



Design for a World of Solidarity by Adelia Borges - Brazil

Adélia Borges is a design curator and writer. Lives in São Paulo, Brasil. Was director of Museu da Casa Brasileira, a governmental museum specialized in design and architecture (2003-2007). Has written six books on design or designers, among them Designer não é Personal Trainer (2002) and Sergio Rodrigues (2005). As a journalist, was the director of the magazine Design & Interiores(1987-1994), the design editor of Gazeta Mercantil, daily business newspaper(1998-2002), and freelancer writer for many Brazilian and international magazines. Articles, texts for catalogs, books or books' chapters by her have been published in Portuguese, Korean, Germany, Spanish, French, English, Italian and Japanese. Teaches Design History. Curator for a number of exhibitions about Brazilian design (including furniture, product and graphic design). Has served on a number of national and international design juries. Lectures frequently in Brazil and abroad (Argentina, Australia, Chile, Japan, Mexico, Paraguay, United States and Uruguay).

The following article is a transcript from a lecture given by Borges in Seattle

Design for a World of Solidarity

I first would like to express my thanks to the organizers for the privilege of speaking at the IcoGrada Design Week and to compliment them for their courage. Most international conferences on design have as speakers only people from the so-called decision making centers - the United States of America, some European countries and the affluent countries of Asia. I have participated in some juries as the only representative from the Southern Hemisphere and you can imagine how lonely I felt.

In this conference, I am pleased to see the participation of representatives from Turkey, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Croatia and some others, which like Brazil, are seldom present at this kind of event, thereby making it really multicultural, as the beautiful poster shows. And even our keynote speaker, the North-American Sara Little Turnbull, has experience in Borneo, Malaysia, the Philippines, India and Kenya. That is why I once again compliment the organizers for their courage, which certainly will bring about a more stimulating meeting.

Before addressing today's subject I would like to introduce myself. Basically I am a person acting in the dissemination of the idea of design in Brazilian society and, at the same time endeavoring to publicize Brazilian design on the international scenario to make it better known. I am a graduate journalist, a domain in which I have been acting for over 30 years. I specialized in design by the nineteen eighties, when I became the Director of Design & Interiores, the first Brazilian magazine on product design and since then I started to write on this theme for various publications among them the largest daily business newspaper in the country, the "Gazeta Mercantil", when I had the opportunity to extend the idea of design to businessmen. For the last ten years, in addition to using the text as a tool I began to use another means for this dissemination acting as a curator of design exhibitions. I was curator for various exhibitions in Brazil and abroad. Now, my principal occupation is to direct the "Museu da Casa Brasileira", a state museum located in São Paulo, the largest city in the country. This museum is fully dedicated to design and architecture.

The title of my lecture is Design for a World of Solidarity and I intend to highlight some initiatives that have recently taken place in Brazil and that seek to retrieve the social meaning of design, while improving the quality of life of people who produce and use design. Instead of trying to make a Brazilian or Latin-American global design panorama, I would like to underline some strictly local experiences that in my opinion have a great potential to change the until now subaltern condition of design in the region that we shall call tangential in relation to the center.

They are experiences that timidly emerged over the last 20 years, brought about by a thought that withstood the hegemony of functionality prevailing until then in most of Latin America. The first higher education course on design in Latin America was the "Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial(Esdi)" created in Rio de Janeiro in 1964. The teaching program essentially followed that of the Ulm School in Germany from where many of the teachers also came.

Erudite design in Brazil was therefore born tied to Bauhausian ideas of the "good form" or of the "good design" of "form follows function", turning its back on local cultural origins. This philosophy became the driving force in the practical education of our design. During many years, our product designer endeavored to make as antiseptic and pure objects as the Germans and our graphic designers to draft pages and projects as clean and dry as those of the Swiss graphic arts. It was believed that only adhesion to an "international style" of design would grant Brazil an opportunity for international recognition. Schools also prepared their students for the mass production market, typical of large industries.

Everything that comes from childhood, be it in a person, in an institution or in an activity, leaves a large and deep mark. That we had such a close link with Ulm staunches the liens with our roots. This, together with our atavistic complex of inferiority ever since colonial times, made us prefer what "comes from outside", and one arrives at a design which not only searched points of reference abroad, it sought its own Pole-Star.

