

Reconciling Universal and Regional Design

An urban train is to a car, what a public building (i.e. A hospital, a university) is to a house. We as individuals want to express what we want to look like, what we want to be identified with. This is a well-recognized human need ever since Maslow defined it in his famous pyramid of needs.

We can tell who we are through a personal expression manifested in the house we live in or in the car we drive; even if the house is a low cost council house, we can always paint it differently or add a little ornamental detail as simple as our favorite flowers outside the front window. The same goes for a car (even the flowers in the VW Beetle!), however, none of this can be said to be applied to a public building or to the local city tram and yet, somehow, these objects – unmistakably regarded as an important part of our culture- do bear some identity. Something that immediately hints “hey! I belong here”.

If designers or architects are not careful with these considerations, if they choose to ignore the culture of the environment, then somebody else will put a face to that object. Something that lacks identity will always live with a borrowed face. This is true in all societies simply because it is part of human nature.

Mass transit service and capital goods are objects that have very little to do with our consumption culture but, nevertheless, do need an identity and not necessarily for marketing reasons.

Regardless of the fact that a city train would be far simpler to make and a lot cheaper too if a “universal design” was applied as a technological platform to be based on, the need for a “local” identity is still true. An identity must be given to that mobile piece of urban landscape and there are a number of reasons that explain why.

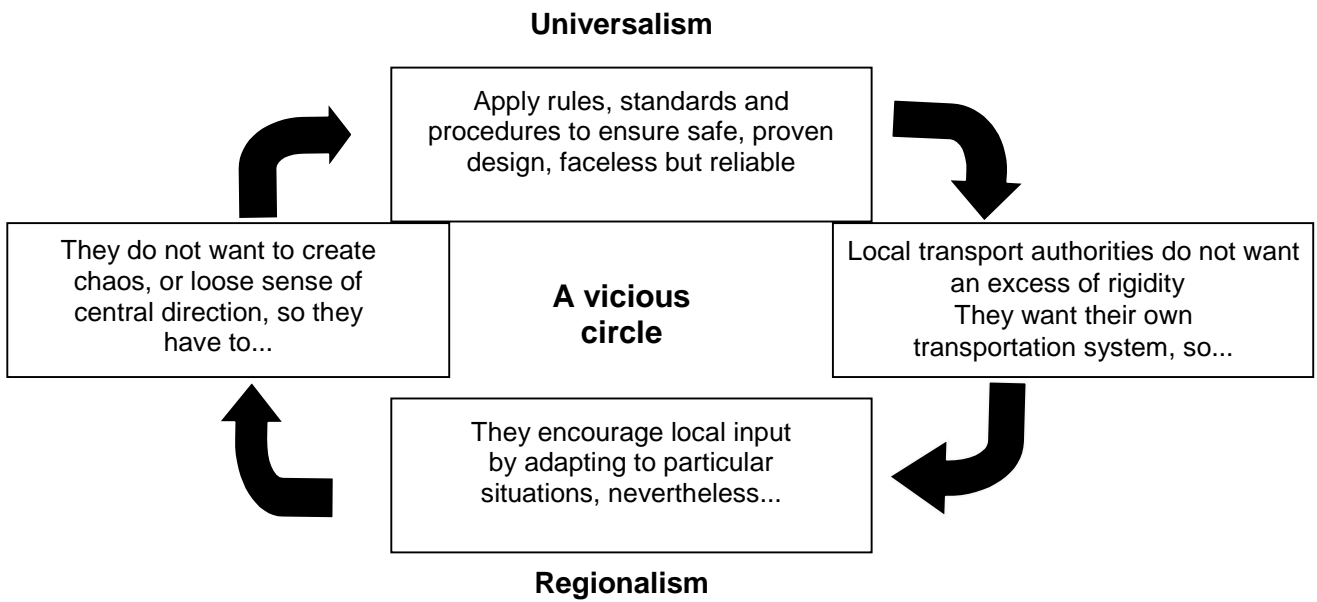
Besides the understandable requirement to keep the local transit authority’s corporate identity, a train which is constantly circulating through a city (particularly those so called light rail trains which, unlike underground vehicles, run over the streets) is part of the city’s environment and so, it does make a statement. It is, therefore, up to the designers to decide what kind of message they want it to convey: a cold, technological product, or a warm reminder of the city’s transport traditions?; a reliable, vandal proof piece of engineering, or a hospitable moving point of encounter with our neighbors?

The identity such a large vehicle is given, should reflect the way local people live and also how they want to welcome their foreign guests; it should be able to subtly remind its users of the

values and traditions they are proud of while maintaining a reassuring feeling that they will be quickly, comfortably and safely taken to the point in the city they want to go to.

Obviously, there is a clear function to fulfill: mass transportation. However, there are many ways to achieve this. The dilemma, nonetheless, still stems from very rational and economical reasons: The well known “mass produced concept, high productivity and low cost” arguments, VS. a “tailored”, unique and, consequently, expensive solution. In other words, universal VS. regional design.

