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DESIGN IN HANDICRAFTS: THE HANDS-ON CULTURE VS. THE PROJECT PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of Design as a contributing factor for improving handicrafts, through the development of new product scenarios.

Handicraft played an important role in society for a long time, as it developed languages in which difference was synonymous with linguistic and technological quality. These production activities were seen as knowledge laboratories, based on a mixture of different languages and places, in which materials and technology were interwoven so as to achieve production.

Nowadays, handicraft is understood as a folklore activity with no project, one in which the concept of "handmade" is seen as a brand instead of the definition of a real production process. Many of these activities are becoming extinct, thus making it urgent to create the necessary conditions to protect all the factors linked to the material tradition of the place. The preservation of these activities could be seen as a motivation to guarantee the local production processes and also as a cause for a new symbiosis between innovation and tradition

The existing market seems to pay more attention to local products when it can define objective qualities. Design must contribute with abilities and strategies which will allow handicraft to change rapidly, so as to become competitive without losing its local essence and characteristics.

In this specific case, we would like to show that Design could work with other areas to transform these manufacturing realities into new production entities. At the same time, make sure that the handicraft is still a sign of the social and cultural tradition of a place. It is possible to establish a well oriented strategy that will rely on the strengths of the sector through the use of project tools, allowing for a more effective development and competition of the marketplace, without losing its specificity.

The application of Design in handicrafts can stimulate a specifically sustainable development of some economically depressed realities and therefore it can play a relevant role in teaching. The academic research in Design should be responsible for stimulating a Hands-on Culture instead of Project Philosophy, because it operates in a vital system reflecting the production realities where the student sees himself. This can be achieved through experimental projects that stimulate the professional context, making the teaching of Design not only a training tool but also a way to educate the economic, political and social realities in which it is located.

Keywords: Teaching of Design, Craftwork, Project Philosophy, The Hands-on Culture, Memorable Material, Identity of Location.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Professional practice that characterize the subject of Design can be understood as an indispensable and decisive approach in the creation of thematics that stimulate the awareness of the local project. In contexts where workshops or small to medium sized industries are the most important productive entities, there seems to be a need to establish a connection with Design to guarantee the survival and continuous renewal of these industries, thus protecting the importance of memories and traditions that these small production methods represents.

Design shares interests and concerns with other subject areas which study the material culture and which are associated with everyday objects. It questions the functionality of craftwork and simultaneously it is associated with the definition of problems that are inherent to the relationship between man and his environment. Research work in Ethnography or Anthropology have produced findings of technologic-productive characteristics and as a consequence many details have been documented, the importance of traditional culture has been highlighted which interprets the memory of a people. These subject areas have contributed to the definition of local identities which can be characterised by the material, technological and typological diversities that are present in each of the local artistic traditions. Through the study of the *Material Culture* of a *People* it is possible to link geographic, social or economic conditions that it characterises and reconstruct the life and customs of each place.

If one were today to carry out a systematic analysis of a nation, associating craft activities with the places that they represent, one would not only obtain a general vision of these activities but also a diagram of a symbiotic and productive system which represents and individualises the territory in focus. Within these contexts there is a constant link between the geographical scope and production, due to the influence of factors which are inherent to the actual culture of a location, such as the practical use of raw materials that are present in the location and the legacy passed down from previous generation which determine the use of techniques and the passing down of forms and typologies.

However, these agents which determine the identification and definition of a material culture may be forgotten due to the inability of knowing how to integrate *"the hands-on culture"* with the *"project philosophy"*. Many of these activities are currently limited to the production of artefacts only because they are merely reproducing imitation of antique forms. According to *Cristina Morozzi* (1997 :32) as no help is provided by project professionals to artisans to see and interpret innovating changes, they are left in isolation, are threatened by globalising market and are not at all adaptable to specific local needs and this can lead to the disappearance of material culture.

Design as project activity carrier of culture should enrich the productive craftwork to exist in present-day markets. This is possible through an incisive and careful interpretation of the productive reality under analysis. The different approaches that characterise craftwork should be taken into consideration when carrying out this analysis in such a way that they become value added to the actual products.

In this way, the institutional power should also assimilate and strengthen the role of Design as an indispensable contribution to the continuity of these productive realities, creating opportunities of collaboration within the project – often overly egocentered – within a context in which the creative altruism enables the auto-sustainability of a local system.

School, as a teaching institution of Design present in an area, bases itself on values such as the influence that it exerts on the community or the mission it has of educating and

investigating, rendering itself as a true initiative to the development of a strategy that conceives sustainable products.
Design schools can be seen as motivators of the local productive culture *"having workshops where future professionals are trained and where the industry conveys and proposes the critical evaluation of its own progresses"* (FINIZIO, 2002 :208). This methodology allows the school to be transform into a place where different approaches of production and project come together and reach a consensus between the culture of the project and the culture of production.
The activity of investigation and experimentation of the project development by the teaching institutions of Design, can generate original productive forms when they are inserted in quality contexts by entrepreneurial realities of a local and craft character. Within this area, where small and medium sized industries define entrepreneurial prospect of a geographical contexts, the experience of teaching Design can be regarded not only as a true and important opportunity for students to get to know the context in which they will later work, but also as a tool which will demonstrate the importance that Design plays in local projects and where the institution is transformed into a contribution factor of development.
More than 10 years ago, the Portuguese architect *António Sena da Silva* wrote in the editorial of the *Cadernos do Design*, that the importance of School as a place of learning should be characterised by *"(...) direct transfer of knowledge by the masters to the learners."* (SILVA, 1992 :14). As such, the teaching Institution will become a meeting place which encourages a mutual and healthy exchange of experiences and knowledge with the opportunity and responsibility to draw the academic world and the craft reality together.

