked while in prison.
- There are many stereotypes of the formerly incarcerated. RISE ABOVE appreciates that everyone has a different story and personal struggle. The center seeks to break harmful impacts of common stereotypes.
- Reconnection with family/loved ones is key in recovery. A space that will allow reunions and safe meeting spaces can allow forgiveness and clarity to occur.



**FIGURE 6.** Rooms with visibility and a slight angle help members see they are not alone. The rooms with adjacent seating and play area (not pictured) provide a safe space to reconnect with family (excerpt from final student presentation).

how the design of the space could address them. Through conversations with traditional spinners and weavers, the student from India embedded networking, marketing, and education structures so weavers could use digital means to directly market products (Figure 5).

A student who decided to design for the formerly incarcerated community developed safe spaces for gradually reconnecting with children and families, something that was discovered to be a difficult and sensitive experience (Figure 6).

Another student, who was able to communicate through American Sign Language, developed a center for the deaf community around three symbols of resistance, affirmation, and liberation through progression, something her collaborator was passionate about (Figures 7 and 8).

The students all presented work confidently and with passion, highlighting community voices for design justifications, whether or not they addressed social problems.

We had extra time after final presentations in one of the small groups, so I asked students about their experience

**Concept**  
The three main symbols of Deaf culture are resistance, affirmation, and liberation. The Deaf community has a history of resistance as the hearing world could not fully understand the beliefs and values of the community. But, over the years and through perseverance, that resistance progressed to affirmation and liberation. This idea of progression is incorporated into the design through leading lines and layout. The layout is linear, as the timeline of this progression was linear, with three main open spaces that progress in size as one moves through the space. Lines, patterns, textures, and natural and transparent materials also progress with clarity when moving through the space to reflect the importance of these core values of the Deaf Community.

**Project Goals**

1. The design of the space is sustainable and materials are environmentally conscious.
2. The design of the space considers factors that effect communication such as sensory reach, spatial proximity, light, color, and acoustics.
3. The design promotes safety and well-being.
4. The design of the space lends itself to be flexible and adaptable for a variety of situations.
5. The design expresses the core values and symbols of the Deaf community.
6. The design creates an inclusive atmosphere where all are welcomed and respected.

**Inspiration**



**Covid-19 Considerations**

1. Sanitary Stations
2. Circulation Space
3. Air Quality
4. Amphitheater/Interactive Space utilizes raised seating distancing



**Design Application of Resistance**  
Resistance for the Deaf Community means going against anything that creates identity confusion, such as audism and oralism, and instead establishing identity clarity. The Deaf Community and Cultural Center of Indiana incorporates this idea of identity clarity and visibility into the space through the use of transparent materials, such as glass wall features and curtain walls, as seen in the designs of the classrooms, retail space, library, and private offices.

**Design Application of Affirmation**  
Affirmation in the Deaf Community emphasizes embracing identity expression and affirms that being Deaf is natural. The design incorporates this idea through the use of natural and expressive forms in its textile materials. Additionally, the flooring and upholstery used throughout the space feature natural patterns and finishes, such as stone, wood, and biophilic imagery. The largest main interactive space in the design also uses a completely green color palette to further articulate this natural element.

**Design Application of Liberation**  
Liberation for the Deaf community represents the final stage of progression after resistance and affirmation. The idea of this progression is applied to the design through its circulation patterns and leading lines. There are three main spaces that run diagonally through the center of the floor plan of the main community space. These areas gradually progress in size and ceiling height to reflect this three part progression. This idea is also applied to the rest of the building plan through a linear layout as well as with the many instances of leading lines as progressions tend to occur on a linear timeline. Leading lines can be seen in the plan with the repeated linear wood forms, as well as with the focal lighting in the cafe being comprised of 3 rows of acoustical lighting units that also individually are comprised of linear lines. This symbolic progression can also be seen in the design overall through the various instances of groupings of three.

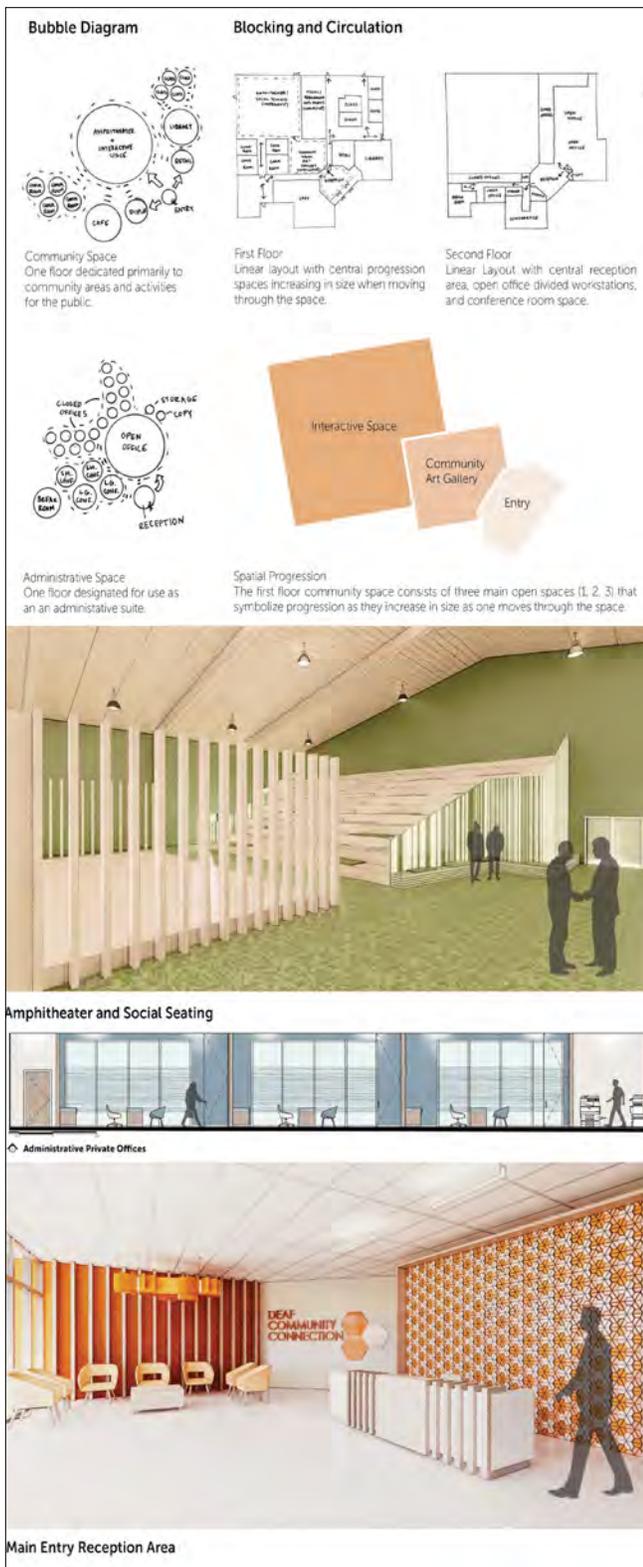
**FIGURE 7.** Concept development through three symbols of Resistance, Affirmation, and Liberation (excerpt from final student presentation).

