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Whose futures need crafting? A collaborative evaluation of the British Council/Crafts Council *Crafting Futures* 5K grant scheme

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Introduction

This evaluation is a reflection in the form of a dialogue between Sandra Fruebing &

Rachel Kelly as recipients of British Council: *Crafting Futures* grants in 2018–19. At a

British Council sharing event hosted for participant researchers involved in these

projects, Fruebing and Kelly related their experiences and recognized, in each other's

reports, issues and concerns which are common to them both. This led them to discuss

their experiences further through regular online exchanges.

Fruebing and Kelly are engaging in an emerging shared awareness regarding the

challenges and imbalances of development practices within international community-

based research. The concerns from where the *Crafting Futures* project arises, are a

concern for all marginalized craft practitioners and in particular those who are women.

Community-based collaboration and the role which female knowledge and work plays

within craft-making practices is at the heart of both Fruebing and Kelly's research

practices. The conversations between these two part-time design educators have become

learning experiences in themselves. The observations they both share, mark a

development for future community-based research and collaboration and both of their individual work in design Higher Education.

The conversation

RK: I have always been interested in design collaborations through my own textile practice, so I was keen to work on a community-based collaboration. I was approached by a work colleague at Manchester School of Art to join the CORDITEX Project at University of the Philippines Baguio, led by Professor of Anthropology, Dr Analyn Salvador-Amores. The CORDITEX Project is seeking to preserve weaving knowledge from the Itneg ethnolinguistic community within the Cordillera region of the Northern Philippines. A British Council: *Crafting Futures* grant provided funding for myself and my research partner Dr Michelle Stephens to travel to the Philippines to join the project. While in the Philippines, we visited and worked with elderly weavers in their communities, with the aim of developing a Weave Learning Tool-Kit that would support communities to reacquaint with extant Itneg weaving patterns and methods.

Figure 1: The Manabo Weavers Association in Abra, Northern Luzon working with the CORDITEX research team in their temporary garage weaving workshop. (Image credit: Arnold Amores, 2019).

SF: My *Crafting Futures* project had a different set-up to Rachel's. I was in Egypt as an independent researcher. I was not affiliated with any academic institution. I lived and worked in Cairo, Egypt from 2014 to 2018 and I taught at the German University in

Cairo. During this time, I researched and connected with the local crafts and design community. I learned speaking Egyptian Arabic and was therefore able to ask questions about the making, the heritage, the makers, the materials.

When I returned to the UK I became aware, applied and received the *Crafting Futures* grant, which allowed me to continue my engagement with the female artisans of the Ababda Bedouin. In my *Crafting Futures* project, I was supported and guided by an in-country partner in Cairo, namely Megawra and Egyptian NGO. Megawra is a platform for debate and action in the built environment with a focus on theory, praxis, art and linking cultural heritage to sustainability and social responsibility.

RK: My project involved my working with the Manabo weavers association and Ilocos Sur weaving community who are both members of the Itneg ethnolinguistic population who reside near to the Abra river delta in the Northern Luzon region of the Philippines. Itneg communities today include small numbers of master weavers who are still able to teach and pass on their knowledge in an extant oral tradition. Textiles are used within Itneg community life and in funeral rituals. Funeral blankets are still woven and used occasionally by some Itneg communities to wrap a skeleton which is then placed underneath a traditional Itneg building in a ritual to ward off malevolent spirits from the community. Itneg traditional weaving utilises supplementary weft pattern method to weave images and stories as floating patterns on the surfaces of woven textiles. We had the opportunity to observe and speak with the master weavers who are the last practitioners of this tradition.

Figure 2: Cowrie shell leather band attached to tent pole. This item is called 'Esboa' and given to a woman after the birth of a boy (image credit: Sandra Fruebing, 2018).

SF: The Ababda community traditionally make objects and craft items using plant-based leather tanning, cowrie shells and beads. From a design point of view, I was asking questions such as, *will my presence and my design guidance influence their cultural heritage?* and *Might I intervene or shift their crafts making?*

The Ababda Bedouin still use a traditional plant-based leather tanning technique, but only for their own community objects, which have changed naturally with time and the innovations available. However, the plant-based leather tanning is not used for the tourist market. Tourist objects are made of chemically tanned leather purchased in Cairo. The reasons for this are multi-layered, but the Bedouin women say, tourists do not like their tradition and think the leather smells too strong and does not look nice enough.

Figure 3: Leather bag with traditional decoration to carry Gabana (local coffee) cooking utensils to the mountains during the rainy season, when the herds are brought there to grass (image credit: Sandra Fruebing, 2018).

While being with and working with the women I learned that many development projects try to market and adjust the Ababda's way of living to make it compatible with city life or a more western lifestyle. Instead of supporting the craft and the inherited knowledge of the community, new and unrelated making techniques such as knitting and crochet are introduced. Leather workshops which are organized by bigger development

projects do not actually incorporate heritage designs and the women's intuition for the making. The women are the artisans. They do not need guidance in the design, maybe in making and adjusting details, but certainly not in designing or artistic development. It is intrinsic to them. Why is there no community research? Everyone talks about development, but would that not mean that we first understand the context and ask if the women want to participate? Paying incentives for communities to participate in projects makes their once free decisions not free anymore.

