

Design Roots and Creative Ecology

Understanding culturally significant designs, products and practices

By Jeyon Jung, Lancaster University. Stuart Walker, Lancaster University. Martyn Evans, Manchester Metropolitan University. Tom Cassidy, University of Leeds. Amy Twigger-Holroyd, University of Leeds,

Introduction

This paper describes AHRC-funded research that explores design's role in developing and revitalising culturally significant designs, products and practices. Although such designs, products and practices are often seen as being out of step with contemporary society, they have rich historical links with communities and cultures and have much to offer for the future in terms of sustainability, cultural identity and wellbeing (Gould 2001). This research employs design-led methods to determine if and how design can make a meaningful contribution to this revitalization effort. In particular, we focus on creative ecologies that are rooted to place, where culturally significant designs, products and practices emerge from place-based communities.

Our work was informed by various initial examples of place-based creative cultures including three in the UK (Graham and Brown Ltd, Blackburn, Morgan Motor Company, Malvern, and Cyber Valley, Malvern), one in the United States (the arts town of Joseph, Oregon) and one in Canada (the artisan Community of Crawford Bay, British Columbia). Consideration of these initial examples provided a basis for an in-depth case study that had proved to be especially successful in maintaining and revitalizing place-based culturally significant designs, products and practices.

The site selected for this study was Santa Fe, and its environs in New Mexico, USA, and particularly its heritage of Spanish Colonial Arts. Here, government policy, history, migration, heritage, culture, music, design, art, a festival and design identity all come together to form a unique place-based creative ecology. For the in-depth study, we conducted sixteen semi-structured key informant interviews in order to profile policy makers, arts leaders and craft makers from various fields of practice, including weaving, woodcarving, tinware, metalwork, ceramics, museums and galleries. From this we were able to draw out information relating to culturally significant product collections and making practices and build a picture of the interrelationships and interdependencies that contribute to this vibrant creative ecology.

We identify three levels of interaction within creative ecologies: 1) products, 2) expertise in creating products and 3) values that underlie the practices of creation. Understanding these levels and their interactions calls upon two rather different approaches that can be contradictory and even incommensurable. Understanding the materiality of product creation requires a more objective/scientific approach that is descriptive and explanatory. On the other hand, expertise and values requires a more experiential approach that is more interpretive, insightful and nuanced.

We conclude with an overview of how these cases are being used to inform our wider research – which aims to develop a framework for successful revitalisation through the application of design strategies to lead creation of place-based creative ecologies.

Research Purpose

In broad terms the purpose of this research is to investigate culturally significant designs, products and practices in order:

- to explore how design can make a meaningful contribution to their development and revitalization;
- to make them relevant to the needs of people today;
- to develop a framework for their development and revitalisation.

Here we define design, products and practices respectively as follows:

- Designs refer to distinctive features of products representing culture such as surface patterns, shape and three-dimensional forms;
- Products are limited to those that are durable (not food and drink), portable (not buildings), tangible (not music, dance, language or religion) and visually creative (not books, scripts or texts);
- Practices mean activities that relate to these products, for example, their creation, use and preservation.

Furthermore, the term 'culturally significant' here refers to attached values (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952) that are first, essential to the culture in which the design products and practices exist and second, are transmitted from past generations into the present and passed on to the next generation. Such transmission is regarded as vital to the preservation of situated, culturally-relevant knowledge, skills, beliefs and cultural, and often religious, identity. During this transmission process, meanings and interpretations formed by individuals, community and the society as a whole will change and evolve, albeit slowly, over time (Spencer-Oatey 2012). Examples of such practices for this research can be identified all over the world, for example: Korean Bojagi textile patterns, Tartan in Scotland, Copping in England and Retablo Painting in New Mexico.

Study Examples

In studying culturally significant designs, products and practices, the importance of their rootedness to the place became more evident. This is because those designs, products and practices that are still thriving nowadays have often emerged and evolved based on deep-rooted tradition within the place. This has shifted our focus of study from looking at individual designs and products to the places that exhibit thriving creative culture. By doing so we aimed to find out what are the factors that contribute to continuing the tradition and generating place-based creative ecologies.

