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# Design against Domestic Violence

## The Project ‘Bringing Peace into the Family’

**Vera Damazio and Gabriel Leitão**

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Design plays an active role in everyday life. It shapes information, products, services environments, as well as ways of thinking, living, behaving and relating to others. Much more than form and function, information, products, services and environments constitute the setting where our experiences take place, influence social practices, incorporate goals and become inseparable from what we are.<sup>1</sup>

Recurrently associated with the task of creating unique and extravagant objects for a sophisticated elite, design is, actually, an activity of broad social range, organized so as to materialize solutions to a wide range of problems and to meet the needs of all kinds, from the most basic to the most transcendental.

According to Jorge Frascara, “design is not concerned with objects, but with the impact that those objects have on people”.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the field of visual information, the Argentinean designer suggests that the activity of design should be concerned with the construction of things with the aim of affecting the knowledge and behaviour

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of people. Among the practical strategies presented through which designers may effectively change peoples’ lives, Frascara highlights associations between professionals and their target public. For the author, “if there is no association between producers and interpreters in relation to the desired objects, attitudes do not change”.<sup>3</sup> Stressing the importance of working in partnership and its benefits, Frascara adds that “it is in association situations where the relationships are ethical, where the finest talents bear fruits, where it is possible to undertake complex and ambitious projects and where designers can play a catalyzing and collaborative role in the creation of a cultural and conceptual environment in constant development.”<sup>4</sup>

The main purpose of this paper is to present an example of a design project that addresses an unusual, but pertinent design problem: violence against children, a global concern that leads to a cycle of aggressiveness and serious consequences on the physical and mental health of victims. It gives an account of how an educational video about the causes and effects of domestic violence and new ways of educating children, came to be made by members of the Design Memory and Emotion Laboratory (LabMemo) of Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) in partnership with the NGO ‘Life and Hope Communitarian Movement’ (MVCE).

The paper consists of three sections: the first briefly summarizes the cultural context and purposes of the NGO ‘Life and Hope Communitarian Movement’ and the project ‘Bringing Peace into the Family’. The second describes the design process of the video and guiding principles learned from Jorge Frascara. The third brings testimonies from the viewing public and final considerations of the rule of Design today.

### **Cultural Context**

The Non Governmental Organization (NGO) “Life and Hope Communitarian Movement” (MVCE) was founded in Terra Nova Cologne situated around Manaus (Amazonia, Brazil) in 1998 by a group of Italian missionaries and by local leaders with the goal of providing the population with basic services not offered by the State. It includes contributors from a wide range of fields such as education, health, psychology and law and is under the sponsorship of two foreign charities, the American World Vision and the Italian Gruppo Missionario.

MCVE has as main objective the fight against domestic violence and currently assists about 3,000 people in twelve communities on the outskirts of the city, of which more than 1,400 are children and adolescents. As said, these communities are under-served by the State, and generally have low levels of literacy.

MCVE psychologist and volunteer, Dorothea Schultz, states that the use of violence as a means of educating children is a cultural

and psychological phenomenon among the Manauara communities and this is present in popular sayings such as: “straighten out, my son, because otherwise the stick will find you” (meaning if you don’t straighten out, you will be punished by means of a stick); “the one who eats my manioc meal will experience my belt” (meaning that while children are under care at home, parents have full authority over them). She explains that many adults rely not only on sayings, but also on passages of the Bible to advocate and justify violence as a form of guidance, discipline and loving care for their children, such as Proverbs 13:24 from the Old Testament that states: “those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them”.

The educator Luciana Pedrosa adds that children and young people raised aggressively end up replicating the violence when they become parents. The situation ends up generating the so called “cycle of violence” perpetuated from generation to generation. In fact, one of the most frequent arguments used by adults to spank their children is: “I was hit as a child and I will do the same ...” For most people who have suffered abuse from parents, there seems to be no other way to bring up a child but by the use of force. “Who is attacked, attacks,” confirms the Executive Secretary for Social Services of the State of Amazonas, Graça Prola.

