MOTHERS FROM INOSEL: AN EXERCISE IN COLLABORATION TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a case study involving a collaboration project in which mothers with children attending Inosel school received capacity building based on design development activities. The school is a catholic charity school based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which admits both deaf and hearing students. As many of the children need the help of their parents/guardians to get around the city, their caregivers stay at the Inosel premises during school hours. Having identified this work opportunity, the following research question was formulated: Can collaboration activities based on the opportunity to develop design projects help empower people to act productively in the development of a project, making and marketing artisan objects? The idea was to draw on methods and procedures from the methodology of design to train groups with creative potential. A methodological approach was devised, enabling the group to work on the different stages of design development and, as a consequence empowering them.

Key Words: Design in Partnership, Collaboration, Sustainability, Inosel.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions about sustainability first emerged from the perception of the need to preserve our environment, and were soon adopted by design as a way of enhancing the humanization of its projects.

Concerns about sustainability in the field of design were first voiced in the 1970s, especially by Victor Papanek in his book Design for the Real World, in which he called on designers to "design solutions for the real world, which was disintegrating into hunger and misery, racial conflicts and political protests, civil wars and independence struggles [...]" (Cardoso, 2012, p.18).

Since then, a number of authors, including Ezio Manzini, have put sustainability at the heart of their work, guided by the ideas of strategic design.

Manzini (2008) believes social innovation is one of the drivers of research in design oriented towards sustainability, and defends the idea that the designer's principal function is to improve the quality of the world, not just the aesthetics of products. As he sees it, in strategic design the designer is an agent responsible for social, environmental, and economic change, a precondition for which is the abandonment of unsustainable and individualistic projects; anagent capable of fostering the transformation of common communities into creative communities and making them self-sustaining.

Certain ideas have burgeoned from this perspective. It follows, for example, that it is not just the environment that needs to be cared for and preserved; sustainability affects other spheres of life, especially the economic and the social. De Ross et al. (2012) show that social sustainability is still a major challenge, explaining that its role is to enhance the quality of life of human beings and that it is related just as much to the indoor environment of abusiness as it is to the outside world, being directly linked to work relations.

The issue of sustainability, which should be a routine part of everybody's lives, still spawns contradictions. According to Cardoso, (2012) "while some negotiate wage increases or shorter working hours, other employ multitudes of workers in conditions of quasi-slavery" (Cardoso, 2012, p.43). Unfortunately, for many, profit continues to be a priority, and the relationship between sustainability and consumption has always sparked conflicts. The author goes on: "How can two legitimate concerns be reconciled – that of consuming more to generate wealth, and that of consuming less to preserve resources?" (Cardoso, 2012, p.250).

Profit and consumption are fundamental preconditions for the capitalist system, which is grounded on mass production for a globalized market, all orchestrated by those who control the production processes. In Brazil, very much a part of this system, there is a high level of social inequality, with people often being unable to express or fight for their most fundamental of rights. In a context like this, design cannot disengage itself from the exercise of power, which stands in the way of designers who wish to take a more socially oriented stance in their work.

This point brings up a crucial question for the field of design: How can designers act for the benefit of social innovation and change?

In our reality, it is no simple task for a designer to stand up against mass production and ignore a global culture in his/her desire to take more socially oriented actions that value the local workforce and their culture.

In a bid to incentivize change, research and initiatives that look at the designer's work from a different perspective are vital, because they represent new paths based on sustainable, collaborative principles.

One such approach is the Social Design methodology, which emerged as a pedagogic practice in the Design degree course given at PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the 1980s, which was later renamed Design in Partnership. Social Design, or Design in Partnership, has much in common with the concepts of Co-Design, which in the last decade has been the label used to designate partnerships between designers and the people with whom they develop project processes.

As such, we begin with a short background introduction to Design in Partnership, as this practice served as inspiration for the methodology developed in the research reported on here, since its principles are fundamental for the construction of a route towards social sustainability. According to Couto (2017), Social design is an ethical, human rights-based professional practice that considers the principles of equality and respect for individual qualities. It is sustainable par excellence and its social dimension is only effectively realized when it is guided by these questions (Couto, 2017, p.32).

In Design in Partnership, the designer involves the future user in every stage of the design process. What sets it apart so fundamentally from other design methods in this "doing with", rather than "doing for" or "doing to" other people, which is only possible when designer and user spend time together throughout the project process.

Unlike what some people believe, this methodology is not some form of welfare, even if it is sometimes geared towards less economically advantaged communities. Its primary focus is on the empowerment of the participants or future users through their involvement in every stage of the process. This is why the term Social Design was dropped in favor of Design in Partnership, in order better to reflect the concept behind the practice.

