

cultural and communication common grounds

in art craft and design

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ABSTRACT

Handcrafts and design have a common ground and an essential difference: they share the ability to produce interface cultural objects but while the craftsman moulds, the designer projects. Design and handcraft share nowadays a new important characteristic since they meet a new market macro-trend that is expressed by the refusal of mass solutions and the demand of personalised products. Products able to perform in this area give the user a special sense of fulfilment since they become a communication channel, an extension of the self. This mechanism can be found in several products, able to establish with users a special and personalised dialog: the Portuguese lovers' handkerchief, that is reinterpreted in its function by users; the Freitag bags, that invites users to define the message they will carry, participating in its production through selecting the recycled truck tarpaulin and the specific part to be used to manufacture the bag; and the "a-poc" Miyake's cloth that requires the user to define the final design and to finish the piece.

The paper goes through the analysis of these three cases and discusses the level of design-user interaction needed to meet the user in its own ground at a communication level. It also reflects over the cultural and communication grounds that link the work of craftsmen and designers.

handcraft and design: convergences and divergences

Through time handcraft has corresponded to the need of producing items to fulfil the most diverse functions. Industrial development took from handcrafts activities its relevance in populations' economic life. In many cases, its' products are still present in the market due to their association to cultural values that attract the interest of several publics by their specificity and genuineness [1]. However, some manifestations of handcraft can be visualized as archaic forms of production oriented to reproduce traditional items that lost their original utility, with greater or smaller fidelity. They survived either because their use was reinvented or because they became interesting and curious objects able to "talk" about past uses and values. Other products, however, kept their utility and showed to be well differentiated from industrial products since they have authenticity, originality and are hand made. In this case, handcraft activities were able to maintain a connection with the traditional practices that are based mainly on the ability, technical skills and ingenuity of the craftsman. This kind of handcraft is characterized by the specificity of the techniques and materials used, and it is a living patrimony of the cultures it flourishes in. It also supports the development of original and differentiated products that find their place in the present society [2].

Design works upon a project based process, in which the product is the optimisation between its form and function. Design considers the multiplicity of aspects that allow the product to fit its use, from the demands of consumers or users, to the maximization of the production process, without neglecting the immaterial components of the product such as the aesthetical and decorative ones. Design integrates know what and know how and has the possibility to choose, to materialize the project by creating industrial products or by projecting unique pieces or limited editions of highly differentiated products.

The convergences between handcraft and design are also significant. Handcraft activity is supported by the work and experience of the craftsman, and by the experience of generations of craftsmen that preceded him. The craftsman moulds the object and starts from his own intuition. The empirical knowledge he has leads him to communicate his personal vision to the products he creates. He masters materials and techniques and from his work result products of excellence in which the craftsman projects himself.

The designer can also develop differentiated and original products that carry the design project approach as well as the designer's personal interpretation of the preferences and needs of the target publics [1]. Like the craftsman, the designer needs to manipulate materials and techniques to create a product or a prototype. It is easy for the designer to slide into the world of doing, generating a continuous movement between to do and to project.

The main difference between the craftsman and the designer is the amplitude of choices that the designer can make in the project stage. These choices are supported not only in his technical and scientific based knowledge but also in his market knowledge. Otherwise he becomes a craftsman himself. Handcraft and design converge in a dialog that increases the value of their individual work [3].

market trends

The present market trends point to the coexistence of two major currents: the globalisation of the production/distribution chains and the conquest of target-market segments of small dimensions with highly differentiated products [4].

In a large range of products, the demand of low cost products leads to mass production, diffuses technologies and production capability all over the world and guarantees the international or global distribution in optimised conditions. In parallel, the market tendency to manifest the individuality and the differences between individuals and groups implies the growing value of differentiated and personalised products. Those products are seen as objects that transcend their function since they have the possibility to "talk" about who wears or uses them.

