TRANSFORMING DESIGN: INDIGENEITY AND MESTIZAJE IN LATIN AMERICA

Abstract

This conversation seeks to explore how we might create a truly global discipline and profession of design. Focusing on their experiences working with Indigenous and *mestizo* communities in Latin America, the convenors will discuss ways to conceive of design theory, research, practice, and education that can level the playing field on which Indigenous and non-Western perspectives encounter the discipline's legacy epistemologies, which are rooted in Western modernity and its attendant coloniality.

Keywords: Decoloniality; Futures; Cultural Perspectives; Global Design; Design Discourse

1. Convenors Information

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2. Context of Conversation Topic

Throughout its history as a profession, communication design has been a thoroughly Western enterprise. Its approaches to theory, research, practice, and education have reflected modernist, Euro-American epistemologies acting as universal values. This has been the case even in the so-called "developing world," most of which is comprised of former colonies and other areas of ongoing Western economic, political, and cultural influence. In order to discard design's provincialism and create a genuinely global discipline, designers must strive not only for traditionally liberal values of inclusivity, multivocality, and equal access; we must also dismantle and rebuild design's epistemological foundations, clearing away their unwitting provincialism and establishing a properly global perspective, one that places all approaches to knowledge and practice—Indigenous, non-Western, and Western—on equal footing.

Our interest in proposing this conversation evolves from our participation in international design research conferences over several years, where we have noticed an epistemological gap in design research and design discussions focused on Latin American contexts, particularly those discussions that focus on Indigenous and *mestizo* communities. Furthermore, as we conduct our own design research and practice with people from these communities, we see and experience this gap firsthand.

We want to identify differences between how design actually operates and how it might operate differently, not only in the Indigenous and *mestizo* contexts with which we are familiar, but *in general*. For example, we want to address questions of form and its cultural legacy, symbology, and visual/visible languages. Broadly, we want to discuss how design's inherited assumptions about phenomena such as power, knowledge, and time can be productively upended. Ultimately, we want to enrich design discourse by loosening Western modernity's grip on the profession's basic assumptions and ideologies.

To foster this conversation, the convenors will discuss—through practical, experiential, and theoretical frameworks—their experiences and perspectives working with Indigenous and *mestizo* groups in Latin America. We will also discuss the conceptual and practical difficulties that lie ahead as the field continues to look beyond its historically narrow borders to adopt broader, deeper, and sustainable perspectives.

The convenors are clear that this conversation needs not be confrontational. Rather, in the spirit of what Communication Studies scholar Sarah Corona Berkin and others call "horizontal methodologies," we seek to expand design so that it may embrace "othered" histories, knowledges, and practices. We expect to share impressions with attendees who have had similar working experiences in other colonial, Indigenous, and/or marginalized communities around the world, in order to find commonalities and identify issues that can be applied to *de*colonial perspectives on design theory, research, practice, and education.

3. Conversation research question

> A. In what ways may design be considered a colonialist enterprise?
> B. What can we learn from past engagements with Indigenous and *mestizo* groups that will help us break out of the inherited epistemologies that have informed design's theory, research, practice and education?

3.1 Sub Questions

> A. How do design's inherited epistemologies influence our ability to co-design in teams that include Indigenous, *mestizo*, or non-Western participants?
> B. How might we recognize the implicit biases and hierarchies in our design systems and replace them with egalitarian and "horizontal" modes?
> C. How should we conduct cultural exchange in contexts of unequal power dynamics?
> D. What is the difference between *exchange* and *appropriation*?
> E. How might we teach design students and researchers to work outside of their own cultural contexts in non-appropriative ways?
> F. How can we avoid the phenomenon of "parachuting?"

4. Set-up of your session

The conversation is organized into four parts: Introduction, Framing Context, Conversation, and Futures.

- *Introduction (5 minutes)*
  Introduce the conversation, the convenors, and an overview of the format.
- *Framing Context (25 minutes)*
  The convenors will frame the conversation by unpacking the problem through sharing experiences, noting preconceptions, observations, and opportunities that relate to the main questions and subquestions. They will share key concepts, terminology, and frameworks.
- *Conversation (30 minutes)*
  Will be facilitated by the convenors based on the proposed questions. They will share the role of taking photographs, notes, and document exchanges. The session will be recorded with permission of recipients and notes will be transcribed as needed for the documentation.
- *Futures (30 minutes)*
  What are some central tenets for moving forward? What are the conceptual and practical difficulties that lie ahead as the field continues to look beyond its historically narrow borders to adopt broader, deeper, and sustainable perspectives?

4.1 Process and role of convenors
All convenors will contribute to establishing a dynamic dialogue and engage with participants. Each will also focus on integrating a specific area of this conversation: Gabriela Hernández, teaching; María Rogal, research; and Raúl Sánchez, theory.

5. Type of space and equipment required

Optimum space will be a meeting room with 5 moveable tables that seat 5 persons each; 30 chairs; digital projector with speaker; and 5 whiteboards. Convenors will provide all other necessary materials.

6. Dissemination strategy

This conversation will be documented using photographs, notes, audio, and sketches. These will be reviewed and curated into a microsite, reflecting the conversation, including opportunities and futures projected as outcomes or next steps.

7. References

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About the Convenors:

Gabriela Hernández, assistant professor of design at the University of Florida. Her expertise includes design for development, visual storytelling, and ethnographic research, and has significant international experience working with disadvantaged communities and indigenous groups in México and Costa Rica.

Maria Rogal, professor of design at the University of Florida. Through the *D4D* Initiative, she works with experts and indigenous entrepreneurs in México to support community well-being through horizontal methods. Her internationally-disseminated research integrates design, development, and decoloniality in Latin America.

Raúl Sánchez, associate professor of English at the University of Florida. He specializes in decolonial theory, and cultural studies. Author of *Inside the Subject: A Theory of Identity for the Study of Writing;* co-editor of *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy.*