Ways of making and collective project: participation experiment and social engagement on actions addressed to artisanal communities

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the importance of the design social role when it is related to productions outside the academic environment, in which the field could dialogue with vernacular knowledge and popular culture. Through the project Bordados de Passira, this research seeks to explore how design can enhance and raise the inventive capacity of artisanal communities. This research investigates how project practice could rethink and balance this relationship, so that it becomes more participatory and addressed to the social context. The objective of this paper is to discuss the role of design in collective project actions when working with traditional handicraft communities.

Keywords: handicraft activity; participatory approaches for design; social engagement in design.

Introduction
Passira is a little town in the hinterland of Pernambuco, about 100 kilometers from the state capital (Recife), Brazil, widely known for the production of hand embroidery. The approach to the handicraft community of Passira was developed during the first author’s postgraduate (Masters) research study. In 2014, the research team developed a collaborative project structured between designers and the artisanal community of Passira, crowdfunded through the support of more than 340 people. Among the aims was the establishment of joint workshops locally that could gather tools to address the problems that the artisans reported in their production and autonomy.

This paper will: (1) introduce the aims of research and the context in which this contact has been developed (the relation between design and handicraft in Brazil). Regarding this, the paper will highlight the thoughts of the architect Lina Bo Bardi (1994) and the designer Aloisio Magalhães (1997); (2) describe the Project Bordados de Passira and the way that the collective project was structured, in order to explore new possibilities of action and research in design; (3) Finally, it will discuss participatory approaches and social engagement in design actions addressed to artisanal communities.

The relation between design and handicraft in Brazil
In the 1960s and 1970s, Brazilian handicraft production began to be discussed by the design field, which had been institutionalized a few years before. Bardi (1994:26) conceptualizes that this practice in Brazil resembled a state of “pre-craftsmanship”, domestic, subsistence production and its inventive character. Magalhães has also differentiated Brazilian handicraft from the European case: “the Brazilian artisan is basically a potential designer, much more than a craftsman in the classic sense” (1997:181). The author finds that Brazilian handicraft is highly inventive, like design, but that it does not reach the industrial scale of design proper. He characterizes this as a “pre-design” attitude.

Both Lina Bo Bardi and Aloisio Magalhães tried to understand the role of design and where it lies within the scope of popular culture. At different times and in distinct ways, they were concerned with a design stance more committed to the material culture conditions of production in the national context, discussing a practice more connected to the local reality (Anastassakis, 2011).

This discussion is growing and it is currently of interest to many academics who are dedicated to analyzing the importance of the social role of design and the ways that it relates to productions outside the academic environment. In addition, these professionals are trying to think of ways in which the field could dialogue with vernacular knowledge and popular culture. In this sense, this paper seeks to explore how design can enhance and raise the inventive capacity of these social groups.

This approach, however, raises several questions and reveals delicate relationships between design and handicraft, as they are socially and economically different fields. The meeting between the two areas is also accentuated and problematized by studies in the area of design, which seek to understand and

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evaluate their potentialities and limitations. Design is seen as a tool to economically and socially empower handicraft communities and the contexts in which they are located. Researchers in this field have highlighted the importance of rethinking the practice beyond a market-oriented vision and challenging the social function as a fundamental part of thinking about the role of design today. (Papanek, 1985; Whiteley, 1993; Margolin, 2004). This reflection broadens the way in which the activity is understood and practiced, as well as opening new possibilities for practicing and researching in design (Latour, 2008; Bonsiepe, 2011; Fry, 2011; Mazé, 2013).

This research intends to explore, through the project Bordados de Passira⁴, how project practice, addressed to the social context could rethink and balance this relationship, so that it becomes more participatory and integrated.

Before presenting the project Bordados de Passira, it is important to highlight the context in which this collaboration has been developed. Seeking to understand how the relationship between design and handicraft has become more common in Brazil, we have found some important key points in the last decades in each of the fields.

It is largely because of public funding policies that design projects with artisan groups have increased. There are a great number of initiatives for the conceptualization, strengthening and availability of resources, which are carried out by various agents, from different sectors of society, such as NGOs, government entities, companies and academic institutions. These projects are, most of the time, linked to the purpose of valuing and preserving the knowledge that is embedded in all artisans activities, in addition to generating income and promoting a better life quality for them.

