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## Towards a Cross Cultural Society; from ethnicity to design, “narrative” heritage drives innovation.

*Mapuche Weavers and Italian Designers co-create for fostering diversity.*

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the territorial dimension of the project, which is meant to be a resource for the development and support of local economies, helping them to increase the value of their cultural identity and their creativity design process as well as production's know how.

Last August a team of designer from School of Design of Politecnico di Milano meets, thanks to the support of ProChile Italy, and their office in Santiago and Temuco, a groups of Mapuche weavers and Chilean Association made a workshop for a possible innovation about the identity of the products and the strategic way to develop a creativity network based on commercial opportunities.

This activity of cross fertilization of knowledge was important about the contemporary idea on creativity, on concept of “identity of place” through objects and, overall, on new possible bridge between Italy and Chile.

More and more frequently we are currently seeing the return and a new discovery of traditional techniques and manufacturing, which have re-appeared in the contemporary world with a new look and a new balance. The set of traditions, meant as material culture, can be identified with the craft manufacture, which becomes the founding element of a community's identity. As it is subject to changes in time, the set has to be interpreted as a variable heritage which should be preserved.

Through this field experience we can observe that creativity in design with Art represent the expression of a society wish, able to understand the changes; today the object of market and consumption is not only the simple possession of a specific product but it is the experience, the “story” that the customer can live inside the object, according to values of the manufacture that create add value to the existence.

**KEYWORDS:** Cross fertilization, Social Innovation, design driven innovation, human capital growth, creative community, Co- Creativity , Fostering Diversity

### **Introduction**

The intercultural experience conducted last August in the Mapuche community of Temuco in Chile has fostered cultural exchange and economic methodology among the community of weavers and young designers from the School of Design at the Politecnico di Milano.

The workshop, sponsored and hosted by PROCHILE Italy, together with national offices in Santiago and Temuco, was aimed at bringing together the culture of ancestral Mapuche weaving, characterized by manual production and processing of color and fantasy, with more contemporary design methods, in this case where the designer is the “doctor”, the expert, who along with his cognitive tools, methodology and design, is able to observe, understand the specific and spatial characteristics of the craftsmen's “way of doing” together with the people around him at that time. Complex design experience, on the one hand, enhances “what you do” and, secondly, proposes innovative ways to use for identification of new product lines and shapes but also different approaches to the market through intervention on communication and product distribution.

### **The “know how” as the value of Made in Italy to be transferred**

The Italian design, tacit or explicit, has always been an engine of innovation for small and medium sized Italian companies, and recognized as the main competitive advantage of “Made in Italy” at the international level. If historically the “Made in Italy” is born from the success of some companies in the production of differentiated products, identifiable mainly in the fields of furniture and textiles and clothing, today the term Made in Italy has become a “meta-brand” that identifies the different productive sectors giving a strong identity to the Italian production system and not only by incorporating the style of living, quality, ethics, creativity. The ability of a professional designer to identify and exploit local conditions and materials, fusing them into innovative products, is one of the strongest factors for the Italian districts' typical “know how”, having found new life in the synergy of multiple firms with different specific production.

So the designer becomes a “knowledge broker” , an orchestra conductor, a careful observer of the ways and processes involved, so as to exploit the full production potential, based primarily on what can be done and not only involved in creating new forms.

The ability of designers to build connections and be the mediator between producers and consumers is not a new feature of the profession. By nature designers find themselves having to communicate with actors of different levels, but may be involved in a project with a single company, assuming then the role of “facilitator”. In this context, the designer, must make use of his/her ability to interpret the various languages and build a relation and to push for innovation in the relative system.



At the international level, unprecedented opportunities to build connections, networks and supply chains are available now. This phenomenon has certainly been facilitated and accelerated by the development of communication and information technologies that allow the exchange of design data at a rate which cancels physical distances. Still, the fact is that the “world of design” reports are not attributable to individual actors, but enlarged to the community of scholars who represent the scientific debate and design verification at the international level. Today, the contamination of the design languages, cross-fertilization between disciplines methodologically related and / or different represent unprecedented mergers and design produce specific local know-how.

This phenomenon goes beyond any study or possible schematization to where the ability of designers to interpret the needs of customers and turn them into tangible responses are combined with the ability to interpret different cultures, capturing values, signs, traditions, customs, and translating them into innovative consumer solutions.

### **Historical starting points**

Before beginning the critical analysis of recent DDIT (Design Driven Transfer activities) projects, it is useful to have an overview of some suggestions given from past experiences in this field.

It is important to underline that the following suggestions are particularly referred to how a single designer or design research center should act in planning Design knowledge transfer projects in “developing countries” or in “peripheral countries” and not in general in all territories with a gap (as defined in the above paragraph) as could be the case for example of European artisans.

