

Design as a Tool for Local Transformation

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Abstract: Globalization promotes exchanges. But there is no reason to exchange if we are all the same. From this understanding comes the necessity of belonging. What we are doing now in Brazil, is washing our eyes, constantly used to looking for external solutions and jumping into our richness, methods and ways of production. In this moment we are changing the view of Design X Craft as two different fields and starting to consider Design AND Craft as a rich confluence that overtakes the borders of design by looking for a delicate balance between tradition, modernity, art, conduct of work, politics, nature and social issues. Every action seeks to retrieve the social meaning of design, while improving the quality of life of people who produce and/or use design.

Key words: *Globalization, local solutions, sustainability, social meaning of design, quality of life.*

1. Introduction

The material presented is a compilation of a practical research program developed mainly in urban and rural communities of handcraft production throughout Brazil during the last eight years. The tonic of this work is about collectively developed products relating design, society and ecology. The methodology respectfully develops and adapts traditional craftworks into products that generate income and improve the quality of life of communities, while stimulating the people's self-esteem and the value they give to their own culture.

2. Popular Design

My research in the Social Design field began in 2002. I was looking for a way to work with design in Brazil when I went to the Northern region of the country where I had my first contact with what I call "popular design". Popular design is a rich production made by people in an excluded situation that brings alternatives for survival with creativity and beauty. They develop all kinds of products using local materials that can be easily reached. These materials are transformed and adapted from little pieces of wood in a little wood stool or a tin can in a kerosene lamp. It woke me up to the true meaning of necessity and the role of the designer.

Amidst this long-lasting research among an anthropologist, designers, architects and craftsmen about different craft techniques, history and markets, I realized the importance of reconnecting design with society and ecology,

in their social impact and the sustainable chain created locally. This took me inside the communities.

After the initial period of research, I began to be directly involved in the orientation of urban communities in the suburbs of São Paulo. Those areas are really destitute. Usually, what we have in our hands for the work are urban remnants, donations of industrial leftovers, and a group of people with a great will and strength to change, doing what we started to call '**more with less**'.

With these experiences I see that the Brazilian reality, from a social and economic point of view, has structured itself using an excluding development model. In one hand we have the "Emergent Brazil" based on the main urban centres, aiming for development following external and international models and in the other hand we have the "Regional Brazil", strongly under-developed (or under-valued), but with great cultural and social roots and expressions.



Figure.1 Contrast in one culture - Salvador Market and São Paulo skyline.

As a designer I intend to act as an agent of transformation working transversally between these situations. My proposal is to join, through Design, these two extremes of Brazilian Society, developing products that can improve the income and self-esteem of the communities, while recognizing the values of regional and cultural Brazilian identities.

In December 2004, after many experiences within communities located in urban areas, the Supereco Institute invited me to write a project proposal about economic development through the use of eucalyptus forest by-products for the neighboring communities of the Suzano Paper and Cellulose Industry, one of the largest industries in Brazil and a leader in its area. This was a very important moment. We noticed that the larger industrial corporations were being pressed by the international norms and certificates such as **ISO** (International Organization for Standardization), **SA-8000** (Social Accountability) and **FSC** (Forest Stewardship Council), to responsibly address environmental and social issues.

To design the project, we visited 16 different areas located in the extreme south of the state of Bahia, looking for indicators, evaluating the social and environmental impact of the handcraft production and its potential for

income generation. From the visited communities, we chose São José de Alcobaça as a base for our pilot project, due to its high levels of poverty and disease. During the following three months, I placed myself as an observer of the local life and conditions, identifying elements for the work. I also searched for and grouped the available prime-materials and resources: eucalyptus leaves, branches and barks. Among these materials, it was the bark that gave us the greatest possibilities.



Figure.2 Visual research – Southern state of Bahia - *Projeto Comunidade Produtiva* – Productive Community Project 2006 - 2007

With the help of local leaders we constituted a group of 30 people visiting schools, churches, and other local institutions. When we arrive to a region, work starts by meeting the people with whom we will work and during the first days we walk around the village, talking with each of them to gain understanding of their needs, aspirations, vocations, knowledge, and histories. We are there to learn about the place, the relations, the traditions, the social and economical and of course about their work. So through the crossing of elements -- local available material, abilities found within the group, local culture in every aspect, landscape, colors, aroma and so on -- we promote a collective exercise of self-discovering and experimentation. The most important thing in this first moments is to get to know each other and build confidence in an equal relationship: walking, talking, showing interest and playing, lightly and freely as in childhood. No expectations. The next step is devoted to working with materials and here we want to let everybody free so that new and spontaneous ideas appear.



