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Redakcja naukowa
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A view from the South on excess and scarcity

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I have spent my professional life as a design curator, journalist, filmmaker, and writer spreading the idea that the southern hemisphere cannot be relegated to the role of an importer of products, technologies, and lifestyles from the northern hemisphere, but should be able to devise its own solutions.

About 80 percent of the world's population lives on 10 USD per day or less. This majority does not have to deal with excess, but with scarcity. In their daily lives, they have to create strategies to deal with deficiencies. The main strategy is to consider a resource which for others is waste. Reusing cheap materials to create new objects and extend their life cycles has been part of the material cultures of many regions of the world for a long time. In Europe, this practice derives from environmental awareness, but in our countries, it derives from the need to survive.

Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1930-1992), who went to Brazil in the 1940s, fell in love with utensils created by reusing various kinds of aluminum packaging and with quilts made from small scraps of fabric. In the 1970s, these recycling practices were documented by Brazilian designer Aloisio Magalhães (1927-1982). The lack of access to industrially manufactured goods prompted people to use their own hands to create and make objects aimed at satisfying their everyday needs.

It is not just in Brazil that people must deal with scarcity. Maria Szolc told us yesterday that:

- Germans buy 15 kilos of clothes per year,
- Englishmen buy 30 kilos of clothes per year,
- Americans buy 36 kilos of clothes per year.¹

Where do they discard them? Maybe a tiny part goes to places like the public sale of second-hand clothes sent to Mozambique. They call these clothes there *calamidade* — the Portuguese word for calamity. They can sell one piece for 10 euro cents. I saw them last year at a street fair in Pemba in northern Mozambique on a Saturday morning and I found many examples there of what I would consider good design.

Returning to Brazil, recycling is a persistent practice that can still be found today. In the exhibition *New Alchemists*, which I curated in 1999, I gathered objects created from cheap materials or trash up-cycling. In the same exhibition space, vernacular creations by untrained people from around the country were presented side by side with creations by educated designers who sought inspiration in Brazilian traditional culture. Many of them referred to their grandparents as “recycling masters,” people able to reuse anything, able to transform waste into gold.

Ten years later, in 2010, I proposed a public collection of vernacular design for São Paulo's city hall. They accepted and part of it can be seen in the exhibition I curated. The Spanish art critic and philosopher

1 This is a reference to Maria Szolc's presentation on the first day of the Fair Design 2018 conference.

Eduardo Subirats, a professor at Columbia University in New York, saw an oven found at a street market and said, “It’s like Duchamp, but better.” As far as I know, this is the only permanent vernacular public collection.

Why Pay Attention

But why should we pay attention to such objects? I believe they hold precious lessons, which I will synthesize in three points:

First of all, they reveal perfect functionality in smart ways of solving everyday problems. As designer Aloisio Magalhães used to say, in Brazil, the ability to invent emerges as a “strategy of survival.” Necessity is the mother of invention.²

Secondly, the forms of these objects transcend their functions. In the early 2000s, Swiss-Italian architect and designer Mário Botta saw an exhibition I had done and, in an article for *Ottagono* magazine, wrote “These are not merely technical, functional responses. It is evident in these objects that their use is a pretext for proposing fantastic shapes, marks and colors, asserting with conviction that only beauty can save the world. ... This is a chapter in the infinite history of how humans manage to continually invent objects and tools to lighten the load of their daily work. I find it amazing how everything finds a simplicity and lost poetry just as happens in the creativity of great artists where every mark and every gesture seems indispensable.”³

Thirdly, they reveal *avant la lettre* sustainability. Even before the word ecology existed, populations in poor countries in the southern hemisphere had already been practicing it in their everyday life. These objects reveal economy of resources and means, as well as wise utilization of local materials. It is the attitude of making more with less.

Learning from Makeshift Solutions

I have just asked why we should pay attention to such objects. Let’s quote other authors on this. In 2008, at the apex of the economic crisis in northern hemisphere countries, English design thinker John Thackara wrote in an article entitled “We Are All Emerging Economies Now”:

“The most powerful lesson for me, after twenty years working as a visitor on projects in India and South Asia, is that we have more to learn from smart poor people regarding things like ecology, connectivity, devices and infrastructures, than they have to learn from us.”⁴

2 Aloisio Magalhães, *E Triunfo?: A questão dos bens culturais no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, Fundação Roberto Marinho, 1997.

3 Mario Botta, “Design anonimo sul punto vendita,” (Anonymous design at points of sales), *Ottagono*, Italy: Oct. 2004.

4 John Thackara, “We Are All Emerging Economies Now,” *Design Observer*, June 5, 2008. <http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=6947>. Thackara came back to the theme a few times, for instance in “Humanitarian Design vs. Design Imperialism: Debate Summary,” *ChangeObserver*, July 16, 2010. <http://changeobserver.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=14498>.