RK: Walter Benjamin 'conceived history as a text, as a series of events which 'will have been' -their meaning, their historical dimension, is decided afterwards' (Žižek 1989: 151). The removal of textiles and objects from communities as a result of trading and mainly western academic and museum research practices, has meant that many historic textiles and objects have been preserved, but not in their original geographic home. We don't know if the textiles were originally traded, gifted or otherwise appropriated by museums and anthropologists, but an outcome was that the removal of the textiles resulted in the losses of intangible cultural heritage. Itneg weaving looms and tools, along with textiles and objects, were also removed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century. What is so significant, is that knowledges are held within loom heddle configurations, which mean when the loom is taken so often are the patterns. We became aware of the representative disconnection, which the preserved textiles and tools held in museums have with the communities that produced them.

An aim of my project, was to bridge the divide which knowledge loss through the removal of objects more widely creates. We explored such losses through the development of new community-based learning tools and digital knowledge frameworks

to try to reintroduce to communities, their extant weaving, culture, methods and skills. The *Crafting Futures* programme provided resource to support a reflexive space to be created where practitioners, institutions and communities can begin to tackle such longstanding concerns and consider difficult questions raised together.

SF: My partner was Megawra, based in Cairo and I knew the whole team beforehand and they gave me a platform in Cairo to present the collaboration with the Ababda women to a national audience. This posed different difficulties for my project, but also advantages. I found it difficult that I was able to decide everything by myself. Very early on I noticed the connection to the ethics of the development sector, which I did not understand at that point. However, at the same time I now see it as an advantage because I could take my time to understand these relationships and learn how to navigate that environment. I had the time to understand what I agree with and what I disagree with.

From the beginning I stressed that I wanted to learn from the women first before I was going to suggest anything. I also avoided saying that I want to help or improve. In 2017/18 I was less experienced than I am now. I did not need to negotiate ethics with a national institution. In Egypt, there is a huge divide between Egyptians and Bedouins. The term 'to improve lifestyle and livelihood' is commonly used in bigger international development projects such as the *Crafting Futures* grant. The language that is used is an aspect I find challenging. It provides ground for segregation on national and international levels.

A difficult moment for me was when I learned that development agencies and big projects pay incentives to the women to participate. One of the women was asking me

about money. This was already towards the end of my stay and when we were finishing the project. The conversation was both enlightening and sad as I learned about the matter of payment. The whole system of development feels unequal and I started wondering who actually needs development? Who benefits from it? Who wants to wash their minds clean and from what?

I started to read more and more about development aid, and how and for what reasons it does not work. If it would be a successful model should not development agencies become redundant after a project has been declared successful? I used the Theory of Change (Nesta 2011) to plan the project and it was helpful to define potential outcomes from the outset.

I have learned that a six-week project is so short that it feels almost ridiculous to define long-term and even short-term goals with the amount of money that was provided and with the goals the British Council was trying to achieve. This made me ask new questions: Why is it not valid to foster 'learning' as an outcome? I felt that I benefited much more than the women and gained experience. One major aspect I learned throughout the whole process was being honest and managing expectations – my own and the collaborating partners.

RK: I also used the Theory of Change (Nesta 2011) and it was helpful as a framework through which to consider the project from a future facing perspective. I also feel that in the *Crafting Futures* evaluation, shared learning as an outcome, became a secondary focus. Lyotard warns that knowledge 'will continue to be, a major – perhaps *the* major –

stake in the worldwide competition for power' (Lyotard 1984: 5) and this means that the intellectual property within and from communities and their folklore is a topic which is ripe for review. We worked to re-introduce through the CORDITEX project a shared learning framework through workshops using textile samples and patterns and drafts developed from extant museum samples.

The extinction of practices along with the potential irreversible changes to land, flora and fauna, are a result colonialism. In my project we were trying fix something which was broken in part as a result of foreign interventions. In addition to the craft traditions we were exploring, we were also being given an opportunity to share understanding which is situated within the identities and experiences of all textile making, teaching and practice.

Figure 4: Community weavers at the Museo Kordilyera, Baguio (image credit: Arnold Amores 2019).

Our project involved a workshop held at the University of the Philippines in Baguio which was attended by weavers and stakeholders from many communities from the region. At the workshop we talked and learned about the concerns regarding weaving and textile traditions. During the workshop, a tour of the new CORDITEX textile archive at the Museum Kordilyera was organised by the museum curators as an opportunity to share and explore the textiles in the archive. On the weavers return from their visit I sensed something had changed as a result of this tour. The tone and mood of the participants changed and they became more introspective and somewhat withdrawn. This tour

became a keystone moment in my research understanding as it became apparent to me that the textiles which were only known in the communities through oral traditions and stories were suddenly present in material form like ancestors coming back from the past. At this point the differences rather than the connections between the weaving community and our privileged, western academic view was made apparent to me. As a result of this, I feel I have a responsibility to remember what I felt like on realising this.

