Local Design and Development: A space for coordination between design, craft and territory

Design local e desenvolvimento: um espaço para coordenação entre design, artesanato e território

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Abstract

The creation of the Centro Metropolitano de Diseño (Design Metropolitan Center) was the resolution emerging from a strategy and a methodological search which allowed to contact the design and its main actors with the new context phenomena which appeared by the end of the 90s in Argentina, such as the social crisis, unemployment, the devaluation and subsequent revaluation of national production, the industry collapse and recovery, the exponential growth in the number of design professionals, the emergence of new entrepreneurs, etcetera. Several experiences, programs and activities have been developed during the 10 years of this institution and, perhaps, the greatest contribution has been to clearly propose an agenda linking design activities to local development strategies in the City of Buenos Aires, through a systemic model which covered each of its initiatives. Hence, recurrent and many times irreductible conflicts concerning apparently antagonistic positions, which are usually frequent in academic and professional debates of the Latin American design world, were channeled from practices exceeding reductionisms and diving into the complexity brought by the work with multiple actors who are part of a project settled in the territory. This work explores, based on one of the projects carried out by the CMD and other particular experiences still in progress, the outstanding aspects observed in a process of mutual transfer between craftsmen and designers located in different territories: one being an urban and compact territory, and the other being the vast puna of the Argentine Northwest. Likewise, it intends to mention the multiplicity of actors and factors operating in the design-craft relation as part of a local development system, which contains and conditions it. Finally, some methodological recommendations are proposed to advance in the design of programs which allow to articulate these two universes.

Resumo

A criação do Centro Metropolitano de Diseño (Design Metropolitan Center) surgiu a partir da resolução de uma estratégia e de uma pesquisa metodológica que permitiu entrar em contato com o projeto e seus principais atores. Assim como, com os fenômenos do novo contexto, que surgiu no final dos anos 90 na Argentina, como a crise social, desemprego, desvalorização e revalorização subsequente da produção nacional, o colapso da indústria e de recuperação, o crescimento exponencial do número de profissionais de design, o surgimento de novos empreendedores, etc. Várias experiências, programas e atividades foram desenvolvidas durante os 10 anos desta instituição e, talvez, a maior contribuição foi a de propor uma conexão clara na agenda entre as atividades de design para estratégias de desenvolvimento local na Cidade de Buenos Aires, através de um modelo sistêmico, que abrangeu cada uma de suas iniciativas. Por isso, de forma recorrente muitos conflitos irredutíveis sobre posições aparentemente antagônicas, presentes em muitos debates acadêmicos e profissionais, foram canalizados pelas práticas e reducionismos diante da complexidade trazida pelo trabalho com múltiplos atores que fazem parte de um projeto comum estabelecido no território. Este trabalho explora, baseado em um dos projetos realizados pelas experiências CMD e outros ainda em curso, os aspectos de um processo de transferência mútua entre artesãos e designers localizados em territórios diferentes: diferenças que se definem por um território ser urbano e compacto, e sendo o outro um vasto território do noroeste argentino. Da mesma forma, pretende-se mencionar a multiplicidade de atores e fatores operacionais na relação de design artesanal como parte de um sistema de desenvolvimento local, que contém e condiciona. Finalmente, algumas recomendações metodológicas são propostas para avançar na elaboração de programas que permitem articular esses dois universos.

Key words: design, craft, local development, territory, research.

Palavras-chave: design, artesanato, desenvolvimento local, território de pesquisa.

Introduction. Local development related aspects

The Design Metropolitan Center's birth in 2001 did not occur by chance within a context of revaluation of public policies and of the State's role regarding local development.

Until that year, neoliberal policies turned their backs on institutions and socio-cultural ties existing in a certain community, minimizing the possibility of exploiting its endogenous capabilities to develop growth and welfarerelated projects.

So, what has the foundation of CDM meant as part of a local development strategy? Basically, it was a public administration tool among many others which were part of a change in the evolution of business logic -in particular the design intensive ones- in the City of Buenos Aires, which governed until then. And the definition of a new priorities structure for development from an adequate coordination among economic agents, one of them being the State, which played a leading role by defining the guidelines and directing business flows with an incentives scheme that offered a coherent framework to the diverse willingnesses involved in these processes (Hecker, 2003).

