

Relationship between handicraft and design in a community of embroiderers: the case of São João dos Patos - Maranhão

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Abstract. This article discusses the relationship between crafts and sustainable design in the Associação das Mulheres da Agulha Criativa (Creative Needle Women's Association) - AMAC, in São João dos Patos, Maranhão, specifically in the "Marcando Bordado em Cores" ("Marking Embroideries in Color") Project, in 2011. The research presents the course and completion of the project by a team of SEBRAE designers and consultants. It is characterized as a case study, with a descriptive and qualitative approach. The aim of this study was to understand the role of design in the community of embroiderers, in order to see if their work with these women made them independent in the process of creation, manufacture, exhibition and commercialization of their products. The reference used was the Virtuous Design and Development Ladder, created by Gabriel Patrocínio (2015), through Papanek and Bonsiepe, where the role of sustainable design is realized in the determination of different types of innovation. Finally, the results of this study showed a positive social impact in the community of artisans producing cross-stitch embroidery; but, regarding the economic aspects, there is a need for a planned relationship with the partner entities with the purpose of making the role of the designer in the community enable the artisans to enter into a promising market that assimilates their products, making them reach the stage of autonomy. The sustainable design interventions, in this sense, aim to contribute to the development of forms of innovation, that respond to the demands of the communities themselves and that make possible the renewal, transformation and appreciation of their identity and knowledge.

Keywords. Sustainable Design, Embroiderers, Case Study, Handicraft.

Introduction

This article aims to observe the hybridization process between the designer and the craftsman through the "Marcando Bordado em Cores" – henceforth referred to by its translated name, "Marking Embroideries in Color", for the sake of clarity – Project in all its course in the Associação de Mulheres da Agulha Criativa – hereinafter also referred to by its translated name, Creative Needle Women's Association, for the aforementioned reason –, AMAC, in the county of São João dos Patos, Maranhão. I speak of women who embroider in a town situated in the Sertão Maranhense: São João dos Patos. Located 570 km away from São Luís and with 24.928 inhabitants (IBGE, 2013), it possesses a significant and ongoing production of embroidery, mainly that of the cross-stitch kind. It has, throughout its entire territorial area, this cultural peculiarity which is passed down through generations, thus perpetuating a craft technique which is considered primitive, but at the same time, contemporary (NASCIMENTO, 2012), since the building of a sustainable life through products, systems, services and innovative experiences are sought through the push for innovation.

The work of the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (SEBRAE) in the Creative Needle

Women's Association (AMAC) in the county of São João dos Patos began in 2009, with the coordination of a designer and consultant in craft product development, and brought the association among then lost elements, and concepts retrieved through iconography, in order to set the creative and innovative dialogue between the artisanal with the contemporary.

Patrocínio (2015), through Papanek and Bonsiepe, brings up some questions: is promoting something for the basic needs (which identifies itself in the borders of a rampantly consumerist society) related to design, or is contributing to the construction of the development of the artisan community?

Through that question, I aim to understand the role of design in the AMAC, specifically in the "Marking Embroideries in Color" project, for the purpose of seeing if the work of that design consultancy with the embroiderers made them independent in the process of creation, manufacture, exhibition and commercialization of the products, taking into account the aspects pointed out by Bonsiepe (2010) with an innovation-promoting focus.

The relationship between Design and handicraft has been known to us for a long time. If we think of the concept defined by Cardoso (2004), in which design assigns material form to intellectual concepts, being an activity that generates projects, in the sense of plans,

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sketches or models, projecting certain types of movable artifacts, we can easily associate it with the craftwork field through its products. The fusion between the fields of design and craftsmanship is the result of interdisciplinary experience, which, according to Domingues (2005), can be defined as different disciplinary fields which approach one another for the solution of specific problems, in which there is a sharing of methodology. Today, many designers have begun to realize the value in retrieving the old relationships with manual making.

Thackara (2008) supports design as an innovative and creative practice with the potential to transform societies and contribute to the well-being of humanity. Thus, the designer is required, in addition to their designing skills, an intellectual deepening that allows them to make associations between elements, codes and concepts with multiple meanings, derived from several behavioral models.

