SYNTHESIS

The Cultural Intelligence Field Guide

BY Rajeev Lunkad **PUBLISHED** 2026-09-10

What this guide is

This is a working guide to Cultural Intelligence as Direct Create practices it. It assembles what the practice has already set out across its canon pages into one continuous read: what the discipline reads, how a study is built, what the delivered Study contains, and the two laws that govern its use. Nothing here is new. Every statement traces to a page or a canon file listed under Sources at the close, with its date.

It is written for three readers. A designer holding a cultural brief and wondering what a study would actually give them. A client's design head deciding whether the reading is worth commissioning. A student who wants the method in one place rather than across a dozen essays. Read it in ten minutes, print it, and keep it beside the brief.

What Cultural Intelligence reads

Cultural Intelligence, as Direct Create defines it, is a discipline that pairs modern capability with civilizational depth, working to restore specificity to a world that industrialization has tended to homogenize. It reads culture at its source, refuses to flatten it into a category or a motif, and organizes it into knowledge any design discipline can draw from. Where the industrial method advances by reduction, Cultural Intelligence advances by fidelity.

The gap it closes is visible on any parcel of land. Before a site clears an investment committee it has already been read many ways: title, geotechnical survey, catchment demographics, and the underwriting model. Every one of those readings covers the land and the market. None of them covers the place, meaning what it has carried for centuries, its craft and its festivals, its built memory and the languages spoken on its streets. That is the most underpriced information on the parcel, and reading it is the work.

The discipline is practiced through three instruments. The Culture Stack is the end product, a place-and-purpose Study a designer builds on. Culture Stacking is the five-stage process that produces it. The Culture Code is the companion framework that reads a craft tradition as a language of vocabulary, grammar, and expression, holding the artisan as the speaker of that language. The Culture Codex is the published body of knowledge through which the discipline is released. Terms are fixed once in the Glossary and used as defined everywhere else.

Two boundaries hold across all of it. The discipline itself is open and belongs to its practitioners; what Direct Create owns is its own instruments, the Culture Stack and the Culture Stacking method, the Culture Code framework, and the Codex as Direct Create curates it. Direct Create is building toward recognition as the founding practice, and the claim stays in that tense. The second boundary is the working one. The practice researches, synthesizes, frames, recommends, and guides. It does not design interiors, does not fabricate, and does not manage construction. Alongside an architect or a design team the relationship is parallel.

The Fields, tangible and intangible

The material a study investigates is the full set of cultural Fields. There are twelve, split along the tangible and intangible line the practice drew in Understanding Identity and later drew as a taxonomy.

The four tangible Fields are the geographic, the living, the immovable, and the movable. The eight intangible Fields are languages, performing arts, oral

traditions, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and skill, and cuisine.

Two properties of the set matter more than the list. The Fields are universal and unordered, so no Field comes first and no chronology is implied. And they are interdependent, so they pull on one another; giving weight to one will often lift its neighbors.

From Field to Finding

A Field investigated in one specific place, and grounded in that place's evidence, becomes a Finding. Fields are the areas a study can look at. Findings are what this ground actually yields. The work of reading is the work of turning one into the other.

Evidence is the sourced facts a Finding rests on. Carried inside a delivered Exhibit, it becomes that Exhibit's evidence anchor, and it is what lets a reader walk a claim back to where it came from. Every Field stays in scope during the gathering. A Field that yields no evidence is recorded as a gap to fill. It is never recorded as a zero.

Emphasis, where judgment enters

Emphasis is the relative weight a Finding carries for the project's purpose. It is set during the Argument stage, and it is how judgment and locality enter the study.

The published worked pair reads Worli against Kokapet. Built memory carries seventeen points of weight in the first reading against four in the second, and geographic weight carries thirteen against four. Worli inherits its city's culture, while Kokapet must compose its own from the land and the arriving community, a city-reading against a parcel-reading. Same Fields, different weight, different identity. Because the Findings are interdependent, raising one surfaces the Findings it pulls, which the builder can lift alongside it or decline with a stated reason.

Emphasis can be set two ways, offered together. Set each Finding's weight directly, which is fast and intuitive. Or answer a bounded set of comparisons asking which of two carries more weight here, from which the weights are derived and checked for coherence, which is slower and more defensible. Emphasis is a structuring measure. It is never a formula, and it is never the build on its own.

The five stages, and what each produces

1. **Scoping.** Scope the study to the project: its purpose, its end use, its audience, its constraints. Scoping is not yet about the place. It produces the governing question the study must answer, and it is why two studies of the same place diverge.
2. **Fieldwork.** Gather cultural evidence across the Fields, drawing on site research, archives, interviews, and the image archive. It produces raw, sourced evidence held against the Fields, with the gaps named.
3. **Mapping.** Clean the evidence, derive the Findings the place actually yields, and trace which Findings reinforce, depend on, or pull each other. It produces the Findings and the web that connects them.
4. **Argument.** Build the Findings into a narrative and set Emphasis for the project's purpose. It produces an emphasized, connected argument, and the method can hold two or three coherent resolutions of the same place rather than one.
5. **Edition.** Compose the argument into the delivered form. It produces the Study, a narrative of Chapters made of Exhibits, which is the thing handed to the designer.

