

The ICDH&DS Barcelona'1999 and Design History in Spain

Towards a Geographical Approach for Design History: Spirit and Scope of

ICDH&DSs. At the background of Barcelona'99 1st International Conference there was the suspicion that now-a-days, current Design History had to take into account local histories of design and so doing, approach the question about how all these many local histories could challenge the discipline from its foundations. So, the horizon was the new outline of the map of design. Since then, two directions had already appeared for research among national historians. The first one deals with the differences existing among Design cultures trying to establish identities of Design, grasping peculiarities and national oddities. This is a way that could easily help to build a general, or rather a common large narrative of the World History of Design, open-minded enough to be shared by different regions or nations. It allows a way of researching that works going from general to particular. The second research direction aims at finding points and aspects to be compared between different local, or rather national identities worthy because their differences. Thus, it works from particular to general, and through sharing peculiarities, should introduce new interpretative models adapted to local realities.¹

Both directions were displayed and discussed in La Havana conference although the focus was put mostly on the second one being considered a further step once it has been accepted in Barcelona that the plural applied to the history of design has also acquired a geographic sense. In fact, underlying Barcelona debates was the opportunity to handle the geographic plural using an approach similar to that used to grasp the other plurals arisen recently in Design History, namely, all those reflecting the many marginalised, or simply omitted; in short, the many design experiences let aside by the standard larger narrative such as, for example, commodities actually consumed in front of the promoted hardly high culture or designy items; other popular items whether not considered because its market economy addressing, or because its mass culture inspiration as well.² From the geographical point of view, the let aside are these nations and cultures whose design activities and achievements are still unknown abroad. The subject was not completely new neither in La Havana or Barcelona: a quick glance to *Design Issues* and the *Journal of Design History* volumes proves that many historians belonging to the class of unfamiliar countries are nowadays trying to introduce and explain their experiences to a larger public, mainly the international community of design historians. So at last, after this first stage of acknowledging and collecting pluralities, we are nowadays in front of many "other" histories besides the old history of design, the 'alternate' ones, the 'peripheral' or the 'marginalised' ones, using and taking advantage of the polysemic character of all these words. Therefore, Barcelona conference "Design History Seen from Abroad" had mainly geographical connotations but it also suggested the need of a way of looking able to recognise boundaries wherever they exist: in the social environment, in cultural performances, among demographic groups or even academic disciplines.

Then, when the whole map of design is concerned, some specific issues appear due, in part, to the need of managing different cultural models defined anthropologically; inside the broad westernised area, to deal with geopolitical areas defined according to the economic development achieved, all of them connected one to each other in a globalised scene. At La Havana there was also a wish to overcome Barcelona 1999's proposal of using the centre/periphery scheme to articulate the map –in fact, translating literally from Spanish, the title of Barcelona's conference was '*doing history from a peripheral standing*'³. At the foundational time, to focus on Geography was a claim to enlarge the boundaries of design history and it has been proposed using the contrast between a large periphery composed by many different and rather unknown regions, against a unique centre defined by the larger narrative shared internationally as the History of Design of reference. Of course, it was an unbalanced schema articulated on a vertical axis where regions and countries find its own place according to different viewpoints able to be used to characterize them: sometimes the scale of economic development –and thus the map become a geopolitical or geo-economic one-; other times, the degree of modernization achieved, mostly through design –and the map become a sociological one-; or the degree of westernisation happened –and thus, the map displays the colonisation process and the paths of dissemination of Western ways of life.⁴ There is also the possibility to consider an intellectual or scholarship map along with the others ones, where periphery affects Design History activities, taking also account on the spread of research outcomes in an international scale.

Outlining a Progressive Research Program for the ICDH&DS.

At La Havana, Tevfik Balcioglu clearly introduced the question in a new way. He said *'the tacit acceptance of universal communicative power of design and its multicultural identity is not only supporting but also requiring a global understanding of the subject'*⁵. Design standards were here seen as multicultural, the outcome of a synthetic process resulting thanks to the contribution of many different regions and cultural realities. Underlying Balcioglu's statement, there are many theoretical assumptions that might be displayed for the research agenda sake: What does actually mean the universal communicative power of design when modern standards and modern design style seems not worth anymore as a reference to be shared globally? Does identity, if referred to many different cultures, mean just an analytical approach; or rather is a synthetic one, the identity of design culture itself? If so, what is and should be the role of different cultures and regions in defining what a shared design culture may be? And finally, what is understood by a 'global understanding of the subject'? Is it a claim for a general history that could explain and tell many different histories at the same time, integrating them in a new synthesis such as that included in the scope of a World Wide History? In that case, what could be the logic –or rather the articulation- of that general history in the case it should act, or has to perform the role of a larger narrative?