There are some traits in the county of São João dos Patos (Maranhão) which make it unique. Like the rest of the state, it suffers some economic stagnation and seeks innovations to promote its development. According to Albuquerque (2004), the state of Maranhão has a cultural attachment to handicrafts. Its artistic productions contribute directly and indirectly to its growth.

The objective of this article was to understand the designer's role in the community of embroiderers, specifically in the project "Marking Embroideries in Color", in order to see if their work with these women made them autonomous in their process of creation, manufacture, exhibition and commercialization of their products.

1 Hybridization between design and Handicraft

Canclini (2008) defines hybridization as being socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, which existed separately, combine to generate new structures, objects and practices, through which these practices seek to reconvert a patrimony, (a factory, a professional qualification, a set of knowledges and techniques) in order to reinsert it in new conditions of production and market.

The ICSID (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) defines which designers should place the human being at the center of the processes. Thus, this study is justified by trying to understand how design can contribute to artisanal production in the municipality of São João dos Patos, in order to provide the perception and self-recognition of the condition of agents of their own productions.

After mentioning the concept of design and hybridization used for this research, it is important to specify at the moment the following definition of artisanal products adopted by Unesco:

Artisanal products are those produced by artisans, either completely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most substantial component of the finished product. These are produced without restriction in terms of quantity and using raw materials from sustainable resources. The special nature of artisanal products derives from their distinctive features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, creative, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously and socially symbolic and significant. (UNESCO, 2007).

Having outlined the concepts and definitions of the covered fields, we can then discuss the processes of hybridization between design and craftsmanship. Regarding the use of local resources combining design and craftsmanship, it is noticeable how this process is done in an exemplary way in peripheral countries, including Brazil, following some approaches pointed by Bonsiepe (2010, p.67):

- Culturalist or essentialist approach: the local artisans' projects are used as the basis or starting point for what can be de facto called design. Here it's possible to relate this approach to the designer's strategic use of the embroiderers' memory through the retrieval of their culture and identity through the personal archives of Ms. Silvia, the first artisan who began embroidery work in that region.

- Paternalistic approach: artisans are considered as a political clientele for welfare programs, playing a mediating role between producers and commercialization, with high profit margins for sellers. There is, today, a large number of governmental organizations in Brazil with handicraft qualification programs. Among the associations maintained with public resources involved with the issue, SEBRAE (Brazilian Service to Support Small and Medium Enterprises) was the most successful in its actions.

- Innovation-promoting approach: it defends the artisans' autonomy to improve their subsistence conditions, which are almost always precarious. Such an approach requires the effective participation of producers. In this case the result of this approach may be of extreme importance to the country, promoting what is referred to as social sustainability.

According to these points, I believe that this last approach addressed by the author will be able to promote satisfactory results for the community. And the combined actions between designers and artisans – in which designers do not simply work on the form, surface or appearance of products and services, but do instead on more significant points for effective hybridization – will therefore promote social sustainability, as the virtuous ladder of design and development will later show.

Borges (2011) mentioned some of these important points, those being:

- Improvement of the quality of objects;
- Increased awareness of this quality by the consumer;
- Reduction of raw material;
- Rationalization or reduction of manpower;
- Improvement in manufacturing processes;
- Combination of processes and materials;
- Dialogue between drawings and centers;
- Adaptation of functions;
- Displacement of objects from one segment to another more valued by the market;
- Intermediation between the communities and the market;
- Communication of the intangible attributes of craft objects;
- Facilitation of access to the means of production;
- Contribution in the strategic management of actions;
- Explanation of the story behind the craft objects.

Thus, in craft revitalization actions, projects involving design insertion in craft work has had a large role, interacting skillfully in teams with different skills involving multidisciplinary professionals.

I see the Creative Needle Women's Association - AMAC in this context, from the role of the designer immersed in the daily routines of the embroiderers, and especially in the "marking color embroideries" project, bringing them the aforementioned aspects, although timidly and often lacking the necessary resources.

2 Methodological aspects

According to Yin (2005), the use of the case study is adequate when one intends to investigate the how and why of a set of contemporary events. The author argues that the case study is an empirical investigation that allows the study of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined.

