

# DESIGN AND SUSTAINABILITY IN PRACTICE

## VALUING THE TERRITORY AS A POSSIBILITY

*Laura de Souza Cota Carvalho Silva Pinto*

Since the industrial revolution, the consumption of objects by society has only increased. We are now facing an unsustainable scenario, since “sustainable development is, of course, incompatible with the unrestricted play of market forces” (SACHS, 2009, p. 55). In this sense, there is a great question about which path to follow. Does it make sense for designers to continue designing without a more critical evaluation of how we consume? What is the current goal of design? What is its current purpose?

In order for us to truly move forward in terms of sustainability, a deeper change of paradigm and behavior is necessary. But for that, it is necessary to leave our comfort zone. This in itself is an arduous task, since “it is natural in man to be free and want to be free; but it is also in his nature to keep certain habits that education gives him” (BOÉTIE, 1982).

We are living an unprecedented globalization and urbanization process. Since the great navigations, when all parts of the world started to communicate (MORIN; WULF, 2003, p. 22), there has never been such a possibility of world-wide connection. We are one click away from almost any kind of information and people.

Such a reality has printed a change in the lifestyle of society and in the organization of culture. The advent of new technologies and media, such as digital social networks, for example, has allowed the redesign of human relationships, creating the possibility of new presence modes. According to Castells (apud LOMNITZ, 2009, p. 17), the globalization process has created “a new dominant social structure, the networked society; a new economy, the global information economy and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality”.

In the midst of this increasingly connected and codified world, some concepts and understandings are lost, and we always incur the “danger of unique history” (ADICHIE, 2009). For Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie, as human beings, we always incur the danger of believing that there is only one version to a story. A single story that tries to establish itself as the **story**, which contains the **truth** about a certain fact. However, it is up to us to create new descriptions and new designs of the world. What is not lacking today are models that need to be rewritten and/or reinvented.

Despite all access to information and living in times of sustainability, Morin and Wulf believe that we know little of everything and that the world readings have been done in a superficial way, which consequently creates a lack of awareness of the whole. For these authors “the paradox is this: we live in an era in which everything in the world is interrelated, and there is no pertinent consciousness that is valid if it does not have at least the world as a horizon for all major problems” (MORIN; WULF, 2003, p. 27). In this perspective, the need for a new design of the way we see the world and act is imposed. A global vision and action on world problems is effectively lacking, but one that does not ignore local specificities.

In recent decades, we have experienced an apex of discussions about necessary environmental, economic and social changes in favor of a more sustainable lifestyle. However, for these changes to occur, it is necessary to implement them and not just propose them. We believe that this can be done through small actions that are well structured and that effectively generate impact. As Gansky (2011, p. 5) states, “we are being forced to rethink what matters to us”.

For the French economist and philosopher Serge Latouche (2009, p. 34), it is the adopted growth model that is bankrupt. The unmeasured logic of our economic system cannot be sustained. It is therefore imperative that we find alternative paths to the current model in the search for greater balance.

In the current model “small civilizations are being eliminated and we do not know how to preserve them [...]. We cannot confine them, as in zoos, to protect

them, but if we open them, we run the risk of disintegrating them by integrating them” (MORIN; WULF, 2003, p. 34).

*The industrial civilization process is thus a continuous process of the objectification of science as a technique in social relations, which leads not only to the construction of a ‘second nature’, but also to the self-construction of an ‘artificial man’, who generates himself in the objectification of scientific knowledge as a ‘... spontaneity transformed into objective regularity’ (BARTHOLO JUNIOR, 1986, p. 16).*

What we see is a real necessity for change in several aspects. And in this sense, the proposal of the decrement model suggested by Latouche (2009, p. 6) is pertinent: “Your goal is a society where you will live better working and consuming less. It is a necessary proposal to reopen the space of inventiveness and creativity of the imaginary blocked by economic, developmental and progressive totalitarianism”.

