

DESIGN AS A MEDIUM FOR THE TRADITIONAL PORTUGUESE GOLDSMITHING: THE NUANCE PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a design project which offered the opportunity to develop new product scenarios focusing on the heritage of Portuguese goldsmithing. The paper analyses how design students developed new project solutions based on goldsmiths' experience. The authors describe the project and illustrate how it embodies sustainable values, both for the students, the professors and for the craftsmen. Travassos, a small community located in the north of Portugal, is well characterized by small workshops of traditional goldsmithing. Nowadays this activity associated with the manual work of filigree is in a deep crisis. Design is able to create new dimensions for a global innovation, by making new project models available in the goldsmithing market.

In terms of pedagogical use, the paper presents and analysis the reasons why the experience of design was central to the development of innovation in craftwork. The learning and the teaching objectives focused on the fact that students had to associate the craft place with the project issues; to identify the activity's culture; the fact that these craft activities as companies have to define their risk tolerance and clarify the specific level of newness in the new product; to identify the possible productive and commercial links with hypothetical partners; to identify and catalogue raw materials; to analyse the productive process and techniques; to identify typologies; to create a strategy based on new product development and to outline how new product ideas must go through stages of physical and functional development before launching.

Keywords: craftwork, project philosophy, the hands-on culture, memorable material, new product development

1 INTRODUCTION

When associated with the local context of belonging, one of the main objectives of Design can be said to be its ability to create Project themes that foster the development of the production context it refers to. Nowadays, the market implementation of local products, such as embroideries or filigree, may become an important distinguishing factor of product success in the global market. This local factor may guarantee the competitiveness of the handicraft, turning them into a differentiating resource in a market of ever more standardised and stereotyped products. If we analyse the local Portuguese economic and production development process, we may easily conclude that in many contexts it is strongly connected with handicraft activities, which can be found all over the country contributing to the definition of the identity elements of a given

place. It is possible to identify the idiosyncrasies determining the specificities of the Material Culture of a people in the different materials, technology and production that characterise each of these activities. These specificities are fundamental for the kind of Design that takes success as a reading process able to find local qualities, implementing a product through the qualitative differences that state its unique character in a global market. As the sociologist Francesco Morace puts it when he talks about the need to emphasise the local roots when implementing a product: *“to know and value the Genius Loci itself makes the products more attractive, more credible, more distinctive, thus being possible to put forward an effective alternative to the classic market segmentations.”* [8]. The handicraft activities are undoubtedly related with the production fabric in which they are carried out, thus decisively contributing to the definition of the local identity. *“In these contexts there is a permanent connection between the geographical area and the production, due to the role played by factors inherent to the local culture itself, such as the use of local raw materials and the legacy of generations that determine the use of techniques and the transmission of forms and typologies.”* [2]. In the Portuguese case, the goldsmithing of Póvoa de Lanhoso can be idealised as something above the production activity, as a principle of cultural determination translated into the manufacture of handiwork characteristic of part of the Material culture of the North of Portugal. This handicraft reveals and perpetuates age-old motifs and techniques dating back to ancestral times and that were passed down from father to son, from generation to generation. Presently, this culture of producing, characteristic of the geographical area of Póvoa do Lanhoso, is in risk of disappearing and with it all the heritage consisting of gestures, shapes, rituals and tools that characterise its uniqueness. If we analyse the data made available by the Managers’ Association, in Portugal between 1996 and 2003 the crisis in the gold sector “resulted from a sharp decrease both in the Gross Added Value (44.6%) and in the number of staff (37.7%). On the other hand, the volume of sales recorded a 67% fall and the number of companies fell 20.6%.” [1] Póvoa de Lanhoso has about 60 workshops, located in the parishes of Sobradelo da Goma, Travassos, Castelões and Oliveira, all with traditional production. The number of craftwork labs, where goldsmiths and their apprentices work, is decreasing, which may, in practice, translate into the extinction of the entire sector. Nowadays, Design has the responsibility of finding new ways to innovate and stimulate this traditional art, thus guaranteeing and preserving its characteristic values.

