

# **Beyond the Hills**

## **Design, Society, and Citizenship**

Adélia Borges's Acceptance Speech at the Award Ceremony for her Doctor Honoris Causa Title from UNESP

*São Paulo, March 8, 2021*

I am extremely moved by the Doctor Honoris Causa title that the São Paulo State University (Universidade Estadual Paulista), UNESP, is awarding me in this ceremony. With its thirty-four schools in twenty-four cities and towns throughout the state of São Paulo, this public university makes all of us Brazilians proud. I thank UNESP profusely through the university's Vice-Chancellor Maysa Furlan, presiding this session, and General Secretary Erivaldo Antônio da Silva.

The proposition for this academic recognition was initiated by the School of Architecture, Arts, Communication, and Design (Faculdade de Arquitetura, Artes, Comunicação e Design; FAAC) at the Bauru campus, which I salute through the persons of its current Director Fernanda Henriques, who was Vice-Director when the award process was initiated, and Professor Mônica Moura, who has been following my professional work for three decades and started this process. I know how much sweat, dedication, energy, and competence the teams at FAAC and UNESP spent so we could get to this day today. It was a long process, which went through different filters and evaluations, as it must be in a public university. I will never be able to thank you enough for this!

We are living through dreadful times. Not only we are deep immersed in an unprecedented sanitary crisis, but also in a sharp social, environmental, economic, and cultural backwards movement in our country. However, here we are, having a day of celebration. Let us allow ourselves some space to breathe the joy of this reconciliation.

This is a celebration for UNESP and for Brazilian design as a whole! Design deeply impacts everyone's lives and routines, but it is barely known and little discussed, generally speaking, in our country. Design receives little distinction within academic circles themselves, if compared to STEM disciplines and to most human sciences. While physicists, mathematicians, and MDs—just to mention a few professionals—are among many academic distinction laureates, there are few awardees coming from creative and cultural fields. Furthermore, some cultural languages have important mechanisms of legitimation, such as academies of letters. However, design and even visual arts lack instances of public recognition.

In design, as far as I was able to verify, only three titles were awarded to this day. Gui Bonsiepe, a professor who was born in Germany and spent many years of his life in Latin America with relevant participation in theory and conceptualization of design, was awarded Doctor Honoris Causa titles twice—first by the Rio de Janeiro State University (Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, UERJ), in 2001; and the second by the Santa Catarina State University (Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, UDESC), in 2012. In that same date, UDESC awarded the title to Professor Nelson Back as well. It is too little for a universe as wide and vibrant as that of Brazilian design!

This ceremony is also a celebration of women. The list of seventeen names in which UNESP now includes me contains personalities who I deeply admire, such as literary critic Antonio Candido, geographer Milton Santos, economist Celso Furtado, aeronautical engineer Ozires Silva, indigenist Orlando Villas Bôas, and two recipients of the Nobel Prize— Nobel Peace Prize recipient Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, from Argentina; and Nobel Physics Prize recipient David Gross, from the United States.

Up until now, not a single woman! We are half of the population, but we suffer a historic process of obliteration. An extra reason for joy is to know that women today occupy key positions at FAAC—such as Fernanda Henriques, Director; Cassia Carrara Domiciano, Chief of the Design Division; Monica Moura, Design

Undergrad Coordinator; and Paula Landim, Design Graduation Program Coordinator. Therefore, there could be no better day to receive this title!

When I first heard about the awarding of this honor by UNESP's University Board, I started to wonder what really was the essence of what I have done or intended to do through my profession. Building bridges between design and society through articles, books, exhibitions, classes, workshops, and talks has been my mission over the past thirty-five years. I want to increase everyone's everyday awareness of design's presence in their lives in order to enhance their discernment abilities.

