

Handcrafts refuse to die

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*"Maybe the craft does not always give food for my stomach,
but it feeds my soul ... "*

Margarita Ruiz.

Textile Artisan Textiles, Soledad

Atzompa Veracruz. Mexico.

I have traveled for over ten years to 245 communities in 20 states of the 32 that make up the Mexican Republic. There I worked with artisans that produce textiles and other crafts.

Following activities were performed in collaboration with these communities: technical trainings; advice on design; developing different, technical, iconographic manual's, testimonials; workshops with emphasis on design or using wood, ceramics, lapidary, feather art, carving horn, shell, leather, embossing and glazing copper and silver jewelry work.

We also realized in-depth diagnostics on the technical capabilities as well as on the socio-economic situation of these indigenous communities.

Results were discussed and refined during meetings with local and regional representatives of the participating communities.

The vast majority of above described activities took place in communities where a majority of the population is indigenous.

Many of the crafts in Mexico are performed in indigenous communities and by vulnerable populations. These techniques are becoming extinct, because many artisans leave their communities and migrate.

Another cause is environmental deterioration; it is no longer possible to obtain the needed raw materials.

The knowledge and crafts get lost and in a lot of cases there exist no records or documentation nor is this information transmitted by any other means.

Identify qualified craft diaspora is an opportunity to extend lines of communication with local designers to jointly promote the preservation and recovery of these traditional crafts and skills.

May be an integral approach integrating design with other social and environmental disciplines can preserve the presence of artisans in their communities and as such the local traditions with related crafts can be kept a live for the future generations.

From this perspective of intensive fieldwork I want to share some thoughts on why the crafts are struggling to survive and share my experiences on how a holistic approach could be developed to preserve them.

These thoughts are grouped in the following topics:

1. Design Strategies with social intervention.
2. Relationship Between Strategies designers and artisans.
3. Rescue crafts and knowledge, documentation and graphic files
4. Diaspora of qualified techniques.
5. Production Ecosystems and overall design.
6. Market development, balancing the needs of conscious Consumers and Producers.
7. Conclusion.

1. Design Strategies with social intervention.

Increasingly comprehensive worldwide consumer ideas are developed, these ideas try to be sensitive, consistent with their ideology and their daily practices. It is not enough to be attractive but there must also be correlations to environmental factors, identity and social commitment.

Currently to know consumers, more penetrating interventions are required, to detect their affinities and sensitivity, to investigate their needs and recognize the empathy that leads to a product or service¹.

¹ Design anthropology is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the role of design artifacts and processes in defining what it means to be human (e.g., human nature). It is more than lists of user requirements in a design brief, which makes it different from contextual inquiry, some forms of design research, and qualitative focus groups. Design anthropology offers challenges to existing ideas about human experiences and values. Dori Tunstall 2008, Design

In the communities, during the process of interaction between the designers, the craft (object) and training of artisans there are a number of previous actions that should be considered.

These actions are not only limited to the creation or transformation of objects. You need to first build a community dialogue, because the art form depends on the environment, geographic location, impact on the environment and probably the artisan has no or very limited contact with the consumer. All these elements determine the design of appropriate intervention.

If the design as well as crafts and descending part of the tradition, the various styles, give identity to an object, both are interceding from the beginning, raw materials, operating conditions, technical processes and conceptual exhibition market for immediate sale.

The implementation of methods of intervention into the traditional crafts producing communities, need social, environmental, technological and marketing strategies based on diagnosis and previous research that the designer has done with the artisans and their community.

Therefore, the basic parts of this craft development are both design intervention as well as the teaching method.

2. Relationship between strategies, designers and artisans.

Designing or redesigning objects is part of the immediate demands of the artisans to sell more and better products, but the reality is that the craftsman continues to make the same products with the same tools and within the same circumstances.

Designers must develop more attractive ideas and clearly know the consumers for which they design. In such a way that together they should have: the commitment to be productive, creative and achieve greater commercial success, but in reality it is not so².

How to prepare a designer to work in the field? Currently you have access to the geographic or ethnographic information.

