

Between Anthropology and Design, Position Statement from an Experience with Palm Objects in the Mixteca Region in Oaxaca, Mexico

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In texts published as a result of seminars prior to this conference it seems that one of the core discussions focuses on the role of intervention in design anthropology, in which how to intervene is still “highly unexplored” (Smith and Otto, 2015: 1)

Most articles coincide in seeing design as a discipline of intervention. In this way, some seek similarities with ethnography, in which they sustain that from the moment the anthropologist is introduced to the community, he or she intervenes in social processes (Damsholt and Krogh; Tang and Hulvej, 2015). Others, (Gatt and Ingold, 2013; Ingold, 2015; Olander, 2015) think that anthropology is not ethnography, and see intervention as a way of correspondence *with* the people.

I would like to establish my position on *intervention* and around *things in the making* based on my own experience in design anthropology, in which I somewhat intuitively had to resolve the way of conducting it with a Mixtec community, both in my role as an anthropologist, and as a designer.

I start from a context that clearly has distinctive features based on the physical and cultural circumstances and consequently, I offer a brief overview of the indigenous context, specifically in the Mixteca region in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.

I believe that in these cases design anthropology offers immense possibilities in which intervention plays a fundamental role, especially for the potential it has in developing local objects that are currently undervalued in Mexico as a whole.

In the Mixteca region of Oaxaca palm leaf weaving is an activity that has been performed as long as the people can remember and one of the objects that is most often reproduced is the *sombrero* or hat, whose particular features vary from one town to another.

The woven palm hat is an object that serves practical functions: it is used for working in the fields, for ceremonial occasions known as *fiestas*, to carry seeds, for herding, and practically any male activity performed outside the home. It also has profound symbolism for individual and local identity. Traditionally it was regarded as an item of male clothing that has variations depending on its use at a given moment. In other words, a man of economic means has a hat for the *fiesta*, another for working

in the field, another for going to the city, and one that for going out for a walk, whereas a man of limited means uses the same *sombrero* until it falls apart.

The object also defines the user. It smells of the wearer; it adopts to the shape of his head; and it is worn out depending on the experiences shared by the thing and the wearer (Cila et al., 2015: 4).

A man feels “naked” without his hat, an item of attire that he wears as an extension of his body from the moment he rises to the time he sleeps. The hat maintains an intimate relationship with the individual, as well as the group. In its production, the object serves as an element of union, coexistence, and exchange, because the weavers tend to gather in the afternoons to weave with their parents or their *compadres* (i.e., their good friends). Weaving is interspersed with cooking, chatting, and with *fiestas*.

Bunn (2015: 4) explored the case of Scottish basketry and described the techniques used to make a basket that are alien to processes of industrial production.

The processes employed in making a Mixtec hat are completely manual too, and there is no tool or machinery that can replace them. The body almost exclusively provides the tools: hands, arms, eyes, and memory. Given that it is an activity that weavers learn at an early age—around the time they are 6—it is practiced with such skill that the movements become automatic and they are executed with such speed that for anyone not familiar with the technique, it is impossible to imitate them. Nevertheless, the payment that the weavers receive for their work is extremely low—around \$0.30 USD per hat—which makes many weavers want to abandon weaving and migrate to the city.

These factors are what led me to become interested in the study of the relationship between the palm object and the person, so my first approach to this nexus was through ethnographic work. However, it was not until I myself participated in the process of hat-making—when I learned to weave—that I was able to establish a real dialogue—in terms of speaking and production—with the “other.”

Here I would like to think of design anthropology from the interaction between the “professional designer” and “the other designer,” the one who is overlooked, one of the “invisible” individuals who forms part of some indigenous communities in Mexico.

From my viewpoint, the processes of an artisan’s creation are not much different from those faced by a designer, so I prefer to use the term “traditional designer,” to differentiate this individual from what Martín (2002: 28-32) defines as the “professional designer,” who is the one who received a formal school education to perform this role. I believe that among other aspects, an important difference between both designers is the relationship that each one establishes with the object that is being created, because by having divided the production process in the urban domain and in industrial societies, the idea of the professional designer often ends on paper, and even when the object is produced, the relationship that he or she establishes with the machine is through interaction—no matter

how profound the designer's knowledge of the tool may be.

Meanwhile, the traditional designer has an intimate relationship with the object, because it is his or her own body that produces it, the thing cannot exist without the maker, and the maker would not be what he or she is without the object produced.

Another element that Bunn (2015:3) mentioned is the way in which the "practice" of basketry facilitates the telling of histories, which coincides with my own experience. Weaving palm allowed me to comprehend the design processes involved in making the hat, the difficulty of making it, and therefore, to value the object itself. Furthermore, the time spent weaving was when both of us—the traditional designer and the professional designer—exchanged histories and got to know each other better. The dialogue that we established was through our role as designers¹, because by dealing with the production of objects the connection was formed on the basis of the thing and in this way, I can say that the design, in my experience in anthropological work, was a central element in communication, a part of language not restricted to oral communication, but instead something that transcended to body language. Trying to learn the positions of hands and executing the movements of the weaving enabled me to understand not only the processes, technique, and materials, but also the importance that this activity had for the makers.

Anthropology and design enabled me to comprehend more than the histories told about the past of the object, to understand it in the present, and to visualize it in the future through the eyes, voice, and body of the weavers.

I believe that intervention in design anthropology, specifically when it is a matter of the production of objects in indigenous communities in Mexico, can and must be through participation. It is fundamental *to work with* people and not *for* them (Ingold, 2008: 89), above all when it comes to populations in which the remuneration that a traditional designer receives for his or her work is barely enough to survive, which leaves no room for error in the process of intervention.

At the same time, we are talking about objects that are bearers of identity and that define those who produce and wear them, as individuals and as a community. It is therefore indispensable that anthropology contribute to the designer's understanding of the culture of the "other" through both the person and the object.

Design is a discipline that looks to the future and that seeks change (Otto and Smith, 2013:3), but it is also a language that can serve to communication in the anthropological world, specifically when it is a matter of the "other designer." On this point, the object is the center of interaction, because it is the means that gives significance to the relationship.

¹ According to Mauss (1971: 309-334) we have different roles in society, and objects serve to represent specific characters of ourselves.

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