According to the experience of Gui Bonsiepe in particular in South America, Design knowledge transfer projects should keep into consideration that:

- 1. the socialization of strategic production tools (technologies) must be sustained by the elaboration of innovative projects characterized by a high value of use;*
- 2. the import of external design ideas (design from other cultures) should be reduced to minimum [...];*
- 3. the influence of foreign consumption models [...] have formed and deformed the (local) consumers conscience. New products should be introduced slowly and accompanied by information in order to let the (local) consumer to form an authentic conscience of their (local) needs.*
- 4. it is important to socialize the design process in order to let workers (local community) participate directly as producers of (their) material environment [...]. (italic words are the authors writing)*

According to the Ahmenabad Declaration (1979) in India, Design knowledge transfer projects should aim:

*1. to understand the values of a society and to define a good quality of life inside its parameters;*

*2. to look for local solutions for local needs using local materials and competences and applying advanced technologies;*

*3. to build new values, to satisfy primary needs and to preserve the plurality of cultural identities.*

The typology of technologies that should be used and transferred to communities within these projects has also been an important topic of discussion lead by the pioneers of Design knowledge transfer: V. Papanek’s belief in the use of “autochthonous technologies” ; G. Bonsiepe’s theory on “intermediate technologies vs. appropriate technologies” ; K. Schumacher’s attempt to apply “intermediate technologies” and develop “vernacular solutions”. However the aim of this paper is not to investigate this specific matter.

These two examples do not aim to give an exhaustive and omni comprehensive picture of the past actions in the field of design knowledge transfer projects, but merely aim to underline the importance that Design knowledge transfer projects have had in the past and to stimulate an international discussion on the meaning of these projects in today’s new economic and geo-political paradigms. In summary, we can say that design fits in the processes of globalization with tools and methods developed in the discipline, which permit:

- *To identify CULTURAL CONTEXTS (design resources, creative basins);*
- *To identify TECHNOLOGIES (specialty area);*
- *To Prefigure CONTEXTS OF CONSUMPTION (new markets, new consumer scenarios).*

This approach relies on the belief that this project can create more knowledge and innovation. Specifically, the project developed with the Mapuche community has moved on two levels:

\_ Promote the democratization of access by the craft and industry associations in the area with possible international connections giving rise to virtuous relations which are based on mutual recognition of the players in the sector while remaining masters of strategic aspects of their production;

\_ Encourage a kind of exponential growth driven by the internationalization of cultural relationship and the creation of “cultural flows” to generate new sustainable design and production scenarios consisting of “hybrid cultures” projects, from production to consumption.

### **Designing in the micro to a macro reality**

*“The guru of the ‘global village’ concept, Marshall McLuhan, predicted in 1966 that ‘in the future, the role of the craftsman will not be more important than ever before’.*



*Four decades later, there are some interesting signs sustaining this forecast: the growing awareness by the public and private sectors as well as regional agencies for International Cooperation of the dual role of crafts in their blending of traditional and modern skills, creativity, economics and in their social-cultural impact on sustainable development, and so have increased the public's preference for eco-friendly, handmade, quality products and the greater recognition of the very qualities we take for granted in crafts - qualities of timelessness and permanence, the adaptability of artisans to their materials and to changing needs, and above all, the spiritual dimension of crafts. These are all favorable trends, nevertheless, counter-balanced by some disturbing contradictions. In today's "global village", the artisan is, paradoxically, more and more disconnected from consumers' needs and tastes. With the expansion of markets and the spectacular growth of tourism, the traditional direct, personal contact between makers and users has been disrupted. Can the artisan take any longer, as in the past, the combined roles of a designer, producer and marketer? In this context, there is an increasing demand for well-applied design, much of which comes from the local cultures and from the imagination and creative skills of artisans. "*

As evidenced by Indrasen Vencatachellum comments, there are interesting signs that show a greater interest in the peculiar character of micro and small enterprises' productions, with widespread difficulties for small producers to connect to international networks of production and distribution. Many international institutions, including the School of Design and the Department of Industrial Design, Art, Communication and fashion, are engaged in supporting and developing productive territories, motivated both by a desire to support local economic development, "to preserve the knowledge" of small production companies in real danger of "extinction". We can generalize by saying that the crisis of small producers is due mainly to their difficulty in adapting to sudden changes in the socio-economic world and their inability to connect with other leading players in alternative ways of growth and development. According to Indrasen Vencatachellum, to deal with this kind of constant change one must break away from traditional ways of working, all concentrated in the figure of the craftsman with the knowledge and skills necessary to design (the designer), produce (the producer) and distribute (the distributor) their artifacts and identify alternative ways of building strategic alliances to develop new forms of work that see craftsmen collaborate and dialogue with designers to whom falls the task of understanding how to switch between "ethnic" production based primarily on local characteristics, to a "product narrative" in which the value of the product is related to its quality materials that take on a new meaning through the symbolic, emotional or identity relation the consumer is able to experience.

