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## Design for Social Innovation in Local Communities. Weaving collaborative networks in a women's textile cooperative in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil)

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**Abstract:** In this paper we share some thoughts about possible designer roles in community-based initiatives. We carried a case study in Salvador, Bahia, that presents itself as a platform for social transformation through creative economy. We analyzed social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts of design actions in this project, which aims to support artists and artisans and other professionals in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability. The case study's main focus is the impact of a social innovation project at the Coopertêxtil, *Cooperativa Mista de Produção e Trabalho de Artigos Têxteis* (a handmade textile cooperative) that involves 16 women and benefits 40 families. *We point out some opportunities for design intervention, aiming at: a) bringing new perspectives of local crafts production (systemic view and planning); b) developing artifacts based on local resources and adding value to material and immaterial culture embedded in the production processes; c) promoting the reuse of local industrial refuse; d) supporting new business models; e) developing strategic communication of the products.* Main authors that we reviewed on design for social innovation and Transition Design are Thackara (2005), Manzini (2015), Irwin (2015), Willis (2015) and Escobar (2018). This essay is relevant for designers, managers and organizations that search for examples of solutions that aim to increase communities' quality of life and social wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Design for Social Innovation - Community Based Projects - Collaborative Networks - Sustainable Design - Circular Economy - Recycling - Upcycling - Bahia Revoluções Criativas - Weaving.

[Abstracts in spanish and portuguese at pages 94-95]

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## Introduction

*There are different ways of looking at the world, and you can bring that to your design. We should examine this more deeply, speak about individualism versus collectivism like we've discussed, and also how cultures impact that. As designers, being aware of bigger issues, being aware of conversations around representation, race and power, are also what we should keep in mind as we practice.*  
Neebinnaukzhik Southall<sup>1</sup>

The project “Bahia: Revoluções Criativas - BRC” (Bahia: Creative Revolutions) is an ongoing initiative, started in 2016, in Salvador’s historic downtown. Among their goals, there are work, profit and sustainable development generation promoting territorial and cultural identity valorization through fashion, design, crafts, capoeira, events and social transformation. The events happen at Pelourinho, a historic site of Salvador, which has been facing real estate speculation and gentrification processes along the last decades. In the scope of this research analysis, BRC is understood as an action for social innovation, bringing out design as one of the tools to reinforce local creative initiatives, especially from groups in situations of social vulnerability<sup>2</sup>.

*This article is organized in 4 sections: 1) Description of context, 2) Brief history of the co-op Coopertêxtil, 3) Identification of possible social design interventions in this context and 4) Final considerations.*

