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## REDISCOVERING PLACES AND HANDICRAFTS

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*“¿Qué significa, entonces, un verso exitoso? Significa un enriquecimiento de la lengua, pero de ningún modo un empobrecimiento de lo inarticulable. La lengua se expandió, pero el caos no disminuyó. La poesía aumenta el territorio de lo pensable, pero no disminuye el territorio del impensable” - Vilém Flusser, 1999*

To investigate the possible and producible is a theme that fascinates man. The objects reflected in themselves and in their conformations, the choices and values of those who produced and those who use them. In this sense, we can consider that the form reflects these two dimensions – since the product (producible) is the result of a process of creating (thinkable, created by a thought, most times, non-linear).

We consider, therefore, that an artefact is time and matter condensed in space. We can use it, here and now, because it was thought out and articulated in time, from the selection of raw materials, production and distribution processes, until it reaches us. Understanding an artefact in this way encourages us to think it as a witness of time and a cultural manifestation located in space. Probably this is why handicraft is such an interesting product. One can clearly recognize the hand of man in the process that results in its shape and in its features. Behind the handicraft lies "human time", a rare thing in the 21st century. Human time is in the "thinking" and "making", which also leads to a deeper appreciation of "using". In other words, handicraft recalls a ritual of making, and stimulates a ritual of fruition.

We know how to appreciate the quality of a product, in which we recognize the caution that has been put into its making, until it reaches our hands. An example is a good wine, that invites to savour it, and this deference is noticed in the utensils we use to serve it, in the lack of urgency with which we explore its bouquet and its multiple tones, grown for years on end and which involved many people before it got to that point.

Another important dimension embedded in handicraft is that of the location, the territory from which it arose. Again, here, we are confronted with a challenge: it is becoming increasingly rare to find an authentic product. The world-our daily supermarket e, so hasty, offers us a plethora of “de-identified” products, impeding us from understanding its origin and identity.

It is in the perception of these tensions — and the potential that the design has to create new solutions, especially in complex contexts — that lies the focus of this essay. The goal, therefore, is to stimulate a reflection on the material culture and its relationship with territory, enhancing the designer’s skills of the designer to “*increase the conceivable territory, though not diminishing the territory of the unthinkable*” - as points Flusser out (1999). This is an essential point: increasing the possibilities, without diminishing the potential and the environmental resources. Design, as a “innovation boosting agent”, can contribute to an critical and sensitive analysis of the territory’s potential, promoting the development of projects that enhance the role of the local community and its artists, as well as the development of networks and synergies. Thus, it is possible to strengthen the local references and traditions and, at the same time, promote the upgrading of processes in a contemporary language.

In this essay, we will first comment on the location, on the relation between material culture and territory. Then we’ll highlight some of the skills the designer has been developing in recent decades to deal with the growing complexity of his professional performance.

## **1 PLACE AND THE PROJECT’S AFFECTIVE DIMENSION**

Michael de Certeau’s (1984) phrase, “*place is a palimpsest*”<sup>1</sup> refers to the passage of time in space, and to think of it as “guardian” of events. So, the place is a witness of its visitors over time and of social, economical and cultural change. Place is, simultaneously, an actor, with its own characteristics, an emotional state, independent of the visitor’s state of mind at the time of the meeting. This “*sense of place*”, described by Norberg-Schulz (1980), is referred to as *genius loci*.

Originally, the in classical Roman religion, genius loci was considered the protective spirit of a place. It was often registered in iconography religion as the figure of a cornucopia, panther or a snake. Currently, this concept has been used

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<sup>1</sup> Palimpsest-sm (gr palimpsestos) Papyrus or parchment whose primitive text was scraped, to make way for another; currently you can decipher the primitive through photography with ultraviolet rays. Source: Michaelis Portuguese dictionary online, 2013

to express the set of features and dynamics related to a place, which characterizes it as unique and specific.

The place, while appropriating the affective dimension of space and territory, is the centre of events for those who live in it or of which they are part. Therefore, to investigate the identity of the place helps us to understand products as demonstrations located in a specific context.

Handicraft is precisely the product of knowledge and know-how (process) located in one place. This account highlights the need to develop strategies to protect and enhance the plural knowledge and natural resources, seeking alternatives for transformation and renovation of territory and traditions. A major challenge is to channel the forces (recognized and dormant) present on the territory and support a proactive behaviour versus a collaboration and integration of local interests, so that the innovations materialise and bring collective benefits. Local products, as cultural manifestations, are strongly related to territory and the community that produced them. Therefore, they involve material and immaterial, tangible and intangible assets that comprise cultural heritage.

The territorial approach also refers to the concept of "*terroir*", originally from French, used to define a territory characterized by its interaction with man over the years, whose resources and products are strongly determined by soil, climate and cultural conditions. According to the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA, 2002, trad.), the *terroir* can be considered as "*a territorial entity whose equity values arise from complex relationships among cultural, social, economic, ecological elements that have developed over time*". Thus, and quoting Barjolle et al. (1998, p. 10, trad.), a *terroir* comprises a complex area characterized by three geographic perspectives: a territory with its soil and climate conditions; an environment of knowledge and practices; a set located of traditions and customs.