### **From ethnic product to narrative object**

The experience with the Mapuche weavers, within their territory and with their instruments and their wisdom and knowledge, was primarily a human adventure in which the designers tried to enhance the normal capacity of the weavers beyond repetitive experiences, proposing to express creative freedom over what is normally processed as "mechanical". This type of design model resembles the "theory of the unbalanced system" by Ugo La Pietra in the 60s, who acted on that "rigid system" so as to reveal its contradictions and / or open new expression possibilities.

The workshop lasted three days and it is possible to synthesize the activities as follows:

*- Understanding: activities performed the first day: meeting with the weavers, participation in stages of coloring of the wool through plants and flowers collected in the region of Temuco, until the visit to one of the stores built inside the shopping mall in Temuco;*

*- Action: on the second day, the designers held the first business and interaction seminars, so that by this implication, the two work methods could meet and exchange ideas;*

*- Consolidation: activities developed between craftsmen and designers leading directly to the product.*

The phase of understanding was to approach and learn hyper specialized loom spinning and weaving, with Italian designers constantly accompanied by a translator, and this made sure that the designers seized not only aspects of the language but the way of living and thinking of the craft. In this phase were important steps such as sharing a typical Chilean breakfast, exchanging glances and with respect to the first question "What will we do together?" It was important at this stage to have the same cultural level by ensuring that both groups perceived it as intercultural exchange rather than intellectual colonialism. Then were the participation and listening by the designers of the phases of coloration of the wool already spun, the explanation of the characteristics, in terms of color qualities, of each plant adapted to this type of processing.

Therefore, understanding not only the characteristics of the "elements of the project" but also the ancestral culture, the transmission of ways of doing and typical of those women who have been handed down their unique and uncopyable craft from mother to daughter.





Fig. 1, From Ethnicity to design; action and understanding.

Action is the first phase of interaction activities the designers addressed on this occasion, through two workshops, on the issue of how design and methodology are involved in the process of reconfiguration of crafted products. For the contribution of the design is not a purely formal act, which reinterprets and recovers the classical manuscripts, icons and traditional materials in a different way, at this stage the artisan is considered a partner at the same level in the creative process.



Fig. 2, From Ethnicity to design; Understanding and consolidation.

In the consolidation phase we work directly with the craftsman suggesting new uses or new instances of the typical product of interpretation; *In light of the observations reported, we could identify new trends that seeks to recover those deep-rooted cultural values over time, through close bonds that unite the individuals to the community and to their manual arts' history and the identity of a territory. It spreads the nostalgic memory of the past and the desire to retrieve objects and memories of the era. The meeting between dissimilar cultures and different design approaches such as the designer and craftsman, is transformed in many cases by a number of ideas for new products with unique and different codes and languages. With these characteristics, the local produce stand on the market as goods with high differentiation (Sassu, 2003), becoming "cultural objects" because they show an implicit association with a specific territorial identity (Lai, 2007).*



Fig. 3, Narrative design workshop, an interpretation between design user and culture.



## Conclusion

Things become icons that testify to the origins of each culture, their strength is expressed through the ability of memory that mixes archetypal images and ideas into a future that is fascinating, with the intensity of history.

Through this vision, it is possible to think that internationalization processes are not merely seen as strategies which involve the migration of goods (import/export) nor technologies, but also the migration of designers and of productive communities in search of new "sense". Design therefore can become a genera to of new knowledge and goods flux by bulk ding international connections between design and production communities.

This experience with the Mapuche weavers has triggered a cross-fertilization of design methodologies that have led the community to redefine the production objectives and designers to reflect on the methodological skills and relationship between design and craftsmanship.

The second day especially, during the design phase, the goal was to transfer a new point of view on the product to the craftsmen. Sometimes the artisan is aware of what makes his work a valuable one, but tends to not recognize his work as a kind of intangible value. On this occasion we wanted to communicate through design for an object that traditionally could be anything, but taking unusual shapes for different uses. Another objective was to communicate to the actors of the territory the commercial value, the strategic value of the recovery and enhancement of textile identity. As a plus in this case we can say that design represents the interface between tradition and modernity, which reconfigures the traditional codes to make them consistent with contemporary languages. So we must talk about strategies that bring value to a system with a traditional knowledge-oriented approach to design.

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