

REINVENTING MODERNITY THROUGH TRADITION: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT IN TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

In modern times, where life is permanently accelerating, people lose natural sense for matter as well as their inherent awareness of the environment.

Looking back in the history of products, we now acknowledge that the *designed* did not replace the *crafted* in all its sensitive and semiotic dimensions. Craft stands for authenticity, skill and tradition – things we naturally rely on – at the same time it's built on human-to-human relations. On the contrary, the industrial lacks the social engagement, the cultural recognition and the “human touch”.

There is a growing need to connect with the material world, in a more truthful and honest way - people are longing for more sensitive and down-to-earth experiences. It seems that the more virtual life gets, the more tactile we wish it to become. It is urgent to find ways to bring soul into the designed – to breathe new life into everyday things.

We should now focus on what has always been central to human development in a sustainable way, things such as folk culture, craftsmanship and rural knowledge. These comprehend methods and processes of fabrication and socializing that are embedded by a consequent acquaintance of nature which, if considered as guideline for making new things, can bring soulful value into our material world. Design takes here the roll of catalyst and innovation driver, creating new contexts and defining new development strategies.

This paper reports on the design experiments going on in the Algarve (Portugal) and Catalonia (Spain) with traditional craftsmen. Workshops that team up traditional craftsmen with designers to develop new products, as well as strategies for local empowerment and social sustainability. The final goals are: the materialization of folk knowledge into new products and grassroots viability for the craftsmen activity.

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INTRODUCTION

„Up until today, function is the trademark of industrial and serial design, reluctantly giving way to the emotional and the ephemeral. But it seems that mankind has a limited interest in pure functionality. (...) It is time to empower goods with a new dimension; their own character, an invisible energy locked into the design process.“¹ (Li Edelkoort, 2003)

Traditional culture is the result of unique local identity and social experience. Contemporary culture takes however the form of a product shaped by urban life, global reflection, and by an economy that seems to perpetually be under constant, almost irrational mutation.

The notions of »traditional« and »craft« still suffer today from connotations to an obsolete past, being also tied down to objects governed by static and intrinsically unchanging rules.

But traditional craftsmanship is much more than a collection of objectified artifacts or rituals; quite the contrary, it contains unparalleled mechanisms of transformation, invention and even of renewal. A promising future is greatly dependent on how tradition will solve its complex interaction with modernity. Or, better still, how contemporaneity will be able to apprehend traditional culture as its most natural and efficient mechanism of innovation.

UPGRADING TRADITION: VIABLE INNOVATION FOR TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, THROUGH DESIGN

Context

This research infact, agrees with the *zeitgeist*: between the capitalist crash and the political awareness to new economical resources, it becomes easier to tie the end of two ropes. On the one side, the traditional crafts are in bad shape after long years of resisting the serial industry. Their last representatives are about to quit and the existing product line has become obsolete. The stage is set to bring young and old together. On the other end, the design discipline still suffers from an education based on antiseptic Bauhausian ideas, which turn their backs to local culture. Design schools teach the "international style", preparing students for the mass market, following the demand of industrial specialization, instead of providing the experimental ground for enlightenment and renovation. As young creatives feel the system trembling, they get curious about the real origin of things and start digging on local knowledge and "the artisanal".



Old oven at the Marcó Potter Haus. (Quart, Spain)

Working with traditional craftsmanship, means one is facing vernacular artifacts and methods, which have evolved slowly through trial-error experience, rudimentary technologies and a strong capacity of invention. These also embed established production rituals, defined by accurate technical skill and an extreme consciousness of material and shape. Reasons enough to consider the knowledge behind these objects to be a basic principle, while designing something new to be released into this world. Apart from this, a craft skill is an incontestable source of individual and social empowerment.

Project-wise

The research and experiments described here, and others which will also contribute to a final dissertation, are taking place in disperse locations, with different backgrounds and partners. The point is to find specific

situations where the questions raised can be framed concretely and where the respective topics can be treated accurately. The problematic surrounding the survival of traditional crafts is, in this way, brought right into practice, research is a hands-on process. Research, learning and try-out support themselves retroactively and the new proposals are improved on a trial-error basis, just like in craftsmanship.

For this paper two cases are considered: the on-going workshop with potter Francisco Eugénio, in the Algarve (Portugal), and the "Black Ceramics" workshop going on in Catalonia (Spain) with ten craftsmen, where an area renowned for its skilled potters and special technics, is now seeing the end of an ancient tradition, for economic reasons.

The first case reviews the craftsman alone, how he shapes and develops his activity and trade. The second is about the relation of the craft activity and its traditional values with the contemporary surroundings.