What a Study contains

The Study is the delivered form of a Culture Stack. It is built to be presented and reads as one narrative with an arc. Chapters are its sections, chosen for what the project needs, with the Findings visible inside each. Exhibits are the slide-ready units inside a Chapter.

Every Exhibit carries six parts so it can stand on its own: a **Title** that states its claim, a **Narrative** written to be presented, an **Evidence anchor** of sourced facts, an **Open meaning** left for the reader, the **Findings** it expresses, and a **Visual intention** for the eventual image. One rule holds inside every Exhibit. Complete evidence, open meaning. The facts are closed and sourced; the design implications are left open for the designer to draw.

An Exhibit, in shape:

> **Title.** Everything Here Begins at Talakaveri
>
> **Narrative.** On the Brahmagiri ridge, at 1,341 meters, the Cauvery rises from a spring that slips underground and surfaces again below. The whole of Kodagu lies downstream of that one source. The water is the first cause. It is not a feature of the place.
>
> **Evidence anchor.** Cauvery rises at Talakaveri, Brahmagiri range, 1,341 m; a revered source; nearly 280 inches of annual rain.
>
> **Open meaning.** If the site sits downstream of a sacred source, what does the arrival sequence owe to water?
>
> **Findings.** Geographic (lead), Rituals, Living.
>
> **Visual intention.** The spring-fed tank at Talakaveri in monsoon mist, or a watershed section from ridge to estate.

A designer reads the Study as themselves. An architect, a landscape designer, a brand lead, and a product designer read the same Study differently, each through their own training, and each reading can be right. The Study is a reference to return to as the work develops. It is never a brief consumed once and discarded. After delivery, the interpretations Direct Create offers are captured one at a time as Annotations and accumulate into the Commentary.

The two governing laws

Non-determinism. Outputs are weighted by Emphasis and plural. The Study offers readings and resolutions rather than a single verdict. The same Findings under different Emphasis resolve into different and equally valid Studies, and that openness is the method rather than a defect in it.

Substrate not solver. The Study informs a human author and is interpreted by them. It never authors the design in their place. No tool turns a Study into a finished design, brand, or object on its own, and generating design moves automatically from the Emphasis is forbidden.

What a Culture Stack is not

These are the errors that keep creeping back, for people and for machines alike. A Study never supports them.

It is not linear, because the Fields carry no fixed order and no chronology. It is not deterministic, because there is no formula and no sum to solve for. It is not a solver, because no tool finishes a design from it. It is not the Culture Code, because reading how a craft carries meaning and building a study for a place are different acts. It is not a machine or a grammar to be run. It is not a catalog of right answers. It does not close the meaning; it closes only the evidence. It is not one fixed lens, it never rests on a single corroborating signal, and it is not served by forced analogy.

A Culture Stack is also hyper-local by design. Two projects on the same land produce different Studies, because purpose changes what matters, which is why a Study cannot be carried from one project to another.

How an engagement begins

Engagements begin with Scoping. The practice and the client agree on the project's governing question, the audience, the constraints, and the deliverable shape, before any fieldwork begins. The fee structure is phased against the five stages, with the largest weight on Argument and Edition. The default deliverable is a Study, delivered as a deck that reads as a narrative of Chapters and Exhibits.

Delivering the Study is the start of the work. It is not the end, because the Commentary continues for as long as the designer is reading from it. To open a conversation, write to rajeev@directcreate.com.

A checklist for your own place

Twelve questions, in the order the practice asks them. Working through them is a first reading rather than a Study; the difference is the evidence under each answer and the Emphasis a full engagement builds. Take them to a place you are working on now.

1. What is the question your project needs answered, stated before you look at the place at all? Write it in one sentence and keep it visible.
2. Who reads the answer, and what will they do with it? Name the audience and the end use, since both change what the study must carry.
3. Walk all twelve Fields, four tangible and eight intangible. Which of them does your place actually yield evidence for?
4. Where a Field yields nothing yet, have you recorded it as a gap to fill rather than as a zero, and do you know how you would fill it?
5. For each Finding you are claiming, what is the source, and can a reader open it and see the same fact? An evidence anchor is what lets a reader walk a claim back to where it came from.
6. Which craft traditions are living here, and who are the people who speak them? Have you asked whether the tradition is living, endangered, revived, or extinct?
7. Which of your Findings pull on which others? If you raise one, name the ones that rise with it.
8. Which Findings carry the most weight for this purpose, and would a different program on the same land change that ordering?
9. Build a second coherent reading of the same Findings under different Emphasis. If you cannot, you are holding a conclusion rather than a study.
10. Where does your reading reduce the place to a motif or a palette? The industrial method advances by reduction; Cultural Intelligence advances

by fidelity.