A *terroir* can also refer to a traditional product of a given territory. Therefore, we can consider that some types of handicrafts are qualified in this way. The notion of *terroir* is appears as important counterpoint to the homogenization process represented by globalisation. In fact, the tension between cultural homogenization and heterogeneity, is pointed out by Appadurai (1990) and several authors, as the central problem of global interactions.

The apparent opposition of relationships created by globalization may represent complementarities and the emergence of new scenarios and possibilities, which require logical and analytical perspectives. The need to design alternative forms of local-global intermediation is pointed out by Manzini (2004). According to the author, the intersection of two complementary strategies can represent a scenario of "*cosmopolitan localism*": a balanced interaction between the local

dimension and the global dimension and the sustainable development of local resources.

Design, as an area of transversal knowledge might be able to contextualize and globalize, developing solutions that favorably relate these two poles. Thus, it may contribute to promoting the local resources and potential, given the needs of the users located in specific contexts and, at the same time, promote the integration of communities and of diversity, incorporating the benefits of the technological advances and encouraging dialogue and local and global networks. The development of alliances and networks, as well as the integration of actions in the territory are essential to strengthen the local competitiveness and the development of products and services, balancing tradition and innovation.

## **2 DESIGN AND VALUING TRADITIONS**

There are several concepts and interpretations related to design. The word refers to the drawing, to design and to the planning of products, services and systems. So, when we talk about design we are referring to the mediation between the immaterial (images and ideas) and material (physical artifacts) dimensions. The mediator feature of design is evident in the recently proposed concept by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design-ICSID (2005): "Design is a creative activity that seeks to establish the multiple qualities of objects, processes, services and their systems throughout its lifecycle." Therefore, the definition continues "(...) design is a central factor for the innovative humanization of technologies and a crucial factor for the economic and cultural exchange".

"The design approach seeks to produce coherence", stresses Bonsiepe (1998), and the criterion for success lies in the satisfaction of society. In this way, results may be characterized as "socio-cultural innovation", continues the author. In fact, it is the systemic perception that characterizes and stimulates the action of design over contemporaneity.

It is in this dynamic context that some of the specific features of this discipline, such as the interpretative richness and the visionary or anticipatory ability, as Maldonado stresses (1999), may contribute to the development of a plurality of solutions and, also to future scenarios. It is precisely because design is so deeply related to the development of socio-cultural and technological innovations, that there is this strong trend to become a tool for competitiveness. And, in recent years, there is also this strong awareness among professionals – industrial, entrepreneurs, and researchers – of the importance of investing in

design. Some countries have stood out due to their strong promotion of design as a strategic activity, which registers many successful experiences- such as the British Design Council in the United Kingdom, the Barcelona Design Centre in Spain, and the System Design Italy. Among these initiatives lies the common fact that they involve the scientific environment, the productive and the governmental sectors, encouraging the development of a design culture in those countries.

With regard to the relation with the handicraft production one can consider the designer as "*promoter of diffuse project capabilities*" (Manzini, p. 20, 2004). According to the author, the designer can be considered a "*design specialist*", who operates in a complex network of players/partnerships (companies, institutions, local authorities, associations non-governmental end-users) as a "*facilitator of processes*". In this sense, the designer, is able to, by means of his creativity and communication skills, contribute with the artisan to promote a high degree active social participation.

Some issues seem to be frequent in the discussions about the craft and design in a contemporary context, such as the challenges of promoting innovation and, simultaneously, enhancing tradition. The artisan's know-how represents a tacit knowledge, alive, of enormous wealth for a territory and also a process that has its own time and value. While a process, it can be considered a co-creation located in the territory. As a product, it is an index of human time and of the territory of origin. Therefore, engaging in actions to promote and enhance handicrafts and the artisan's know-how in a contemporary language contemporary, so as to 'innovate tradition', is a task that requires a lot of responsibility, sensitivity and the ability to integrate diverse players in the process.

Challenging issues such as 'innovate and enhance tradition'- which bring about elements that are simultaneously antagonistic and complementary - seem to emerge successively in society throughout time. Here, it is appropriate to quote the work "On modernity: the painter of modern life ", first published in 1869 by Charles Baudelaire. The author addressed the importance of the classical and current elements present in the composition of the "beautiful" and pleasant:

*"The beautiful consists of an eternal, invariable element whose quantity is too difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which is, subsequently or simultaneously, time, fashion, morality, passion. Without this second element, something like the pleasant casing, the aperitif of the divine delicacy, the first element would be indigestible, immeasurable, unfit and unsuitable to human nature. I challenge anyone to discover an example of beauty that does not contain these two elements." (Baudelaire, 1996, p. 10)*

The major challenge, therefore, appears to be embedding the qualities that comprise and perpetuate the beautiful, whose search is part of the aspirations of all of us. To search for the "contemporary beauty" and the sustainable (socially and economically environmental), in its multiple dimensions, seems to be an interesting guideline for both the process and the product of design.

The project "EDITORIA, design, artesanato, e indústria" (EDITORIAL, design, crafts, and industry), with its proposal to relate the material and immaterial heritage of the Vale do Ave region with the cultural contemporary offerings is an important initiative of promotion of synergies that involve artisans, designers and industry, and points out interesting paths to think Design in contemporary times. By promoting, on the one hand, the link between the craftsmen, products and place, and innovation, on the other hand, and by incorporating the knowledge of the area of design, this project is an important action for the recovery of the Guimarães, strengthening its recognition as the European Capital of Culture.

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