A 'creative ecology' is here understood as comprising the interactions of a wide range of practices, organizations, resources, activities and connections that enable culturally significant designs, products and practices to flourish.

In addition to these outer or externally verifiable factors, we also include in our study inner factors, interpreted from our reading of relevant literature and from our field observations and interviews – these include the priorities, perceptions, values and outlooks of those who are involved in the sustainment of these culturally significant traditions.

This section will briefly describe our five initial study examples that informed our thinking about creative ecologies, all of which have arisen in a specific place. Considerations and insights from these initial examples, based mainly on information from secondary sources, provided a basis for developing our thinking and understanding. They also provided a basis for developing a programme for primary data acquisition in order to explore the concept of place-based creative ecologies in greater depth.

Graham and Brown Ltd is a wallpaper company in Blackburn, UK. Established in 1946, this company's existence in Blackburn is directly related to the cotton industry that was once central to the region's economy. The cotton industry arose here in the latter part of the 18th century. However, in the 20th century it went into rapid decline even though cotton manufacturing equipment and capacity remained preserved in the region.

This history provided a basis for the development of the wallpaper production as the printing of patterns on wallpapers is essentially the same technique, with similar equipment and skills, as printing patterns on cotton fabric. This example makes an interesting case as it demonstrates how enterprise can change over time based on historical development of industry in the area, while still being rooted into that history and the related techniques and skills available in a particular place.

Morgan Motors Company is the only family owned British motor manufacturer, which has been producing in the same factory for more than 100 years. While the car manufacturing industry has gone through the major transformation of mass production and the global hi-tech, Morgan Motors has survived and produces traditional, hand-built motor cars that are exported worldwide (Ranchhod and Gurau 2007). Each stage of the production process involves materials (mainly ash wood and aluminium are used for the car frame and body work) crafted and assembled by hand, which highly-skilled craftsmanship. This craftsmanship is key in continuing the traditional, hand built practices to a high standard. Its continuation is achieved through an apprenticeship programme run by the company in close connection with the local people and institutions. It also contributes to developing a local tradition of craftsmanship that transcends the community. Overall, this company serves as foundation for building traditional culture of craftsmanship in the area as a provider of good quality work, which enhances employment in the local economy. Furthermore, the family business model allows more independent decision-making based on ethical, social and environmental values not just maximises stakeholder profit.

Cyber Valley in Malvern, UK is a good example of how historical circumstance can lead to the establishment of a host of independent and interrelated enterprises that sometimes work independently and sometimes collaboratively. In this case the expertise is not related to traditional arts practices but to cyber-defence security. The reason why these highly scientific firms are located in Malvern is directly related to events in WWII. The research lab that was developing radar in WWII was moved out of London to this rural location to be safe from bombing raids (Day 2014).

Since then, expertise has grown and adapted to deal with new security threats – especially in cybercrime – and due to government policy, much of the previously government run enterprises have been privatized. Later, small firms branched off, and being a centre of expertise, other expertise has been attracted to it. Consequently, a high concentration of SMEs in the area enabled collaborative activities of making and designing of relevant products and services. This has led to the development of a creative ecology of contemporary, non-craft, cyber security enterprise, concentrated in a specific location.

Joseph, Oregon, USA is an arts town and another example of a creative ecology that emerged from a place. Until the 1980s, the main economy of this town was the timber industry. However, this collapsed, unemployment was high and the town became a rather dilapidated. Being in economic depression meant property was relatively inexpensive and the town became a potential location for artists who often have relatively limited financial means. Here, bronze casting became the basis of the economic revival of the town. In the 1980s, a fine art bronze foundry set up in town. Other foundries followed and since then it has gained a national reputation for bronze casting with high quality patinas. These foundries alongside the beauty of natural environment of the area attracted other artists to the town (Baer and Scott 2015). The foundries, set up by artists, produce their own work and also produce work of others, and galleries were opened on the main street for the display and sale of the work. This attracted the attention not only of other bronze artists but also painters, ceramicists, sculptors, and so on. It has now become a thriving arts community with a high concentration of artists, galleries and festivals. For example, in every August the Bronze, Blues & Brews Festival is held, amongst many other events organised throughout a year, attracting tourists, which in turn enrich arts and culture in the town.