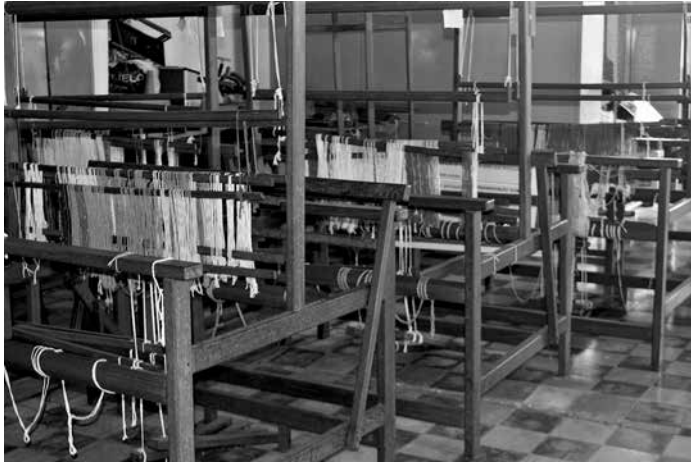
## 1. Description of context

This initiative is located at Salvador's historic downtown. The city, capital of Bahia's state (See Figure 1), has 2,9 millions of inhabitants according to Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2020) and it is a place of many cultural activities, especially holding afro Brazilian narratives in music, dance among other artistic expressions. Salvador's historic downtown, could be described as the heart of the city, a secular territory, landscape of the tourist imaginary and naturally a postcard. The architectural landscape of Pelourinho, has ancient stone streets, with various baroque churches and colorful houses facades. Historic downtown's streets are usually crowded with tourist attractions, adding cultural manifestations such as capoeira, samba and several parties, bars, restaurants and hotels. The neighborhood faces a strong real estate speculation trajectory, which has evicted many of their original dwellers, revealing a gentrification process. This reality brings out a vulnerable community, sometimes homeless or unemployed, behind a tourist scenario. The historical contrasting scene attracting many social movements, is naturally motivating for hoping for a social transformation. This territory is the scenario of many social innovation projects actions, such as Coopertêxtil.



**Figure 1.** Salvador in the South America's Map. Source: Elaborated by the Authors (2020).

The cooperative works in a warehouse, which is part of the former San Francisco Church Convent. Its discreet entrance attached to the church is a big room placing about forty professional pedal weaving looms, two sewing machines, large work-tables and material cabinets (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Shed where the cooperative works, was lended and then rented by the Franciscan community and it used to be a convent. Source: Authors' collection (2019).

## 2. Brief history of the co-op Coopertêtil

### Cooperative of Women Weavers

The Coopertêtil (Cooperativa Mista de Produção e Trabalho de Artigos Têxteis), a textile works production co-op, started their activities in 2003 from the initiative of mothers of children and teenagers linked to Project Axé<sup>3</sup>. Many of these families suffered the impact of historic center expulsion that generated a hopeless scenario to minors (rising the risk of drug abuse, child labor or mistreatment). Looking for an alternative profit generation, mothers of the community's children planned a profitable project involving textil hand-works and asked a textile weaving training to the municipal secretary of social development. The group's intention was to learn the technique, set up a cooperative and commercialize their products. For their first year, the initiative was financed by Child Labor Erad-

ication Program, and contributed for ca. 40 families (*40 people directly, and around 200 indirectly, including mainly children and teenagers in situations of vulnerability*), developing a professional training program. Through the implementation of a handwoven weaving community workshop, many participants could practice and enter the job market. The Co-op was formalized and by 2019 there were 16 women associated, working in the tertiary sector, producing material goods and services. Among the products there are placemats, bags, rugs and other textile products commercialized in some tourist points of the city and also produced by demand. The materials used in Coopertêxtil productions are cellulosic fibers with several colors and textures such as cotton, ouricuri fiber, piassava



**Figure 3.** Artisanal textile made by Coopertêxtil. Source: Authors' collection (2019).

straw, jute, and sisal, among others synthetic yarns and threads (See Figure 3 and 4). The weaving process consists in the creation of textiles by the intertwining of yarns, equally separated after a calculation of the amount of material needed. The calculation varies according to the piece's size to be woven, including centimeters of waste and leftovers. After separation of yarns for creating a warp (vertical threads in a textile) they are allocated in heddles - that is a kind of needle - and tensioned on the weaving looms. Only after setting the loom, the weaver starts creating the weft, which are the horizontal threads, and usually the most apparent feature of the textile. The weaver interlaces warp and weft, creating a plain textile.



**Figure 4.**  
Coopertêxtil's  
weaving materials.  
Source: Authors'  
collection (2019).

Coopertêxtil is the only weaving co-op in Bahia. Weaving is a very antique and traditional technique and offers a great potential to explore creativity. Although, this tradition does not interest a large public. For that reason, many handcraft techniques –which present unique features– were lost in history and do not come to the light of scientific learning and registration, or simply happened in social contexts where people have a reduced access to literacy. The significance of maintaining these traditional practices is to motivate the insertion of popular expertise in scientific research and to feed a diverse and multi perspective knowledge.

Weaver's hands mobilize an inspiring potential of learning and creativity, that how it was a moment with Ms. Eriel, while she created a original model of curtain, with macrame, a weaving technique that creates a textile only by adding knots to the yarns, making possible numerous designs (See Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Miss Eriel shows her own developed macrame style, while a participative observation visit. Source: Authors' collection (2019).

