Designing storytellers for Barranquilla

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Abstract: Despite the emotional connection that the citizens of Barranquilla have with their Carnival, there are elements which are vanishing, and new practices brought from foreign cities are taking part in this traditional festivity. The main purpose of this project has been to involve the Design in the rescue of Cultural Patrimony, and from this point of view to provide other methods which can become models for other places that experienced the same situation. The approach to this goal throughout Design is a gradual process which, thanks to the analysis of the patrimony, has provided conclusions of colors, textures, shapes, materials, etc., that have determined the appearance of different products for the modern surroundings of this Caribbean city. With this scheme the products designed acquire values that go further than functionality, they become elements which throughout their features reflect, keep alive and remind the uniqueness of the Carnival Heritage.

Key words: Cultural Identity, Design, Safeguarding

1. Introduction
Forty days before Eastern Week Barranquilla Carnival begins and all the activities inside this Caribbean city stop; citizens get submerged during five days in celebrations where tradition is the main personage, there is an encounter with cultural roots (dances, characters, music, instruments, etc) which stir up the passion of people during the whole event. Although this tradition has been preserved, this kind of encounters with the intangible patrimony are receiving strong foreign influences and right now there are many expressions (which are part of the carnival) that are slowly transforming and losing their cultural meaning, because they are in touch with models of international styles which are quite appreciated by the citizens and are giving strong characteristics that not only change cultural expressions but also alter the identity of the context [2,8]. This situation is modifying the natural evolution of folklore and creates a misunderstanding in new generations, which don’t distinguish some elements of their own culture because they are getting immersed and mixed with foreign lifestyles.

This phenomenon is happening and despite all the safeguarding practices executed for the protection of the Intangible Patrimony of this celebration, the extinction process is evident and foreigner is more esteemed (by
citizens) than the own elements which have been part of Barranquilla lifetime and cultural heritage, because these elements don’t have a proper adaptation to the contemporary context and to the expectations of citizens (influenced by mass media and globalization); the authentic cultural elements get isolated into the Carnival and become museum pieces or book descriptions which identify the past and a short period of the year but not the present of the city. Inevitably, the Carnival is an unquestionable way for remembering Barranquilla’s folklore and its connection with the citizens is quite deep and remarkable but at the same time the discourse around this Heritage needs to be remembered not only during this specific period but also to be involved in the city reality and modernity.

These circumstances are the foundation of this research project, which has been guided by the program of Industrial Design at Universidad del Norte and sponsored by COLCIENCIAS (Colombian Institute for the Science and Technology Development) since January 2008. The university, as part of the community, got involved and committed with the preservation and rescue of its own Cultural Patrimony and proposed this project as an innovative practice, which can be able to develop other safeguarding strategies.

Currently, the project is at the last stage and this paper will show the results achieved and the new goals that are going to be encouraged for the next research which expects to continue with the implementation of the project in Barranquilla, according to the future impacts initially proposed.

2. Carnival struggling with modernity

As many safeguarding practices, the first stages of this project involved the recognition and approach of the research group to the actors considered part of the Patrimony, because they are bearers of traditions which have been inherited from their families and communities centuries ago. The knowledge about their cultural background and its evolution is told throughout stories, where myths get mixed with the reality of their ancestors, and always show their deep commitment with their folklore not only for the pleasurable time that the festivity implies, in the case of the Barranquilla Carnival, but also for the feeling of pride which is sense every time that they realize the uniqueness of the intangible knowledge that they carry (about dances, music, rhythms, costumes, instruments, etc). This is the case of myths like “Francisco el Hombre” (Francisco The Man), who thanks to his accordion and voice won a musical contest with “Satan”, showing the strength of the music that he played which is called “Vallenato” (genre quite important in the Caribbean region of Colombia), and giving enough reasons and pride for an annual Colombian festival which keeps alive this traditional rhythm that centuries ago beat that evil spirit.

