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Deglobalizer, from global to local

Abstract

Deglobalizer is part of an ongoing research project about objects, global taste and local traditions. In 2012 Ikea opened its doors in Qatar and immediately created a sort of friction or misalignment between the Swedish brand and the Doha environment. Supercars parked outside of the corporate blue and yellow building, a local disinclination for DIY, and the colorful, sparkling North European catalogue, all stand in contrast to the country's efforts in preserving a sense of heritage and Middle Eastern aesthetic. What is the role of design indeed? In which way could global and local converge to a common recognizable hybrid? Deglobalizer is an IKEAHACKING project where globally purchased standard objects have been subjected to a cultural mutation process and contaminated with local handcrafting.

Keywords: Product Design, Globalization, Localism, Handcrafting, IKEA Hacking, Cross-cultural products

Introduction

"The supposition made in the 1970s by Theodore Levitt and others business theorists that national taste and cultures would converge, does not appear to becoming true. People's habits (...) remain distinct. Thus, the products that help them do these things will and should continue to reflect the different ways they do them from country to another, even if many manufacturers would rather they did not". This passage by the British writer Hugh Aldersey-Williams in his "Globalism, Nationalism and Design" describes perfectly the foundation of this research even thus we think necessary to add a significant new element: hybridity. Society is surrounded by continuous cross-cultural interactions, our daily objects often don't represent our specific cultures and personalization is becoming a need to face the widespread one-size-fits-all model. The research work proposes the creation of a hybrid collection, made by the mix between global goods and local needs. Through a sort of reverse design process we aim to demonstrate the validity of a new *Hybrid Aesthetic* and to define a new socio-economical scenario where products are able to switch from global to local market.

Context Definition

Ezio Manzini defined *Cosmopolitan localism* as the result of a particular condition characterized by the balance between being rooted (rooted in a place and in the community related to that place) and being open (open to global flows of ideas, information, people, things and money – Appadurai, 1990). This delicate balance is highly evident and dramatically unstable in those emerging economies, often sustained by revenues from natural resources exploitation, where a fast-growing attitude endorses globalization to the detriment of local identity conservation. The socio-economical unsustainability of the mass-production/global-distribution mode denounced by multiple actors, from farmers to political activists, is now more than ever on the product design agenda. The rediscovery of handcrafting, the Makers movement and the on-line open environment are design responses to that dissatisfaction. In the next paragraphs the research context will be briefly clarified and analyzed following three different components: *Local Context*, *Global Context*, *Design Context*.

Local Context

The project *Deglobalizer*, sets as research ground the State of Qatar. Qatar is a sovereign Arab country, located in Western Asia, occupying the small Qatar Peninsula on the northeasterly coast of the Arabian Peninsula. The modern, ambitious, and ongoing developing country have actually only opened its doors to modernity in the late 1940's after the discovery of oil. After this significant milestone, Qatar rushed into the journey of its modern history. According to the CIA World Factbook Qatar has the highest GDP per capita in the world as of 2013, although before the oil-boom the country's economy was mostly based on fishing and pearl hunting. The straight jump from a pre-industrial condition to a passive consumerism, without any passage through the Industrial Revolution, well defines why the present production industry is still struggling. The lack of this significant historical step and the consequent weakness in Qatar's manufacturing system, and manufacturing culture, brought the country to import in 2014 goods for 7.928 million US dollars (Qatar Central Bank). Inevitably the globalization virus got caught on many aspects including social and cultural ones reshaping the role of many symbolic objects and traditions. Last but not least in 2013, Qatar's total population was 1.8 million; 278,000 Qatari citizens and 1.5 million expatriates, underlining another significant data about the inevitably grade of hybridization the local culture is subjected to.

