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***design for development: A Case Study in Empowerment***
Maria Rogal

*Introduction*

Historically the field of graphic design does not integrate research, fieldwork, practice, and pedagogy. However, this work is becoming increasingly more important, as evidenced by the AIGA Design Research Grant I received in 2009 for *design for development* (d4d). This intiative explores how graphic designers, in partnership with marginalized communities, use design processes, products, and strategies to develop sustainable solutions for local economic, social, cultural, and environmental problems.[1] My students and I explore ways to integrate research and fieldwork into our design process, thereby learning to be more culturally competent designers. Since 2004, I have worked in México on a precursor to this initiative. This grant however, proposed two new projects in order to demonstrate proof of concept. In this article, I provide background on d4d and, using one of these projects as an example, I share the process by which we work with indigenous groups on problems they have identified. These community partners benefit from our design products, processes, and strategies, and my students and I learn from the new knowledge and methods we develop "in the field." We share this knowledge with the graphic design community through writing, photographs, videos, and other materials, which are linked from this article.[2]

*The Context*

The ancient Maya culture is part of what drives tourism in the Yucatán, yet contemporary Mayans are marginalized by the tourism industry. They suffer from long-standing ethnic, class, and political prejudices held by many Mexicans and foreigners in the region. Contemporary Mayans living in rural communities have long produced crafts for sale to tourists. But these crafts tend to resemble one another, are often modeled on each other, and change little over time. Often, whole villages are devoted to producing one craft that they sell to a distributor/vendor, who often dictate the design and materials of the product, for which the artisans are poorly paid. Tourists are deluged with low quality "Mexican" crafts, some of which are even made in China. The sheer volume of identical items on display overwhelms the consumer and further diminishes each product's already low value.

*The Project*

In early 2009, my students and I began work with Kuxtal Sian Ka'an (Kuxtal), a project founded by local conservationists to help artisans develop a sustainable and economically viable craft industry.[3] It is designed to counter the exploitation of artisans living near the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) by training them in small business management, product development and presentation, esteem building, and interpersonal skills.[4]  With sustainable products, a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities, and control of their brand, the artisans could collectively market their products to upscale boutiques and hotels in the Maya Riviera. In November 2008, I met with Kuxtal project coordinator Elsa Torres to explore the possibilities of collaboration between the artisans and my students. After we had reached an agreement, I began planning the course, also titled *Design for Development*, which would bring my graphic design students into the project.[5]

*The Student Designers*

While some of the students were from other countries or had previously traveled outside of the US, most had never traveled to México prior to their involvement in d4d.[6] Some spoke Spanish fluently, others understood but had difficulty communicating, and still others understood little or no Spanish. Despite living in Florida (which, according to the US Census Bureau, has a 19.5% hispanic population) they had little or no contact with Mexicans.[7] In our university town, Mexicans are most visible working in the construction, service, and agricultural industries. Most of the students' knowledge about México is generated by the news media and deals with immigration, drug trafficking, or related violence. For them, as for most Americans, México is essentialized through popular icons, including the mariachi, the sombrero, and tequila. Therefore, it was critical that they see beyond these caricatures in general as well as those of Mayan people in particular. In order to help them do this, I described my previous projects in the region. In addition, Gabriela Hernandez and Abby Chryst, two graduate students with whom I worked in 2008, shared their experiences.  I did not expect that any of this could replace the experience of being there, but they needed a framework in which to begin.

*Working in Context*

Upon arriving in Cancun, we drove south to Playa del Carmen for the students to see first-hand the low-quality crafts I mentioned above. Our purpose was not to evaluate these objects but to understand one of the main contexts that would inform the project. I teach students, when working

in the field, to suspend judgement and admit ignorance of the immediate context. To work in this context, I show them how to integrate ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and thick description into their process.[8] This approach demands active participation and removes the pressure to have all the answers. As one of the students, Yesenia Rivero, notes, "We tried to leave our stereotypes behind and keep an open mind about our experience. In Playa del Carmen we were surrounded by an overwhelming amount of things to buy, all of which seemed to lack uniqueness and a sense of place. It was exactly the type of market that Kuxtal Sian Ka'an was trying to avoid."

