FROM NEWLYN TO ROCINHA: CRAFT AS A MEDIUM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the central role of craft in initiatives which seek to transform lives through economic inclusion. Craft as an activator of social change. It focuses on Coopa-Roca, a craft cooperative offering flexible employment to women from Rocinha – the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro. Historically, craft underpinned the idealist discourse of the Arts & Crafts movement. As a mode of production (making things by hand), a high level of workmanship and a body of knowledge of materials, craft was co-opted with the aim of improving the quality of goods and the lives of workers. Craft was also seen as a solution for those without work, resulting in the creation of philanthropic projects, like the Newlyn Industrial Class in Cornwall in 1890. Today, the global discussion surrounding sustainability and ethical production brings craft once more to the fore by focusing on the value of local resources and cultural practices, and places craft at the heart of many socially responsible initiatives. By examining the Coopa-Roca enterprise in light of the ethos that guided the Newlyn project, the paper raises questions about intervention and cooperation between locals and ‘outsiders’, artisans and designers; the impact of these initiatives and the consumption of socially responsible design.

Faraway yet so close
Craft is at the centre of many socially responsible initiatives that aim to create work opportunities and improve the lives of the socially excluded. The projects I will be focusing on in this paper - one contemporary, the other historical - come from two very different places. And one could not imagine two more culturally disparate environments: Rocinha is the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with a population currently estimated at 200,000 people; Newlyn is a small fishing village in southwest Cornwall, England, with around 1,200 inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century.
Different centuries, different continents and different colours, but with a problem in common: lack of work opportunities and income. Coopa-Roca and the Newlyn Industrial Class were projects created in an attempt to address this problem and improve lives in these communities. In common, they saw craft as part of the ‘solution’. But how can craft address the predicament of unemployment and help to achieve a sustainable livelihood for those involved in these initiatives?

Crafting a solution

Craft here can be understood as skill and knowledge of processes and materials employed in artisanal production. It is often connected to locality, yet both initiatives were instigated by outside agents, and engaged skills that were not always indigenous. The Newlyn Class ‘targeted’ men and taught them skills to make utilitarian and decorative copperware. Coopa-Roca is a women’s craftwork and sewing cooperative, whose members exploit and refine their existing skills.

Craft is a body of knowledge and a mode of production. How people engage with these aspects, and not just with the end product, may determine craft’s potential to effect social change. Just as there are many possible meanings for the word craft, there are different and complex ways to engage with it.

In the West, the popularity of craft continues to rise. A new exhibition in 2011 at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, called Power of Making, celebrates “the role of making in our lives”. Whether as a hobby, as a trade or in the guise of studio craft (which is a way of expressing a particular aesthetic or discourse by an individual author, often trained at a higher education institution), craft as a mode of production in the West is exercised mostly by choice (and some would even say as a form of self-indulgence). This stands in contrast to the reality of many artisans in the developing world, where craft has frequently been seen as a means of livelihood in difficult, even desperate, economic circumstances. As Indian designer and social entrepreneur Laila Tyabji asserts, “beauty, authenticity, original creativity and spontaneity of the product is second to sheer economic necessity of its production and sale” (Tyabji 2003: 122-3).

As we know from history, it is not only economic necessity that encourages craft production. In response to increasing industrialisation and bad working conditions in factories (and to the decline of the quality of goods), the second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, based on the ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris, which aimed for social and artistic reform. The movement instigated a revival of craft production that often stood in “conscious opposition to industrialization” (Adamson 2009: 3). Making things by hand went from being a mode of production to become an idealism. Craft found itself at the centre of socially engaged initiatives inspired by the tenets of the Arts and Crafts.
For the more philanthropically minded followers of the movement, the teaching of traditional craft techniques to those in the lower ranks of society offered them the opportunity to acquire skills and earn a living. This was perceived as more dignified labour compared to alienated factory labour. Among these was the artist Mary Watts, who around 1900 founded a pottery – The Potters’ Arts Guild – in Compton, Surrey. This was an attempt to mitigate local unemployment and to give the workers a chance to “ennoble their lives through creative handiwork;” a common sentiment at the time. But these attempts were not always successful in fostering creative work and properly addressing unemployment.