Data collection took place during two visits to the Casa de Nhoziho Museum, located in downtown São Luís, Maranhão. Prior to the visits, telephone contacts and the scheduling of the meetings took place in July 2016. The two interviews were conducted with the Designer / Consultant in Craft Product Development, who in this case was responsible for the actions developed with AMAC, for the realization of the "Marking Embroideries in Color" Project, held in May 2011. Each interview had an average duration of one and a half hours, and were semi-structured, in which the order of questions was not necessarily followed, because as the interview went on, the questions and the subjects were directed. During the interviews, other relevant information that had not been initially contemplated in the interview script was collected.

In addition to the interviews, public documents and information contained in the corporate website were used in data collection, and some information was supplemented by e-mail after the interviews.

The president of the Creative Needle Women's Association - AMAC, who added important information about the project and, more specifically, about the results

of this project in the community, was contacted by telephone.

3 The "Marking Embroideries in Color" project

The role of the designer in AMAC arose from the need to magnify the value of the talent, the products and especially the significance of these embroiderers as holders of this craft which has as strong link to the past of São João dos Patos.

The designer's work started with research and retrieval of iconographies regarding the embroidery of that region. The contribution of the designer was initially to trace the history of São João dos Patos through oral history and to notice elements in this history in which one could rescue the time and identity of those people, while not casting aside the transformations that globalization inevitably brings in this process, and with care not to lose the essence of traditional knowledge. The information was collected through what is called oral history, which is the record of testimonies about this lived history.

The final result of the "Marking Embroideries in Color" project was presented in an exhibition of some products achieved during the work developed in partnership with SEBRAE advisors. In addition to facilitating advice, SEBRAE allowed the acquisition of raw material for the production of the products. This process of preparation for the event presented as its main characteristic the recovering of traditional graphics applied to the "cross-stitch" technique in the development of the products. See the figure below:



Figure 1. Front and back views of an embroidery.

In this detail of the product embroidered in the "cross-stitch" technique, to the left one can see the right side of the embroidery, and to the right, the back side, in which one can appreciate the delicacy of the technical finish. According to experts, in cross-stitch embroidery, it's in the back side of the product where the finish of the workpiece is evaluated.

The color pattern was also observed, having been thoroughly studied and having the centennial iconography of São João dos Patos as its reference.

The "Marking Embroideries in Color" exhibition was held in the "Dona Sula" space, located in the center of

the town of São João dos Patos and was attended by authorities such as the mayor, local councilors and entrepreneurs, as well as family, friends and lovers of the craft of embroidery. The event was sponsored by furniture stores, where specific environments were set up to exhibit the handmade bed, bath and table products.

The event took place in May 2011, with the assistance and organization of a designer and a tourismologist / consultant in Handicraft Development Management, as well as the talent of the embroiderers of AMAC. This exhibition showed the work of the artisans of São João dos Patos through products such as napkins, cushions, towels, placemats etc.



Figure 2. AMAC embroiderers exhibiting their products.

In almost two years of work and relationship between design and crafts in that Association, they studied the constructive structure of cross stitch embroidery, and, together, also developed embroidery pieces different from those that were daily produced, such as accessories and smaller, easier to be produced and marketed workpieces (SANTOS, 2012). From this work emerged other embroidery colors and materials, which became the high sales point of that craft, giving wings to the lace makers so that they themselves could start developing and putting their ideas into new products (PEROBA, 2008).

Through this project, the embroiderers started producing other types of artifacts and new design structures developed in molds by the designer which began to make up a great part of his creations. These products are marketed in the Association itself. The embroiderers say in their touching stories that today they participate effectively in the economy of their homes, in addition to considering themselves to be qualified professionals like any other (SANTOS, 2012).

The designer who works within the communities is often a vector of change in the way the artisans look at their own products. In the case of the “Marking Embroideries in Color” project, through the simple act of taking part in a photoshoot in which the embroiderers could pose with their products in the universe of their craft, they could realize and value what was behind the art and craft that they had in their hands. The long-term exchanges between designers and artisans are the true revolution: when the designer is part of the community's production and daily life, and when the artisans are given information about what is drawing, geometry, design, and how the creation process is developed (PEROBA, 2008).