2 DEVELOPMENT

The *Nuance* Project, developed under the scope of the subject Project/ Workshop IV of the Product Design course available at the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, was created with the purpose to stimulate the students and the local crafts producers. The students were encouraged not only to develop and implement the role of design into a craft productive environment, but also to create a critical analyse of a productive situation. The aim of recovering the production capacity of the local goldsmithing activity in terms of the creation of a new material heritage, made more valuable by the idiosyncrasies characteristic of this culture of producing. The project is funded by the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, the Museum of Gold from Travassos and the Goldsmiths’ Association of Travassos, and offers the opportunity to develop new product scenarios focused on the heritage of Portuguese goldsmithing. In the North of Portugal, especially in the Minho region, the filigree culture is mingled with the folklore culture, in which many of the handicraft elements are also part of the popular costume.

The symbolic values of the traditional Portuguese goldsmithing contrast with the contemporary aesthetic values. The excessive, and sometimes, complete adhesion to traditional models risks compromising the survival of the whole production sector. Design, as an agent of local development, has the objective of reviving the local production techniques by applying strategies and methodologies that will make it possible to penetrate the market, after a correct interpretation of the production context. According to Bonsiepe, we could say that *“designers should work as catalytic agents, in order to stimulate innovation not only in the object typologies but also in the variation of the existing typologies”* [3]. The research and experiments carried out by Design Schools may create new development ways for the production activities and, as a consequence, the Education sector may become a synergy factor for development. The Design Schools, as places for experimenting, have the responsibility of bringing nearer the world of projects and the world of handicraft production, making it possible for the self-sustainability of a production system with local character and transforming the modus operandi into an opportunity for the survival of the production activities. This theory *“underlines the importance of a teaching method that is also useful for society as a whole and not just as a specialised future at which teaching is directed”* [5], strengthening the connection between the Educational Institution and the social, geographical and political context in which it is located.



Figure 1 The goldsmith Custódio Gomes in the School, explaining to Design students the techniques and the fundamental principles of the traditional Portuguese jewellery.

2.1 Methodology

In the relationship between the educational world and the handicraft world, one of the main aspects to be considered is the need to facilitate the relationship itself, as they are often too much apart. To make it possible to bring these two universes closer to each other, the designer Ugo la Pietra stated (when talking about the role played by Design Education in the handicraft culture) that *“to know the system also means to experiment, i.e., to have a close experience with the commercial and production structures, and not simply to have an indirect contact through the surviving laboratories in the several art ateliers around the country. Knowing ultimately means to project the handicraft production surviving inside systems too often archaic and only occasionally renewed in production into a product communication and commercial system.”* [6]. In this project, students were asked to apply the design tool to the traditional context of goldsmithing, always bearing in mind the uniqueness of the area they would be working in. The students made a prompt and contextualized reading of this production activity with the objective of developing object systems that had the skill to innovate without annulling the specific characteristics and the value of the activity. This type of assignment resulted from the premise that the student had to deeply know the production activity, using a

practical approach that would allow the construction of an effective project and at the same time adequate for the chosen handicraft context. The direct contact between student and craftsman makes it possible for the first to guarantee a better understanding of the techniques and fundamental principles behind one of the oldest production processes in the traditional western goldsmithing. By visiting the different workshops, the student became aware of the variety in this production sector revealed by the differences present in each goldsmith's techniques and understood the need to conceptualize a project adaptable to a specific context. At the other end of this relationship was the goldsmith who could then understand the added value brought about by the subject design in its educational perspective, because the project was not directly conditioned by the market constraints and therefore worked in an experimental perspective, thus allowing the detection of new product aesthetics and at the same time to see the School as a creative laboratory. More specifically, students had to make a critical analysis finding information about the type of products produced, examining the production context in which the goldsmith worked, emphasizing the type of tools and techniques used and referring its characteristics. This type of information made it possible to establish an identifying framework of the analysed activity, making it also easier to introduce later new project premises. For a period of four months, 28 students and 4 design teachers researched and structured their own proposals, accompanied by the attentive goldsmiths, adapted their proposals to the handicraft performance and looked for a new language for common usage objects, accessories and complements for the home. The future designers and the professors approached the design concept between tradition and innovation, recovering the memory of the materials, using them in the project or harmonizing them with others considered new in the traditional production context. The students were not only encouraged to apply the statement "learning by doing", but were also given the opportunity to work on design with some of the teachers involved in the project, thus getting acquainted with another side of the teaching body, that of project creators. It allowed the students to have a hands-on experience, in which to verify the applicability of the methodologies and strategies previously determined.



