

Local needs and global desires

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Abstract

Purpose

There is renewed interest in combining traditional and contemporary making cultures for textiles (Ravetz et al. 2013), but while resulting design collaborations might freely use terms like design responsibility, cultural appropriateness and authenticity, due concern is not always given to how systematic differences between craft and design might effect this cultural exchange.

Methodology

This paper investigates attributes of craft and of design with a view to identifying socio-cultural differences according to context of production. An ethnographic approach was taken to compare craft intervention projects in Sri Lanka to a Scottish/ Indian residency. Participant observation, interviews and content analysis from practitioner logs reflect makers' and designers' engagement with traditional skills, under influence of western design practices and markets.

Findings

Contrasting the experiences from designer and maker perspectives in both settings brings to attention how differently local needs and global desires can be reflected in seemingly parallel projects: The transnational residencies between India and Scotland highlighted making practices that thrived on exchange of knowledge within and beyond communities whereas the observed communities in Sri Lanka had largely replaced an inherited craft tradition by division of labour and jealous guarding of design skills more akin to behaviour in the industrial revolution.

Originality/ value

This research has implications beyond the confines of craft survival, as results may serve to inform designers to re-think craft engagements in the Global fashion arena. A need for such expression is in

demand within global consumerism when fashion trends occupying traditional skills are supposed to create and evoke artisanal values through products (WGSN 2014, CBI 2014)

Keywords: craft communities, design interventions, commercial drivers, making traditions, meaningful craft

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There is renewed interest in combining traditional and contemporary making cultures for textiles (Ravetz et al. 2013), but while resulting design collaborations might freely use terms like design responsibility, cultural appropriateness and authenticity, due concern is not always given to how systematic differences between craft and design might effect this cultural exchange.

Analysing craft design collaborations

This paper investigates wider attributes of craft and of design, including knowledge construction through practice and emotional attachment to the made object, with a view to identifying socio-cultural differences of product according to context of its production. An ethnographic approach was taken to consider craft intervention projects in Sri Lanka against the findings of a funded practitioner residency between India and Scotland in 2012/3. Using a qualitative methodology of participant observation, interviews, group discussions and content analysis from practitioner logs we reflect makers' and designers' engagement with traditional skills and techniques, under influence of western design practices and markets, and vice versa.

An overview of the reSIde residency

The reSIde project was a Creative Scotland funded exchange programme for makers between Scotland and India from August 2012 to May 2013. Creative Scotland is the public body that supports the arts, screen and creative industries across all parts of Scotland on behalf of everyone who lives, works or visits here.

“It (...) enables people and organisations to work in and experience the arts, screen and creative industries in Scotland by helping others to develop great ideas and bring them to life.”(Creative Scotland 2014)

reSIde had the objective of facilitating highest quality production and knowledge exchange around making by bringing together practitioners with educational, professional and wider community based making networks particular to each country. The programme allowed two textile based designer makers from Scotland and two practitioners from India to pursue two separate 4-week periods of practice in the respective host country, with considerable emphasis placed on providing opportunities for audience engagement and broadening of cultural experience at all levels of making; Especially during the second residency phase practitioners therefore engaged with hobbyists and industry leaders, high school pupils and university researchers in the Scottish Borders, while interacting with traditional artisans in Kutch, Gujarat, collaborating with experimental design in Calcutta and engaging with Indian models of student internships. The enduring success of the programme was identified as being rooted in the development of a collaborative atmosphere which allowed immersion into another culture. Craft here developed as part of a socially situated learning process with due consideration of

dissemination of learning to a broad audience beyond the immediate participants involved. (see Greru and Kalkreuter 2013)

Comparing design innovation in other craft communities

In recognition of the fact that reSide's objective to facilitate knowledge exchange through making was conceived through the western lens of craft as cultural expression and might therefore go beyond the immediate remit of most meetings of craft with design, a field trip to Sri Lanka was undertaken in August and September 2014. Local craft projects there had been introduced to global design with the dual purpose of promoting economic rejuvenation and humanitarian reconciliation to a society recovering from civil war and beyond.

Identification of field sites

A first step consisted of identifying key players working with the local craft sector in Sri Lanka, as well as those providing design education and implementing policy plans for crafts.

The majority of these organisations operate at the behest of state policies and programmes, though some design interventions can be found via HEI involvements. Some themes common to most projects turned out to be local needs being jolted due to constant displacements by global desires, and examples of craft providing livelihoods within an era of post war reconstruction of society, of craft playing its part in providing a normal life away from the restlessness of war.

