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CHIC explained in a different way Designer Maker User going towards the “doing it together” Design is everywhere!

How did you get to your new school? Which transport did you use? How did you find the way? Did you use a website or a map? How did you choose your clothes for the first day back at school? What did your milk carton look like at breakfast? Can you remember what the design and colours looked like? Can you list the items in your house, or those you may have seen in town, like a bin, a bench, a new public space? All of these items, where do they come from? Who drew them? Who manufactured them?

By using any of the objects, services or systems, you use something that has been « designed ». « Design » is an English-sounding word but with a French origin. It comes from the word « dessein », which in the XVIth century used to encompass the meanings of the two contemporary words ‘dessin’ (drawing) et ‘dessein’ (conception of an objective to reach). In essence, design is a process or a way of thinking that can be applied to any scale. The designer’s skill is to understand both our practical and emotional needs. This attitude sets it apart from other creative professions, as the design is utilitarian: it needs to have a purpose.

When you think about design, we often think about well-established disciplines such as graphic design, architecture, fashion. But these categories are not representative of the diversity of design and its trades. Indeed, design expands to transports, health, software etc. You are a designer: product, style, stage design, culinary, jewellery, etc.

Design is a process carried out by people for people. It is a dialogue between designer, maker and user. It is important to understand how the designer responds to the needs of the users, how the users consume and influence the design and how technological revolutions – starting with manufacturing – transformed the production of objects.

If the traditional production of objects was handmade for centuries by specialists, during the industrial revolution, machines eventually replaced it to enable the serial production of objects. This meant a transition from the craft to the industrial object. However, these days, in the post-industrial era and with the arrival of new technologies and new production sites such as fab labs, what are the new conditions for designing and producing an object? What new roles for designers? For makers? For users? Is it possible to ‘make’, following a « *doing it together* » logic?

Re-inventing the ink stamps

With a French origin, the term « design » comes indirectly from the latin *designare*, meaning « to brand, to draw, to signal ». Thus, for the CHIC programme, the obvious object that was selected is the ink stamp, as its first function is to make a mark on various materials, such as paper, textile or wax.

It is often used in our daily lives, for example in companies, to stamp documents such as contracts, invoices or delivery notes, alongside a signature and a date. It is also used to mark official administrative documents (seal, dated stamp, paginating stamp).

However, it is also an object full of heritage with its specific skills. Its ancestor is none other than the seal used in Mesopotamia in 4000 BC, to mark clay objects. Since then, it has been used to guaranty the authenticity of a document, as a signature. Whether in Africa, India, in Europe or in Asia, the stamp was also used as a tool and mould to mark the textile, the leather and the paper with decorative patterns;

many artistic professions were born that way. Historically, stamps were engraved by hand on wood, metal, or stone. The modern ink stamp was born in the XIXth century: the stamp, now made out of rubber, is held by a base and comes with an ink box. It wasn't until 1976 that the automatic self-inking stamp was developed (the stamp and the ink in the same box): in one movement, it means the base can be stamped.

The modern stamp was made by typographers with heavy techniques taken from industrial manufacture (letter case or letter smelters, printing press etc.). But thanks to technology, it is easy to discard these heavy techniques. Nowadays, it is very easy to create one's own stamp : from home, it is possible to send a pattern or text by computer and to get it back by post. But where does it come from ? Where was it manufactured ? Most probably China, so pretty far!

The pantolino, a Europe Créative stamp machine

With the programme Chic of Europe Créative, the objective was to make stamps by avoiding, on the one hand, outsourcing at the other end of the world and on the other hand, digitization (sending a virtual drawing via the web to a far away manufacturing location).

On the contrary, the idea was to produce stamps in local third spaces such as fablabs (« manufacturing labs »), a sort of new generation of «DIY» workshops. There, the designer is hands on and works with new technologies such as the 3D printers or the laser digital saw to manufacture directly the prototypes, with an « open source » philosophy and a «Collaborative work » approach.

Several European workshops were organised with teams made up of designers and fab managers (sort of «ingenious engineer » makers) from France, Belgium, Spain, Italy and Latvia, to create stamps. In this manufacturing process, having a high level of technological knowledge – or even expertise – is crucial : not everyone knows how to vectorise a drawing or use the machines found in fablabs !

These experiences in fablabs were really interesting, as the stamps were fabricated locally, quickly and at low-cost. In addition, the designers found great pleasure in making their own objects, testing different engraving materials (foam, wood, lino etc.) and to experiment alongside the fab managers. The prototype and the R&D (Research and Development) seemed more economical for the designers. In other words : the designers tested and turned an idea into reality at a lower cost.

But can we avoid the dependency to information technology ? Is it possible to stop using it and to make stamps manually, in low-tech mode, without necessarily going back to a knowledge of craft which requires several years of experience in order to engrave a stamp?

This final stage was another one of the objectives of Chic. A low-tech stamp machine was introduced in Brussels, in the Open Fab, under the guidance of Nicolas B., as a result of the collaboration between other fab managers and designers : the Pantolino.

The name comes from the contraction between « pantograph », a drawing instrument invented in the XVIIth century, and « lino », the material on which the stamp is engraved. It is a revisited pantograph which enables to simultaneously draw by down-sizing the model and to engrave the stamp by using only hand and electricity. The manufacturing technique is not hidden, the user sees it, as opposed to the various manufacturing tools. It is worth noting that the pantograph was made with wood, except for the connectors, produced in fablab thanks to the 3D printer. The Pantolino, which can be researched on the internet, is now in open source : this means that anyone can make it and suggest improvements to the community. Once the Pantolino has been built, no need for technology: a small stamp factory can be created manually, like a handcraft manufactory !

Creative Play and social design

The Chic programme not only wanted to create stamps for the sake of making stamps, but to give meaning, in the sense of what is called social innovation design, by putting the methods and knowledge from designers at the service of projects which can be socially beneficial. In this particular case, junk food and

identity crisis were discussed.

From the « stamp » object, the objective was to create several design objects, by putting the emphasis on creative play. Playing, for a number of specialists, is an effective educational tool for emotional, psychological, cultural and motor development of the child, so as to approach complex topics whilst remaining the driver in the process.

During the workshop organised in Rome, designers, fab managers, teachers and children created and tested stamps. The designers were evidently creating around an educational and esthetical project so that the children could take charge, create, and have fun making stamps whilst thinking about the chosen topic. The fab managers confirmed the ergonomics of the Tampolino and would like to develop a printing system for children better suited to their size. The distribution of these games can be done through a collection of educational boxes.

This is it : Designer – Maker – User, towards the “doing it together“ !

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