

# Cultural Influence

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Comparing different regions of the United States or comparing the United States to other countries reveals several cultural differences. When two cultures come together in one place they influence one another. Some basic characteristics of influence could be language, customs, timeliness, methods, and values, just to name a few. All these characteristics have influence on culture and between two cultures there may be similarities, but moreover there are differences. In the architectural practice these differences can relate to the way a firm functions; culture can influence how decisions are made and the attitudes among the people involved. The extents of cultural influence reach beyond measure.

Even though there are several cultures found in San Francisco, there are two powerful influencing cultures I find myself in the midst of since arriving to the city. There is a strong Mexican culture in the United States and the influences manifest itself at KMD Architects, the office that I work with.

KMD has five offices, one of which is located in Mexico City, Mexico. Recently, I had the opportunity to sit in during an all-day meeting for a project happening in Sayulita, Mexico. The meeting itself was held in San Francisco, California. Several things were of note during my observation of the meeting. For example, having an office in Mexico has an effect on the type of project KMD makes a proposal for. The Sayulita project is a resort which inclines me to believe that commercial/tourist projects are perhaps the kind of successful economic venues that are opening up in that country. The project team from the Mexico City office flew into San Francisco to have this meeting. Why did they come to San Francisco? At the time, I was not sure. I did not understand why the meeting could not have happened at the Mexico City office. Later on, as I understood more clearly the relationship between KMD offices in various locations, I found out that KMD employees

who work on international projects are in frequent collaboration with each other between San Francisco and the offices that are specifically associated to the project. So meetings could occur at all the office locations relevant to the ongoing project. The office layout at KMD San Francisco has teams of people located by the type of project they are working on. Therefore, the majority of “KMDers” (employees of KMD) who are working on international projects are stationed within close proximity to each other in one area of the office space. This is the reason why an all day meeting was held in San Francisco people from the KMD Mexico City office flew in to be directly connected with those working in San Francisco in order have a marathon meeting with the clients. I also had the chance to talk with a KMD employee, Gabriela Martin del Campos, who has experience working on international projects in both the Mexico City office and San Francisco office. She provided affirmation relating to the concept of cultural influence. Her stories were insightful concerning cultural influences and work ethics found within the architecture profession of Mexico and the United States.

## **The Meeting**

Beginning at 9:00AM we had a meeting with KMDers from the San Francisco and Mexico City office along with the clients. The project is located at Sayulita, Nayarit, Mexico. The project is Sayulita Bald Mountain. There were various parties attending these all-day meetings for the project. All-day meetings are held due to limited time and long distance traveling. There is a specific time frame to work collaboratively because the members are flying in from distant locations. In order to maintain efficiency and maintain good communication it is necessary to focus an ample amount of attention to the design investigations. Everyone attending will have the knowledge of the progress, design ideas and other related issues. Then the client and designers can discern what direction to move towards as the design process continues.

The client is Bald Mountain Development. Those in attendance from BMD were David, the principal, Erik and Jeff, who are Project Managers. Those from KMD Mexico are Juan Diego Perez-Vargas (SF), KMD Director, Luis Crdenas (MC), Director of Design, Maca Zeballos (MC), Project Manager, and Roberto Velazco (MC), Project Designer. Aside from the client and the architecture design firm, Patxi Borbolla Arizti was at the meeting; he is a general contractor from GA&A in Mexico City. Another participant of the meeting is Tomas, but he stayed in Mexico City. We had a phone

conference with him and he is representing the civil engineering firm, Nolte. These were all the main contributors to the full day Programming meeting on the Sayulita Bald Mountain project.

Methods of conducting the meeting were fronted with basic cultural clashes from time to time. Nevertheless, the purpose for everyone coming together at one location is to have a unified Programming meeting. Programming happens early on in the design process and it is necessary that ideas are directly addressed with major parties involved on the project. On the agenda, land planning, architectural design, entitlement review, schedule and contract review were the topics of the meeting. Throughout the dialogue, some characteristics I have observed during this event as contributing factors to cultural influence are language, work habits, and project type

## **Language**

One of the most noticeable variables of cultural influence occurs while collaborating on international projects and communicating in multiple languages. A language barrier adds a slight complication when trying to explain detailed issues. Throughout the meeting there was a regular mix of English and Spanish spoken. Detailed clarification is necessary while translating between two different languages. I observed among the members of the KMD Mexico team that items of discussion were described in Spanish for further understanding. This was done with haste so the meeting could continue to progress swiftly. During these moments of clarification several minutes passed. My first thought was that there was a lot of time lost in translation. However, my second thought was that this is necessary. It is far greater benefit to have a local professional architecture firm work on a project that is within their country because they are more knowledgeable of architectural issues in relation to their region. In addition, the Mexico City office is officially part of KMD Architects, a U.S. firm. This means both offices can benefit from both countries. The extra time to translate is hardly a loss in comparison to the gain of international cooperation.

