

**Sustainable Strategies in Mexican Textile Crafts based on Participative Social Co-design.**

**Success Stories.**

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**Abstract**

The current research is based on case studies, using a qualitative analysis method focused on different sustainable strategies grounded in participatory social co-design as an element of development and conservation of the culture and the textile traditions of native Mexican peoples.

It is framed within a wider project called *Crafts and Fashion Design. Secular textile crafts in contemporary fashion and their bonds with the concept of sustainability*. This research project has been funded by the Department of Innovation, Universities, Science and Digital Society and ISEACV (Instituto Superior de Enseñanzas Artísticas de la Comunidad Valenciana).

All the research undertaken by the *Contemporary Fashion. Models and Context* Research Group is applied in the Official Master in Fashion Co-design and Sustainability, in which two of the researchers in the group teach. This contribution has been recognized by ANECA (National Quality Assessment and Accreditation Agency of Spain) in the re-accreditation of the master in 2019.

**Keywords:** Mexican textile crafts. Social co-design. Empowerment. Slow fashion. Sustainability.

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## Introduction

Textile crafts can be likened to the traces or fingerprints left behind by humans, and in this regard they can be viewed as representations exclusive to the culture in which they are made. Mexico is a melting pot of cultures. In fact, it is the third country in the world in terms of the greatest cultural diversity, following China and India, even though its geographical size is not comparable to these first two countries. This cultural diversity is materialized in living manifestations whose maximum expression can be found in music, gastronomy and, very particularly, in traditional dress.

Textile crafts in general and Mexican textile crafts in particular, and their survival into the twenty-first century is under serious threat from globalization and the homogenization of cultures this entails, diminishing the material and immaterial wealth inherent in all crafts. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to intervene in favour of the recovery, recognition, updating and conservation of this invaluable learning. However, several key questions arise: How, when and where do we intervene, and with which agents? In this regard, certain guidelines have already been specified by international organizations like UNESCO which, in its Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions(2005)<sup>1</sup>, defined what it understands as Cultural and Creative Industries, within which it includes Handcrafts and Design as a key component.

As a result, when focusing on contemporary fashion, there can be no doubt that the recovery of handcrafts is also one of the many necessary strategic lines. Furthermore, in addition to conforming to UNESCO principles, it also helps to consolidate the concept of sustainability, in such a highly unsustainable sector as the fashion industry.

## State of the question

The high profile cases of cultural appropriation involving major brands and famous designers evince the vulnerability of certain traditional cultural expressions. In a world where what sells is “novelty”, it seems as if everything has already been invented and it is necessary to fall back on the mass circulation of patterns, embroidery, ornaments or motifs from other cultures other than our own and which, as a consequence, are removed from the sociocultural circumstances that give rise to them in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Take, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/es/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/cultural-expressions/the-convention/convention-text> [Last consulted: 14/4/2020].

<sup>2</sup> Worth underscoring is the case of María Gelacia Vargas Barranco and the embroiderers from Tenango de Doria, in the state of Hidalgo, which took more than 15 years to register the collective brand *Tenangos Bordados de Hidalgo*, which means that they no longer have to patent design by design and whose labels means that the products with them are recognized and registered by the government of Mexico as an “original tenango”. This allowed them to take a case of plagiarism against Mango in 2017, forcing the company to withdraw from the market the articles of clothing which

the case of Mexican textile crafts, basic for the economy of indigenous peoples and communities, which is to say, for societies with very different cultural and linguistic profiles that extend from the north to the south of the country, with a limited or subsistence economy, and which, on many occasions, are maintained largely thanks to the sale of the products they make, commercialized well below a fair price.<sup>3</sup>

The revitalization of traditional know-how can be strengthened by participative processes and the introduction of co-design, which facilitate tools that enable the activation and recognition of this learning and know-how. In this regard, it is critical to involve and engage institutions and organizations interested in making the most of the process of civil empowerment. To this end, it is necessary to introduce new approaches, methods and tools, from the optic of decolonized science and technology and able to dialogue with individuals and local or regional groups (Toledo, 2011, p.471). In the practice of co-design and social design participation (DP), people are no longer viewed as simple users, consumers or clients. Instead they are seen as experts in the understanding of their own forms of life and their work. And they are seen as valuable partners in the development of the design process (Sanders, 2013, p.62).

Ezio Manzini defined co-design as “a dynamic process in which participants intervene bringing their own particular knowledge and designing capacity”, turning co-design into a social conversation in which individuals and groups dialogue and plan design initiatives from their differing forms of knowledge and collaboration (Manzini, 2015, p.48). Meanwhile, Yanki Lee (2007) outlined the roles the designer should play in the participative process (design developer, facilitator and generator). In this sense, co-design is related with the role of design facilitator, in which the designer should transfer the capacities and skills of design in benefit of the empowerment of the community, helping in the development of a project that improves its living conditions. For this reason, one could underscore “the attitude and importance of the role of the designer as facilitator” (Cuenca, 2017, p. 182)

Therefore, when attempting to respond to the questions posed above (how, when, what agents and where to intervene?) we delimited and directed our analysis to cases in which co-design and social design participation have underscored a strategy to improve business, which implies a conservation of Mexican textile crafts, given their capacity to create products with a higher added social value, derived from the collaboration between craftspeople and the task of facilitation undertaken by the designers.

