

WHAT DESIGN CAN DO! FOR ACCESS TO CULTURES

BY ADÉLIA BORGES

Adélia Borges is a design writer and curator from São Paulo, Brazil. From 2003 to 2007 she was director of the Museu da Casa Brasileira, a government-funded museum for design and architecture. Among the exhibitions she curated were the Brazilian Design Biennial (2010) and *Puras Misturas* (Pure Blends, 2010). Her books include *Designer não é Personal Trainer* (2002), *Sergio Rodrigues* (2005) and *Brazilian design today: Frontiers* (2009). She was director of the magazine *Design & Interiores* (1987-1994) and design editor of *Gazeta Mercantil*, a daily business newspaper (1998-2002), and has contributed to various Brazilian and international magazines, including *Indaba* in South Africa, *Interni* in Italy, and *Form* in Germany. Borges teaches Design History at Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado (FAAP) in São Paulo. She believes that the Southern Hemisphere should take pride in its cultural heritage and should avoid mimicking cultures.

TRUE CULTURAL EXCHANGE REQUIRES EQUALITY

When we talk about access to culture, this expression is usually regarded as championing the access of the poorer population to culture. This view originates in a dual principle: there is a part of the population that lacks culture, 'them'; and another one, those who possess culture, 'us'. I would like to invert this equation and talk, here, about the right all inhabitants of the world have of having their cultures recognized as such. Or, looking at it from a different angle, I would like to talk about our right of access to cultures of the world, in their rich polyphony and diversity. I believe this demands some Herculean dedication on our part, as the world has been conceived up to now in a different form. The experience of colonization is nothing but an attempt to try to impose a new way of life – new beliefs, religions, values, etc. – on the so-called uncivilized peoples. This procedure is very well exposed by the great author Amadou Hampâté Bâ, from Mali, who has represented his country for many years at UNESCO: 'One of the main objectives of all colonization, under any sky and in any period of time, has always been to start by interpreting the conquered terrain. . . . First, they have to root out from the spirit, as if they were weeds, values, habits, and local cultures, so that they sow in their place the colonizers' values, habits, and culture, considered as superior and as the only ones that have validity'. As Italian anthropologist Massimo Canevacci says, those who have been colonized have had, historically, as their only alternative,



ARTISAN FROM AMAZONE REGION SHOWS HER PRODUCTS

to adopt the colonizers' thought. 'Either you were identical / similar or you were eliminated.' Through war or diplomacy, countries have been acquiring their independence over the past two centuries. The effects of colonization, however, extend beyond the political victory of emancipatory movements. This can be felt very strongly in the economic domain and, also, in the cultural domain. The power to define what is and what is not culture has remained in the metropolis. Cultural flows used to be unidirectional, coming from a few centres – remarkably London and Paris, and, later, New York as well – to the periphery. In this division, the Southern Hemisphere as a whole was left with the role of being an exporter of raw materials and importer of finished goods, lifestyles and trends.

Multidirectional exchanges

This one-way route is changing. Macro-transformations in economy, with the BRIC countries' ascension; in politics, with democratization in many different countries; and in communication, with possibilities of instant access to information that is not mediated by a central power, bring about possibilities of many different exchanges, in many different directions. Exchanges are becoming multidirectional. The concepts regarding centre and periphery have been subverted. The roadmap of connections through Facebook is an indication of this when it shows a quite pulverized distribution.

This landscape in which we live in, in the early 21st century, is extremely exciting. If this was a forum about politics, we could talk about the impact of social networks in the ascension of leaders like Barack Obama and the fall of a dictator like Hosni Mubarak; if it was about economy, we could talk about changes in the money map... However, this is a forum about design, so I would like to steer our reflection towards challenges and opportunities that this historical moment presents to us in our action field.

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North versus South

Up until recently, design created in Latin America, Africa and Oceania was sorely ignored and disregarded. Objects we have created for our daily lives, logos we have created for our brands, signs we have developed to publicize our ventures – in short, manifestations of our makings, of our material culture regarding the bias of utility, which is what design focuses on – were unknown. At most, they brought about some anthropological interest, like some exotic curio, which could eventually have a place in an ethnographic museum, but never in a design museum or an art museum. This situation started to change, little by little; however, it is still an incipient phenomenon. The international media open their eyes to what is being made in the 'far-away countries', as Andrea Branzi said (we would have to use this as a relative concept, though, as when we say 'far-away' we have a point from where this distance is measured, and it supposes this point as reference, i.e., the centre). People from the Southern Hemisphere are starting to be invited, even though in marked minority, to speak at international seminars in the Northern Hemisphere. And a few initiatives are definitely opening to what is being made in and for the Southern Hemisphere, such as Denmark's INDEX design award. This current historical moment brings us the opportunity to extend and deepen initiatives such as these. Our challenge is to do this in a way that will not repeat the regard and the prejudice of our colonial past.

Revitalizing crafts

A recent phenomenon that has been taking place in the Southern Hemisphere is that of design based on local knowledge and crafts. This word crafts deserves a little explanation. In talks with Europeans, I noticed this word brings them the idea of trained artists who make with their hands one-of-a-kind pieces in sophisticated ateliers. However, when I say crafts, I mean collective initiatives containing all components related to problem solving, to proper use of raw materials and production techniques etc., in a kind of production that is often made in large series, usually using not only hands, but also tools and machines, which brings this production into the domain of design. Since the 1990s, a movement of revitalization of crafts has been going on in Latin America, Africa and South Asia. Local or foreign designers are conducting workshops spread in the far corners



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of these countries in search of the preservation of productive techniques that have been passed down through the generations, but with the incorporation of new elements of design. They are improving the standards of quality of the products, making use of the potential of local materials, developing graphic and packaging design for the artisanal pieces and helping to 'anchor' the formal references of the objects in local cultural traditions.

