

“MADE BY” VS. “DESIGNED BY” – TWO APPROACHES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIONS WITH ARTISAN COMMUNITIES

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Myriad organizations such as Aid to Artisans (Aid to Artisans 2009), individuals, and most recently, universities, have embarked on projects through which they hope to create a significant, and positive, impact on artisan communities in the areas of design, marketing, and business, with the principal goal for these communities to generate income via the sale of their artisan goods. This exploratory paper discusses how the “Designed By” and “Made By” models can be used at different times, and with very different goals, and talks about the challenges and advantages of each.

CONTEXT

Case studies, such as those documented by UNESCO, have demonstrated that design can play “an important role in encouraging environmentally sustainable and economically viable models...of marginalized groups.” (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia

S.A., UNESCO 2005)

However, design can only play this role if it is central to the activity performed by the artisans (ie. if it is not imposed by an external person, creating a situation of dependency.)

MADE BY VS. DESIGNED BY

The term “Made By” is used to indicate the practice of design from a developed country being handed down to a low-wage manufacturing situation in a developed country. (Margolin 2007) This model (adapted to an artisan situation) describes the underlying premise of projects like Cojolyá, an association in Santiago, Guatemala which “provides weavers with threads and looms, design services, infrastructures and the development of markets to promote sales.” (Cojolyá 2009) Here, design is not an intrinsic part of the making process. Instead, it is a service that is given to the weavers by the

organization's founder, and design interns who spend some time in Santiago.

The artisans are thus limited to the role of manufacturer, making products by hand. These women have relatively small input into what product is made, or why it is made. The principal advantage to this model is the guarantee that what is being made aligns with current market trends and is more likely to be sold. It is therefore most appropriate for initiatives in which the priority is the generation of income. If the goal is sustainable development, the challenges become that the women do not develop their skills beyond the physical, hands-on making of the products; the women are not learning about the market or design industry; the women often receive a very small percentage of profit; the women become dependent on the person/people playing the role of the designer, thus compromising the self-sustainability of the project. (Berdiel & Dehejia 2007)

There are two ways to consider the "Designed by" model. The first is the case of Artesanías de Colombia (Artesanías de Colombia 2009), which has been able to position originally designed handcrafts as desired products, accessories, and furnishings. In this case, the design is inherent to the artisans' traditions, and is not being transformed or adjusted to meet market needs. Instead, the overarching organization positions these original and authentic designs as desired goods, via the now internationally known Colombian fair Expoartesanías, stores around the country,

and even through exports. This case is ideal, and yet is not necessarily translatable to the artisanship of a country like Guatemala, for example, in which the techniques (i. e. back strap loom weaving) is of interest, but the design (i.e. the huipil, or traditional Maya blouse) does not have a sustained market. In this case, the "Designed by" model needs to be framed as a process through which the artisans learn to creatively innovate and experiment with their techniques, and follow design guidelines (in terms of quality, form, and color) so as to create a more marketable product. In both of these cases, artisans in developing countries are elevated to a new social/economic position by playing a pivotal role in the actual design of the products. This approach provides the artisans with the skills to design their own products and move up the value chain of designers rather than just manufacturers. (Craft Revival Trust *et al* 2008)

Furthermore, "Designed By" can be extended to include "Marketed By" and "Managed By" – models in which artisans are trained in the necessary skills (quality control, product design and development, business and organizational skills), to ensure a long-term and sustainable income-generation business through the sale of their goods. The key concept here is to increase exposure for the Mayan women (and eventually others), adding value to what they have produced for generations, in the hope of preserving their culture, heritage and traditional skills.

THE NEW SCHOOL COLLABORATES
The Design for the Other 90% exhibition

website states that “Of the world’s total population of 6.5 billion...90%, have little or no access to most of the products and services many of us take for granted.” (Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum 2009)

This statistic offers a responsibility and an opportunity for educational institutions to specifically engage students in collaborations that will ameliorate this statistic. There has been much engagement from the disciplines in the Social Sciences, particularly around economic development, but art and design institutions have not, until very recently, started to understand the positive impact design can have in underserved communities.