*At the Project Site*
The students met the artisans at a creativity workshop we had planned prior to the trip. Its purpose was to teach the artisans how to design quality products of their own that would appeal to upscale consumer-tourists. Over two days, we addressed such issues as design and design process, tools and resources (including open source software programs), and marketing and audience. The workshop had been carefully planned, but the students worked together, reorganizing their presentations to accommodate the artisans' emerging interests. On the first day, "none of us really knew what to expect," Yesenia Rivero notes:

> We had never met the artisans or knew exactly what they were expecting from us, or even in what kind of environment where our workshop would take place. Once there, we learned the importance and necessity for flexibility and modularity. The workshop was very informal, taking place in Enrique Mendoza's Internet café, adjacent to his woodshop. We steered away from the way our presentation was planned and instead chose to let things unfold naturally based on the interest the artisans expressed. Although some did not appear as enthusiastic about the workshop as others, this helped us refine our approach to the workshop the next day, making it much more engaging for everyone.

As Yesenia indicates, working in a different and unfamiliar environment requires the flexibility to think on one's feet and improvise. I was impressed with the students' quick thinking and willingness to adjust to the artisans' interests. "You have to let go of everything you've ever learned about design," said Morgan Slavens, "it was frustrating for me because I wanted something to hold on to and be in control of. You have to be open-minded. That was the hardest part for me—just letting go."

On the second day, we moved to Mendoza's adjacent woodshop to brainstorm, sketch, and critique new products. He and three other artisans let us observe and learn about their processes, goals, challenges, and opportunities. We highlighted the importance of intentionality in the design process, sharing a potential user's perspective, as it was clear from our conversations that they had not thought about this. In fact, they rarely interacted with tourists nor knew how they make purchasing decisions. Consequently, their product development up to this point had been hit or miss. Their products were not unique in the marketplace. However, they were skillfully crafted from beautiful, sustainably harvested hardwoods. The artisans, many of whom lacked formal training, had little confidence in their drawing skills, making them reluctant to sketch their ideas. We told them that, in the design process, there is no right or wrong, no single way to work. Throughout the workshop, we reinforced the idea that design is a creative process requiring iteration. This message was reinforced by Morgan's presentation of her design process. "When I was showing the artisans my process from a project we did at the University of Florida," Morgan recollects:

> The artisans seemed very surprised that we worked through so many sketches and ideas before we got to a final product. They did not realize that the design process is new and different for every project we design, and may take quite a long time from conception to production.

The message that design is an iterative activity was repeated in the hands-on workshop and in our collective post-design critique.

During this critique, Morgan, Ariella Mostkoff, and I commented on each proposal, focusing on its potential development, usefulness, and appeal to an international audience. "I felt the hands-on part of our workshop was the most successful and rewarding for everyone involved," Mike McVicar concludes:

> Our eagerness as a group to share our process and ideas during the workshop came from an innocent and authentically passionate place, and it almost amounted to an unengaging litany of power point slides. Fortunately, we were flexible enough to make it more dynamic. I think we all saw this. After the first day, when we switched gears and started to hand over the process to the participants, that's when we saw the lights really come on. There was pride and ownership in figuring out a design solution on their own, and you could see that excitement in their eyes.

I teach my students that creativity workshops of this kind, which engender dialogue, are a form of fieldwork. Combining the workshop with site visits to other woodshops and a one-day meeting with the project directors in the city of Felipe Carrillo Puerto gave students a more holistic view of the entire Kuxtal project. We conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews while photographing and videotaping in order to document our interactions. We interacted with many project participants, seeing not only the different stages of their craft, organization, and business development but also learning about their varied goals and motivations. On site at the woodshop of another artisan, Celso Kumul Caamal, Yesenia noted, "One of the employees, Ramiro, hoped to someday learn the craft well enough to be able to teach poor Maya people and help them rise above their economic situation, a goal that parallels ours." Likewise, Morgan realized, "When you're actually in the field, you see more differences between" each of the project partners. "When you say 'a group of artisans from México,' they sound generalized." Morgan makes a good point: even if they all worked in wood, the artisans were all at different points in their careers, made different products, and had different goals.

