

EXPLORING THE “CULTURAL DNA” OF WORLD-RENOWNED DESIGNERS

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Abstract

The paper provides an insight into the minds of eight of the world's most celebrated designers. The eight designers have been drawn from a number of design centres throughout the world and selected on their current contribution to contemporary design practice and thinking. Using traditional semi-structured interview techniques [1], the paper explores what makes the world's top designers critically and commercially successful? The paper also seeks to identify whether these designers adopt a unique approach to their design work? Moreover, the paper questions whether the designers possess a special something in their genetic make up or DNA, which makes them flourish in the contemporary design world? Utilising the Watson-Crick model of living organisms [2] as a speculative model for each designer's “cultural DNA”, the paper illustrates the significant design-related cultural influences which the designers possess and draw on in their work.

Keywords: Design Influences, Interviews, Creative Design

1. Objectives

An individual's cultural identity is shaped largely by the customs, traditions, language, and superstitions that the individuals within the community utilise. Dawkins [3] believes cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution. For example, art, architecture, engineering and technology all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speeded up genetic evolution. Gell-Mann [4] has developed the laws of natural selection and genetic diversity to cultural and linguistic phenomena and combined these concepts and labels into the amalgam “cultural DNA”, first coined by Hazel Henderson in her analysis of global economic markets [5].

The importance of cultural frames of reference and influence and sources of inspiration for designers is well acknowledged and documented [6, 7]. Taking this acknowledgement as a starting point, the author set out to explore the “cultural DNA” of a number of the world's top designers using the Watson-Crick model [2] of living organisms as a template wherein the structure of each “cultural DNA” is in the form of a double helix of two chains with each chain linked by a series of cultural connecting rungs. The goal being not merely to detect specific design influences, but rather to collect and classify some of the principal cultural ingredients from the worlds of art, design, cinema, and literature, etc. that successful contemporary designers use in their design activities. The key aims of this work are:

- to investigate the range of “cultural DNA” (*i.e.* made up from the worlds of art, product design, cinema, literature, etc.);

- to study any cross-“cultural DNA” relevance (*i.e.* does the “cultural DNA” cross traditional national/cultural boundaries?);
- to define the frequency of any strong “cultural DNA” elements which the designers might share.

The next section of the paper describes the approach taken in interviewing, capturing, and defining the “cultural DNA” of the world’s top designers involved in this study.

2. Methodology

A number of the world’s most successful designers, from culturally significant centres throughout the world including New York City, London, Paris, Amsterdam, and Tokyo, have been interviewed during this project. The interviews centre on what iconic influences and inspiration sources [8] the designers use to inform and drive their work. That is, what artists and designers do they admire, what books and magazines do they read, and what particular pieces from fine art, cinema or architecture do they admire.

The approach adopted here has been developed from the author’s earlier work, in which he explored the relationship between undergraduate design student’s degree performance (*i.e.* success) and their iconic and cultural inspiration sources [9]. Similarly, the aim of this work is to show the range and cultural diversity of influences that the world’s top designers rely upon and use in their design work.

3. Model

The genetic make up or DNA of living organisms [2] (Crick, 1962) is used as a speculative metaphor in this paper to illustrate the differences and similarities of the “top designers” responses collected during the interviews.