Pacheco and Toledo (2015) argue that this practice of involving end users in every stage of the design project began in the 1970s with other names like co-creation and co-design. They conclude that these participative design methodologies have expanded gradually in the last thirty years, because, as Saunders and Stappers (2008, cited in Pacheco and Toledo, 2015) put it, the practice has little relevance in the labor market.

Manzini (2017) shows that there is now a whole host of possibilities for dialogue between design and society, which could be called Social Design in its broadest sense. He stresses that this dialogue, which he calls social dialogue, is an expression of co-design.

According to Portas[4] (2016), the case study in question did not aim to form a social enterprise, but was more geared towards the individuals, which is why the explanation of the methodology was supplemented by information on the group, their particular characteristics, and what they produced.

2.1. METHODOLOGY

The first module, called Tilda dolls, lasted six sessions, during which the participants learned how to make a Tilda rag doll[5].

At first glance, making a Tilda doll seems quite a challenging task, but after a few stages it becomes clear that despite the complexity of the technique, it is simple to execute. The training began with this technique to boost the women's self-esteem from the outset, so they would then feel ready to tackle a different task. Another important point was the ease of obtaining the raw materials, because the dolls are made from scraps of fabric and leftover haberdashery and wool.

The Tilda doll technique is practically universal and was consistent with the research goals, namely:

- The desire the women had expressed during the diagnostic stage to learn how to use a sewing machine;
- The sentimental issues behind the technique, with which the women could identify;
- The chance to go through and teach different stages in a design project.

In this module, the participants went through the stages of a design project, but without reflecting on their actions, which led to a degree of inertia on their part. Even so, some gains could be perceived from the activity, as reported in the participants' statements.

P4 and P7 highlighted the importance of the learning process in the first module.

I've already made dolls to sell. This work will help us a lot." (Statement by P4, 2016)

This work inspired me to earn some money, because we're mothers of special children and we can't work. The work helped us to develop, think, and create how, with a piece of fabric, we can make a doll. (Statement by P7, 2016).

In every group there is a distribution of roles, and these two participants, P4 and P7, were fundamental for the development of this work. For the communication necessary for the tasks to be effective, each group member takes on a role according to their own individuality and subjectivity. Imbroisi (2011) stresses the importance, in this kind of work, of two key figures: the leader, who in this case was P7, and the skilled worker, who was P4.

As soon as we arrived we realized how important a leadership role P7 had in the group. Her child had been at the school for ten years, so as an old hand she could build a bridge between the school and the other mothers. She was very keen to learn the craft techniques and was always making or teaching the other mothers how to make bags and cushions. Pichon-Rivière (1994) emphasizes the importance of the leader in understanding a group's dynamics.

The second module, called basic and compound forms, also lasted six sessions. The students were encouraged to use scraps of cloth to make basic and compound shapes. The first shapes were basic ones – the circle, square, and triangle – all using fabric, until all the different techniques had been used up.

This module served to show the women that creativity and originality should not be limited by a shortage of raw materials. Indeed, some apparent problems, like a shortage of resources, may even prompt greater creativity.

The aims of this module were:

- to develop the women's autonomy in the different stages of a design project;
- to show the great variety of forms and objects that can be developed from used materials, working on techniques that can be developed from basic forms, such as the circle, using fabric yoyos (*fuxico*)[6].

The autonomy barrier in the project stages was overcome, but now we had a new problem: a lack of originality in the products developed. The visual references presented in the classroom, which were designed to broaden the students' visual repertoire, were inhibiting their creativity.

The third and final module was called image abstraction and also lasted six sessions. Compared to the stages proposed by Pichon-Rivière (1994), this could be considered the last stage, which he calls a project, because it was at this stage that we managed to attain the goals proposed for the methodology as a whole.

Taking basic concepts from visual language and reinforcing figurative representation through the abstraction of real images, the idea was to make the products the participants developed more original. The heterogeneity of the group revealed the lack of any cultural unity and limited familiarity with craftwork on the part of most of the participants.

4 Comment made by Roberta Portas in an orientation session, 23/09/2016, Rio de Janeiro.

5 The Tilda doll was created by the Norwegian designer Tone Finnanger in 1999, when she was 25 years old. She had always enjoyed arts and crafts and dreamed of making dolls and sets for animation films while she was working in a craft shop. The idea for the doll was inspired byfamily members who were also artisans. The original Tilda doll measures 63 cm and its main features are its little face with two dots for eyes and rosy cheeks. She does not have a mouth because she speaks with her heart. Today, Tilda is a craft brand that produces books, craft materials, fabrics, craft paper, and decorations. Each artisan who makes a Tilda doll gives it her own special touch. Available at: <http://questaodeafeto.blogspot.com.br/2014/03/tilda-historia.html>. Accessed on January 28, 2016.