Craft programmes for poverty alleviation and political reconciliation:

Founded by the government, the Ministry of Traditional Industries & Small Enterprise Development is the main body formulating overall policy programmes for the Sri Lankan craft sector. Established through an extra ordinary gazette in 2010, the ministry is responsible for promoting traditional industries and developing the handicraft sector. (Ministry of traditional industries and small enterprise development 2013) Its particular focus is stated as "dissemination of designs, marketing, exporting and promoting the handicrafts for national and international markets" (Ministry of traditional industries and small enterprise development 2013) which has brought global design needs and desires to the local craft sector through state intervention.

Within this policy framework, cluster based development is a major aspect, where industrial production villages and craft villages become a significant aspect in development activities. This approach anticipates to bring foreign investment straight into the village sector, avoiding the involvement of middlemen.

One specific initiative is the development of handicraft villages which act as skill exchanges for craftsmen. Their remits show that in the Sri Lankan context craft is actively considered as a method of

poverty reduction, as a means of income generation and contribution to the country's GDP. This is via regional and social development converting the 'home based backyard economy' into a compelling industry that targets both local and international markets. (Ministry of traditional industries and small enterprise development 2013)

Some additional remit can be detected in state and internationally funded projects such as the development of the Palmyra Palm craft in the Northern part of the country, which shows a considerable focus on post war reconstructions and reconciliations. (Ministry of traditional industries and small enterprise development 2013)

Design as a key factor for policy: The National Craft Council and National Design Centre

Focusing on the traditional industries and the local craft sector, the importance of design was identified as key by policy makers as they anticipate growth within the sector through exporting to the international markets. (Ministry of traditional industries and small enterprise development 2013)

While the policies are implemented through the ministry's statutory boards and institutes the following institutes were approached during the field work.

National Craft Council (NCC)

The NCC mainly works for identification and classification of craft sectors, as well as registering craftsmen. While organising these craftsmen under one roof, a range of other services are provided by initiating skills development programmes and providing additional funding and infrastructural facilities.

National Design Centre (NDC)

NDC mainly provides design and development needs for the craft sector, identifying how to make the traditional crafts a more viable sector by introducing new technology and design ideas.

Some of the crafts initially considered, such as rush and reed weaving, basket weaving using cane and bamboo and talipot palm craft production transpired to be a rather dispersed craft at this present time, whereas the geographically defined Dumbara community turned out to be a particularly suitable craft setting to explore in our research context for comparison with reSIde. However, it transpired quickly that direct comparisons between the Indian/ Scottish and Sri Lankan projects ended there, as global market needs rather superseded local desires in the Sri Lankan example.

Design in a Sri Lankan craft community – 'Dumbara Textiles'

Dumbara textile weaving is a community where craft resides strictly amongst the family members and is passed down from generation to generation. Until the 1980s a pit loom was used before its

replacement with a treadle loom to make production more efficient.

It is said that the weavers of Dumbara community belong to the cast of 'berawayos' and are descendants from the indigenous people of Sri Lanka according to the oral history of the craftsmen of that community, whereas other accounts talk of migrants of Indian settlers practicing finest cloth weaving in Sri Lanka. (Coomaraswamy 1913) In the 19th century, craft here was practiced largely by 'village craftsmen' occupying a specific geographic area. (Coomaraswamy 1909) Astonishingly, those belonging to the berawayo's cast are still practicing their tradition in Thalagune, Ududumbara, where a strong take on community of practice still resides. According to Coomaraswamy's description (1913) of Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) textiles weaving we can see similar accounts of Dumbara weaving through the descriptions and images he presents about the situation on century ago. "The Sinhalese cotton was of very different quality; no muslin was made, but the best stuff was thick, soft and heavy like the finest linen. The craft is preserved in only one village. There are many simple traditional designs, some geometrical, others of flowers, animals or very elaborated strap-work, like that in Keltic manuscripts, or such as one sees at Ravenna. The geometrical patterns are all shuttle-work: the more complex designs are tapestry as in the Dacca muslin." (Coomaraswamy 1913 p196-197)



Image 1: Dumbara Weaving

The traditional community of practice

This strong tradition in the Dumbara community has in more recent times been influenced by linkages with external buyers and middlemen as what was once a domestic pursuit that carried rather personal

meaning is now prepared for a broader audience. An artisan talked about how a child blanket which he did 30 years ago for his new born child still affords him fond memories of making and a sense of appreciation of his own craft. He stressed how craft practices were endowed with emotional attachment as work stayed within the community. In the same interview, the artisan mentioned how his ancestors had been feudal craftsmen for the Kings, effectively hinting at an evolving pattern of place-related significance of their craft.