According to cooperative's president, Jucélia Nascimento dos Santos, in 2019 there was a visible evasion of members of the group, for living in distant neighborhoods and having no conditions of guaranteeing the access to work. This crucial fact reveals most realistic aspects of a work in the cooperative, and consequently, the fragility of these precariousness context relations. During this research, it was noticed that Coopertêxtil relates in many instances to social innovation projects in their surroundings. Over their emergence, there were many obstacles and since 2016, when Jucélia assumed the co-op's management, they committed with a continuous training to enhance their creative processes.

An important initiative of training which the group has joined was the project *Bahia: Revoluções Criativas* (BRC). BRC project can be understood as a social innovation initiative, in which design is one of the main tools for achieving the profit generation and sustainable development goals, by promoting the valorization of territory, local culture and identity (through fashion, design, crafts, capoeira and the promotion of events in historic downtown of Salvador), and social transformation.

Among some of the actions of BRC project (See Figure 6), there are different types of accomplishments. BRC generated training and formations in design and brand management, by offering courses to groups of artisans, artists and designers in order to improve and enrich their creative processes. From this reunion, emerged a collective called Pelô Design, bringing forth a collaborative store by the same name, for the creatives to show and sell their works and also offer art, crafts and design workshops. Also from this project, emerged a fair, called Feira da Sé, at Fé's square, in Pelourinho, and it is currently one of the main creative fairs of the city.

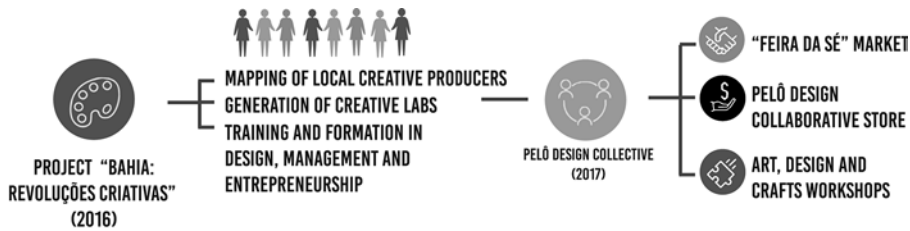


Figure 6. BRC Project's accomplishments. Source: from the author, 2020.

## Training and Qualification

According to the designer responsible to manage the training and qualification courses of BRC, the main goal of these activities is to make the participants aware about the possibilities and benefits of making plans and projects. By introducing several dynamics for elaboration of references and material boards and drawing, the program stimulates bringing out ideas to materiality. The aim of the courses is the production and commercialization of products that value Bahia's identity, from the use of low environmental impact raw materials (less polluting, recycled or low energy cost fabrication materials) and the application of 3R's: reduce, reuse and recycle. In Coopertêxtil's practices have been noticed these learnings through the use of more natural and local cellulosic fibers and the addition of waste material such as old banner ads in their products conceived post BRC.

The first stage of costless training and qualification courses reached directly around 100 men and women above 18 years old. Among the group where local creatives with previous experience and different artistic work expressions, most of them from low-income families. The goal of the BRC project was to enhance local brands, promoting cultural identity as a tourist attraction through arts, crafts and designs aligned to principles of sustainable design and more conscious consumption.

## Communication, diffusion and marketing

Developing and improving communication and distribution strategies were also targeted at the project. The Pelô Design collaborative store, for example, offered an incubation space for the participants. The store represents 24 local brands that use renewable materials. Being a gallery-store that is also space for workshops opened to the public, the store becomes a place of multiplication of the project in the community, promoting culture and knowledge exchange. Among the workshops are macramé, tapestry, embroidery, and watercolor painting. Also, BRC promoted a radio broadcast with talks about creative processes and reached the local news promoting their fair and store.