Global Context

Global market is the place where companies can sell standardized products to a unified target. Nationalities, cultures, traditions and heritage don't really matter for the mass distribution system; a good product is the one that easily adapts to different contexts or better to say the one which the local context adapts better. Localism has to matter not just as place to sell things, but as a medium of innovation (Thackara, 2006:74) and the schism between production and users, seen as humans and not just consumers, is no longer sustainable. The global representative within our case study is IKEA the biggest furniture store in the world. Within their corporate blue and yellow buildings IKEA is selling more than cheap furniture, IKEA is selling "IKEA's culture" made by unpronounceable-named items, Swedish meatballs and western clean and simple lifestyle. Looking at its numbers IKEA's strategy seems working well, with 250 stores in 31 countries, but when the focus is set on social behaviors is clear how much IKEA care about its users, providing very functional solutions, and how less about local habits and deep cultural understanding. One example is the special edition of the 2012 IKEA's catalogue in Saudi Arabia. All images of women had been systematically removed and the operation appeared to be an effort to minimize the risk of upsetting Saudi clients. The result has been instead a

public apology and the reintroduction in Saudi's advertisement campaigns of women, however appearing infrequently, and if so with most of their bodies covered.

Design Context

The project recalls the *IKEAHackers* design experiment. IkeaHackers.net is a website, initiated in 2006 by the Kuala Lumpur-based blogger under the pseudonym Jules Yap, where people post photos and plans of how they created new furniture from combining and changing standard Ikea furniture. Both designers and amateurs upload their products as result of modification and alteration of IKEA pieces in accord to personal needs. Agreeing with designboom's definition "the term hacking holds many varying definitions. The predominant meaning of the word used to refer to illegal activity performed by computer experts, however a new definition is slowly taking over. This new form of hacking is not done by expert computer users or digital criminals, but is in fact done by everyday people. This new terminology for hacking refers to the act of modifying or customizing everyday products to improve their functionality, repurpose them or just for fun". Upgrade, modify or personalize design projects is part of the new design wave that set ideas-sharing as key factor for design innovation. This research falls under the broader dialogue about new design forms and Open Design represents a crucial structural element of these recent movements. Open Design represents the open-source software theories applied to product Design. Open Design is defined as "design whose makers allowed its free distribution and documentation and permitted modifications and derivations of it" (opendesign.org). This open scenario highlights two new ways to look at the designers of the future: they can be *Meta-designers*, quoting Professor Jos De Mull, when they shape environments in which unskilled users can design their own objects, or *Remixers*, when they no longer create from scratch but they wisely mix existing elements. *Deglobalizer*, the project described in this paper, use meta-design to create a socio economical framework in which design Remixers can modify existing objects. *Deglobalizer* wants to address the cultural implications of objects and display how a global artifact, designed to match a wide and anonymous target, can turn to be recognized by local consumers groups.

Design Process and Methodology

The *Deglobalizer* project is a result of an idea to localize the global marketplace in Qatar, specifically IKEA case perfectly fit our investigation purposes. The Swedish store opened its doors in Qatar in 2012 willing to transform many homes by its distinct, simple, and eco-friendly looking furniture. This modern style does not however associate with Qatari traditional objects. In Qatar great efforts are made to preserve and valorize the country's own heritage and culture, elements at high risk of global contamination and consequent future extinction. Within Qatar's National Vision 2030, the document that sets the guidelines for the developing of the country, one of the crucial points is "Modernization and Preservation of Tradition", focusing on the need to merge progress with cultural identity. Nowadays different skilled artisans, mostly base in the city of Doha, are the ones in charge to produce the products that most represent the local culture and most people recognize as part of their heritage. For this reason the core of our experiment has been subjecting globally purchased standard objects to a cultural mutation process and contaminated with local handcrafting. Key factor behind the *Deglobalizer* is the economies of scale typical of the global market that makes convenient to use IKEA's pieces as raw resources in spite of wood or others materials, imported and usually overprized. Customizing global products results therefore more suitable then design them from scratch. The

design process saw the following steps: Idea Creation, Catalogue Analysis, Items Selection, Design Intervention, and Artisans Engagements.

Idea Creation

Many traditions and social needs affect the design of certain furniture and objects around us. The process of Deglobalizer started from listing and selecting traditional Qatari pieces of furniture and associating them with IKEA symbolic pieces. The contrast of style was very interesting in many aspects. Transforming something simple and basic to something detailed and vibrant. Mainly, the creation of ideas consisted of understanding the cultural differences and adapting to the modern style of IKEA. Sketched and pictures of traditional furniture were made and collected to later use as a reference of design.

Catalogue Analysis

You can get a sense of IKEA store through browsing their catalogue. Not only to view the products, but to realize their style, quality, and concept. From the catalogue a deep analysis was made through viewing the products and comparing it to the local market and traditional crafts.