Image 2: A master craftsman showing a child blanket he made for his own son

Unlike in the Indian or other the Asian contexts, Dumbara people had not led nomadic lifestyles but had inherited permanent settlements around which their craft revolved: Their oral histories document how they have been growing their own cotton, and how all supplies had been sourced from their surrounding environment.

Another fact of the Dumbara community of practice reported was that they had been strictly associated with the cast system which is as interesting as it is surprising given the cast system is not

specially established in present day Sri Lanka, unlike in the old time when mentioned by Coomaraswamy (1909 , p ii) ‘as a method of division of labour’.

The looms in Dumbara weaving in Sri Lanka are known as aluva and the process was generally done in an open shed, on a platform called al-pila, attached to an outer veranda. In the house of a weaver a room was dedicated to the materials and technology necessary to weave. It is worth mentioning that both men and women wove, though most likely women were engaged in weaving for the household while men wove professionally per common arrangement.



Image 3: How patterns are marked on the warp

Even in this setting the master craftsmen recall of their previous generations that weaving was not treated as a profession, but as an informal activity carried out in the households. Though it is recorded through oral history that certain skills and knowledge were passed down through poems as part of an oral tradition, such practices of passing on the meaning of motifs are no longer remembered by the present day craftsmen.

The current communities of practice

As a result, today only 7 or 8 families practice this craft and claim to have inherited it within their family as skills were passed down from generation to generation. In the 1980s, renewed interest for this particular craft emerged, and the craft flourished thanks to new market demand, in turn improving the economic situation of the craftsmen and rekindling their interest to carry on the craft. Memories of a much harder life in the 1970s and early 1980s were recalled by the master craftsmen interviewed who told of weavers taking up many menial jobs to supplement their income from craft, and later weaving one off pieces and selling them to the nearby villages in the area till mid 80's before 'catching up with market'.

Such recent memories of economic hardship in the community seemed to enhance their appreciation of current design interventions as they are believed to be important for the progress of the community and the craft itself. Current practices are geared towards producing commoditised craft products which are sometimes even mass produced according to market demands. Those families who inherited the earlier weaving traditions have now formed their own production workshops where they hire unrelated village women to come and work under them. These women work for a monthly payment and work under the guidance of the craftsman. They are not skilled craftspeople at all, but are purely doing a job for the craftsman as labourers. An interesting aspect of this working model is that the craftsmen keep some of their vital craft knowledge as trade secrets, which they do not wish to pass down to these workers. It thus becomes impossible for the majority of makers of this craft today to grasp and learn the traditional techniques as the craft knowledge remains confined to the family.

Division of labour

The role of the craft once equated with pleasure and local significance has thus been altered dramatically by the pressures and economic promises of external markets, as craft communities have separated out the roles of planner and maker of product in a division of labour associated more with industrial scenarios than artisanal practices. In this process the weaver might still get involved at certain stages of the making, while mainly monitoring the production line. As in much of post industrial revolution making, they will first design their work on paper and then commission others to take the drawing into weaving. Knowledge here is no longer expressed through making even though in the very recent past craftsman still had the sole responsibility for weaving the entire piece of fabric as a design evolving on the loom. The weaver then was designing through making, whereas now the delegation of the making to several people working concurrently fixes his ideas before they have been realised. Equally, the quest for economic success, has made sharing work with fellow craftsmen more of a risk as individual designs might easily be copied by any labourers working for any family business, and family copyright must be maintained, as somewhat surprisingly perhaps, 'this is our craft'.



Image 4: A group of women working under a craftsman who belongs to the second generation of a weaving family.