Although many citizens of Barranquilla and its surroundings can be considered as part of the group described above, others participate but aren’t aware of the knowledge and the cultural magnitude of the carnival, they usually state that the whole year makes part of this celebration and show a quite emotional and deep connection with the festivity but, at the same time, don’t recognize many elements of this patrimony which have been isolated in parades that aren’t popular among assistants and can only be seen during this annual event and are starting to become museum pieces. On the other hand, this extinction risk faces the arrival of foreign expressions (spread thanks to globalization and mass media), which constantly propose renovations around music, ways of
dancing, clothing, etc., and hypnotize people, with their ephemeral and surprising changes, that always suggest desirable lifestyles. As a matter of fact, most of the elements that currently belong to the city don’t reflect the bond with the carnival; architecture, furniture and the whole family of Barranquilla’s objects try to replicate places like Miami, and the patrimony keeps its intangible quality, which is quite fragile among all the contemporary and tangible influences.

Modernization has become an unavoidable aspect nowadays and at the same time one of the main hazards of worldwide cultural diversity, which shows the vulnerability of those traditions when young generations prefer new styles and labels over their own cultural patrimony. This situation can be frequently seen in parades of different carnivals, where some participants, most of them sponsored by big companies, use costumes and music with images of international labels and icons that give them more recognition and popularity among assistants (because they remind the desirable styles mentioned before), while parades that try to keep the authenticity of folklore get isolated because they refuse to that kind of modernization which doesn’t respect differences and just look for the publicity of companies. This is the case of the Oruro Carnival in Bolivia where Fernando Flores, traditional mask maker, said that most mask artisans follow commercial fads rather than the cultural ones: “Now we are only five people making masks according to an age-old tradition (in Oruro). The others make masks with the logo of (hard rock band) Iron Maiden and demons of comics” [7].

Despite the risks brought by modernity it’s important to understand that folklore doesn’t settle in the past and doesn’t keep itself as an absolute and pure element, it evolves throughout time thanks to influences received by close contexts and the whole globalization phenomenon [9]. However this transformation is not dynamic enough when it has to compete with constant, transitory and global movements as fashion trends, which frequently change and show new aesthetic possibilities that satisfy the contemporary society need of continuous renovation. Traditions should be aware of this situation and not only keep their cultural essence through different practices but also understand themselves as a product that belongs to the contemporary world, and needs a regular renewal according to people expectations, like a company which wants to keep itself in the market. A key point of worldwide cultural diversity perdurability is the understanding of this process where humans must be seen as bearers of something that must completely satisfy them across time.

Anyway is important to remember that this constant renewal must always preserve the essence and the uniqueness of culture, and as Felicidad Valencia, mask maker of the Oruro Carnival in Bolivia, said: “if there is an evolution in mask design it must be in line with tradition and history” [7].

3. Design as part of safeguarding processes

This section shows how Product Design could be part of safeguarding processes thanks to its visual and aesthetic language, because Design should not only feel responsible of the quality of life improvement in aspects related to physical tasks, but should also, like in this case, be involved with other areas where this kind of language could give more options for safeguarding practices, thanks to its perceptive stimulation which encourages users in different ways. Supporting this statement, in the article Aesthetics redefined, Gianfranco Zaccai says: “Aesthetic in regard to any object, therefore, is not an absolute and separate value. Rather, it is totally related to
our ability to see a congruence among our intellectual expectations of an object’s functional characteristics, our emotional need to feel that ethical and social values are met, and finally our physical need for sensory stimulation” [10].

3.1 Objects or storytellers
From the viewpoint of design, objects not only satisfy functional needs, they also are a register which tells a story about the context around and the people who use them, which makes them more emotional and not just a tangible element that accomplishes different tasks; according to the German architect Andreas Brandolini, design should reflect history, culture and technology [3]. Designers can involve any message in the design of their objects, and stimulate different reactions, which can go from the most dramatic feeling to the funniest mood thanks to the visual and aesthetic composition created with colors, geometry, textures and all the elements that make part of this language. As an example of this, drama is read in every detail of Hussein Chalayan or Alexander McQueen garments, and at the same time the amusement and excitement is involved in Ettore Sottsass furniture.