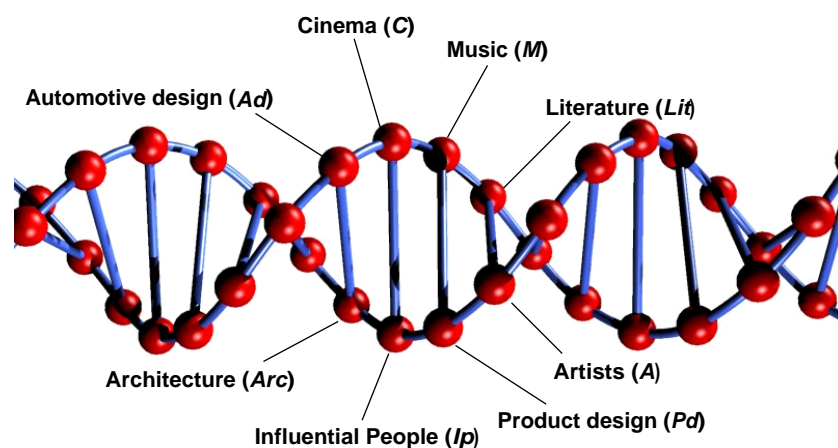


Figure 1. Cultural DNA Schema

That is, the structure of hereditary material is made up of two chains coiled around one another in the form of a double helix with each chain linked by the purines¹ adenine (*a*) and guanine (*g*) and the pyrimidines² thymine (*t*) and cytosine (*c*). Similarly, the structure of each

¹ a derivative of purine; especially : a base (as adenine or guanine) that is a constituent of DNA

² a derivative of pyrimidine; especially : a base (as cytosine, thymine, or uracil) that is a constituent of DNA

designer's prototypical "cultural DNA" make up is in the form of a double helix of two chains with each chain linked by a series of cultural connecting rungs (Figure 1). The two chains denote design influences from the bases of architecture (*Arc*), product design (*Pd*), cinema (*C*), art (*A*), literature (*Lit*), automotive design (*Ad*), music (*M*), and influential people (*Ip*).

4. Designer Genes

This section of the paper outlines a very small but significant portion of the 6 designers' identities as "cultural DNA" from the perspective of their responses to questions regarding where their ideas originate, what influences their work and what inspires them from a cultural context. The goal is not to detect specific cultural influences, but rather to collect and classify the principal ingredients which successful contemporary designers utilise in their design work.

4.1 Nick Crosbie, INFLATE Design, London

The philosophy of INFLATE Design is to design and produce original, fun, functional and affordable products. Launched in 1995, INFLATE exhibited their collection of 7 inflatable products at 100% Design London and achieved a remarkable response. Recently, INFLATE have added a range of dipped PVC products to their portfolio as well as their inflatable products [10].

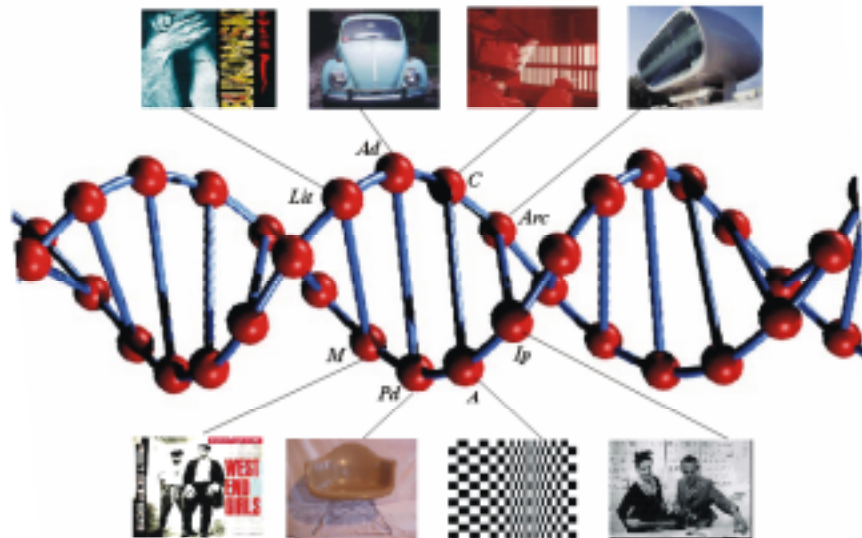


Figure 2. Nick Crosbie, INFLATE Design's Cultural DNA Specimen

Nick Crosbie of INFLATE's DNA specimen (Figure 2) shows his main influences to be the work of Charles Bukowski (*Lit*), the VW Beetle (*Ad*), Kubrick's 2001 (*C*), Future Systems' Media Tower at Lords Cricket Ground (*Arc*), the music of the Pet Shop Boys (*M*), and the pop artist Bridget Riley (*A*). Crosbie cited the work of Charles and Ray Eames as doubly influential, for both their furniture (*Pd*) and their enduring spirit (*Ip*).