By contrast, Scottish reSide designers remarked on the continuation of bonds and liberal sharing and copying of designs gained through global exposure within the Indian weave communities of which the residents who travelled to Scotland had been part. Jenny Allison, a knitwear designer from Glasgow observed *“The women artisans in particular interested me a lot, the way they use textile as a way to meet, as a way to create and a way to communicate was incredibly inspiring.”*

The presence of global design influences

While talking to one of the master craftsmen of this weaving community in Thalagune, it was revealed how important the new design interventions are for the sustainment of the craft and as a livelihood practice for these people. He recalled how a designer who approached them in the 1990’s to develop new colour schemes and patterns, started an entirely new direction for their weaving which brought economic success and a lasting design direction: Even today similar practices are still adopted as new colours and geometric shapes are introduced into traditional patterns.

Approaches from other international designers from as far afield as Italy have followed and the community now sees development of their weaving as a successful attempt to follow new trends and design directions. Jennifer S Esperanza (Esperanza 2008, p 27) highlights similar issues of

globalization and strict middlemen involvement in the ethnic handicraft markets in Bali creating a dichotomy of culture often described as ‘tradition/modernity, local/global, handmade/industrial’. Furthermore she emphasises the fact that artisanal production is in demand as a version of exoticism, and craftsmen are always challenged by the influence of ‘middlemen’ like the buyers, distributors, contract labourers, design consultants. Therefore artisanal making is not just a relationship between the producer and the consumer per se, but it rather has become part of a larger social, cultural and an economic process, where global needs are part of a larger domain of complex issues. This results in creating a twofold approach to local craft sectors by the virtue of global interventions, for example via the involvement of various middlemen which control both the flow of the goods as well as cultural values and meanings of the products. (Esperanza 2008)



Image 5: Contemporary artisan products

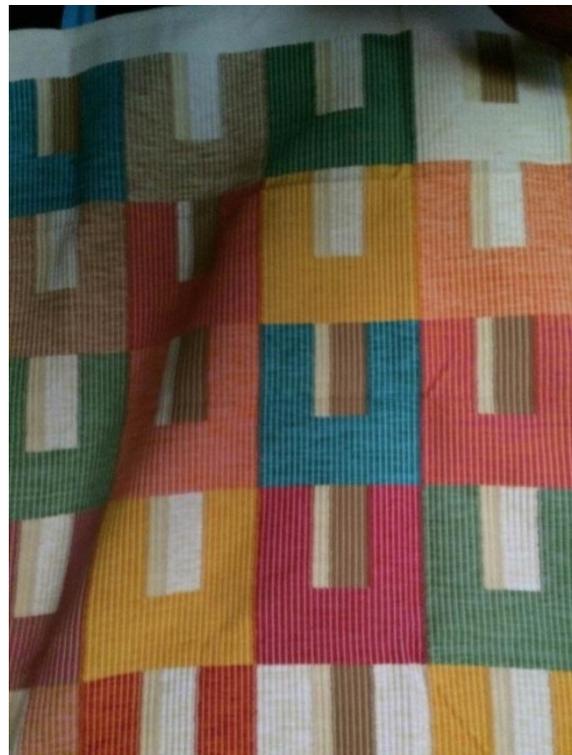


Image 6: Design of craftsman after global exposure

While traditional motifs, colours and certain weaving techniques have thus necessarily changed within these textiles, the craftsmen still consider their products very much as craft, as great value is assigned to design interventions as a means of generating sustainable income, thus lifting their economic and their social status, when they say ‘we need to survive while we practice this craft’. They did however acknowledge that the contemporary designs are far removed from their tradition, saying ‘we know our tradition and we carry it with us in our heart’.

Artisans in reSIde had gone considerably further in describing how their craft remained rooted in their very own local tradition even after sustained exposure to the global market. Murji Vankar from Kutch had explained that he “*enjoyed the natural beauty of the land. I saw prosperity and meticulous*

*infrastructure and small things made me aware of my own 'Indianness.' In the silence, I saw an absence of people while life back home was grounded in people... people and children buzzing all around! I realised I needed that context to create. I appreciated that in India despite all the societal pressures, the struggle for livelihood, the dirt, the noise, the absence of infrastructure, **despite all of this, one could still create, one could still make the most of things and still be happy.**”*

Another master artisan revealed his story of tying up with a local retailer selling craft items to high end consumers and foreigners mainly. For almost 30 years he has been solely producing his crafts to this company, where the colours and material quality, and certain design elements as well as the sizes and what to make are wholly being decided by the company. The craftsman tells how a strong design intervention was important to continue his craft as since the 1970s he changed his product in order to make affordable pieces just for sales purposes, with less quality and fewer design elements. As he says ‘selling it somehow’ and ‘selling it to someone’ became important at that time.