The challenge of decrement is to learn how to share resources. This invariably implies a cultural change. As the author states, “what is needed is much more radical: a cultural revolution, no more and no less, which should culminate in a political re-foundation” (LATOUCHE, 2009, p. 40). In other words, it is not a simple action, much less a short-term one.

What we see is that new structures have emerged in response to the current scenario. The so-called social businesses, for example, an alternative way to the traditional business model of the second sector and to the assistance model of the third sector, have been established in several countries in the search to ‘do it differently’, creating companies that effectively bring positive impact to society, not only aiming at profit in their actions. On the other hand, collaborative networks have grown and multiplied through the Internet, such as the well-known virtual encyclopedia Wikipedia.

We believe that a fundamental point in this discussion in favor of change is guided by the concept of solidarity presented by Rorty. Solidarity is linked to an expansion of our sense of community. It can be defined as an action that respects context, culture and diversity.

For Morin and Wulf (2003, p. 33), if we are able to exercise self-criticism, we will be able to understand others as diverse and different, respecting them. And, from this, we will be able to understand the other as one of us. But, for this exercise it is important to be open to new possibilities of speech, it is essential to understand otherness, because “[...] to speak about otherness is to speak about difference, and the recognition of what is different and of borders” (SANTOS, 2008, p. 65).

We believe that solidarity can contribute to the survival of different cultures in the midst of globalization, collaborating for diversity. What we need is to develop translation and language apparatuses. This is because “the problem of knowledge is basically a translation problem” (FLUSSER, 2009, p. 73), of language adequacy. And this is not an easy task, because being open to dialogue is an exercise in recognizing otherness and accepting vulnerability before the other.

## DESIGN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by several dichotomies, such as: local × global; craft × industrial; personal × impersonal; consumption × sharing. In addition, immediacy and reductionism have been very present characteristics, there is a lot of information available about almost everything, but there are equally uninformed people. This is a problem when we talk about sustainability, since sustainability implies information. It implies being informed and understanding that the various actors in society are related to each other in a complex system.

Faced with this reality, design, as a dynamic discipline, redesigns itself and gains new contours and new approaches, aiming to become more current and appropriate to the present moment. If in the beginning design was created to meet the demand of a growing industry, we have learned over the years that, in fact, design meets society and its complexities, and is transformed and rewritten with it. Design is a product of culture and as a product of culture it follows the fluctuations to which it is subjected, such as: beliefs, tastes, values and technological advances. It follows that design needs to be as dynamic as society in order to continue to exist. This is because the possibilities and restrictions of each time imply different ways of acting when faced with problems given to design.

Design is a projecting discipline. And projecting is an inherent activity of the human being. Systematically or not, we have been projecting things (objects, actions, constructions, etc.) for many years. But there is not only one way to project. Different ways of projecting have been developed and improved with the development of society itself. Design, as a discipline, acts directly on the conception of objects and, in fact, this activity is much more than just aesthetic issues, given that objects carry in themselves scientific theories and meanings.

We understand that the discipline does not only serve the interests of the industry, but is committed to the world we live in. In times of virtual social networks and 3D printers, it is no longer appropriate to talk only about industrial

design. We are living an unprecedented globalization and virtualization process and design cannot and should not be out of it. But how does design walk in a world that dematerializes and connects even more?

It is necessary to rethink the object in the world we live in and the function of those who imagine these objects. Thus, we understand the need to rethink the designer's performance in face of the new context that presents itself.

Some possibilities already started are service, interaction and business designs. In all of them, the professional starts to design immaterial elements and not only the materials, as before.

However, it is vital to understand that design is not only neutral but also a future-oriented activity, that is, objects are loaded with intentions and we are able to design things for a world in which we wish to live in. Design, if you wish, can be an agent of transformation and change, but for this a critical and responsible positioning from professionals in the area is necessary. As Margolin states, "design will change as its professionals develop a new consciousness" (MARGOLIN, 2014, p. 130).

