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Designing in Argentina with indigenous groups

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Abstract: Indigeneity in Argentina has historically been oppressed. The project presented here is a collaboration between design researchers and students from Buenos Aires and Indigenous groups in Northern Argentina that combines anthropological and design methods. Participatory experiences are at the core of the proposal. Interactions within the communities led to various lines of work. The topics varied from textile production, natural coloring, traditional nourishment, and construction to didactic materials for schools within intercultural bilingual education. The results show not only material outcomes, but also how the project moved its participants. In light of the widely differing worldviews, the learning process became an exchange. Is it possible that design education in Argentina will change its predominant practices, as the result of dialogical collaborations with Indigenous peoples? What challenges would this lead to? The project aims to be an example of a dialogue between worlds, in a pluriversal context.

Keywords: Pluriversal Design; Decolonial Perspective; Argentinian Design; Participatory Project; Indigenous Territory

1. Introduction

In this text, I present a project whose aim was to bring together, on the one hand, design students and researchers from design-related disciplines and the social sciences and, on the other, Indigenous groups from Northern Argentina. The focus is on understanding work done *pluriversally*, in the sense of a world where many worlds exist, in which design is thought about in a relational way.

Like many other Latin American countries, Argentina is a place where Indigeneity has not been highlighted. Here, in particular, oppression took the form not only of military violence, but also of discursive violence that settled among the people. As the anthropologists Gordillo and Hirsch explain, Indigenous groups have been exposed to subjective violence, discrimination, and even negation in this *Argentina Blanca*, as the result of a historical process

of identity construction (Gordillo, 2016; Gordillo & Hirsch, 2003). The fact that people are surprised to learn that Argentina has a proportionally larger Indigenous population than Brazil (Gordillo & Hirsch, 2003) is an example of the success of this discursive project, which negates the existence of Indigenous groups in the country. This phenomenon is conspicuous at universities, which, in Latin America, have become what Segato calls the place where the elite is reproduced (Segato, 2016). In the specific case of design education, it is important to note that design studies at the Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism at the University of Buenos Aires (FADU) were created in the 1980s following a European model, mainly that of the Ulm School of Design in Germany (Ledesma, 2018). Thus, it is unsurprising that topics related to Indigeneity are not at the core of design education. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that two optional seminars offered for all disciplines at FADU have focused on general social issues, mainly in Buenos Aires[1]. It was Prof. Dr. Beatriz Galán who, in 2009, started a seminar-workshop related to territorial and social issues, which became an optional component of the core of industrial design studies. It was she who declared, on various occasions, that education at FADU very much avoids the sociopolitical context, instead generating irrelevant content that is disconnected from Argentina's reality (Galán, 2008, 2018b, 2018a; Galán, 2011).

A focus on the sociopolitical context and territory takes on central importance when design aims to address complex social issues. It is important to reformulate the project trigger questions, in order to problematize *from* the territory. If the focus is on a peripheral topic, the projects become irrelevant or are unable to give answers (Dorst, 2017; Galán, 2007, 2018b; Manzini, 2015). For example, Columbian author Arturo Escobar mentions many cases in which (probably well-intended) humanitarian projects end up producing an economic benefit for the companies involved rather than addressing peoples' needs (Escobar, 2018). American anthropologist Tunstall makes a similar claim with regard to Western design companies focused on social impact that end up further developing imperialist practices (Tunstall, 2013), a situation that American researchers Janzer and Weinstein (2014) call *design neocolonialism*. Thus, I argue that the discipline of design can only be modified from within.

Within this framework, my research[2] reflects upon propositions and questions that arise when design is placed in interaction with Indigenous groups. Together with Malena Pasin and Mercedes Ceciaga, we presented an advanced research project (PIA) at FADU[3] that gave students the opportunity to participate as research trainees and to receive a corresponding number of credits. Research *through* design refers to the conception underlying the project, which places the interactions of students with Indigenous people at the center. This distinction between projects *about*, *for*, and *through* art/design was established by Frayling (1993).

