

Territories and connections: Design with the Global South

Territórios e conexões: Design com o Global Sul

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Abstract

Design is an instrument to offer a new approach to the valorization of differences, playing an important role in the society's development. This position will be presented by recounting experiences, describing projects affronting main themes of design for the global south, especially regarding the relationship with NGOs based in affected areas; The development of the role of women, through their cultural knowledge, leading to their own emancipation; The collaboration with local universities for the construction of a new, plural society, open to compromise of paying special attention to the case of the Mediterranean area and its different development models.

Key words: sustainable development, Mediterranean area, crafts, traditional knowledge, cooperation.

Resumo

Design é um instrumento para oferecer uma nova abordagem para a valorização das diferenças, jogando um papel importante no desenvolvimento da sociedade. Esta posição será apresentada por experiências, descrevendo projetos para o global Sul, especialmente em relação ao relacionamento com as ONGs com base nas áreas afetadas; O desenvolvimento do papel das mulheres, através de seu conhecimento cultural, levando a sua própria emancipação; a colaboração com as universidades locais para a construção de uma nova sociedade plural, aberta ao compromisso de dar especial atenção para o caso da área do Mediterrâneo e seus diferentes modelos de desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento sustentável, área do Mediterrâneo, artesanato, conhecimentos tradicionais, cooperação.

Design with the Global South: Theoretical contributions

As a definition for Southern and Northern countries far from judgments we can use Franco Cassano's definition which says that the idea of South is settled in the conviction that a different kind of richness is possible. In this model common goods are more important than private ones (Cassano, 2009).

From this point of view the South represents a reality that can teach instead of learning from the northern society because it is able to give a critical evaluation of the present and look forward to the future giving new advice (Cassano, 1996).

There is not a systematic theory about this theme so far, especially considering it from a point of view of the debate between local and global development models.

Since the mid 60's, for the first time, the design and research started to question about the contribution they can give for the development of southern countries. This new attitude was connected to a general growing interest in social and political matters. The experiences of the Esdi,

Rio de Janeiro – first design school in Brazil – and of the Indian designer Sudhakar Nadkarni – both coming from the Ulm school background – express this concept of a critical design. A first theoretical contribution in this field belongs to this period. For example Victor Papanek (1970) says that graphic design for advertisement is immediately followed by industrial design in using shiny and excessive images to persuade people to buy useless things.

To come out from this standoff, Papanek says that is necessary to find new fields of intervention in design knocking on doors that have never been opened before. For example UNESCO, UNICEF and many other Non Governmental Organizations which work all over the world taking care of the needs of a wide range of the world population.

Gui Bonsiepe has a similar opinion, and referring to Marcuse, he believes in the possibility of a new alternative developing model in Southern countries.

Under this point of view design can be seen as a kind of de-colonization which relies on the production of objects made with local material, low technology; a production that focuses on work and not on capital, on the pres-

ervation of local wisdom and identity, and that works for the development of low income people.

Bonsiepe applied these principles to the reality of Chile during Salvador Allende's government of Unidad Popular creating a group that focuses on many goals such as:

- the decrease of importation;
- lower price for patents, models and brands;
- satisfaction of basic needs;
- rationalization of industrial local production;
- standardization of parts and products to make the production easier, to lower prices and to improve technical and functional features of products;
- the decrease the number of products;
- the creation of basis for a local culture of materials (Bonsiepe, 1975)

Among experiences made in southern countries there is some experimentation, an analytical approach studying the origin of objects and hit connections with local culture.

Among them Lina Bo Bardi's (1995) experience is strongly against the wild industrialization of Brazil, and the increase in product's number that brings to the production useless gadgets, which wipes out the original culture of the country.

From these aspects comes the need to draw a balance, and at the same time to protect the local culture; it's not folk, but a story seen from another point of view, highly active and thoroughly felt. Talking about Brazilian North-eastern region, she says that the creation of products is strictly connected to the reality and the background of the local population. This background is made of dry, rough and strong objects, such as the place where they come from (the *Sertão*, Brazilian desert).

We are facing a radical re-vision of utopias which were at the basis of Modernity: the role of design should be "being able to say no" to a society based on a wrong model of development even if probably the result will not be the one expected - as the experience of Lina Bo Bardi during the Brazilian dictatorship shows.

A new approach to the theme: Some experiences

Nowadays, after years of poor attention to social implications, design started to adopt a more critical approach to the project by paying more attention to southern countries.

The argument is wide, with a special attention on big themes such as hunger, water, energy. Under this point of view the most important experience is the recent exposition of Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Design for the other 90% (Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2007).

Also the attention upon the themes more strictly related to local development is growing. All of this in a view of a sustainability model, which comprehends not only environmental but also social and cultural aspects.