11. In every exhibit you write, are the facts closed and the design implications left open? Mark any place where you have closed the meaning for the reader.
12. Would the artisans who speak the craft traditions in your evidence read your proposal as fluent? A proposal that ignores the grammar of the craft produces a tourist's sentence, recognizable as outsider work.

Sources

Every statement above is drawn from the following, each with the date of the page or document it comes from.

- The Glossary, the practice's source of truth for terms, 2026-06-02
- The Culture Stack, the definition of the product and the guardrail set, 2026-06-02
- Culture Stacking, the method, the five stages and the Emphasis mechanics, 2026-06-02
- Cultural Intelligence, the discipline, the instruments, and the ownership position, positioning locked 2026-05-21, revised to canon vocabulary 2026-06-03
- Culture Code, the companion framework of vocabulary, grammar, and expression, framework formed 2025, page current 2026-09-10
- The Tangible and Intangible Taxonomy, the parent split of the Fields, 2024-10-03 and 2025-01-30
- Commentary and Interpretation, the post-delivery layer and the Annotation, 2026-06-02
- Work, the advisory boundary and how engagements are commissioned, 2026-06-03
- How to Read a Place: Building a Culture Stack, the first public statement of Field, Finding, and Emphasis, published 2026-06-06

- Understanding Identity, the tangible and intangible foundation, published 2024-10-03
- What is Culture Code? Jaipur workshop, the framework at full length, delivered 2025-01-30
- The Culture Stack Canon, files 01 and 03, agreed with Rajeev Lunkad 2026-06-01 and cascaded to the wiki 2026-06-02

EVIDENCE

METHOD

An assembly rather than a new argument. Every statement on this page is drawn from a Direct Create page or canon file already published or already agreed, listed with its date under Sources at the close. The canon this guide assembles was agreed with Rajeev Lunkad on 2026-06-01 and cascaded to the wiki on 2026-06-02. Corrections: write to rajeev@directcreate.com naming the page and the line.

OBSERVATIONS

- The vocabulary used here (Field, Finding, Evidence, Emphasis, Study, Chapter, Exhibit, Commentary, Annotation) is taken from the Glossary of 2026-06-02, which is the practice's source of truth for terms.
- The public articulation of these terms was first made outside the practice in How to Read a Place, published 6 June 2026, and the tangible and intangible split was stated earlier still in Understanding Identity of 3 October 2024.

SOURCES

- The Glossary, the source of truth for terms, 2026-06-02
- The Culture Stack Definition, Culture Stack Canon, 01, 2026-06-01
- Culture Stacking: The Method, Culture Stack Canon, 03, 2026-06-01
- How to Read a Place: Building a Culture Stack, Future of Tradition (https://rajeevlunkad.substack.com/p/how-to-read-a-place-building-a-culture), 2026-06-06
- Understanding Identity, Future of Tradition (https://rajeevlunkad.substack.com/p/creating-identity), 2024-10-03
- What is Culture Code? Future of Tradition workshop presentation, Jaipur, 2025-01-30

ATTRIBUTION

Author: Rajeev Lunkad, Direct Create. The craft traditions and communities named across the pages this guide assembles are the work of their own communities and are cited as evidence.

UNCERTAINTY

This is an assembly, so it carries the uncertainties of the pages it draws on rather than resolving them. The founding-practice

claim is a forward bet the work must earn and is held in the building-toward tense. The exhibit shown as an illustration is drawn from a hospitality study that is not yet public, so a reader cannot check it against a named engagement. Engagement detail stays generalized on public surfaces under the disclosure ruling of 2026-07-07.

REVIEWED REVIEW PENDING

Questions readers ask

What is this field guide?

A single public page that assembles Direct Create's published canon into one working read. It covers what Cultural Intelligence reads, the five stages of Culture Stacking, the cultural Fields, how a Finding is grounded and weighted, what a delivered Study contains, the two governing laws, and a checklist a reader can apply to their own place. It introduces nothing new; every statement traces to a page listed under Sources.

Who is it for?

A designer working with a cultural brief, a client's design head deciding whether a study is worth commissioning, and a student who wants the method in one place. It is written to be read in ten minutes and printed.

Can I use the checklist on my own project?

Yes. The twelve questions at the close are the ones the practice asks as it moves through the five stages, from the governing question at Scoping through to the fluency test on what you propose, written in the second person so a reader can walk their own place with them. Working through them is a first reading rather than a Study, and the difference is the evidence and the Emphasis a full engagement builds.

Continue



The guide describes the method; the Dadar Edit shows it producing three carpets from one reading.

Dadar Edit →

You will learn how a neighbourhood's reading became a drawing, a weave and a finished object, in six parts.