The idealism and the idealisation of craft carried through into the twentieth century. When the ravages of the First World War produced an army of disabled men, handicraft was seen as a way of benefitting them. It was also seen as aiding the reconstruction of England: it was tinged with nostalgia, focused on the countryside and marked by ‘utopian idealism’ (Harrod 1999; Sarsby 1997). As design historian Tanya Harrod points out, “…during the inter-war years the disabled, the weak of mind and the village poor were not in a strong position to challenge the belief that for them handicraft... was an appropriate activity” (Harrod 1999: 161). She goes on to say that by the 1930s, the handicrafts came to be seen as a ‘panacea’ for the problems of the unemployed, and over a thousand ‘Voluntary Occupational Centres’ were set up in Britain. Surprisingly, in these schemes, the goods produced by the unemployed were prohibited from being traded commercially (in part due to pressures from the trade unions); thus apparently not dealing with the problem of unemployment, and only promoting craft’s supposed ‘therapeutic’ value. A similar concern for the welfare of the unemployed, based on the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, had guided the Newlyn project some 40 years earlier.

The Newlyn Industrial Class

The Newlyn Industrial Class was created in 1890. In the nineteenth century, Newlyn was the largest fishing port in Cornwall, but the fishermen faced temporary unemployment due to bad weather and the fluctuations of this seasonal trade. The region had also suffered since the 1870s with the decline of the metal mining industry, which added to the unemployment problem. In view of this, a number of artists who had settled in the village in the 1880s decided that the introduction of craft training was a palliative to inactivity, a way of supplementing the income of the locals, and of offering apprenticeships. The community-based project was supported by local MP and benefactor T.B. Bolitho, and linked to the Home Arts and Industries Association (HAIA), a society that promoted the teaching of handicrafts (Bennett and Pill 2008; Berriman 1986).

Such initiatives seemed to have moralising overtones. The emphasis of the Newlyn Class seemed to be on keeping idle hands busy. The painter Stanhope Forbes had this to say about the
initiative: “the idea was to find employment for the spare moments of fisher lads, and certainly a more admirable safety valve for their superfluous energy could not have been devised”. The ‘superfluous energy’ was probably a reference to spending time in the pub or engaging in some other ungodly activity. This is perhaps not surprising, as the discourse of taste of the Victorian artists based in Newlyn favoured ‘wholesome’ subjects, and that ‘charm’ was to be found after a “nostalgic search for the ‘old-fashioned’ and the ‘simple’” (Deacon 2001).

The man generally regarded as the main instigator of the Newlyn Industrial Class was John D. Mackenzie, a painter and illustrator who arrived in Newlyn in 1888. The Class started teaching local people fretwork, metalwork, enamelling and embroidery. However, it is the repoussé metalwork – known as Newlyn Copper – that survived and became collectable.

The copper work required training that was not related to any indigenous skills, and the Newlyn artists did not possess the necessary skills to teach the fishermen. John Pearson, an expert metalworker, came to Newlyn as an instructor, arriving in 1892. He was one of the founding members of the Guild of Handicraft in London and also had worked with William de Morgan. Although Pearson was a key figure in the development of the Newlyn project, its success was due in large part to the efforts of Mackenzie – he created most of the designs that were then copied and executed by the ‘fisher lads’. The inspiration for the designs came from the local environment and featured all sorts of marine motifs. Utilitarian and decorative objects were decorated with a profusion of fish, boats, seabirds and seaweed.

Newlyn Copper was promoted through exhibitions such as those organised by the Home Arts and Industries Association, sold directly in Newlyn, St. Ives and Penzance, and also retailed in Liberty & Co., London, which catered for the fashionable urban market. In this context, their retail price put them firmly out of reach of the working class people of the community. They were essentially items affordable mostly by the professional classes and the rich. In spite of this, author Colin Pill asserts that “Newlyn copper work was clearly valued locally and played an important role in the celebration of social and religious life…. and shows Newlyn work as 'art for and by the people' - as William Morris might have wished.”
As it has been well documented, most Arts and Crafts projects were not economically viable for long. Craft historian Glenn Adamson deals with this point and suggests there was “a fundamental disconnection with the capitalist marketplace” (Adamson 2009: 135). The Newlyn Class enjoyed a relatively good run, but after Mackenzie’s death, in 1918, the enterprise declined. Without their mentor, only a few individuals carried on making. The Newlyn Class became a more commercial concern and was run after by two of its former pupils, Tom Batten and John Payne Cotton from 1920 (later changing its name to Newlyn Art Metal Industries). The production of Newlyn Copper continued in various guises, but by the late 1950s changes in taste and competition with mass-produced goods signalled its end.