4.2 Karim Rashid, New York City

Karim Rashid is one of the best-known and most prolific designers at work in the world today. Rashid works in diverse fields such as architecture, high-tech industrial design products, and cosmetics' packaging for clients such as Flos, Italy, Herman Miller, USA and Sony. Rashid has coined the term "Sensual Minimalism" to describe much of his design work [11].

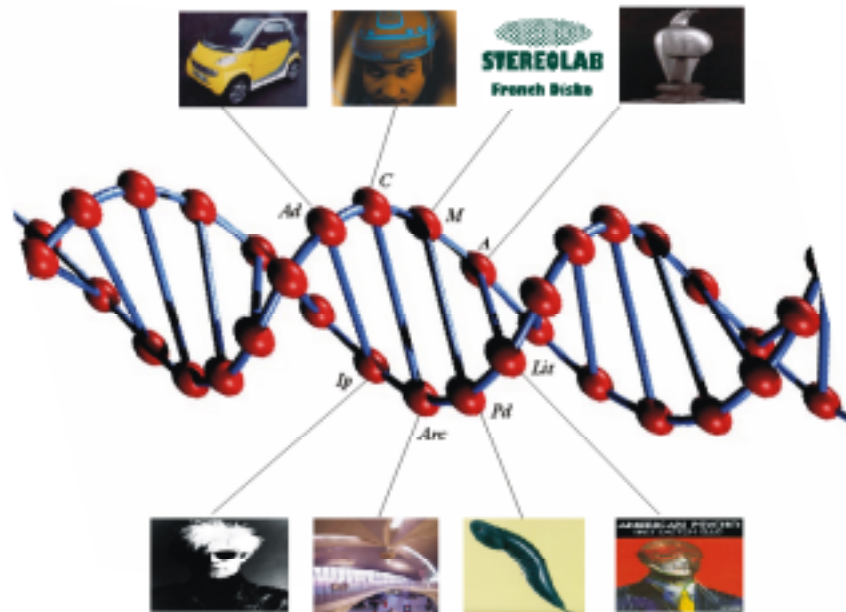


Figure 3. Karim Rashid's Cultural DNA Specimen

Karim Rashid's influences (Figure 3) include the Mercedes Smart Car (*Ad*), the film *Tron* (*C*), French disco music (*M*), the work of Brancusi (*A*), the influential figure of Andy Warhol (*Ip*), Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal in New York (*Arc*), Starck's phone for Philips Design (*Pd*), and Bret Easton Ellis' book *American Psycho* (*Lit*).

4.3 Ron Arad, London

Ron Arad originally studied architecture at the Jerusalem Academy of Art before coming to London to complete his architectural training at the Architectural Association in 1979. Today, Ron Arad is seen as one of the International superstars of design [12]. Arad is as famous for his architecture (*e.g.* Tel Aviv Opera House, Belgo Restaurant, London) as he is for his furniture and product design (*e.g.* Bookworm shelving, Tom Vac chair). Arad always seeks to challenge conventions in his work, yet prefers truth to sincerity. Arad believes that Bob Dylan (one of his key iconic influences in Figure 4) sums this feeling up best when he says:

"...to live outside the law you have to be honest." [13].