Items Selection

After analyzing the IKEA catalogue and realizing some symbolic pieces worldwide, we visited the store. The process of selecting the pieces to be hacked was based on the ideas of traditional furniture and artisans skills used in Qatar. Hours were spent wandering in the store and viewing the pieces in search for hybrid candidate. This part of the process was the most experimental as many pieces were purchased for trial of hybridity between global and local.

Design Intervention

“Once you understand that context matters you realize that specific and relatively small elements in the environment can serve as Tipping Points” (Gladwell, 2000). The *deglobalization* process is based on the concept that the design interventions had to be minimal. This rule is motivated by two main factors. First a massive change in the nature of the object would hide or delete the modern spin that in part contributes to create the *Hybrid Aesthetic* we wanted to endorse. The second reason is that overdesigning the products we would raise up way too much their economical value reducing drastically their affordability.

Artisans Engagement

After selecting the pieces, they were taken to the local artisans to transform them according to our design but giving them freedom in production specifications. The details of the design including patterns and techniques were left to the artisans to decide and create. The outcome of handmade crafted labor was a total surprise from an artisan to another. Imperfection, flaws, and defects were characteristics in their work but embraced as local, handicraft quality.

Outcomes

The outcome of the deglobalization process was a series of hybrid objects that reflect a local taste but embedding a modern twist. The merging of global and local, mass production and handmade was worth the experiment. These pieces could be integrated in the daily lives of locals and would reflect their identity and culture but maintaining a certain modern touch. The ones below are just few

examples of the multiple experimentations that count in total 17 deglobalized objects realized in collaboration with 6 local artisans.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Umbrella (Figure 1, Figure 2)

It is known through history that people in the region built tents as homes or *majlis*. Now days, people still like to own tents for social events and gatherings. This fact was inspiring to recreate the umbrella from IKEA store to culturally match the traditional fabric used within the tents.



Figure 3



Figures 4

Moose (Figure 3)

A moose-rocking toy is playful, but could not be associated to the local culture or perhaps even recognized by young users. As this animal is not familiar to the region, yet, it quite looks like a camel, which is very familiar. Therefore, this rocking toy was transformed from a moose to a camel simply by changing its color, cutting its horns, and adding a cushion-hump.

The coffee pot (Figure 4)

Coffee is one of the most important heritages in hospitality. The coffee pot, or *dalla* in the local khaliiji language, has a distinct shape with its long spout to pour finely in little cups. The coffee pots found in IKEA does not match the local coffee pots. Therefore, it has been transformed by adding a long spout to bring local culture and habits closer to this object.



Figure 5



Figure6

The coffee Table (Figure 5, Figure6)

One of the most typical and recognizable Middle Eastern decorations is represented by golden nails hammered in wooden boxes, stands or stools. One of the IKEA's bestsellers is the coffee table LACK characterized by a shiny flat surface that perfectly matched the pattern creation needs.



Figure7



Figure8

Building Blocks (Figure7, Figure8)

How a Qatari little kid could recall his or her environment pretending to build houses with colorful blocks and triangular shapes? In Middle East buildings are usually beige and no one roof is pointy as it use to be in the west. Some paint and some sandpaper has been enough to transform triangles in semicircles and blue-red-yellow housing into desert mosques.

Conclusions

It's a utopian thought that the national boundaries would dissolve. As mentioned before Theodore Levitt 's theory about converging tastes and cultures is moving further away from reality day after day. People from different countries have their own way of living. They have distinct cultures and traditions and that makes them live their daily lives differently, thus, doing their daily chores and socializing differently. Good design should create a better situation for living. And because living needs are different from a country to another, one design solution is quit difficult to serve everyone worldwide. People have the need to connect to their roots, the further they go away from it, the stronger they relapse to it. Hypothetically, and being the project free of property rights, the local artisans involved in the process could start selling their IKEA hacked products. This would define a completely new socio-economical environment and a new definition of the local market. With the *Deglobalizer* project we attempted to prove how design could help to merge Local and Global, appreciating the benefits of the global economy but respecting local contexts. The typical affordability of a global production has been use then to aliment the local market and promote local culture. Without rejecting and sentencing globalization at large design is in charge to understand how to use it properly and how local and global could converge towards a sustainable hybrid.

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