

# REPORT

## NOMAD WORKSHOP, LOOK FOR WHAT, FIND OUT WHAT? LOOK FOR AND FIND WHAT THE COLLECTIVE KNOWS

*Christian Ullmann*

For more than 20 years I have had the opportunity to travel across Brazil and South America meeting and working with artisan production groups. The activities developed are very dynamic and most of the time involving an intermediary, a development institution that invites or hires the design consulting service to be applied in a craft production group.

The objective has always been clear, to help the group to improve some situation related to production, product/service and/or relationship between the group or with the market.

Surely Brazil, and in particular the Brazilian Amazon, is a very important reference for my work, because that is where I saw, understood and had time to think about it: making design, because the action of designing is greater than what we knew as industrial design until the 90s.

In 1995, I had the opportunity to work on an exploratory project of the Italian company Alessi — the Centro Studi Alessi, selected 7 young Argentine designers to participate in the “Progetto Biológico del Centro Studi Alessi”.

And there it was, in the mecca of design in Alessi’s show room in Milan, thinking possible products for a line of objects for the bathroom. But exactly one

year later I was getting involved in another project to work with native Amazon wood for the manufacture of furniture.

Only now I can understand, reflect on how things happened and why they happened:

Alessi introduced me to the daily industrial design that I had studied in Buenos Aires — all the university theory in practice, to finally achieve: impose our “project authority” and everything would work out.

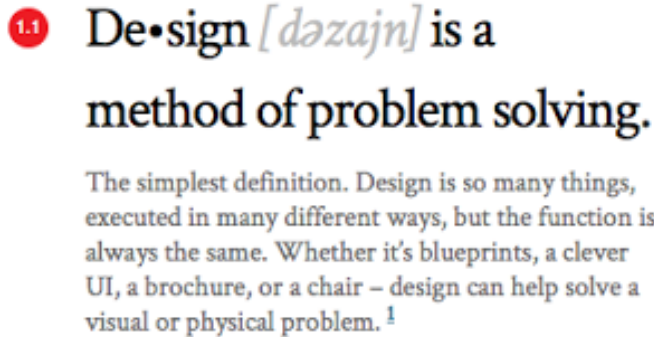
However, a year later, I began to discover the multiple Amazonian realities; another view of design, thinking the action in a broad way: to project — to project from the cultural, social references, limitations, contradictions and especially with the valorization of the natural and human.

This was a big mess in my head in many exchanges of ideas and discussions, because what I was starting to live was what the design universe would take almost 10 years to assimilate.

This “new” cut-out of the design universe, design focused on handcrafted production, gained strength, scale and recognition at the beginning of this century, in which designers, NGOs, companies, governments and, finally, the academic universe believed they had a lot to collaborate — surely this can happen thanks to the separation of the words “industrial design” and finally we were able to see and understand that “design” has more strength than industrial — that designing is more important than how we do it; handcrafted, semi-artisanal, industrial or robotized.

And when everything seemed to be getting clearer, another update arrives to the universe of Brazilian design, focused on the cut of the more commercial, corporate design, where design is seen as a tool for “problems solving” definition of — design is a method of problem solving — Wells Riley, an idea reinforced in the last decade thanks to the dissemination and popularization of the concept and methodology of design thinking.

Figure 1 – Method of problem solving by Riley



Source: Riley (2012a, b).

## TO PROJECT

As we can see, the lines of thought are not few: past, present and future meet and contradictions appear — here everyone can see the lines of thought they can see and understand. But it has already been seen that we, designers, are not good at solving problems, because if this is really what we do, and we have been doing this for at least 50 years (that there is a recognized design with a university degree), today we have more problems than 50 years ago.

In punctual and very well-defined situations, I can even agree, but in general it is not easy to believe this truth as unique, broad and infallible.

If we cannot solve problems within known contexts and even “invented” as urban markets of industrialized products in an endless sequence of endless fashions.

What can we talk about the meeting between globalized contemporary urban designers with artisans and or craft production groups from the interior of Brazil or simply from the periphery of the city where we live?

