

## VU Research Portal

**[Book review of:] Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.)**

Gimeno Martinez, J.C.

***published in***

Journal of Design History  
2018

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1093/jdh/epy029](https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epy029)

***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

***document license***

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

***citation for published version (APA)***

Gimeno Martinez, J. C. (2018). [Book review of:] Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.): [Book review of:] Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.) Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.), Berghahn Books, 2016. 296 pp., 72 illus., cloth, \$130.00. ISBN: 9781785331558; paper, \$34.95, ISBN: 9781785338328. . *Journal of Design History*, 31(3), 302-303. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epy029>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

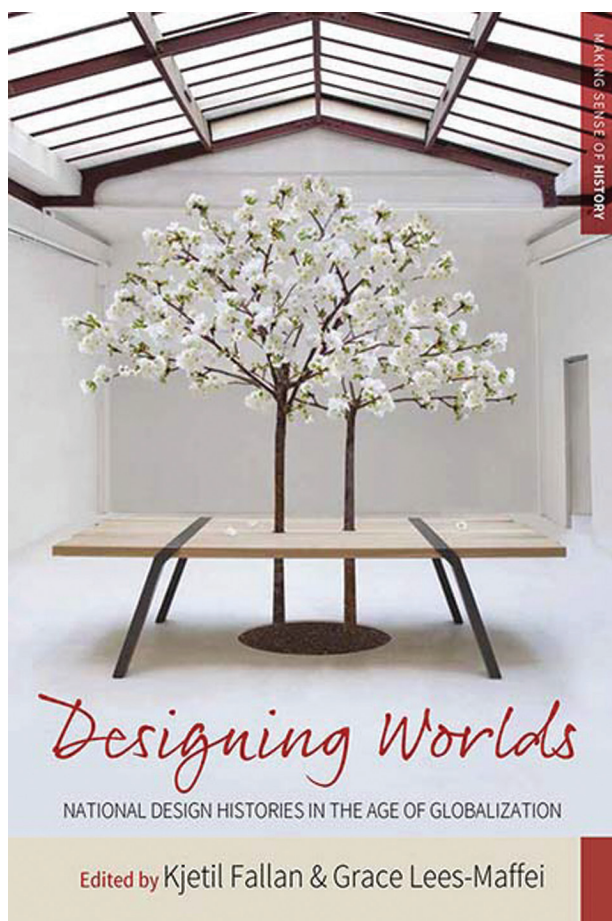
- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)



## Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization

Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.), *Berghahn Books*, 2016. 296 pp., 72 illus., cloth, \$130.00. ISBN: 9781785331558; paper, \$34.95, ISBN: 9781785338328.

National design histories have been both a popular and a contested format. Particularly in these intensively globalized times, the nation has been questioned as an appropriate framework to study design. This book argues that even under globalization, nations flourish and disseminate. Nations as frameworks for design enquiry need nevertheless be re-evaluated to incorporate the mutual influence between international and national dynamics. As the editors state, '... the national framework—although contested—remains a vital and rewarding organizational concept in the writing of history not in spite of its contested character, but because of it' (p. 7). To achieve this aim, the editors chose a plural approach based on specific case studies that present an alternative to 'world histories of design', which they consider as too 'prone to generalizing

about the commonality of huge international regions' (p. 7). This volume gathers essays from different authors scrutinizing empirical material on specific geographies and periods and offering a range of methodologies for writing national design histories. On the one hand, the case studies provide 'knowledge of underexplored nations and regions'. On the other hand, they offer 'new and unique understandings of how design cultures are formed and operationalized in the complex and contested processes of forging societies, collectives, communities, institutions and identities' (p. 5). This results in a volume gathering examples from all the five continents and offering a canopy of visions for how the national can be used to study design. The editors proclaim a certain predilection for a comparative approach between nations themselves and between events in the same nation. At the same time, however, this methodology has not been imposed on the authors, who were allowed 'to explore a range of approaches' (p. 13).