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[1] Websites: SIUS http://www.sius.com.ar and Taller Libre https://www.tlps.com.ar

[2] Doctoral project in SINTA program (Studies in the Arts), which is a collaboration between the University of Applied Sciences and the University of Bern—in my case, at the Institute of Design Research and at the Institute of Social Anthropology. The project is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF): Doc.CH 01/09/2021—31/01/2025.

[3] PIA 22-001. Composed by the researchers Pasin Malena, Ceciaga Mercedes, Trillo Joaquin, Safón Lautaro, Cassiau Martina, Díaz Valeria, and the author.

However, I make use of the definition formulated by Findeli et al. (2008), according to which research *through* design is composed of three layers: a theoretical output, as with any other research project; an output related to education in design; and an output specifically related to this field, which comprises the doing or concrete experiences of design. Thus, the reflections presented here on how designers can work together with Indigenous groups is based on these many practical experiences and opens a discussion about design education in Argentina. It is *through* the doing that the reflection is generated. As design theorists María Ledesma and Beatriz Galán put it: although many disciplines *do project*, design is the only one that has made the project its epistemological foundation (Galán, 2018b; Ledesma, 2005, 2007). From an anthropological perspective, I adhere to Segato's methodology of *Anthropology on Demand* (Segato, 2013), in which the ethnographer offers him/herself to the group he/she is working with.

The Indigenous groups we worked with live in area on the border with Bolivia and Paraguay in Salta province (Figure 1). This Indigenous territory of 643,000 hectares is the subject of an ongoing international legal procedure, in which the people are demanding rights to the land that they have historically occupied. Five ethnic groups cohabit within this vast territory: the Wichi, Chorote, Tulupí, Toba, and Tapiete, each of which has its own language. The Wichis are in the majority, but the groups interact and, in some cases, there are mixed families. In 2020, according to the ruling of the Court of Human Rights,[4] there were 132 communities cohabiting within the territory. A community is composed of groups of people, what some authors call extended families, whose numbers can vary considerably. Since 1992, all the communities have been organized into an Indigenous association called "Lhaka Honhat" (meaning "Our Land" in the Wichi language), and they are legally represented by CELS (Legal and Social Studies Center), based in Buenos Aires (Carrasco, 2009; Carrasco & Zimmerman, 2006; Gordillo & Leguizamón, 2002). After several local and national rejections, the association presented the case to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. Finally, in 2020, the Court ruled in favor of the communities, forcing the Argentinian government to cede the land rights to them within six years (Carrasco, 2020).

In 2008–2009, I had the personal experience of working within this territory as part of an NGO project. The experience moved me to want to work with them again, albeit in a different way—with enough time and the appropriate social tools to understand the complexity of the situation. At the end of my studies in Buenos Aires in 2010, Prof. Galán suggested that I undertake a research project on the production of wooden handicrafts. She made me realize that it was possible to seriously address the topic in an academic way. Over the course of the last 13 years it has evolved into the research I am presenting here.

[4] Entire Sentence: http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_400_esp.pdf (entrance on February 9th 2024).

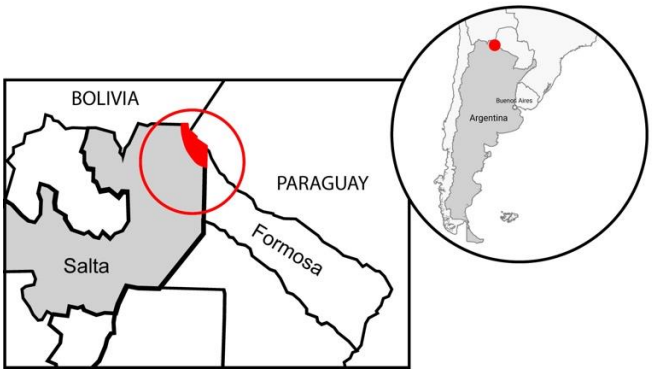

Figure 1 Lhaka Honhat Indigenous territory in Salta province, Argentina.