Nevertheless, slowly this attitude which considers only what comes from abroad and denies its own origins began to change. A number of factors contributed to it. On the international scenario I believe that globalization fostered the multiplicity and multi-directionality of cultural flows. Until a few years ago "trends" were unidirectional, from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere. It was what some playfully called the "Helena Rubinstein circuit" or the New York-London-Paris triangle that dictated

trends, behavior and consumption standards for the rest of the world. In the midnineties, instead of one way, from North to South, cultural flows started to envisage all sorts of South-South dialogues and to emit signals from the South towards the North.

A governing aspect is the change in the economic framework. BRIC is the buzz-word that the Goldman Sachs brokers invented for the emergent markets considered to be the more promising in today's world - Brazil, Russia, India and China -, which may change the planet's alignment of powers. There are also the endless political changes, and the technological changes that have a great impact in our lives.

Changes in the Brazilian scenario, also, cannot be underestimated. In the economic domain the opening of the market to foreign products in 1990 jolted all business men used in their majority to simply copying. More intensive programs of industrial exports also brought to light the lack of competitiveness due to copying. Politically, 1992 was the turningpoint when President Fernando Collor de Mello was impeached after an impressive movement led by youths that took to the streets in protest. In that moment, the feeling of shame of being Brazilian was replaced by hope. That is when research institutes detected a change in the Brazilians' opinion of themselves; people that are really joyful, however also serious and trustworthy. To say "it seems to come from the First World" had traditionally been a compliment. From that moment on the "proud to be Brazilian" became an advertising motto of the large companies, from airlines to shopping centers.

All these changes brought about the emergence of a phenomenon that in my opinion is one of the most significant under way on the continent: the enhancement of local cultural identities, beginning with the approximation of two actors that until then had lived completely apart, the designer and the craftsman. I will explain: the teaching of design is marked by the search of a project for rationalized mass production. The region, however, was not sufficiently industrialized, leading to stagnation of design and to a lack of jobs for young graduates. On the other hand, the traditional craftsmanship of the country was broken-up, scattered in rural areas of poor regions and bore a severe loss of cultural significance.

The rich traditions of handcraft where the communities made products for their own use and that of the community began to suffer from the competition of industrial products imported from China. Then craftsmen began to replicate the industrial forms and/or adopt stereotypes in their production. Everywhere in Brazil one would find practically the same "motifs", objects reproducing gnomes, pyramids or the flora and fauna of the snowy countries copied from some magazine.

In the mid-eighties a timid movement of the designers began towards the interior of the country seeking to safeguard the craft techniques that had been passed down from generations however incorporating a new appeal to the design. Designers have traveled to the far corners of the country conducting workshops to upgrade the technical and esthetic quality of craftsmanship. They had sponsorship of institutions as Sebrae, an institution committed to small and medium sized Brazilian entrepreneurs, and ArteSol, that promotes craftsmanship to generate income for the destitute populations.

From these contacts and hybridization some names stand out. One is that of Renato Imbroisi, that has an exemplary story of revival of craftsmanship. His first work took place in 1986 in Minas Gerais. Ever since then he has worked in 17 different Brazilian States, holding workshops with the craftsmen.

Another noteworthy experience is that of the Piracema Design Laboratory which defines itself as a center of research of the form in Brazilian culture. The Laboratory brings together a multidisciplinary team, involving product designers, graphic designers, fine arts artists, architects, photographers etc., under the leadership of José Alberto Nemer and Heloísa Crocco. One of their cornerstones is that "the craftsman is a sovereign, the beginning and end point of any intervention". In this sense the entire approximation technique was developed to make this encounter an event of mutual interest and feedback. The understanding is that "the product of the craftsman must be seen as a materialization of his complex cultural heritage. That is to say that every change in the object entails also a change in the person who fashioned it and therefore, in the context it belongs to". Another of the cornerstones views culture as a live element to assert that craftsmanship must be approached in its anthropological depth. "To avoid a superficial point of view is the only way to bring about the changes needed for craftsmanship without threatening its cultural identity", they assert.

The Laboratory's name, Piracema, is of Brazilian indigenous origin and it is important for our understanding of the founding principle. In the Tupi idiom (an important linguistic branch of Brazilian natives) piracema refers to the natural phenomenon when fish migrate towards the headwaters of rivers, going upstream for reproduction. "For reasons known only to nature, the fish are compelled to return to where they were spawned, from there to project the future, by spawning once again. This image of plunging into the origins and from there to establish a vanguard is the source of inspiration and the framework of the Laboratory. "To imbibe tradition and transpire contemporaneity", says its scientific manager, José Alberto Nemer.

These initiatives therefore represent an immersion into local cultural identities beginning with them to develop product, graphic and packaging design for this craft production.