We designers are in the middle, between this dubious truth and the artisans or artisan production groups waiting for answers, help or tips to improve their work.

To better understand my point of view I will quickly comment on the experience accumulated in the development of products and projects with artisan production groups:

In 1996, I had the opportunity to participate in the pilot experience of a project that proposed to combine design and handicraft of Serviço Brasileiro de

Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas (Sebrae-DF), the “Tradition & Renewal” project of the Global Program for Assistance and Valuing Craft Production. After that and also in Brasília, I had the opportunity to get involved in the project of Laboratório de Produtos Florestais of the Ministério do Meio Ambiente (LPF-IBAMA) of the Amazon for the manufacture of furniture. The involvement was of three years and many trips to the Brazilian Amazon, knowing the diversity of possible realities in the Amazon linked to the universe of manufacturing of furniture and wood objects. From areas of illegal timber extraction, areas of sustainable management, certified extraction areas, degraded areas, reforestation areas and artisans who work in the forest itself, to companies that exported the wood to be sold in Europe.

In 2000, already living in Sao Paulo, we created with Tania de Paula our design office and as we were not known and believed in the differential of the Brazilian sociobiodiversity we bet our VARIG miles and fairs in a project of development of new products from Amazonian native wood residues certified Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) seal.

Today, we understand that in the year 2000, we did everything wrong, responding to the interests and wishes of the market: we developed a product in Boa Vista do Ramos in the countryside of Amazonas to be commercialized in a store in Vila Madalena in São Paulo, and little by little we understood that this logic made no sense. We wanted to do different, to help the artisans to have more chances of selling their products. But this did not happen, or at least not in a lasting way.

We were able to see only the first layer of problems and were involved in the market demand and had a small success.

For instance, it was difficult to explain to a craftsman in a city in the interior of the state of Amazonas that the customized paper bag used in the Projeto Terra store in the city of São Paulo was more expensive than the cost of the product that was inside.

Contemporary urban market logic, where sometimes appearance and “social demand” have more weight, cost and value than the product itself to be commercialized.

Here we can understand that the logic of making design and solving problems, is only a variable of a bigger equation when we talk about making design together with artisan production groups in the interior of Brazil.

I confess that since I was a design student at Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo de la Universidad de Buenos Aires (FADU/UBA), I have difficulty responding to ready-made variables of the market and I still question what could be done differently.

Surely for this reason that together with Tânia de Paula we created the Oficina Nômade Project, valuing the environmental issues, cultures and characteristics of each place in the year 2000.

After the project in the city of Boa Vista do Ramos in the Amazon, we started our consultancy for the state handcraft programs of SEBRAEs, NGOs, companies and it was always difficult to leave the established market logic.

Little by little we understood that our “clients” were the artisans and we had to develop the projects for them and not necessarily for those who “hired and paid us”, it was fun to do something in the field and in the reports of the contractor (as the contracts we signed spoke) we described what was necessary to be able to continue doing the consulting.

## TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Between 2000 and 2010 we developed many projects together with artisan production groups, being able to expand our field of action to the five regions of Brazil and neighboring countries. And, in the different projects, we were able to see similar situations where the designer was expected as a professional full of answers and opportunities, and yes, we carried out our work in the best possible way, but always with a clear objective, from a single point of view, or at least opening little the range of alternatives to see different situations and build new possibilities that could become new opportunities.

We always manage to reach some layer of problems, but never all or a great majority. The social, economic, cultural and political reality of each group is very complex and our intervention had a very small cut-off to be able to involve us.

Between 2000 and 2010, it was interesting to compare us with other designers and or projects that also worked for this sector of design, first with designers such as: Renato Imbroisi, Fabiola Bergamo, Lars Diederichsen, Porfírio Valadares, Luiz Galvão or the Italianized Colombians Giulio and Valerio Vinaccia and/or projects that emerged from institutions and or universities such as: Cultural Capital, Tropical Design, Laboratório Piracema, Imaginário Pernambucano and Design Possível.