2. Pluriversal framework

2.1 A relational project

> "Designing pluriversally implies designing relationally. It is based on the premise that life is constituted by the radical interdependence of everything that exists." (Escobar & Maffei, 2022, p. 46)

One interesting aspect of how the sub-projects came about is that, in many cases, they were interconnected. The architecture was thought up and discussed on the basis of textile knowledge, the didactic material was partly developed by a textile designer who was interested in games, and certain ethnographic materials provided the starting point for productions for schools. The discussions within the team gave rise to interesting exchanges between different disciplines, and the projects were mutually enriching. The framework was the same, but the topics were different. Furthermore, the students who came to the territory for about a week always came in pairs or small groups, sometimes with another researcher. The students' feedback about being able to share the experience with a teammate was always very positive, as it was about the possibility to engage in dialogue with other disciplines. One of the students wrote in the text they had to deliver at the end of their research training:

> These days in Salta set a precedent for the rest of my professional work as a designer. If I do something, I will do it with the people for whom I am working. Furthermore, I will do it with the opinions of others, because all the development and possible improvements that I may do to the project I also owe them to these people I have talked to: my teammates on the trip, the teachers, a father or a child at school. It was the first time I felt I did design outside the walls of FADU, and that it was design in a collaborative way. (Notes of Ignacio Agote, a FADU design student)

Participatory design projects are highly valued, but what does this mean exactly? This feedback gives insight into what a student felt was actually such a project. It was very important to sensibilize the students to decoloniality by means of the bibliography and group talks, exchanges that also established the framework for a joint project, a team. The debates were focused on how we approached the territory, on how we can seriously exchange knowledge

with Indigenous people, if we work together. All of these aspects are rarely considered in design projects, which are generally too focused on esthetic and functional aspects, or, in many cases, on market success. That is why I see it as crucial that the project be seen as a whole, in the sense that the different approaches do not give a precise answer about how to work with the people of the territory, but are rather experiences shared in the research group, that are enriched by the group. This is also why it was crucial to hold an exhibition at the end of the fieldwork, in order to show all the different sub-projects together. In each case there was success and failure, but the most interesting aspect for me was the group reflections, where "the whole" was understood and debated.

2.2 Many worlds at FADU

The modern world has made us think there is a single expectation with regard to the world and how we should live, one idealized way that has become a goal to be achieved. This would mean that countries in the so-called Third World have to follow the path of First World countries in order to become developed. Although this conception of development has been dismantled (see, e.g., Escobar, 2014), what often remains unsaid is that the existence of the so-called Third World is very much necessary for the First World to exist and to enjoy the supposed material *benefits* of being *developed*. This is what many decolonial thinkers call *coloniality*, as the other side of the coin, the hidden, oppressed side that makes the modern system exist (W. Mignolo, 2017, 2019; W. D. Mignolo, 2017; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). This perspective is proposed by Quijano as a historical process in which economical resources were appropriated, giving the Europeans of that time a vastly greater economic capacity than other groups of that time (Quijano, 2000). Furthermore, the scientific creation of the concept of *race*, which was, of course, subsequently dismantled, was, from Quijano's perspective, the key element for subjective domination. They were not just the superiors, but the *natural superiors* (W. Mignolo, 2019; Quijano, 2000; Segato, 2013). Knowledge became hierarchized, with academic knowledge at the top of the pyramid, what Castro-Gómez called *the hubris of the zero point* (Castro-Gómez, 2007). Furthermore, the timeline itself took on a geopolitical dimension, where the present and future took place in Europe and afterwards in the United States, while the rest of the world belonged to the past (Quijano, 2000; Vázquez, 2020). Segato proposes that this conception of time as *one* vector must be overturned: A group of people, she proclaims, should be considered as a vector in time, with a common past and a common project for the future (Segato, 2013). Her proposition brings to the fore the idea that there is no *single* history or timeline, but many. Catherine Walsh makes a similar statement in affirming that decoloniality is not a single destination to reach, but rather that it makes visible "radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought" (Walsh, 2018, p. 17). This is, from my perspective, central to decolonial thinking: There is no such *single* direction; there is not *only* one world. The key is to understand that we can have pluriverses of answers, of projects, of histories. This is what Escobar (2018) proposes within the framework of design.