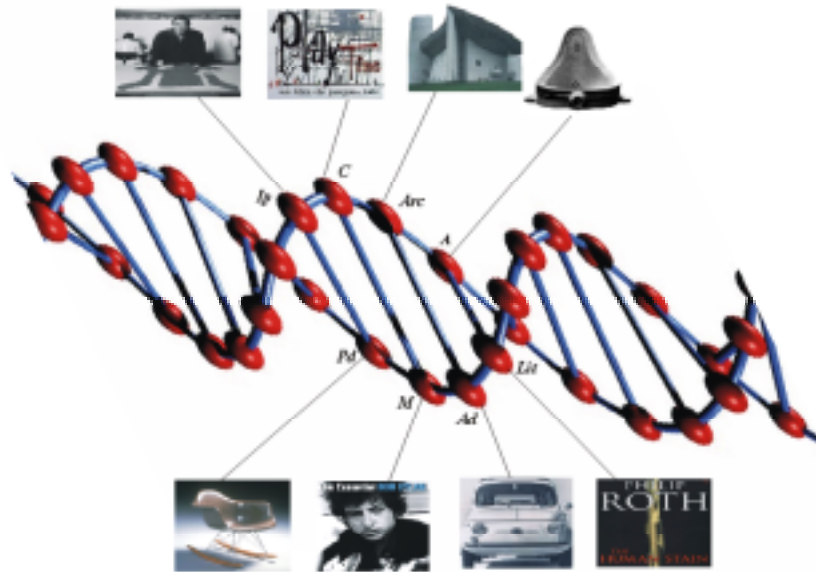


Figure 4. Ron Arad's Cultural DNA Specimen

Ron Arad is influenced greatly by the work of Issey Miyake (*Ip*). Arad also cites the work of Jacques Tati as influential in his personal development as a designer, particularly Tati's film *Playtime* (*C*). He also includes Le Corbusier's masterpiece *Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp* (*Arc*), the work of Marcel Duchamp (*A*), Charles and Ray Eames' furniture (*Pd*), and the 1950's Fiat 500 (*Ad*) as major contributors to his work (Figure 4). The music of Bob Dylan (*M*), mentioned earlier, is important to him as is the author Philip Roth (*Lit*).

4.4 Scott Henderson, SMART design, New York City

SMART design's Director of Industrial Design Scott Henderson has an approach to design which he terms "expression sessions" which exploits the power of spontaneous thinking. His work has been included in the ID magazine's Annual Design review five times and has won a number of International Design awards. SMART produce a wide range of products for clients such as Black and Decker, Hewlett-Packard and Timberland.

Scott Henderson of SMART design mentions the E Type Jaguar as a strong cultural icon in his make up (*Ad*). The work of Charles and Ray Eames (*Ip*), like Nick Crosbie of INFLATE, Ron Arad and Marcel Wanders, is listed by Henderson as important. The Seagram building in Manhattan, New York (*Arc*), Hitchcock's movies especially *North by Northwest* (*C*), and *The Fountainhead* by Ann Rand (*Lit*) are also mentioned in his cultural icons. Henderson cites a specific work (*i.e.* Tom Vac Chair) of Ron Arad as particularly important to him (*Pd*). He also lists the work of Brancusi (*A*), which he shares with Karim Rashid as meaningful, and the Prodigy as his musical influence (*M*).

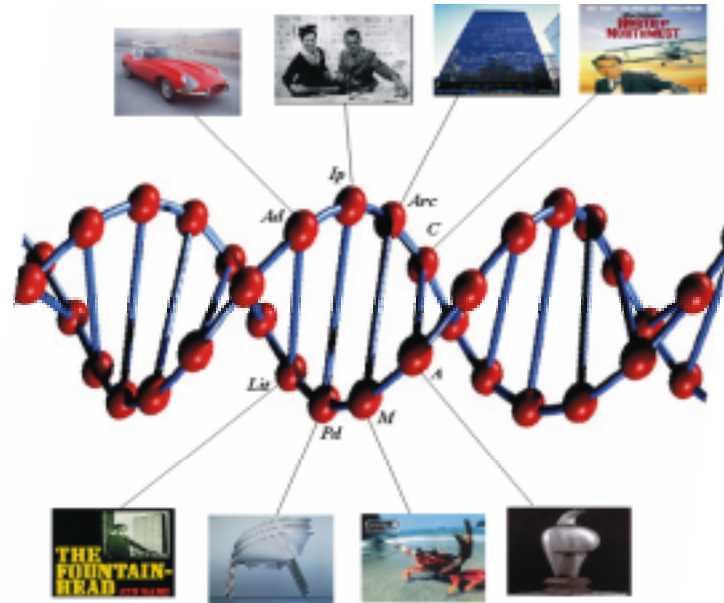


Figure 5. Scott Henderson, SMART design Cultural DNA Specimen

4.5 Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet, RADI designers, Paris

Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet of RADI designers, Paris view the process of design as one of interpolation and transfiguration, rather than of merely representation. In other words, design is not about the interpretation of the meaning of an object only, but rather about the many possibilities of its interpretation. This is best summarised when RADI state:

“By transposing our philosophy of design into forms that are at once humorous and subtly out-of-step but also thoroughly humanised, we try to project a gentle yet profound way of imagining tomorrow.” [14].

The group members of RADI work together on a variety of projects covering product, exhibition and interior design. RADI’s clients include Air France, Issey Miyake, Cartier and Schweppes. In terms of their “cultural DNA”, RADI list Gabriel Orozco, the Spanish Artist (**A**), Frank Gehry’s furniture (**Pd**), and Umberto Eco’s work (**Lit**) as potent icons in their make up. They admire the work of Salvador Dali (**Ip**), the VW Beetle (**Ad**), which they have in common with Nick Crosbie of INFLATE, and the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao (**Arc**). RADI state that the work of Stanley Kubrick, most notably the film 2001 (**C**) which they also share with Nick Crosbie of INFLATE, and the music of Beck (**M**) amongst others are highly influential to their work (Figure 6).

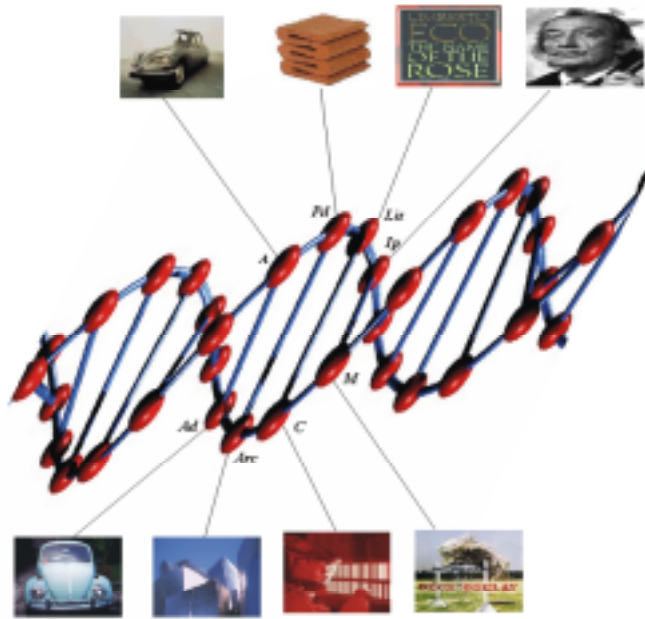


Figure 6. Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet, RADI design Cultural DNA Specimen

4.6 Marcel Wanders, Amsterdam

Marcel Wanders' work, according to Andrea Branzi quoted in Joris [15], is:

"...placed within that range of researches that investigate about a new relationship between technology and nature."