I will allow myself to go back in time briefly. I was born almost seventy years ago in Cássia, a little town in Minas Gerais state, in a family of farmers who had little access to formal education. My parents did not finish primary school. However, both them and my grandparents were very wise people. My father always had his eyes set on the future, he was someone who would cross boundaries that had been raised for them and would follow their dreams. "You have to cast your eyes beyond the hills," he would repeat. Following this kind of mantra, he opened a small store in the rural area and years later established himself as a store owner in town.

Aiming at giving a better life to their seven children, he and my mother moved to Ribeirão Preto, a larger town in inner São Paulo state. I was then four years old. Ribeirão left deep marks in my education, particularly the year spent at Colégio Otoniel Motta, the public school where I for the first time took part in student manifestations. However, I had to cast my eyes beyond the hills. I was thirsty to know the world, to leave my mark in it. Journalism seemed to me the ideal profession to do so. Then, when I was eighteen, I moved to São Paulo to attend the School of Communications and Arts at the University of São Paulo (Escola de Comunicações e Artes da Universidade de São Paulo), ECA USP.

I was lucky that, while I was still a student, in 1972, I started working at *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper, in the education section, led by journalist Perseu Abramo. He showed me the rule-and-compass of the profession. It was a time

when universities and educators had a key role in resisting the country's dictatorial regime. From there, I went to work at *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper, where I rubbed shoulders with superlative characters such as Clóvis Rossi, who was then editor-in-chief. During the eight years I worked at *Estado*, I also collaborated with other outlets such as *Movimento* weekly, led by Raimundo Rodrigues Pereira.

Censors were always around in press offices. In 1976 I coordinated a *Movimento* special edition about working women in Brazil. It was almost entirely cut by censorship, including graphics with official data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE) pointing wage inequalities between men and women. Those were tough times...

A journalists' strike left me without a job. That was when Carmen Barroso and Fúlvia Rosenberg, of the Carlos Chagas Foundation, asked me to edit the *Mulherio* journal, a major player in the feminist movement. My wish to talk to wider audiences took me to TV Globo network as a newscast editor and later to TV Cultura public network, where I directed the *Palavra de Mulher* (Women's Word) show, devoted to subjects connected to gender, environment, Native People's rights, and human rights, among others.

I started to work in the field of design in 1987 at Projeto publisher, through the hands of the great journalist Vicente Wissenbach, who created the *Design & Interiores* magazine. We discussed product, interior, and graphic design. Many people asked: "How can it be, a design magazine if there is no design in Brazil?" We did have design, and it was quite great. What we did not have was communication about it.

Since then, reporting design, discussing design, and showing design became my goal. Because I already had my own world view, from the beginning I wondered what my role would be within this theme. A key moment happened in 1990 when I had the opportunity of participating in my first international design jury panel in Stuttgart, Germany. We were nine jurors, seven men among them. Renowned designers from the industrialized world—such as Achille Castiglioni

from Italy and Kenji Ekuan from Japan. Only two women. I alone was from the Southern Hemisphere.

When I was getting ready for the event, I reflected upon the fact that my point of view from Brazil, from the half of the world below the Equator, would have to be different from their point of view. That was when I started to forge my profession of faith that the Southern Hemisphere cannot be merely an importer of products, technologies, and lifestyles from the Northern Hemisphere, but needs to be able to create their own paths.

I was extremely happy when I heard about the written opinion by Ana Mae Barbosa, the greatest art educator in Brazil, who was consulted within the Honoris Causa process. She placed my path in the context of a de-colonializing approach, defining de-colonialization as criticism of the importing of white European and North American cultural model codes. Thank you so much, Ana Mae, you who have opened so many paths for those who work with culture and art in this country.