Having a phone conference is one method of communicating over distances. This method is used for more than just international projects, but in this case having a phone conference is a very useful tool. During the first two hours of the meeting a 45 minute phone conference was held with a representative of Nolte. Nolte is a civil engineering firm in Mexico City. During the phone conference everyone, ideally, remains silent and one person will speak

at a time. It was not very difficult to understand Tomas; he is the Nolte civil engineer in Mexico City. However, on occasion several people in the room would perk up and direct their ears toward the speaker phone to hear more clearly through the static sound of the phone line and also to decipher the words Tomas is saying through his Spanish accent. Language presents a communication barrier at times, and even while learning other languages, the sounds and pronunciations are still affected by a person's native tongue. Tomas spoke English very well; it comes down to cultural differences that make a situation slightly more challenging.

## **Work Habits**

It is interesting to observe the show of urgency that came from the KMD Mexico City team. Regardless of location or culture, presentations have a tendency to be approached with a heightened level of adrenaline because it is all about the level or performance the client recognizes from a design team. This desire to perform well in front of others is a common human trait among all culture groups. How this trait is revealed varies from person to person and can be influenced by culture. In this case, when a new topic was brought up during the meeting everyone from KMD Mexico responded with urgency. The highly energetic and eager reaction of the design was very noticeable. Perhaps this is a result of the desire to do an excellent job. For example, if a sketch was needed in order to explain a design issue, someone hand-drew it very clearly and quickly on trace paper. This was done promptly, so there could be a visual understanding as immediately as possible. This situation was repeated again and again over the course of the Programming Meeting.

Another fascinating work habit I noticed is when a technical issue was happening on the computer, a handful of people would gather around the one computer all looking at the screen to hopefully figure out what is going on. Even with the computer screen image projected on the wall, everyone still looked at the computer monitor instead. It appears to be a habit for processing through ideas a group conversing around one computer as opposed to everyone talking and sitting apart from each other around a table with one person administering the computer functions. Various formalities are handled differently between diverse people groups. This is an example of how collaboration differs among those from the Mexico City office in comparison to others at the San Francisco office; all this to conclude that perhaps work habits are influenced by culture as well.

## **Project Type**

Architecture involves designing and constructing buildings which can include the design of the total built environment, from the macro level of how a building integrates with its surroundings to the micro level of construction details. The project types are developed with influence from the local culture. In the case of projects happening in Mexico there is a high demand for tourist attractions because the climate in Mexico is warm and there is land available along the ocean coast. This is desirable for many international travelers to come and visit. The culture in Mexico promotes the development which markets toward FIT (First-class International Travelers) because the hope is to bring in more domestic revenue from outside sources. The climate is in demand as a vacation spot and there are consumers willing to pay large sums of money to visit. This can be viewed as an economic influence but culture has an impact on how the local people embrace the idea of developing such building types. Is there more value in maintaining the nature of the ocean coastline or in bringing more monetary revenue into the country? I had first impressions relating to the social image of Mexico tourism from attending this meeting. I had not any awareness of Mexico's tourism except for the popularity of Cancun, Mexico among American tourists. Learning about the Sayulita Bald Mountain project made me think more about what kind of visitors go to Mexico on vacation. The project itself is on a hilly terrain and there is a very picturesque feel to the layout and planning of the vacation homes and suites. The experience of the promenade in this project is given a lot of attention because the type of visitors the client hopes to receive after the completion of this project are those with a high income, high status and with a desire to be big spenders while relaxing in a tropical paradise.

### **0.1 The Interview**

I had the opportunity to have lunch with a KMD employee who had grown up in Mexico, worked at architectural firms in Mexico City, one being the KMD - Mexico City office and is now working at the KMD - San Francisco office. Her name is Gabriela Martin del Campo. During our lunch together she invited her husband, whom she has been married to for a few years now to join us as well. His name is Ignacio, but people just call him "Nacho" as a nickname. In my opinion his actual name is so much more eloquent and refine, I personally think it is a vice that our American culture has not

fulfilled adapting to the pronunciation of a foreign name like Ignacio and has influenced his introduction, reducing it to “My name is ‘Ignacio’ but you can call me ‘Nacho.’” I suppose it is my opinion that a person’s name is of great value and meaning and there is a significant loss due to cultural influence. This was only the beginning of our lunch together. It was a delight to observe Gabriela and Ignacio together; I can see the value they put on their relationship with one another. Since Ignacio is also from Mexico City, they both have expressed with great enthusiasm how much they love San Francisco. From what I observe from several people who come to the U.S. and begin the rest of their lives here is that they still view the United States of America as a “land of opportunity.” Gabriela and Ignacio moving to the U.S. attests to the fact that people have the opinion that this is a good country to build their lives in.