This macro-trend emerged in the last two decades and appears to be obvious in the increasing demand of differentiated market brands and in the diversity of products that are continuously introduced in the market [5]. The product became a way consumer uses to obtain the satisfaction of his multiple needs and his purchase options are based on immaterial aspects of the product more than on its technical characteristics [6].

In this market environment, unique or limited series products, original or highly differentiated, meet the consumers' expectations and desires of finding on them unique elements of seduction. The commercial success of many handcraft and author-design products show to have this characteristic. The tendency of the consumer for personalization is an opportunity that opens horizons to handcraft and design products as well as to new offers resultant of designers and craftsmen cooperative work.

levels of communication: three cases in analysis

The "lenços de namorados" - lovers' handkerchiefs



Pictures taken from "lenços de namorados - escritas de amor" [8]

The “lenços de namorados”, lovers’ handkerchiefs, are a handcraft product profoundly rooted in the traditional culture of Northwest Portugal.

These handkerchiefs, containing love poems and decorated with nature elements, as flowers, leaves and butterflies, were embroidered by girls with the intent of offering them to the boy they were in love with. The tradition dictated that the boy, by accepting the handkerchief, declared to her he corresponded to her affection and, by using it on the neck on Sundays, he assumed his commitment to her before the community. Its characteristics reflected the taste, the sensibility of each young girl and the way she felt about the man she loved. Thus, each piece was able to tell its own story [7]. In its design there was no concern about aspect or quality, only elements that communicated the emotions and feelings of who manufactured it, as it was an offer of affection.

“Aliança Artesanal” rediscovered the lovers’ handkerchiefs. This organisation proceeded to the recollection of original pieces and initiated its reproduction. The fabric base was ennobled through the use of linen in its natural colour and the handkerchiefs are sold with texts explaining the tradition and the ethnographic features of the region [8].

These handkerchiefs, by their profound cultural message and richness of motifs, were a source of inspiration for fashion designers, such as Ana Salazar, that used these motifs as decorative elements in haute couture pieces. The products presently commercialised are reproductions of original handkerchiefs, hand embroidered and hand finished. Their meaning, distant from the one that originated them, appears as a testimony of a centenary tradition and reflects a cultural heritage and the values of a region. Its use has lost the context but the buyer can find in each product differentiated elements and he can establish with it a personalized relationship. Thus, the buyer may define its use, the function he chooses to give it, and that depends of the way he feels its beauty or detaches its cultural value. He can use it as an embroidered cloth over a furniture piece, as an application on decorative pillows or he can have it framed and hanged on the wall. Whatever use he chooses to give it, the colouring and simplicity of this handcraft product gives a touch of joy and vivacity to the environment.



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Freitagbag – F-CUT

The Freitagbag was introduced as a highly differentiated product under a trademark that focused on the concept of recycling. The basic materials are used truck tarpaulins and seat belts. The lateral seams are covered with bicycle inner tubes. Only the thread filament, the Velcro and buckles are new materials [9]. The Freitagbag F-CUT is a recent proposal differentiated from the initial one and is focused on the personalization. This proposal is structured on some well-defined bag models and pre-selected truck tarpaulins. Through an online application, the user is invited to become his own bag-designer and to personalize the bag he acquires. The client chooses the bag model and the tarpaulin he prefers and defines the parts from it that will be used in the bag manufacture by placing the pre-defined stencils over it. After finishing this process, the consumer selects the visualization function in order to see the final effect. He can redesign his bag until he meets the aspect he prefers. Then he can proceed to the shipment of his bag order or he can request the Freitag designers to give their opinion on his design. In such case he can request the Freitag logo on his bag. If he does not wish for others to interfere in his creation, he assumes to be it’s exclusive designer [10].

The unitary feature of each piece makes this product a special kind of urban handcraft as each piece is unique and the production process is closer to manual production than to industrial one. The relation of this product with urban contemporaneous handcraft lays on the fact that the patrimonial and ethnic codes are built on references to other products, familiar to the populations on their every day

Pictures taken from Freitag [9] [10]



life, such as the seat belts, the truck tarpaulins and the messages they include. The imprints designs, patterns and icons are the synonyms of a culture, a contemporaneous patrimony, in many cases associated to certain user “tribes”. Besides this feature, the F-CUT recurs to processes of image selection and fitting close to handcraft, supported by online tools, which allow the user to develop with the product a relation of complicity, of authorship.