Crawford Bay, British Columbia, Canada is small but growing settlement known for its vibrant culture of arts and crafts from the local artisan community. Probably its most famous artisan is its handmade broom maker – the Northern Woven Broom Company. There is also a blacksmith, a potter, a weaver, a glass blower, and a copper enamel artist, a saddler and jewellery makers. Even though the population is approximately four hundred people in the community, this example testifies how a creative ecology can be thriving based on close connections between artisans, shops, galleries, cafes, restaurants, hotels, and so on.

Initial Findings from Study Examples

The above examples demonstrate successful cases for creating and sustaining ecologies of creative practices that are rooted to a specific place. They represent varying sizes and diverse locations as well as different creative mediums – product forms and types of expertise and practice. Also, They represent well-developed, flourishing place-based cultures. However, there are different characteristics and factors that have contributed to their success.

Specifically, the example of Graham and Brown Ltd illustrates the importance of historical events, tradition and the existing capacity of the place and its adaptation to the changing needs and markets – i.e. skills and knowledge in textile pattern printing adapted to the wallpaper production, during the transformation of Blackburn from a cotton town to a modern industrial town. However, this historical development was obviously unplanned and somewhat serendipitous. This ‘chance’ element can greatly influence the emergence of creative ecologies.

In the Morgan Motors Company example, it is critical that tradition and culture within organisation are highly valued, both of which are founded on craftsmanship. This craftsmanship-based value also formed a basis for their decision-making, which include a strong commitment to ethical, social and environmental aspects to sustain their business not just profit-driven considerations and the wish to continually grow and expand.

For the Cyber Valley example, the medium of creative practice is services based on accumulated knowledge and expertise, rather than tangible products. Due to the proximity between companies, their knowledge and expertise are easily shared in-between and collectively, enabling a collective growth through collaboration, rather than competing each other. Here we find competition and independent enterprise along with cooperation and collaboration. As with the Graham and Brown Ltd example, here too, the basis of this expertise and creative ecology in Malvern is found in historical events and a certain serendipity.

The last two examples of an art town, Joseph and the community of crafts people in Crawford Bay illustrate the growth of local culture of Arts and Crafts as a result of a collective effort in building artisan community through working independently and collaboratively. The role of creating places to gather together and meet potential customers were also important, such as galleries, shops, museums, festivals and other events.

The role of creating places to gather together and meet potential customers were also important, such as galleries, shops, museums, festivals and other events.

From initial investigation of these examples, some contributing factors for the emergence of creative ecologies were identified, drawn from one or more examples. Also, these five examples commonly comprise three main components of a creative ecology: products – designs and materials (materiality), knowledge and skills in product creation (expertise) and other contributing factors (values). This is summarized in Table 1 on the next page.

	Product (Materiality)	Knowledge and Skills (Expertise)	Underlying factors (Values)
Graham and Brown Ltd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wallpaper • Patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pattern printing skills • Manufacturing and production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition and adaptation • Historical circumstances and serendipity – ‘chance’
Morgan Motors Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Car • Model design • Materials – e.g. ash wood, aluminum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craftsmanship – hand-made • Apprenticeship • Knowledge of materials and technique 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition and culture based on craftsmanship with innovative designs and techniques • Value-based decision making, not pure profit motive
Cyber Valley – cluster of SMEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyber security service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and skills in dealing with cybercrimes and providing related products and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence & collaboration • Competition & cooperation
Art Town, Joseph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts and crafts – mainly bronze casting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craft skills in various forms of art • Bronze foundries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective effort to develop the town based on Arts and crafts
Arts and Crafts Community, Crawford Bay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts and crafts – mainly handmade brooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craft skills in various forms of art 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community of artisans, working independently and collectively

Table 1. A summary of study examples

These findings formed a basis for our next in-depth case study of Santa Fe, where Spanish colonial arts are well sustained and still thriving. A particular focus was on validating these initial findings from secondary resources by using information collected from the primary field research.