Anthropology: What can it add to your design practice?, Adobe Design Center ThinkTank. Accessed on 11 September 2011 at <http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/thinktank/tt_tunstall.html>.

² Notas a partir de Historia del Diseño en América Latina y el Caribe, Fernández Silvia-Bonsiepe Gui (Coordinación), Ed. Blucher, Sao Paolo, 2008.

But if you do not achieve to understand the social situation and the technical process to produce handicrafts, it is unlikely you will be able to have an assertive communication with the artisans. Sometimes you even do not speak the same language, which further complicates an effective communication.

As a consequence the artisans do not learn better techniques, do not improve their production processes and end-customer-understanding.

To avoid this a community and technical assessment followed by tutorial development process is indispensable.

For the planning of joint projects with artisans and designers, it is also important to consider the calendar of community's activities such as agriculture, cattle rising, and also the numerous festivities part of the local social cohesion.

Linking design with other disciplines such as social skills and organizing of an overall environment that enables both artists and designers to collaborate efficiently and effectively opens doors to new sustainable projects.

It is important that the artisan and the designer are not just confined to proposals for products but they should actively participate in a larger discussion or decision-making process.

If it is the designer who performs most of the time the actions within the communities he cannot be neglected in the "design of the intervention" from its conceptual phase.

In such a way the learning engagement between designers and artisans builds integrated solutions. For example: adapted tools for each technique, improved access to raw materials and the registration of traditional knowledge in electronic media.

From the design lines the artisan's identity should be preserved. If for the artisan it is "easy" to distinguish between traditional designs and variants for different consumers, designing and developing new products will be become a natural and autonomous process.

On one hand, you need to create interfaces between tradition, design and overall production cost. On the other hand, the selling price is closely related to the perceived value of the produced goods. This balance should be supported by a viable market strategy.

This strategy must go beyond a pure economic cost/benefit relation; other elements must be taken in to account to be successful. For instance by leveraging local knowledge and traditions the cultural heritage of the crafts sector is promoted.

3. Rescue crafts and knowledge, documentation and graphic files.

Dignifying the crafts encourages creative expression and through this activity groups of artisans are constituted which in turn promotes production autonomy.

Timely documentation of iconography preserves the collective memory and allows the exchange of information between regions. It promotes the knowledge of traditional artisanal techniques that are in danger of extinction. Risk factors for extinction must be identified which allows to define mitigation actions that reduce or eliminate these risks. The collected knowledge of traditional arts and crafts can be transmitted within communities and accessed by academics from Mexico and other countries.

The benefit of creating a graphic heritage of cultural identity comes in different stages. Initially it serves the immediate community, then the surrounding communities that have shared characteristics, so that the cultural identity of a region is strengthened.

Organizing the registration of and research of crafts creates new job opportunities for this specialized subject. The availability of this information will generate more academic interest, which will give an extra impulse to collect more information.

With the support of technology, this information can be shared and disseminated digitally and the research process become streamlined.

Through tutorials, digital guides these often centuries old techniques are safeguarded.

The artisan has to adapt the design to customer needs, and the design has to complement traditional techniques while maintaining quality, identity and originality in the products. Failing to do this will result in trivial products that do not meet market needs and the technique will therefore not be used any more and become extinct.

For example, tapestry needs contemporary designs and requires the participation of designers and artists to draw them. Weaved fabrics made with a traditional techniques, gives unique pieces, handmade and with a perfect and original result. This is almost impossible with mass produced products.

Obviously having a digital repository of traditional techniques and designs accessible for artists and designers will allow to develop new products inspired on this documentation, which can be developed by the communities.

As can be understood from the above it is not only relevant but also urgent to make an iconographic record of each region accompanied by a productive mapping, craft rescue techniques with ethnographic and anthropological support and adequate attention to each craft as a cultural heritage.

This opens a dialog to dignify an industry that struggles to survive. If not now when we can rescue this knowledge? And if not we the designers, do it then who will do?