In 1995, there were two programs coordinated by the Department for Development, Industry and Foreign Trade (MDIC, in Portuguese), which has implemented actions to boost and promote design and handicrafts in Brazil: the Programa Brasileiro de Design (Brazilian Design Program, PBD in Portuguese) and the Programa do Artesanato Brasileiro (Brazilian Handicraft Program, PAB in Portuguese). It is important to highlight that the institutionalization of design and handicrafts through departments and programs can influence how design and handicrafts are practiced and understood.

Traditional handicraft in Brazil is associated with a family or community production, where knowledge and techniques are transmitted from generation to generation through verbal tradition, loaded with cultural meanings of the place where it is located (MDIC, 2012). In this sense, it reflects the situation of its social groups and carries its own meanings of the community ways of life, its knowledge, vernacular techniques and limited resources. Craft products are cultural manifestations, strongly related to the territory and the community that have generated them (Krucken, 2009; Noronha, 2015, Sennett, 2013).

**Project Bordados de Passira**

The approach to the handicraft community of Passira has developed during my Masters research, with the purpose of analyzing the process and the transformations that the group had passed on when relating to design. Passira is a little town in the hinterland of Pernambuco, about 100 kilometers from the state capital (Recife), widely known for the production of manual embroidery. In conversation, the artisans reported that the embroidery appeared with Passira and that it is traditional of the town ever since.

The research raised new questions and showed points of tensions in the relationship between Passira handicraft and design. Artisans pointed to a lack of transparency in the running of projects – including development of aims, methods employed and actions taken – as well as a lack of commitments from public authorities. Regarding this, Leon (2007) describes as one of the basic assumptions of artisanal production the gathering of manual and intellectual knowledge. The author questions the validity of the
projects that involve design and handicraft in Brazil, due to the fact that the separation between these two fields of knowledge is often maintained. Moreover, "a design and craftsmanship program must create conditions and project autonomy for artisans" (2007: 66) 5.

The contact with the embroiderers continued after I completed my Masters degree, and during the following year, in 2014, through a collaborative project structured between designers and the artisan community of Passira, by means of collective funding6. Among the aims was the establishment of joint workshops locally that could gather tools to address the problems that the artisans reported in their production and self direction in the commercialisation of the products they had developed.

The path of Passira artisan community
In Passira, artisans have long been organized around a group until, in 2008, they decided to found an association to stimulate and promote handicraft production made in the town and also with the aim of representing themselves in dealings with governmental and private entities. After that, they set out to seek support from federal funding programs. They heard about the "Ponto de Cultura" initiative and signed up with the project "Promotion of Self-Esteem for Artisans and Quilombolas" from Passira", a project approved in 2008, which consisted in rescuing the artisanal culture of the region and promoting the exchange of knowledge between the artisans and Quilombo Chã dos Negros, a traditional group very close to Passira.

With this initiative, artisans gained prominence and were invited to join another project, this time with the State of Pernambuco, "Pernambuco com Design", managed by the Economic Development Agency of Pernambuco (AD Diper), in partnership with the federal government. According to the proposal sent to the Ministry of Culture, the project aimed to "promote training actions for the development of skills and abilities in the sector of clothing and handicrafts, inserting design in products made by the two municipalities [Quipapá and Passira, where the partnership was started] with the intervention of nationally recognized designers"8.

Project and collective funding
The Pernambuco com Design initiative was the focus of research during the Masters degree. When conducting fieldwork in Passira, the artisans reported the repercussions and transformations they have experienced after this interaction.

Of all the aspects commented on, three were most prominent: the autonomy of artisanal communities, the duration of projects and the transparency of managed. Handicraft when used only as an inspiration or through short interactions may not lead to a more longterm transformation. Intermittent contacts are disruptive to both production and thought processes of artisanal work. Manual skill is developed through experience; the artisans improve their technique when they strive to know the materials, combining them with the practice, which results in the good execution of the object. This way of learning and making demands time, which makes it a slow activity. If the intervention is not understood, assimilated and discussed with the artisans that are involved, they lose the autonomy of their work and become dependent on these interventions. Moreover, since there are no clear definitions of actions and because of the distance of these communities from the large urban centers - to which these products are usually destined - it is difficult to ascertain whether there is an attitude consistent with what is communicated. Another difficulty in analyzing these partnerships is that, for the most part, contact is brief and the chances of detecting positive and negative effects are dramatically reduced for that matter.

After talking about these factors with the community of Passira, the idea emerged of putting together a project that could question the contact between design and handicraft, and could promote a greater participation of the artisans in the formulation of these actions. With this intention, as a solution found to structure and finance the new project, a collective funding was developed.
The figure below (Figure 1) shows the different stages of the project, the members engaged and how the action was structured with the community of Passira. The figures 2, 3 and 4 were chosen for the project "Bordados de Passira" promotion.