Several craftsmen in this village seemed prone and content to adopt fully the designs given to them by an external designer or a buyer without much concern for how that might affect the tradition.

Copyright and ownership

Being part of the modern design world of exclusivity as a major sales factor has, however, caused other problems within the community: ‘Copying of designs by fellow artisans’ has become a serious and a business-critical issue for some of the craftsmen, as copy rights of their designs need to be maintained when supplying for external buyers. The community has become rather divided by the issue of who supplies what to whom, as exclusivity, supply and demand disrupt the way in which craft is passed on as a form of communal knowledge.

In the outset of globalization and global trade in crafts, copying of design has become a problem that questions the artisanal values once endowed as part of a harmonious community activity according to Scarse (2012). He echoes the story of the Dumbara communities when he states, ‘global competition, copying and cheating on one hand, the inevitable disappearing of one’s craft occupation due to ‘natural attrition’ and decline on the other’ has direct effect on the progression of traditional crafts (Scarse 2012, p 123)

This is evident when comparing a traditional Dumbara weave said locally to be more than 100 years old and more accurately dated in comparison to a textile mat with similar motifs which found its way in the V&A collection in London, to current work for global markets (image 5), where neither colours, shape, techniques or motifs have passed the test of time- or evaded the temptations of commerce.



Image 7: Dumbara weave in local setting, said to be more than 100 years old



Image 8: A Rectangular mat (etirilla) available in Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Date: ca. 1900 (V&A)

In stark contrast to our traditional view of craft, design interventions via international designers, external buyers or other middlemen has delimited the constraints of traditional craft in terms of visual language and techniques as design are no longer linked closely to naturally evolving communities, but are instead part of a system of planned obsolescence where differentiation through exclusivity rather than a lasting link to the maker's culture is key.

Changing crafts in global contexts

Given this potentially rather gloomy perspective on craft and communities in the globalized world of design, it is encouraging to witness within the Dumbara community that young generations are keen to practice the craft and follow in their father's and grandfather's footsteps. The young children even have taken up learning computer aided designing like coral draw to aid the design process. We might in fact be witnessing a very contemporary adaptation of craft, steeped as much in global market pressures as in local realization of opportunities, and while some traditions might come to an end, new traditions with some chance of longevity in real economic situations are being forged, not least powered by the possibilities of digital knowledge exchange.

In that sense, the economic realism which the Dumbara weaving communities display is enabled by the same digital world that supports lasting cultural exchange through making once physical

residences such as reSIde have exhausted their politically driven funding. (Greru and Kalkreuter 2014)

Stephanie Bunn (2012, p 12-13) also brings a story of Kyrgyz felt making where contemporarisation and commoditisation of traditional maker practices questions the reality of the craft that beholds traditional knowledge. As she says; “Kyrgyz shyrdak felts are born of skills and beliefs generated in the home and the landscape of a society which valued such textiles as fabrics of connection between generations and their cultural and natural environment rather than in a commercial sense... In Kyrgyz terms I would like to think that what helps their textile art to endure have been their very domestic and improvisatory aspects, their practice on a small scale. They are not designed to be political, but having their roots in an ‘ideology of nature’ and their social context in Kyrgyz values from the past, somehow gives this form the greater power.” This resonates with what the Dumbara weaving community might be concerned with if they are to still carry out those practices which were once close to their heart, even as they have outwardly adapted to economic opportunities and pressures.

The dual role of global design interventions in craft

It can be seen from the discussion above that design interventions can play a dual role in the craft community sector. It can bring benefits but has also caused attrition of traditional skills once embedded in traditional making and consumption habits. What is interesting is how the communities interviewed in Sri Lanka were relatively untroubled by this development as they viewed their craft as improvisations that integrated traditional making while embracing the future. In this model, certain motifs can be identified as belonging to tradition, even though these geometric shapes and zoomorphic designs might have adopted an altogether more contemporary and global form.

In reSIde, the benefits of global exposure were even more unequivocal as a more holistic engagement with global design avoided the narrow effects that global market forces may exert on a culturally embedded tradition.

Different roles for craftsmen following design interventions

Within the Sri Lankan communities of practice we were able to see different roles of the craftsmen: performing a job for an external designer/ buyer, delegating a job for someone else and becoming a maker as well. Somewhat left behind by this arrangement are the women workers who have de facto adopted certain skills from the crafts families but are not necessarily identified as crafters. Their role remains divisive as some craftsmen believe these women are sometimes a threat to the craft and to the tradition, as they also set up their own looms at their households. ‘They don’t have the feel for this craft’ said one craftsman, which also links with the issue of copying design previously mentioned.