In order to be able to better fit our work within the context of local development theories, we will consider some definitions which allow us to clearly explain the reason of this option when dealing with convergence projects between design and craft.

We understand local development as the "process through which local institutions and actors mobilize to support different actions, trying to create, reinforce and preserve activities and jobs, through the use of the means and resources provided by the territory" (Alburquerque, 1999). It consists of a self-generated process which must be seen as an "integral phenomenon involving the economic, political-institutional, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions of territories" (Alburquerque, 1999).

This entails a territory idea -a location, a city, a region- which does not confine this term only to its geographical dimension, but considers it as a social construction, a series of activities, institutional relations, material, immaterial and physical products, which constitute a society located in a certain territory; in that regard, territory can be considered as a "social interaction and organization matrix" (Alburguergue, 1999), an approach remarking the institutional network which fosters and sustains the territorial development dynamics (Rofiman, 2005). Whereas other approaches are mainly concerned about the economic base of locability, or the existing infrastructure, or the availability of natural resources, the socio-cultural perspective of local development pays special attention to the social group density, the degree of consolidation of inter-institutional and social networks, the strength, legitimacy and representativeness of state and non-governmental institutions; to a political culture sustained by agreements and rules created democratically, and to the community commitment to a collectively built long-term social transformation project (Rofjman, 2005).

From that perspective, a coordinated strategy of design-specific tools and programs was proposed at the

CMD with the intention of rebuilding and stimulating improvements in the context where economic and social actors interacted and played a role so as to avoid deepening old dichotomies such as art-design, craft-design, technology-culture, businessman-designer, public sector-private sector, through their replacement by short, medium and long-term collaborative systems.

The work model is shown in Figure 1.

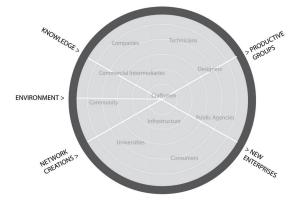


Figure 1. Work model of the different programs designed in the CMD.

Let's see each of these strategic lines:

- (i) Knowledge. The need to stimulate lines of research in universities as well as to classify and document the empirical knowledge of designers, craftsmen and companies was considered.
- (ii) Environment. It was necessary to create an environment prone to the arising of new products, based on the revaluation of local talent (genius loci).
- (iii) Networks Creation. Hard work was done to recreate and consolidate the networks favoring the collaboration and the knowledge exchange between actors of the same productive groups and those of different productive sectors, by fostering both competitiveness and collaboration.
- (iv) Design and Development of Products in Productive Groups. A series of activities and methodologies intended to improve the production processes and products in different segments was established. The use of materials with identity, processes improvement and the articulation with all value chains including traders and consumers were considered. Special emphasis was placed on the communication of each of these projects.
- (v) New enterprises. The development of new designintensive enterprises was encouraged; many of them with semi-handcrafted productions, by helping them in all aspects related to their business performance.

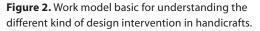
Designers and craftsmen meeting

Among the multiplicity of interactions permitted by the above mentioned framework, the interaction between designers and craftsmen sets up a controversial and recurrent debate basically about the types of different interventions that should be performed with handicrafts so that they achieve a better performance in the market. And besides, what is the institutional framework that should be established so that the only beneficiaries of this meeting are neither the designer nor the consumer?

According to the "Designers and Craftsmen Meeting" work edited by UNESCO, Craft Revival Trust and Artesanias de Colombia, there are three different groups of design interventions in handicrafts, which may be grouped as follows, according to whether they prevail in the materials and processes field, in the socio-cultural context field or in the market and consumption field:

- (i) Interventions in markets and buyers
- (ii) Interventions in handicraft creativity, tradition and cultural contexts.
- (iii) Interventions in techniques, technologies and materials.





Regarding the first intervention group, controversies arise around the type of market to which the craftsman should access. It consists of a near, local and accessible market but the output of which is scarcely valued, or is conceived as a market of greater purchasing power but geographically and culturally remote.

As to creativity-oriented interventions, problems arise when the craftsman's production is only considered as the making of the designs created by professionals. In that regard, it can be expected that the designer provides knowledge and innovation so that innovative products are created by craftsmen themselves.