Case Study: Spanish Colonial Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA

Santa Fe was chosen as our field research because it was known to be thriving arts and crafts community and based in long history of Spanish Colonialism, which has influenced and shaped its culture and the aesthetic characteristic of its arts and crafts. The city's vibrant culture also results from the mix of three different peoples: Hispanic, Indian and Anglo. In going to Santa Fe and the Northern New Mexico area our aim was to study the Hispanic Arts and Crafts Culture and understand the success of traditional arts and crafts in the region.

We conducted an eleven-day field trip to Santa Fe, carrying out sixteen interviews with twenty-two participants as well as a series of site visits. Participants included artist/craft-makers, gallery owners, museum directors, and policy makers. Specifically, participating craft-makers work on various art forms, such as weaving, woodcarving, 'retablo' (small wooden religious panel) painting and 'bulto' (small wooden religious sculpture) carving. The following sections describe our initial findings, thoughts and observations under each of six subheadings: continuation of arts and crafts tradition; innovation within tradition; motivation and learning; underlying values and belief; markets – place for selling and socialising; and serendipity – historical and geographical circumstances.

Continuation of Arts and Crafts Tradition

We found that in most cases, artists and craft makers had their studio at their home, in their house or garden. This meant that from a very young age their children could see and become accustomed to the art or craft being practiced by their parent(s) and/or grandparent(s); such practices were entirely familiar and normalized. In one case, a weaver in Nambe, New Mexico, with her studio in the grounds of her house, had two large looms for her own use alongside a medium sized and a small loom for her grandchildren. We found that, because the children have been made familiar with the crafts from an early age, even if they do not engage in the arts and crafts as they grow into teenagers and young adults, they are more likely to take them up later in life. Many of the people we interviewed had taken up their practice in their mid-thirties or later; when younger they are often concerned with other things – going to college, getting a job, getting married and having children, etc.

Innovation within Tradition

This enculturation through early exposure to arts traditions and culture was a critical factor for participating artists – whether it was in the family environment or the wider community. However, the practices are not always concerned with rigidly adhering to previous practices and continuing in exactly the same way, with exactly the same approaches and products as the previous generation(s). Many artists acknowledged that the tradition within their practice has always evolved over time, either generation-to-generation or by the individual maker. For some, it was more or less an unavoidable path due to changes in available resources or individual styles, while for others it was more intentional changes in continuing the traditions by adapting them to create something new. This was stated explicitly by a woodcarver in Santa Fe:

I wanted to take those traditions and the materials and methods and show people that you can honour your tradition, you can continue to use these old methods to create new work. And so that was kind of important to me as well as what's going on with the world around you, how you can kind of introduce or reintroduce an old art form and make it either new again or more interesting to the viewer.

Motivations and Learning

Some artists engaged in their art or craft as their primary occupation and income source. However, for many others, engaging the arts and crafts was a part-time activity and a source of supplementary income only. It was something they did in the evenings or weekends. Others take up or expand their practice when they are retired. For these especially, we found that the motivation was the practice, the tradition and community, and income was secondary. It was about being artistic, being creative and being productive, contributing to the continuation of a tradition, or it might be an expression of their faith. We found that many of the artist's trade their artefacts with other artists and often heavily decorate their homes with these religious paintings and sculptures. In several cases, votive candles and home altars were prominent in the living or reception rooms of their homes.

Their motivation to continue a tradition is also well presented in how they learn about their craft. Most artists we interviewed indicated the importance of continuous learning and being inspired. The following quote is from a weaver who used to be a teacher and learned how to weave herself, describing how important it was to her to learn about and use traditional materials and to use traditional skills. She conducted research from books and museums.

I learned what I could, and there are books and research studies and all sorts of things. So the Churro sheep are the ones that were used in Colonial times and I said to myself, 'if I'm going to weave and I'm going to work and I'm going to do it as close as possible to the traditional ways'.

While studying and learning themselves to sustain traditional practices, artists were also committed to passing their knowledge on to the next generation and teaching future artists. We learned from our interviews that some artists had a long career in lecturing and teaching students and/or the general public and teaching various age groups through different educational programmes.