The constant challenge of design is to do so seeking to meet and overcome contemporary constraints, which today are: virtualization, dematerialization, high connectivity, the demands for a more sustainable way of life, economic, social and cultural inequalities, among others. We cannot get stuck with the original motivation: industrialization and the project of market-oriented objects. It is necessary to rethink the role of design in the world, it is necessary to extend its limits and, fundamentally, a change of attitude is indispensable. As Margolin (2014, p. 132) says, "Designers have the ability to design and shape material and immaterial products that can address human problems on a broad scale and contribute to social welfare [...]. This goes far beyond green design or ecodesign [...]".

But, as far as sustainability is concerned, how are sustainable projects executed? If the solution was simple, we would already have an answer to the question. However, articulating the various dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, social and cultural) in a project becomes a complex challenge that should not be disregarded. Perhaps the best way to arrive at an answer to the question is to think how we can minimize negative impacts and increase positive impacts in a project.

In this sense, the proposal of working on the design with focus on the valorization of a territory may be a possibility. This is because, from the perspective of design and territory, we seek to understand all local peculiarities in search

of solutions more appropriate to the context, which articulate producers of the territory and value local products.

## TERRITORY AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The human being is a territorial (situated) and relational being, he is a being-in-the-world. As the Moroccan economist Hassan Zaoual states, as beings situated in time, space and the imaginary, we need meaning and direction (ZAOUAL, 2008, p. 100). In other words, we need to belong to a place.

For Zaoual (2006, p. 36), “men do not behave in the same way at all latitudes and at all times”. We are extremely diverse. Each region, each society, each culture has its own way of organizing itself, has its stories, its customs, its way of living. According to Morin and Wulf (2003, p. 43) “cultures are particular forms of worldview, particular interpretations of the world”. These places to which we link and from which we act are called by Zaoual as symbolic places of belonging.

However, this “necessity of belonging cannot be understood by the rationality of market economic logic, in which utilitarian values prevail and does not take into account the multiple dimensions of human existence” (ZAOUAL, 2006, p. 17). Zaoual’s theory of sites is born of the failure of traditional economic models and seeks to understand how another form of economy can be thought of, one that understands and respects the diversity of human contexts without seeking to homogenize them. For the author it is fundamental to understand humans as they are, in their universality and diversity, instead of reducing them to a simple *Homo economicus*, pasteurized and homogenized.

According to Zaoual, we are *Homo situs*, that is, we build our ethics, identity and rationality *in situ*. In this way, despite being global and connected, we keep our local baggage, we continue to search for elements that make us belong to places. This is because, as undetermined (contingent) beings, we, human beings live in search of elements that gives us roots and fix us, allowing us to more easily say “I am...”. Thus, we live the local × global dichotomy, we are belonging and being foreign at the same time. We belong to one symbolic place, but we are foreigners in any other.

From this perspective, the contingencies of a territory determine that a product is one way and not another (RORTY, 2007). This is because territories are particular places, the result of the sum of natural characteristics and knowledge developed by the population living there. This results in specific products that

incorporate such characteristics, such as food, which is often the result of their territories of origin and represent a place.

Although the concept of territory, popularly, is related only to a delimited geographic space, a portion of land, the understanding of territory in a broader way, contemplating human influences on space, was spread with the ease of access to imported products and also to information in books and on the Internet that contemplated the term *terroir*. The French term that stood out positively in the 60s in that country gained strength in Brazil and has been associated with some products to raise the perception of quality.

In the midst of this high connectivity, massification and uniformity universe, people have sought points to fix themselves, to differentiate themselves. This reflects directly on consumer actions, increasing the priority for the purchase of products that contain meaning, that are effectively differentiated (ZUIN, L; ZUIN, P, 2008, p. 111). In this sense, products identified by their location are often acquired exactly because they represent a reference and the tradition of a particular place, even if it does not have a certification of origin.