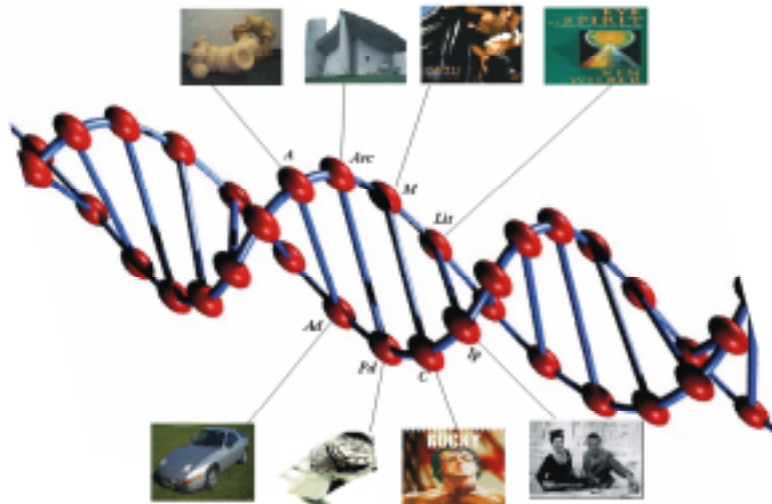


Figure 7. Marcel Wanders' Cultural DNA Specimen

This is best exemplified in Wanders' "Dry Tech Knotted Chair" where he opted to integrate macramé, a traditional way of working, with Dry Tech experiments (air and space technology) with new materials at the Delft University of Technical Engineering [16]. Marcel Wander's "cultural DNA" specimen (Figure 7) comprises the work of Tony Cragg (*A*), Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp (*Arc*), the music of George Michael (*M*), and Ken Wilber books (*Lit*). Wanders is a huge admirer of Porsche cars, particularly the late 1980's 928 model (*Ad*), the design philosophy of Swatch (*Pd*), and all of the Rocky movies (*C*). Wanders cites the work of Charles and Ray Eames as influential in his work (*Ip*). This final cultural base he shares with both Nick Crosbie of INFLATE and Scott Henderson of SMART design.

5. "Cultural DNA" Results

The results from the interviews indicate that there are a number of significant and confluent "cultural DNA" elements which the designers share. Using the "cultural DNA" schema illustrated in Figure 2, Figure 8 below highlights these confluent responses. For instance, the base *Arc* (architecture) comprises important buildings such as Foster's Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Future Systems' Media Tower, and the Seagram Building in New York. Le Corbusier's Ronchamp is a cultural highlight which is shared by both Ron Arad and Marcel Wanders, for example.

Within the base *Pd* (product design), there is a variety of responses which illustrates excellently the diversity of skills, knowledge and interests that the designers possess. As most of the designers' work is three-dimensionally-based this is not at all surprising. An interesting outcome of this base, however, is the significance of the work of Charles and Ray Eames. Their work, in particular, is cited frequently both within the *Pd* base and the *Ip* (influential personalities) base. The cinema base (*C*) contains other significant cultural connection points for many of the designers interviewed. The notable movies quoted as influential cultural reference points include Ridley Scott's "Bladerunner", Stanley Kubrick's "2001", Alfred Hitchcock's "North by Northwest". Stanley Kubrick's "2001" connects Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet of RADI designers, Paris with Nick Crosbie of INFLATE design, London for instance.

The art base (*A*) elements of the "cultural DNA" reflected a wide range of specific art disciplines including painting, sculpture, and conceptual art. Specific artists named as influential included Marcel Duchamp, Gabriel Orozco, Pop Art protagonists such as Andy Warhol and Bridget Riley, and Pablo Picasso. Both Karim Rashid and Scott Henderson of SMART design (both New York City) cite the work of Brancusi as one of their most important *A* (art) base DNA elements. The DNA connecting node of literature (*Lit*) typified most the cultural boundaries between the designers in that the literary influences reflected the cultural experiences and education of the designer's situation. That is, designers based in the USA stated well known USA/Western European authors and books as their major influences as did UK-based designers to a lesser extent. Designers based in Paris (*e.g.* Florence Doléac and Olivier Sidet of RADI designers) or Amsterdam (*e.g.* Marcel Wanders) listed non-English language literary works as inspirational to them.

In terms of automotive design inspiration, the *Ad* confluent bases comprised one major automobile design classics, namely the original Volkswagen Beetle. Again RADI of Paris and INFLATE of London share a common base here with their *Ad* response as they do with their cinematic (*C*) base. Other notable stated *Ad* influences include classic cars from the major manufacturers Citroen, Mercedes and Porsche. The cultural DNA base *M* (music), like

Lit, highlights a wide range of responses. Unlike *Lit*, however, these responses do not mark out the cultural boundaries of the designers themselves. Rather they illustrate that musical influences (*M*) cross borders (*i.e.* Dutch designer Marcel Wanders citing English musicians and USA designers Rashid and Henderson stating French and English musicians respectively as influential). An interesting outcome of the *M* base responses is that although the replies are not geographically dependent, they appear to be temporally dependent amongst the designers interviewed.