Underlying Values and Beliefs

We found that the Spanish Colonial Arts are carried out by makers who often have a deep commitment to their Catholic faith – and this is reflected in their motivations and in the nature of the work itself – the themes. There is an underlying, shared set of important beliefs that help sustain the work. The importance of the religion and faith in creative work was described by a woodcarver in Taos, New Mexico.

I think it (religion) plays a huge role, I mean it's part of the background and there is a big spiritual involvement... That's all part of a meaningful aspect for me for sure and I participate with my saints just like everyone else does in New Mexico where you light a candle to it or you might say a prayer to it.

However, this artist also emphasised that the artefacts he creates do not remain in the purely religious tradition, they are not just to be used in Churches or other religious events, but they are strongly associated with people's lives on a daily basis.

Thus, the religious aspects often underlie the themes of his artwork rather than its functional use. In other words, people find the relevance between the themes in his work and aspects of their daily lives. For example, this artist was making 'bultos' that sometimes depicted seeming very contemporary scenes. One example was of a man on a motorbike driving from his home with a woman waving from the door. He explained that this was actually a piece commissioned by a motorbike enthusiast but it actually depicted a traditional story about a saint Columbanus leaving the home of his mother.

Markets – Place for Selling and Socialising

There are many arts events with diverse themes throughout the year – markets, fairs, festivals, etc. These events are where artists can show their work, ostensibly for business purpose. However, most artists we interviewed stressed how important to participate these events not just for selling but for gathering to meet other artists and share ideas. Therefore, these events and venues become focal points for socialising and collaboration, facilitating the growth of creative ecologies. The Spanish Market was mentioned by most as the primary event to which they worked and by which they earned a good deal of the annual income. For those who had other income sources (e.g. pensions) the markets seemed to be as much about meeting people, learning, teaching and seeing other artists as it was about making money. For all Spanish Colonial artists, the Spanish Market, which has strict rules and quality standards, is a recognition and affirmation of their art or craft. To be selected in the Spanish Market is regarded as an achievement, it affirms and validates the standard and quality of their work and it is highly prestigious.

Serendipity – Historical and Geographical Circumstances

One of the serendipitous factors of creative ecologies in Santa Fe is the coming of the railroad to the region in the nineteenth century. It went through Albuquerque, a neighbouring city, but missed Santa Fe by some 18 miles. Being somewhat isolated with few natural resources local inhabitants has to be very self-sufficient and inventive. Also, a long history of Spanish colonialization created a distinctive form of Catholicism and a deep set of beliefs and values. A historian we interviewed in Santa Fe confirmed that these unplanned and unexpected factors contributed to shaping and maintaining a unique culture of the region.

He also indicated that the geographical isolation of the city has attracted people who are affluent but do not fit in mainstream American society. These people supported the local artists to continue their practices by patronizing and buying their artwork.

Findings and Validation

The findings from our research in Santa Fe and its environs are summarized in Table 2, alongside the initial findings from our study examples. It is indicated that the Santa Fe case study findings mostly resonate the initial findings from five study examples.

	Underlying Factors (Values)	Santa Fe case
Graham and Brown Ltd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition and adaptation • Historical circumstances and serendipity – ‘chance’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing arts and crafts tradition at the family and community levels, enabling the next generation to be familiarised and enculturated from an early age. • Many unexpected and unplanned historical events that have contributed the growth of vibrant culture of the place – railroad, Spanish invasion, etc.
Morgan Motors Company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition and culture based on craftsmanship with innovative designs and techniques • Value-based decision-making, not pure profit motive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of tradition to create something new that is more contemporary, while adhering to traditional materials and techniques. • A deep commitment to the Catholic faith that underpins Spanish Colonial Artists’ creative practices and motivation to continue a tradition
Cyber Valley – cluster of SMEs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence & collaboration • Competition & cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artists/craft-makers in different art forms work independently but also collaboratively • Participating markets and other events to show their work, which provides opportunities for socializing and collaborating
Art Town, Joseph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective effort to develop the town based on Arts and crafts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual artists, galleries, museums, galleries, shops are interrelated, promoting the community as a whole based in its vibrant arts and craft tradition • Conscious efforts by the Santa Fe Municipal Government to make the city an attractive destination for visitors: from early in the 20th century, city guidelines encouraged a policy of ‘adobe’ style building types for public and private buildings later this became a part of city policy.
Artisans Community, Crawford Bay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community of artisans, working independently and collectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thriving arts and crafts community provides various opportunities for the exposure and enhancement of individual artwork but also as a collectives through many markets and events • The prestigious Santa Fe Opera attracting people to the city from the New Mexico area, America and beyond: Many of these are arts lovers, and the summer opera season coincides with many of the main arts and crafts markets in the city, making it a vibrant venue for tourists and fueling the local economy directly through the arts – makers, galleries, markets – and also indirectly through restaurants, hotels and associated services.