4. Diaspora of qualified techniques³

As a result of this social phenomenon, we find that exchange takes place. On one hand people are grouped together and collectively preserve their ethnic identity, in habits, customs, education and religious beliefs and with this also the selling of traditional crafts, equipment, food and clothing. And on the other hand they are facing a new geographical, social and cultural situation that will transform them.

From an artisan point of view each community has different designs and local characteristics. Based on the production know-how artists and artisans make a series of regional products. These artisans are considered as the traditional designers of their communities and their niche market is concentrated among the diaspora. Following questions arise: What have these designers in common with each other? Why do we believe that a successful design is achieved in the identity of each object?

The interfaces between tradition, design and price allow that traditional crafts transcend to another object category.

For example, a religious hand made object has a specific meaning for a certain group, while for a designer it can be the inspiration for a new trend. The production technique and the raw material may be do different versions of this object but the symbolism is maintained.

Using ceremonial objects as an inspiration to design new objects without any ritual use could be an alternative to commercialize handicrafts.

³ *Diaspora is a social phenomenon of migration and the formation of communities outside the countries of origin, is a time of fragmentation and dispersal in the history of mankind. The voyages of exploration, conquest of the world wars who voluntarily or forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of people at different continents. Migration has led to the proliferation of diaspora communities and the redefinition of its role and importance in today's world.*

The Diaspora is also closely linked to other terms such as migration and exile, used as synonyms. Diáspora: La complejidad de un término. Mireya Fernández M., Revista Venezolana de Análisis de Coyuntura v.14 n.2 Caracas, Venezuela Dic.2008, versión impresa ISSN 1315-3617. Mireyafernandez2002@yahoo.com. www.2cielo.org.ve

For the artisans the creation of objects are not limited to do it, they also prepare raw materials, maintain tradition, technology and processes. These values should be transmitted from generation to generation, this is part of knowledge and traditions, and those are the basic piece to preserves the craftsmanship.

Currently, the communication of knowledge between artisans of different diasporas and with designers and other artisans within the region that adopted them does not emerge as a cultural exchange.

Why don't they know each other? why no bridges are created, where a dialog exists? If the common denominator in both is creativity, how can we encourage them to transfer their knowledge, technology and innovation? We must be able to identify and take advantage of the technical expertise to benefit from this cultural wealth.

5. Exchange programs between universities to disseminate artisans' techniques.

If we analyze the relations between: designer-handicraft artisans-handicraft, artisans-consumer, artisan-design; you can generate the link that encourages students to research artisanal techniques and universities to be the bridge with other countries.

To the extent that students can have access to knowledge and traditional craft subjects either of their own communities or other communities, through iconographic, tutorial files, they can engage in productive projects, and contribute with their own knowledge.

With a commitment to rescue the artisanal activities in their community, to improve a tools or techniques, programs can be dedicated to the production and research.

The exchange in teaching artisanal techniques generates feedback with other players from other areas who will be involved on the longer term with the production projects.

These different programs range from ethnographic, anthropological and sociological research to health, community, social, education, gender and sustainable projects in different areas, as transversals projects⁴.

Similarly, with vulnerable groups you can contribute to a larger collective balance, social cohesion and peace for benefit for wider population⁵.

⁴ Arte Popular y feminismo, Bartra Eli, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de Xochimilco.1999

⁵ The current development recognizes the importance of regional initiatives arising from the localities to boost economic growth and welfare in entire regions. Here comes in a set of elements to leverage the resources and capabilities of each locality, where the educational aspect is a crucial resource, as is also the movement and socialization of knowledge: Región Centro Occidente de México. Dra. Elia Catalina Cruz Barajas, Mayo 2013. Diásporas científicas en movimiento. www.diasporascientificas.org/proyecto.html

Empathy between the artisan and designer forms vital part in both their lives, learning artisanal techniques becomes attractive for the new generations, when there is a decent remuneration for this activity will survive as a valid self-employment.

6. Production ecosystems and overall design.

Currently, globalization and electronic media have a massive impact. Consequently some communities become isolated as they lack the tools and knowledge to commercialize their products in the “connected world”.