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were the subject of the dispute. Other cases attracting a lot of media coverage include Isabel Marant and the Mixe shirt of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec, the tenangos by Louis Vuitton, the designer Raw Edges or Carolina Herrera.

<sup>3</sup> La Ley General de Salvaguardia de los Elementos de la Cultura e Identidad de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas, Afromexicanas y Equiparables, was approved by the Mexican Senate on 3 December 2019.

## Theme

A detailed study was undertaken of three cases showcasing successful strategies focused on co-design (Roberts & Darler, 2017), which do not follow a pre-established methodology but which use various techniques such as *telling*, *making* and *enacting* (Sanders, Brandt, Binder, 2010). In short, we analysed the contributions that co-design offers to artisans, the exchange of information between artisans-designers-society and the results of the work of redesign, updating and conservation of textile crafts.

## Methodology

The methodology proposed for this research is based on a qualitative strategy that enables an observation, analysis and understanding of the practices, customs, behaviours, relations and interactions of the different agents involved in shaping the current and future productive dynamics in co-design.

In this regard, non-numeric data have been compiled and analysed with the purpose of providing meaningful information on the incorporation of Mexican textile crafts into the larger framework of contemporary and future fashion, which will necessarily have to opt for these kinds of sustainable and integrating strategies. (Salcedo, 2014; Fletcher, 2010; Little, 2018; Fletcher & Grose, 2012; Chapman, 2009).

The proposed methodology is divided into four clearly differentiated working phases:

1. Definition of selection criteria for the cases, sustained on three premises and the provision of evidence that attests to their implementation:
  - a. A clear operating business model that generates revenue.
  - b. Positive impact on the social environment in which it is developed.
  - c. Contribution to innovation through social co-design.

2. Search for and identification of relevant cases.

Undertaken mainly through interviews, access to primary sources, specialized databases, consulting webpages and official blogs of non-governmental organizations, foundations, international design networks, universities, independent managers, urban collectives.

3. Selection and categorization. Factsheet.

- a. Name of project

- b. Author(s)
- c. Year of creation
- d. Country / City
- e. Organization
- f. Lead manager (state, industry, academia, community)
- g. Sector (public / private)
- h. Description
- i. Working methodology
- j. Funding
- k. Revenue model
- l. Webpage

4. Drafting and sending a questionnaire to the managers of each organization. Selection of case studies.

## Results

Three successful cases were selected for study: the first one, based in Mexico City, works with craftswomen from six states in Mexico; the second is located in the Maya region, in Chiapas, one of the poorest states and one with the highest population of original peoples; and third in the Mixteca region in the state of Oaxaca.

### *Case I: Fábrica Social*

*Authors:* Dulce María Martínez de la Rosa. Creative director, industrial designer from UNAM and social anthropologist / Daniela Gremión Urdiain. Executive director, anthropologist.

*Year of creation:* 2007.

*Country / City:* Mexico / Mexico City.

*Organization:* Limited company with variable capital, and civil society organization.

*Lead manager:* Community.

*Sector:* Private.

*Description:* Fábrica Social was founded to raise awareness and promote craftswomen and their techniques as expert textile makers. Its mission is to preserve textile trades and to ensure that they provide a stable and permanent income, thus preventing the abandonment of rural regions. Fábrica Social works in 6 states with more than 150 women from the Mixteca, Amuzga, Maya, Nahuatl, Hñahñu, Tzotzil and Wixarika peoples. The states are Yucatán, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Jalisco and Hidalgo.

*Working methodology:* Over the years it has developed and applied its own methodology in design,

organization, administration and fair trade. Its focus is based on horizontal work and collaboration, ensuring that the craftswomen have spaces where they can exercise their trade. It is also a travelling rural school which runs workshops in design, organization, administration and fair trade for indigenous women in Mexico.

Fábrica Social calculates the price per hour with the groups of craftswomen, as well as the percentage for savings and an additional payment for the leaders of the project.

In the words of Dulce Martínez “**Material production must be in consonance with social production. We make society when we make social objects.**”<sup>4</sup>

*Funding:* Public and private.

*Revenue model:* Training and sale of products. At the current moment it has three points of sale. The first (2012) and principal outlet is the Fábrica Social store in Colonia Centro in Mexico City, Hotel Downtown, Isabel la Católica 30. The second (2019) is located in Colonia San Ángel, calle Madero 4 and the third (2020) is a point of sale in SABER HACER, a Mexican crafts store located in Colonia Polanco Chapultepec, in Pasaje Polanco Masaryk 360.