I will now focus on two examples of the work carried out by the Piracema Laboratory, because in my opinion they are a paradigm. One example is that developed by the community of pottery workers of Maragogipinho in the State of Bahia. Craftsmen are scattered all over 80 pottery yards. In them, since the dawning of colonization, decorative pottery utensils continue to be produced. This example portrays the tenacity of such traditional technology acting at the same time as a trustee of the Brazilian cultural ethnic miscegenation.

Intervention of the designers was very delicate, in the domain of product design. Modification was practically non-existent, only some objects already forgotten in the everyday of production were rescued to stress the decorative aspect of the objects' coloring. This exacerbation of painting was a decision of the designers after noticing that the motifs utilized had along standing tradition and have a similarity with white lace (an inherent element of the feminine culture of Bahia, and curiously painting of the objects is traditionally a woman's task). Floral motifs thus started to cover a larger surface of the object.

The major intervention took place in the domain of visual identity. "Products were given a name - Pottery makers of Maragogipinho - which eliminated the impersonality of artisan production bringing it down to a human level. At the same time a profession was rescued - that of the potter - known since primeval times. Finally, it displaced the generic concept of "pottery" elevating it to the idea of ancestry. Yet the graphics of the brand are inspired in the organic distribution of the pottery works and on the routes traced by them. The circular shape of the brand expresses the continuous flow, aside from the

logical construction of beginning, middle and end. Thus it celebrates the great freedom of a creative community, into which one enters by any door, from any side. The other two circles that compose the graphic design are a reminder of the two plates of the lathe, fundamental parts for feet and hands and that when in movement fashion from clay the objects of life. The colors used in the graphic pieces come from the clay and from the pottery material that nature provides and the shape that man creates".

Another example is the work carried out on the Marajó Island, in the Amazon region. To develop their work designers found their inspiration in the local material and in its dense forest. Since primeval times, the black and red colors are often found in the Marajoara culture. Likewise a simplified geometry, comprised of broken lines and rhythmic modulations is found in the old drawings or in today's popular architecture.

The visual identity project is the graphic synthesis of some of these primary references. The font of the letter is inspired in the writing of embroidered sticks on which, among other details, some letters do not close. The letter O with its accent merges with the drawing of the brand. The red dot in the center of the letter O refers to the Island's geography and graphically embellishes the name.

The collection of products made during one week of joint experience makes intelligent use of the forest's residues, until then largely ignored. Plants, seeds, leaves, fibers etc, were not only inventoried but the iruses were organized. Embroideries mainly in cross stitch are part of the Island women's handicraft. Be it on the shirts of the old cowboys, the tablecloths or necklaces the Marajoara frieze is always apparent, with its continuous and decorative forms. From the archeological pieces, an important chapter of Brazilian culture, emerged pieces of a contemporary structure. The buffalo is a hallmark of the scenery and economy of Marajo. In addition to the milk, cheese or meat, its hide suggests a variety of uses. The collection displays this set of new and diversified products.

In other Latin American countries, among the experiences I know a remarkable one is that of Jujuy, in the North of Argentina, confluence with Bolivia. There, since 1999 young designers of the group Usos, under the leadership of Carlos Gronda and Arturo Tezanos Pinto, are engaged in work with furniture, rugs, carpets and tapestry using local materials such as leather, pure llama and sheep wool and the exquisite variety of native trees, such as carob trees, cedar, walnut tree, "lanza", thistle, cebil, "quina", lapacho, etc. The techniques are traditional, but the designs are contemporary.

Another noteworthy initiative is the Circuit of Latin Identities, created in 2003 by an Argentinean now living in Chile Laura Novik, and by a Brazilian Celaine Refosco. The Circuit of Latin Identities is a nonprofit project that disseminates a concept: the evolution of the design language with a Latin-American identity and intended to generate differentiated, nevertheless competitive products. The Circuit of Latin Identities is at the same time a network of professionals supported by educational organizations, institutions and companies of Latin-America that collaborate and participate in this concept. It is an Itinerant Creative Laboratory on Design, Culture and Identity that travels through cities of South America implementing a week of activities that induce reflection, debate, experiments and exchange of information related to this concept. Headquarters of this project are the education institutions which in each Country warrant the organization and development of the project. Among others, INACAP (Chile), La Salle College (Colombia), UDE (University of the Enterprise from Uruguay), U.P. (University of Palermo, Argentina), and from Brazil UNERJ (University Center from Jaraguá do Sul), and the University Anhembi Morumbi from Sao Paulo, are participants.