Ethnography is a slow and often serendipitous process, requiring one to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. For example, on the way to Chichén Itzá, an archaeological site and major tourist attraction, the students saw first hand the contrast in working and living conditions between those artisans who make high-quality crafts and those who make inferior products. By the side of the road, we came upon some hammock vendors—Efren Mukul Puc, María Amada Uc Poot, María del Socorro Mukul Puc, María Félix Caamal, Landi Batun Chimal, whom we had met earlier that week at an event exhibiting Kuxtal's products. They recognized us and invited us to see how they make their demonstrably intricate hammocks, which require a great deal of skilled labor. In the artisans' home, one of us noticed a wooden mask, the kind one typically sees for sale in mass quantities in the tourist zone. The hammock artisans took us to meet the people who made the mask, an extended family demonstrably poorer than the hammock artisans themselves. There we saw how masks are mass-produced according to the specifications of a distributor/vendor, not those of craftspeople. This family told us about their ongoing struggle to earn a decent living by making low quality woodcarvings for bargain-hunting downmarket tourists.

*Lessons from the Field*
The fieldwork and research for d4d projects demand active participation, collaboration, and direct engagement with partners, communities, and other collaborators. Because the people with whom

we interact—organic farmers, beekeepers, horticulturists, educators, artisans, and so on—are so varied, and because the social, cultural, economic, and environmental context is so complex, working on-site is the most pragmatic and socially responsible way to proceed. From a professional standpoint, it is more effective than working from a studio, where one can design in a vacuum. On site, and in dialogue with project participants, we assess our findings and (re)define the project itself. As student Laila Simonovsky remarks, "It is hard to explain to people who haven't been there. The research involved in this kind of work is so different from any other—it requires interacting in unfamiliar environments and in a more personal and humanistic way than I am used to. When you're there you learn so much about people and I think for any kind of design you really need to understand who people are and what they want." What students learn from d4d is how culture and human interaction can and should shape design processes and outcomes.

Clearly, in these cases, there is no substitute for direct involvement and being there. Our interactions and observations on-site were intrinsic to project development, in part because we could see what could not be explained, that fieldwork is necessary to graphic design research and practice. Therefore, it is a necessary part of design education. Graphic designers need to be involved from the beginning to the end of a project. My experience working in communities has taught me that actively incorporating inclusive research methods and activities into design practice has a positive impact on all participants. It encourages agency and pride of ownership, especially for marginalized people with little formal education.

For their part, many of the artisans in the Kuxtal project wish to establish their identity as modern Maya people (a mural in downtown Felipe Carrillo Puerto claims, "the Maya zone is not an ethnographic museum, it is a community on the move"). They wish to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and make people aware of their contemporary culture. With our help, Mayan artisans become agents in control of a culturally responsible representation of all Maya people through such strategies as product naming, language use, and brand identity.

In the end, our dialogue benefitted all participants. It was a liberating activity, supporting the education of graphic designers and the empowerment of partners and community members. We exchanged ideas and resources, thus increasing access to materials, ideas, and information. The value of our work is greater than the products we produce. It resides in the collaboration, exchange, and learning that that is a result of each experience.

*Postscript*

Working online, with on-site visits in July and August 2009, we continue to work on developing content for the Kuxtal Sian Ka'an website—our primary project—and other related materials. We are using open source software for the website and have delivered training sessions. Ultimately members of Kuxtal Sian Ka'an will manage the website and content. In summer 2009 we conducted semi-structured interviews with each artisan group. These interviews will allow site visitors to learn about the artisans in their own words. Since mid 2009, we have seen tourism decline in the Maya Riviera because of the H1N1 virus and perception of violence in Mexico. Although the Maya Riviera does not experience the horrifying violence of some northern Mexican cities, this news affects the tourism industry nationwide. Begun when the economy was strong, the Kuxtal project has felt the impact of the economic downturn and sales are not as vibrant as expected. One solution we're exploring is to sell products online. At this time, I continue to work on this and other projects in progress as well as write about d4d to share with the graphic design community, project participants, and others interested in this work.