Figure.3 Building confidence in an equal relationship - *Projeto Comunidade Produtiva* - Productive Community Project 2006 – 2007

The designer's role is little by little and with great respect to bring and join the most interesting results and encourage them for the new ones. The whole process is built up collectively , generating results with meaning and references for the community, flourishing the belonging feeling of know-how and all the elements related to it. This process is very rich not only to feel the potentialities but difficulties, too. During the hand-training activities we realized that almost all of the participants had had prior work in agriculture, which was noticeable through their heavy hands.



Figure.4 Precious tools – process to understand abilities – *Projeto Comunidade Produtiva* - Productive Community Project 2006 – 2007

We then took fiber from the barks and refuse paper from local schools, and processed these into a pulp. Since we knew the difficulty for handcrafting fine products, we decided to use the “hand-on-model” technique. Also with the help of local knowledge, we prepared pigments from natural herbs and seeds, and developed a range of over thirty products.

Working together we discovered that if we cooked the bark with the ashes of the wood ovens, common in the area, it would easily dissolve in a natural process. From that, we came to learn that ashes have strong alkaline properties, which substitute the use of caustic soda.

When I say together, it is because we need to research together and design together so the result will have a meaning for people in the community, and will belong to them. Today the group has turned into an association - *Ação Artesanal São José de Alcobaça* - Hand Craft Action São José de Alcobaça and is being commercially represented in main urban centers. Their successful attitude demonstrated that the idea of sustainability is possible and that we are getting close to it.

The average monthly home income in March 2006, at the beginning of the project was around US\$37. Today it has been raised to around US\$93, having reached a peak of US\$325 in December 2007. We consider this a good beginning. The success of this project has led to the creation of similar projects in another two communities, in the cities of Helvecia, also in Southern Bahia, and Biritiba-Mirim, in São Paulo’s countryside.

Again, each community receives instructions according to their local conditions, abilities, available prime-materials, and historical backgrounds. The word RESPECT is the guide for each action.

The Community of Helvecia, a remnant of a Quilombo -- a town originally founded in secret by fugitive slaves during the slavery period -- received an orientation that values the African culture of their ancestors. While we were researching materials and abilities when I saw some ladies crocheting and unmaking, crocheting and unmaking. I didn't understand and asked one of the women why she was remaking. Her answer was that there was not enough material and she was just killing time. It was then that I decided to join their technique with what we had in hand: little pieces of eucalyptus wood and local seeds.



Figure.5 Process of self-discovering and experimentation

Projeto Comunidade Produtiva Helvécia - Productive Community Project Helvécia 2006 – 2007

The whole process is absolutely rich and unique. Together we realize the potential of the place and of the group involved, and a new relation of self-discovering and experimentation emerges with enthusiasm to change. The group is selling its products in many shops throughout Brazil as well as exporting to Switzerland. The average monthly income has been raised by 49%.



RESULTADOS



GRUPO



Figure.6 First results and the ladies from Arte Helvécia Association - 2007

Through these experiences, I am noticing the importance of exchanging knowledge with the communities. When a “new way of looking” arrives to a sleeping region, and awakes people to the potential they have, literally , in their own hands, a process of transformation is stirred up, first through observation, and then through acts and attitudes.

3. Conclusions

Today, the Brazilian government maintains a more active and realistic posture about social inequalities. Companies are being pressed, both by the government and by the consumers to obtain quality seals and to meet quality standards. The society, as a whole, is slowly taking consciousness towards ecology and society.

As a designer, I intend to act as an agent of transformation, calling attention towards this new source of design, opening new opportunities, strengthening this activity , and pursuing effective changes towards collective benefits. Furthermore, when these experiences are reported, we are strengthening the notion that we do not need to seek the Pole Star outside, but inside us. The transforming potential that this rescue of self-esteem triggers in people is enormous. As food for the flesh or for the soul, the result of these actions proves how design can improve people’s lives – which is, from the beginning to the end, the primary and ultimate mission of design.

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