SF: Rachel's descriptions always strike me with how similar the problems and situations are we put ourselves in and were put in.

RK: I met strong elderly women who were impressive, but the other description I can apply to them is that they live in economic and environmental precarity. Regardless of the multiple and complex issues underpinning the project context, it was by recognising the women as independent craft practitioners, I began to understand what I was seeing and experiencing as a craft practitioner myself. The identity of being a weaver, is a support system which sits beyond the profound changeable aspects, losses and poverty that surrounds such communities. I felt my task was to connect what I saw in the weavers, with all women who are seeking to practice with autonomy, whether in communities or in art colleges or universities. This newly revealed basis of understanding, as a result of my observations and experiences, shifted my perspective from being positional (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999) to universal.

SF: In Rachel's projects, there are local traditions lost and changed and replaced for multiple reasons which connect the global and the ultra-local. My greatest concern and question and struggle for myself is whether I have anything to say in it. I do not think that

it is and should be my decision because I am an outsider. I do not even know if I have the right to comment on it or have an opinion. This is where I think design education and social design has a huge amount of work to do. How do we engage with communities and how do we prepare students for those ethical questions and concerns?

I work as an educator and also change student's briefs which have formulations of 'working for people' to 'working with people'. It is difficult to describe all the details I have observed and understanding I have gained. Again, I need to stress that the 'project' was a collaboration and an observation. I think there are already difficulties surfacing by using those words and call a human interaction 'a project'.

Immediately I have trouble speaking about observing another human being. Rachel and myself started to discuss these questions in private weekly conversations. The grant we both received has left us in an emotional whirlwind. Again, personally I think with an increasingly growing social design innovation community, ethics, gender equality and community projects, reflexivity should become more important in design education.

RK I agree that the term *project* is problematic, when the *project* is a community, society and their intangible cultural heritage. During visits to weavers, I observed posters displayed on walls in weavers' homes or outside workshops representing projects or activities they had participated in. The posters became significant to me in the context in which they were displayed. It appeared that the posters were souvenir celebrations of projects and were being displayed by the weavers with pride and affectionate remembrance. I felt moved when I saw them, but also conflicted. I was asking myself

'but what were the outcomes of these previous projects, because from where I am standing it looks like there has been no improvement for these communities'

Figure 5: Celebration poster displayed inside weavers' home (image credit: Rachel Kelly, 2019).

On return from the Philippines, I looked again at the photos of the posters I saw, and my feelings about them altered in that they became a simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). I asked myself in naive terms, if the posters I saw were *a good or a bad thing?* The images began to represent for me a mirror where I was led to consider if our project was any different to previous interventions and if our project was better, worse or relevant? Will our project even be remembered with any affection? I hoped that by leaving weaving tools and samples as a kit some difference may have been achieved.

SF: I have mentioned before already the material practice of the Ababda Bedouin is connected to a global network. It is not just about making tourist objects with a particular stitch. It is a sustainable practice connected to land, to rites, to plants, to animals, to the mountains, the sea and the stars.

I have had many conversations with the Bedouin, with Sheiks in Cairo and the general public about beauty. I asked what is beauty in Islam and what is beauty in your culture. Most people say there are two categories of beauty: the things that are beyond your lifespan: the sky, the moon, the stars, the sea, the mountains and there are the objects of beauty which are in your lifespan: camels, goats, trees, shells for example.

Conclusion

RK: Despite the brief time span of my project, the effect on me has been profound. My project involved working with a university and academics, and this is where mine and Sandra's experience differed. Through my reflections and in my conversations with you (Sandra) the insights I have gained have changed my professional practice. While the aim was to bring the weaving of the Itneg community into visibility, it was the shared experience which was created between the different communities who connected, which still resonates in me today. I was propelled through this project into asking difficult questions of myself, my academic role and my responsibilities through the *Crafting Futures* programme. The project has been worthwhile because it enabled some troubled and dislocated textiles and their weavers to be re-acquainted. A positive outcome will be if the archive is opened and the communities are given a key, so they can begin to reconnect and re-learn through their tradition, on their own terms.

SF: In contrast to *Rachel's* approach, I followed a very intuitive and free methodology where I could decide the pace and schedule, but I also had to state potential outcomes in the application process which I was trying to achieve. My research questions were based on gaining insight what the women's understanding of beauty is on a local cultural level and within Islam.

    The outcomes of my project are defined and countable as objects and events. However, the real outcome is experience, mutual understanding and an actual long-term relationship that could foster support. After a few years, I am still in touch with the women on a regular basis.

Figure 6: Collaborative drawing session to learn about designs and processes from each other (image credit: Sandra Fruebing, 2018).

Acknowledgements

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