What we witness here may be the emergence of a kind of ‘designer’ at some point within the second

generation of weavers in Dumbara, where a lengthier research process and prototyping before the actual making resembles that of the western, professionally trained designer who might be lacking in the making skills. It seems this new role of the ‘designer’ has been adopted by working with designers and external buyers, and has been an accidental effect of the new economic models they work with. It may be the reason why craftsmen here tend to stick to once introduced global designs by changing only certain elements. In any case, these craftsmen have gained access to mainstream local and global market places through such means. Crafts here have become commercial products first and cultural artefacts second, with implications for artisanal displacements (Scarse 2012) and subsequent knowledge loss due to misplacement and misuse of knowledge in the local knowledge system.(Menkhoff et al. 2011)

This is a key difference to the sense of community and sharing experienced in the residency model of reSIde, where all craft produced remained very much cultural as well as commercial goods.

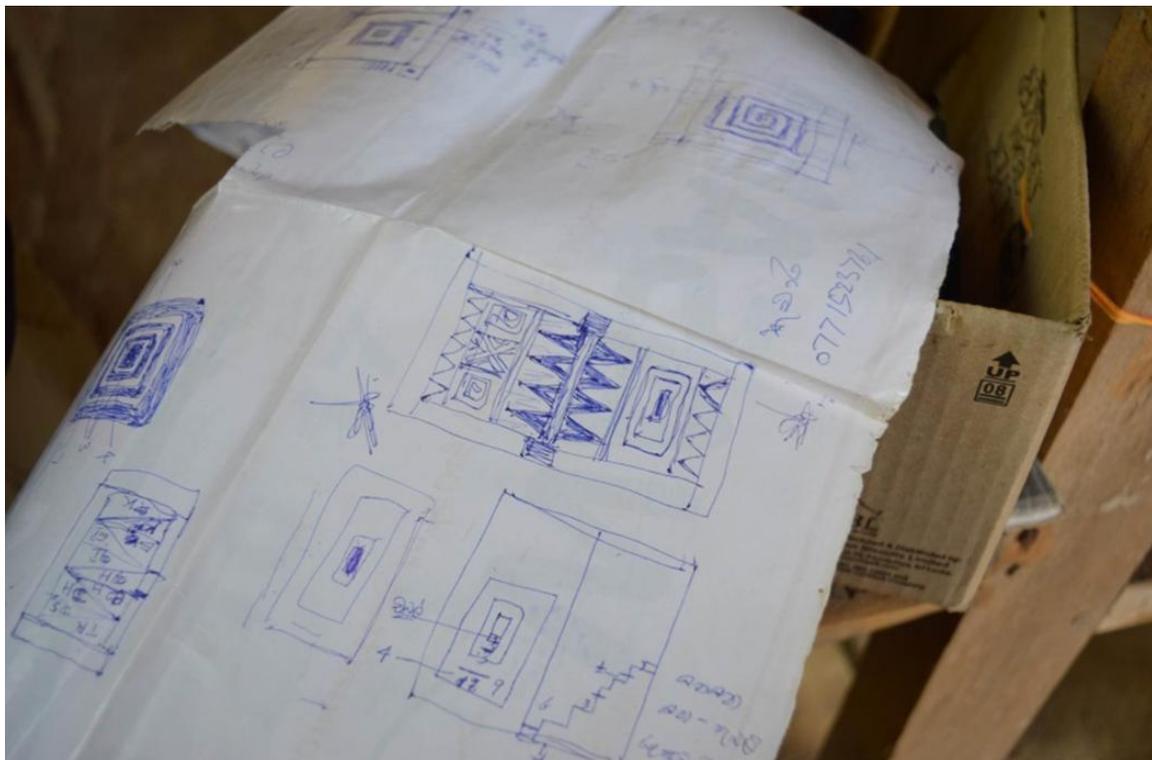


Image 9: Sketches supplied by craftsman to workers

Recommendations

Further research into the precise motivations for all actors in different design interventions should be conducted to fully appreciate the role crafts people, designers, governments/ commercial investors and consumers play in such collaborations.

Such research would promise further discoveries as to where knowledge is embodied in making in

these settings.

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