working on this project. They compared the process to a project from a previous semester in which they designed restaurants with different cultural themes (another competition organized by a local design organization). With a new critical eye on that project, some questioned their approach of culture as product through stereotypes and considered making revisions before placing the project in their portfolios, while others confidently stood by their previous work. I noted that, for this project, most of them chose communities with cultures that were not defined by race, nationality, or religion and asked them why that was (Figure 9). To my chagrin, they admitted that they were afraid of “doing something wrong.” There it was. My own fear, defined by white guilt, staring back at me. Hadjiyanni, (2013, p.vii) states “Interior design students who are taught to navigate an interconnected global reality should feel competent and secure to identify problems and their consequences as well as be empowered to take responsibility and action.” Although I was encouraged by the initial reading responses and discussion, this final admission clearly showed that I fell short of imbuing this ideal.

The student who initially considered designing a center for the Asian-American community ultimately decided to abandon the approach for a community of dancers. The other student continued with the LGBTQ+ center, but more openly connected their personal experience in the community.

Issues with pick-your-own culture projects are familiar for many who have attempted to integrate such approaches in a design studio. They are unfortunately commonplace, typically seated in a thematic restaurant or historical reconstruction. Eliminating the thematic quality of a dining or entertainment experience in this project exposed underlying issues that need to be addressed in any hypothetical cultural design scenario. My initial reaction to the competition project brief was to politely decline the invitation to participate. However, it provided an opportunity to discuss a variety of cultural perspectives. It also opened a conversation about whether the client, in this case the competition organizer as the main stakeholder, is always right.

I am a trained Interior Designer with a broad, theoretical, understanding of social issues pertaining to design. I am not



**FIGURE 8.** Design application of progression in planning, joyful colors, natural materials, and visibility. The stage surround affords views of activities for people passing-by in the way sound emanates from a performance. Patterned glass walls for private offices balance privacy and visibility (excerpt from final student presentation).

an expert in teaching cultural sensitivity and race relations. I recognize that there were times throughout this project process that I could have done better in facilitating the conversation, especially when justifying the selection of marginalized vs majority identities. More importantly, I am certain that were instances, that I am not even aware of, that may have been recognized by students but not brought to my attention. If I were to do this again, I would consider bringing in an expert on culture, diversity, and inclusion to help the conversation. Uncertain of what their role would look like across a nine-week project, and how often it would be appropriate to engage, finding the right person could pose logistical difficulties.

The project afforded multiple opportunities to discuss diversity, race, power, and privilege as it relates to our role in the built environment. It also created opportunities for students to consider their role as a designer and question the impact of their value systems in decision making (from selecting the community, to interviews, concept development, space planning, furniture arrangements and material selections). The question remains: Was it poor judgement to participate in this pick-your-own culture project? Would I do it again? I do not know.

As I move into another semester with the same cohort of students, I am met with yet another competition project with intent to integrate cultural aspects of a community. This time the culture is defined. It is a fictitious client who belongs to the Dine Nation and practices traditional Navajo textile weaving. I plan to engage students with the Native American Educational and Cultural Center as well as a local textile weavers guild. I wonder what the students will carry into this project from our last experience. After being reminded of lessons relating to value systems, appropriation, stereotyping, and assumptions, will they default to leaning into problems during our interview sessions with invited speakers? Will they respectfully appropriate typical Navajo textile colors and motifs for application in murals or as a formal basis of their design approaches? Or will they take the white-box approach, providing a blank slate for their client to express themselves in the best way they see fit? If they choose the latter, will that be another excuse to side-step issues of culture altogether – so they don't "do something wrong"?

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to recognize the volunteers who gave their time to craft a, well intentioned, student competition. This critique speaks to larger issues within the Interior Design industry and education that commonly plague studio projects. I commend the students who participated in this project for approaching the entire process with critical thought and dedication.



**FIGURE 9.** This Buddhist Community Center is one of the few projects defined by religion (excerpt from final student presentation).

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