With respect to the cultural context, it is essential that the craft activity can assume the traceability of the entire process which gave life to the product, including the cultural context from which it has arisen. Nowadays, in remote or global markets, the product is valued due to its symbolic charge and the ability of telling its own story, without which it becomes empty, thus losing identity layers which are necessary to access very competitive markets.

And regarding the mentioned purpose of preserving tradition, this can be achieved by using original pieces or reliably reproduced ones which become part of a museum's wealth, as the transition from a traditional piece to a functional or commercial one can be sensitively performed without affecting the traditions that gave rise to it.

As far as technology and techniques interventions are concerned, improvements in technology and materials are often critical for a handicraft product to survive in the market. Generally, an improvement in materials favorably impacts on the quality and durability of a product, even though the technology used is the same. On the other hand, if adequate technologies are used such as enhanced tools or simple machines, craftsmen can greatly improve their work conditions and products.

Another classification of design intervention levels in crafting is the one proposed by José Luis Rhi Sausi, focused on the type of bond developed between the designer and the craftsman, and the manner it acts in the object-subject relation to communicate: product, process or craftsman. Rhi Sausi establishes 3 levels:

- (i) When the external intervention is minimal and is mainly developed in immaterial or not visible processes: In this case, traditional designs and products are not substantially modified. In this strategic line, emphasis is mainly placed on two aspects: production process improvement and application of new marketing techniques and actions.
- (ii) When the external intervention is sensitive and is based on a tendentially symmetric partnership with the traditional producer: This second strategic hypothesis consists in influencing, also radically, on the designs and products of traditional craftsmen. There are several variants but their common feature is based on the professional designer-producer craftsmen relationship.
- (iii) When the external intervention is decisive and the craftsman's manual ability is key to the handicraft production: This third strategy is based on the repositioning of craftsmen in the value chain. The key element is not the handicraft product, but the craftsman himself. The product is not proposed as an end product -modified or not-, but as an intermediate product or accessory to industrial end products. The handicraft production is inserted into industrial value chains. This strategic hypothesis is widely used in Italy (and in Europe) where the botteghe artigiane produce for industrial production chains. The products of these "workshops" do not lose their handicraft authenticity -handmade with traditional designs and materials-, but are "reallocated" to a different chain position and, therefore, reconverted into new products for all purposes.

Wicker Exploration Workshop. The case of Los Mimbreros Cooperativa de Productores

The Cooperative Los Mimbreros, is made up of some 200 wicker growers who met in 1988 in order to defend themselves from commercial intermediaries who distorted prices in the local market. Wicker growers and craftsmen, that is, the people who grow wicker and work with it, participate in this cooperative. Most members have settled down in the Paraná Delta region, in the town of El Tigre, located 33 km north of the City of Buenos Aires.

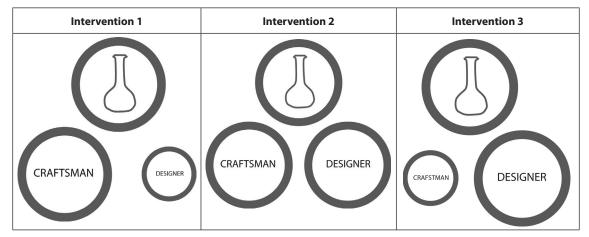


Figure 3. Intervention 1 - External design intervention minimal. Intervention 2 - External design intervention sensitive. Intervention 3 - External design intervention decisive.

Since 2002, and due to the currency depreciation in Argentina, tourism began to grow steadily in the most diverse places within the country.

Until then, wicker growers and craftsmen used to sell their products in different points of sale, but the big increase in tourism led to the revival of the Feria de Artesanías (Crafts Fair), which was established in *Puerto de Frutos*, in the town mentioned above.

Craftsmen came into contact with CMD through their cooperative in order to organize a workshop aimed at exploring different design alternatives for products made of wicker, as their offer was extremely limited and repetitive. They had noticed the great change in the perception of similar fibers such as rattan, which quickly began to be more and more sought by consumers with high purchasing power, and considering this, wanted to place a value on their traditional proposal.