Throughout history storytellers have become bearers of folklore and thanks to their skills hypnotize listeners and spread their knowledge about believes, mythology and past events; the structure of a story captures the attention and quietly leaves a message which is easy to remember because is related to images and the pleasurable feeling that any listener has when hears a good story. Cases like the one described in “The one thousand and one nights” where Scheherezada kept the king’s attention throughout nights, shows the powerful effect produced by a good storyteller. When objects become storytellers, their language tells more than a message for a practical use, they should be able to become like Scheherezada and make people to read them and love the stories that they can be able to communicate, like the king who was mesmerized by the stories in “The one thousand and one nights”.

3.2 Objects/storytellers in Barranquilla
In the case of Barranquilla, the objects apparently accomplish the first statement because they show how foreign influences are currently prevailing in the context and transforming this culture, but at the same time it’s quite sad to realize that they don’t show the importance and transformation of the Carnival inside the present of the city and its identity. The current Carnival’s objects (costumes, masks, etc.) complement the intangible elements which make part of this patrimony, but normally they are only used during this celebration and don’t have a place in the city during the rest of the year, because they are like fossilized and they haven’t been properly adapted to the contemporary conditions and expectations of the city and the festivity; then despite the love that people feel for them, they are not considered as possible elements of Barranquilla’s daily life.

This weakness can be explained by the short background of product design in the Colombian Caribbean, the Industrial Design program at Universidad del Norte is the only one in the region and is barely four and half years old; then the city doesn’t have its own designers, design has been completely imported and people have received it because there aren’t options that can give them other possibilities of choice, which can identify them better or stimulate the perception of visual and aesthetic messages that remind them their culture.
There is a need for registering these cultural elements which are vanishing throughout time, they shouldn’t be kept just like intangible or fossilized museum pieces, because citizens are forgetting many of them since they can’t easily access to this part of their patrimony with the same frequency that they can see new collections of stores like Zara, or new buildings that reproduce Miami’s architecture. The objects/storytellers of this Carnival should be always present and accessible in the city and in a tangible way express and demonstrate, as many citizens believe, that this celebration is present during the whole year in Barranquilla.

3.3 Hypnotized by Scheherezada – hypnotized by objects/storytellers

Scheherezada saved her life thanks to her magnificent skills as storyteller; day after day the king delayed her death because she was able to capture his attention until changed his mind and got the king’s forgiveness; but can the messages of objects hypnotize people and get forgiveness for the cultural patrimony?

For answering this question it is important to understand that if the main purpose is safeguarding, the objects must be designed according to folklore, and transmit, every time that people access and interact with them, visual messages that remind the Patrimony importance and the feeling of pride related with the uniqueness of their culture, which is a strategic emotion when conservation projects want to involve the community in the protection of its own cultural heritage. But this design process must always remember to adjust the traditional cultural language to the contemporary (influenced by globalization phenomenon) context and the citizens desires, then the objects designed will be suitable for the constant transformations that the city and its citizens experienced.

The deep connection that people from Barranquilla have with their Carnival will be the hypnotic factor that will make these objects become in storytellers like Scheherezada, because the messages won’t be just about functionality, they will also communicate something about that special uniqueness which every year submerge the city in frenetic celebrations, then the intangible character of this patrimony will be supported by the tangible new objects. Thanks to this new design and adaptation to modernity, objects/storytellers will be able to be part of every city’s corner at any time of the year, and create a truly accessible register (different from the one found in books and museums) which would confirm the statement that people from Barranquilla proudly say: “the whole year is part of the Carnival”.