From this point of view, I have sought to research and spread design developed in the Global South. From *Design & Interiores*, I looked for different magazines and newspapers, trying to get away from a specialized publications niche and go to media outlets that reached the society as a whole. From the mid-1990s my field of action grew, with History of Design lectures at FAAP (Fundação Armando Álvares Penteado Foundation); talks; and, above all, exhibitions and museological projects, locally and abroad. I also had the opportunity to lead Museu da Casa Brasileira (Museum of the Brazilian Home) and, since 2016, to work as co-curator for the MASP Loja shop (at the Assis Chateaubriand São Paulo Art Museum; Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand). I have never done, and I don't do anything by myself alone. Every work includes teams mixing many different abilities. To the people who have been with me on this path, I thank you profusely. This recognition is for you as well.

Many people still connect design mainly to furniture and home objects. It is this as well, but not only this. Design is in school desks and trucks. In tiles and

branding. In packaging and shoes. In posters and digital applications. In private spaces where we live and in public spaces we share. In bus stops and ICU respirators.

Whatever the field, I'm actually interested to see how design can improve not the lives of the elite, but of people in general. Projects that bring well-being to people, regardless of them being at the peak of their physical or mental capacities or if they have temporary or permanent handicaps related to vision, movement, or hearing. Projects that respect nature by employing clean processes. That use raw materials and production techniques wisely. That can cause smiles or a feeling of belonging in those who use it or who made it.

Because design is part of everybody's everyday lives, even if we are not aware of its presence, issues affected by it affect all of us, citizens, as well. Therefore, they cannot be restricted to specific professional and academic circles in this field of knowledge. When society owns this knowledge, that's when there will be enough pressure to implement effective public policies related to design and creative economy in our country.

From my point of view, I realized how in this half of the world industrial design still finds many doors closed while artisanal design is quite powerful, especially within less privileged communities. I've eaten much dust through lost roads in villages or through narrow paths in inner cities to record the richness of production by Native Peoples and to meet with communities that properly practice all requisites for a modern vision of sustainable development, who understand concepts of environmentally responsible, economically inclusive, socially fair, and culturally diverse.

I also opened my eyes to design created by common people with the goal of fulfilling their needs and wishes. Ingenuity is a survival strategy for poor populations in Latin America and Africa, manifested through objects employing great creative freedom, rich shape and color vocabulary, and wise use of local techniques and resources.

Because I give value to this local folk knowledge in my path, many people connect me exclusively to this adjective. With the disdain provoked by folk things in our society, deeply rooted in slavery, this is also a way of putting myself and others who champion these ideas in a ghetto. And, even among those who praise folk culture, some wrinkle their noses at craft, a word with a negative connotation in the Portuguese language.

I keep on going in this journey of praising the knowledge and knowhow of design and craft in the Global South, through a regard that is part of my deepest DNA. I thank my grandparents and my parents, my siblings, and my whole family for supporting me. A very special thanks goes to my children Joana and Bruno and my grandson Sebastião—they brought new meaning to my life.

I keep on going on this journey, now strengthened by this academic title that UNESP generously awards me. This recognition is not mine only. Ailton Krenak, one of those people who kindly gave a testimony to this ceremony, says that Native Peoples consider themselves to be all from the same family. Therefore, I'm here today to represent all members of this large family of workers in the cultural field. Representing designers, instructors, researchers, critics, and specialized writers who want design to be part of the solutions, not the problems faced by humanity today.

Design that interests us is design that favors conviviality among differences in a moment of so much polarization. It is the design of empathy. Not a design that purposefully places stones on public pavement to prevent homeless people to sleep there. But the design that, like Father Júlio Lancelotti did, breaks these stones.

I hope that this great celebration today will strengthen us so that, in these dreadful times, we can put our powers together to break the social, environmental, cultural, sanitary, and political stones that are willing to destroy our country.

A salute to the recognition of women's contributions to our society. A salute to all of those who work towards building critical thinking in their industries. A salute to UNESP. A salute to public university! A salute to SUS (Universal System of Health in Brazil)! And a salute to all of those who, regardless of their profession, devote their energy and their personal abilities to the more than pressing task of building a more dignified and fair society for all of us.

*Translation into English by Ana Ban*