As explained at the beginning of the text, design studies in Argentina are mainly Eurocentric, following what may be seen as a *universal design*. In my studies in Argentina, I learnt more about Bauhaus than my German colleagues in Switzerland did. Indigenous realities were not even mentioned. Thus, in line with Escobar's further claim that pluriversal designing is "designing from and within a world of many worlds" (Escobar & Maffei, 2022, p. 46), I argue that another premise of the project was to acknowledge the fact that we worked in dialog with another world, which co-exists in Argentina. The recognition of this other world as valid was not as simple as it sounds, and working together did create tensions. At the beginning of the project, for example, one of the students said to me that she was overwhelmed, because she had seen a documentary about the Indigenous peoples in this area: "Needs, and poverty, are so extensive that I would not know where to start" (Conversation with a design student at FADU in July 2022). My answer to this was that we were going to work with them, but in no way to think and promise we would solve problems connected to poverty. This interesting conversation (which was similar to ones I had with other students) have many aspects, but what I want to highlight here is our preconception that we, as Westerners, must help the Indigenous peoples, who are poor, almost by definition[5]. This statement that "the other is poor" makes it impossible to work horizontally. The contradiction is, of course, that we need to recognize the existing structural power asymmetry, which is related to the *Colonial Matrix of Power* (Quijano, 2000) and which frames the historical oppression they have suffered. Nevertheless, I argue that it was crucial to recognize all the people involved in the project as peers, and for the designers or researchers to never position themselves as rescuers or saviors.

For me, the idea of accepting the existence of many worlds means, in this project, that we, Westerners (in this case, researchers and design students) may have a lot to learn from Indigenous people. A respectful approach in design is not a given. If we are to approach the territory in this way, it is important to thematize this point and reflect upon it. In the case of the students involved, they engaged with theoretical readings and group discussions about decoloniality before the phase of planning material outcomes, some of which I will describe in the following section.

3. Fieldwork and material outcomes

The fieldwork in Argentina lasted one year (July 2022—July 2023). It mainly involved working within the Indigenous groups and hosting students and researchers who came to develop sub-projects. Ultimately, different interactions and topics, as well as different universities, were involved. All the projects had to take into account the perspective of the local Indigenous people, and they were carried out in different ways, always with the aim of integrating participatory work. In every case, material outcomes resulted from the flux the sub-projects

[5] Moreover, in many cases where they are not poor in an economic sense, they are questioned or their Indigenous identity is even denied. It would also be interesting to raise the question of what being poor means. However, this would go beyond the scope of this text.

took on. Already at the planning stage of the project, the idea was to leave these materials in the field. Moreover, one premise of the project was that these things needed to have some relevance to the territory. Some of the experiences led to workshops, where we all did something together, some took the form of productions done by the students and brought to the territory to try out with the local people, and some students went with a topic in mind and undertook a material development after the trip.

When I first entered the field, I talked to one of the Indigenous leaders and suggested that we could accompany them in a process of recording something they wanted to record. She answered that it would be good to have written material about natural coloring, for example, because they had experience with recording the process of using *chaguar*[6], and it had been well received by the women. Moreover, we accompanied the recording of some of the group's traditional recipes and nutritional knowledge. The gathering of this information took up the whole year I spent in the field. During certain periods, I was accompanied by students and researchers who had a specific task, which we decided on together, including with part of the team.