3.4 Rescuing the patrimony throughout objects/storytellers

New designers of Barranquilla have commitments not only with the development of their region and country; they also should realize the significance of their design abilities in the safeguarding processes, which can continuously help to adapt patrimony tangible elements to the modernization influences, without forgetting that in the design of these objects/storytellers it’s important to understand and use the same language of young generations, because they are going to inherit the patrimony and will have the responsibility of transmitting this invaluable heritage to next generations, and if they are completely satisfied (emotionally and aesthetically) they would give a better care and protection to those precious elements that identify them and could perfectly coexist with global products, thanks to Design.
The hypnotic messages about Barranquilla Carnival would make people to give significance to the objects/storytellers and interaction would become an experience, which in the first place makes users to realize that their context is a reflection of their culture and doesn’t need to identically repeat foreign models because there could be design options that are more suitable for their surroundings which identify them better and keep the cultural diversity; all of this with the purpose of avoiding the dominant power of homogenization brought by the different phenomena of Globalization [2,8].

After the understanding of this first communication stage, people from Barranquilla would experience their surroundings with the pride and excitement that at the present they just feel during the Carnival time, the idea is to make the city not only familiar but also the favorite place of its citizens, due to the whole engagement of its products with the users satisfaction in terms of basic functions and spiritual needs (the last related to the Carnival) [10].

Finally, the future impacts in this process would expect the building of a profound bond between citizens and the objects/storytellers, which would help to the conservation of the intangible patrimony throughout those tangible messages that remind people their folklore in their daily life. And like Carolina Escobar says in her paper *Happiness and its role in sustainable design*: “If we are left satisfied we are more likely to keep the product, reuse it, repair it and value it – in other words be ‘happy’ with it” [4], and additionally (for the case of this project) keep alive the messengers that remind us our whole commitment as bearers of our cultural heritage.

4. The objects/storytellers designed

This project is an initial approach to the goals described above; at the beginning (January 2005) was only managed as a workshop of the curriculum of the Industrial Design program at Universidad del Norte, and after two years it was presented as a formal research project of the university. During this time the students of the workshop and the research group have worked together developing a design process where they have identified an extensive number of features always related with myths and anthropological meanings that evidence the aesthetic and human richness of this Patrimony, result of three cultures that met in the Colombian Caribbean time ago (Indigenous, Spanish and Africans). After, there is a sketching process (with drawings and draft models), which at the same time analyzes the remarkable elements that the design should involve for the construction of the cultural messages that would hypnotize users and citizens. The final stage is the prototyping, which involved different factories and artisans of the region, because in this way other members of the community will start being part of this process. At this point and close to the end of the project (July 2009), there is a first collection of residential and urban objects, which will be described in the following sections.

4.1 Graphic catalogues and video

The products developed at the beginning of the project were two catalogues where the initial stages of the research are registered; one of them contains some of the most beautiful pictures taken during the 2008 Carnival by the research group, which show not only the traditional characters (that can be found in many photography books of the Barranquilla Carnival) but also the costumes details that identify them; after they were classified according to parameters that have been already specified by different entities which have worked with the
Carnival. The second catalogue, which is quite extensive, contains the analysis of all the characters in terms of geometry, color, texture and all the visual language use by them; the conclusions are a wide list of aesthetic foundations for the product design process. Finally the video, which is part of the final project stages, is a summary that explains, throughout sequences of images, the mental process developed for the design of each product.

4.2 Residential objects/storytellers

4.2.1 Cayena chair
The frame of the Carnival is the exuberant nature of the tropical environment, which can be considered an important element of inspiration for this celebration; every year artisans reproduce its colors and shapes in the giant parade floats, and costumes are decorated with thousands of colorful flowers of the region. The Cayena is an emblematic flower (Figure.1) quite used year after year and has become an important element of this Patrimony; thanks to its significance is called “the flower of Barranquilla”, which is a powerful reason for designing a product which manages its visual and aesthetic language. The Cayena chair (Figure.2) was manufactured with plywood that has been curved in order to reflect the delicacy of its petals.