2 THE BASIS

Design has always portrayed the characteristic of being a developing agent of productive entities within the geographical context in which it operates, enabling the enrichment and repetition of constant experiences that are able to be transformed into a project factor within local productive realities. These experiments may be seen as up-to-date case studies for the practice of project teaching in Design, supported by the ability of interpretation and analysis of productive contexts.
The Industrial Revolution witnessed a technological evolution that was supported by the use of machines but which did not correspond to the development of the language used. The new industrial products were copied automatically from forms that had been previously used by craftsmen. This made craftwork become quite ordinary and this lead to the need for new vocabularies to be sought with the aid of the cultural component. This problem lead to the opening of new project schools near museums which made it easy for students and teachers to access knowledge and possible references.
The proven experience of the *Arts and Craft* and *Werkbund* School movement reinforced the importance of design as a subject which views research in culture as a method that is capable of evoking change and the evolution in the language of artefacts. In this way, both schools highlighted the benefits that could be attained through dialogue between art and craftwork in order to dignify productive work.
In *Bauhaus, Walter Gropius* reconfirmed the importance of Art and Craftwork for those professional who work with Design. It is materialised with the creation of workshops where these two approaches exist side by side in an effective manner. A successful product can only be made by combining both the practical side of craftwork and artistic interpretation married to mass production.

Renato de Fusco (1985) exemplifies this methodology with *Marcel Breuer*'s tubular furniture. In a small workshop he experimented and created his first armchair. This experiment is regarded as a point of reference for the conception of tubular furniture in Bauhaus.

For the *Ulm* school, the strong influence of International Style took design to a gradual homogeneous vision of construction and a global diffusion of products, leading to the disappearance of individual and specific characteristics that local realities have whether they be productive, typological our purely social.

Gradually in many project contexts located in several parts of the world, a need to seek a local reason and a reference point to help establish an identity for the definition of the industrial production began to emerge.

During the seventies in Italy, the architect *Riccardo Dalisi* carried out a research project with his own students from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Naples. He carried out an experience to investigate a simple language in order to interact with school age children from the local neighbourhood of *Traiano*, in *Naples*. This workshop, which was based on the idea of recovering poor and untouched technologies, created a series of objects that were in perfect harmony with the metropolitan city of that time.

In Portugal, the interaction between school/productive context, can be illustrated by a well-known experience with the *"Magna Mater – Design in Craftwork"* in the *University of Aveiro*. According to the journal *"Pessoas e Lugares"*, this project promoted team work between senior students from the Design course and Azorean craftsmen. They linked the importance of traditional technologies to craftwork such as lace, embroidery, weaving and ceramics, using project methodology and taking current market demand into consideration.

In the conference *"Sense and Sensibility in Technology" Margaret C. Perivoliotis* states that in Greece a team of students and teachers from the *Technological Eductional Institution of Athens, Faculty of Graphic Arts and Design, Department of Interior Design* developed a research and successive innovation process for local production confirming the potential of resources and the importance of cultural identity to set up a strategy for sustainable production. For this, projects were carried out in the areas of textile, ceramics and equipment and these confirmed the link with the past, more concretely with the Hellenic pattern. As such Design became a mediator between the cultural legacy and local productive resources permitting a stable and constant relationship.

In South America, the lack of a careful analysis of the local conditions created an invalid project reality in relation to a logical interpretation of Design as an accelerating agent in the process of development. *Tonino Paris* (2005) affirms that in the last few years the rediscovery and consequent appreciation of the local cultural process allowed Design to lead an interpretative process attracting attention to the experiences of local Schools which emphasised the diversities, interpreting them as growing factors.

In 1950, *Lina Bo Bardi*, director of the *Curso Regular de Design at IAC – MASP* in São Paulo initiated the very important investigation and recognition of craftwork from the Northeast of Brazil concentrating on the productive process and typologies that best represented the local culture. This investigation can be considered as the basic standard that currently represent Brazilian design and which are exported worldwide. These initiatives held qualities that were exclusively interpretative and cultural but the importance of exploiting a productive culture was also considered and through Design they were transformed into a project factor.

An experience that illustrates this was carried out with the *University of Buenos Aires* and the Cooperative of the Craftsmen of *Manos del Delta*, where artefacts are made with wicker. *Beatriz Galan* and *Rosario Bernatene* (2005) state that the intervention from the institution helped to boost this production through a careful analysis of the productive processes and by promoting the brand label of the cooperative.

3 CONCLUSION

The isolated experiences carried out in various parts of the world strengthen the importance of Design in its ability to not only interpret the local characteristics used in the production of artefacts, but also to determine its own survival.

The concept "Hands-on Culture vs. the Project Philosophy" should be approached as an indispensable opportunity for teaching in the design field. That could be achieved by creating project units related to production, combining the more pragmatic aspect, the artisans workshops, with research-oriented activity through the School of Design.

This methodology will only be possible through the exchange of knowledge. For that to happen students should visit the artisans workshop in order to understand the technical and production context and artisans should visit the School in order to comprehend and assimilate the project's message. It is the responsibility of the design teaching community to articulate the two contexts through design project courses, contributing to the students learning skills and future career development.

The definition of a Designer's role which is extended to include other areas of action, to new areas and new contexts of global products; to the definition of a new action to promote, where the role of the School is distinguished as a place for experiments and is regarded as the conveyor of strategies between professionals and society.

School, through the knowledge that defines each teacher as an agent who is able to transform his or her own professional experiences into moments of reflection, operates as an active Institution in the field so that the project may transform itself into an important stimulus for local entities. This position is evidenced in important pilot tests which influence professional activities encouraging dialogue between institutions, society and the market, thus transforming Design into a possible mediator, conveyor of a culture of making into a reasoning of sustainable production.

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