Actually, many companies and people in the northern hemisphere are learning the capacity of doing more with less. A very good book on this subject is *Jugaad Innovation*, by professors Navi Radjou, Jaideep Prabhu, and Simone Ahuja⁵. In this publication, they refer to a frugal and flexible approach to innovation that is dominant in India and, according to them, is also found in countries like Brazil, China, and Kenya. Jugaad is a Hindi word that roughly can be translated as “overcoming harsh constraints by improvising an effective solution using limited resources.” They have been teaching business people to take advantage of frugal innovation, and in their book, they mention many examples of international companies such as 3M, GE, Google, and Siemens.

There are some examples of Jugaad innovation from Latin American designers.

In Argentina, an old, widely used tool (created by the locals to cut animal leather into strips) was adapted by designer Alejandro Sarmiento to cut PET plastic. He also created a simple system to thermo-shape plastic strips and created a variety of objects with them. He shares the tool’s technical drawings with whoever wants to use it.

In Mexico, we can highlight Cecilia Leon de la Barra’s stool, which revisits a very popular chair made of multicolored thin plastic straps. Or the magazine holder by Emiliano Godoy in polyurethane foam — a very simple process — switching one component, material or object from one function to another. Or, still, a chair by Cala Laboratório de Design that uses plastic wrap filled with paper, both reused materials.

In Chile, a very important project is Elemental, a popular housing system, conceived by architect Alejandro Aravena and his team. They were invited by the government to create houses using a budget of only 7,200 USD per unit. They decided to take advantage of the inhabitants’ of poor countries practice of self-construction, often in a collaborative effort with neighbors and relatives. So, the project covers a building lot, infrastructure, and framing, with the balance being turned over to residents for self-building. Aravena was also the curator for the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale and made use there of a very common practice in Latin America: the reuse of materials. The core exhibit in the Arsenale opened with a large installation made with one-hundred tons of materials recycled from the previous Biennale.⁶

Large companies are also inspired by popular solutions. Cosmetics company Natura Brazil, for instance, discovered in ethnographic research that consumers preferred refill containers for hair care products because it was cheaper. Based on this, they introduced

5 Navi Radjou, Jaideep Prabhu, and Simone Ahuja, *Jugaad Innovation, Think Frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.

6 <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/06/02/venice-architecture-biennale-2016-recycled-waste-exhibition-entrances-alejandro-aravena/>: 27 July 2018.

refills as the normal packaging. It uses 75 percent less plastic compared to regular packaging and the carbon footprint was reduced by 50 percent. The material and the form permit full use of the contents to the last drop, avoiding waste. The price of the final product also dropped.

I believe that the growth of the makers' and do-it-yourself (DIY) movements also has relevance to this topic. Technologies are bringing — and will bring even more — deep changes in the way we design and consume products. The boundaries between designers, manufacturers, and consumers are becoming finer each day.

We can now see the emergence of groups such as Fixperts, based in London, which believes that “mending is a creative, social valuable resource.”⁷ They share their content on the Internet to encourage people to use the power of mending stuff to fix everyday problems. When I learn about initiatives like that, I cannot help but see the parallel with spontaneous design in developing countries! We could continue mentioning these influences in various fields of design; however, I believe that, more than incorporating these influences, we need to know them better.

Giving Visibility to Spontaneous Solutions

In Bogotá, Colombia, the Popular de Lujo group aims to spread local graphics, promoting exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and publications.

In my work as an independent curator, I try to give visibility to vernacular creations, including Native Peoples' contemporary design, and present them together with trained designers' projects.

And a remarkable thing happened at the first edition of the London Design Biennale two years ago. I belong to its international committee. Among high end and “very chic” designs from 30 countries, the main prize of the Biennale went to a street installation made by a Lebanese representative. It was an amazing show by designer Annabel Kassir and I am glad to have participated in the jury that made this choice. The Lebanese installation hosts a variety of improvised street furniture, from innovatively repaired chairs to stacked sofas mounted on pick-up trucks.

According to the designer:

“When I first considered Biennale, I thought of the many design exhibitions I had visited in the past years. On this occasion, I thought the most interesting thing to do would be to get away from that world, to do something less deliberate. This installation looks at the makers and the traditional aesthetics of Beirut; the memes of the design industry do not intervene. Instead, we discover items made on the streets that are serving a need — improvised, ingenious, imperfect.”

7 Press release distributed during a visit to Fixperts studio in London September 2016 [eds.]

For me, it was a turning point because in many design exhibitions in rich countries we see objects that stimulate excess and just generate pressure for newer — and meaningless — stuff. Actually, scarcity and excess are two sides of the same coin. With this look from the South, I would like to invite you to reflect on how design can help us surpass this dual situation; how design can help us move toward the path of more sustainable societies, in which objects gain meaning and in which there is more egalitarian distribution among people.

I would like to share three images: a capulana, fabric that can be a cloth, can be bedding, can be support for carrying babies; a vegetable fiber mat; and an improvised game, all from Mozambique. In my view, they show us that scarcity, sustainability, and poetry can come together.

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