*Online d4d Project Resources*

2009 d4d fieldwork photographs to accompany article: http://to.ly/TiR

d4d Website|designShares.com (http://designshares.com/share/)

d4d Fieldwork 2009: http://designshares.com/d4dmx09/

d4d Projects in Quintana Roo on GoogleMaps: http://to.ly/Thu

d4d Projects Map (pdf): www.designshares.com/documents/d4d_projects_19jan10.pdf

d4d Projects Map (svg): http://www.designshares.com/documents/d4d_projects_19jan10.svg

d4d Interviews on YouTube: http://to.ly/ThJ

Kuxtal Sian Ka'an: www.kuxtalsiankaan.com


*About the Author*

Maria Rogal is an Associate Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Florida where she teaches advanced graphic design courses, specializing in design for development and social design. She spent her formative years living in the US and internationally. Her trans-cultural perspective influences her work, which focuses on the relationship between culture and design and how we can

leverage the potential of design, broadly defined, to positively shape the human experience. The majority of her research is situated in México, where she explores and analyzes the visual representation of indigenous cultures; works on entrepreneurial projects with indigenous cooperatives; and develops design materials and products with indigenous constituencies and design students to aid in demystifying and breaking down stereotypes. Rogal publishes and exhibits her creative projects and writing internationally and works on collaborative design projects. She has received the American Institute of Graphic Arts Design Educators Grant (2009), a Fulbright-García Robles Scholar Grant (2006–2007), and a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Grant (2007). In 2009 She received the University of Florida's College of Fine Arts Senior International Educator Award. Her website is www.mariarogal.com.

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*Recommended Reading*

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Certeau, Michel de, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. 1998. *The practice of everyday life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Laurel, Brenda. 2003. *Design research: methods and perspectives*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Visocky O'Grady, Jennifer and Kenneth Visocky O'Grady. 2006. *A Designer's Research Manual: Succeed in Design by Knowing Your Clients and What They Really Need*. Beverly, MA: Rockport.

ENDNOTES

[1] Marginalize**: to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group; to relegate to the fringes, out of the mainstream; make seem unimportant—*various economic assumptions marginalize women.* Sources: www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalized; <u>Collins English Dictionary</u> – Complete and Unabridged 6th Edition 2003.

[2] For a map of project locations in Quintana Roo, Mexico, visit http://tinyurl.com/d4dprojects-qr**.

[3] A note on pronunciation: In Yucatec Maya language, the 'x' is pronounced as a 'sh'. For example Kuxtal is pronounced as 'kush-tal'.

[4] For more information on the Sian Ka'an Biospher Reserve, visit the Centro Ecológico Sian Ka'an at www.cesiak.org and the Amigos de Sian Ka'an at www.amigosdesiankaan.org/eng/.

[5] 2009 Design for Development Participants: Abby Chryst, Greg Cole, Gabriela Hernandez, Mike McVicar, Ariella Mostkoff, Yesenia Rivero, Laila Simonovsky, Morgan Slavens, and Maria Rogal. During summer 2009, I worked on-site with Ligia Carvallo, Greg Cole, Edwin Correa, and Laila Simonovsky. For more information on participants, visit http://tinyurl.com/d4dprojects-participants.

[6] This comment takes into account all student participants I have worked with since 2004.

[7] Florida's hispanic population is more diverse than other states such as Texas, Arizona, and California, where Mexican-Americans and Mexicans dominate the hispanic category.

[8] Thick description, as conceived by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, is a way to describe in detail what is not inherently understood in a photograph or other visual representation and particularly useful for fieldwork and process photographs.