Figure 2 Bracelet "Vitrail", made by the student Tiago Martins and the Goldsmith Manuel Amândio Vieira. Pending "Manel&Maria" made by the professor Liliana Soares and the Goldsmith Custódio and Hermenegildo Gomes.

2.2 The scope and the actors in the project

Jewellery can be said to be set in a highly experimental project scope, "(...) pioneer of the existing industrial sector, where the serial production of a piece is justified by the interpretation of modularity and the elements made up by an object are repeated differently in other objects, thus creating new creative scopes." [9]. A jewel may be considered a system of objects ready to equip the person whose artifact can be

acclaimed when the chosen materials and techniques are used to their fullest symbolic and formal synergies. Jewellery makes it possible to develop a project whose fundamental questions (for example, comfort, productivity, or the symbolic value of the artifacts) are related to the fleetingness of fashion and that “(...) *the phenomenon traditionally exclusive of the elite, over the last decades has reached almost all social classes: from a cultural phenomenon it turned into a consumption phenomenon.*” [4]. Due to the experience gathered during the equipment Project, the Design students were able to develop a wider perspective on the relation between the objects and society and, consequently, to have a different perspective on the classic project of a jewel. Aware that the jewellers’ workshops are an important element in the entrepreneurial landscape of Minho, associating the teaching of Design to traditional jewellery can be not only an opportunity for the students to know a part of the production fabric where they may work later on, but also a tool that adds value to Design Education in local projects, turning the Educational Institution into a development factor. This type of project may also strengthen the importance of the cooperation and understanding between the academic world and the production world in terms of craftwork production, whose condition shows that in any project “*the designers should update the ideas they have on what it means to be a designer nowadays (...), accepting that the local development results from a collective process in which they (if they are able) can actively participate and also promote.*” [7].



Figure 3 Necklac “Muhila”, made by the student Liliana Viana and the goldsmith Jorge Silva.
Brooch “Coração em Bico”, made by the student Liliana Barbosa and the goldsmith Inês Barbosa.

3 CONCLUSION

The *Nuance* Project shows a School of Design can be an incentive to reactivate the production activities existing in its geographical area, turning the School into a research laboratory for the development of a sustainability strategy. Considering that filigree, together with other manufacturing activities, is one of the Portuguese symbols, the role to be played by Design in this context concerns the use of its interpretative abilities, using the local characteristics applied to the production of artifacts as fundamental elements for the definition and survival of the activities themselves. Design as a project subject able to materialize the link between tradition and innovation asserts itself as a creative act, based on the strong dependence on the scopes defined by the production activities and by problems discussed between technique and aesthetic, between marketplace and society. If the goldsmith’s experience is an indispensable tool for the achievement of an evolving project strategy whose objective is guaranteeing the survival of the goldsmiths’ production activity, what is asked of Design Education is that it transmits to its students the need and importance of agreeing on exercises of permanent reading of the production realities, thus achieving product typologies able to

assert themselves for their specific characteristics, the result of a project standing between tradition and innovation. The School as a Design Education institution should act as an awareness and promotion factor, acting in its geographical area and making Design a relevant factor for the development of local companies. This behaviour could be materialized in pilot-projects that encourage the entrepreneurial dynamics, make the society and the marketplace aware and, consequently, turn the School into a driving agent for the production culture. The 32 projects presented resulted in 32 feasible prototypes, which were shown in several exhibitions, namely Portojoia (the International Jewellery, Goldsmithing and Watchmaking Exhibition). The *Nuance* Project proved that the product designer graduating from Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo is given the opportunity to develop a methodology throughout the course that may be applicable and implemented in any production context. As a consequence, the student is not only able to correctly use the design tool (as is proven by the students' placements periods, ranging from the possibility of working at a fashion design house, goldsmithing workshops, office furniture companies, graphic arts ateliers to industries of materials for architecture), but also to put global design into practice, thus making available to the different entities involved project solutions ranging from product systems to company image.

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