### 3. Identification of possible social design interventions in this context

#### Design for Social Innovation

Design can be a powerful catalyst for sustainability and social innovation, as an effective methodology of intervention, proposing plural solutions and new scenarios, establishing conditions for the creative context, developing tools and infrastructure to support promising practices, and facilitating convergence towards shared ideas and potential solutions<sup>4</sup>. The focus of design is evolving toward a systemic perspective, increasing its field of action, as Irwin (2015) states: *“The transition to a sustainable society will require new ways of designing that are informed by a vision, a deep understanding of the dynamics of change and a new mindset and posture”*.

During the last two decades we can observe that design research, teaching and thinking has increasingly considering social innovation as a core drive: in the expansion of project conception from –making for– to –making with–, as points Tackara (2005) in the perspective that everybody designs and the role of designers as agents for social innovation towards sustainability, as highlights Manzini (2015); in many movements related to –Transition Design– (Irwin, 2015) as *“the need to refuse discipline and transcend instrumentalism”* towards *“new modes of thinking and acting in professional and everyday life”* (Willis, 2015: 73); considering *“design for the pluriverse”* i.e. for *“a world where many worlds fit”* (Escobar, 2018:16). The author argues that *“every community practices the design of itself”* and *this is a matter of “survival as distinct worlds”*. The collective determination toward transitions, broadly understood, may be seen as a response to the urge for innovation and the creation of new, non exploitative forms of life, out of the dreams, desires, and struggles of so many groups and peoples worldwide. Could it be that another design imagination, this time more radical and constructive *is emerging?* Might a new breed of designers come to be thought of *as transition activists?* If this were to be the case, they would have to walk hand in hand with those who are protecting and redefining well-being, life projects, territories, local economies, and communities worldwide. These are the harbingers of the transition toward plural ways of making the world (Escobar, 2018:7).

Considering the importance of understanding and giving visibility to initiatives towards transition, we present a short analysis of BRC project, following dimensions of sustainability.

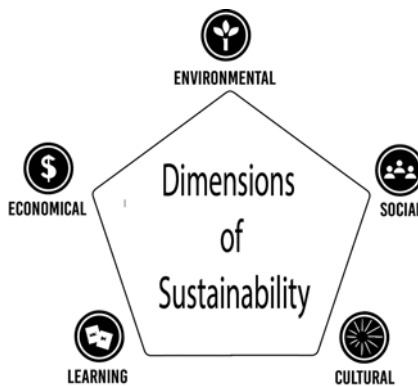
#### An Analysis of Dimensions of Sustainability and Design Contributions

Thinking in terms of environmental, social, economic, learning and cultural dimensions of sustainability we can point out positive impacts of the BRC project in the co-op. We can identify that a design approach contributed in several ways to Coopertêxtil’s sustainability. As defined in 1987 by the United Nations Organization, and registered in the document *Our Common Future*, *“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own*

needs” (Brundtland, 1987:15). According to Sachs (2004), sustainable development must satisfy three main criteria:

- to be inclusive from the social point of view,
- to be sustainable from a ecological point of view and
- to be sustainable from an economic point of view.

Considering social innovation projects, we can also add cultural and learning dimensions to these perspectives (See Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Dimensions of sustainability.  
Source: Prepared by authors, 2020.

In our study, we identified some contributions of BRC projects and its impact on Coop-ertêxtil according to those dimensions<sup>5</sup>.

#### *Environmental Dimension*

- Use of renewable and local raw material.
- Creative use of waste material and fabrication of new products (upcycling).

#### *Social Dimension*

- Generation of places and relations: exchanges between artisans and other local creatives.
- Development of proposals and long-term projects.
- Enhancement of working conditions and social well-being.

#### *Economical Dimension*

- Promotion of transformation through creative economy, focusing on small artisan groups and local and territorial identity.

- Creation of sales spaces and promotion strategies.
- Expansion of the brand recognition and increasing of local products and creators market<sup>(\*)</sup>.
- Strengthening of the work of women and families of vulnerable social contexts<sup>(\*)</sup>.
- Development of skills in management and entrepreneurship<sup>(\*)</sup>.