Wicker is an ancient fiber belonging to the genus Salix, of the family Salicaceae. There are about 500 species of Salix all over the world and its uses are mentioned in stories dating back 3,000 years. Wicker spread through Europe, particularly through France until in the 50s and 60s, it was displaced by plastic polymers.

Nowadays, Argentina, Chile and Brazil are the countries with the largest area planted to this vegetable. Wicker requires large amounts of water to grow. That is why the Paraná Delta region in the Province of Buenos Aires has been the ideal place for growing this species. Wicker is classified into barked or non-barked depending on the first process with which it is treated. Then, fibers are grouped according to their size into thin, medium and thick. Wicker is also classified according to its colour, which can be white, pink or dyed. Finally, its quality is categorized depending on the number of imperfections of sticks: special, semi special, first-class, second-class or "branchy" (with a lot of branches).

Wicker can be dyed in black or with colors through aniline dyes. The 4-meter wide wicker is the one used to prepare the wicker mat (wicker weave). The wicker stick is worked with the wickerwork machine, which runs at high speed and has sharp blades, thus obtaining two material sheets. Craftsmen choose the type of wicker to be used according to the pieces they will produce. The type of pieces is quite diverse: ornaments, baskets, furniture, chairs, presents, and etcetera.

The project among designers, craftsmen and producers demanded 4 months of work and consisted of 4 workshops: a working day in the production facilities of the cooperative; a sessions group for developing and adjusting prototypes; and, afterwards, their preparation so that they were shown to the public. Subsequent production and marketing were performed out of the workshop framework.

- First workshop. Transfer of knowledge. A presentation in charge of the Cooperative was made: introduction, history, uses, wicker and its derivatives techniques.
- Afterwards, the CMD did the same by providing material on the different languages used with similar fibers in different countries.
- Second workshop. Detailed transfer about the use of wicker and its transformation processes. A presentation in charge of the Cooperative and of the Agronomist Engineer Jorge Alvarez, specialized in wicker, was performed. Then, the experimentation process by designers together with craftsmen started. The former were in contact with the material so as to identify the different products development possibilities.

• Working day in the Cooperative's Production Facilities. The participants, accompanied by craftsmen and producers, went to the wicker plantation area. They could experiment on the fiber cut; observe treatment processes such as boiling, machine and handmade peeling, machine and handmade wickerwork, and dyeing. Finally, questions and answers were exchanged, led by specialists and craftsmen.

- Third workshop. Proposals Development. Participating designers worked around different product proposals with the coordination of the CMD and the participation of craftsmen.
- · Fourth workshop. Projects Open Exhibition
- 16 prototypes were selected.
- Projects Adjustment

A number of meetings were held by the cooperative's designers and craftsmen so that the former could adjust their proposals to the remarks made by the latter. Final prototypes building and showcase preparation.
Final showcase of the prototypes in a commercial event.

Once the workshop was finished, the Cooperative proceeded with the project by incorporating some of the new products designs into its own production and by starting a research line focused on obtaining technologies which allow to intervene in the material not only morphologically but also in its physical attributes.

In this case, the level of intervention by designers was deep, as completely new products were created even though the material, the transformation technologies and the commercial chain in charge of the Cooperative were respected. The intervention project was focused on complementing and expanding the products offer by incorporating families with more contemporaneous languages.

The process was documented, published and communicated in specialized publications, fairs and commercial exhibitions.

A new social luxury concept. The case of *Red Puna* and *Tramando*

Martín Churba is a well-known Argentine textile and fashion designer who, due to his great ability and virtuosity, has managed to exquisitely combine experimentation and innovation in the textile field with the permanent task of building bonds with social actors who are far away from big markets. Thanks to that permanent effort devoted to weave his clothes materials as well as building bonds in the different communities with whom he worked, he has succeeded in giving his products and collections a sense which allows them to be in contact with a market eager for different things, with craftsmen or unemployed people who need to reach those consumers to get recognition for their output.

Walking through that path, Churba met *Red Puna*, an organization founded in 1995 and made up of 25 aboriginal and rural organizations in the Puna and Jujuy Ravines (North of Argentina), which involves more than 1,200 families from 70 different rural communities, spread in a vast and arid territory.