The interest comes also from an attempt to get creative power back from reality which has not yet been contaminated by globalization. Objects created for markets more sensitive to particular products, some of which are unique.

Forty years have passed from the works of Papanek, Bonsiepe and Bo Bardi, but the situation in Southern Countries in most cases has not changed, indeed the economic gap has increased.

Among the present contribution of design to international cooperation the more structured experience is surely the one promoted by the Eindhoven Design Academy. The Academy's master in Man and Humanity foresees three project areas, Global, Local and Personal.

It is in the Global section that projects which are more related to our considerations have been implemented. The projects have been realized in different local realities:

- *Design Solidario* (2001) which has been developed in Serrita a village in Pernambuco State and in São Paulo in the *Associação Comunitaria Monte Azul*;
- the project "Enjoy the difference" in Kenya (2002);
- in Peru with the collaboration of the NGO Alpa, placed in Lima
- the project "Home" in India (2004) (Eindhoven Design Academy, 2002; Eindhoven Design Academy, 2004a; Eindhoven Design Academy, 2004b).

This kind of intervention, according to project publication, faces troubles that usually are present in this kind of projects: the difficulties of the first moment in front of an unknown reality; the problems that the local population is facing and the following emotional involvement; the role of women, who in spite of all the difficulties can be the true changing power; the risks that once again, the western point of view impose.

Another interesting project is the collaboration between the Biennale of Dakar and the Saint-Etienne, which in 2003 gathered for three weeks African and French designers.

The project was about creating an object with the human, natural, and technical resources of the region and in a real partnership with local artisans, where according to design, faces hits ethical responsibility, exalting local wisdom and potential creativity without falling in a folkloristic vision, neither in the melting model diffusion (Biennale of Saint-Etienne, 2004).

Talking about the Italian reality, we can point out the experience of the Corso di Laurea in Disegno Industriale at the IUAV of Venice, coordinated by Gaddo Morpurgo, which started the collaboration with the *Consorzio Botteghe di Solidarietà* that works on fair trade. They both implemented the project SuDesign realized in the Bac Nonh a district in the North Vietnam.

More recently IUAV in the San Marino's division, among activities on the design for the Southern countries theme - the creation of a study center, involvement in exhibitions, workshops - implemented the Atelier Ruanda - *Laboratoire de recherche et des projets d'innovation de design en Afrique* - . The Atelier Ruanda aims to give value to local production as, for example, hut-basket, the agaseks k'uruhindu. As it often happens, this kind of technique, slow and low-income generating, risks to be forgotten and substituted by simpler, faster and apparently better paid activities (IUAV, *South out there*, 2008).

Also the Corso di Laurea in Disegno Industriale e Magistrale in Design of University of Florence has developed

projects on these themes. For example the action done in collaboration with ADEDRA - *Association pour le développement de la Vallée du Draa* – in the framework of the project *Valorizzazione ed innovazione della Produzione Artigianale legata alla palma nella Provincia di Zagora* – Morocco.

The project was about encouraging the economic development of the Province of Zagora through the knowledge, valorization, development and innovation of the region's artisanal capital.

The professionalization of artisans has been one of the main aims - in particular of the associations of *femmes rurales* which work with palm and near sectors.

All of this in a particular interesting context such as the oasis of Valle del Draa, where the desert is advancing inexorably (Lotti and Bedeschi, 2007).

More recently, in the project *Sviluppo dei Saperi artigianali tradizionali e Integrazione dei sistemi produttivi in Italia e Marocco* the Corso has worked with the INBA, - *Institut National de Beaux Arts de Tetouan* – e le associazioni ADEO - *Association de développement et protection de l'environnement di Oued Laou* – di Ifrane Ali e Assaïda al Horra di M'diq – Tetouan –.

The two contexts have a really different production; the first has a highly traditional production, almost archaic, with extremely functional products. The second is featured by the production of ceramics which aesthetics features are not strictly related to the Moroccan tradition, and decorative elements are quite different from those featuring the local culture; also shapes are usually non-functional.

The main objective of the workshop is to help women working on ceramics to produce objects which can be interesting for local and international markets through the valorization of local knowledge and tradition.

In order to make the project more operative the laboratory ARCO, Action Research for co-development of the PIN of Prato has been involved.

Starting from the same principle applied to a different context the project *Design Possivel* has been developed in the *favelas* of São Paulo with the collaboration of the Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie of São Paulo – Brazil –. The slums of the Brazilian metropolis are particularly suitable to verify logics of the exchange and contamination in relationship with the NGOs working on re-using garbage for the realization of objects – Aldeia do Futuro, Monte Azul, Projeto Arrastão among others.