This decade was also important because there was a lot of discussion and a change in the definition of industrial design to design in universities and gradually the work with artisans was accepted and incorporated into classroom activities. Before that, the work with artisans was not well seen by the academy.

The consequence of this is that many projects of course completion had the subject of artisan production as a focus and then masters and doctorates. Finally, the design had a broad vision without the limitation by quantity of pieces produced or processes used.

The young people who studied design during this period created and are creating a new generation of designers with a broader vision, where the reality of handcrafted production of almost 50% of Brazil was considered, studied and even promoted by teachers and universities.

Finally, we were able to leave page 81 to enter a new universe, that of page 82 of the book *Diseñar para el Mundo Real* by Victor Papanek (1977), where he presents the possible ways to act and develop projects with underdeveloped countries.

This way of acting described by Victor Papanek for countries in underdevelopment has always inspired us and we were able to understand and adapt it to projects with artisans or artisan production groups. Where the first step is to develop products as he presents “for tourists or decorative”.

Where we can only enchain our economy with theirs, the only thing we are doing here is to speed up the process of artisans to reach the situation we are living in. And we must agree that bringing them into our world and reality is not a big deal, from this point of view the more distant from the design the artisans can stay, the better for them.

A second moment, which he presents as “slightly more effective” is the designer living the reality of the craftsman during a period perfecting his products and projects.

And finally, we enter page 82 where the proposed evolution suggests a change of proposal and performance, where we, designers, collaborate with the formation of these artisans from the local reality, committed to their daily lives and the local context.

This suggestion is very interesting and so yes, we will really be able to think differently and, the most important, to live differently and understand which things are important and which are worth the investment in long-term projects.

The last step or “ideal solution” proposed is the formation of a body of designers from the local population involving one, two or three generations.

All this was necessary to tell you exactly what happened to us and the evolution of our work in the Projeto Oficina Nômade together with the artisans, almost 20 years have passed and we have grown together, making mistakes, adjusting and creating alternatives.

Even so, we never managed to identify ourselves in a region or with a group and change our lifestyle. But we know some designers, architects, artists and or projects that made this change: Domingo Totorá, Mauricio Azeredo, Imaginário Pernambucano and Design Possível.

What we got right was the choice of the project name and what we still propose to do today and what we felt and finally we can confirm is that looking at the collective, valuing the individualities that build the group is the great differential of every group and that is what we must be attentive to identify the great ideas and opportunities.

Doing different is that, not only in theory, but in practice: doing different is really proposing changes. Because the problems are more complicated than we can understand, there are different levels of problems and most of the time our vision allows us to see the first and second layers of problems, but under them there are so many layers with bigger and bigger problems.

Developing open alternatives, multiple and dynamic, can be a first response directly connected with the context and the specific time of each situation.

Theoretical and practical of the design universe, we coined definitions of our performance and, soon after, we always discovered that something has escaped and we need to expand our own limits of understanding. It is not being different today.

Once again, thinkers, doers, teachers and students’ question: what is design? What is design for? What can design achieve? Design for what? Design for who? Design why?

The current moment brings new issues related to social relations, environmental crises, inclusive projects, collaborative platforms, behavior changes, new production processes, dematerialization and, finally, the disclosure and acceptance of design thinking for all human activities.

We talk about thinking differently, we talk to groups to think differently, but we can only think for them and not with them to build a bigger reality than a market response. Let’s provoke, create time and space to discover what the col-

lective knows — it is time to embrace the mystery and not leave for the solution of a problem.

The challenge is the same as that of every designer of any age: to seek new paths that change our old perspectives and certainties to enhance our projects to a new level where discussion is what really matters and quality of life is what is essential.

Constantly, I repeat that to have reached this point and to have the necessary evaluations to act in this craft design sector, it took 30 years of studies, consulting and opportunities.

And it is not in a visit, 40-hour workshop, 6-month consultancy or 2-year project that concepts, learning and results can be passed on.