The following are among the Red Puna objectives:

- The planning of a development project for the Puna.
- The organization of producers.
- Technical, production and social research on integral and sustainable production systems for communities.
- The search of market insertion alternatives, without implying the loss of cultural identity for communities.
- The permanent systematization of experiences.
- The coordination among institutions working in the Puna.
- The creation of consensuses in order to be able to develop social policies from the Puna itself and with the participation of different actors.
- The change in the education system so that it considers the cultural special features of Puna inhabitants and which is useful to cope with the area's needs (Red Puna document, 1998).

The authors Carina Borgogno and Ariel Ogando (2004), in their Juntos tenemos más fuerza research, highlight as an interesting issue that the document questioned, in one of its paragraphs, the work done until then by different non-governmental organizations (NGO) and technical agencies, by considering that they viewed beneficiaries as an "object" population and not as a "subject" population of development; therefore, spaces for participating in the design, planning and execution of programs and projects were not generated.

As part of its never-ending task of developing projects allowing the community to generate more quality work, the cloth area of the *Red Puna* discovered that weaving was one of the main informal income in many homes which were part of the network. Notwithstanding that, the remuneration received by weavers for their products -generally gloves, sweaters or caps- did not compensate the time devoted to them. "Each textile handicraft product comprises all the work which involves raising cattle, their shearing, fiber selection, washing, dyeing, burling, bristle removing, handmade yarn and subsequent weaving -with two needles, crochet or in loom," explains Daniela Uribarri, in charge of *Trama Social*, the area specialized in social projects of *Tramando*, Martín Churba's company (Musso and Ulla, 2009).

The work system consisted in the weaving of each cloth by weavers at their homes. Due to the great territorial dispersion of these communities, one *Red Puna* manager was in charge of collecting the clothes and placing them in different national handicraft and pseudo-handicraft fairs.

One of the first problems Churba could ascertain while observing the products shown in fairs was that "gloves, sweaters, or caps did not have the same proportions" (Lebendiker and Cervini, 2010).

From the first diagnostics, the *Nosotros* group, made up of *Tramando* and *Red Puna* was created, and soon, it planned a 4-year program that started to operate in 2007 and is still working nowadays.

During the first year, the *Tramando* team traveled a lot and met many times with weavers with the aim of building bonds of trust, learning about the processes, designs and the manner products were marketed. A product's standardization as well as quality and tools improvements process was started to increase the value perception of handicrafts.

Being enthusiastic about the first steps achieved, *Tra-mando* purchased from *Red Puna* a series of handicrafts made during the beginning of the program at prices substantially superior to those obtained in fairs.

Craftswomen, who were not used to working according to the terms and requirements of a particular customer, delivered the products late, with problems in their finishings and quality.

Problems which arose in this first stage were reviewed by the teams of both organizations and, by the year 2008, they started a search intended to revaluate old textile handicrafts that were replaced by different substitute products along time. With the aim of rescuing these old "textile jewels" created by older community generations, the search for value was focused on developing a collection of its own, called *Red Puna*, which were are the same level as the "social luxury" concept coined by Churba.¹

To that end, Tramando started a research on all the pre-Columbian production of these communities by detecting wonderful pieces made with obsolete techniques with the aim of rescuing them through training courses given by craftsmen themselves. The idea consisted of combining the production of the most common pieces, which are currently provided and which have better finishing quality, with others of higher value that could rescue cultural objects which have been replaced along time and, in turn, could allow weavers to generate income proportional to the work applied to handicrafts. Pieces such as ceremonial cloaks and others would allow these communities to position their handicraft as a high-value product (Lebendiker and Cervini, 2010). Likewise, by increasing products prices, part of the income could begin to be reinvested in the enhancement of processes and tools.

Once a 30-piece series was finished in 2009, *Tramando* presented part of the *Red Puna* collection in the launch of its Fall-Winter collection called *Infinito* (Infinite), consisting of clothes embedded with Swarovsky crystals. The reason why crystals of such known luxury brand were embedded in clothes was to call the attention of the highest purchasing power market.

Nowadays, the program is focused on the edition of a Procedures Manual, with a double function: to gather all the necessary documentation so that craftsmen can reproduce each product and, in turn, have a dissemination tool to be offered to potential buyers.

Moreover, the project is expected to enter a more intensive stage regarding communication and marketing by the year 2011.