Thus, traditional products, those that “constitute and are part of the social history of a particular culture [...] until a few years ago, considered as symbols of the socioeconomic backwardness of an individual, a region or a country [...]” (ZUIN, L; ZUIN, P, 2008, p. 111) have gained prominence and value. Precisely because they represent a link to a territory. This strategy has been worked on for some years in Europe, mainly with food products.

For all this, it was expected that traditional foods, strongly linked to the culture and history of a place, would be effectively valued. However, what is happening in the field in Brazil is that small producers of traditional foods face great difficulties in valuing and marketing their products, remaining on the margins of the market or at their mercy.

This fact, besides resulting in a financial problem, generates much greater impacts on producers and their regions of origin. It impacts the sustainability of the rural environment and its survival. Besides affecting the urban environment, since in many cases the final solution found is still the rural exodus.

In Brazil, the commercialization process of small rural producers is deficient. Besides having restricted access to the market, when they do so, in most cases it is informal and unstable.

The uncertainty of this commercialization process makes it impossible to perpetuate the business and, consequently, the permanence of the family in the

countryside. Thus, the construction of strategies and new tools that allow a better flow of production and the sustainability of the family in the field from its main economic activity becomes crucial.

In scenarios like this, the designer's immersion in the territory becomes a fruitful path for the development of solutions more appropriate to the local reality and that minimize negative impacts and enhance the positive ones. This is because the immersion makes it possible to understand the local specificities and to design solutions with greater potential to be assertive, a path that analyzes and respects the specificities of each site. Otherwise, the designer ends up developing generic projects that contribute little to the sustainability of a given population. In Zaoual's words, they would be "projectiles, thrown at sites about which there are no visions from within, because it has always been assumed that local actors are 'idiots' and that they need to learn to act according to a superior and scientific rationality decreed" (ZAOUAL, 2006, p. 28).

## THOUGHTS

Living in an extremely connected and industrialized reality, getting out of the homogenization pattern is a huge challenge for the designer, who, inserted in this context, often has difficulties to get away from it to observe other distinct realities. Therefore, the recognition of otherness is an important ability for professionals in the area to identify differences and respect them.

This is because the practice of design needs to be contextualized so that it makes sense to the various actors impacted by the project. The possibilities and restrictions of each time imply different ways of acting when faced with design problems. It matters when, where, how and for whom it is designed.

In this sense, the territory is a context that needs to be understood in its specificities and particularities. The proposal of working design and territory demands another way of looking at the environment to design. A more sensitive and humanized look that is able to capture the nuances of a site to develop solutions that can be more sustainable and respect local conditions.

By immersing oneself in the territory, seeking information about people, culture, the place itself, the local economy, productions, know-how, traditions, among other important aspects to be observed, it is possible to understand the ways of life, production and consumption of a place. These elements are fundamental for a design project with a view to sustainability, especially of small



local productions, which are often not valued and do not find a market to sell the production.

The proposal of design and territory is fundamental for the development of projects with small local producers. This is because such enterprises present an economic, productive and marketing reality very different from a large company that, most of the time, does not have its production so dependent on the territory.

In his theory, Zaoual believes that only by respecting the farms will we be able to preserve our diversities. On the contrary, in the logic of truth and unique history that seek pasteurization, we have implemented a unique solution to serve everyone without considering their peculiarities, which results in inequalities and annihilation of cultures.

To achieve a more sustainable path, we need to understand the importance of preserving and respecting diversity, not only environmental, but social, economic and cultural. The understanding of this diversity is guided by the recognition of otherness and the exercise of redescription. This is because, in the exercise of accepting the other as another, we also redescribe ourselves, reinventing who we are.

However, for this to occur it is necessary to establish true dialogues in favor of multiple stories, avoiding the danger of the single story (ADICHIE, 2009). In other words, we need to change the way we understand and relate to the other.

The proposal of the symbolic sites of Zaoual moves towards identifying the local diversities to respect and preserve them. In this way, it contributes to the search for more sustainable solutions, since sustainability can be achieved if we seek to preserve the diversities. This is because homogenized ways, such as a monoculture, unbalance the system and do not contribute to its preservation/sustainability.