Designers who are aware of the value of craftsmanship and the need to perform actions that

enhance this craft not only value local craftwork, but also contribute in bringing new models to the design produced in the country (ROIZENBRUCH, 2009). In this exchange, designers go on to have, at the very least, access to traditional knowledge and an expansion to their job market. The artisans, in turn, have the possibility of interlocution on their practice and an interval in time to reflect on it (Borges, 2011).

Thackara (2008) emphasizes and supports design as an innovative and creative practice with the potential to transform societies and contribute to the well-being of humanity.

According to Papanek (1973), all human beings are considered designers. Design is part of all human activities. Through the “Marking Embroideries in Color” project, there was the appreciation of the crafts by the embroiderers themselves, which was seen and made explicit through the products and their smiles, which serve as a materialization of their self-esteem.

4 Results and discussion

Patrocínio (2015) uses the Virtuous Design and Development Ladder for the implementation of design in the determining of different types of innovation. The ladder indicates a progressive reduction of external dependence to the autonomy of the local production of design.

In this context, the intervention of design in the environment in which it is inserted, proposing local development, is based on the user's involvement in the design process. The ladder goes from the dependency stage to the design autonomy stage.

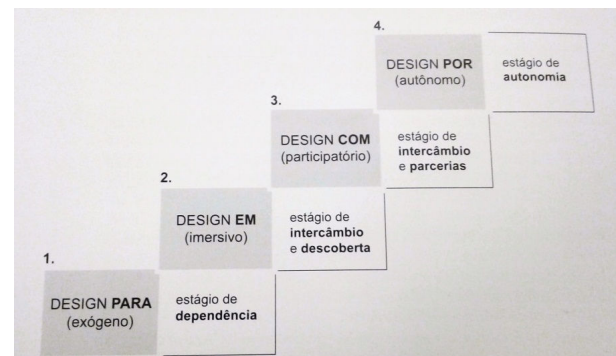


Figure 3. Virtuous Design and Development Ladder

According to Forty (2007), the most important point lies in the consequences that changes in design bring to society, as it influences people's desires, behavior and thinking.

The user, when choosing a product, seeks information that allows them to track and identify their qualities. In this sense, according to Krucken (2009), design can contribute significantly in this context, seeking ways to make the story behind the products visible to society. Telling the story of these products means communicating associated historical, cultural and social elements, enabling the consumer to evaluate and appreciate the product more broadly.

All this experience and exchange of information described above were achieved with the performance and participation of the designer amidst the community, who made use of the theoretical repertoire acquired from his research and design techniques.

The designer is tasked with the promoting the diversification and economic revaluation of the handicraft, which corroborates with the appreciation of the local cultural identity. (SILVA, 2011).

The fact that the advice and partnership with SEBRAE was finalized shortly after the “Marking Embroideries in Color” project, and there not having had time to insert the products made by embroiderers in the market, in a way, made it impossible for the artisans to enter a promising market that could assimilate their products, so that they could not reach the stage of autonomy described in Figure 3, where the author deals with design POR (by) in which this relationship with design has already been developed and is coordinated by places. But according to Patrocínio (2015), this situation does not prevent partnerships and exchanges, but these will be among equals, each contributing to the development of a local design with territorial identity.

5 Final considerations

The social and economic impact of the cross-stitch embroidery community in São João dos Patos was noticed, as well as its cultural and identity significance, from the beginning of the designer's intervention, and more specifically in the course of the “Marking Embroideries in Color” project until the completion of its consulting, and thus the great importance of the process of hybridization between the fields of design and local crafts. In addition to the benefits to artisan communities, this process of hybridization has resulted in learning for designers as well, because the craftsman's technique and creative ability are united with the functional, cultural and aesthetic procedures of these professionals, who find creative and unique solutions for their products.

It is recommended that there be a continuation of this process and better planning by the partner entities, in order to realize that the role of sustainable design goes beyond its creative characteristics and search to solutions to environmental problems, but also that these advisors play a role in the community to support and help these products to enter the market, as this part of management is an essential support for the communities to reach the stage of autonomy and that there be a development throughout the region. The designer is also a manager, since they have knowledge that helps organize projects and translate the process.

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