In spite of the visible relationship of Freitagbag with the handcrafts, the product follows a typical project model, the main characteristic of a design process. The object contemplates the design process in itself (pre-defined models and moulds to be manipulated by the potential buyer) and responds positively from the point of view of ergonomics, production and market. This approach produces a real interaction between the project creator and the user. It also contributes for a new era where the design assumes to be a process that allows the extension of the users personal communication through the message incorporated in the product. We watch the emergence of a new paradigm in which products become an extension of the Man himself and not more a creation of the Man for the Man.

The Freitagbag approach is an almost perfect alliance between handcraft and design if faced in a user satisfaction perspective, perpetuating the best in each area: in handcraft, the production of unique or limited series manufactured in workshops where exists a personalized relation with each object; in design, the space of reflection and creation using a methodology that, responding to the needs and demands of the consumer, allows the materialisation and reinterpretation of the existing relations between the populations and their contemporaneous cultural patrimonies.

In this approach the design process of each piece is an open process, where the end-user takes the decisions that are going to give the product its unique character not only in its form but also in its message [11].



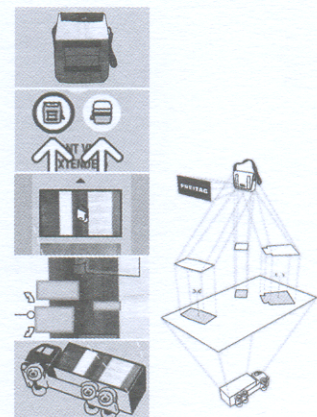
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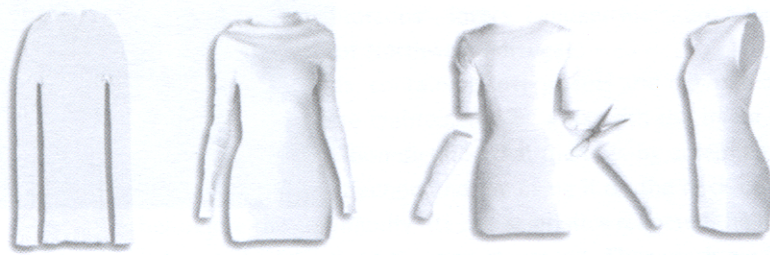
“a-poc”

Issey Miyake through his path of ethnic and patrimonial researches manifested his universal character, which he uses to build new products, like in the creation of “a-poc” that results from a project initiated in 1997. The goal of this project was to integrate the user in the creating process [12]. Miyake states that “a-poc” stands for “A Piece of Cloth” and considers this product a revolutionary idea in the fashion field [13].

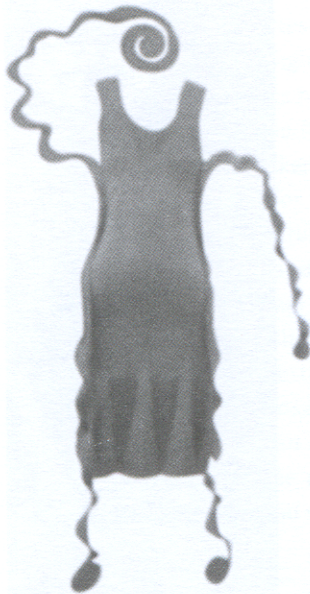
The development of “a-poc” was based in tubular knits and jacquard woven fabrics construction technologies, combined with handcraft techniques for the creation of continuous fabric tubes within which lies both shape and pattern. The product is made in a sequence in which the thread goes into the machine and re-emerges as a piece of clothing. This interactive process allows the user to participate in the final phase of the design of his piece of clothing by determining its final shape [14].