Coopa-Roca

The Newlyn initiative did not evolve from a body of knowledge possessed by the local men. Rather, it was imposed on them by outside agents. This contrasts with the Coopa-Roca project in Brazil, which, although instigated by an outsider, evolved from the craft knowledge of the local women.

Coopa-Roca is a craftwork and sewing cooperative established in 1987. It is a ‘brand’ that promotes its own creations and also collaborates with commercial partners. For the last decade or so, its name has been associated with the worlds of fashion, high-end design and contemporary art. It has worked with, among many others, fashion designers like Paul Smith and Carlos Miele, product designers such as Tord Boontje and the Campana brothers and artist Ernesto Neto.

The cooperative was spearheaded by sociologist Maria Teresa Leal, Tetê as she is affectionately known, who is still its executive director. As a university student, Leal was interested in the theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, which emphasise the importance of dialogue and raising awareness in communities, and the sharing of lived experience. This led her to work with children from Rocinha in the early 1980s.

At this time, she became acutely aware of the plight of the women from the favela: they were from low-income families, mostly with a low level of formal education and who had migrated to Rio from the Northeast of Brazil, one of its poorest regions. They had carried with them skills that would eventually serve them well, but they also carried the stigma of both geographies. They would have been discriminated, both for being migrants from a poor region of Brazil and for living in a favela. Nordestinos, as the people from northeastern Brazil are known in general, are
often treated with contempt in the southern cities of Brazil. *Favelado*, literally the inhabitant of a *favela*, has become a pejorative term in Brazil, associated with a discourse of criminality and lack of social order. It could be argued that the prejudiced posture entrenched in some members of a socially unequal society has contributed to the lack of work opportunities available to these women.

Many would have ended up working as domestic servants and cleaners on a low income. Finding employment is even more problematic for those with families, due to the difficulty in arranging childcare.\textsuperscript{vi} So when Coopa-Roca was created, it aimed to offer more flexible work conditions and, of particular value to mothers, the possibility of working from home. Some women in Rocinha would already have worked from home doing piecework for the clothing industry, but this wasn’t as flexible as it seemed (the women still had to collect and deliver jobs).

On a personal note, this was part of my childhood. I grew up surrounded by fabric and seamstresses. My mother had a small business and subcontracted seamstresses from all over Rio, including Rocinha. Sometimes I would go there with her to collect the clothes, and remember once staying for a birthday party. I also recall that some seamstresses who were employed full-time by my mother sometimes had to come to work with their child. Not an ideal situation.

The project that Tetê Leal originally worked on with children involved recycling fabric remnants. But it was their mothers who ended up using them to make cushion covers, bedspreads, small rugs etc. She was impressed by their skills, but realised they were underutilized. Their craft knowledge was not often applied effectively to generate income. Handicrafts like crochet, embroidery, patchwork and appliqué were commonly used to make pieces destined for personal use. If offered for sale, they did not always command good prices. Working class Brazilians could not afford to pay much for this type of vernacular production, much of it utilizing recycled fabric. Sometimes it would also be dismissed as inferior or kitsch (by both the middle-class and the working class). It suffered a prejudice that was not unlike that experienced by the people themselves. Of course, this was before Brazil’s popular cultural production became trendy outside and inside Brazil.

\textbf{Rethinking Craft}

The recovery and revaluation of traditional artisanal activities in Brazil is relatively recent. Figures like the architect Lina Bo Bardi had cherished and attempted to promote vernacular making in the 1950s and 1960s. But she was a rare figure in a country that even seemed ashamed of this kind of production and censored its promotion (in 1965, a show organised by her in Rome was cancelled by the Brazilian military dictatorship) (Gama 2009).

As Brazilian writer and curator Adélio Borges asserts, it was in the mid-1980s that designers like Renato Imbroisi and Heloisa Crocco, and initiatives like Coopa-Roca, started to look to the objects, materials and modes of production of Brazilian
craft (Borges 2011). They started to ‘rethink’ them and blend them with design thinking, and have done much to contribute to a shift in perception.