We would all need 30 years of activities to be able to be at the same time, intensity to build new alternatives together and, as we already know, this is not common to happen.

To cocreate and connect ideas only makes sense when it happens in all directions and not from the designer to the group or from the institution to the group.

It is time to stop creating more problems and shortcuts to solve them, it is time for collaborative processes, to work with the diversity and complexity of the group, the local handicraft of your product and service or context.

The great challenge is to provoke and realize the collective intelligence and differential that this artisan or group has and this is not defined by the market or what the market wants, but what the artisan or group knows and wants to do.

How is this recognized? It is necessary to listen attentively for hours, days and even months, perceiving, understanding, believing and materializing the interests of the group, connecting and pollinating ideas, making visible the intelligence and wisdom of the collective.

#### History

**1995:** Participant of “Progetto Biologico” Centro Studi Alessi – Milan, IT;

**1995/6:** Participation with a designer in the Programa de Valorização do Artesanato do Distrito Federal. Tradition and Renewal – Giulio e Valerio Vinaccia – SEBRAE-DF, Brasília;

**1997/8/9:** Participant of the Projeto Madeiras em Design – LPF-IBAMA, Brasília coordination of the Prêmio Madeira da Amazônia, Móveis e Design –



LPF-IBAMA, Brasília coordination of the Projeto de Divulgação de Madeiras Amazônicas – LPF-IBAMA, Brasília;

**1999/2009:** Creator and curator of the exposition Design & Natureza, Shopping D&D, São Paulo;

**2000:** Line of table objects for the Projeto Terra Store – Boa Vista do Ramos, AM Coca-Cola toast – Itacoatiara, AM;

**2002/8:** Consultancy Louceiras de Maruanum – SEBRAE-AP – Balneário de Maruanum, AP consulting Oficina Escola de Marcenaria Carlo Castiglioni – EMEC – Xapuri, AC co-coordinator of the Núcleo de Inovação e Design para Artesanato – Via Design SEBRAE-SP, São Paulo. Guest researcher of the sustainable design center UFPR, Curitiba;

**2006:** Curator of the design for social and environmental improvement sector of the Contemporâneo of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bienal Brasileira de Design, São Paulo;

**2008:** Founding member of the Red Latinoamericana de Diseño Sostenible, Red Alebrije – Mexico;

**2011:** Project Oficina Nômade Ribeirão Preto e Região;

**2013:** Design coordinator of the Como Penso Como project, SESC Pompeia, São Paulo;

**2014/2015:** Coca-Cola Arts Collective Project – Brazilian Groups, Cooperac, Criar & Criar, Charlotte and Visart – ASTA Network, São Paulo;

**2015:** Oficina Nômade Novo Horizonte project, São Paulo;

**2015/6/7:** Coordinator of the Núcleo Exploratório de Design of Instituto Europeu de Design, São Paulo;

**2017:** Carpentry of Good | Instituto Leo Madeira, São Paulo.

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

**Christian Ullmann** has a degree in Industrial Design from the Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Designer porteño, maker predigital, unsustainable, resides in Brazil since 1996, consultant in design, innovation and management for the creation and development of products, projects, systems and services. Project coordinator for companies, governments and institutions in Brazil and Latin America, his products and projects have received awards in Italy, Spain, Brazil and Argentina. His areas of greatest interest and research are social and environmental issues, which since 2000 have been redefined as sustainable development, entering the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reorganizes its ideas and intends to act in the area of Design for Social Innovation within a context of creative economy for a circular economy system. Professor, consultant and lecturer of Design in different national and international educational institutions. In 2001, together with Tania de Paula, they created the office iT Projetos — an office for product development and projects with social and environmental responsibility. Within the universe of creative economy and as a development strategy, they use design tools to improve the interfaces between culture, creativity, tradition, economy and technology with low environmental impact and high social impact in the contemporary world, promoting activities capable of generating income, local development, valorization of the territory and citizenship: [be.net/christianullmann](http://be.net/christianullmann) or [itprojetos.wordpress.com](http://itprojetos.wordpress.com).