Studies carried out by MCVE’s participants detected an alarming number of cases of violence against children committed by parents or guardians and confirmed that family violence is the root of serious problems such as school failure, aggression, psychological disorders, among many other problems. In view of this, MCVE created the project ‘Bringing Peace into the Family: how to raise without violence’ in order to break the cycle of family violence by making the adults aware of the negative effects of the use of violence against children and showing new ways to raise them. This awareness raising began through meetings with families assisted by MCVE, held after working time, using an interactive dynamic approach involving adults, while children participate in recreational activities in another room. Initially, the central activity of this dynamic was a play staged by four employees, in which the five types of violence – physical, psychological, sexual, neglect and child labor – were depicted and the audience was encouraged to participate by proposing peaceful ways of dealing with the situations in question. After staging, the team promoted the sharing of experiences and reflection on the causes and consequences of using violence as a means of upbringing. The team also taught ways of dealing with children with patience, respect and affection. After that, the family got together to participate in confraternity activities. At the end, leaflets were distributed with information about the consequences of family violence, children’s and adolescents’ rights, non-violent upbringing ways, and channels to report cases of violence. There were also draws for clothes and toys, a strategy often used by the

community movements to stimulate people's participation in social projects.

After a few months, the dynamic of the project 'Bringing Peace into the Family' proved to be extremely tiring both physically and psychologically for MCVE employees, since, besides not being professional actors, all of them had already experienced some type of violence that they staged. The lack of experience as actors brought yet another problem: some scenes became comical, transforming a serious issue into laughter and jokes. Other scenes were not even understood, and may have run the risk of being trivialized, legitimized and even ending up in more violence.

These problems led the group to identify the need to replace the play performed live by some other means of communication.

### **Design Action**

The need of the group responsible for the project "Bringing Peace into the Family" and their fight against domestic violence was chosen as the central aim of the final project of a designer student from Pontifical Catholic University during his six-months voluntary participation in UNICOM (University-Community), a program in partnership with the Archdiocese of Manaus and the Brazilian Army, which aims to promote interaction among students and teachers with communities in the Amazon region as well as involvement in social projects. The dominant feeling of the student designer in the initial phase of the process was estrangement due to the geographical, climatic, social and cultural differences. Bearing this in mind, the first step was to observe, talk, write, record, inquire, learn and get in tune with the community. Being aware of all "Amazonic" differences and the importance of working in partnership, each step of the process was done in close collaboration with the interdisciplinary team of MCVE.

The team's general understanding was that the play performed live should be replaced by productions recorded on video. The new format had many positive aspects: in addition to solving the team's problem regarding physical and emotional distress, the form of expression was similar to the one found in soap operas and quite appropriate for the general low level of literacy of the communities assisted. In the same way as the play performed live, the performances recorded on video portrayed the five types of violence: physical, psychological, sexual, neglect and child labor. However, they were staged and directed by actors and directors prepared to reproduce the message that was being conveyed in the appropriate way.

Frascara points out that to affect knowledge, attitudes and people's behaviour, communication must be attractive, but above all, understandable and convincing.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, it was essential that the staging provide both the public and MCVE members with a sense of belonging and

recognition. For the audience, the messages conveyed would have to portray familiar situations so as to convince them to act differently. As for the MCVE, the messages would be the basis of their arguments with a view to the action of 'Bringing Peace into the Family.' In this sense, we opted for the use of simple language, accessible and familiar to people, with the inclusion of popular sayings and jargon used by the community, as well as everyday situations and scenarios to make the scenes as realistic as possible.