In this product four oppositions are merged: two- and three-dimensional spaces; creation and destruction; technology and handcraft; randomness and intentionality [14]. The “a-poc” is a line of clothing rooted in research and tradition, made real through contemporaneous technology. The main differentiating factor lays not on the prod-





Pictures taken from A-Poc Making: Issey Miyake & Dai Fujiwara [12]



uct that will be acquired but on the individualization possibilities it offers. It is not a fashion product into which the user moulds himself, but a product the user must personalize according to his vision of the piece, to the message he wishes to communicate and also that requires to be fitted to his physical characteristics, thus individualizing it. Therefore, the “a-poc” exists only and if the user moulds it according to the shape of his own body, taste, imagination and personal image. For example, in the Baguette collection the user has a choice in terms of the design and he must define lengths and sizes (according to his individual requirements). The user participates in the creation of “his” product with no guidelines or instructions, since no information is given to him about how to cut the sleeves, how to do the neckline cut or about the recommended shape of the dress or sweater [15].

Miyake, the creator of “a-poc”, is a craftsman and although his work presents a universal appeal, the conception of his products is rooted in the Japanese culture [16]. In the handcraft perspective the technology used in this product forces the user to imprint his personal mark to the pieces he acquires, becoming himself a craftsman. This product is the result of a design methodology and appears as an industrial product that is finished manually. The relationship between the designer and the user is a continuous one and the tubular knit is an interface. Thus, the product becomes not only an author-product since it is “signed by the user”, but also reflects an entire process of industrial production, supported by a vast market knowledge. The product value transcends its materiality assuming the differentiation obtained in a non-planned way by the user as a preponderant element.

The user’s relation with this product is completely active. After acquiring the unfinished product, he engages with it a personal dialogue that is completed in the product use. Thus, the product becomes a communication channel of the identity of its final creator.

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discussion

The three cases analysed present increasing interaction degrees with the users. This interaction considers the potential communication level of the products as well as their capability to reflect cultural values. In the first case the product/user interaction is expressed by the definition of the product function, in the second case by the choice among the tarpaulins messages and their personal reformulation. In the third case, the interaction goes deeper and is expressed not only by the personalization of design but also by the individualization of each piece that must be adjusted to its user.

The intrinsic cultural values of these products reflect in the first case the valorisation of ancestral cultures that the user integrates in his daily life. In the second case they appear expressed in the bonds the buyer reveals to have with the contemporaneous urban culture, expressed in the recycling concept and in the use of symbolic and chromatic codes directly connected to an urban life. Finally, in the third case, emerges the association between the value added through technology, an

industrial cultural value, in close combination with the traditional value of manual manufacture, as the final product depends of the hands that shape it and make it unique.

All three cases show a dynamic association between design and handcrafts, between a structured vision that begins with the market knowledge, definition of opportunity and project development and ends with the active participation of the user who defines either the use or the shape and the message the product will convey. The combination of the typical design and handcraft approaches maximizes the seduction of these products allowing the users to own genuine and original pieces, able to correspond to their personal tastes, to their way of life.

The three products reflect different processes but all of them show a close relation with the craftsman who conceives or the craftsman who finishes the process. Also, in this three cases the mind that projects, plans and develops the product, focused on the satisfaction of the target-public needs, is present, structuring the business and intensifying the relation between products and users.

conclusions

The present market conditions favour the connection between the design and the handcraft that, by their specificities, have been kept more or less dissociated. The market tendency towards the valorisation of personalized products, able to support cultural or personal messages by their originality, uniqueness and individualization potential, has created new opportunities that generate a new interest in reinforcing the dialog between those activities.

The three cases studied, the “lenços de namorados” (lovers’ handkerchiefs), the Freitagbags and the “a-poc”, testify the great existing potential in the design/handcraft relation, and certify the possibility of joining visions, techniques, methods and processes around products with high added value. This value is granted to buyers more by the immaterial characteristics of products than by the material ones, since they became desirable to them for being able to convey unique and/or personalized messages.

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