Figure 1. Stages of the project "Bordados de Passira"
Source: Project "Bordados de Passira", 2017
During this campaign, when contacting the public that has supported the initiative, it noticed the participation of another agent in this process. That interaction also led to improvisations in the initial form as the project was conceived; one of them was the will of these supporters to have a closer contact with the artisans through a workshop where there could be an exchange of knowledge. For 60 days, the project became available on the Catarse platform to receive support and funding. As people interacted with the initiative, the project has been transformed and adapted to the participation and engagement of the public. It was a dynamic experience and made by many people from the very first start till the end. At the end of June 2014, we secured funding through the support of more than 340 people.

Figure 2. Embroiderers at the association head office, in Pernambuco (Brazil). The image was chosen for the project “Bordados de Passira” promotion
Source: Helder Santana, 2014

At the beginning of the project, the rewards were determined. According to the amount donated to the initiative, each person earned a reward. During the 60 days that the project was opened for collective funding, people suggested other forms of offers. As the major of the backers lived in São Paulo, a city 1600 miles from Passira, one of these suggestions was to make a workshop in São Paulo with the embroiderers, since people wanted to know the artisans closer and to learn from them about the traditional embroider.
With this experience, we have noticed the importance of considering all the agents involved and integrating them, providing participation even for the design of the project itself. For Latour (2008), thinking artifacts today through design is to consider them more and more as "things", something that concerns the human and their complex and contradictory interests.

From this perspective, in addition to the activity involving skills to deal with social, cultural and economic issues surrounding the relationship between human and non-human actors, as Latour (2008) writes, new challenges arise when design is thought through a collective project exercise: one of them is that adopting an approach of collaborative and participatory practices requires thinking that the exercise of creativity extends to all people - designers and non-designers (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). Another aspect is how we can think of the design process as a mechanism that encourages the participation of different stakeholders, who present different dimensions of creativity. These questions raise a central point of inquiry for this scenario: what role does the designer take in collective project actions? After this experience, we believe it is important to investigate collaborative project exercises and how they can be considered in a way that empowers the different actors involved. Design thinking will be put to fill a gap between what exists, what has already been done in Passira, and what may be possible, a way to rethink that relationship and arrive at more meaningful contributions that may emerge from the practices of collaboration.

For Latour (2008:3), design is an activity that never starts from scratch, it is always a redesign, because there is a question or a problem that exists before and it is from there that elaborations and collective re-elaborations are developed. In this sense, Sennett (2015) highlights the rituals of cooperation and how there is always a creativity that does not cease, put into continuous movement and extends to all participants involved.
Workshops and the creation process

With the project funded and the resource released directly to the association bank account, we started the discussion of how the group would execute it. The main premiss, which guided the whole project, was the autonomy of the artisans, from the management of financial resources to the elaboration of which workshops they needed the most and which tools they wanted to explore. Another aspect debated among the participants was to promote the handicraft from locality without intermediaries. One way to harness the engagement of the supporter community from the collective funding and to reverse it in potential buyers was the creation of an ecommerce. The idea came from the team of designers and was soon joined by the artisans. Four members of the project developed the ecommerce. Ana Julia Melo and Patricia Matos, who work in fashion, planned its structure, the price and the description of the products. Eduardo Paschoal and Ricardo Goya designed the website and elaborated the shopping flow. Before we defined the structure and products for the ecommerce, the artisans gave us what information and products they thought were more important to highlight.

In order for it to be realized, it was necessary that the artisans had knowledge related to the management and operation of the ecommerce itself. The experience they had with sending the rewards to those who donated in the crowdfunding was decisive for this aspect.

Established the objectives, two types of workshops were run. The first was focused on the development of the products: product development workshop (figures 5 and 6), with modeling and sewing classes; and creation workshop, with the development of new designs from the repertoire of motifs and points already used by the artisans. These workshops were given in September 2014.

The second type took place in November 2014, focusing on the promotion of products and the new ways of selling the products: ecommerce management workshop; and brand identity workshop for the logo and the packaging. The ecommerce and collection (figure 7) were opened in November 2015.