Figure.1 [6] and 2

4.2.2 Lamp and wine bottle holder inspired in the Congo
The influence from African cultures can be found in the dance of Congo, were the main character has a tall crown and a warrior appearance that intimidates assistants. The designers found in the tall crown a significant language that gives the identity to this character (Figure.3); during the parades each Congo’s crown shows a meticulous work where different icons of the region are reflected, for this reason this was the starting point for the design of the wine bottle holder and the lamp (Figure.4). On the other hand, the decorative painting of some models were made by the mask maker Manuel Pertuz (some of his work can be seen in Figure.5) who is considered “master of this traditional work” and a creative member able to adjust his knowledge to other kind of products (Figure.5).

Figure.3
4.2.3 Son de Negro table
Another result of the African legacy can be seen in the Son de Negro (Figure 6), which is a group of children who paint their whole body in black and their lips and tongue in red; the elements that identify them are the exaggerated gestures of their mouths and the colorful petals of their hats, which produce an impact thanks to the visual contrast created with the black of their bodies. These characteristics inspired the Son de Negro table that is decorated with a graphic abstraction that represents all the aesthetic features described above.

4.2.4 Torito lattice
The Torito, or little bull in English (Figure 5), is another special character of this cultural event; people who personify it wear a wooden mask full of colors and geometrical compositions that as the mask maker Manuel Pertuz says: “represent the bright colors of the environment and the creativity of each artisan”. The lattice is a modular structure (Figure 7) where the lines that are usually decorating these masks create a 3D piece able to arrange small and decorative walls that let the light go throughout, generating beautiful shadows.

4.3 Urban objects/storytellers
The last products are a system for public parks inspired in the weaving techniques of the “Sombrero Vueltiao” (Figure 8) which is a traditional hat quite used in most of the costumes of the Barranquilla Carnival, and besides is considered one of the most representative symbols of Colombia; its weaving is a tradition learned by families.
since centuries ago and the patterns made by the threads create a wide amount of rectangular compositions quite iconic in the region. Floor lamps, stools, benches, pots for plants and fences are the elements proposed for creating the whole composition of parks (Figure 9), which evokes the aesthetic arrangement of the weaving patterns.

5. Conclusions and future strategies

The coexistence of modernity and tradition should be managed in a positive way where these opposite sides can give adequate answers that respect the essence of tradition and diversity without forgetting the reality of the current worldwide contexts; the products designed and described in this paper are an example of this synergy, where the design was determined by the wide amount of features (colors, shapes, textures, etc.) that characterized Barranquilla’s Carnival and the expectations that distinguish modern consumers. But, despite the accomplishment of the goals in terms of product design and aesthetics, is necessary that, (in the next stages that this project initiate), the emotional impact of these products get tested with the community help because in this way there will be conclusions around the effectiveness of these products as storytellers of the traditional heritage and the design method as a practice for patrimony safeguarding.

After these tests the results can lead to more opportunities of improvements in the methodology and to other ambitious projects where other members of the community get involve, in the product development, as sponsors,
designers and producers. The significance of this participation can be understood with the following conclusion, made in the first session of the Intangible Heritage Committee in Algeria: “Some noted their own national experiences where safeguarding efforts developed with communities succeeded, while those developed without community involvement or consent failed.” [9]

Other projections involve in these future strategies, are related with the UNESCO declaration of Barranquilla Carnival as “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Humanity Heritage” that has created a positive impact and an international recognition, which could be an advantage for the future marketing of these objects/storytellers in different places and a starting point for more projects related to the phases of production and marketing. Therefore Globalization could become a useful phenomenon that allows bringing these unique products to markets where the culture is completely different, and consequently the benefits for the future manufactures could be increased because their incomes would be the result of productions not just for the Carnival of Barranquilla but also for another places where this Carnival is still unknown.

6. References