In the communities handcraft is a versatile job that depends on agriculture, and labor festive calendars. Handcraft creates jobs for various people along the supply chain from consumption of industrial goods, to transportation and other intermediaries.

The artisans have to balance between production, regeneration of raw materials and the development of parts. This situation does not allow changing collections per season, placing its products in alternative markets.

Training, consulting and products designed to consumer needs go hand in hand with the vital idea of preserving cultural and community traditions. As such these ancient techniques can also be attractive for “educational tourism”.

Educational tourism is a development opportunity because it will stimulate the commercialization and production of handicraft, and lead to coordinated actions for the benefit of local progress.

This represents a bridge between the developments of sustainable projects with rational use of the environment and supports the local culture highlighting ancient traditions.

Promoting sustainable products for the benefit of the environment and the community opens new markets and attracts tourists seeking this balance. This can be supported with the realization of thematic tours, educational workshops and teaching artisanal techniques and explaining the local culture, among other activities that are of interest.

Developing a "brand" internationally implies a high cost. A planned supporting infrastructure with benefits to the communities is a prerequisite. And there also must be certitude that such an important investment will leave a greater economic benefit for the local user.

Commercialization does not conflict with cultural integrity, on the contrary “The 21st century is an era of putting more emphasis on selling cultural experiences, rather than selling goods”⁶

7. Development of conscious markets

The conscious market seeks to inform consumers about the manufacturing processes and how these have an impact on the social, cultural and environmental elements.

If you keep the consumer informed and aware of the reality of the production processes through advertising, product labels and electronic media; consumer co-responsibility is created⁷.

Therefore effective partnerships between private or public entities both national and international must be building. These entities must be socially committed and promote sustainable projects. Their corporate social responsibility should have a direct impact on civil society and positively enhance the environment through the development of sustainable products and services. Intermediaries between producers and consumers should be kept to the needed minimum.

The documentation process of the artisan techniques used and the transformation of a community will serve as promotional material. Explaining both the uniqueness of the produced goods and the positive impact on the daily lives of the artisanal communities process as a result of corporate social engagement of the contributing entity. This will greatly contribute to the prestige of the sponsoring brand (entity).

Production cycles in the communities cannot follow the seasonal rhythm of fashion collections. A valid alternative is to develop thematic collections, which have a longer life span. As such time becomes an ally and various costs – such as development,

⁶ The 21st century is an era of putting more emphasis on selling cultural experiences, rather than selling goods. " Jeremy Rifkin, Futurist.

⁷ Encuentro entre Diseñadores y Artesanos, Guía práctica, Unesco, Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A. Nueva Delhi 2005.

commercialization, transport - are reduced. Further more production capacity can be easier tuned to market demand because of better predictably of needed quantities.

Activities such as market research, branding and brand building, are unattainable for artisans.

These alliances with companies, advertisers, carriers, raw material suppliers, governmental entities, will help the promotion of artisanal products, which in turn will generate tangible benefits for the producing communities and allied entities.

8. Conclusion

When we speak of artisan activities, we speak about human beings with a useful and cultural occupation. We must design specific projects that address social needs and encourage artisans to continue to produce their traditional handmade goods.

Dignify the traditional handcraft, as a cultural heritage of humanity is required.

The official recognition of each craft, the creation of an archive of traditional craftsmanship before it becomes extinct, developing tutorials and manuals, is an urgent priority.

The current advance of the diagnosis and registration of the handcrafts, is not encouraging. However we seek to cooperate with other sectors and institutions to advance in ordered phases and to find the professional profiles suitable for the development of community programs.

In 2010 we formed a civil association in Mexico, Development Projects Craft and Design, DEPROART. AC., and carry out projects inspired by the lives of the artisans.

Based on an intervention methodology we design projects within the communities, which include issues that go beyond handcrafts. Topics such as food sovereignty, sustainable community development, education and community health, development of value chains from a gender perspective, plant registration for the use in traditional medicine, dyeing plants inventory, sparing use of natural resources to name a few are part of the projects that will benefit the artisanal sector that refuses to die, but yes is struggling to survive.

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