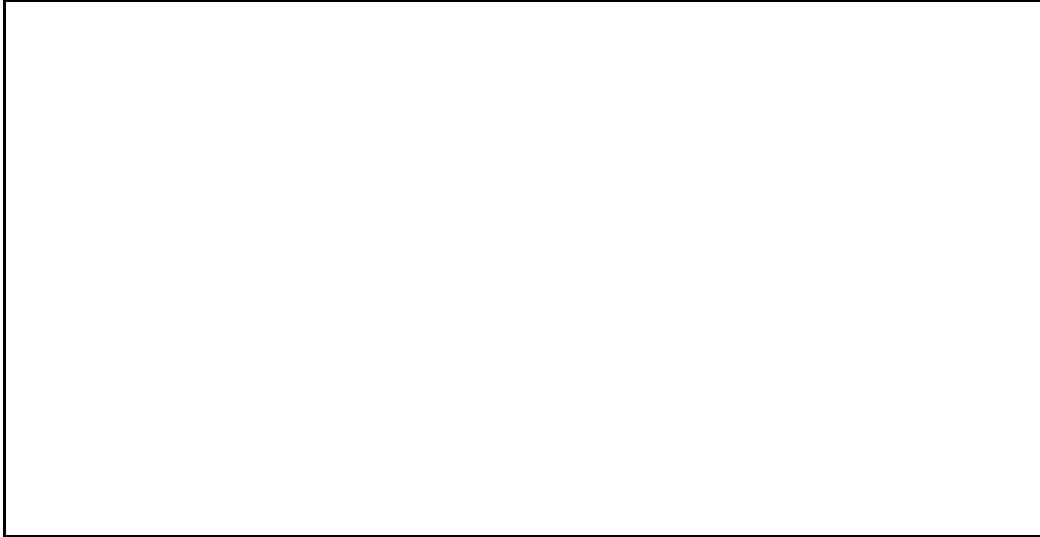


Figure 8. Shared “Cultural DNA”

6. Conclusions and Future Work

In conclusion, the “strong” cultural totems of the designers presented here are Charles and Ray Eames, Le Corbusier (*Arc, Pd, Ip*), Stanley Kubrick’s movie 2001 (*C*), the work of Brancusi (*A*), and the VW Beetle (*Ad*). It is interesting to note that music (*M*) and literature (*Lit*) are the only bases where there is no confluence amongst the designers. From the research carried out, the *Lit* base appears to be geographically dependent (*i.e.* French designers citing French writers as influential and so on) whereas the *M* base appears to be temporally dependent (*i.e.* the age of the designer reflects directly their taste in musical influences, such as Ron Arad – Bob Dylan, and INFLATE – Pet Shop Boys). The high incidence of cultural icon confluence amongst the designers appears to lend weight to Featherstone’s notion of “*polyculturalism*” [17]. That is, that due to the increasing international flows of money, products, people, images and information “*third cultures*” have developed which mediate between traditional national cultures. Furthermore, according to Votolato [18]:

“...design has become international...and the international nature of design practice have tended to standardize the design of goods, environments and the presentation of services around the world.”

This paper has described the results of an ongoing project which is investigating where designers’ ideas originate, what influences their work and what inspires them from a cultural context. The main findings of the work, at this early stage in the project, is that many of the designers share some “cultural DNA”. This is particularly interesting bearing in mind the fact that the designers are from different cultural centres, have different educational backgrounds

and personal experiences and also adopt differing approaches in their design practice. Future work on this project will include widening the interviews to include non western-based designers. Work is also planned on this project to publish a book which describes in greater detail the responses collected during the interviews which contains all the designers who have taken part in the study to date.

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