By reinterpreting the traditional crafts in a contemporary way, and through its participation in fashion shows and collaborations with designers and other commercial partners, Coopa-Roca gave them greater visibility. As for the women, the cooperative gave them a voice and a sense of self-worth – they are not simply artisans, but partners of the project. Craft in their hands is a practice and a tool for social change.

Coopa-Roca aims to empower women through craft, so they can use and refine their craft skills to benefit themselves and their families and develop in a sustainable way. It also helps to recover skills that could be easily forgotten, and to pass them on to future generations. The cooperative members have by now established a reputation as skilled craftswomen, who can collaborate with artists and designers in the development of the pieces, and not just be simply ‘hands’ paid for their manual skill. It helps the enterprise that the ‘burden’ of promoting the product is borne by the commissioning company.

Collaboration or Exploitation?

But is there a catch? For the cynics among us, the meeting between brands, designers and artisans could appear to be simply an exercise in marketing. As design critic Frederico Duarte points out, the emphasis on who produces the goods has become something of ‘added value to design’, and in the case of Coopa-Roca, this is helped by what he calls the ‘favela factor’ (Duarte 2011). The example Duarte gives is the involvement of the cooperative in the production of the Lacoste Holiday Collector Series designed by the Campana brothers. The super limited edition polo shirts, entirely made up of Lacoste embroidered logos sewn by hand, cost between 5,000 and 7,500 US dollars. How much of this goes into the hands of the makers, one wonders... The favela sourcing has itself become of value. Brands and designers seem eager to emphasise their engagement with social causes in their press releases.

Campanas + Lacoste 2009 Collector’s Series; men’s limited edition polo shirt

Is this a form of exploitation? One could argue that at least the women of Coopa-Roca set their own rates and workload (they are paid on a piece rate basis), unlike the workers in sweatshops who produce innumerable goods for many brands. And the women need to work, so one could say too that they are happy to work on projects like this, which furthermore give them international exposure and the opportunity to make new contacts and appeal to new clients. But this ‘collaboration’ is still problematic, not least because the project seems to emphasise the laborious aspect of making ('sewing-hours'), rather than drawing more sensitively on their craft
knowledge. However, the ethics of this type of ‘collaboration’ would require a fuller debate.

In this apparent ‘tug of war’ between ethical and commercial interests, how can craft values be preserved? And can designers help?

The elephant in the room

Despite the respect that we may have for the organisations that promote ‘craft’ production, we can find many examples that do not make the best use of the artisan’s knowledge and skills, and do not reflect their culture. The many initiatives that tap into local material and human resources offer handcrafted products to a complex network of consumers who can make choices, but sometimes it seems that we are asked to suspend judgement of quality and buy the work for its ‘social value’. We are presented with a ‘socially responsible’

object that we buy ‘into’ to be seen as ‘socially responsible’ consumers. This can impact negatively on the appreciation of the handcrafted object and even contribute to its debasement. Many objects do not take into account changes in tastes and habits; they are made without a thorough consideration of commercial viability and risk being as dated as antimacassars.

When designers meet artisans: design as intervention

According to Indrasen Vencatachellum (former UNESCO Chief, Section for Arts, Crafts and Design), writing in a UNESCO report, artisans are “more and more disconnected from consumer needs and tastes” (Vencatachellum 2005: v). If this is still true, how can their products appeal to the consumer? The same study suggested the need for an intermediate, the designer, to “intervene”, to work with the artisan in order to bridge the gap between craft knowledge and the creation of a product for an increasingly demanding consumer (and hopefully intervention not as interference, but as a legitimate in between).

Considering that before the craftsperson was “designer, producer and marketeer”, it seems that now the artisan needs the designer to make things that are commercially viable. The designer thus can act as a kind of interpreter of the consumer world, helping the artisan to fine-tune production and reconnect with the capitalist marketplace. Importantly, the involvement of the designer may
open up markets that were previously beyond the reach of the artisan.