6 There are no records of the origins of fuxico, or the making of fabric yoyos, but it is widely used in Brazil. We chose this technique because the women showed interest in learning it. Another curious point is that this technique was once commonplace amongst groups of women in rural parts of the country, who would "fuxicar" – or gossip – while they worked. Not in the sense of badmouthing others, but in the sense of talking through their everyday problems, and this is a very strong feature amongst the Inosel mothers.

The aims of this module were:

- to reinforce the stages of a project, which had already been gone through in the second module;
- to resolve the problem of lack of originality of the products made.

In tasks of this kind, where designers are interacting with groups of artisans, what stands out is how much they draw culturally on local artisanal practices. It was through basic concepts of visual language, reinforcing figurative representation through the abstraction of real images, that this originality was sought.

The idea was therefore not just to expand the participants' visual repertoire, but also to develop their visual literacy. They were asked to do exercises to help them understand the concepts of abstraction based on real images. According to Dondis (1997), visual literacy is responsible for enhancing an individual's capacity to understand and create a visual message.

Dondis (1997) explains that the process of abstraction is a reduction of visual elements to simplified lines. In abstraction, details are irrelevant, while essential lines become the focus.

As such, some element was sought out that could interlink all those women. So we started observing the school and its surroundings. It is set in a very attractive landscape, with elements that epitomize the city of Rio de Janeiro: forest, mountains, a river, and the Rocinha community. They took photographs of their surroundings and, as a group, picked five of these to work on. These images were enlarged to A3 format and each woman chose one as her reference.

Some of the participants successfully grasped the idea of abstracting the image, and presented excellent results, such as P1 and P8. Others, like P2 and P5, turned away from the concept of abstraction and moved towards symbolism. This concept can be seen in P5's collage, which includes a kite to represent the favela, and in P2's, who puts a house alongside a coconut palm, although the perspective of the photo, taken looking upwards, does not show the ground.

We cannot fail to highlight the work of P3, who adopted neither the abstraction of the photograph, like P1 and P8, nor recourse to symbolism, like P2 and P5; rather, she deviated from the proposed approach to engage in creative signature work of her own.

P3 did not enroll for the course at the beginning of the year. She joined half way through withoutletting us know she wanted to take part. The first day she showed up, she said she was there just to see what it was like, so we asked her to help another participant make an object using *fuxico*. After this day, she continued to frequent the lessons. Every lesson, she would do something different from what had been asked of the participants, deciding on her own initiative what she was going to work on, without any guidance. After a few sessions like this, we talked with her and she explained that she did not know any handicrafts but that she wanted to take part in the lessons. We started working with her individually, and she showed creativity and an unrest that needed to take expression through art. This became clear in the third module of the course, the only one she took part in from beginning to end. The most important thing in dealing with P3 was to let her express herself without interference, for her to build her self-confidence. The recompense came in the quality of her work and her statement.

It was a real challenge for me, because I don't have a way with art. I joined the course thinking of making a rag doll. I skipped some stages and almost gave up. The girls supported me, even knowing that I hadn't understood the course dynamic.

I gave them a bit of atough time. I joined at the end of the course and I didn't know there were stages and there was a process. I joined in the middle of the process, I skipped stages. I gave them a lot of trouble. I said, "guys, I'm going to give up. Today's my last day," and they said, "today's not your last day." We started doing some collage. Every person has their own view. The girls were really obedient, but I was, like, completely disobedient. Whatever went through my mind, that's what I did. At the end of the day it was really good. This work, it's added a lot to my life. Everything I ever started I'd stop. I decided I didn't want that for my life any more, and this course helped me carry on and now I'm really pleased with myself. (Statement by P3, 2016)




[Figure 19] Photo used by P3 in module 3. Source: personal archive.

[Figure 20] Collage on fabric done by P3 in module 3. Source: personal archive.

[Figure 21] Painting on fabric done by P3 in module 3. Source: personal archive.

[Figure 22] Product developed by P3 in module 3. Source: personal archive.

3. CONCLUSION

The methodological steps described for the three stages of operative group tasks by Pichon-Rivière (1994) – pre-task, task, and project – were fulfilled. There was not necessarily a standard result of products to be attained, but rather certain expectations about the development of design project autonomy on the part of the participants. The goals set at the beginning of the study were therefore attained: based on design methodologies, we incentivized and trained the group to create and produce original objects, stimulating their creative and innovative potential, while boosting their self-esteem, entrepreneurial spirit, collaborative capacity, and citizenship.

The point is not so much what type of work is done, what type of methodology is used, or what this kind of initiative is called, but that through this process a path is taken towards a society based principles of social sustainability. Through this research, it is possible to trace a reorientation of the designer's work in the labor market based on more sustainable principles. The quest of some designers for a more socially-oriented professional direction for the common good and less geared towards market demands and consumerism may help contribute to the understanding of the true role and responsibility of the design professional in relation to the problems of our society.

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