On the topic of natural coloring, where we were asked to record the techniques in writing, we proposed to do a workshop to tint small pieces of cloth instead of dyeing the thread. This was done in two communities, where we invited women to participate: *Cañaveral I* and *Santa María*. The result was a diverse selection of samples, which gave us the opportunity to experience for ourselves how the dyeing works, under the guidance of the women. Another example relating to textiles was a series of workshops accompanied by two students, where the focus was on talking about accessories and finishes in handicraft productions. Together we produced some sample buttons made from bottle caps with the fiber they produce and work (Figure 2). Furthermore, in relation to constructions, we built a panel for architectural use based on local textile designs (Figure 3), using the traditional technique for building wooden fences. In this case, the reflection prior to the proposal was concerned with how the Argentinian state deals with housing. Houses are constructed in the same way in all regions of the country, despite huge climate and cultural differences, and the materials are brought from outside, using companies and criteria from urban centers, mainly Buenos Aires. These productions arrive in the territory like spaceships, ignorant of local knowledge and sweeping aside local habits[7]. Thus, the idea at the core of this brief exercise was to think of possible designs connected to the local way of building and living.

[6] *Chaguar* is a plant they traditionally used to produce a textile, out of which they make handicrafts.
[7] More on the analysis we did can be found in Trillo et al., 2023.

Figure 2 Textile explorations. Left: Dying chaguar cloths. Right: Examples of buttons made from bottle caps with the chaguar fiber and dying of cloths.

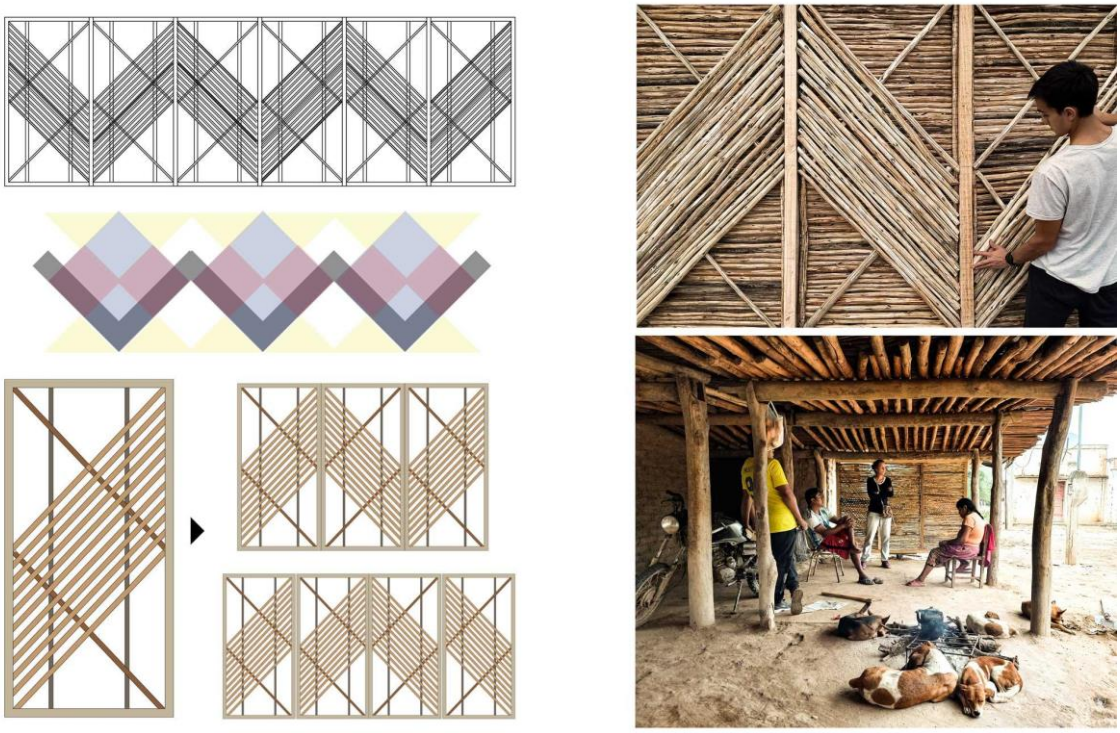

Figure 3 Architectural panel. Left: Student's illustrations. Right: Photographs of the production and installed panel.