In Europe, a good example of design being used to revitalize artisanal production is the Portuguese ‘Projecto TASA’ (which stands for Old Skills, Current Solutions). It was commissioned by CCDR Algarve (the region’s development agency), and conceived and delivered by The Home Project design studio, which already had experience of collaborating with artisans. For TASA, the design studio collaborated closely with artisans from the Algarve to create a range of contemporary objects that thoughtfully draw from local traditional knowledge, materials and skills.

Old Skills, New Life

Some of Coopa-Roca commissions also resulted from an initiative promoted by a cultural agency. In 2004, the British Council invited Dutch designer Tord Boontje to collaborate with the cooperative. Boontje’s interest in the handmade and recyclable materials chimed with Coopa-Roca’s use of fabric remnants. The result was the chandelier Come Rain Come Shine, a confection of crochet and organza that later went into production thanks to Artecnica.

Local communities of artisans can benefit from collaborating with designers, but as Hazel Chalk points out, drawing on local production skills and culture has an impact on wider social and economic issues everyone should be aware of (Clark 2007). When a case is made for tapping into local resources as a form of fomenting socially responsible and sustainable design, we should always bear in mind the cultural context of the ‘productive communities’ involved. Rather than seeing the artisans as ‘poor people who need to be helped’, projects like Coopa-Roca show how the attention paid to their knowledge can direct the course of a social enterprise. By promoting existing skills, and working with its members to maintain a consistently high quality of production and finish, the cooperative has shown that it is possible to create new models of production, and not simply impose them (as was the case with the Newlyn project). Their knowledge in turn informs the design of objects which rely on the textures, aesthetics and poetics of the handmade.

100 years separate the Newlyn Class from Coopa-Roca, but the Arts and Crafts principles that guided the first project still resonate. The Arts and Crafts movement sought to restore the worker’s relationship to hand-making following its erosion caused by industrial production. Many of its projects were short-lived, but ideas like
“pleasure in labour” and “fulfilment in work” find their modern equivalent in the resonance craftwork has for the women of Rocinha. Craft not only offers them a way of earning an income, it is also a way of reconnecting to their origins, part of an affective relationship to locality and people.

The skills learnt from their mothers and brought by them from the Northeast of Brazil, skills carried in their minds and hands, can now be utilized and shared. Their example encourages other women, as Tetê Leal has expressed:

“By promoting our work, we will encourage lots of women in Brazil [to see] that they have the capacity to work and to improve their lives... We are promoting a movement more than a job...”

But Brazil is changing rapidly, and becoming more industrialized. Craft should not be seen as a universal solution for social exclusion (or the pitfalls of industrialization or even of a post-industrial society). For craft to be of value, and to be able to activate social change, those involved should not forget where it came from. Craft is more than manual skills and labour. Craft is knowledge. And as Coopa-Roca encapsulates so well, craft is collective knowledge.

REFERENCES
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Social philanthropy has tried to address the age-old problem of unemployment (and underemployment) in a usually admirable but nevertheless small way. It cannot be said to compensate in any way for a good welfare system or a society with more social equality and employment opportunities. In spite of the more limited scope of their action, if compared to governmental initiatives or certain grassroots movements like the Landless Rural Workers Movement in Brazil (MST), social philanthropists continue to work with deprived communities the world over.
In Europe, craftsmanship underpins the manufacturing of handmade goods of the luxury sector, but this is a small segment of the industry as a whole and is currently under threat with the decline of traditional skills. According to an article published in the Financial Times in April 2010, the erosion of skills in the luxury sector is a major concern for the trade bodies, see http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3a6af8ee-3e8b-11df-a706-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1S7pKRwS9 (last accessed 15/07/2011).

Tyabjy is a founder member and chairperson of DASTKAR, a society for crafts and craftspeople based in India, who works with artisans to develop products with contemporary appeal. See www.dastkar.org.

On craft and idealism, see Glenn Adamson’s (ed.) introduction to Section 3, The Craft Reader, pp. 135-8.


In these communities, it is not uncommon for women to leave their oldest child looking after the young ones while they are out at work, even though this constitutes a criminal offence. The women do this out of desperation, knowing it is not the right thing to do but often do not have an alternative (there are some nurseries in Rocinha itself, managed by the state or by NGOs, but they are still insufficient to serve the whole community).


See www.projectotasa.com (in Portuguese) and http://www.the-home-project.com/work/work_tasa1.htm (in English).