The great challenge of the project was to find a way of dialogue between the knowledge of design and the way of thinking and doing of the handicraft. Artisans needed design tools to make their products work within a market context, which was different from what they were used to: in removing the figure from the intermediary, artisans would have to take all the product stages until the consumer.
According to Sennett (2009:30), craftsmanship connects manual skill to ethical values; the artisan, in seeking to produce in the best possible way certain object, is able to reflect through the act of doing. There is, therefore, a practical engagement; and by engaging in this way with his own work, the artisan is linked to reality. Craft skill is developed with experience. Craftsmen improve their technique as they strive to know the materials, combining them with practice, which results in the good execution of the object. The search for this precision takes time, which makes it a slow activity.

On the other hand, there was a need to improve dialogue with the consumer and to clarify the production logic developed in Passira. As much as the artisans use a tool like the ecommerce, the time of production and delivery would be different, other than consumers are used to, buying ordinary products over the Internet. This stage was fundamental to the project, to describe piece by piece, to communicate through videos and graphic materials how was the production process in Passira, bringing more transparency to this relation of producer and buyer.

In this stage, the project established a direct communication with the public through the page on Facebook: the videos and the graphic materials emphasized the time of the artisan production, with testimonials from the artisans herself, talking about their productive process and the matter of the embroidery in their lives. These videos were sent by the local supporters that already had experience with shooting and sent to the crew by internet. Once received, they were prepared for promotion in social media. Besides that, the project developed a detailed description of each piece on the site explaining the embroidery points and the time it took to produce them.

**Final Thoughts: Challenges**

Transparency and autonomy were factors worked throughout the initiative. However, although the project has had significant results and achievements, the group has encountered several challenges and problems along the way. It had been tried to circumvent several of them, but some still persist as a hindrance. There are cases where we come up against obstacles that are not in our sphere of decision: in the experience of Passira, one of these points was the operation of the post office of the town, for example; The place has its restricted hours of operation (4 hours a day) and, often, it functions as the only bank agency of the place. Another more structural problem is the logic of the ecommerce itself, which is still challenging for the artisans, which kept the team of designers longer then them had imagined acting as support for these issues.
However, one of the great gains for the association was the bargaining power with both the public and private spheres. As people have been engaged in the project, the association gained more visibility and was able to negotiate with fabric and embroidery thread companies, who were interested in investing in materials for that production, without influencing the structure of the project and its conduct. In addition, the artisans have gained more strength to demand more commitment and actions from local government.

Two companies supported the project: Tecotton, fabric producer, and Círculo, that sells line for embroidery. The artisans still receive donations of fabrics and lines from these companies. After the realization of the project, the artisans participated in interviews, articles and exhibitions and most important increasing the value of their products, whereas previously they were sold for unfair prices.

The dialogue with the artisans is still ongoing and, by the end of this year, the project intends to do another workshop cycle. The artisans asked for another fashion molding workshop and it is likely to be realized in São Paulo, where most of the project members live. The most challenging issue of the project was the budget: it was not possible to plan more workshops or go more often to Passira with the amount that had been raised. As a consequence of the meetings (the intervention), the crew and artisans had to learn to work quickly. It also took time for them to learn the ecommerce and fashion molding processes, but over time they have become accustomed to it.

There is no way to think about design and handicraft without relating them to the contexts in which each activity is produced. It is necessary to understand the social structure of each field to issue more horizontal exchanges. This project was fundamental for this researcher to reflect on how the field of design could dialogue with other ways of doing things and how the practice could influence practices to be more democratic, attuned to the real concerns of that locality.

References


Note/s
1 From the original in Portuguese: “o artesão brasileiro é basicamente um designer em potencial, muito mais do que propriamente um artesão no sentido clássico ” (Magalhães, 1997:181). Translated by these authors.
2 Aloisio Magalhaes (1927 - 1982) was a Brazilian designer, considered pioneer in the introduction of modern design in Brazil, elaborating social function of design practice in the national context. Besides being a designer, he worked as a professor in the first university level design program in Brazil, the Industrial Design School of Rio de Janeiro (ESDI) and was secretary of culture in the Ministerial Department for Education and Culture (MEC). He has addressed political and cultural issues during his life.
3 The researches that approach the handicraft practice and its relation with the design are generally found in themes such as: design and social inclusion; social design; design for sustainability; design for transformation; eco design; vernacular design; design for the other 90%; design for social innovation and sustainability.
4 The name of this project means, literally, Embroidery from Passira.
5 From the original in Portuguese: “um programa de design e artesanato deve criar condições e autonomia projetual para os artesãos” (Leon, 2007:66). Translated by these authors.
6 The funding campaign could be reached by: https://www.catarse.me/bordadosdepassira (in Portuguese).
7 Descendants of African slaves who fled from the farms and formed small and free places called quilombos.