Globalization has highlighted the local  $\times$  global dichotomy and the clash between preserving diversity and pasteurizing everything and everyone. While the preservation of sites and their singularities grows in the sense of safeguarding local knowledge, artisan and traditional products, pasteurization walks in the industrial logic of more of the same per unit of time, eliminating heterogeneity.

In view of this, design focused on the territory is configured as a way to preserve the local singularities, seeking to generate value for this diversity, making it known and recognizable. In order to be executed, it is necessary to immerse oneself in the local reality, trying to understand the context to design

solutions that make “visible” the stories of the place, its products, inhabitants and knowledge.

As a professional who designs objects for the world, most of the time in industrial logic, the designer needs to understand that there is no invisible hand of the market that coordinates everything and everyone. It is decisions and actions in favor of a different world that will effectively make a difference in building a more sustainable society. The market represents the society itself, is made up of several actors, including the designer, and reinvents itself every day. If the designer projects in accordance with systems that are often perverse, why not project for a better world?

One possible path to sustainability is the construction of a more dialogue-based society that can preserve the diversity of sites. This can be done through respect for others and their otherness, and through solidarity that allows listening and dialogue. As long as we remain in a discursive model we will not truly move forward in sustainable terms.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADICHIE, C. N. **O perigo da história única**. TED, 2009. Available from: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=pt](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=pt). Access on: 23 Mar. 2010.

BARTHOLO JR., R. S. **Os labirintos do silêncio: cosmovisão e tecnologia na modernidade**. São Paulo: Marco Zero, 1986.

BARTHOLO JR., R. S. Breves notas sobre inovações sociais solidárias. **AGITPROP, Revista Brasileira de Design**, São Paulo, v. 1, n. 10, 2008.

BOÉTIE, E. **Discurso da Servidão Voluntária**. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982.

FLUSSER, V. **A dúvida**. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 2009.

GANSKY, L. **Mesh: porque o futuro dos negócios é compartilhar**. Rio de Janeiro: Alta Books, 2011.

LATOUCHE, S. **Pequeno tratado do decrescimento sereno**. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2009.

LOMNITZ, L. A. **Redes Sociais, Cultura e Poder**. Rio de Janeiro: E-papers, 2009.

SANTOS, M. C. L. Consumo, descarte, catação e reciclagem: notas sobre design e multiculturalismo. **Cadernos de Estudos Avançados em Design**, v.1, p. 60-67, 2008.

- MARGOLIN, V. **A política do artificial: ensaios e estudos sobre design**. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2014.
- MORIN, E.; WULF, C. **Planeta: a aventura desconhecida**. São Paulo: Unesp, 2003.
- RORTY, R. **Contingência, ironia e solidariedade**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2007.
- SACHS, I. **Caminhos para o desenvolvimento sustentável**. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2009.
- ZAOUAL, H. **Globalização e diversidade cultural**. São Paulo: Cortez, 2008.
- ZAOUAL, H. **Nova Economia das Iniciativas Locais: uma introdução ao pensamento pós-global**. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 2006.
- ZUIN, L. F. S.; ZUIN, P. B. Produção de alimentos tradicionais: contribuindo para o desenvolvimento local/regional e dos pequenos produtores rurais. **Revista Brasileira de Gestão e Desenvolvimento Regional**, Taubaté, v. 4, n. 1, p. 109-127, 2008.

## **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

*Laura de Souza Cota Carvalho Silva Pinto is a professor of Design at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Ph.D. in Design at the Graduate Design Program of PUC-Rio (2016), master in Production Engineering at COPPE/UFRJ (2011) with emphasis on management and innovation, has a degree in Industrial Design from the Universidade do Estado de Minas Gerais (2007). She has experience in the area of Industrial Design, with emphasis on product design, working mainly on the following topics: design and territory, product design, service design, social innovation, new business models, food, family farming and sustainability.*

E-mail: lauracota@ufmg.br