In the case of food practices, as mentioned, we accompanied a part of the Indigenous community *Cañaveral I* in creating audiovisual recordings of local knowledge. At the same time, we worked together with INTA (National Institute of Agricultural Technology) and INAFCI (National Institute of Family, Peasant and Indigenous Agriculture), which have an office in the territory. Since they were already running a project on the topic of feeding, we jointly produced some videos in the Wichi Indigenous language about new and traditional cooking recipes to share on social media[8]. The new recipes were intended to make use of the vegetables that the INTA offers within the context of a program they run to develop vegetable gardens.

Some students wanted to gather information during the fieldwork. In one case, a student interested in the topic of languages helped with the conception and analysis of an interview with the bilingual Wichi teacher Eduardo Pérez, who works at School N.° 4819 Cacique Nicasio Miranda in the community *Pozo la Yegua*. Our research led us to intercultural bilingual education (EIB), which became one of the central topics of the whole fieldwork. One of the most relevant issues that emerged in the context of this fieldwork related to schools was that Indigenous languages and knowledge are largely ignored, a fact that becomes very much related to the general analysis already mentioned of *Argentina Blanca* (Gordillo & Hirsch, 2003). Despite the framework of EIB, they still do not have material contemplating their cosmovision and language. They are forced to learn, for example, that A is for *Avión* ("plane" in Spanish), when they learn the alphabet, because no materials have been developed in their language[9]. Besides that, children start school not knowing Spanish and teachers, who are mainly non-Indigenous, are not familiar with the Indigenous language. All of this may not be apparent merely from the material outcomes. However, it is important to present it as an example of how we worked and what reflections lay behind the material productions.

This particular design student, who started with the topic, developed a 3D puzzle of three animals, with their names written on the bases in the Wichi language and Spanish. The idea was to foster literacy in a gamelike way, putting both languages on the same level and coding them by color. Another research trainee, after reading ethnographical material, became interested in the topic of play, games, and textiles. Once in the field, she gathered photos of a thread game played in the area and then produced some illustrations to be used in schools (Figure 4).

[8] Project called "Por una alimentación de vida".

[9] This example came up in an interview with Eduardo Pérez, a bilingual Wichi Indigenous teacher. It is clear that they do not know what A is, like any child who is learning, but they have to learn it in this way despite never having seen an airplane in their lives. More about the problem of EIB can be found in Ceciaga et al., 2023.

Figure 4 Didactic material. Left: 3D puzzle. Right: Photographs of the student's fieldwork and resulting illustrations.

The field of EIB expanded and design students from two other institutions took part in the project in different ways: two industrial design students from the UNRaf (University of Rafaela, Santa Fé province) got involved and visited the territory, with a similar program to that of the research trainees at FADU[10]. Moreover, a workshop on illustration[11] at UADE university in Buenos Aires took the topic as the basis for the exercises over two semesters. On this occasion, I shared the bibliography and some information I had gathered. More than 120 students in the middle stage of their graphic design studies worked in Buenos Aires producing an illustrated alphabet in the Wichi language and informative illustrated posters (Figure 5).

[10] At UNRaf, the articulation with the doctoral project was institutionalized as *Práctica Social Educativa* (PSE) (Educational Social Practice). The research team project was composed of Mercedes Ceciaga, the sociologist Dr. Juliana Carpinetti, the industrial designers Mariana Theler and Macarena Saks Maryniv, and myself.
[11] Led by Lorena Leonhardt, Ximena García, and Paz Tamburrini.

Figure 5 Didactic material. Left: Illustrated panel. Right: Some illustrations of the Wichi-Spanish alphabet.

Once again, the idea is to see the sub-projects as what Escobar calls a "constellation of things" (Escobar et al., 2022), which is not always easy to describe.