This volume opens with an introduction by the editors and continues with a collection of fifteen essays, each illustrated with a maximum of five black and white illustrations. The cases have rarely been explored in canonical design histories, and the images will be therefore novel for most readers. The participating seventeen authors have nationalities from the five continents and are based in the UK (8), Scandinavia (3), South Africa (3), India (1), Japan (1) and New Zealand (1). The authors are mostly design historians, except for Davinia Gregory, who is working on a PhD in sociology, and the chapters are multifarious in their scope. Some explore specific case studies or a comparison of two. For example, Suchitra Balasubrahmanyam compares the designs of Gandhi's Dandi March and Nehru's Republic Day Parade and their afterlife. Livia Rezende compares the representation of Brazil at International Exhibitions in 1867 and 1904. Other authors explore long evolutions across a longer period of time, such as Patricia Lara-Betancourt's overview of design in Latin America in the nineteenth century or Marta Filipová's account of how the terms 'Czech', 'Bohemian', or 'Czechoslovak' have been used to coin the glass manufactured in the region throughout the twentieth century depending on the political situation. Alongside, there are other approaches such as Deirdre Pretorius' overview of the emergence and development of design history in South Africa as a discipline, or Grace Lees-Maffei's chapter on methodology, focusing on the advantages of a transnational approach through a literature review of domestic advice from the UK and the USA.

The introduction is soundly theoretical, exploring theories of nationalism and discussions on the same topic from

the discipline of history. A literature review of existing national design histories is, however, absent; this could have been useful to better understand what has been done in the past and the need for an alternative model. Furthermore, this introduction presents the chapters and highlights their main ideas. Similarly, each author explicitly states his or her goal in the chapter. For example, Zeina Maasri explores 'how design for the tourism industry intersects with political processes of nation building, modernization and globalization in postcolonial contexts' (p. 138), and Ariyuki Kondo argues that design historical inquiry based on a geographical-national framework 'is an approach more crucial than ever to be employed in the historiography of art, architecture and design' (p. 105). The chapters follow each other according to a geographical sequence dealing with cases from Africa, Oceania, Asia, Europe and America but without being grouped into thematic sections. Nevertheless, the reader can easily establish overarching connections among the chapters since they deal with similar topics. For example, how design practice and exhibitions have dealt with minorities is a shared topic in two chapters. Claudia Bell's article examines how Maori natives have been used in New Zealand as myths of national character in design, what has been called 'Maoriana'. Kjetil Fallan and Christina Zetterlund conversely demonstrate how dominant notions of Scandinavian design have excluded Sami craft as well as other minorities, such as recent immigrant waves or Roma people. This volume consequently offers a myriad of these connections between articles, showing its versatility and richness of approaches. Still, it is the reader who must connect the dots. Needless to say, the introduction cannot cover the diversity of readings that the book offers, but the reader might have the impression that there are issues that have not been sufficiently explored.

This diversity of approaches results not only in remarkable interconnections but also in some contradictions, which

might perhaps be intrinsic to all edited volumes. For example, Dipti Bhagat argues that one cannot speak of Africa in general as a continent, but that its inner diversity must be acknowledged. Conversely, in her article, Patricia Lara-Betancourt uses Latin America as a category to designate a vast, diverse region. Both options are potentially useful and applicable depending on the goal of the chapter. Despite that, this book does not offer a conclusive opinion about this aspect. For example, the diversity of the different chapters seems to be united in what seems to be the main goal of this book, the fact that '[w]riting history today, then, should be less about pitching the global against the local, regional and national, and more a matter of exploring the intersections and influences between these different scales' (p. 8). This is an evidently valuable observation but one wonders if this is such a groundbreaking novelty. Histories of design dealing with a given country have habitually considered the flux of transnational influences. When exploring, let's say, French art nouveau, the authors acknowledge the influence of the Belgian variant.

To conclude, the contributions are valuable beyond question and the cases studied original. This book will therefore be a referent for future studies on national design histories. One misses only a more elaborated framework that would make this originality explicit and articulate it along general lines of inquiry. This could have resulted in an alternative to writing national design histories beyond existing examples. This book offers abundant, eloquent reflection on the topic but perhaps not an original, specific direction to move towards.

doi:10.1093/jdh/epy029

Javier Gimeno-Martínez  
Assistant Professor, Department of Arts & Culture,  
History and Antiquity  
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
E-mail: [j.c.gimenomartinez@vu.nl](mailto:j.c.gimenomartinez@vu.nl)