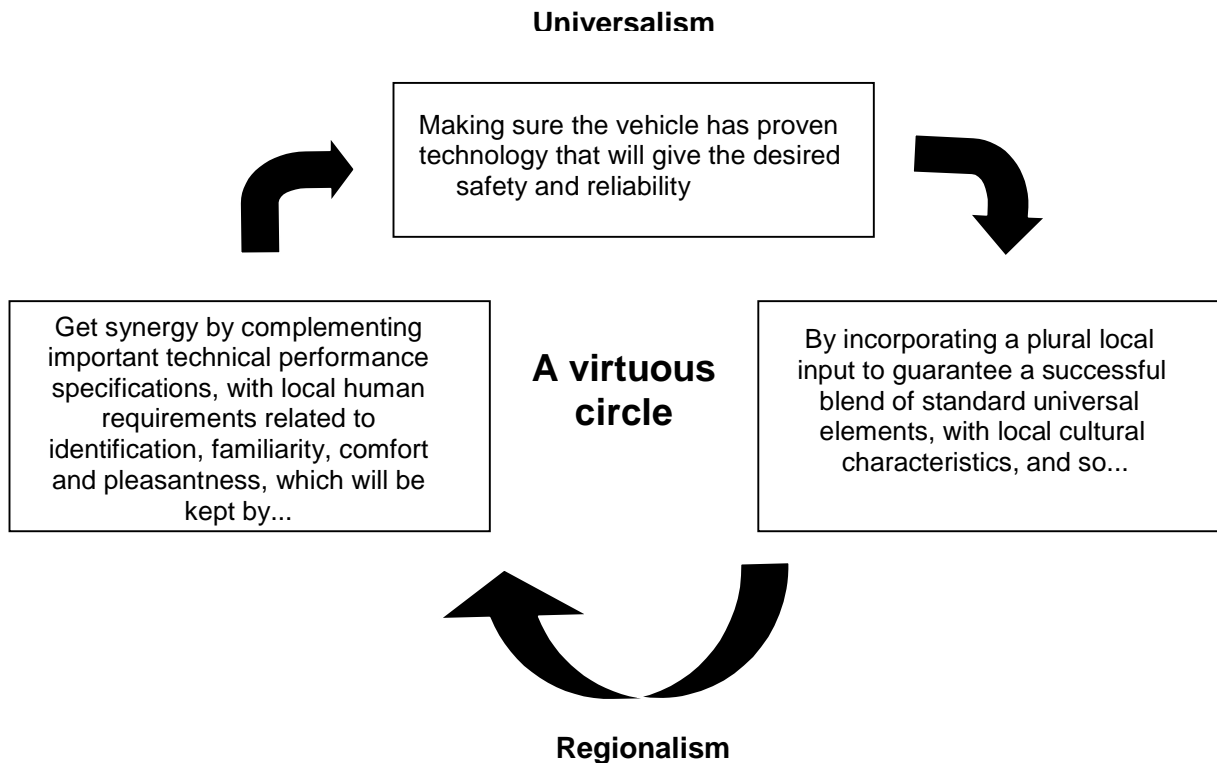
Reconciling Universalism and Regionalism.



Within the Mass Transportation industry there are many marketing considerations which need to be taken into account. Here we can include:

- Customized solutions = high prices
- LRV fleets = low production lots
- Clients require proven design for sophisticated systems
- Requirements for safety and reliability performance are extremely demanding
- Long warranties
- Long product life cycles
- Short design and engineering development times

The only way to reconcile Universal, necessary requirements, with a desirable Regional input, is by turning a vicious circle into a virtuous one.



The time issue

Another important issue to bear in mind when designing with a reconciling spirit (of apparent conflicting forces), is the time factor. Since one of the important marketing considerations already mentioned is a long product life cycle, we have to assume that a train should be expected to last between 30 to 40 years. Within this kind of time span... what a modern train is supposed to look like ?. Let's not forget the following considerations:

- It has to resemble local cultural traditions (dealing with the past)
- It has to reflect our contemporary way of life, as we tend to like new things and modern looking objects (dealing with the present)
- It has to look contemporary ... even in thirty years! allowing a gradual incorporation of new technology over the years (dealing with the future)

While some products grow old, others, despite keeping their intrinsic qualities, visually age; however in the ideal world a well designed product should merely mature, just like anything else in nature.

The issue of time, or rather “timeless” design, is therefore quite a challenge for the design team, which, of course, needs to be included in the agenda, especially if time orientation among different societies is acknowledged as another important cultural aspect. There are at least three well-recognized time orientation types:

- Present oriented societies, which are relatively timeless large groups with little traditions who practically ignore the future
- Past oriented societies, mainly concerned to maintain and restore traditions in the present
- Future oriented societies, who envision a more desirable future and set out to make it happen.

For a responsible design group, the need to research a local “profile” and orientation comes as equally important as any other social issue within the design brief.

Strategies

The idea of reconciling marketing, design and engineering issues sounds like a simple one. Of course, putting it into practice is quite a different matter. The following are a few recommendations that may be helpful for the conformation of a more comprehensive business strategy which may also encompass actions to be considered for the marketing leaders, as well as for design and engineering teams:

- Make sure that “the voice of the customer” is listened to and, more importantly, correctly interpreted (not only by marketing)
- Build design “platforms” (modular, flexible engineering platforms to suit a reasonable range of technical requirements) and keep a good design team to “tailor” specific solutions considering different social and cultural requirements for every project
- Keep a highly effective design and engineering network
- Develop a “dictionary” of visual terminology and semantic elements to be used under diverse circumstances.
- Set out to undertake workshops with local people (opinion leaders) in order to get a cultural insight that will eventually be translated into design elements of the end product.

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