Table 2. Validation initial findings using the Santa Fe case (Table 1. is partially reproduced here)

From the exploratory study examples and an in-depth case study of Santa Fe, we identify three levels of interaction within creative ecologies: 1) products, 2) expertise in creating products and 3) values that underlie practice of creation (category headings in Table 1). To describe in more detail, products here mean a medium of creativity, either craft or non-craft; expertise refers to knowledge and experience combined with skills relating to the product creation; and values underpin creative practices by the community of people in a place, comprising underlying factors that contribute to the emergence of creative ecologies. These three levels of creative ecologies and their interaction are represented in Figure 1.

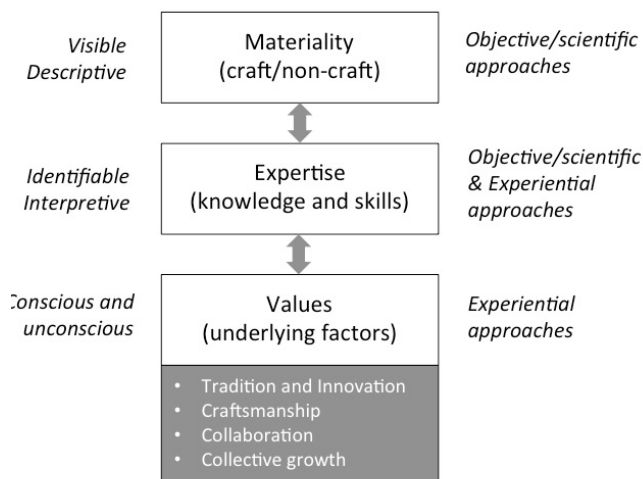


Figure 1. The level of creative ecologies and their interaction

Given the differences between the nature of each level, and their potential incommensurability, different approaches may be needed to understand them and their interaction. To be specific, understanding these levels and their interaction may require two different approaches that can be quite contradictory and incommensurable. Understanding materiality of product creation and relating skills may require a more objective/scientific approach that is descriptive and explanatory. On the other hand, expertise (knowledge and experience based) and values require a more experiential approach. This is interpretive, experimental, values-based and related with cultural and spiritual meanings.

Conclusions

We see from the foregoing that a diverse range of factors can result in a creative ecology emerging in a particular location. Some of these can be deliberately planned and promoted – as we see in the city policy of Santa Fe, and through collaborations and the development of market. Others are more serendipitous – such as historical events and geographical circumstances. Our research is continuing – we are currently developing spatial, thematic and temporal visualizations of ‘creative ecologies’ in order to better understand the interrelationships, and in future publications we will be clearly delineating those factors that can be consciously planned, in order to develop feasible strategies for the revitalization of culturally significant designs, products and practices.

Bibliography

Baer, A. and Scott, A. (2015). Joseph: From Economic Depression To Arts Powerhouse. Oregon Public Broadcasting. [online] Available at: <http://www.opb.org/news/article/joseph-from-poster-child-for-economic-depression-to-arts-powerhouse/> [Accessed 4 Apr. 2016].

Day, P. (2014). [radio]. Cyber Town Malvern. BBC World Service Global Business. 16 January.

Gould, H. (2001). Recognising Culture. UNESCO.

Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions. Papers. Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, Harvard University.

Ranchhod, A., & Gur u, C. (2007). Marketing strategies: a contemporary approach. Pearson Education.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012) What is culture? A compilation of quotations. GlobalPAD Core Concepts.