The resulting video, performed by local actors, showed plausible situations and contexts to communicate the five different types of violence. The interdisciplinary team involved in producing the video considered it relevant to present different views on family violence. For this purpose, interviews were included with professionals in the fields of psychology, pedagogy and social work; as well as police officers concerning offences and protection for children and adolescents; guardianship councils; aggressors and victims, including a former inmate. The purpose of this strategy was to bring the topic of violence into the real world – not as fiction as the staging might suggest. Interviews were conducted with experts in their respective places of work and had the additional objective of validating the information about the negative effects of family violence. Interviews with ordinary people and reports on their experiences as victims and/or aggressors, in turn, were intended to make the audience recognize and reflect upon their own experiences. It is important to highlight that the recognition and reflection on the consequences of their actions were mentioned by MCVE experts as fundamental steps to raise awareness and prompt subsequent behaviour change. In line with that, Frascara observes that when seeking a change of behaviour it is not advisable to try to prohibit such conduct, but rather to promote the spontaneous exchange of habitual conduct by another one more desirable.<sup>6</sup>

Considering this point, it is important to highlight that at the beginning of the process of recognizing the reality of Manauara communities, we regarded the use of violence as a means of upbringing as absolutely unacceptable and disgusting. But as we started to have contact with the community, it became clear that this was a cultural practice, constructed and reproduced by generations. Violence against children in many cases was not a consequence of the lack of love, but lack of knowledge of other forms of upbringing. In our case, the aggressor, contrary to what a cursory reading might suggest, is reactive and may change his/her behaviour. Adults who commit violent acts may actually be unaware of the consequences of their actions. Among the aggressors involved in sexual violence, for example, there are fathers who believe, for cultural reasons, they have the right to be the first to have sex with their daughters. Brothers, who have lived in areas where there is just one room since they were very young, end up "naturalizing" sex.

The design process for making the video 'Bringing Peace into the Family' was under-pinned by a belief that this community wanted the best for their children. The habitual violent conduct should not be condemned or prohibited, but "deconstructed."

Thus, the video shows peaceful ways of raising children, and suggests that peace within the family can only be constructed through affection and respect.

It lasts 21 minutes and 43 seconds and it was incorporated into a new pattern which is presented below.

### **Observing the Effect of the Video**

The first public exhibition of the video took place on June 13, 2009 at St. Helena Church, in a neighborhood of New Israel for an audience of 25 adults. The meeting began by "welcoming" the families and by conducting the adults and children to different rooms and activities. The adult interaction was conducted by a team of five MCVE members. The participants sat in chairs arranged in a circle and were told to greet and introduce themselves to the person sitting next to them as follows: "I came to the meeting 'Bringing Peace into the Family' and met ....., who has ..... children."

After all participants introduced themselves, a dialogue was opened with the question: 'What do you wish for the future of your children?'

The wishes were recorded on a blackboard. The MCVE members then proceeded to read and comment on each one of about 25 wishes, such as happiness, health and success. In the end, they announced "the reality is different" and also mentioned the video. During the screening of the video, the audience remained attentive. Some seemed especially tense and touched by what they were viewing and listening. Just a few people seemed uninterested and distracted during some of the interviews with experts. After the presentation, the audience was quiet for a few minutes. Some looked at each other, others kept their eyes glued to the floor. The team asked them to talk about their impressions and what had particularly caught their attention.

Adriana, a mother of three children, said her upbringing was strict, but justified the aggression of her mother stating that she beat her children, but explained the reasons. Maria, also a mother of three, revealed that she beat her children because her parents had brought her up the same way, but that she had never imagined that there could be such bad effects. Some participants reported violent incidents with neighbours and acquaintances, and confessed that they felt that they should not interfere. José questioned if the ways of treating children presented in the video would actually work. He mentioned that he was beaten and, therefore, he also hit his grandson with a belt. According to him, the little boy was naughty and would only learn by being beaten. Everybody seemed quite convinced of the importance of denouncing the most serious

cases of violence, but not everyone was convinced that the most loving ways to treat the children could be effective. After that, the team presented posters illustrating what they understood as the 'pedagogy of peace' or actions to raise children by means of dialogue, caring, support and so forth.