As I continued to ask questions, have some good laughs, and talk about architecture I found out some interesting little tidbits about the general atmosphere of the architecture office in Mexico City, regarding the responsibilities and actions taken by employees in the office, family values, and the effects these values can have on some design projects. I found out that the collaborative nature of the employees have this habit of problem-solving around a single computer monitor. I witnessed this in action at the Sayulita Bald Mountain Programming meeting. If there is a design issue in need of discussing a couple of people may talk about it, but then sometimes additional people join in. It is just how things commonly happen at the Mexico City office. From listening to Gabriela explain scenarios at the KMD Mexico City office, I gather that people always want to contribute and be a part of the project at hand. She confirmed to me that the action of communicating ideas in one place, huddling around at one computer is fairly common. This does not really occur in any of the U.S. offices. The culture in Mexico affects how people work together in a common work space.

Another interesting attribute of how the Mexico City office manages the firm differently due to culture is in how responsibilities are shared among every individual. There are several people who are very hard working. In the U.S. it is more common for jobs to be separated from one another. Each person has a particular role and brings their strengths to one place in order for the job to be completed. Some tasks are shared during the design process, but most often, not one person has to be involved in every aspect of a project. In the U.S. this type of response seems to happen more naturally. More often in the U.S. there is an ability to separate and compromise the responsibil-

ities among different people so no one is over-loaded with several different thoughts. The culture in Mexico is different and it affects the work happening in the office. While there are different phases in the design process and various other issues that are administered in a project, the responsibilities are more often shared between several people. So every worker in the KMD Mexico City office has more than just one or two responsibilities to juggle. What happens is if there is a project manager administrating a project, that project manager probably has additional duties that involve doing drawings too. There is less of a hierarchy and job description; everyone can do whatever is necessary to get the job done. More than one person may share the task of putting together a proposal; one person may be in a CD phase of work, but also does schematic drawings on another project. Tasks are not always clear cut and divided among the employees. Every person does a little bit of everything that is involved with a project. What I gather from the conversation with Gabriela is that since she had transferred to the San Francisco office, her work load is more specific to a few things rather than so many things all at once. It is easier for her to manage the work because there is dividing and compromising of work among the staff. These work ethics I believe stem from culture affecting and playing into professional work ethic. The method for achieving goals are approached differently from one culture to another.

An additional topic of discussion relates to how culture affects design work. One type of influence is due to strong family ties that many people in Mexico have and continue to encourage. These values carry into the needs of a building and how the layout and programming is arranged. For example, there is a project happening in Mexico; a prison building. Part of the programming requirement for that prison is to provide an enclosed room for a spouse to come visit the significant other in jail and that space is specified as space where the couple can have personal time/sexual relations with each other. It could be considered strange to provide certain benefits within a jail for prisoners. I'm not sure if this is something adapted into the prisons found in the U.S. but that example reflects something about the culture in Mexico. While projects are designed by a U.S. architectural firm, the programming and design decisions are made based on the local culture of the projects location in Mexico.

In conclusion, there is a large influence of Mexican culture that I have noticed in San Francisco. I have seen it impact how a meeting is conducted, the types of projects that are worked on and the design decisions made. Observ-

ing an extensive meeting that involved collaboration between the office in San Francisco and the office in Mexico City was a great experience to watch the habits and presentation methods merge into one place. Observing the manner of communication as cultures cross revealed some truth that differences need to be worked through as patiently and efficiently as possible. Understanding differences between cultures can stimulate progress on a project. The benefit of understanding cultural influences is having a healthy team cooperating together. The opportunity to interview a person brought insight through the testimony of her experiences. The interviewee had lived among both extreme cultural conditions; her stories reflect the values and brought me further awareness of a culture I am not very knowledgeable about. Cultural influences occur everywhere, they affect every individual's life whether directly or indirectly. It is important to observe the cultural influences, because developing further awareness will only benefit the collaboration and quality of life and the work we do together.