Red Puna's work team is made up of 30 weavers. Most of them are aboriginal women -from the colla ethnic group- who live in the Puna region and the Humahuaca Ravines, in the province of Jujuy. These women survive thanks to household farming and cattle rising. Craftswomen belong to 16 different communities to which they transfer their knowledge and skills acquired in workshops. It is calculated that approximately 160 people have participated in the production of the *Red Puna* Collection; therefore, the creation of material for the transmission of new knowledge becomes vital (Musso and Ulla, 2009).

Intervention levels performed in the cases described

Wicker Exploration Workshop

- Intervention levels in this work have been the following: (i) According to the impact on different scenarios:
- (ii) Interventions in handicraft creativity, tradition and cultural contexts.
- (iii) Interventions in techniques, technologies and materials.
- (2) According to the designer-craftsman relation type Sensitive external intervention based on a tendentially symmetric partnership with the traditional producer.

Red Puna

Intervention levels in this work have been the following:

- (1) According to the impact on different scenarios:
 - (i) Interventions in markets and buyers
 - (ii) Interventions in handicraft creativity, tradition and cultural contexts.
 - (iii) Interventions in techniques, technologies and materials.

(2) According to the designer-craftsman relation type

- (i) Sensitive external intervention based on a tendentially symmetric partnership with the traditional producer.
- (ii) Decisive external intervention, where the crafstman's manual ability is key to the handicraft production.

Conclusions and recommendations

From the experiences and concepts described, we can draw some conclusions and give some recommendations which allow to adjust expectations about the results that may be expected regarding design interventions in the handicrafts field.

It is essential to acknowledge the socio-cultural context in which craftsmen develop their activities. The approach should necessarily consider the context not only to establish good bonds of trust but also to begin a research and rescue a process beneficial for both parties.

It is very important to consider the territorial dimension of craftsmen communities with whom we are going to work. Urban, dense, compact territories with good chances of accessing the market and so close to institutional actors, including the State, have nothing to do with those loose, isolated ones which are far from their potential markets and disregarded when public policies are established.

To involve the territory's institutional structure and a group of public and private actors aware of the matter is an externalities contribution factor which will provide sustainability to the project.

Apart from merely technical aspects related to design, techniques, materials and the handicraft cultural burden, those issues leading to the development of craftsmen's activity as a business and an enterprise should be considered when training them, by stimulating the search for opportunities which the program and the collaboration may offer to them, and the better exploitation of the scarce resources they usually have.

To establish short, medium and long-term objectives. The obtention of results in this type of programs requires an efficient time management and the search for results. The insertion of products in differentiated markets is a time consuming process due to the fact that -as we have seen- to develop a product suitable for the

¹ "I opted to call as "social luxury" or "socially responsible luxury" to that which is made being conscious of the fact that anybody participating in it lives it as such" (Martín Churba in Página 12, [s.d.]).

market is quite different from being able to comply with the time, quality and quantity standards required once the commercial bonds with customers are set up. On the other hand, these projects' financing sources usually demand faster results than those which are generally achieved within the required term. An appropriate time management is vital when coordinating visible and communicable results needs with deeper transformation processes.

It is important to set a realistic intervention objective. Selling products quickly in certain markets is usually desired. As previously seen in the *Tramando* case, this may result in failure or frustration, which could have an immense negative impact on communities of this kind.

Research prior to techniques, materials, processes and existing marketing systems is essential both for current handicrafts as well as for those which have been completely forgotten. Preliminary researches on this field are essential supplies when trying to open new ways to craftsmen.

Communication is a critical component for adding value to products, inserting them in markets and searching for new publics. Deep knowledge about the processes, materials and cultural context in which the product is created is as important as the capacity to penetrate in the imagination of those who will consume said products.

The search for new markets should not be associated solely with external and global markets. To develop them entails a great load of expectations as well as of effort, time and resources. Differentiated local markets, tourism and commercial intermediaries in urban areas of each country can be excellent spaces to start proving the commercial results of this type of programs. It is essential to achieve programs continuity. Craftsmen communities usually accumulate disappointment and frustration as tens of projects are not completed due to their promoters' lack of funds or perseverance, whether they are part of the public or private sector.

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