At the end of the fieldwork, on June 5th—9th, 2023, an exhibition called "Situated Design. Experiences in Indigenous Territory Lhaka Honhat, Argentina" was held at FADU, Buenos Aires. It was carefully planned so as to catch the public's attention, and an indigenous leader, Cristina Pérez, was invited to attend and give a talk to the audience. One of the challenges was to show the processes alongside the results, what is highlighted for example by (Kelly, 2020), as well as to exhibit Indigenous reality not as a sign of poverty, as it is generally presented, but rather to portray Indigenous people as socially active actors in the project. To this end, we decided to show a selection of photographs made by the students who took part in the project, which were displayed in black and white in a horizontal line running through the entire exhibition hall, to delink them from the presentation of the projects, which were shown in color.

4. Conclusions

The exhibition at FADU was meaningful, since it showed the production at the heart of *Eurocentric* design studies in Buenos Aires, where the curriculum for studying design is set. We

had a warm reception at the institution, and the exhibition was featured in the faculty's official communication, after certain university directors attended and gave positive feedback. I argue that the time has come to propose such interventions; the question is whether we have the courage to do so. Galán argued that more such exercises are not proposed at the university, because additional effort is required to manage them and because they confront teachers and professors with others (2018a). This means that the territory, the context, and the social group we work with will acquire the agency to help define the relevance of the exercise, taking away power that has been assumed within a hierarchical traditional learning structure.

Escobar's question about how to think about design outside the logic of the markets remains very challenging for me (Escobar, 2018). I feel extremely proud to have presented a collaborative project, which proposed to develop ideas that do not necessarily have to do with the market. Nevertheless, I find it fair to recognize that financial aspects are involved. The experience related to the textile *chaguar* handicrafts was the working line that, from the beginning, used design in a way that was focused on market solutions, on selling.

This was a way of working within design I did not want to force to develop, but it was a possibility that I knew could appear (my role back when I worked for the NGO, which was to develop new product lines). Nevertheless, I accepted to do so, because the women are open to working together with designers on handicrafts, since they sell their products and see this as a possibility to increase their income. Furthermore, the dying textile samples, for example, was a production that was bought from the women: we could pay for each piece of cloth from the project's funds. I am aware that part of the success of the participation had to do with the fact that there was money involved. In the case of constructions, I was explicitly told by one of the leaders that men would come to workshops only if they were paid to do so. Modernity and money have already made their way into these remote areas. With this, I want to make visible the trap created by the system, where money plays a role in such projects. Nevertheless, it is also important to make clear that honest approaches enable joint work, as in the case architecture. For the development of the panel, three men from the community of Cañaveral voluntarily helped us: Amadeo, Justino, and Adolfo Pérez. I had known them from before and had had the opportunity to build up trust over the time of my fieldwork.

Another decisive moment was when an Indigenous leader, halfway through my stay, told me that some of the material we had produced during the project could be of interest to them for the international trial, to defend their territory. This gives me hope that the work designers do on such projects may open up fields of application for our knowledge that go beyond our initial conception.

Material outcomes *per se* may not express the richness of the processes students and researchers experienced while working on the project. In the text, I tried to make clear how the different lines of work were related to one another to compose the project, displaying different approaches to the territory. This does not mean that the experiences are therefore

exhausted. Rather, they serve as triggers for ideas to make us reflect and continue to improve on respectful propositions for working with design methods, mainly in contexts where the social atmosphere differs significantly from our own, and in this sense represents another world.

Another central idea to highlight from the project is what Galán noted, namely that through design we can intervene in the social network (Galán 2015, p. 295). In this particular case, I argue, the intention was primarily to intervene in the design scene. The narrative must change, but is this possible? I do not have the right answer, but what I am sure of is that from within, just by doing, it may be imaginable. The project is proposed as an example, as a proposition, not, of course, as the (only) way. It is an approach that tries to give an answer to the question of how to design pluriversally. This is because on the level of theory there is valuable content, but the question is: How do we, as designers, transform this content into reality when we work and teach? The question of how we give concrete answers is a different challenge.

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