



Design and Developing Countries

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To cite this article: Kati Reijonen (2003) Design and Developing Countries, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:6, 337-339

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299302992>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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Kati Reijonen

Kati Reijonen recently returned home to Finland after more than a decade of working on handicraft development in Southern Africa and the South Pacific, including four years in Vanuatu. She is currently enrolled as a doctorate student at Robert Gordon University, researching 'New Business Models for Artisans in Developing Countries'.

My dilemma is that I am involved in the practice of handicraft development, not so much in its theory. This makes me wonder whether your journal, focusing on *Design Philosophy*, is at all appropriate forum for me. I am an ex-philosopher who went to live in poor countries and for the last decade or so, I have probably spent more time in weaving baskets with women in dusty backyards and in listening to them, than in reading Western philosophy and anthropology.

As much as I value the works of (for example) James Clifford, whose Art-Culture-system has inspired me greatly, and Marshall Sahlins whose *Stone Age Economics* and particularly the more recent *How Natives Think* are my absolute favourites, I find them somewhat distant from the dusty and messy reality where I operate.¹ I would not say they are irrelevant, though, as surely they have had a huge impact on the way I see the world and hence work. They help me to understand why the world is the way it is and what it should be like – but they don't tell me much about how to get there.

'Design' as a word does not have equivalents in most indigenous languages. It is, for many reasons, rarely used in developing countries.

I think about my friend Puleoko, a woodcarver in the Solomon Islands. Is he a designer? He never uses the word design. We communicate in South Pacific Pidgin and the word he uses to describe his practise is 'mekem' (=to make) or 'kavem' (= to carve). I don't think the word 'design' exists in their vocabulary.

To fully understand what design has come to mean in the Western world, one needs to be familiar with the Western way of life. Knowing English is not enough.

Puleoko works in a shabby workshop in the outskirts of Honiara. He is the Master Carver, with 3–4 colleagues. The men carve wooden bowls with shell inlays. The tradition is about 500 years old, I am told. They also have some new 'designs' in their product range, apparently 'designed' to attract tourists, such as bowls with the shape of a clamshell or naturalistic sculptures of eagles. Puleoko told me that one day an American came to the workshop and ordered a whole container of wooden eagles. Filling the order was, of course, beyond the possibilities of the carvers, who work without machines. But later Puleoko included eagles in his product range. He reckoned that the 'waet man' likes eagles. He tried to sell me one – but was not successful.

Carving a wooden bowl – or an eagle – is an activity that involves design, in the very basic sense of the word.

Design is, many say, pervasive in human relationships with things, spaces, etc. Design is present in almost everything we do. But the problem is that people, other than professional designers or theorists, seldom use the word in this way. For most Westerners, 'design' has increasingly come to be associated with the marketing of style. It has been relegated to markets of distinction: designing goods that only a minority can afford. While this might be wrong from the designer's point of view, it is nevertheless understandable. Design did, after all, come into being "at a particular stage in the history of capitalism and played a vital part in the creation of industrial wealth", as Adrian Forty writes. There is a long-standing link between design and commerce.

Since Victor Papanek, responsible designers have challenged the commercial and style-driven model of design. They have sought instead to employ the problem-solving attributes of the design process to creatively facilitate social and economic needs – this, also in developing countries.

When looked at this way, design does seem to have great prospective in developing countries, as there certainly are many "needs to facilitate".

Do developing countries, then, need more design?

If design is the missing link in the chain of development, the question is: how can it be taken up and used in societies that have value structures entirely different from those that have shaped design into what it means for us (Westerners) today?

Whichever way we look at it, and particularly when we look at it from the non Western point of view, from the shabby workshops in remote villages and urban slums, design looks like a thoroughly modernistic strategy, with roots in the Enlightenment worldview. Design implies change, movement, progress, innovation, development and improvement.

A Westerner often finds it hard to come into terms with the reality of Non Western societies. In the light of design endeavours, these societies look hopelessly conservative and backward, unwilling to change, stagnant and unpredictable. Design represents everything they are not.

Other cultures certainly seem to get along without the word design. In Mozambique, for instance, instead of designers, you are likely to find 'artistas' (artists). This term covers a wide range of different professions and characteristics, starting from metal smiths and ending to just about anyone interested in art and culture, in the very widest sense of the words.

It has to be noted, though, that in Africa and in the South Pacific, where my experience comes from, people are generally quite relaxed with professional identities. What you do for living is less significant than your social role in your community. Personal ambition and need to express oneself, is a driving force in the West, but in the South, people are moved by something else.

Is this one of the reasons why there are so few designers in developing countries? After all, the history of (Western) design is not so much about design as it is about design heroes.

Note

1. James Clifford 'On Collecting Art and Culture' in James Clifford *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 215–251; Marshall Sahlins *Stone Age Economics* NY: Aldine/DeGruyter, 1972 and *How 'Natives' Think: about Captain Cook, for example* University of Chicago Press, 1995.