

PDC2020 БВО
POSAL
LUCIA TRIAS

AUTONOMÍA-LED-DESIGN.
THE USE OF PROBES AS A
DECOLONIAL DESIGN ENABLER

0. Introduction

This proposal is an invitation to understand cultural Probes as a practice for design processes led by Autonomía.

Current global south design discourses stress the importance of broadening perspectives to address the complexity of design problems. From the stance that it is normal to approach content as a means of "customizing" ways of design without actually tackling the hegemonic form of design, decoloniality advocates for the acknowledgement of forms being as important as content.

In this scenario, Design Research appears as a medium to take over control of the notion of knowledge by performing participatory design as an epistemological practice. This work serves as an invitation to look into the potential of design research as an epistemological practice. Through the use of Probes, as a participatory tool, that engages peoples into connecting with their ontologies.

1. Design Ontology: The Entanglement Between People(s) and Knowledge(s)

Changing the paradigms of understanding knowledge requires adopting a much broader position towards it. In this research, knowledge is thought to exist concerning different peoples and the worlds in which they live. In this regard, Design Ontology (DO), with a relatively new but prominent appearance in global south design, is considered a way of advocating alternative systems to rationalism (Schultz et al 2018).

Tlostanova (2017) argues that design is ontological in itself as it creates human ways. Consequently, Fry (2018) sees DO as a way of understanding and of practising design, focusing on the awareness of what a design object brings into the relation with peoples and worlds.

1.1. Autonomía as a Means for People(s) Participation

The idea of Autonomía has long been linked to liberation and anti-colonial movements in Latin America. The Strategic Design Research Journal published a full edition in May-August 2018 on Autonomías, concerning a pluriversal design idea in which different knowledges/cultures and human conceptions can find a liberated design form.

Autonomía is seen as a way of enabling the development of culturally based design, by means of enabling the acceptance of modern knowledge in combination with local knowledge; and from the logic of its subordination in pursuit of the common good (Testori & d'Auria 2018; Escobar 2018).

In a very similar argument, Mazini (2018) argues that it "is an autonomous attitude that brings people to choose to collaborate, joining forces with others and working together. (...) when one grows so does the other, and vice versa", showing autonomía as a force of collaboration between different cultural expressions. This has a strong connection to Escobar's (2018) notion of OD as plurality enabler.

Consequently, for Andrea Botero (et al. 2018), autonomía requires a contextualization of thinking,

sensing and acting that would shape it in different manners. Hence, results difficult to define it. Botero suggests that the combination of autonomía and design "might run the risk of instrumentalizing it and therefore producing the very same issues it is meant to highlight". It is necessary not to interpret it as a design branch, to avoid its relation to certain forms and methods.

In line with this argumentation, Nold (2018) points out a misleading potential for the practical applications of autonomía and DO, questioning the possible postulation of these as broader understandings of user-based design and translating these into mere platitudes.

1.2. Design research as a means of participatory practices.

Beyond the many definitions and approaches concerning participatory design forms, I would like to refer to two structural aspects of all of them. First, the idea of the collective creativity of designers and non-designers within a design process. Second, the redistribution of roles, which leads to a redistribution of tasks. While designers become researchers, people(s) become partners.

Unlike in 'classic design', such approaches give the person who will later use that design, the option to take on the role of an expert of their experience in the design process (Sanders and Stappers 2014).

According to Tuuli Mattelmäki (2006), the practice of user-centred design education, and research into it, began to apply and develop particularly successful approaches to design thinking and making. In this line, her work explores the use of Probes as a means for having an insight into our user's perception and context. Putting our user in the focus of our project gives us the possibility to understand and incorporate new factors into a product development process. The idea of this tool is that the user and the designer have equal weight when making a product. As a research tool, it gives us several opportunities to condense different types of information. Stimulating personal reflection utilizing an object or performing an activity. They allow us to work with people who are in different places since they are usually sent and returned by post.

Like any research method, there are many types, so I will refer to two examples described by Tuuli Mattelmäki:

- As an initiative to participate: the idea is to show in a more real way the needs of the user and to think together about the solutions for it. The idea is to give people tools of expression that we designers can use in the development of our products.

- As a form of dialogue: this tool seeks to introduce the user to the discussion team. The material of the Probes is the basis of the description of the user's situation. You need to work and analyze the information in a multidisciplinary team that can offer different points of view regarding the user experience.

The Probes are a good example to show how Co-Design requires creativity in all parts of your process, including from customers and end-users. Turn research into a design piece and see that it contributes to the improvement of the outcome.

2. Case study: Cultural Probes for fashion design

To investigate the relationship between the physical body and clothing, I conducted a series of cultural probes that specifically studied the use of pants in women. By stimulating the women's reflection on their dressed body, the use of this tool allows the user to be put in the centre of the investigation, and avoid "generalizations".

The procedure consists of the following: the Probes-kit personalized is sent to the person. The Probe intends the same activity to be repeated during 5 consecutive days: tracking the use of trousers. All communication happens through WhatsApp, with a phone number under the name of Probes -this helps to make the activity more impersonal, increasing their confidence throughout the process. Each day they must send audio messages, counting discomforts and facilities during the time of dressing and undressing. At the end of each day, they have to document any marks left on their bodies by the pants, by using a one-way camera. It is encouraged to increase the contact via WP -as well as through the use of a personal notebook- if during the day situations linked to the relationship pants-body appeared. The last one would return per post to me once the Probe is finished together with the camera.



Image of the Probe-kit implemented for the above-mentioned research.

2.1. Analysis

The Probes serve to understand that designing requires inspiration and information. After the Probes, I realized that by giving more importance to information, I was able to make research a vital part of my design process. That made it easier for me, from my role as a designer, to show my interest and commitment in this instance. Performing the Probes was like carrying out a design project, and that made it possible for the activity to be thought of both conceptually and methodologically specifically for this work. I consider that the Probes was not only a way to involve the user in the process of my work but to involve me in a new way to my design process. It forced me to stand from an objective perspective, and thus be able to think about the research without imagining a final product.

It is important to highlight the increasing involvement of women in the Probes, and how they have raised their level of reflection in terms of the research situation.

3. Conclusions

The use of probes gave me the possibility to understand the meaning of a design research process, where the results are marked by research and not by preconceived ideas.

This led me to conclude on how the use of new research tools within the design process improves the results obtained by the user, allowing an understanding of how the user lives the relationship with the product and the social and cultural importance that this link has.

I consider positive the fact that designers can take into account the vision and the knowledge of their users.

An important aspect is the place given to the process of research as knowledge creation, though placing it in the phase of idea generation and concept development. Promoting design research can be very beneficial, not only for the formation of the decolonial designer, but also to contribute to the general understanding of what is involved in designing products that will be inserted in the most private of cultural formations and therefore affect peoples ontologies.

The increasing involvement of women during the Probes, showed me the potential of participatory approaches as a means of collective creation. When reflecting upon this from an Autonomía perspective, the potential of Probes stands as a way for researching the different ontologies related to the same design; and as a means for cutting the gap between design and societal structures from a pluriversal point of view.

4. References

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