### *Cultural Dimension*

- Mapping and training of local artisans.
- Generation of new collaborative creative arrangements.
- Recognition of Salvador's cultural equipments by promoting technical visits and educational actions<sup>(\*)</sup>.
- Product development that adds value to the origin, identity and territorial resources<sup>(\*)</sup>.
- Appreciation of cultural heritage<sup>(\*)</sup>.
- Increase the visibility of local artisanal production in important tourist points of the city<sup>(\*)</sup>.

### *Learning Dimensions*

- Awareness of the importance of understanding and addressing group/community needs.
- Amplification of knowledge, by means of creating learning spaces, workshops, lectures, debates and introducing new ideas and possibilities of work and collaborative creative processes.
- Awareness of the importance of design competences and also the collaboration with designers.
- Comprehension of design as projects with a systematic thinking, which can produce several solutions according to the context.

The dimensions of sustainability can be understood as guiding targets to social innovation actions towards sustainable development. The actions pointed on environmental, social, economical, learning and cultural dimensions, represent an analysis of BRC project's contributions to Coopertêxtil, historic downtown activities and local artisans. It is interesting to notice that dimensions overlap, and this feature is important to the achievement of a systematic projectual thinking, making possible solutions of problems in more than one field. Ideally, we can think of design for social innovation projects that aim to consider at least one action in each one of those dimensions.

Therefore, the analysis of a socially innovative project, considering their action's impacts according to the mentioned dimensions, can be interesting to support designers' approaches when working with communities.

The classification of actions by dimensions also propounds a visualization of a project's reach and demonstrates which dimensions are strong and which ones must be incremented, and this analysis opens up an opportunity to think more enhancement possibilities for a project's future actions just as it offers a reference to other similar initiatives. For example, in the Coopertêxtil study case, from learning design processes such as fashion collection planning, brand management, reference boards and material studies, the ar-

tisan collective started to develop new kinds of products and reached new points of sale craving new types of public. It can be said that from their participation on BRC project, new opportunities opened up to Coopertêxtil and consequently more profit generation to these women. Also, social innovation actions can be considered a fuel to maintain activities, enhancement of management and market actuation capacities for creative small entrepreneurs. Joining actions which contemplate environmental, social, economic, learning and cultural dimensions, it can be possible to enhance life quality of craftwork producing communities, maintaining their traditional processes towards sustainable development.

#### 4. Final Considerations

The case study presented turned possible to analyze design contributions related to social innovation and sustainability. This analysis shows that identified micro level actions in a group (community, cooperative) relates to macro level actions (such as, development of public policies of design for valuing the territory).

In this sense, it is visible the importance of developing a systematic and strategic design thinking. At last, we share some thoughts emerged from this analysis and can be considered for other cases and contexts, supporting the actuation of designers in existing projects or future ones. The questions are related to projects continuity, knowledge transmission and resilience and strategy instruction in design and activism learning.

- *Which actions and articulations (with public, private, governmental among other actors) designers can help to develop, aiming at promoting the continuity of socially innovative actions?*
- *Which devices/dispositives are suitable to transmit design knowledge to non-designers creatives in a community context?*
- *How strategic design planning can help to foster resilience of social innovation projects in order to achieve self-sufficiency?*
- *How design teaching can support the development of competences that stimulate students (and future professionals) to collaborate with communities in a social innovation perspective, and with autonomy to hegemonic models?*
- *How can the analysis of social innovation project's impacts can subsidize public policies proposals supporting future projects and actions (promoting social transformation, enhance of life quality, insertion of women in the labor market, among other sustainable development goals)?*

#### Notes

1. Neebinnaukzhik Southall interviewed by Khandwala (2020).

2. This investigation has been carried on since 2019 and is part of master studies at the Post-graduation Program of Visual Arts in the Federal University of Bahia.
  3. Projeto Axé is a project created by Césare La Rocco, former president of UNICEF (United Nations Found to Childhood) in Brasil, in the 1990's. It has a social and educational practice directed to children in vulnerability and is recognized as an example of non-governmental social politics (Pereira, 2010). The project has been offering a safe and controlled environment with opportunities of artistic and social educative practices for children and teenagers.
  4. See Mouchreck & Krucken (2018) and Krucken (2020)
- (\* Items indicated with <sup>(\*)</sup> are related to more than one dimension of sustainability.