The last questions were clearly put in Istanbul by Victor Margolin and Jonathan M. Woodham when preparing their strand in these terms: *'the issue of local histories and the criterion for doing them does relate to the theme of a larger narrative'*. Thus, the aim nowadays is to find a way to manage and to draw a new outline of the map of design useful enough to build upon a World History that allows a global understanding of the subject. While proposed in the context defined by the two former ICDH&DS (Barcelona and La Havana), the matter clearly suggests that a general feeling is growing, the need of an integrating discourse which might be a theoretical tool strong enough to manage the already well accepted existence of the plurality of histories of design which have recently risen according to the variety of approaches used to study design in history. So, what is now at stake is the capacity and usefulness of a Geography of Design seen as a structuring element for a World history. Probably Helsinki next ICDH&DS should take the challenge and include issues such as these in its informing general themes.

Design History and the History of Design in Spain: Some General Questions.

Spanish History of Design or rather, what is still the same, the story of the stylistic features and spirit of products and images designed since the Civil War, is now-a-days quite known around the world thanks to some British scholars who studied the subject.⁶ They worked using the literature on the subject available in Spain, written mostly in Spanish and Catalan, quite large now-a-days. However, as Viviana Narotzky pointed clearly out in her paper presented at the 2nd ICDH&DS,⁷ it must be acknowledged that it is still quite difficult to collect that literature, to find reliable sources of documentation and complete archives, especially those belonging to companies. That means that inner Spanish Design History has been written mostly trusting on designer' reminds and experiences, some art critic's comments and the documents preserved by design institutions concerning mainly their own deeds and policy. It must be said that many times, the people involved were mostly the same. The outcome, as Gui Julier suggested many times, is a history which relates only one side of the whole process, and even doing so, has become the official one. This history explains the way by which design achieved some degree of popularity, firstly, fighting against manufacturers who didn't really understand what design could do for them; secondly, fighting against government policy on cultural matters trying to bring avant-garde back to life again; and finally, fighting against the social and economical models characteristic of Western world with which Spain was involved since fascist economical policy failed totally during the fifties.

Obviously, a history such as this could seem an ideological tale and, from our point of view, to some extent it was so, but it has been very useful. Afterwards, some writers on Design tried to overpass that narrow approach and introduce new data to the debate. In fact, the history of Spanish Design History shows quite clearly the process through which local history is build up. From now, it is easy to see to what degree early critics and writers worked to promote a specific idea of design and the style linked to it. Later critics are trying to consider broadly the real situation and to place former history in its historical context.

To do their job, present researchers have to face the situation by working at the same time in several fronts: by finding new sources for documentation, by placing the very well known designs made by the local pioneers and design leaders in its context, by organising archives and collecting literature, mostly all that press literature still sparse. We are trying to do it now: in fact this is part of the job we started when founding a research group at the UB devoted to study the link between decorative arts since the turn of the 20th century and the design growing process after the Civil War. It is called

GRACMON and his contributions can be followed through the website <http://www.ub.edu/gracmon/>. Similar groups had risen within other universities trying too to understand the specific character of the design system and industrial needs existing at the different Spanish regions. The UB group also gathers and in some way is continuing a research conducted some years ago by the Barcelona Museum of Decorative Arts to document items (over 900) of furniture, product and domestic industrial design collected in its Industrial Design department. Then, seen in perspective, the organisation of ICDH&DS have offered the opportunity to compare and check the results obtained till now, but also to reflect upon some challenges local history research face as seen when displaying the Conference's spirit and main features.

In the case of Spain, at least of Barcelona, design historians would like to contribute with their work to the international debate trying to answer, from their own point of view and experience, the issues shared by many other regions. This is an important question for local historians because it has a counterpart: their problem then is how to answer at the same time general questions and those very peculiar concerns of its own cultural ambience and academic tradition. Thus, they have two different publics to speak with: their foreign colleagues, who are not familiar with social characteristics of the region, and the local audience, self-conscious of its past and traditions. In fact, to balance both interests is a very strategic decision in every research. For instance, it could decide the choice of the language to use each time (Catalan, Spanish or English). But in a wider sense, what is a stake in the debate local/global, or regional/general is how very local interests and characteristic issues should become general issues as well, general enough to be widely shared. For local history, methodologically, comparative history becomes a very useful tool, but a general history is needed. It is the model to which compare and measure. Afterwards, in a feedback process, it puts an important question to local historians: how to grasp and deal with influences coming from abroad.