The posters reinforced the scenes of the video through drawings, teaching, for example, that when talking with a child, the parent must bend down, gently hold their hands, look in his/her eyes and explain the rules slowly and clearly. After the posters presentation, the team distributed paper, pen and scissors to the participants and asked them to draw their hands to seal their commitment to change their conduct from that moment on concerning the education of their children. Those hands would then symbolize the hands that once had beaten their children and now would become instruments of peace. Each participant committed himself/herself verbally to acting peacefully and affectionately when addressing their children. They were all invited to bring their "hands" home and put them in a prominent place to remind them of their commitment. Thereafter, the meeting went well with the presence of the children, who previously participated in recreational activities in a separate room. The team then invited the adults to embrace their children and try the new ways of upbringing presented in the video and the activities performed during the meeting. The adults knelt down, hugged, kissed and talked looking into their children's eyes who immediately and spontaneously responded with great joy.

This was an especially poignant moment in which the theory that affection and understanding generate affection and understanding was shown in practice and in a very tangible and visible way. The grandfather, who had reported knocking his grandson with a belt, took the leading role in this particularly touching scene. He said excitedly that he had never hugged and kissed her grandson and that the feeling was very good, so good that it could even have a "corrective effect".

Maria's eldest daughter, about 12 years old, was especially touched by her mother's loving conduct. She cried a lot and said she would rather be treated that way. In exchange for hugs and kisses she would be more studious and obedient. "Being kissed is much better than being slapped and insulted", she declared.

Finally, a draw for clothes and toys was made. Then parents and grandparents returned to their homes with their children, their grandchildren, the drawing of their hands and the commitment to breaking the cycle of violence and start treating their children with more affection and understanding.

Based on the observation of the audience reaction to each of its scenes, several adjustments to be made to the video were written down. And that night, the dominant feeling was optimism.



## Final Considerations

Jorge Frascara warns that design is not able to eradicate complex social problems such as family violence. It may, however, contribute significantly to the reduction of its intensity through coordinated strategies. In this sense, it is important to understand design, and more specifically visual communication design, as presented here, more like “an interdiscipline than discipline” or “a meeting point for a set of disciplines that converge in order to create communications”.<sup>7</sup> The author teaches that the decisions involved in conveying messages - or producing a video like the one presented in this paper - should not be the result of supposed universal aesthetic principles or personal whims of the designer. They should, instead, be located “in a field created between people’s current reality and the reality to which one wants to achieve after people come across the messages”.<sup>8</sup>

The decisions to create the video ‘Bringing Peace into the Family’ have been taken in partnership with MCVE members, who not only belonged to the communities that were being portrayed, but who have also studied and sought means to combat domestic violence for a long time. They knew and experienced people’s current reality and therefore what should be communicated and how. Many of them had even been victims as children. They knew, too, the reality that they wanted to reach: breaking the cycle of violence and making families aware of the consequences of upbringing children in a violent manner.

As Frascara wisely observes, “the role of visual communication does not end in its production and distribution, but in its effect on people. The motivation for its creation and its purpose should be focused on the intention to transform an existing reality into a desired reality. This reality does not consist of graphic shapes, but of people”.<sup>9</sup>

The desired reality was a peaceful and loving upbringing and parents’ awareness of the harm caused by family violence. Therefore, we present ways of building a peaceful life within the family and the replacement of a violent routine by another of respect and understanding.

Frascara states that “it is time for the designer to deal with things that really matter: people’s life, death, pain, happiness and well-being”.<sup>10</sup>

The participation in the project ‘Bringing Peace Into the Family’ was a rewarding exercise, and throughout it we dealt with things that really matter: people’s life, death, pain, happiness and well-being. And coming to its end, there is a feeling of certainty that the design is, indeed, capable of transforming existing realities into other ones more desirable.

## Notes

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