## Acknowledgement

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**Resumen:** En este artículo compartimos algunas reflexiones sobre los posibles roles del Diseñador en iniciativas basadas en la comunidad. Realizamos un estudio de caso en Salvador, Bahía, que se presenta como una plataforma para la transformación social a través de la economía creativa. Analizamos los impactos sociales, culturales, ambientales y económicos de las acciones de diseño en este proyecto, que tiene como objetivo apoyar a artistas y artesanos y otros profesionales en situaciones de vulnerabilidad socioeconómica. El enfoque principal del estudio de caso es el impacto de un proyecto de innovación social en Coopertêxtil, Cooperativa Mista de Produção e Trabalho de Artigos Têxteis (una cooperativa textil artesanal) que involucra a 16 mujeres y beneficia a 40 familias. Señalamos algunas oportunidades para la intervención del diseño, con el objetivo de: a) traer nuevas perspectivas de la producción artesanal local (visión sistémica y planificación); b) desarrollar artefactos basados en recursos locales y agregar valor a la cultura material e inmaterial incrustada en los procesos de producción; c) promover la reutilización de residuos industriales locales; d) apoyo a nuevos modelos comerciales; e) desarrollar la comunicación estratégica de los productos.

Los principales autores que revisamos sobre diseño para la innovación social y el Diseño para la Transición son Thackara (2005), Manzini (2015), Irwin (2015), Willis (2015) y Escobar (2018). Este ensayo es relevante para diseñadores, gerentes y organizaciones que buscan ejemplos de soluciones que tienen como objetivo aumentar la calidad de vida y el bienestar social de las comunidades.

**Palabras clave:** Diseño para la Innovación Social - Proyectos Comunitarios - Redes Colaborativas - Diseño Sostenible - Economía Circular - Reciclaje - Upcycling - Bahia Revoluções Criativas - Costura.

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, compartilhamos algumas reflexões sobre os possíveis papéis do designer em iniciativas baseadas na comunidade. Realizamos um estudo de caso em Salvador, Bahia, que se apresenta como uma plataforma de transformação social por meio da economia criativa. Foram analisados os impactos sociais, culturais, ambientais e econômicos das ações de design deste projeto, que visa apoiar artistas e artesãos e outros profissionais em situação de vulnerabilidade socioeconômica.

O estudo de caso tem como foco principal o impacto de um projeto de inovação social na Coopertêxtil, Cooperativa Mista de Produção e Trabalho de Artigos Têxteis que envolve 16 mulheres e beneficia 40 famílias. Apontamos algumas oportunidades de intervenção projetual, visando: a) trazer novas perspectivas para a produção artesanal local (visão sistémica e planejamento); b) desenvolver artefatos a partir de recursos locais e agregar valor à cultura material e imaterial embutida nos processos produtivos; c) promover o reapro-

veitamento do lixo industrial local; d) apoiar novos modelos de negócios; e) desenvolver a comunicação estratégica dos produtos.

Os principais autores que revisamos sobre design para inovação social e Design de transição são Thackara (2005), Manzini (2015), Irwin (2015), Willis (2015) e Escobar (2018). Este ensaio é relevante para designers, gestores e organizações que buscam exemplos de soluções que visam aumentar a qualidade de vida e o bem-estar social das comunidades.

**Palavras chave:** Design para Inovação Social - Projetos de Base Comunitária - Redes Colaborativas - Design Sustentável - Economia Circular - Reciclagem - Upcycling - Bahia Revoluções Criativas - Tecelagem.

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