This methodology of workshops in quest of cultural identities and local production techniques is, shall we say, being exported. Renato Imbroisi also began work in Mozambique Africa in 2004. A workshop was set up for the local production of fabric and clothes. As amazing as it may seem, the marvelous colored drapes used by the dwellers of many African Countries are still now woven abroad, mainly in Holland. The experience in weaving and printing has only recently been developed in countries like the Ivory Coast and Nigeria. During a week long workshop in Xai-Xai, Mozambique, Renato began by identifying the community needs and by observation and interaction with the local community and culture. It was a workshop to prepare professionals and was directed towards young people who had just finished high school. This was the outcome of a partnership between the Foundation for the Development of the community and the Anglican Church.

We could also mention other initiatives such as The South Project, seated in Australia, which intends to be a cultural highway linking countries of the South. They encourage the valorization of local cultures and their core values are Reciprocity, Sustainability and Creativity.

However, as time is short I believe that these examples are enough to illustrate that other voices and languages wish to be heard today on the international design scenario.

As a journalist, curator and writer I believe that my mission is to make these voices heard and make visible these multiple fringe areas. Because this concept of center and fringe area is also changeable. The United States is unquestionably the center of the world and in this conference I am somewhat a "representative" of the fringe areas. But in my work in Brazil I am in the center, as São Paulo is a city with 16 million inhabitants – the third most populated city in the world, a puissant and energetic economic and financial center of the Country. The Museum which I direct belongs to the government of the State of São Paulo and is located in the wealthiest and more fashionable part of the city. It is there, in this "center" that I have sought to carry out a program that mirrors the enormous cultural diversity of Brazil. The action line I have endeavored to imprint on the Museum is to make of it a privileged place to enhance these initiatives scattered throughout the country, often unknown even to Brazilians. And that this takes place not with the view of the exotic, of the faraway, the view that folklorizes and keeps away, but with the look that rejoices and revels in this diversity with this hybridization which we consider so characteristic of contemporary society.

The Museum conducts 10 exhibitions a year showing objects suitable for production that portray the diversity of Latin America's erudite design as well as the anonymous and popular design. We aim to show this not with the view of the exotic, of the faraway, the view that folklorizes and keeps away, but with the look that rejoices in this diversity the hybridization which we consider so characteristic of contemporary society. We carried out exhibitions which show the work of Renato Imbroisi, the work of ArteSol, some of the first Brazilian designs such as the Indian stools that up to this date are being made by the indigenous peoples of the country as well as the design practiced in the street, the anonymous and popular design.

The Museum also launched an Educational Center directed toward the fringe population of the city of São Paulo, mainly of the 8 to 18 year old bracket. Some one to two hundred young students are brought to the Museum each day at no charge and encouraged to appreciate the objects shown, so as to "create" their own products using a variety of techniques.

The intention of the exhibitions program and of the educational program is to:

- . To improve people's awareness about the role of design;
- . To show the extraordinary resourcefulness of Latin-America's material culture;
- . To encourage and disseminate creative thinking.

The underlying concept is that Latin America cannot continue to be an importer of ready products and technologies from developed countries but must strive to produce objects that meet the peoples' requirements and that express their cultures.

But why "design of a world of solidarity", which is the title of this lecture? Because when the output of our fringe areas is fostered and improved, one is giving a wide range of people conditions to survive. See for instance this house, of a craftsman, before and after having become an integral part of revival of the artisan production. It is a photo we showed in an exhibition at the Museu da Casa Brasileira. Often, it is difference between eating and not eating.

In our opinion, to enhance products, processes and practices directly associated to their environment is the way not only to warrant social and economic development of the involved regions, but also to preserve the essence of the cultural expression of countries. I would not like design to become an Esperanto, the standardized and homogenized language which we should speak to understand each other. Let us all keep the distinctions and carry out the exchange based upon them. If we forsake our peculiarities, the world will become tiresome. In such an equal world, so destitute of originality, I would like to quote the Catalan architect, designer and artist Antoni Gaudí that "la originalidad es volver al origen" – "the originality is to go back to the origin".

Furthermore, when these experiences are reported we are strengthening the notion that we do not need to seek the Pole Star outside, but inside us. And the transforming potential that this rescue of self esteem triggers in people is enormous. As food for the flesh or for the soul, the result of these actions proves how design can improve life of the people – which from the beginning to the end is the primary and ultimate mission of design.