To get influences from foreign countries needs some previous statements, first of all, to be aware of what is going on abroad; then to convert a foreign practical experience in a model to be studied, understood and in some way, imitated and mostly adapted to local reality. This is a process similar to that of translation and, as Italians said, a translation bears always a sort of betray. For that reason, a first step when studying a local history is to consider the several influences, either theoretical or practical, received by local designers, Spaniards in that case, and the way they were adapted to local needs, aims and tastes as long as those influences could explain the local character.

Furthermore, to receive influences also means to select from what the others do and make according to a previous idea of what it is worth doing and making. This allows the selection in a coherent related to own aims and purposes. In fact, looking at the process by which a specific Catalan idea of design was built up through theoretical debates, the explanation of aims, the setting up of policies, the ways things have been made and, eventually, advertised to general public, you achieve a clear representation of Design in its whole cycle. Then, in what concerns consumers, there isn't space enough here to explain the identity and mentality of Catalan bourgeoisie and society although more or less displayed yesterday during the talk about Catalan Modernism and its social background. However, I would like to bear in mind our high and middle classes most accepted characteristic, their constant will to be and behave in a modern way whatever the word "modern" means according to every historical context. Design and its culture have to be placed in that context, an expression of that dynamic town stirring always for more modernity. When for the first time some practitioners started to use the word design to explain their own activity, if they wanted to have a chance in that sort of society, design have to present itself with the most modern aspect it could adopt at the time. It still was a very European look. This took place during the fifties and consolidated at the early sixties.

If I had to follow the tale with the aim to propose items to compare and issues to share with other local realities, I shall explain how and when the idea of design arrived to Barcelona and spread all around Spain, what were the main influences considered, the policies adopted to disseminate models and practices of design and finally, analysing which was the idea of design current in Spain and the process through which its main meaning was established and champion until become a popular and overused word. However, I'm afraid the time is gone. Let's give way to other speakers, and share with them worries, concerns and approaches to push together the building up of a world wide history of design.

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References

- ¹ See Calvera, Anna: "Historia e historias del diseño: la emergencia de las historias regionales". La Habana: 2nd ICDH&DS, 2000. www.culturadeldisenocult.cu; See also Calvera, Anna: "Design in Barcelona: Its history and Its Future in the Globalised Scene". *The Design Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue 2: p.4-13. See also Alpay Er: "Development Industrial Design in the Third World. *Journal of Design History*, 10/3: 293-307.
- ² Woodham, Jonathan M.: "Recent trends in Design Historical Research in Britain". Calvera & Mallol: *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference in Design History*, Barcelona: Publicacions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2001: 85-97. See also Julier, Guy: "Towards a 'Third way' in Design History", íd: 112-116; and Narotzky, Viviana: "Consumir diseño: de lo privado a lo público", íd: 155-159. See also Doordan, Dennis P. (ed): *Design History*. Chicago: The MIT Press: 1995 and his references to Kruger & Mariani: *Remaking History*, 1989. They are the authors of the term "alternate histories" to refer to all those nowadays acknowledged marginalised or neglected groups inside western and developed tradition.
- ³ The Barcelona Conference had two titles not exactly meaning the same due to translation: in Spanish was called: "*Doing History from the Periphery Standing: History and Histories of Design*" while in English the title was "*Design History Seen from Abroad: History and Histories of Design*". When the pun was discovered, an interesting debate concerning how to evaluate and describe different regions came to the stage together with a need to find equivalences for words. Peripheral seemed soon a very victimist and ideological word to English spoken people while Marginal countries proposed by them following Tony Fry, had the same or even worse connotations to Spanish speaking people. The debate was explained in La Havana together with the proposal of thinking at the Geography of Design in a way that allows to overcome the dependent relationship implicit in the geopolitical discourse, and to enjoy an egalitarian horizon at least on the starting point of the research.
- ⁴ In Istanbul, it was the subject of a strand devoted to analyse what westernisation means in countries such as Japan and Turkey which have a strong craft tradition and cultural heritage behind them. Professor Fujita was the strand organiser.
- ⁵ See Balcioglu, Tevfik: "On the priorities of regional design historiography". La Havana: 2ª. Reunión Internacional de Historiadores y Estudiosos del Diseño, 2000. www.culturadeldisenocult.cu;
- ⁶ See JULIER, Guy: "Re-Drawing the Geography of European Design: the Case of Transitional Countries", Conference paper. The 2nd European Academy of Design Conference, Stockholm 1997. www.svid.se/ead/ead-Julier.htm. It must be said that many ideas inspiring that report comes from Julier's approach to transitional countries and intends to offer the inner insight to what he has related in the telling of a regional history.
- ⁷ See specially NAROTZKY, Viviana: "Texto y contexto: desde la realidad al discurso". Proceedings of the 2nd ICDH&DS, La Havana, June 2000: www.culturadeldisenocult.cu