Research and Mapping

The research was thought of to build a clear knowledge from single to plural i.e. from the individual to the community. The first step was to understand the actual state of affairs and started by questioning: what is the social status of craftsmen in our days? and what kind of conceptual and functional change is happening to the product and the workshop? At this point, in case A (Algarve), we confronted the potter Francisco Eugénio with terra-cotta pieces from the XI century existing at Faro's Archaeological Museum. This built up a discussion about the resemblance between his shapes and the ancient ones, resulting in a reflection about evolution of the practice.

In case B (Catalonia) a long talk with senior local historian Ramon Boleda, who also guided us on a visit to the medieval castle, retracing the events and status of the craftsmen from the region.



Handmade bricks mounted in the oven for firing. (Quart, Spain)

The second step was to figure the contemporary context, meaning and value of the traditional craft: how are they perceived in our days? How is its social and cultural potential explored in design and industry? Also important to understand is in which contemporary environments

these artifacts still exist and how does the contextualization process happens.

In both cases, the search for everyday items that come from the craft production, showed that the strongest commercial channel is gardening retail. Where decorative ceramics is still cheaper to buy locally than to import. In case A a research on young creatives using local production sites and traditional techniques finished in a small exhibition about the topic, named "Artesanato Pop", hosted by the local city hall.

The third step is to analyze the possible channels to market the crafted products. How to potentate the cultural "added value" embedded in these. Or look for alternative business strategies as, for example, the art trading world. At these point it is thoughtful to raise ethical questions such as to the branding of cultural identity, or the dangers of using tradition as alibi for commercial purposes.



Potter Josep Mestres, realising prototypes for the Black Ceramics Workshop (Quart, Spain)

Intervention and Development

The field work was structured in five stages:

1. Approaching the Craftsman
2. Cultural and Creative Research
3. Concept and Product Development
4. Design Management and Promotion
5. Commercialization Models

The success of the first stage is crucial to build a solid base for the project. It's decisive to win the craftsman trust and respect, to get into his or her world and be allowed to work there. In both locations we are dealing with family businesses that go back, in some cases, as far as thirteen generations. The position assumed by the designer here is rather different from the one he has in a mass production facility. Inside the workshop one must follow a strict code of conduct, ones manners and posture are tested sharply. One has to overcome this proof because there will be probably no second chance. After the acquaintance with the artisan and his environment we should arrive to a full understanding of how product and production are solved in each workshop - have a feeling for how each craftsman works. The development of the new objects, which result from this collaboration, have to follow this system of rules and methods. Also here, case A and B are very similar - in both the artisans are seniors with very defined ways to

work. They are very secure of what was taught to them, as if these methods are proved by time and is absurd to break the rules.



Potter Francisco Eugénio showing the making of a traditional pot. (Algarve, Portugal)

To come out of research, into the conception of new ideas, a series of creative debates are provoked, which take the shape a small brainstorm. Usually a subject close to the craftsmen experience is chosen for discussion, for example: retelling the story of the origin of a vernacular tool or putting in question the usefulness of such utensils in our days. From there we dissect the object semantically and, at the same time, get the artisan into a product development mood. As far as possible, when ideas come to shape, the craftsmen is invited to contribute with formal solutions and aesthetics. In the following period of time, a collection of pieces is defined and prototypes made.

The phase when the management and promotion of the new collections starts is exactly where the project is at this point. Presentations are organized for the media and other opportunities to show the collection are researched. For the commercial part, pricing, sales conditions, distribution and policies are being agreed with the craftsmen and the involved institutions. In case A the situation is simpler for there is only one potter and the results were rather more experimental than commercial.



Potter Sisco Sambola making the first prototypes. (Verdú, Spain)

Conclusion

One of the main objectives is that the project becomes a design programme to be applied at different places. Right now other teams of designers are already starting other workshops in Catalonia, following the same philosophy. About the interchange between the design and craftsmanship, the craftsman cannot fall into the position of a mere producer, but be brought into the design process as an interpreter. The designer should, on his part, not just follow indications of material, technologies and skills but absorb the language in which all this is expressed. One can argue that design, when confronted with the crafts, is clearly a result and tool of mass industry, where the focus is on *producing*. On the contrary, craftsmanship is object based. A vernacular knowledge designs the object, building meaning into it, at the same the shape appears (or happens). The making of something is curated in detail and so the activity becomes also valuable and meaningful. In that factor lays the added value and space for innovation - the production controlled by hand, not by machine.



Flower vase. By potter Magí Sambola.
(Verdú, Spain)

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