In this case the objective was to cooperate with Brazilian NGOs from São Paulo working in re-use of production waste – jeans, textiles, wood, pvc – in order to increase their market through design.

The collaboration gave birth to 20 products which have been shown at the *Fuori Salone di Salone del Mobile di Milano* in 2005 at the IBRIT – *Istituto di Cultura Brasile Italia* –.

In the following years many students travelled to Brazil to improve their projects and to make new ones. Some of these immediately got into production and have been commercialized by distributors in the furniture and product sectors.

Design Possivel is nowadays a trade mark which gathers different experiences done with the supervision of the Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie. *Design Possivel* group has promoted many projects financed by important institutions and firms of the country; among these Petrobras, Price Waterhouse, Coopers Metro São Paulo, and

others; moreover some years ago Mastercard has commissioned to NGOs 30.000 products as a Christmas gift to its clients creating work for the *favelas'* communities (Legnante and Lotti, 2005).

Some open questions

The themes addressed in this paper are just a part of the typical problems of the design for the South of the world and the implication in terms of sustainability of the model of intervention, there are still many open questions to answer and debate:

Which innovation is necessary in a case of intervention?

Usually we are in front of highly traditional contexts with an ancient production the level of innovation introduced in the production needs to be attentively calibrated.

It is fundamental, to have multi-disciplinary teams, involving economists and anthropologists, which are able to answer properly to the complexity of this theme.

How can we operate on shared, truly agreed upon projects without any risk of falling back to neocolonialism?

It is impossible to give an absolute answer to this question; despite this the experience shows that products made in this kind of projects have a strong sharing level between the designer and the artisan.

Usually students are disappointed at the beginning, because the product does not correspond to their idea, but then, they understand the value, the formal contamination, the continuity with the tradition, the material concreteness, and in the end, they prefer the transformed product.

Which instruments should be used to describe the project, making it comprehensible to those enacting the project (for example how to describe forms, dimensions to artisans)?

The description of the project is never traditional (in a modern sense). Measures are given by hands; technical drawings are usually impossible to be understood while 3D is perceived as something already existing, and therefore, useless to copy; the comparison with objects is fundamental because it gives the possibility to work with similitude or difference.

Regarding the market, how can we guarantee concrete positive results to those working within the project safeguarding their rights?

The rules of fair trade seem a sure reference. But the complexity of local contexts and the distance from our reality require a special attention. For example, considering the case of the Dr. Valley's project and to the hypothesis of development of a big production with palm in a long time term can destroy an extremely fragile environment such as the one of the oasis.

Which can be the more adapt partner in order to obtain durable results in the area?

An important role is surely the one of local NGOs, while more difficult seems to be the work with the Italian ones less related to the territory.

Local NGOs usually are more able to manage the complexity of relationships with local background and to keep these relationships correct.

The limit of local NGOs is that they have the difficulties to relate with a market that traditionally is not part of their core business.

Talking about the durable effects, it is relevant the role of local schools and universities which is expressed by the relationship with students, in the growing empathy, in the building of new, plural society, open to compromise

The contribution of women is also very important; through the consciousness of the importance of their work they can progressively acquire position into family and society.

The case of Mediterranean area

Last but not the least, the role of Mediterranean area in this context.

"For 'Mediterranean alternative' we can, therefore, mean the attempt to resist, using tradition and local values, to the universalistic and "monotheist" drift, which comes from the west, from the United States and that violently gets to the old world... The 'Mediterranean alternative'... would like to value the culture of limes, of the many Gods, of the many languages and civilizations, of the sea among the lands, which is alien to the monist, cosmopolitan and humanitarian dimension of oceanic powers" (Cassano and Zolo, 2007, p. 20-21).

Mediterranean, therefore once again, as a sea in between, not only between hearth but between two models of development: the first commonly known as occidental, ours, which brought in average to economic well-being but lacks on environment sustainability, and creates disparities with realities featured by lower development level. This attitude if generalized all over the world would bring the planet to collapse; the second



Figure 1. Innovation in traditional products, two *tagines* designed by students compared to the traditional one – Ifrane Ali, Morocco.



Figure 2. Students working with an artisan – Ifrane Ali, Morocco.

of the southern part, too slow, that risks to be subject to uncontrolled westernization even if it still expresses continuity with the territory, in relation with tradition and strong social connections.

All of this gives birth to a new design phenomenology which has lost any assertive temptation; it becomes an instrument of sharing and participation.

According to Canevacci Ribeiro (2007, p. 231): "The relativist takes a position... it is not neutral anymore, as now it challenges the totalitarian theories... the new relativism is a method not a doctrine, it valorizes cultural differences against every universalism".

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