This opportunity has led to the creation of a cross-divisional and interdisciplinary faculty research group at The New School (TNS), a university in New York, interested in socio-economic and urban development through design, through which both the models of “Made By” and “Designed By” are being explored and analyzed in terms of their effectiveness to reach the goal of sustainable development and cultural preservation.

The program is run as a spring course that prepares students from TNS’ divisions of Parsons (design), Milano (management and urban development) and General Studies (international affairs) to travel to Guatemala for a one or two-month long intensive fieldwork program collaborating with local artisan communities.

The 2008 summer program in San Lucas

Tolimán was originally planned in two parts: two weeks of TNS students running capacity-building workshops focusing on skills in the areas of business, marketing, and design, and two weeks for collaborative development of new artisan products. Specifically, teams of students led workshops in work time valuation, pricing, inventory, quality control, the association’s organization, new product development, patternmaking, sewing, marketing, computers, and English. The group felt that these basic workshops would introduce the members of AL to all the aspects needed to be a sustainable income-generating organization. A final evaluation of the month long collaboration indicates that there was active learning demonstrated in eight areas – work time valuation, inventory, quality control, new product development, patternmaking, sewing, computers and English. In three of the areas, pricing, marketing, and the association’s organization, this evaluation demonstrates some learning, but with a need of further emphasis to have a unified approach and understanding of these three areas. (Lawson 2008) Furthermore, it was clear to all participants that engaging in a “Designed By” paradigm would delay the goals of the project by at least another year. The faculty recommended continuing the collaboration with its original stated goals, while at the same time engaging in a pilot of the “Made By” model, with the hypothesis that making, under the supervision of a professional designer, would productively enhance the artisan’s skill set and facilitate their training towards designers *and* makers.

A grant from the Amsterdam-based arts organization W139 has supported further work between two faculty from Parsons and the women of Ajkem'a Loy'a. This project, initiated in December 2008 and running for one year, is clearly framed within the "Made By" model – one of the faculty is working with the women on weaving experimentation, and designing a two-piece outfit, of which the association will need to produce 139. These handmade garments will be purchased at a higher than fair trade price by W139. Already there are observable positive outcomes from this collaboration: AL is being paid 1.5 times the fair wage calculated for Guatemala; the "design expert" has been able to engage the women, through their own craft, in experimentation that wouldn't have been otherwise possible, the women of AL have been able to put into practice some of the design skills taught in Summer 2008, more than with the traditional product line they normally produce; in follow-up telephone conversations with AL, the artisans have shared that they have come up with new design variations on their own products (directly putting into practice the summer 2008 workshops.) This shift is also documented in cases such as Sop Moei Arts in Thailand, in which, after several years of working on designs provided to them, artisans started to innovate their own product variations. (Jongeward 2001)

NEXT STEPS/QUESTIONS

In theory, a "Designed By" model is more likely to lead to sustainable development, but in practice the challenges (Jongeward 2001) of

working with artisans from different education levels and backgrounds lead to a long-term feasibility for this model. In The New School project it has been observed that "Made By" short-term initiatives can help push forward the ideal model, since they serve as opportunities to put into practice design skills and concepts that are not easily integrated via workshops, and therefore a combination of the two models may be the ideal path towards sustainable development with artisan communities.

Questions that remain include

1. Is it possible to train an artisan with varying levels of previous education to become an independent designer?
2. Are there ways to ensure sustainable development even if there are dependent relationships (such as artisan-designer)?
3. Do sustainable development initiatives have a responsibility of pursuing the "Designed By" model so as to more responsibly empower artisan communities?
4. Is the "Made By" model only appropriate in for-profit ventures, or can it also lead toward sustainable development?

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