As the Australian researcher and curator in the area of craft design Kevin Murray says, a true 'silent (r)evolution' is taking place. I consider this rapport to be an extremely important phenomenon, for the social and economic impact it generates and for its cultural significance. I have been one of its warmest defenders, proclaiming it as a journalist, as a lecturer, as an exhibition curator, and also in my four-year period as director of the Museu da Casa Brasileira, the Brazilian design museum.

Who's teaching whom?

However, there have also been many mistakes, many bad experiences. Some teams are going to communities, taking with them ready-made projects, so the artisans end up elaborating with their own hands something that others have created. This is a posture that sees designers or design students – in other words, people with formal schooling – as superior to the artisans, people without formal schooling. In these cases what takes place is a meeting – or a detour! – between unequal people. The power, the sagacity, the dominance lies with the studios. The 'others' join in with their ability, their skill with their hands and, at the most, their familiarity with the raw matter. It is common to see a group of designers or students travel to a community, use local labour at will and then leave with beautiful photographs of the fine products that were made there, to be featured in glossy magazines throughout the world, saying they are carrying out a social project, when in truth they are simply using cheap labour that in return receives – in money, recognition and prestige – a lot less than received by the designers. Often, these experiences leave no positive results

DESIGN CAN PLAY A KEY FUNCTION IN CREATING A MULTI-FLAVOURED CULTURAL LANDSCAPE INSTEAD OF A UNIFORM ESPERANTO.

in the communities, except enormous expectations that are almost always frustrated. There is the need for an urgent discussion about the ethics of this relationship. Powerful voices are making their contribution. Commenting on the movement of northern designers towards the south, the influential North American journalist Bruce Nussbaum wrote the article 'Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism? Does our desire to help do more harm than good?', published in *Fast Company* magazine. His words: 'Should we take a moment now that the movement is gathering speed to ask whether or not American and European designers are collaborating with the right partners, learning from the best local people, and being as sensitive as they might to the colonial legacies of the countries they want to do good in. Do designers need to better see themselves through the eyes of the local professional and business classes who believe their countries are rising as the U.S. and Europe fall and wonder who, in the end, has the right answers? Might Indian, Brazilian and African designers have important design lessons to teach Western designers?...

Two years before, the English author John Thackara had already given his view: 'The most powerful lesson for me, after 20 years working as a visitor on projects in India and South Asia, is that we have more to learn from smart poor people on things like ecology, connectivity, devices and infrastructures, than they have to learn from us', he wrote in a text published on the Design Observer site, under the title 'We Are All Emerging Economies Now'.

Revealing the solutions

About 80 per cent of the world's population lives on USD 10 a day or less. These people are excluded from the consumers' market. What objects, visual signs and systems did they develop to be used in their daily lives? Contributions aimed at revealing these solutions are, for me, an urgent need. First, because we can only respect the things we know. Second, because we certainly have a great deal to learn from them, if we can regard them not as curios, as something exotic, but as true manifestations of creative thought and project intelligence.

I began researching popular objects made in Brazil a decade ago and it is amazing how they can surprise us with smart solutions, how they can teach us. They have a 'strong life force', as



WOMEN OF COOPA-ROCA COOPERATIVE

Lina Bardi, Italian architect and designer based in Brazil, said; she made a great effort for their recognition. They reveal a 'new essentiality', as Swiss architect and designer Mario Botta wrote after visiting an exhibition of Brazilian popular design we organized in 2004.

Trying to know more about the What Design Can Do! conference, I found out that Mr. M P Ranjan made the mapping of artisan skills all across India, which he believes to be the foundation for inclusive action and the seeding of the creative economy of the future for India. The outcome was published in 2008 in a book entitled *Handmade in India*. I wish I had access to the wonderful things he must have found, in the same way I have access to Italian furniture exhibitions or to Apple's new products. And I do not have anything against them – I love them both!

Towards a richer cultural landscape

I believe our world could be much better if we could see, in magazines, in museums, in seminars, in publications, not only them, but also the objects and visual systems generated by social entrepreneurs in countries such as India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Argentina, Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Congo, Namibia.

An emphasis on local skills and crafts may create a cultural landscape with stronger multiple voices. Design can play a key function in creating a multi-flavoured cultural landscape instead of a uniform Esperanto.

ALL INHABITANTS OF THE WORLD HAVE A RIGHT TO SEE THEIR CULTURES ACKNOWLEDGED AS SUCH AND WE HAVE THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO THE CULTURES OF THE WORLD.



REED PLAITING FROM AMAZONE REGION

As I said at the beginning of this text, I believe the inhabitants of the world have a right to see their cultures acknowledged as such and we have the right of access to the cultures of the world. Access entails the removal of boundaries. And there is a boundary of prejudice as well, a high and monolithic barrier, which we must tear down so that we can finally see the full quality of these creations. I know many people do not agree with this stand and who even disagree that these creations can be regarded as design. A forum such as the opportune What Design Can Do! conference can be excellent in order for us to share our visions and exchange our points of view.

The inclusion of emerging countries as new and important partners in the world set is transforming many things, and it ought to shake design paradigms as well. Overcoming colonialism and a geopolitical reconfiguration of the world are finally bringing us to a non-hierarchic vision of cultures. We have this opportunity today. Let us use it wisely.