*Webpage:* [www.fabricasocial.org](http://www.fabricasocial.org)

## Photo 1,2,3,4

### Case II: El Camino de los Altos AC

*Authors:* 130 craftswomen and 9 French designers. Véronique Tesseraud (Legal representative)

*Year of creation:* 2009

*Country / City:* Mexico / San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas)

*Organization:* Mexican Civil Association

*Lead manager:* Community

*Sector:* Private

*Description:* El Camino de los Altos promotes, diffuses and drives an interchange of experiences between designers and artisans and training and education for personal and work development for indigenous women. Nine French designers from the El Camino Association (France, 1996) and Maya weavers from fourteen municipalities in Los Altos de Chiapas join together to co-design textiles integrating contemporary design and Maya crafts. Today, the members of the association are all professionals working in art and design applied to textiles. They work together to develop high quality collections with the purpose of improving the living conditions of the weavers and their families while at once contributing

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<sup>4</sup> Pérez, A (presenter) (30 August 2019). Observatorio Cotidiano [TV program TV]. tv.unam. Mexico: UNAM. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKIRaeeS-Rw>

to maintain this ancestral textile art alive.

The fourteen municipalities in which the weavers are located, all in Los Altos de Chiapas, are Zinacantán, San Juan Chamula, San Andrés Larrainzar, Santa Magdalena, Chalchihuitán, Chenalhó, Pantelhó, Cancuc, Tenejapa, Huixtán, Oxchuc, Abasolo, Chanal with the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas as the neuralgic centre.

*Working methodology:* Guide, instruct and qualify craftswomen by showing them how to create new textile designs, using the traditional techniques, methods and designs of Maya cultures. The designers travel once a year to Mexico to agree on ideas and colour charts for the new season, and to propose new working methodologies between the designers and the weavers.

They also advise the women on all the processes necessary to commercialize their products.

*Funding:* The association is funded by the sales of their own craft textiles. In 2019 it was authorized to receive donations.

*Revenue model:* Production and sale of contemporary Maya handcrafted textile products for the home in their store in San Cristóbal de las Casas (2011), in exhibition-fairs in Paris, all over Mexico and online.

*Webpage:* [www.elcaminodelosalto.com](http://www.elcaminodelosalto.com)

## Photo 5,6,7,8

*Case III: Ñaa Ñanga collective in Tijaltepec. (Ñaa Ñanga means “the women of toys”)*

*Authors:* Women from the Ñaa Ñanga collective in Tijaltepec.

*Year of creation:* 2017.

*Country / City:* Mexico / San Pablo Tijaltepec (Oaxaca).

*Organization:* Collective.

*Lead manager:* Laura Margarita Quiroz Ruiz (cultural manager specialized in participative design)<sup>5</sup> and Rosalía Bautista García (master craft embroiderer).

*Sector:* Private.

*Description:* Social design between the CADA Foundation<sup>6</sup> and a group of women from San Pablo Tijaltepec.

*Working methodology:* CADA facilitates tools and capacities for four years (2013-2017) for craftswomen

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<sup>5</sup> *El Arte Textil y el Diseño Participativo. Casos de experiencia con grupos de artesanos de las regiones de la Mixteca y la Costa de Oaxaca*, is the title of a paper given by Laura Quiroz at the Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES Morelia UNAM) in October 2019, as part of the symposium on “Culture, Art and Participative Design”.

Support programme for technological innovation and research projects (PAPIIT IN406219) “Anthropology, design and participative intervention with rural communities in the state of Michoacán”

<sup>6</sup> CADA Foundation Inc. is a public charity foundation registered in the state of New York in 2013 and a member of the UNESCO Chair on Sustainability Barcelona. Created and directed by Carmen Malva, it is made up of designers, ethnographers, anthropologists and artisans. Webpage: <http://www.cadafoundation.org>.

to recover traditional textile techniques and, in this way, to foster economic self-sufficiency and a position in the market through training.

*Funding:* Contributions from members of the collective.

*Revenue:* Production and sale of embroidered shirts from San Pablo Tijaltepec and embroidered toys (animals) in the Hilo de Nube Oaxaca store and online.

*Webpage:* <https://www.facebook.com/blusastijaltepec> / Instagram: Ñaa Ñanga Tijaltepec

## **Photo 9,10,11,12**

## **Conclusions**

The added value of the co-design process, following Ezio Manzini (2015, p.49), can be addressed from three scenarios:

- 1) Highly dynamic processes with a linear co-design development and agreed creative methodologies.
- 2) A process of creative and proactive activities in which the role of the designer is that of a mediator (between different interests) and a facilitator, making use of the creative experience and the culture of the designer. In this sense, with their ability to conceive and project and the possibility of employing their skills, the designer is able to instigate social conversations and foster new ideas.
- 3) A set of tools able to visualize the ideas and make them tangible through different prototypes and whose responsibility in the creation, conception and validation falls on the designer.

In the three case studies addressed in this research, these three above-detailed scenarios are interrelated in the process of co-design, either simultaneously or at different moments in the participative process.

On the other hand, it is worth underscoring that it was possible to identify elements such as: the commitment of the collaboration; the experience and interests of the participants; the exploration and development of their ideas and proposals; the experience of the designers as facilitators and mediators and the development of processes and tools in consonance with the space and with the participants.

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